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Master Thesis

WOMEN AT WAR:

Representation of War in British Women's Poetry of the First World War

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1. Introduction

As Robert Giddings puts it in *The War Poets*, describing the poetry of the First World War, “war had been a subject for poetry, but never like this” (qtd. in Stout 28). Both men and women have written extensively on the subject of the First World War; yet an enormous number of poets were completely forgotten: some for good reason, others for no reason at all. Most of the forgotten poets happen to be women, as if the selective literary memory was motivated by a gender stereotype that the war is “man’s concern, as birth is woman’s” (Kazantzis in Reilly 23).

The problem lies not only in the area of gender prejudices, but mainly in the definition of war poetry, and in the war poetry canon itself: it has always been based on “combat gnosticism” (Campbell 203) which assumes that the poetry written out of combat experience is more authentic, therefore poets who fought in the war have more authority to speak on the subject. Those three categories – experience, authenticity and authority – will be defined and analyzed in this thesis to prove they have nothing to do with the aesthetic qualities of the writing. Yet their dominance in the canon is so strong that it managed to exclude good women poets and their writing from the canon for nearly a century.

This thesis argues that the current criteria that form the war poetry canon are outdated and require revision. They are based on gender and literary misconceptions of the primacy of experience, which has no relevance when it comes to judging the artistic merit of a poetic work.

The aim of this work is to prove those criteria wrong: by firstly analyzing the existing views of academia and the publishing world; and, secondly, by presenting a close reading of the war poems written by women, whose work is valuable because of its artistic merit as well as the depth of feeling and contemplation — with or without the direct experience of war, and can in many ways enrich the canon.

In order to oppose the existing emphasis on the combat experience in war poetry canon, this thesis focuses on *representation* of war in war poetry, because in a sense that is exactly what is missing from the current canon: the common view is that the meanings are taken directly from the front experience and simply *reproduced* in poetry. Yet this is not how any artistic practices work: as Stuart Hall puts it, “meaning is thought to be *produced* – constructed – rather than simply found” (italics supplied; Hall 6). The thesis provides a close reading of war poems written by

women poets – without the lens of experience and authenticity – in order to explicate the meanings that construct their vision of war.

The material for the analysis consists of fifteen poems written by twelve British women poets. Most of the poems were published in *Scars Upon My Heart*, a one-of-a-kind anthology of the women's poetry of the First World War selected by Catherine Reilly; several poems can be found in the collections of corresponding women poets.

The secondary literature includes *Sexchanges*, the second volume of a massive research on gender in the twentieth century *No Man's Land* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (first published in 1989); an anthology *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (published in 1987), which brings together articles by historians, literary scholars, and political scientists discussing how the notions of gender were modified by the World Wars; and also a more recent research *Coming out of War: Poetry, Grieving and the Culture of the World Wars*, published by an American professor Janis P. Stout in 2006. Other scholars cited in the thesis include Nosheen Khan, Jon Silkin, James Campbell, and Michael Williams.

The first part of this thesis deals with how academia and publishing world approaches war poetry and its canon. The first chapter discusses in detail the reasons that might stand behind women's exclusion from the canon, and tries to spot the illogic of these reasons. The second chapter presents the problems women's war poetry comes across in publishing, which is still much more conservative than academia and reluctant to accept women into the canon. This chapter is also an attempt to analyze several introductions to the most prominent war poetry volumes and figure out the reasons of female exclusion from the publishers' and editors' perspective.

The second part of the thesis is devoted to close reading of women's poetry on the subject of war, while linking the texts to the potential reasons behind their exclusion.

The chapter *Representing Disorder* focuses on how women poets choose to represent war. Disruption of war for women is connected very closely to the idea of time and continuity.

The chapter *Representing Gender* presents another possible reason for exclusion of women poets from the canon connected with the concept of "gender war", and includes close reading of the poems on the complex gender issues that are not currently represented in the canon.

The chapter *Representing the Front* argues that in the war poetry canon the great divide of home and front can be solved by women's poetry of the battlefield, which also proves the existing focus on the poetry of actual combat experience wrong and irrelevant to the artistic merit of literary works.

The thesis ends with a conclusion, a bibliography, which includes primary and secondary sources, and an appendix, which includes all of the poems that are analyzed in this thesis in detail.

2. Defining War Poetry: "The Space of the Battle is the Space of Writing"?

Poets have always written about war, which is reflected in the latest *The New Oxford Book of War Poetry* (2014): it opens with extracts from the Bible and Homer's *The Iliad*, followed by centuries of writing on the subject. However, it was not before the First World War that an established tradition of war poetry appeared in Great Britain (Silkin 35) and started being culturally acknowledged. Catherine Reilly, the editor of several anthologies of war poetry, in the preface to her *Scars Upon My Heart*, a volume of the women's poetry of the First World War, writes that only in Britain there were around 2225 poets, both male and female, writing on the subject of the Great war. As a global phenomenon and a global trauma, the war certainly did dominate the literature of the time. However, writing on the subject of war somehow has not been seen as an immediate marker for naming a poem "a war poem" and a poet becoming "a war poet". The problem of how to define "war poetry" was, perhaps, one of the more controversial questions literary scholars had to face in the twentieth century, and, as the recent anthologies show, it might have not been solved at the beginning of the twenty-first century as well.

In fact, the controversy would have not been there if women had chosen not to write war poetry, but they did, and this fact alone, with no regard to the quality of their writing, led to numerous questions. Can the poetry on the subject of war, written by those who never had a battlefield experience, still be considered "war poetry"? Or even: do women poets have a moral right to write on the subject of war, if they are the ones safe at the home front? These questions are very problematic in terms of gender, but, ironically, have nothing at all to do with poetry as an art form. Judith Kazantzis has formulated the counter-question very precisely in the preface to Catherine Reilly's anthology *Scars Upon My Heart*: "Is there among men, not

excluding editors of war poetry anthologies, the atavistic feeling that war is man's concern, as birth is woman's; and that women simply cannot speak on the matter – an illogic which holds sway even when women have done so with knowledge and talent?" (Reilly 23).

The problematic questions that arise when one tries to define war poetry concentrate around three concepts, all of them problematic and difficult to define as well: *experience*, *authenticity* and *authority*.

The question of whether the battle *experience* is necessary to write war poetry first appeared during the First World War, because "the Great War, with its mass conscription of educated, nonprofessional soldiers, created a new phenomenon: the soldier-writer", who is characterized by "the authentic voice and the intensity of moral conflict" (Higonnet in Higonnet et al. 13). Everyone outside the new phenomenon of a soldier-writer, or a "trench poet", is considered to be less authentic, therefore to have less moral authority to talk on the subject, if any at all. The definition of war poetry is then reduced to battlefield poetry, leaving out all the other accounts as second-hand experiences with little or no relevance to the subject. James Campbell coined a term for such an approach – "combat gnosticism", which he describes as "the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate" (Campbell 203). He then goes on saying that not only did this critical approach limit the canon of texts which can be seen as "legitimate war writing" (Ibid.), but also made it seem that war literature is "a discreet body of work with almost no relation to non-war writing" (Ibid.). Campbell believes that the result of such a narrow understanding of war poetry was "the canonization of male war writers" (Campbell 204): in poetry, those are Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves.

Women, apart from the nurses in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), had no direct experience of the battlefield, which from the point of view of combat gnosticism meant their inability to talk on the subject of war. This is how Margaret Higonnet describes the position of women poets within the spectrum of "authenticity":

Women, even during the Second World War, were rarely situated where they could create war poetry... Since the definition of war poetry privileges actual battlefield experience, women who are barred from combat can only participate in this literary mode at *second hand*. To evoke the experience of blood and muck, they may ventriloquize [...] a "*transferred voice*" [...] Even when the women writers describe the wartime losses that they have suffered

as women – as wives, mothers, lovers – they are displaced, for *the primary loss in war literature is inevitably death; mourning is secondary* (all italics supplied; Higonnet in Higonnet et al. 14).

All the italicized expressions emphasize the idea of women's poetry of the First World War as secondary to the poetry written by combatants, because their loss is secondary, and their voice is only a transferred voice.

This focus on authenticity of experience is one of the reasons why the poems of the First World War, or, in fact, any war, are often treated as “human documents” (Stallworthy 892). The requirement of authenticity presupposes that there is a special link between literature and history, literary works being seen as historically (in)accurate and (ir)relevant. Therefore, one of the reasons women's war poetry has been constantly excluded from the canon lies in the perception of history as such. The central point in the narrative of human history has always been the “Western white man” (Scott in Higonnet et al. 21). During the times of all the wars the “Western white man” was fighting on the front; therefore the history of wars that remained consists at most of the events that took place on the battlefield, while women find themselves out of the focus of war history. The event-centered nature of history is also important. As Margaret and Patrice Higonnet put it, “masculinist history has stressed the sharply defined event of war; women's time more closely reflects Bergson's concept of *durée*” (Higonnet et al. 46). According to French philosopher Henri Bergson, “in the duration, there is no juxtaposition of events; therefore there is no mechanistic causality” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, online). His vision of time and history is “an irreversible flow, which is not given all at once”, and “cannot be adequately represented by a symbol” (Ibid.). This means that every time period cannot be “adequately represented” by a single event, which should summarize the whole experience of history. However, as the masculinist history of event prevails, it tends to cut off all the experiences unrelated to those “exceptional, marked” events (Higonnet et al. 46).

Literature of war due to its subject also becomes, or rather seems to become a part of written history, its artifact, or at times even its archive document. As women's history is treated in the times of war, so is literature. Battlefield poetry, poetry of the direct experience is valued as the poetry of an event. Female war poetry fits in the abovementioned concept of *durée*, as a no-event, but a duration, a sense of a loss

stretched in time (moreover, for most of them the loss did not end with the official end of the war). Therefore, it does not fit into the canon.

The issues of authenticity, authority and experience are also related to time as a philosophical category: in particular, how people tend to interpret war with the help of categories of time and space. One of the reasons behind the exclusion when it comes to experience is that war itself is seen rather as a *space* than *time*. Those who are not spatially present have no experience of the *space* of war. The sole fact of being an event's contemporary does not provide a person with a knowledge and authority to speak on the subject. This is exactly what Susan Gubar is implying when she writes "the space of the battle is the space of writing" (Gilbert, Gubar vol. 3 235). One of the most frequently used expressions in terms of gender relations in the times of war, "*left behind*", also has a spatial meaning: "behind" means towards the back of something – out of focus, not visible, not as important. But also "behind" is the antonym to the "front" in its non-military meaning; front as something visible, present, and important. Therefore, the expression "home front" seems more of a propaganda tactic. It seems that culturally and linguistically people also tend to explain war in spatial terms. Even Margaret Higonnet, trying to secure the position for women's writers in the canon, makes the same assumption in the passage that was quoted earlier: "Women were rarely situated *where* they could create war poetry" (italics supplied; in Higonnet et al. 14). These spatial ways to talk about war writing imply that the poetry of war is written out of a particular *place*. However, even the dictionaries prove this approach to war wrong: Longman dictionary defines war in the first place as "*when* there is fighting between two or more countries or between opposing groups within a country, involving large number of soldiers and weapons" (italics supplied; Longman dictionary 1854). The second definition is "*a struggle over a long period of time* to control something harmful" (italics supplied; Ibid.). While the definitions have no spatial characteristics to them, they are both related to time, as the italicized words and expressions show. This means that the existing cultural approach to war and war poetry might be wrong on a more philosophical level, and Gubar's statement can be potentially modified into "*the time of the battle is the time of writing*", thus becoming much more inclusive.

Having said this, judging poetry from the three axes mentioned above – authority, experience and authenticity – presents a serious logical flaw, be it with or without women's poetry. From these three factors, the judgment of artistic value of a poem is

made based on the criteria which do not influence its artistic value. While analyzing poetry as a work of art, it is absolutely essential to remember that the work itself should be viewed at a distance from the poet, which means the work of art does not have to necessarily reflect personal experience, and if it does not, it does not make it less of an art. But it should also be separated from the subject, which means the work of art does not have to be a copy of reality; art is based on contemplation and imagination, both of which have nothing to do with the objective, historical perspective on events. War is undoubtedly a very delicate subject to address in art, partly because of the history of the twentieth century and how traumatic those events were and still remain in global and individual memory. However, it justifies neither an attempt to force non-artistic criteria on the works of art nor to explain their refusal from canon by the lack of personal experience. As the Russian twentieth century literary scholar Likhachev puts it, judging a literary work from the point of view of truth is like measuring a bedroom in light years (Likhachev 75).

However, for some reason the literary field continues measuring the bedroom in light years when it comes to war poetry. Somehow the “poetry” aspect of the term “war poetry” became outweighed by the “war” aspect, which suddenly got placed at the centre of the notion. At the extreme, it seems that some of the poems written by the trench poets do not have to meet certain esthetic criteria, because they have the authority of first-hand experience. Interestingly, it seems to be the only subject where such a limitation occurs: one does not question if a poet has been in love to write a love poem, or if he or she has seen the places and wonders described in the poetry on the subject of nature. This approach also fails when it comes to fairy-tales, myths, legends, or any other genres, where a first-hand experience is problematic. However, in order to write about war, one is expected to have experienced it. This misconception allowed the editors and authors of various war poetry anthologies to exclude women from the canon. Now, a hundred years from the outbreak of the World War I and many anthologies later, the misconception is still there, despite all the attempts of feminist literary criticism to get women’s poetry into the canon. In the following sub-chapter this misconception will be further analyzed based on the prefaces to several recent war anthologies.

Interestingly, however, even feminist criticism quite often falls into the same logical trap: instead of proving that the aspect of experience has no relevance at all, they defend a woman’s experience of war, which gives women a right to talk about

war on the same level as men. For example, Janis P. Stout first states quite correctly that the main point “is not that women did experience the battlefield and its immediate effects, but that it does not matter” (Stout 64), but then, several sentences later, she comes back to the old paradigm by saying that anyone “who has lived through any of effects [of war] ... has experienced some aspect of the total experience of war. Authentic war poetry is written out of all aspects of that total experience” (Ibid.). The usage of words “experience” and “authentic” proves again that when it comes to war poetry, scholars tend to forget that it is art in the first place. Indeed, women did experience war, and loss, and suffering, and deprivation, and it should be an important point to prove to historians or other scholars who deal with historical truth. Art, however, does not require such a justification. There should not be such a limitation to art, no right to art: one does not need any other authority but the authority of one’s own literary abilities.

This thesis, therefore, will be using the broadest definition of “war poetry”: poetry written, implicitly or explicitly, on the subject of war. Within the definition, “war” is not limited to the events happening at the battlefield, but is seen in its totality, as a “when” rather than a “where”.

3. War and Publishing

The publishing world is dominated by combat gnosticism as much, or even more than literary criticism is. Even the most contemporary anthologies of war poetry include so little of women’s writing that it often seems quite striking how in this particular area feminist criticism has had surprisingly little or no influence. This is how Catherine Reilly describes the situation in her introduction to *Scars Upon My Heart*:

Naturally enough, the anthologies of Great War poetry published in recent years tend to concentrate on the work of the soldier poets who served on the Western Front... The contribution by women has been largely ignored, although Phillip Larkin includes May Wedderburn Cannan’s ‘Rouen’ in his choice for *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*. Only three other women – Charlotte Mew, Alice Meynell and Fredegond Grove – are represented in modern anthologies of First World War poetry (Reilly XXXIV).

So, in total four women poets made it to the First World War anthologies, and with that – to the war poetry canon. The reason for such a small number is neither

qualitative nor quantitative: women did not write less on the subject of war than men, neither did they write lesser poetry; it is their lack of battlefield experience that does not get them to the anthologies. Or, perhaps, in some cases even the gender itself: during her bibliographic research, Catherine Reilly tried to quantify the poetry on the theme of the Great War, “which had been published in book, pamphlet or broadsheet form” (Reilly XXXIII). She managed to identify “2225 British individuals, men and women, servicemen and civilians, who had written verse on the theme... Of these 2225 at least 532 were women and at least 417 (men and women) served in the armed forces or other uniformed organisations” (Ibid.). Reilly decided not to mention any statistical data on how many of those 417 were male, but even without knowing it for sure it is clear that most male poets writing on the subject of the Great War have never served in the army and had no experience at the front. Even though some women did, it does not automatically include them into the canon. These numbers show quite precisely how gendered the perspective on the poetry of the First World War is when it comes to publishing.

The research Catherine Reilly invested into the unknown terrain of women’s poetry of war while working on her anthologies on the First and the Second World Wars was unprecedented. Janis S. Stout mentions Reilly as one of the first to challenge the critical disregard of women poets (Stout 58). Since her collection of poems written by women poets on the First World War, *Scars Upon My Heart*, was published by Virago Press in 1981, many studies inspired by the book “have added to our awareness of women’s war writing” (Ibid.). *Scars Upon My Heart* has been reprinted many times since then. It was the first anthology of this kind, and it showed the scope and the talent behind women’s writing on the subject of war. Elizabeth Marsland, commenting on Reilly’s anthology, says it gave a new perspective to war poetry by proving “the typical English First World War poet was not a combatant but a civilian” (qtd. in Campbell 205).

However, partly because women’s poetry was only published in those segregated anthologies, it still did not quite make it to the “grand” anthologies, published by the mainstream or academic publishing houses. If those volumes include female writing, it is curious how editors decide to mention this fact. For instance, *Poetry of the First World War, an Anthology* edited by Tim Kendall and published in 2013 by Oxford University Press, was in many ways an unexpected volume, trying to challenge the canon by giving voice to many of the less famous poets alongside with the classics of

the canon. However, in the catalogue of Oxford University Press it is annotated as “a new anthology of First World War poetry that brings together the best poetry by soldiers, civilians, and women” (Catalogue of Oxford University Press, online). The fact that women are put into a separate category which is neither “soldiers” nor “civilians” is problematic, and shows how in 2013 the publishing world is still uncertain of women poets’ status in the war poetry. It might be that the expression was intended to have a different meaning, emphasizing that women poets have their place in this volume, but the wording of it does not become less problematic just because of the editor’s good intention.

Editors of some war anthologies had to come up with the new editions to include women poets in particular, but the way they talk about their writing also raises many questions. *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, edited by Jon Silkin, was first published in 1979, and contained only four poems by women. In 1996 it was revised, and another six poems by women were added to the anthology, making it ten in total. *A note on the 1996 edition*, explaining the revision, is nothing short of weird:

My editors rightly ask, ‘Why did you put in this additional material,’ indicating one poem by Mina Loy, and five others, all by women. Meaning, were these poems included under feminist pressures, or did you feel that these poems, because of their excellence, demanded inclusion? Having no simple answer, I feel I must say that feminism did require me to consider... why, with the following exception, all the poets in the anthology are male... A simple, perhaps, too simple reply is that the largest part of suffering, and brutality, was borne, and inflicted, by men in this war (Silkin 13-14).

The sole fact that adding six poems by women to a 185-poem volume, making it ten in total requires such a lengthy explanation is, to say the least, curious. Besides, the explanation does not quite explain anything: Jon Silkin does not say he was either influenced by feminism or finds the poetry excellent in terms of quality, and he does not give an explanation to why all the poets in the anthology were previously male, apart from the “simple” one he does not entirely agree with himself. He then goes on naming the two criteria he based his choices on: the poems should not be “diluted or amerced by patriotism” and should “fulfill the requirement of literary excellence” (Silkin 14). In a way, this is a much more honest set of criteria than the criteria of authenticity and experience. However, the question why, among all poetry written by women from all over the world on the subject of the First World War, only six poems fulfilled those requirements, would be impossible to answer.

However, in some anthologies editors decide not to analyze women's status in war poetry, as if it does not exist or as if the question of their exclusion is not at all problematic. The latest *The New Oxford Book of War Poetry*, published by Oxford University Press in 2014 contains two introductory notes, both written by the editor Jon Stallworthy: the most recent one, and the one from the first edition of *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, published exactly 30 years ago, in 1984. What is surprising is that, judging from those two texts, the editor's approach to exclusivity of experience in war poetry has become even more strict in the thirty years in between the volumes. The most important remark on the subject from the older text reads: "The poems of these young men [soldier poets] move us, as human documents, more than many better poems" (Stallworthy 892). This is an ambiguous statement because what it says is that good poems do not move us as much as poems that are not necessarily good, but were written out of actual combat experience. But at least it is honest in saying that when it comes to war poetry, the tendency is to judge its artistic merit as secondary to authenticity and experience, and that war poems are therefore often treated as documents, but not works of art. However, thirty years later Stallworthy takes up a different position on the subject:

It does not follow, however, that a poem of first-hand witness will necessarily be better – more moving because more focused – than one of second-hand witness... These poems [by Hardy and Wordsworth] of second-hand witness have an immediacy and power equal to any of first-hand witness, being the work of great poets, each with a lifelong imaginative investment in his subject. But such poems are rare. The second-hand testimony of lesser poets, lacking such investment, is seldom impressive and often embarrassing (Stallworthy 1084).

Basically, the first sentence in the quotation mentioned above contradicts the earlier statement of Stallworthy to the full. What he says is that the first-hand account does not make a better poem, and "better" he understands as "more moving" and "more focused" (Ibid.), while in the earlier version of introduction those were two different categories. Then he goes on saying that in order to make a second-hand account poetically great, it has to be done by a great poet – which is, in his view, not necessary for the first-hand account. This is another example of how poetry of experience suddenly becomes better poetry in view of those who, with or without knowing, support combat gnosticism.

Interestingly, in the introductory text Stallworthy does not mention women as poets at all: moreover, in the very first passage of his 1984 introduction, while

naming the feelings that war poets focus on in their creative work, he mentions, among other, love “for fellow soldiers, for women and children left behind” (Stallworthy 639). By making fellow soldiers, women and children the object of the feeling, therefore, the object of poetry, Stallworthy separates them from the creative process, from being a subject. Doing so in the very first paragraph of his text, Stallworthy shows what he means by war poetry: only the poetry created by those who were on the battlefield. He does not name them directly, but he does not have to: his usage of expressions “*fellow soldiers*” and especially “women and children *left behind*” (the spatial meaning of the latter was briefly analyzed in the first chapter) makes it obvious that the editor is talking specifically about soldier poets. The fact that war poets are soldier poets seems so obvious to the author of the text that he chooses not to explain it. Even though not being mentioned at all in the introduction, there are some poems written by women poets in the anthology: 12 out of 292 – in the twenty-first century anthology which claims to have gathered the most important poems ever written on the subject of war from all over the world.

What all these examples have in common is the perplexity that the editors experience when they have to explain what fits into the canon and why women’s poetry does not. Their arguments are often illogical and contradict each other. The reason for that perplexity is simply that the poets who get published in war anthologies have been, so to say, heavily canonized for almost a hundred years now. With war poets like Sassoon, Owen, and Brooke this canonization is almost religious: sometimes literally religious. Stallworthy gives an example of how the Dean of St. Paul’s, shortly before Rupert Brooke’s death in 1915, read aloud his most famous poem *The Soldier* in a sermon (Stallworthy 830). Their poems are the ones that appear in the public domain every Remembrance Day: as an example, in November 2014 *The Telegraph* published a selection of *Remembrance Day poems: 10 poems for the fallen* (The Telegraph, online). Needless to say, none of those ten poems are written by women, but Rupert Brooke’s *The Soldier*, one of the most idealistic poems about war, is still there. Canonization on this level often starts to distort the meaning and the perception of the poems, as their greatness becomes unquestionable and undeniable. A century has passed since the beginning of the First World War, and perhaps now is the best time for scholars, editors, and publishers to question the canon, and to de-canonize and de-familiarize the poetry of the Great War.

4. Representing Disorder:

“All the world is topsy-turvy since the war began”

In *Rewriting History* Joan W. Scott describes a war as “the ultimate disorder, the disruption of all previously established relationships” (Scott in Higonnet et al. 27). This description seems to be particularly relevant to the First World War. The world had never seen this kind of warfare before: Sandra Gilbert describes it as “the war of wars, a paradigm of technological warfare that in some sense created all subsequent battles in its own bleak image” (Gilbert, *Gubar* Vol.2 259). Technology and science were crucial to the new image of warfare: “With its trenches and zeppelins, its gases and mines, this conflict has become a diabolical summary of the idea of modern warfare – the murderous face of Galileo revealed at last” (Ibid.). Whether fighting at the front or receiving the news at home, people started to question the world which allowed such a massive-scale tragedy: the most important concepts, such as faith and science, human life and human body, heroism and sacrifice, masculinity and femininity, were all suddenly unfixed and unsettled.

Janis P. Stout argues that this conceptual change inevitably influenced the language of artistic expression, the way of representation: “The war served as a great dividing line in human conceptions of the world and in the language in which such conceptions were expressed. As James Hannah, an anthologist of *Great War Writings*, puts it, the war murdered romanticism” (Stout 2). Poetry of the time was sensitive to both conceptual and linguistic changes, and it was quick to notice and represent the world of “murdered romanticism” (Ibid.). Stout, when characterizing the new poetry of the war, mentions irony, ambiguity, and disorder as the main features of the new poetic language (Stout 41). Among those, the motive of disorder becomes one of the most prominent features of war poetry, written by both men and women. But was there a particular way in which women poets dealt with disorder in their works?

One of the most popular lines on the subject comes from the poem *Sing a Song of War-Time* by Nina Macdonald: “All the world is topsy-turvy / Since the War began” (Reilly 69). The poem is written from the point of view of a little boy named Archie. Macdonald chooses this persona for a good reason: the childish perspective allows her to clear out all the decorative elements of her poetic language and leave the essence of it, which makes the meaning behind her poem appear much clearer. The

vocabulary and grammar used in the poem is very simplistic, for instance in the second stanza: “Life’s not very funny / Now, for little boys, / Haven’t any money, / Can’t buy any toys” (Ibid.). This pale linguistic canvas helps Macdonald to emphasize the words that do not belong to the child’s discourse and belong to the discourse of war, as in third stanza: “Mummie does the house-work, / Can’t get any maid, / Gone to make munitions” (Ibid.). “Munitions” is a serious, grown-up word, directly related to war; it is clearly unusual for a boy’s vocabulary. The fact that it appears alongside with deliberately diminutive “mummie” is the linguistic expression of disorder, representation of how war enters the level of language. On a broader level, it represents the process of serious and dangerous reality of war represented by “munitions” becoming part of previously familiar and homely daily existence (“mummie”). However, the poem has no representation of warfare apart from this linguistic insertion: the only way the boy sees the war is by the disruption of his own routine. No toys, no cakes and jam, and nobody to play with – the poem represents the sense of a lack of something on a level of the most basic needs. For the boy those deprivations are odd and unfamiliar, and war for him consists of only those elements, and not the distant front, which he probably has little or no knowledge of. The basic idea behind the poem is, therefore, that the war as the ultimate disorder is present in small things, which seem unimportant in such a massive-scale event, yet they construct the image of the war as well as the battlefield tragedies.

In women’s poetry disorder is often described not only on an individual level, but the poets also make an attempt to comprehend the global phenomenon of War on a global, almost cosmic level, as in a poem *Afterwards* by Margaret Postgate Cole. The poem represents a state of disorder that cannot be fixed, and which does not end when the war is over. It consists of two opposing stanzas, representing the dichotomy of how people imagined peace would look like, and how it actually came to be. The first stanza, representing peace as it was seen in the times of war, creates almost a pastoral picture:

– Peace will come and you will lie
Under the larches up in Sheer,
Sleeping,
And eating strawberries and cream and cakes –
O cakes, O cakes, O cakes, from Fuller’s!
And quite forgetting there’s a train to town,
Plotting in an afternoon the new curves for the world.
(Reilly 21)

This part of the first stanza has a sense of ease and lightness to it that simply could not exist during the time of war. In a way, it is written as if war has never happened, or rather as if war is not present anymore as soon as it is over. This unreal peace is the restoration of the old order, which in the poem is emphasized in the first two lines by the repetition of the words “be young again”: “Oh, my beloved, shall you and I / Ever be young again, be young again?” (Ibid.). It seems that this ideal version of peace during the times of war is imagined as a total comeback to all the familiar things, almost as a travel back in time to when “you and I [were] young” (Ibid.). The actions that the protagonist of the poems connects with peace are also important: “sleeping” and “forgetting” (Ibid.) can both be related to recovering from a traumatic experience. “Forgetting” also connects well to the idea of the stanza that peace should make it seem like war in fact never happened. In terms of time, the first stanza is directed both towards the future and the past, where the future becomes a copy of the past, excluding the present of the wartime. The last line of the stanza is a link towards the future: “Plotting in the afternoon the new curves of the world”. It proves the point that in the perfect situation of peace people’s minds are focused on the future “plots” instead of looking back and rethinking the tragedy. Margaret Postgate Cole uses the word “curve”, which works as an image supporting the future stability: curve represents a very calm and harmonious movement, “a line that gradually bends like part of a circle” (*Longman Dictionary* 385). This definition of “a curve” also contains the idea of continuity: as if war did not break the natural movement of the world, and that it can be restored and continued as a part of a natural circle, a cycle, which is also a very pastoral category. However, the ideal image of peace does not coincide with the description of the actual peace in the second stanza:

And peace came. And lying in Sheer
 I look around at the corpses of the larches
 Whom they slew to make pit-props
 For mining the coal for the great armies.
 And think, a pit-prop cannot move in the wind,
 Nor have red manes hanging in spring from its branches,
 And sap making the warm air sweet.
 Though you planted it out on the hill again it would be dead.
 (Reilly 21)

Firstly, the word “peace” itself is used differently in two stanzas: in the first stanza it was put into position where it was capitalized, “Peace” as an ideal, almost biblical, paradise-like category, associated with the concepts of purification or atonement. In

the second stanza “peace” is brought down to earth in a very sobering and grim way; it has none of the pastoral qualities of the first stanza. The picture of the Sheers the protagonist paints is somewhat apocalyptic, representing the ultimate disorder. The image of the larches and what has been done to them by the unidentified and anonymous “they” for the poet is the representation of the war. “The corpses of the larches” followed by the subjective pronoun “whom” instead of “which” that would have been grammatically more appropriate hints that larches are more than just an object, they are the symbols of all the victims of war. They are displaced, taken away from their natural habitat, turned into something else (pit-props), put into unfamiliar, unnatural surroundings of coal mines, becoming raw materials for “the great armies”. When brought back and “planted” into familiar environment, the tree does not grow again, because its state has been modified: it is not a tree anymore; it is a pit-prop. The larch lost all the qualities of the tree (“cannot move in the wind”, “nor have red manes hanging in spring from its branches” (Ibid.)), its nature has changed, and is dead as a larch tree. The image of the larch tree in the second stanza therefore can be interpreted as the image of a soldier, who coming back from the war is not the same person he was when he left for the front. “Planting” him back would not make him grow again.

Through the image of the larch, the poem also communicates the idea how the disorder cannot be undone on a global level, and how peace does not bring relief, because the order of things has been ruined on such a deep level that it seems nothing is able to bring it back together again. The last line of the second stanza is crucial: “Though you planted it out on the hill again it would be dead” (Ibid.). The word “again” connects the second stanza with, or rather opposes the first stanza. The idea behind this “again” is, in a way, reply to the rhetorical question of the first stanza: “shall you and I / ever be young again, be young again?” (Ibid.). People would try to restore things and bring them back together again, but what was done cannot be undone, and what is dead stays dead. “Again” of the first stanza is the nostalgic view over the happy past, “again” of the second stanza represents the changed reality (or even future) of the post-war world, where all the attempts to restore the order are bound to fail.

The last stanza supports such an interpretation directly: “And if these years have made you into a pit-prop, / To carry the twisting galleries of the world’s reconstruction / [...] What use is it to you?” (Reilly 22). “The twisting galleries of

the world's reconstruction" directly oppose "the new curves of the word" (Ibid.) of the first stanza. While the first stanza represented continuity and cycle, the last stanza states there is no continuity in peace, but "reconstruction", and curves representing the idea of soft, delicate change no longer exist. The word "twisting" itself implies negative connotations: it symbolizes chaotic, unorganized turns in the post-war world. According to the poem, chaos and madness become the part of the world's new history. The poem ends with another rhetorical question: "What use / To have your body lying here / In Sheer, underneath the larches?" (Ibid.). "Body" of the war poetry is most commonly the body of the dead. However, in this poem "body" might symbolize not just that: body as opposed to a person; the same transformation happened to a larch, a human is being subtracted of all things human, reduced to an object, a function, or a raw material. This, according to Margaret Postgate Cole, is the most tragic representation of disorder, and the fact the last question starts with "what use" emphasizes the uselessness and impotence of this post-war condition, and makes the poem end on a very hopeless note.

The strength of the poem *Afterwards* is in its delicacy and subtleness: throughout the stanzas the poet does not refer to the battlefield or warfare directly to describe the disorder, the only expressions belonging to the field of war is "great armies", and "dead". However, she does not have to verbalize the war to make it appear in her work: without addressing the subject directly, Margaret Postgate Cole in her poem makes a serious philosophical judgment about the First World War and its consequences. *Afterwards* is a poem of great power and deep contemplation. The poem also supports the argument mentioned in the first chapter of war being not only space, but time: the main dichotomy of the poem is not the battlefield and the home front, but the time of the war and the time after the war. The dichotomy of space for Margaret Postgate Cole does not make much of a difference, because the tragedy had already happened and could not be undone. Disorder might have come from the battlefield, but it did not stop there.

Another curious way to represent disorder, apart from individual point of view on small changes of the routine, or a global, philosophical perspective on the trauma of war, is interiorizing disorder by turning it into a physical and psychological human condition. In women's poetry it is often linked to time and age. In some of those poems, war is represented as an illness that can be defined as "age-disorder": a condition of extra-added traumatic experience in an extremely short span of time.

Margaret Postgate Cole portrays this trauma from perspectives of both men and women in two of her poems: *The Veteran* and *Praematuri*.

The Veteran is a narrative poem, telling about a group of young women and young soldiers approaching an army veteran, “sitting in the sun, / Blinded by war” (Reilly 22-23). Although he is never named directly as an old man, numerous indirect hints point at it. The name of the poem itself, *The Veteran*, implies old age and experience. Also the fact that the men who are only going to war are opposed to the veteran by being named “young soldiers” (Ibid.) makes the reader logically assume that the main character of the poem is old, especially because the young men ask him “advice of his experience” (Ibid.). It is also essential that in reply to their questions he tells them “tales” (not “accounts” or “observations”): it makes the distance between the moment of speaking and the events longer, because a tale is a distanced narration, that existed for a period of time long enough to get mythologized. All these factors seem to create an age gap between the character and all the young men and women interested in him. However, the last stanza of the poem comes as a surprise by de-familiarizing the concept of the veteran:

And we stood there, and watched him as he sat,
Turning his sockets where they went away,
Until it came to one of us to ask
‘And you’re – how old?’
‘Nineteen, the third of May.’
(Reilly 22-23)

A nineteen-year-old veteran is a strong image of the First World War, as it was the first war to make this kind of a veteran – a young veteran – common and familiar. Young men coming from the war have seen so many horrors which in normal circumstances would not fit into one life span. In this poem Margaret Postgate Cole wanted to portray this form of disorder in the new world, affected by war: experience is no longer acquired with age, and age is no longer a symbol of experience. The intensity of the war experience changes the natural order of events and the natural way human age used to be measured. The actual biological age therefore stops being one of the markers of personality, because it carries little meaning in the times of war.

Praematuri, another poem by Margaret Postgate Cole, portrays the time-disorder which affected the women left behind in the times of war quite differently than men. The title of the poem itself, the Latin word translated as “premature”, shares many ideas with *The Veteran*: premature means “happening before the natural and proper

time” (*Longman Dictionary* 1288), so both poems reflect the unnatural character of events, happening against the natural rhythm of life. “Premature” is most commonly used in combination with “birth” and “death”, the starting and the ending point of a human’s life. The key meaning behind the word combinations is that both events are characterized by being displaced, put in the wrong chronological order – disordered. With all these relations in mind, the title on its own creates many meanings.

However, it is hard to define who in the Margaret Postgate Cole’s poem is referred to as “premature”: the word in Latin is used in plural masculine form, so it might refer to all the men who died on the war unnaturally, before their time. The poem itself suggests a second interpretation: women left alone by the war feeling as if they were becoming old many years before reaching the old age naturally. The poem is built on a dichotomy of natural and unnatural “oldness”: in the first stanza the speaker talks about the “old men”, whose “love is running slow”, “And they are happy with many memories, / And only a little while to be left alone” (Reilly 22). The natural ageing of the first stanza is represented as happy and harmonious time, filled with memories rather than pain, a time of retrospection. The second stanza describes the unnatural feeling of age that appeared during the war:

But we are young, and our friends are dead
Suddenly, and our quick love is torn in two;
So our memories are only hopes that came to nothing.
We are left alone like old men; we should be dead
– But there are years and years in which we shall still be young.
(Reilly 22)

Being young in time of war is described as a paradox: as a burden of age, normally attributed to the process of ageing. The conditions of those young women are suddenly the same as of the old men: they are left alone losing their friends and beloved ones. But the one attribute that separates them from one another are memories: for old men of the first stanza memories act as a pain-killer, a symbol of relief, they represent a life that was worthwhile. Young women of the second stanza have a huge gap of experience, no or few memories to fill their past with, because the war came “suddenly” and their love was only “quick” (Ibid.). Their memories “are only hopes that came to nothing” (Ibid.), and are therefore not retrospective, but paradoxically prospective, directed towards future – never to be fulfilled. In a way, this condition is similar to the one described in the previous poem by Margaret Postgate Cole: both the veteran and the young woman are suddenly put into a position of an old person without naturally acquiring it. But while the soldier of *The*

Veteran was aged by the overwhelming battle experience in the short time frame, for those young women in *Praematuri* their status of being left on their own puts them into the “social” position of an old man, without his privilege of experience and memory. The biggest burden in the poem is the “vortex” of age. Those women described in the poem are “socially” old, yet biologically young, as the last line reads “but there are years and years in which we shall still be young” (Ibid.). The repetition of “years” in the line creates this circular, vortex-like movement, the sense of drowning in young age. For them, it seems that youth is never going to end, and within the paradox and disorder of war, it is seen as the impossible punishment.

Another poem discussing the change in the perception of time and the sense of disorder is *Subalterns* by Elizabeth Daryush. The poem consists of two short stanzas of the same structure: question asked by a woman addressing a former soldier, followed by his reply. Particularly important is the answer in the second stanza: “The war gave us a shake, / Somehow, knocked one awake... / Now, life’s so deadly slow.” (Reilly 28). The last line is slower in rhythm than the other two; it is also slowed down when recited aloud due to the comma after “now” and by repetition of sounds “l”, which creates a more monotonous, stretchy sound. In terms of meaning, it all comes down to the words “deadly slow” (Ibid.). When it comes to war and peace as opposed to one another, “deadly slow” as a description of peace is supposed to sound almost like an antithesis: the war-time with its overwhelming events and danger is the time which should be addressed as “deadly fast”; peace, on the other hand, should mean the end of deaths and deadly danger. However, this antithetic word combination also represents disorder and change, and yet again shows how war turns the notions around. It might also mean that the speed of the world has changed after the end of the war, but the deadly outcomes of it remain and are even more palpable, now that the rhythm has finally gone down.

In a way, all the poems discussed in this chapter deal with time and disorder, by proving that war is disruption of all things familiar: disruption of childhood, as in *Sing a Song of War-Time* by Nina Macdonald; disruption of the natural cycle and the development of the world, as in *Afterwards* by Margaret Postgate Cole; disruption of age and feeling of the speed of time in general, as in poems by Margaret Postgate Cole and Elizabeth Daryush. The fact that women poets choose to represent disorder in relation to time and disruption of continuity proves that women poets might have another perspective on the war: war as duration, or *durée*, discussed in more detail in

the first chapter. Poems of this kind did not get the place they deserve in the canon exactly for those reasons: they are not focused on the events which are the material of “masculinist history” (Higonnet et al. 46), and with the subjects like war, poetry becomes extremely sensitive to history. The contemplative nature of these poems might make them seem historically unfocused. However, they manage to reach beyond events and experiences with their own artistic means of expression. There is a chance the war poetry canon will accept those poems after feminist historians manage to get their theories of historical process into the mainstream; however, if the connection of literature and history in this particular case works both ways, maybe the first step can be done by poetry.

5. Representing Gender: The Great Gender War

The reasons that could have potentially caused female exclusion from the canon of war poetry were already discussed in the first chapter. However, most of them are related, one way or another, to post-war literary criticism. Yet there is one complex historical and gender phenomenon that became evident during the war: the First World War is seen as the first big “gender war” of the twentieth century, and it has influenced greatly the arts of the time.

As an epigraph to her article *Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War*, Sandra Gilbert quotes one of the early suffrage activists Christabel Pankhurst: “This great war... is Nature's vengeance – is God's vengeance upon the people who held women in subjection, and by doing that have destroyed the perfect, human balance” (Higonnet et al. 197). In this quotation Pankhurst does not only emphasize that humanity, or rather men, deserved this punishment, but that it also happened specifically because of centuries of suppression of women. However radical, this view was often mirrored by the male writers and thinkers; for instance, D.H. Lawrence in his poem *Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabacthani* written in 1915 asks a question, which in terms of anger directed towards the opposite sex might as well outweigh Pankhurst's statement: “Why do the women follow us, satisfied / Feed on our wounds like bread, receive our blood / Like glittering seed upon them for fulfillment?” (qtd. in Higonnet et al.199). This image of women as scavengers, who find enjoyment and fulfillment in the suffering of men during the war, represents the

tension and the immediacy of the gender war, which judging from the quotations given above was a struggle indeed.

Although experience of war has little value when it comes to the judgment of artistic quality of the literary works, the gender war had a lot to do with the fact women did not have to fight in the trenches. The First World War was the first in sense of its totality and horror, and what men had to experience on the battlefield affected them both physically and mentally. Experiencing war they were so alienated from home that they often found themselves in “a situation whereby the soldiers on the line felt a greater sense of solidarity with Germans sitting across No Man’s Land than with their compatriots at home” (Kent 248). In the world where war was for centuries considered a male task, almost a biological calling, it suddenly became apparent that the new kind of warfare does not produce heroes, but dehumanizes, demobilizes and emasculates men (Gilbert, Gubar Vol.2 262). Did this “apocalypse of masculinism” inevitably imply an opposing force, “apotheosis of femaleness” (Ibid.)? Or, as Sandra Gilbert puts it, following her analysis of D.H. Lawrence’s poem: “Because wives, mothers, and sweethearts were safe on the home front, did the war appear in some peculiar sense their fault, a ritual of sacrifice to their victorious femininity?” (Gilbert, Gubar Vol.2 261).

Although both men and women experienced war as a global tragedy, for many women war at the same time became a truly liberating experience: “Despite massive tragedy that the war represented for an entire generation of young men – and for their grieving wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters – it also represented their first rupture with a socioeconomic history that had heretofore denied most women chances at first-class jobs and pay” (Gilbert in Higonnet et al. 204). The number of working women by the end of the war grew from 1,800 registered workers in 1915 to 1,3 million by 1918, “with 700,000 directly replacing men” (Gilbert, Gubar Vol 2 277). Describing Great Britain during the wartime, Gilbert borrows a term “Herland” (Gilbert, Gubar Vol.2 276) from Charlotte Gilman: women were doing jobs they were not allowed to before, surrounded by other women, which created a vision of a sisterhood, “Herland”, a peaceful land where women take action (Gilbert, Gubar Vol.2 276).

While this new and exciting status was indeed a reason for exhilaration for most women, it was inevitably mirrored by the soldiers’ fear that the war has overturned all the basic laws which for centuries formed western societies (Gilbert, Gubar Vol.2

278), and that their fighting and suffering in the mud of trenches would eventually turn out to be for the sole purpose of serving the “victorious femininity” (Gilbert, *Gubar Vol.2* 261). This created an immeasurable gap between home and front, a sense of hostility towards women. This hostility still dominates the canon of war poetry when it comes to representation of women: through some of the works of D.H. Lawrence and other literary men of the home front, but mostly of the soldier-poets Siegfried Sassoon (for example, in *Glory of Women*), Wilfred Owen (*Dulce et Decorum Est*), and Isaac Rosenberg (*Daughters of War*). However, the gender war hidden within the World War context also appears in the women’s poetry in the most unexpected ways. The poems discussed in this chapter deal with the representation of female activeness, female characters as the subject of both action and speech in women’s poetry. In the times following the war those topics were often treated as complex and ambiguous, and sometimes even from a distance of time are seen as immoral, because in those poems women represent themselves as subjects of strength and power, while men appear in the position of inability. Yet, as many of the quotations mentioned above argue, those could have been the actual circumstances of the wartime, artistically acknowledged in its poetry. Considering the importance of those circumstances, representation of gender tensions of war in poetry could be one of the key issues that the current war poetry canon does not acknowledge.

5.1 Victorious Femininity

“Victorious femininity”, an expression coined by Sandra Gilbert, is a precise description of what many women poets of the time tried to portray. Image of an active woman, taking her place in the world – also by occupying those places that became vacant during the times of war – is one of the reoccurring images in women’s poetry of the time. In many poems this process is seen as almost “inheriting” the world, taking the world from male hands, as those hands become incapable of preserving the world (which the war, as a symbol of failed masculinism, seemed to have proven).

In some of the poems this “inheritance” is portrayed almost as a mission, as if being given a symbolic Holy Grail to carry on, which for some reason appears in the texts as unintentionally grim, if not ominous. One of those poems is *Anniversary of the Great Retreat* by Isabel Clarke. In the poem the Great Retreat is portrayed not as

a historical event (even though deliberately marked as its anniversary in the title), but as a metaphorical retreat of leaving the dead behind, in all the “graves still unredeemed that bear no name” (Reilly 20). The six stanzas of the poem are written as an ode to those who died; it glorifies the victims of war in a very archaic way: “O England, sing their fame in song and story / Who knew Death’s victory not Life’s defeat; / Be their names written on thy roll of glory” (Ibid.). The archaization is achieved also through the usage of archaic forms of pronoun “thy”. The archaization creates a distance between the speaker and those spoken of; in a way it is a rhetorical retreat of its own. The speaker deliberately makes the events of the poem sound older and more distant than they were. The whole movement of the poem, supported by the title, is the movement backwards, into oblivion and history. And this is when the last stanza unexpectedly changes the direction:

So we press forward, step by step redeeming
Each hallowed spot our dead have sanctified,
That we may whisper to them in their dreaming,
The Victory is ours because you died...
(Reilly 20)

It seems the whole poem was moving backwards for the sake of this last stanza, which is a final “breakthrough”, a “great breakthrough”, as opposed to the Great Retreat. This is also the first time a speaker identifies his or herself with a personal pronoun – a collective pronoun of “we”, which could be interpreted as “we” of Herland, of the victorious femininity. The last line of the poem creates an ambiguity which could have been unintentional: “*The Victory is ours because you died*” (Ibid.) can be interpreted in two different ways. One is a thankful “we own this victory due to your sacrifice”, or a much more ominous “because you died, we take your victory for ourselves”. Quite ironically, the two interpretations coincide very well with the views of the contemporaries on the female exhilaration: the first interpretation is the view of women, the second – that of many soldiers.

Another poem which projects this metaphorical sense of ownership of the new world is a poem by May Wedderburn Cannan, *Since They Have Died*. The poem communicates the idea of keeping the world safe and healing it as a new mission for those who survived. In this poem the “humanitarian” mission has a strong connection with the values traditionally seen as feminine:

Since they have died to give us gentleness,
And hearts kind with contentment and quiet mirth,
Let us who live give also happiness

And love, that's born of pity, to the earth.
(Reilly 19)

Gentleness, kindness, quietness, love and pity – those are the qualities that according to the poet would help to rebuild the world. With an appeal towards those who are still alive it almost sounds like a world's new manifesto. It has, however, no mention or direct criticism of the previous order: aggressive masculinity which caused the war is verbalized in the first line very delicately: “since they have died”. But the new order it delicately suggests is based on entirely different set of values, on “feminine” values as the savior of the post-war world, thus, implying criticism. The first line of the poem epitomizes “victorious femininity”: it implies that the almost religious sacrifice of the victims of war was for the sake of giving “gentleness” to the world, which the women now inherit. The inheritance appears more vividly in the second stanza:

For, I have thought, some day they may lie sleeping
Forgetting all the weariness and pain,
And smile to think their world is in our keeping,
And laughter come back to the earth again.
(Reilly 19)

“Their world is in our keeping” symbolizes an important shift, change in possession: it was their world, but “since they have died”, it is now inherited by those who are able to fill it with life and laughter again. That might be an indirect hint at women, the new keepers of the world, giving birth to new generation of people. This is why May Wedderburn Cannan uses the word “keeping”: it is not exactly possession, not ownership, but rather “taking care” of the world. The spirit of the poem ties well with one of key works of twentieth-century feminist thought, Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*. One of the most famous lines from Woolf's text sounds as follows: “As a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (Woolf 103). This quotation, as well as the poem, contains the idea of non-ownership as the key to the world peace, and implicitly states that the possessive attitude towards the world is the reason behind all the wars. May Wedderburn Cannan's poem, therefore, is an optimistic manifesto of “victorious femininity”, presenting a happy scenario to the world's process of healing through love and gentleness.

Another important poem, which also connects the notions of femininity and inheritance of the world, is a poem *A Father of Women* by Alice Meynell. This poem is about inheriting not only the workplaces of men, but also their family position: the

daughters of men have to inherit the world of their fathers, as their sons become the victims of the war. Sandra Gilbert, while analyzing the gender shifts the war brought about, also mentions this break in patriarchal succession: “This barely veiled hostility between the front and the home front, along with the exuberance of the women workers who had succeeded to (and in) men’s places, suggested that the most crucial rule the war had overturned was the rule of patrilineal succession, the founding law of patriarchal society itself” (Gilbert, *Gubar* Vol.2 280). Alice Meynell was very observant to notice and portray this shift in her poem.

A Father of Women is full of biblical allusions, as the image of the father inevitably connects the reader to the image of God, and also because the poem itself can be read as a prayer for a metaphorical delegation of powers not only from men, fathers of women, but also from God. The woman-speaker of the poem addresses the father in his several incarnations: as warrior-father and as a shepherd-father (a straight-forward biblical allusion), but she also speaks to “the million living fathers of the War” (Meynell 189). The opening stanza of the poem reads:

Our father works in us,
The daughters of his manhood. Not undone
Is he, not wasted, though transmuted thus,
And though he left no son.
(Meynell 188)

The first line of the stanza is an allusion to the Bible: “But now, O LORD, thou *art* our father; we *are* the clay, and thou our potter; and we all *are* the work of thy hand” (King James Bible, Isaiah 64:8). The fact that the poem is so rooted in the Bible as a symbol of traditional culture implies the idea that the patriarchal culture has a history of thousands of years, and starts as early as the Bible can trace. The war changed the order of the world, and now the women have to take charge of the world on their own, but for that they need a permission and acknowledgement of the symbol of this history and old hierarchy. This explains the address to God, as well as it explains the following stanzas, in which the female speaker asks the Father to change her, to give her the power to be in charge, as his daughter.

Ironically, the middle section of the poem also might be read in parallel with the famous Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy from William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Macbeth*. The intonation of it, the cry for strength, as in “For my delicate mind a casque, / A breastplate for my heart, courage to die” (Meynell 188), is in many ways similar to the following lines: “Make thick my blood. / Stop up the access and passage to

remorse” (Shakespeare Act 1, Scene 5). Both characters are about to take up a task which is naturally or historically against their abilities, or what is seen by the society as the abilities which they have as women. However, as if to counterpart the heavy Lady Macbethian connotation, in the next stanza the new daughter of men asks for something quite different to counterpart her new strength: “Not strengthen only [...] let thy tenderness / a while pause, and prevail” (Meynell 188). The new woman of Meynell, similarly to the character of the Cannan’s poem, wants to rule the new world not with strength, but with tenderness. The fact that the desire for tenderness appears so strongly in two poems only proves how lost in the violence of war the world seemed at the time.

One of the following stanzas of the poem also speaks of equality that the daughters of men deserve, it is, however, not a granted equality, given from men, but inner equality, granted by God: “Crush in my nature the ungenerous art / Of the inferior; set me high, and here, / Here garner up thy heart.” (Meynell 188-9). According to Meynell’s poem, the inequality and inferiority with time has become the part of women’s nature. The last line is particularly important: Meynell’s woman will be worthy of Father’s heart only when the sense of inferiority women lived with for thousands of years would finally be crushed in them.

The final part of the poem makes a significant shift: from the Father in a religious, biblical sense to the fathers of the world, or, as Meynell puts it, to the fathers of the War:

The million living fathers of the War —
Mourning the crippled world, the bitter day —

Whose striplings are no more
The crippled world! Come then,

Fathers of women with your honour in trust;
Approve, accept, know them daughters of men,

Now that your sons are dust.
(Meynell 189)

Those fathers appear quite different from the Father of the first part. Firstly, the emphasis is made on “living fathers of the war” who are opposed to “your sons are dust”, moreover, they are not represented as fathers of their sons, but they are “fathers of the war” – as if they were not worthy of their sons, therefore they do not appear together in the same word combination. Such a positioning makes it seem

these people are to blame for the war itself and for all the deaths it brought about. It is also essential that they are represented as “mourning the crippled world”, doing an action which is passive, but also in traditional cultures most commonly attributed to female lamentation. Therefore, those fathers appear emasculated and unable to take any action, and the only thing they can do now, as a metaphorical, or even religious purification, is to accept the new role of women, to accept them as “daughters of men”.

The final line of the poem, “now that your sons are dust” (Ibid.), makes the reader understand that women do not necessarily want this authority and power, it is not their seizure of power, but according to Meynell, they rather accept it as a burden, because there is no one else to take it. And the fathers of men, who sent their sons to die on the front, have to acknowledge the women as their new heirs, and the new heirs of the world.

Versions of “victorious femininity” of all the women poets have a lot in common, but sense of a mission, often with a religious connotation, prevails in all of them. It is also not necessarily an exuberant or easy mission, as will be discussed in more detail on the examples from the poetry of Jessie Pope. The new women’s mission of keeping and preserving the world in peace is often represented as a burden, if not a religious sacrifice, which is closer to Alice Meynell’s poem. Therefore, for some women poets, there was not too much of a “victory” in their “victorious femininity”.

5.2 The Nurse: Serving to Rule

In women’s war poetry of the Great War, there is one image which epitomizes “victorious femininity” in a very peculiar way: the image of a nurse. Even out of the literary context the nurse was still a very peculiar image: for many women nursing was the only way to experience the actual warfare; not by taking part in combat, but by directly helping those who did. Some of those women were poets and writers, including May Sinclair, Vera Brittain, Eva Dobell, and May Wedderburn Cannan (Stout 59-60). Janis Stout describes the poetry that came out of their observations as written “with striking directness, [...] emphasizing the suffering they witnessed in hospitals and dressing stations” (Stout 60). Those poems “combine traditional feminine roles of care-giving with the newer roles entailing women’s actual presence near the front” (Stout 62). The combination of two creates the most peculiar

sentiment in most of those poems: grief and sympathy for the sufferings of the soldiers went hand in hand with excitement of the new role (Ibid.). This mixture of feelings represented in poetry makes the image of a nurse particularly important when it comes to the gender conflict in the times of war.

In *Sexchanges* Sandra Gilbert analyzes the image of a nurse both in and out of literature, and comes up with a conclusion that “even the most conventionally angelic of women’s wartime ministrations [...] may well have implied to many members of both sexes that while men were now unreal ghosts, wounded, invalid, and maybe invalid, their sisters were triumphant survivors and apparently destined inheritors” (Gilbert, *Gubar Vol.2* 285). For the soldiers, emasculated and literally demobilized by their traumatic experience of war, nurses represented “sinister power” (Gilbert 436). Coming from war, where male soldiers were subjects of action, a grammatical “I” or at least “we”, they suddenly became “medical objects” (Gilbert 435), while women had total control over their bodies. This control was also somehow sexual: as Sandra Gilbert explains, for many of the nurses their new wartime activity became a proper “sex education” (Gilbert, *Gubar Vol.2* 290). A quotation from Vera Brittain illustrates Gilbert’s point: “Short of actually going to bed with them, there was hardly an intimate service that I did not perform for one or another... and I [am] still thankful for the knowledge of masculine functioning which care of them gave me” (Brittain, 165). This “sex education” was not acquired through sex and was not consensual, as seen in the quotation above, moreover, it did not require any action on the male behalf. It is presented as almost a biological observation of a body, dehumanized and de-individualized. This passive position of being observed this way, and separation of “male functioning” from the person is nothing short of sexual objectification.

In self-representation, however, nurse was still a “restorative” (Gilbert, *Gubar Vol.2* 286) rather than destructive image: “The nurses imagined by women appear to be purely restorative [...] they seem to want only to bring peace to their men; more important, they seem positively maternal” (Ibid.). However, for some reason, or even perhaps unintentionally, there is a certain ominous feeling about the image of the nurse in the poems written by women.

One of the poets who wrote extensively about nurses and nursing is Eva Dobell. *Gramophone Tunes* is one of those poems which express, intentionally or not, female excitement about their new mission. The poem starts as an unusual description of

ease and enjoyment rather than suffering of the patients: “The patients listen at their ease / Through clouds of strong tobacco-smoke: / The gramophone can always please.” (Reilly 31). For the same reasons, there is no mention of war in the first stanza, as if it was left behind the doors of the ward. The next two stanzas continue with the description of how the injured men listen to the music:

Jock with his crutches beats the time;
The gunner, with his head close-bound,
Listens with puzzled, patient smile:
(Shell-shock – he cannot hear a sound)
The others join in from their beds,
And send the chorus rolling round.
(Reilly 31)

All those men, when listening to the music, are defined by their inabilities: the soldier “with shattered arm / Picks out the records he must play” (Ibid.), or as in the lines above, the man who cannot walk taps the beat with the instrument which defines his inability, or the man, who throughout the war had to listen to the endless sounds of shooting guns, tries to listen to the music, and yet is unable to “hear a sound” (Ibid.). This representation of the injured men is, on the one hand, opposing the ease of the first stanza, but is also almost ironic: the speaker of the poem wants to represent them as if their wounds, their weaknesses define them. Also quite importantly, the only moving subject in the ward is the sound of music: it travels through the ward, while the disabled men are only capable to “send the chorus rolling round” (Ibid.). The “travelling” music emphasizes the immobility of the patients. In the last stanza of the poem the nurse, absent as a subject of speech in the previous stanzas, suddenly appears:

Somehow for me these common tunes
Can never sound the same again:
They’ve magic now to thrill my heart
And bring before me, clear and plain,
Man that is master of his flesh,
And has the laugh of death and pain.
(Reilly 31)

The words of the nurse represent all the complication of the image of the nurse mentioned earlier. The music for the nurse now has a certain “magic” that “thrill[s]” her heart, reminding of her work in the ward, even though she was surrounded by suffering men. She then goes on to define the reason of her excitement: “Man that is master of his flesh” (Ibid.). This line in a context of war sounds ominously ironic: the war itself was a representation of something completely opposite, of how a human-

being is a master of nothing at all, and in the trenches the last thing he could take care of was his own body. In the ward they are also put into a situation where they are only masters of their beds; this message comes quite clearly from the description of all the men in the ward as disabled, disarmed and immobile from the previous stanza. In the ward, the nurse becomes the master of somebody else's flesh. Such interpretation may explain the nurse's thrill, and it also adds to all the complications behind the nurse image.

Another poem on the subject of nursing is *An Incident* by Mary Henderson. It looks at the image of a nurse from a religious perspective, which in the poem also becomes the integral part in the construction of their "victorious femininity". The poem is built on a connection between the daily and the sacred, the routine and the religious. For instance, this is how the second stanza reads:

I was making tea in the tent where they,
The wounded, came in their agony;
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 the spoon or cup,
And I fed him... Mary, Mother of God,
All women tread where thy have trod.
(Reilly 52).

The routine activities, as "making tea in the tent", and the specific objects, as "spoon or cup" are put together with words from higher, religious register, as "agony", "tread where thy have trod" (Ibid.). Firstly, this interaction of registers uplifts the routine, gives it a higher level of significance. But it also goes the other way round: this way the sacred is brought closer to the earthly activities and objects. This connection of registers also changes the status of both men and women in the poem. Men's war wounds become sacrificial wounds similar to the wounds of Christ, also in the first stanza: "His boy hands, wounded more pitifully / Than Thine, O Christ, on Calvary" (Ibid.). "The trope of a soldier as Christ, suffering because of the sins of the world" (Stout 142) is one of the "regular convention[s] of World War I poetry" (Stout 23). In this poem the religious context is broadened by the comparison of the nurse to the Mother of God.

The emphasis on the "maternal" quality of the nurse is made from the very beginning of the poem: the wounded soldier is never represented as a warrior, but only as a boy: "he was just a boy", "his boy hands", "the boy turned" (Reilly 52). Importantly, this image is different from the boy of propagandist poetry. In those

poems men are “downgraded” into boys so that they correspond to the activity they are urged to take part in: when war is a game, it is not men who take part, but boys (Stout 7). The boy in *An Incident* is not a boy taking part in the game anymore, but rather someone’s boy, someone’s son – Mother’s son. This diminutive naming also implies that the soldier is *taken care of* by the image of a nurse as a universal mother-figure, a collective image which includes every mother (“for each son of man is a son divine / Not just to the mother who calls him mine” (Ibid..)), as well as the Mother of God.

Even though the representation of the soldier as a boy here is made out of a good cause, it also implies another meaning: a boy as inexperienced, young, and helpless, as opposed to a mother-nurse who is wise, active, and protective. In terms of those implications, the image of a nurse holds a superior position.

As seen from the poems discussed above, the image of a nurse has many complications, which sometimes appear in the texts unintentionally. Yet this image represents the gender war with all its complexities: a woman who rules a man by serving him. The poems by Eva Dobell and Mary Henderson approach the image differently: in Dobell’s poem the image of a nurse is an accompanying image in a casual scene, which is focused on the inabilities of the wounded soldiers, while Mary Henderson by adding religious connotations to the image definitely puts the nurse in the centre of attention.

5.3 Jingo-Woman: Jessie Pope

Even today Jessie Pope is considered to be one of the most notorious poets of the war time, and in some ways it is her “fault” that women were excluded from the war canon: while thousands of men were dying on the front, she was the one writing propagandist poetry convincing more men to enlist. As Nosheen Khan describes her, “chauvinists like Jessie Pope could seize upon any situation in order to celebrate British pluck” (Khan 28). For some reason, she became an archetypical image of a women poet, who, although safe at home, cynically promotes the values of the war and the battlefield. One of the most outrageous works is, for instance, *The One-Legged Soldier Man*, with the lines which read “Another leg they’ll find him, / For the one he left behind him” (qtd. in Williams 197). Williams calls this attitude “crashing cynicism” (Williams 197). This poem exudes indifference and almost

playful attitude towards the body of a soldier, who is represented almost like a plastic toy, every part of which is potentially replaceable. The grammar of “leg he left behind him” is also a cynical and sadistic vision of almost a voluntary action, a decision made by the soldier himself, to leave his leg on the battlefield.

One of the most important features that have to be taken into consideration when analyzing Pope’s poetry, Michael Williams claims, is the fact that out of war Jessie Pope was a noticeable children’s poet and writer (Williams 194, 197). For instance, before the war (1908) her *The Little Soldier Book* was published as a children’s book, with poems that accompany the drawings of “angelic little children dressed in the national military costumes” (Williams 198). Here is an example of how the texts in the book look like:

This is not, as you might suppose,
A dancing girl that points her toes.
It is a fierce and fighting Greek,
In spite of looking rather meek.
Although he wears a frilly skirt,
I’m sure his bayonet would hurt.
(qtd. in Williams 198)

This intonation of a children’s poet – talking from the position of a grown-up, or a position of authority, a parenting, explanatory intonation – remained in Jessie Pope’s war poetry for adults. In fact, there seems to be no gap at all between her children’s work and her propagandist poetry: this is, perhaps, her biggest fault and failure, and this gives grounds to many critics to call her work immoral. It is also very unfortunate in the way propagandistic poetry always uses “the rendering of men as boys and of the grim business of war as sport” (Stout 7). In this sense, Pope was perfect for the part of the main propagandist; she already had the necessary language at hand. The child-like quality of her verse which comes through in her simple language, straightforward rhymes and catchy rhythms is obvious in most of her poetry on the subject of war. One of the most famous examples of her war poetry is a poem called *The Call*:

Who’s for the khaki suit –
Are you, my laddie?
Who longs to charge and shoot –
Do you, my laddie?
Who’s keen on getting fit,
Who means to show his grit,
And who’d rather wait a bit –
Would you, my laddie?
(Reilly 88)

The appeal towards the soldier as “laddie” is deliberately diminutive, creating the position of authority. All the elements of warfare are portrayed as a part of some game, or a sport, especially the line “who’s keen on getting fit” (Ibid.) as if war was simply a sportive exercise meant to develop their strength. Representation of war as fun is also meant to humiliate those who do not want to take part in the war in a childlike manner (“and who’d rather wait a bit” (Ibid.)): they do not want to take part in the game, which also means they are excluded from “laddies” of the poem, emasculated by their decision. It is also important that every appeal within the poem is accompanied by a personal pronoun “my”, thus also implying a personal relation between the speaker and the soldier. Those who do not enlist, therefore, also become cut off from this personal affection of the opposite sex. All this makes the poem one of the most straightforward examples of why gender war came to be. This kind of “victorious femininity” is very different from the poems analyzed earlier: it is diminutive and humiliating.

One of Pope’s poems that deals with “victorious femininity” on a very basic, explicit level is another famous work of hers, *War Girls*, a propaganda piece aimed at women workers of the home front. The poem consists of two stanzas; each of the two can be further on divided into three sections: first four lines describing the unusual new tasks women have to do (“There’s the motor girl who drives a heavy van, / There’s the butcher girl, who brings your joint of meat” (Reilly 90)) followed by five lines of praise and approval (“Strong, sensible, and fit, / They’re out to show their grit” (Ibid.)), and then the final refrain same in both stanzas “Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back” (Ibid.). This refrain is the only way the war appears in the text of the poem at all. By presenting another world, the refrain also serves as a meaningful opposition towards the previous development of the stanza, as if saying the women have all those new tasks to tackle for as long as the war is happening; however, when the war is over they have to return to their old place in the society. If so, the poem serves quite well to represent the mood not so uncommon among the working women of the time. In *Sexchanges* Sandra Gilbert quotes David Mitchell, who writes that “when the time came for demobilization, [many women] wept at the ending of what they now saw as the happiest and most purposeful days of their lives” (Mitchell; qtd. in Gilbert, *Gubar* Vol.2 276). Intentionally or not, Pope managed to reflect the temporary character of the change in women’s position in her poem.

War Girls shares the same intonation of excitement most Pope's war poems exude. However, the excitement of *War Girls* is only the temporary excitement of wartime. The last three lines of the first stanza read: "No longer caged and penned up, / They're going to keep their end up / Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back" (in *Scars Upon My Heart* 90). The metaphor of being freed from their cage also has its limits: "till" of the last line presupposes the cage would be closed again and the liberation would be over as soon as the soldiers come to take their work places back. So even in a poem of a war propagandist, the victory of the feminine does not seem to last.

However straightforwardly propagandist, Pope was hugely popular at the time, not only among publishers and newspapers, who published her excessively to keep up the morale both at the front and at the home front, but also among the soldiers (Khan 18-19, Williams 195-197). Having said that, it is important to add she was also heavily criticized by some of her literary contemporaries, both male and female. Among many was one of the most influential soldier-poet Wilfred Owen: his poem *Dulce et Decorum Est*, in which he accuses the propagandists of their preaching "the old Lie: Dulce et Decorum est, / Pro patria mori" (Owen; qtd. in Khan 19), first had a dedication "to Jessie Pope, etc.", which in another draft changed into "to a Certain Poetess", but then, according to Michael Williams, had to be removed under the pressure of editors (Williams 196-197). One of the female poets of the time, Helen Hamilton, also makes a poetic criticism of women propagandists like Pope in a poem *Jingo-woman*, in which the speaker accuses the jingo-woman of "mak[ing] all women seem such duffers" (Reilly 48), and at some point even threatens to "wring [her] neck" (Ibid.). Although the latter is many times less delicate than Owen's poem, there is definitely a shared sentiment in both works.

Jessie Pope's poetry lost its propagandist significance today, and represents little artistic value (Stout, Khan, Williams); however, it is important to analyze her work in order to create a meaningful contrast between propagandist poetry and the other kind of women's poetry of war, which is not only filled with deep feeling and contemplation, but also presents their artistry.

The poems analyzed in this chapter all focus, one way or another, on the gender issues which became palpable during the times of war. Those poems were never included into the canon for reasons that are quite easy to explain: they represent the gender complexities and contradictions, and considering the scale of the Great War

the gender war with its “victims” is inevitably secondary to the primary losses of the front. The women poets in this chapter also represent, quite often unintentionally, the “victorious femininity” in the times of the catastrophic crisis of masculinity. Perhaps, this is where another reason for their exclusion from the canon is to be found: such a poetic “disgrace” could be seen as morally unacceptable; as if the poems which reveal ambiguity of the gender positions somehow offend the memory of those men who died. The moral aspect of war poetry canon is problematic, and it certainly plays its role in why the canon is reluctant to developing and enriching itself in new ways. The moral factor is hard to overcome partly because the subject of the First World War is still incredibly sensitive. However, the poetry of the gender war has to be acknowledged: the gender aspects in men’s writing appear as strongly as in women’s (for examples see Gilbert, *Gubar Vol.2* 258-323), yet the male voice is so dominant in the canon that it inevitably creates bias and misrepresentation of women.

6. Representing the Front:

How to Overcome the Dichotomy of Home and Front

The gap of understanding between men and women was growing as the gender war went on, and during the time of the First World War it could only become wider, as it became geographical, with men being sent to the battlefield and women staying at home. Susan Kent calls this condition “dichotomy of home and front” (Kent 248). In her memoirs *Testament of Youth* Vera Brittain describes her personal experience of separation caused by the war as the “fear that the War would come between us – as, indeed, with time the War always did, putting a barrier of indescribable experience between men and the women they loved... Quite early I realised this possibility of a permanent impediment to understanding” (Brittain 143). Brittain’s “barrier of indescribable experience” (Ibid.) is an important expression because it brings together the verbal and the non-verbal, representation of the event and the event itself. The fact that Brittain refers to the war experience as “indescribable” implies that it is impossible to speak or write about without having a first-hand access to it. The gap between home and front, therefore, seems not only gendered and geographic, but also verbal.

However, the fact that the war experience is seen as indescribable does not only imply that women are unable to understand it; but, quite ironically, that the soldiers

are unable to communicate it to the public as well. The reader is then supposed to mirror the experience of a poet, to have a corresponding experience in his private life to “decode” all the “indescribable” meanings hidden in their writing (Campbell 203-204). And this is impossible at least because the First World War was the first experience of this kind in the history of the world. The experience of war seen from this perspective becomes a completely uncommunicative kind of knowledge which can only be shared among those who already have it, almost an argot. This makes writing on the subject of war seem completely pointless, because literary communication, as any form of communication, requires an addresser, a message, and an addressee, and if an addressee is not capable of decoding the message, the communication fails. Poetry, overtly or covertly, as soon as written and published is directed at a reader, who, according to this position of “indescribable experience”, has no chances at appreciating war poetry at all.

However, men have written about their battlefield experiences extensively and successfully, which means their experience was not so “indescribable” after all. The point is, again, that they managed to do so because their artistic work does not relate directly to their experience, which is inevitably reshaped and refracted through the poetic representation.

Many women poets in their poetry represented this sharp sense of division of home and front: the image of “a girl left behind” is one of the most conventional images of war poetry. It is also one of the few themes that have actually been accepted in the canon from the very start, as if position of mourning and lamentation for a woman in the times of war is preferable. However, few women poets went the other way: they tried to fill the gap of “indescribable experience” by their own take on battlefield poetry. These poems are usually most frowned upon, as tasteless, hypocritical, or even blasphemous. Even some of the feminist scholars, when discussing those poems, change their intonation to somewhat apologetic: for instance, Nosheen Khan, whose *Women’s Poetry of the First World War* has a paragraph on women’s representation of the battle, in between her analyses writes that “the complexities of trench life fall outside [women poets] range” (Khan 21). However, if well-written, those poems could potentially be the best texts to counter the primacy of experience in the war poetry. Women’s battlefield poetry might be the most progressive and productive way to renew the canon.

One of the poets who wrote about the imagined experience of the battlefield is Constance Renshaw. When her book *England's Boys* came out, the review in the *Bookman* applauded “her expertise, though expressing surprise that, as a woman, she has been able to capture realistically the feelings of men at the Front” (Khan 21). One of the poems from this collection, *All Quiet on the Western Front* is written from soldiers’ perspective, yet it is not an individualized “I” of a certain soldier, but the collective “we”. The title of the poem refers to a “dismissive, all-embracing newspaper headline and a commonplace of official reports” (Khan 22). The line is repeated in the poem three times, and the rest of the text is meant to oppose it. This line, with its newspaper and report connotations represents the home front, and also the way the information about the front travels back to Great Britain. The poet wants to oppose the process of reducing the facts to one simple and meaningless line by the actual meaning that stands behind it:

“All quiet on the Western Front.” The foe is
Is firm entrenched near our lengthening lines.
They have placed their guns and laid their deep designs,
And built their bomb-proof shelters.
(Renshaw 9)

Renshaw opposes the “quietness” of the front seen from the outside by the feeling of suspense experienced by the soldiers: for them, the quietness does not represent peace, but the anticipation of a new sound. This silence, as in the stanza above, is a frightened attempt to find out what the enemy is doing now: when the enemy is loud, there is no need for wondering; in quietness there is uncertainty for the soldiers. Even the objects lying still around the trenches, the fragments of shells and mines, serve as a constant reminder of the sound that comes with them, for instance in “shells that sing and hiss and glow” (Ibid.). This anxious anticipation is represented as endless also with the help of punctuation and specific separation of one sentence into several lines, as in “Numbed grow / Our aching limbs, and deadly grim and slow / the weary hours and days” (Ibid.). The punctuation division with a comma happens in the middle of the line, while the end of the line has no punctuation marks. In terms of intonation it means that there is no stop for a breath in between, that one line goes straight into another. This kind of intonation helps to support the semantics of the line: the time which goes “grim and slow” (Ibid.), accumulating into hours and days, becomes audible.

The most important image connected with sound appears in the end of the second stanza: “We know that some of us, with stern face set, / Will be among the morrow’s silent one’s / yet... ‘all is quiet on the Western Front!’” (Renshaw 9). The quietness that is seen from outside as the sign of peace and order, from this side of the front also has a direct connection with death, “will be among the morrow’s silent one’s” (Ibid.). In this poem, words “silent” and “quiet”, which would normally act as synonyms, become the complete opposites of each other. This opposition on the linguistic level shows how deep the misunderstanding between home and front is. Even words change their meaning while travelling from Western Front back home. Ironically, this observation made by a woman without combat experience seems to be a perfect representation of the “barrier of indescribable experience” (Brittain 143).

Another piece dealing with a similar issue is a three-line poem by May Herschel-Clarke titled *Nothing to Report*. It also deals with this transformation of information which happens through time and space between the combat and home. Here is how it reads:

One minute we was laughin’, me an’ Ted,
The next, he lay beside me grinnin’ – dead.
‘There’s nothin’ to report,’ the papers said.
(Reilly 55)

Despite, or, perhaps, due to being so short, this is a very delicate and clever poem; it is also very personal. On the explicit level, the personal effect is achieved simply by the fact the dead person is not referred to as “a soldier”, but by his first name “Ted”. More importantly, the language of the small poem is personalized with the help of grammar mistakes and colloquial reduction “we was laughin’”, or “he lay beside me grinnin’” (Ibid.).

The intonation of the poem on its own is very neutral; it has no evaluative adjectives, no epithets or metaphors, the rhyming is very simple and the rhythm does not make any shifts within those three lines. Yet the poem manages to unfold a little story because the reader can get the sense of a speaker being present. Because of this personal touch, the first two lines create such a strong opposition to the last one. It literally de-personalizes “Ted” into “nothing”. Khan describes it as “the individual human tragedy which goes unnoticed and uncomprehended” (Khan 22). The loss of human life suddenly becomes too small, unnecessary to report: this is a drawback of what Margaret and Patrice Higonnet call a “history of event” (Higonnet et al. 46), the masculinist way of categorizing history into events. With such an approach, only big-

scale events get the attention, and human life in those events is reduced to “nothing” in the eventual report.

The poem *From a Trench* by Maud Anna Bell is written as a first-person narrative of a soldier. As well as the previous poems discussed in this chapter, the poem is based on the principle of “the dichotomy of home and front” (Kent 248), but in this case it is rather an actual distance than the metaphoric one: it is an opposition of an actual location and “nowhere”, “No Man’s Land” of the front. The soldier in the trench is thinking of the crocuses blossoming back home in Nottingham. The definite location of home is opposed to an uncertain location at the front: the speaker only defines it by an adverb “here”. The location is specified only by his presence in it, but it has no other territorial features. It creates the feeling of being lost, being somewhere without clear knowing. Importantly, the space of the battlefield also has no time features: the fact the crocuses are in bloom in Nottingham defines the time of the year back home, but at the front the natural environment is ruined and is unable to provide the soldiers with such information. This opposition appears already in the first stanza:

Across the spoilt and battered fields
We hear their sobbing breath.
The fields where grew the living corn
Are heavy with our dead;
Yet still the fields at home are green
And I have heard it said:

That –
There are crocuses at Nottingham!
Wild crocuses at Nottingham!
Blue crocuses at Nottingham!
(Reilly 10).

The lines describing crocuses in the parallel exclamatory constructions repeat throughout the poem in a song-like motive, creating an almost obsessive repetition. However, each time the adjectives defining the flowers change. The last adjective of the poem seems to be the most important one; the last emphasis of the poem is being made on the “realness” of those flowers back home: “Real crocuses at Nottingham!” (Ibid.). It implies that Nottingham in the poem represents certainty – geographical, natural, seasonal, – in spite of being so distant. To the soldier it seems much more real than the place he finds himself in at the moment of speaking: the space of the battlefield is rather a surreal, a phantasmagoric space. This is why it is also described with particularly grim metaphors, as in “Out here the dogs of war run loose, / Their

whipper-in is Death” or “We live in holes, like cellar rats” (Ibid.). As if opposing this uncertainty and chaos, the only descriptive elements when referring to Nottingham are those simple epithets mentioned above. The contrast is also achieved syntactically; the simple exclamatory sentences referring to home are opposed by the long and complex sentences describing the battlefield.

The unnatural space of the battlefield is also represented through colours: “though here the grass is red”, “But here we trample down the grass / Into a purple slime” (Ibid.). The violent and tense colours of the battlefield are meant to oppose the natural green and blue of the “wild crocuses at Nottingham” (Ibid.). The fact that the flower serves as a symbol of home for the soldier is also meant to emphasize the contrast between the natural situation of living back at home and the unnaturalness of the front.

The last stanza of the poem, although repeating the pattern that has been set from the start, might also serve as an accusation of those who lead a comparatively peaceful existence at home:

Why!
There are crocuses at Nottingham!
Bright crocuses at Nottingham!
Real crocuses at Nottingham!
Because we're here in Hell.
(Reilly 11)

Firstly, only by the end of the poem the space where the speaker is located actually becomes specified as “Hell”, which then explains the allegories and the metaphors of “dogs of war” and “Death” as their “whipper-in” (Ibid.). However, more importantly than that, there appears to be a certain connection between home and front, which did not exist at all before the last stanza: a grammatical, causal relationship. The speaker believes that the reason the crocuses grow at home is the soldiers’ presence “here in Hell”, as if their sacrifice was needed for the natural order to be preserved back home. It might be read as an accusation for those who are able to enjoy the life at the home front despite the war; but it might also be an acceptance of this self-sacrifice, almost a religious sacrifice, for the purpose of the world to carry on. The tragedy behind those lines makes the poem sound hopeless despite the playful song-like repetitive rhythm.

By contemplating on a subject of the battlefield experience, the women poets whose work was analyzed in this chapter attempt to mend the gap between home and front, which they perhaps felt with the similar fear described by Vera Brittain.

However, all of them acknowledge the existence of the gap in their works – a gap which becomes not only geographical, but also verbal, and, so to say, existential, as a gap between life and death. They are curious to find out how the front feels like, and they can do so only with the help of their poetry. These poems prove that experience is only secondary to creative process – in war poetry as well as any other type of poetry, – while contemplation and imagination, reflected in language, is the key. Therefore, good women’s poetry about battlefield experience could serve as the best antidote to the obsession of the war poetry canon with experience. When it comes to real poetry, nothing can be treated as “indescribable”.

7. Conclusion

This thesis focused on the existing misconceptions of primacy of war experience which have been forming war poetry canon for almost a century, and tried to prove, both in theory and practice, that those misconceptions harm the canon by refusing from it the poetry written by women – poetry of high artistic merit.

War in general is a very complex subject to talk or write about: twentieth century with its tragedies made people particularly sensitive to representation of war in various media, including art. When it comes to poetry on the subject of war, it is believed by many scholars, publishers and editors that authentic war poetry has to be written out of actual war experience. This approach was called “combat gnosticism” (Campbell 203), and it has been ruling in the literary field for almost a century, de facto reducing “war poetry” to “battlefield poetry”.

This thesis argued that the primacy of experience in war poetry brought about two current problems of the canon: almost a religious canonization of soldier poets, whose work is seen as the only authentic voice of war; and exclusion of women poets, who had no direct access to the battlefield, and whose works are therefore seen as inferior to the poetry of soldier poets. With the help of literary theory, this thesis tried to prove that the primacy of experience in the war poetry canon is inadequate because it makes a judgment on the work of art based on non-artistic criteria. It means that good poetry gets excluded from the canon for reasons which have nothing to do with its artistic qualities.

Primacy of experience dominates not only academia, but also the publishing world: the research has shown that most contemporary war anthologies still generally

ignore women's writing on the subject of war. In this thesis the inconsistency of the argument of primacy of experience was also proved by analysis of several introductions from the important war poetry anthologies. The arguments the editors choose to explain their selection of poetry as representative while excluding women's writing are often illogical and suggest confusion. It could mean that the editors themselves are influenced by "over-canonization" of trench poets. It leaves little room for variety and contemplation on the actual criteria that could make war poetry canon inclusive rather than exclusive.

This thesis made an attempt to disregard the categories of experience, authenticity and authority in close reading of fifteen works by British women poets.

The first group of poems analyzed in the thesis were poems representing disorder. In women's poetry disorder appears on many levels of meaning: from the most basic disruption of routine to a global, macrocosmic disruption of world order; from disorder on the linguistic level to artistic images and symbols. But what is common in many of them is that women choose to represent disorder from the perspective of time: in their poems, war in the first place appears as a disruption of continuity. It is true about poems by Nina Macdonald and Margaret Postgate Cole. This feature relates to a specific vision of "feminine history", represented by duration rather than separate events. In some of the poems the break in continuity becomes internalized as a personal disease related to age and time: war with its overwhelming experiences seen as changing the natural, biological time. This is one of the reoccurring motives in Margaret Postgate Cole's works. This view on war deserves its place in the canon because it represents a peculiar women's way to speak about disorder. It is not a historical view on disorder, but the one that goes beyond experiences and historical events; in a way, it is disorder that goes beyond the war itself.

This thesis also focused on another important reason behind female exclusion from the war poetry canon: the gender conflict of the First World War often referred to as "the gender war". The gender issues of the time became particularly critical: while men were trying to survive in the trenches, women at home were experiencing an unprecedented change in gender roles, being allowed to jobs previously occupied by men. This new role in society brought about female exhilaration, which contrasted so greatly to the condition of men at the front that it inevitably caused tensions between the sexes. While the male position on female "conquest" is presented in the

canon, the female voice and female perspective on the problematic gender issues did not manage to get it.

The second group of poems analyzed in the thesis proves that poetry on war and gender written by women skillfully represents complex and ambiguous issues. Women represented their “victorious femininity” in various ways: May Wedderburn Cannan and Alice Meynell speak of inheriting the world that had been faulted by men – both a burden and a victory; others, for example, Eva Dobell, represent it with the help of the image of a nurse – the image that is itself full of complexity and gender ambiguity. In this thesis those complex representations are opposed by simplified poetry of jingoist Jessie Pope, who became a collective image of “victorious femininity” in the canon – which is unfair to a different kind of women’s poetry, which represents the gender tension in a much more delicate and skillful way.

The last group of works considered in this thesis was the battlefield poetry written by women. It is the most straightforward counter-argument to the primacy of experience in war poetry: women are capable of writing battlefield poetry without any battlefield experience, and they have done so with artistic merit. Some of those poets, including Constance Renshaw and May Herschel-Clarke, focus, among other issues, on the gap between home and front; their poetry is a way to fill this gap with their imagination and contemplation.

There are several issues which would be analyzed in detail during further research on the subject of women’s poetry of war and war poetry canon. Firstly, it is essential to consider how the canon of war poetry had been formed, and whether the so-called celebrity culture had a lot to do with the canonization of male soldier poets. If so, it would give more insight into the bias towards experience. Secondly, it is important to see how the image of “the girl left behind” was constructed in both men’s and women’s poetry, and how with time it became the only acceptable role for women poets in the canon. Thirdly, the focus of further research would primarily be the battlefield poetry written by women as the most radical way to counter the primacy of experience.

In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* Jon Silkin, talking about the poetry of the Great War, mentions an important point: “The language of that war is still very much ours; the value system inhering in the language of those poets remains the basis of our value system” (Silkin 16). It means

that the poetry of the First World War is still relevant for the contemporary culture, and the current image of the war (that particular war, as well as warfare in general) is still formed by the texts which are almost one hundred years old. This is exactly why the canon has to be taken care of – especially if the principles that have been initially put in the centre of it represent a serious logical mistake. It does not mean that the poetry of Owen, Sassoon and other soldier poets has to be excluded from the canon; it means that the current structure of the canon could be renewed and reevaluated, becoming more inclusive. The poetry of the First World War will only benefit from it, becoming a living, developing body of work, which people are able to question again. Within this body of work, women's voices tell their own story of war, and this story is worth listening to.

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9. Appendix: Women's Poetry of the First World War

NINA MACDONALD

Sing a Song of War-Time

Sing a song of War-Time,
Soldiers marching by,
Crowds of people standing,
Waving them 'Good-bye'.
When the crowds are over,
Home we go to tea,
Bread and margarine to eat,
War economy!

If I ask for cake, or
Jam of any sort,
Nurse says, 'What! in War-time?
Archie, cert'nly not!'
Life's not very funny
Now, for little boys,
Haven't any money,
Can't buy any toys.

Mummie does the house-work,
Can't get any maid,
Gone to make munitions,
'Cause they're better paid,
Nurse is always busy,
Never time to play,
Sewing shirts for soldiers,
Nearly ev'ry day.

Ev'ry body's doing
Something for the War,
Girls are doing things
They've never done before,
Go as 'bus conductors,
Drive a car or van,
All the world is topsy-turvy
Since the War began.

MARGARET POSTGATE COLE

Afterwards

Oh, my beloved, shall you and I
Ever be young again, be young again?
The people that were resigned said to me
-Peace will come and you will lie
Under the larches up in Sheer,
Sleeping,

And eating strawberries and cream and cakes –
 O cakes, O cakes, O cakes, from Fuller's!
And quite forgetting there's a train to town,
Plotting in an afternoon the new curves for the world.

And peace came. And lying in Sheer
I look round at the corpses of the larches
Whom they slew to make pit-props
For mining the coal for the great armies.
And think, a pit-prop cannot move in the wind,
Nor have red manes hanging in spring from its branches,
And sap making the warm air sweet.
Though you planted it out on the hill again it would be dead.

And if these years have made you into a pit-prop,
To carry the twisting galleries of the world's reconstruction
(Where you may thank God, I suppose
That they set you the sole stay of a nasty corner)
What use is it to you? What use
To have your body lying here
In Sheer, underneath the larches?

MARGARET POSTGATE COLE

The Veteran

We came upon him sitting in the sun,
 Blinded by war, and left. And past the fence
There came young soldiers from the Hand and Flower,
 Asking advice of his experience.

And he said this, and that, and told them tales,
 And all the nightmares of each empty head
Blew into air; then, hearing us beside,
 'Poor chaps, how'd they know what it's like?' he said.

And we stood there, and watched him as he sat,
 Turning his sockets where they went away,
Until it came to one of us to ask
 'And you're – how old?'
 'Nineteen, the third of May.'

MARGARET POSTGATE COLE

Praematuri

When men are old, and their friends die,
They are not so sad,
Because their love is running slow,
And cannot spring from the wound with so sharp a pain;
And they are happy with many memories,
And only a little while to be alone.

But we are young, and our friends are dead
Suddenly, and our quick love is torn in two;
So our memories are only hopes that came to nothing.
We are left alone like old men; we should be dead
– But there are years and years in which we shall still be young.

ELIZABETH DARYUSH

Subalterns

She said to once: ‘How glows
My heart at the hot thought
Of battle’s glorious throes!’
He said: ‘For us who fought
Are icy memories
That must for ever freeze
The sunny hours they bought.’

She said to one: ‘How light
Must be your freed heart now,
After the heavy fight!’
He said: ‘Well, I don’t know. . . .
The war gave one a shake,
Somehow, knocked one awake. . . .
Now, life’s so deadly slow.’

ISABEL C. CLARKE

Anniversary of the Great Retreat

Now a whole year has waxed and waned and whitened
Over the mounds that marked that grim advance;
The winter snows have lain, the spring flowers brightened,
On those beloved graves of Northern France.

Caudry, Le Cateau, Landrécies, are written
In our sad hearts with letters as of flame,
Where our young dead still lie, untimely smitten,
In graves still unredeemed that bear no name.

And those who saw them spoke of the ‘boy-faces’
The English soldiers wore; they heard them sing
As they went forth to their appointed places,
Who when night fell lay unremembering. . . .

O England, sing their fame in song and story,
Who knew Death’s victory not Life’s defeat;
Be their names written on thy roll of glory,
Who fought and perished in the Great Retreat!

These held thy high tradition in their keeping
This flower of all a nation’s youth and pride

And safe they hold it still in their last sleeping;
They heard thy call and answered it and died. . . .

And by those graves that mark their proud surrender
In days to come each one that lingereth
Shall sadly think of all their vanished splendour,
'Contemptible', but faithful unto death.

So we press forward, step by step redeeming
Each hallowed spot our dead have sanctified,
That we may whisper to them in their dreaming,
The Victory is ours because you died. . . .

MAY WEDDERBURN CANNAN
'Since They Have Died'

Since they have died to give us gentleness,
And hearts kind with contentment and quiet mirth,
Let us who live give also happiness
And love, that's born of pity, to the earth.

For, I have thought, some day they may lie sleeping
Forgetting all the weariness and pain,
And smile to think their world is in our keeping,
And laughter come back to the earth again.

ALICE MEYNELL
A Father of Women

Ad SOROREM E. B.
"Thy father was transfused into thy blood."

Dryden: Ode to Mrs. Anne Killigrew.

Our father works in us,

The daughters of his manhood. Not undone
Is he, not wasted, though transmuted thus,

And though he left no son.

Therefore on him I cry

To arm me: "For my delicate mind a casque,
A breastplate for my heart, courage to die,

Of thee, captain, I ask.

"Nor strengthen only; press

A finger on this violent blood and pale,
Over this rash will let thy tenderness

A while pause, and prevail.

“And shepherd-father, thou

Whose staff folded my thoughts before my birth,
Control them now I am of earth, and now

Thou art no more of earth.

“O liberal, constant, dear!

Crush in my nature the ungenerous art
Of the inferior; set me high, and here,

Here garner up thy heart.”

Like to him now are they,

The million living fathers of the War —
Mourning the crippled world, the bitter day —

Whose striplings are no more.

The crippled world! Come then,

Fathers of women with your honour in trust;
Approve, accept, know them daughters of men,

Now that your sons are dust.

EVA DOBELL

Gramophone Tunes

Through the long ward the gramophone
Grinds out its nasal melodies:
‘Where did you get that girl?’ it shrills.
The patients listen at their ease,
Through clouds of strong tobacco-smoke:
The gramophone can always please.

The Welsh boy has it by his bed,
(He’s lame – one leg was blown away).
He’ll lie propped up with pillows there,
And wind the handle half the day.
His neighbour, with the shattered arm,
Picks out the records he must play.

Jock with his crutches beats the time;
The gunner, with his head close-bound,
Listens with puzzled, patient smile:
(Shell-shock – he cannot hear a sound).

The others join in from their beds,
And send the chorus rolling round.

Somehow for me these common tunes
Can never sound the same again:
They've magic now to thrill my heart
And bring before me, clear and plain,
Man that is master of his flesh,
And has the laugh of death and pain.

MARY H. J. HENDERSON
An Incident

He was just a boy, as I could see,
For he sat in the tent there close by me.
I held the lamp with its flickering light,
And felt the hot tears blur my sight
As the doctor took the blood-stained bands
From both his brave, shell-shattered hands-
His boy hands, wounded more pitifully
Than Thine, O Christ, on Calvary.

I was making tea in the tent where they,
The wounded, came in their agony;
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 the spoon or cup,
And I fed him. . . . Mary, Mother of God,
All women tread where thy feet have trod.

And still on the battlefield of pain
Christ is stretched on His Cross again;
And the Son of God in agony hangs,
Womanhood striving to ease His pangs.
For each son of man is a son divine,
Not just to the mother who calls him 'mine',
As he stretches out his stricken hand,
Wounded to death for the Mother Land.

JESSIE POPE
The Call

Who's for the trench –
Are you, my laddie?
Who'll follow French –
Will you, my laddie?
Who's fretting to begin,
Who's going out to win?
And who wants to save his skin –

Do you, my laddie?

Who's for the khaki suit –
Are you, my laddie?
Who longs to charge and shoot –
Do you, my laddie?
Who's keen on getting fit,
Who means to show his grit,
And who'd rather wait a bit –
Would you, my laddie?

Who'll earn the Empire's thanks –
Will you, my laddie?
Who'll swell the victor's ranks –
Will you, my laddie?
When that procession comes,
Banners and rolling drums –
Who'll stand and bite his thumbs –
Will you, my laddie?

JESSIE POPE

War Girls

There's the girl who clips your ticket for the train,
And the girl who speeds the lift from floor to floor,
There's the girl who does a milk-round in the rain,
And the girl who calls for orders at your door.
Strong, sensible, and fit,
They're out to show their grit,
And tackle jobs with energy and knack.
No longer caged and penned up,
They're going to keep their end up
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back.

There's the motor girl who drives a heavy van,
There's the butcher girl who brings your joint of meat,
There's the girl who cries 'All fares, please!' like a man,
And the girl who whistles taxis up the street.
Beneath each uniform
Beats a heart that's soft and warm,
Though of canny mother-wit they show no lack;
But a solemn statement this is,
They've no time for love and kisses
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back.

CONSTANCE ADA RENSHAW

All Quiet On The Western Front

'All quiet on the Western Front.' The foe
Is firm entrenched near our lengthening lines.

They have placed their guns and laid their deep designs,
And built their bomb-proof shelters. Numbéd grow
Our aching limbs, and deadly grim and slow
The weary hours and days. . . . And yet the signs
Of death are round us, treacherous bursting mines,
And shattering shells that hiss and sing and glow.

‘All quiet on the Western Front’ – and yet
We keep untiring watch beside our guns,
The while Death hounds us down in tireless hunt.
We know that some of us, with stern face set,
Will be among the morrow’s silent ones.
Yet. . . . ‘all is quiet on the Western Front!’

MAY HERSCHEL-CLARKE

‘Nothing to Report’

One minute we was laughin’, me an’ Ted,
The next, he lay beside me grinnin’ – dead.
‘There’s nothin’ to report,’ the papers said.

MAUD ANNA BELL

From a Trench

Out here the dogs of war run loose,
 Their whipper-in is Death;
Across the spoilt and battered fields
 We hear their sobbing breath.
The fields where grew the living corn
 Are heavy with our dead;
Yet still the fields at home are green
 And I have heard it said:

 That –
There are crocuses at Nottingham!
Wild crocuses at Nottingham!
Blue crocuses at Nottingham!
Though here the grass is red.

There are little girls at Nottingham
 Who do not dread the Boche,
Young girls at school at Nottingham
 (Lord! how I need a wash!).
There are little boys at Nottingham
 Who never heard a gun;
There are silly fools at Nottingham
 Who think we’re here for fun.

 When –
There are crocuses at Nottingham!
Young crocus buds at Nottingham!

Thousands of buds at Nottingham
Ungathered by the Hun.

But here we trample down the grass
 Into a purple slime;
There lives no tree to give the birds
 House room in pairing-time.
We live in holes, like cellar rats,
 But through the noise and smell
I often see those crocuses
 Of which the people tell.

 Why!
There are crocuses at Nottingham!
Bright crocuses at Nottingham!
Real crocuses at Nottingham!
Because we're here in Hell.

Statutory Declaration

I hereby declare the following:

(1) that this work has never been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree, examination, or thesis; (2) that it is my own work; (3) that all the sources, including online sources, cited, reproduced, or referred to herein – especially the sources of quotations, images, and tables – have been acknowledged as such. With my signature, I acknowledge that any violation of these declarations will lead to an investigation for cheating or attempted cheating.

This thesis contains 19448 words.

Sofia Permiakova, Berlin, 31.12.2014