

VERBAL SCREENS AND MENTAL PETTICOATS: WOMEN'S WRITING OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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«You're still in mental pinafores. I don't suppose you were even aware of the War.»

She said unhappily: «I couldn't help it. Being too young and not being a man. I did *try* to imagine it.»

«Imagine!» he said bitterly. «I've seen things you *couldn't* imagine»¹.

«Never such innocence again», the last line of Philip Larkin's poem *MCMXIV*, has become almost a cliché in the literary mythology of World War I². Since so few are now alive who could possibly remember the Great War or the men who died in it, on Remembrance Sunday most of us are remembering nothing, merely imagining. If we are nostalgically imagining Larkin's picture of stable, contented, well-ordered society, destroyed by war, we are choosing to ignore the evidence of pre-war instability and conflict: the troubles in Ireland, the disruption caused by riots in Wales and a general strike in Liverpool, the violence in London in response to the campaign for women's suffrage³. If we allow ourselves to picture pre-First World War England as a rural Garden of Eden, as Orwell portrayed it in *Coming Up for Air*, we are falling back into the pastoral myth of the pre-1916 English literary tradition, which ignored the misery of rural poverty, and the imperialist exploitation on which the British economy was based⁴. By the turn of the century the majority of the British population lived in cities, many in slums, manacled by industrial slavery. Brian Bond, discussing the idealised notion of war held by ordinary citizens in 1914, which offered them romantic and vicarious excitement as a complete contrast to their «humdrum working lives», shows that behind this «innocence»: «zealous patriotic pressure groups and leagues had been working for a decade or more to inculcate a militaristic spirit and belief in the impending, inevitable conflict of nations». Popular literature had been playing an increasingly significant role in «fanning the flames of

self-righteous jingoism». Bond is more inclined to call what has been taken to be the prevailing innocence of mind: «wilful self-delusion»⁵. It seems fair to say that Asquith speaking of «blue skies» in 1914 was wilfully deluding himself and others. Some men deluded themselves; others were fed illusions, or half-truths, or deceptions. The young people of the First World War generation do seem to us now to have been morally, sexually and politically inexperienced. But «Ignorance is *not* innocence»⁶. The young were kept in ignorance, deceived, victims of the public-school ideology that camouflaged the incompetence and complacency of the powerful, an ideology that still persists in mesmerising the English self-image.

For many middle-class young men it was the First World War itself that revealed the smug hypocrisy of the British hierarchy, the contradictions in an inept benevolent-paternalism which, having encouraged a generation into the trenches, whistled it out according to archaic battle-plans to face slaughter of up-to-date efficiency, and made use of religion to do so. On the eve of the Battle of the Somme, which began on 1st July, 1916, and lasted several months, a 'battle' in which 19,000 British men were machine-gunned in the first few minutes, Field Marshall Haig wrote: «I feel that every step in my plan has been taken with Divine help»⁷. The ethos of patriotic sacrifice supported by the established Church, was appropriately satirised by Wilfrid Owen in *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*:

Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Owen's resistance to enchantment, encouraged by Sassoon and echoed in Osbert Sitwell's *Abraham*, was shared by Front-line soldiers of all classes. Religious parody is what gives the edge to some of the yearning, vulgar songs sung by the common soldier to the tunes of hymns (later to be used so effectively in *Oh What a Lovely War*⁸. After 1916 satire became the favoured mode by which the later Georgians distinguished themselves from the Victorians and Edwardians, from the bishops and generals, the politicians and profiteers of the older generation, and from the versified cant that had promoted their eyewash. In *Eye-Deep in Hell*, John Ellis claims that it might be appropriate to mourn on Remembrance Day, but not suitable to give way to «misty-eyed sentimentality». The image he offers us «to sum up the ghastly futility of the Great War» is that of the choice of the Unknown Warrior:

A blindfolded 'British officer of very high rank' was guided into a hut containing the remains of six bodies, taken from various salients. The first coffin he touched as he groped about was taken back to Westminster Abbey to be buried with full military honours. Then, one hopes, the general finally removed his blindfold⁹.

But that blindfold, a protection from intolerable truth, was held in place by the pressure of a whole non-combatant society, which could not endure the contemplation of the futile suffering of its young men. Nor its knowledge that it was responsible for the death of so many. Like so many other defects in the hierarchy, those intolerable truths were screened by the misty-eyed public-school ideology inherited from the Victorians.

It was not only the young men who suffered from the ideological blinkers which steered them to «pour out the red/ Sweet wine of youth» into the stinking Flanders mud; the women also suffered. Antonia White's portrayal of her war-time upbringing shows the determined efforts of the older generation, especially her father, to repress her into childish ignorance, to keep her in «mental pinafores». Her novels are depictions of the efforts of imagination she made to escape this spiritual straightjacket, that led from convent schooling to a period spent locked in an asylum for the insane¹⁰. The writings of the other women of her generation show how they too tried to conquer a world that denied their active participation, a world still rigidly dominated by the Victorian ideas of masculinity and femininity that were reinforced by standards of «respectability» and «what was proper». Flora Sandes, a clergyman's daughter, has left in her diaries and letters the tale of how she succeeded in breaking the stereotypes after having first become a war-time nurse, by joining the Serbian army as a private. She fought, and was seriously wounded¹². In «*Testament of Youth*», written as a memorial to «those misguided dupes, the boys and girls of the War generation», Vera Brittain aimed to display «how abysmally ignorant, how romantically idealistic and how utterly unsophisticated» she and her contemporaries were and continued to be during the War¹². (As late as April 1917, Lt. Geoffrey Thurlow could still write her a letter hoping to do well in the next 'stunt', «for the School's sake», and end by quoting from Rupert Brooke's poetry¹³.) However, despite all her naiveties, readers share the anguish of the «sad little ghost» the twenty-one year old Vera faded into as the young men, her only brother, fiance, friends, to whom she had poured out her heart, poured out their life-blood. Determined that neither their youth nor her own should have been spent in vain, Vera Brittain wrote and left us her literary testament, a feeling account of how world-wide events influence the personal destinies of the obscure, women as well as men.

The First World War was a particularly important period for women's emancipation from imposed ideas of feminine passivity and subordination. The fight to obtain female suffrage gained its first concessions in 1918 when, after women's participation in the war-effort, it could hardly be denied any longer. While the war lasted that participation gained women of all classes economic and social emancipation. Despite

men's resumption of what employment there was after 1918, the psychological effects of the war and its effects on the identity of women were long-term. Although not taking part in physical combat most women were affected by the War. They took jobs vacated by men in industry, commerce, agriculture and transport, as well as the new jobs in munitions factories, and they were also intimately involved through their war service as auxiliaries to the armed forces, giving voluntary aid, mainly as nurses or drivers but also in counter-intelligence, and of course as wives, sisters, mothers, aunts, lovers and friends of combatants¹⁴. Women wrote in an attempt not only to express what their varied war-experience was like, but also to publish opinions about the War, and to try to enter imaginatively into areas of war experience other than their own. Even those literary attempts that we may now judge to be naive, sentimental or blinkered, help us to understand the nature of the restrictions women were trying to overcome: the limits to the growth of their understanding of the world they lived in and of the part they might play in it. The writings of the past are our main legacy of the culture of the past, which as Northrop Frye said: «is not only the memory of mankind, but our buried life». The study of that legacy helps us to recognise «the total cultural form of our present life¹⁵. The writings of women form part of that buried life of (wo)mankind.

In the half-century following its first publication, the selective processes of two generations of publishers, critics and editors effectively repressed the memory of women's literary reaction to the First World War. Poetry written in response to that War has figured in the debate as to whether there was revolution in British poetry in the 1920's due to the moderns, Pound and Eliot, or whether there was a continuous English tradition from the turn of the century until the 1950's which partially absorbed American modernism¹⁶. Poetry written by women is usually seen as 'eccentric', a 'sport' that lies outside any poetic tradition, so that the poetry of Edith Sitwell, Charlotte Mew or Stevie Smith, is not included in the debate. Teachers at both school and university tend to rely for their courses on available publications, preferably cheap ones. Paperback anthologies meet that need. The Second World War encouraged the republication of poetry written in response to the First; the anniversary in 1964 of fifty years since the declaration of the First World War and twenty-five years since the declaration of the Second prompted a second crop of anthologies; continuing interest was stimulated by the war in Viet Nam. These anthologies, by retrieving for a new generation the writings of the past, select and present the materials by which our culture comes to be understood. Poetry anthologies fall into two types: those which select only 'immortal poems' or 'great poets'; and those which collect a range of verse of a certain category, for instance by period, subject matter or author, such as 'war poets' or 'poetry of the 1914-18 War'. Very few war poems are to

be found in the first type of anthology, although Wilfred Owen and Rupert Brooke nearly always figure. This is despite the view of Donald Davie that «pieces by Brooke and Owen are not poems at all, but something less than that and more; they are first-hand and faithful witnesses to a moment in the national destiny... high-water marks in the national psychology»¹⁷.

This makes it all the more perplexing that from 1930 to 1980 volumes of the second type assumed that the poems written in response to the Great War must have been written by men. The assumption is implicit in the very titles: *Men Who March Away*, *Up the Line to Death*. Maurice Hussey makes it explicit in the Preface to his selection, *Poetry of the First World War* (Longman, 1967): «The poetry represented in this book, the work of many hands, may for the moment be approached as that of one composite writer, the English war poet. This man's mind can be seen developing as the conduct of the war makes certain ideas less tenable». Brian Gardner's anthology, *Up the Line to Death* (Methuen, 1964), sub-titled «The War Poets 1914-1918», does include a section headed «Home Front» but it has no female contribution. Even Jon Silkin's anthology, *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (Penguin, 1979, 2nd edition 1981), with its sensitive introductory discussion which quotes the archetypal anti-war poem, *The Soldier's Death* by Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, has selected not one other English poem by a woman. He explains his principles of selection by saying that «the barest historical requirement was that the poetry should have been to do with the war, and have been written by those who lived in, or through, the period» but that within that limitation he has also tried to define what he thought was excellent, offering what he preferred and a little of what other people have liked, especially «certain poems that have embedded themselves in our consciousness». J. M. Parsons only included in his selection, *Men who March Away* (Heinemann, 1965), poems which seemed to him to be «valuable contributions to the literature of the First World War», that is, poems «which would not have been written if that war had not happened». Two of these were written by women. E. L. Black selected the anthology *1914-18 in Poetry* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1970) to encourage students to admire «the excellent poetry written about the First World War» by soldiers and civilians, either during the War or much later. No poems by women are included, not even in the sections «The Pity of It» or «Comments from Remoter Points in Place and Time». Thus, although a couple of poems by women have been presented as «valuable contributions» none has been thought by these editors to be «excellent». It is hardly surprising that women's poems have not «embedded themselves in our consciousness». The natural conclusion to draw is that there were no women's poems about the First World War, or few worth preserving. A determined search of general anthologies of twentieth-century verse would

result in some half-a-dozen, the odd example in the odd anthology¹⁸. Did women fail to bear witness to that «moment in the national destiny»? Is the national psyche only revealed in the writings of men?

A return to the early collections of First War poetry would reveal that there work by women figured prominently. In 1916, volume 2 of Charles Frederick Foreshaw's *One Hundred of the Best Poems of the European War* collected *only* poems by «women poets of the Empire». J. W. Cunliffe's *Poems of the Great War* (1916), Jacqueline Trotter's *Valour and Vision* (1920) and F. Brereton's *An Anthology of War Poems* (1930) all contained poems by women. So did G. H. Clarke's *A Treasury of War Poetry*, which appeared in 1917 with an editorial introduction explaining that editorial policy had been «humanly hospitable rather than academically critical» towards verses of slight technical merit. Yet nearly fifty years later, Gardner's hospitable policy of including both poems that are «great poetry in any company» and those that are «valid in the context of war» did not stretch to welcoming women's contributions, even as typical of their epoch. Critics have been no less exclusive, perhaps taking their clue from Edgell Rickword's seminal article, «War and Poetry, 1914-18» published in 1940¹⁹. In study after study, works by Blunden, Johnston, Bowra, Gregson, Bergonzi, Fussell, Silkin, Spear, Greicus, Klein, Hibberd, which consider the poetry and prose generated by the First World War, women's names are not even mentioned to be dismissed²⁰. The «total cultural form of our present life» as Frye called it has tended to exclude war as a proper literary subject for women, or at least to imply that women had no worthwhile contribution to make to the discussion of the First World War.

The whole field is bedevilled by the unexploded mine of the concept «war poet», and the poisonous question of the distinction between poetry and verse. The qualitative distinction between 'poetry' and mere 'verse' was made by Edward Thomas in a review of «War Poetry» in 1914, to distinguish propaganda from what was more likely to endure²¹. According to Thomas, verses, like hymns, are not «great poetry»; they are the views popular with a certain class, common ideas, dished up in thrilling stanzas. 'Verses' rely for their effectiveness on the stock emotions released by familiar values and sensational phrases, strengthening them by emphatic rhymes and a hypnotic rhythm. This is obvious in what Bergonzi calls «the unspeakable verses» of William Watson, such as *Sons of Britain*, which simply uses terms from a schoolboy's moral vocabulary: 'manhood', 'honour', 'flaunts', 'Bully', in combination with a selection from the sub-religious «poetic» repertoire reiterated by hymns: 'Son', 'rally', 'foe', 'warrior', 'honour', 'crown', as triggers to an impassioned response²². As Fussell noticed, such clichés acted as euphemisms, and

contributed to the general prophylaxis in thought, by shielding the users from the blunter language of 'dead' for 'fallen', 'run away' for 'swerve', 'cowardly' for 'base', and 'the blood of young men' for 'the red'/ Sweet wine of youth²³. What Fussell did not point out is that the shields acted by virtue of their own chivalrous appearance. They did not so much ward off brutal reality as magically transform imperialist rivalry into a crusade; so that German peasants became 'foes' like 'heathen dogs' or 'vandals', threatening the 'New Jerusalem' of England²⁴. Commonplace sentiments gained a wide audience by being expressed in very simple poetic forms that tended to doggerel. The widely read lines of Robert Service and Studdert-Kennedy are good examples. However, technical accomplishment does not guarantee the excellence of a poem either. T. S. Eliot claimed that Kipling's craftsmanship made him a great verse-writer, although not a writer of great poetry²⁵. Only a few anthologies of war poems include his *Gethsemane*, a variation on the war-time platitude of the soldier as a Christ-figure who «laid down his life for his friends»; only a few do not include at least one of his Satirica *Epitaphs of War*. Yet, even if we could agree that Kipling was a poet, rather than versifier, who wrote about war, that would still not make him a 'war-poet' in the almost mystical sense the term came to have.

The value placed on poetry written by men who had actually served in the trenches on the Western Front, because they were able to represent what warfare was like for the common soldier, should not obscure for us the fact that the term 'war-poet' can be very misleading. There were 'soldier-poets'. Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg wrote what is generally considered to be their best poetry in response to their experiences at the Front, but they did not survive the War. Edward Thomas wrote all his poetry after he had enlisted in 1916 but before he fought at the Front. Rupert Brooke was a considerable poet before the War. His war poetry was, like Thomas's, written before he had experienced active combat. They were neither of them 'trench-poets'. David Jones did not write his epic response to the War until long after it was over; like Ivor Gurney, who continued to write about it from a lunatic asylum, the War was his main poetic subject. Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden and Robert Graves published their war-memoirs in the 1930's and continued to write poetry remembering the War during the next half-century. Like Owen, Thomas and Brooke, they were officers. Jones, Gurney and Rosenberg all served in the ranks. Together with Herbert Read and Charles Sorley and Robert Nichols, also officers, these nine are the poets most largely represented in contemporary anthologies and critical discussions of 'War Poetry' and 'War Poets' of 1914-18. Yet it is hard to abstract from their varied experience or literary statements a

representative 'soldier-poet', let alone the 'War Poet' of whom Hussey speaks.

Certainly the fact that they wore uniform does not guarantee either the veracity or sincerity of their poetry; far less its excellence. Although Silkin now accords Sassoon a major place in *The Penguin Anthology of First World War Poetry* and in his introductory discussion, the critics of 1917-18 agreed that Sassoon's war was accused of writing «a colloquial kind of versification»²⁶. On the other hand, Silkin completely ignores a writer who achieved great popularity during the War, being employed by the British government to travel abroad as a professional 'war-poet', and who was still being acclaimed as a 'real poet' in 1940, and as a 'great poet' as late as 1946: Robert Nichols²⁷. Nichols was, in 1975, accused by Paul Fussell of «gross incompetence» as a writer. In 1965, and again in 1980, B. Bergonzi repeated the 1920's verdict of D. Goldring that *The Assault*, one of Nichols's most admired works, was a «masterpiece of drivel»; yet this same poem was chosen by D. Craig and M. Egan in 1982 to contrast with «jingo journalism» as an example of «remarkable literature» which is «powerful», «original», «deeply stirring» and «challenging»²⁸. Nichols had 'been there' on the Western Front, apparently very briefly before being invalided home with shell-shock. Some other soldiers who served longer seem to have regarded him as a phony. Blunden speaks dismissively of Nichols's «attempted realism» as «revolver writing»²⁹. What is found 'stirring', 'powerful' or 'challenging' must depend upon the individual reader's susceptibility, but the *originality* of a poem depends upon the poetic currency of its period. No literature can be seen to be remarkable except by contrast. Nor can one discover the clichés and platitudes by which verse reassures the people of an epoch, except by the wide reading that will locate repetition and reveal its mindlessness. Nichols's 'realist' writing can be seen to be evasive when placed beside the adventure stories written for boys in the same period, such as *With Haig on the Somme*³⁰. Both emphasize the thrill of fear and killing, at the expense of what led to war neurosis and the new attempts at a bald poetic language made by such writers as Sassoon, Owen and A. G. West: the horror of desperate, injured or dying men and rotting corpses. Nichols seems merely to have discovered a new kind of cartoon jingoism that glamorises war in yet another way.

Clearly what counts as poetry, as distinct from mere 'verse' (whether of great or of slight technical merit) or even from 'drivel', remains contentious, and so do the categories of 'war poetry' and 'war-poets'. As Silkin concedes, one can be wrong about English poetry. He concludes that the area «isn't to be demarcated, so that as little error as possible may be made; the area should be as fully as possible explored for what, in the

end, rejoices one»³¹. In that exploration 'one' may also be too limiting about what one counts as the experience of war. Gardner intended his book as a tribute to those «who fought, and died, in the First World War», an account written by «the men who experienced it». Surely such a book should not be a tribute just to those soldiers who fought and died, but also to those others who experienced and fought the War in different ways, such as Edith Cavell and other non-combatants who served in the War; many doctors and nurses, stretcher-bearers and ambulance-drivers fought to save lives and were themselves killed. Many of these were women. Why should the account only be written by *men* who experienced the War. Among those who experienced the War, dead and survivors, were women. War is also woman's concern. As Vera Brittain said in the memorial volume *Promise of Greatness*, to which she was the only woman invited to contribute: «War was a human event, not a happening which affected one age or sex rather than another»³². In 1981, Catherine Reilly stepped back from the problems of who the war-poets were, or of what counts as poetry or verse, but enlarged the area to be explored, by publishing *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War*. Her earlier bibliographical research of books, pamphlets and broadsheets had identified nearly a quarter of a million British individuals who had published verse on the theme of the First World War, of whom at least 500 were women. From amongst these texts she selected 125 poems by 79 women (not all British), some so obscure that no biographical information whatever was available about them. Others were well-known authors: novelists and journalists. Some were recognised poets whose work on other topics besides war had already been widely published³³. Now we may have the opportunity to rejoice (if that is the appropriate word) in the war poems of Amy Lowell, Charlotte Mew and Edith Sitwell, and to set alongside the vicarious old-hat of Newbolt's *War Films*, the female response of Teresa Hooley's *A War Film* and Florence Ripley Martin's *At the Movies*. For me the cream of the anthology came with the discovery of the poetry of Margaret Postgate Cole (the other half of that literary partnership, G. D. H. and M. P. Cole), which expresses her refusal to be resigned to the loss of youth and young friends: «So our memories are only hopes that came to nothing», and speaks for her generation. Women had also experienced the Great War and bore witness to that moment in the national destiny. Reilly has unearthed for us part of the buried memory of the national psyche.

If one of the myths perpetuated about the Great War is that it marked the loss of innocence, England's fall from rural grace into knowledge of the sordid modern world of blind destruction, the other great 'legend', as Brian Gardner calls it, concerns the exclusive brotherhood of «Those who were there» on the Western Front. It is supposed to have been a brotherhood that transcended class, religion, race, in fact «every facet of society»³⁴.

Gardner's views were echoed by Herbert Read in his foreword to *Promise of Greatness*, the volume edited by George Panichas to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1918 Armistice, where he claimed that for most participants in the War, the fear of death was dissipated by a «camaradie» that had no existed in times of peace: «It overcame or ignored all distinctions of class, rank, education. We did not call it love; we did not acknowledge its existence; it was sacramental and therefore secret³⁵. Read expressed his almost mystical sense of that bond as he had felt it to exist between officer and men, in his much anthologised *My Company*: «You became/ in many acts and quiet observances/ a body and a soul entire... 'O beautiful men, O men I loved/ O whither are you gone, my company'» a poem which Black surprisingly includes in the section «Realism on the Western Front» and Parsons in «Bitter Truth». Graves put his sense of that bond as blood-brotherhood into *Two Fusiliers*: «Show me the two so closely bound/ As we, by the wet bond of blood». George Coppard, one of the few common soldiers to write his war-memoirs, also spoke of this attachment, but in more prosaic terms: «the daily comradeship of my pals... gave me strength... It was not a matter of patriotism any longer. What mattered was a silent bonding together of men who knew there was no other way out but to see the thing through»³⁶. In a later edition he stressed that the memory of the trenches he cherished above all was «the comradeship that grew up between us as a result of the way of life we were compelled to lead». The compulsion included the threat of being shot by an officer, or of being court-martialled by a group of officers to be shot by a firing-squad³⁷. This «mystic comradeship», this «holy relationship between Englishman and Englishman» as Delderfield calls it³⁸, was linked by Edmund Blunden with the alienation felt by those at the Front as an «impassable gulf» which cut them off from those behind and away from the trenches:

The main mystery of the old Front Line was that it created a kind of concord between the combatants, but a discord between them and those who, not being there, kept up the war³⁹.

As John Bayley says: «This division, between Us who have had the experience and You who have not, was deeply and terribly apprehended... overriding all national feelings». It resulted in an unjust antagonism which divided «beyond the reach of sympathy and understanding»⁴⁰. That antagonism found nasty expression in Owen's sarcastic *Smile, smile, smile*. Humbly, Gardner agrees that Outsiders are incapable of understanding what the experience had been like for those who were bonded by it.

The new meaning thus given to the notion of England as Two Nations that were mutually incomprehensible has retained widespread currency⁴¹.

It seems to me an appropriate metaphor, not so much because of the emotional estrangement it is taken to signify, or the resultant hostility felt by the combatants to all those behind the Front Line, but because two languages were being used, which represented two competing constructions of reality. Two quite distinct ideologies, with two distinct vocabularies, bounded what Edgell Rickword called «two incommunicable worlds»⁴². The emotional support that the men needed from each other, and which perhaps explains why some men returned to the Front when they might have escaped to Home Service or the Base, came partly from the sense that England was mad, suffering from a mass illusion. Graves expresses this clearly in *Good-bye To All That*:

England looked strange to us returned soldiers. We could understand the war-madness that ran wild everywhere, looking for a pseudo-military outlet. The civilians talked a foreign language... Our best place would be back in France, away from the more shameless madness of home service⁴³.

I took the line that everyone was mad except ourselves and one or two others, and that no good could come of offering common sense to the insane⁴⁴.

The mystical legend promoted by Read and Gardner, and even Blunden, offers a new kind of glamorous religion of war to replace Brooke's; both the fellow-feeling and the «impassable gulf» have been mystified. The legend is an extension of Newbolt's public school mystique in another guise: «O fellowship whose phantom tread/ Hallows a phantom ground»⁴⁵. It is true, as many poets stated, that the facts of trench-warfare seemed intractable to the Georgian conception of poetry and poetic language: «Singing birds are mute», as Graves put it in his poem to Nichols. Like Leslie Coulson, they «flung their lute away», and tried to use colloquial language: «if you ask me, mate», and a mundane vocabulary: lugged, muck, trudge, blighters. But many of the aspects of that War that now seem to us so horrific were already literary commonplaces in prose. Barbusse's *Under Fire* was already available in English translation by 1917, and that is a work as descriptive as one might wish in its evocation of mud, noise and stench⁴⁶. The prevalence of unburied, rotting bodies and flooded trenches can already be taken for granted by Rebecca West in *Return of the Soldier* (1918), where the narrator imagines her soldier-cousin running across «No man's Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead» without looking, «because of the awfulness of an unburied head»⁴⁷. The Boys' adventure fiction may not have dwelt on dead bodies, nor the illustrations have indicated much mud, but «the din and the smoke and the strain» and cases of shell-shock are

already staple fodder⁴⁸. In one of his letters to Eleanor Farjeon, written from the Front in March 1917, Edward Thomas could say: «You have often heard of the mud out here, haven't you? Well, I have been in it. It is what you have heard» and go on to describe it vividly yet again⁴⁹.

Despite the propaganda and the strict censorship on battle details, officers censored their own letters and went home on leave where they could talk freely, at least to those near to them. However, having described the Front, Thomas could still exclaim «imagine it». Clear-sightedly imagining what in a sense they knew seems to have been almost as impossible for those at home, as it was for those who had been at the Front ever to stop imagining it.

Otherwise, how is one to make sense of Vera Brittain's War Diary. In September, 1915, Vera reported in her diary the receipt of a letter from the Front, from twenty-year old Roland Leighton (to whom she had become engaged) that gave her «a fine, if somewhat morbid description of the charnel —house condition of his present trenches— poor darling!». She quoted from the letter which told how among a «chaos of twisted iron and splintered timber and shapeless earth are the fleshless, blackened bones of simple men who poured out their red, sweet wine of youth unknowing, for nothing more tangible than Honour or their Country's Glory or another's Lust of Power. Let him who thinks that war is a glorious golden thing, who loves to roll forth stirring words of exhortation... let him realise how grand & glorious a thing it is to have distilled all Youth and Life into a foetid heap of hideous putrescence»⁵⁰. This deflation of Brooke-style bombast was copied out by Vera without further comment. Three days later, contemplating her fiancé's possible death even as she writes, Vera exalts to Brooke-sublimity the idea that Roland may be «just one lifeless thing among thousands of others, upon the battlefield, and all that is left to us who worship him is just

...some corner of a foreign field
that is forever England»⁵¹.

The rhetoric is more than a mere form of words; it is the spell that hypnotises her imagination, glamorising Leighton's likely reduction to the sort of smashed and rotting corpse he had recently pictured for her, or even to one of the smashed and suppurating amputees she was daily treating in her drudgery at the hospital. It is little wonder that Leighton, finding the disparity between her sanitary, gauzed world and his own barbaric existence too great, began like others to speak of the unreality of England. The gulf was not born of ignorance or of innocence, but of illusion, often self-administered. Published literature, especially the

poetry anthologies of *that* period, helped to transfigure the imagination. It was that gulf which drove Sassoon to counter-attack by publishing his soldier's declaration:

I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise⁵².

However, it was less thick-skinned indifference that those at home suffered from, than a kind of propaganda-induced cataract that corrupted their imaginative vision. Declarations would not lift it.

Vera Brittain was only twenty-one, and inexperienced, although she was exceptionally intelligent. Her histrionic reactions were encouraged by her Oxford tutors and by Leighton's mother, and sanctioned by the publications of the establishment. Waiting for news from the Front, she responds to an article in *The Times*: «Oh! if I can only get him back to hold and kiss and worship once more, how tenderly, how strongly, how reverently I shall love him!»⁵³. After his death Vera began to elevate him even further, capitalising the pronouns and adjectives when referring to him: Him, He, His, as is only conventional in English for God or Jesus, and speaking of Mrs Leighton as the Virgin Mary: «Blessed art thou among women»⁵⁴. This use of religious language might be regarded as Petrarchan were it not located within that period's general admiration for the ideal of nobly heroic self-sacrifice: Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Vera first quotes this biblical tag in February, 1913, with reference to Captain Oakes, but it became a commonplace of the War, and is inscribed on many war-memorials. The idea of the soldier as a Christ-figure laying down his life for others is expressed by poets as diverse as Sassoon (in *The Redeemer*) and Studdert-Kennedy (in *Solomon in All His Glory*). One of the tritest forms is by Corporal J. H. Jarvis (*At a Wayside Shrine*)⁵⁵. Although there is not hint from either Frank Richards or George Coppard that the common soldier was taken in by this idea, an essay written for the *Spectator* by a New Army officer encouraged middle-class readers to believe that the troops saw their «Beloved Captain» as Christ Himself tending their fee⁵⁶. In a letter to Osbert Sitwell in 1918, Owen subverts this image by identifying his men with Christ and himself as their crucifier: «I...inspected his feet to see that they should be worthy of the nails»⁵⁷. The image of Christ crucified was linked to the image of the Mater Dolorosa: the grieving mother could picture her dead or mutilated son as the pierced sacred body, and herself as the Virgin Mary. Perhaps the most moving expression of this is Mary J. Henderson's: «Mary, Mother of God,/ all

women tread where thy feet have trod»⁵⁸. It is at least preferable to the notorious letter from «A Little Mother» republished as a pamphlet from *The Morning Post*, which speaks of women's «sacred trust of motherhood» since they were «created for the purpose of giving life» as men were «to take it». Graves quotes this sanctimonious, jingoistic letter and the fatuous responses in favour of its promotion of «the glorious work» of war, in *Goodbye to All That*; for once he was left speechless⁵⁹.

Graves did, however, comment in his play *But it Still Goes On* (1930) on the way in which «a platoon of men will absolutely worship a good-looking, gallant young officer»: «it's very, very strong romantic link». The attachment is pervertedly «romantic» though; instead of picking their officer flowers, they killed him Germans⁶⁰. In that epoch when sexuality was so severely restrained and distorted, religion became a surrogate, and religious language became the main expression available for romance or passion. Disciplined sexual repression was praised as 'purity' and 'sacrifice'. In a country where the patron saint, St. George, supposedly killed a dragon and the highest reward for service to the state is to be made a Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, it did not seem strange that the public school ethos fostered the archaic ideals of chivalry. The 'mystic fellowship' of Englishmen bears more than a passing resemblance to the legend of the Knights of the Round Table. The language of Christianity had already been linked to that of Romance and warfare at the time of the crusades. The Tales of King Arthur, popular with the Victorians, perpetuated the association. During a speech made in November 1914, Mrs. Pankhurst called upon the male members of her audience to go into battle like a knight of old, who knelt before the altar and vowed he would keep his sword stainless and with absolute honour to his nation⁶¹. If Mrs. Pankhurst was speaking in these terms in public and Robert Service was publishing in 1916: «Over the parapet gleams Romance», one can understand Vera describing her brother in her diary as «fine and knightly» and calling Leighton Sir Galahad because of his «chevalier's purity and uprightness of heart» or transferring the title to their friend Victor, for his «simplicity and humility»⁶². The religious aura of chivalry was some consolation to women for their enforced dependence and for the emptiness of a life without young men, their surrogates in the world of public action. Vera had unconsciously made her motivation clear early in 1915 when she wrote to Roland Leighton about the «agony and absence of ornamentation» of her present life, of «its bareness of all but the few great things which are all we have to cling to now —honour and love and heroism and sacrifice»⁶³. It was such piousness that earned Sassoon's reproaches in *Glory of Women*: «You love us when we're heroes home on leave» since women think «that chivalry redeems/ The war's disgrace» and cannot bring themselves to imagine «that British troops

‘retire’/ When hell’s last horror breaks them, and they run,/ Trampling the terrible corpses —blind with blood». But Medieval ideals of the spiritual value of war, endorsed by the patriotic verse of inexperienced soldiers, proved hard to eradicate once rooted in the blood of young men who had apparently died in their belief.

Owen’s poem *Apologia pro Poemate Meo* takes to extremes Grave’s claim that soldiers were bound to each other by wire and stake and blood, and in *Greater Love* Owen satirises the convention of Christian sacrifice by taking seriously the idea that soldiers died for their *friends*, displaying greater love than any woman could attract. The fellowship Owen made with wretches is only possible if «you share/ With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell». Owen claims that war did bring glory and exultation, and relationships «untold of happy lovers in old song». Owen’s *Apologia* is not widely anthologised, and *Greater Love* appears mainly in American selections, despite the fact that it is usually singled out for special comment in critical discussions of his work. However, assessments vary. In 1971 C. H. Sisson chose the first two lines «Red lips are not so red/ As the stained stones kissed by the English dead» to illustrate the traditional music of Owen’s writing that «sounds skilfully» here; in 1964 Donald Davey quoted from the same stanza to show «Owen *does* write badly, he just is not skilful not resourceful enough». In particular, Davey found the sequence of rhymes in «Kindness of wooed and wooer/ Seems shame to their love pure» *excrutiating*. J. F. McIlroy, writing in 1974, calls the poem «one of Owen’s less successful ventures» and qualified Owen’s claim that no lover’s heart was ever as full as soldier’s heart wick has just stopped a bullet, as «patently absurd». John Bayley, in 1963, had singled out those same lines as an example of Owen’s ability to make certain sentiments «permanently sublime»; the phrase «hearts made great with shot» was «the clue to the great and permanent stature of Owen». In 1976, David Perkins chose the same words to exemplify Owen’s «emotional intensity, directness, boldness, and imaginative grandeur»; they were «magnificent»⁶⁴.

What none of these critics points out is that if Owen is parodying the traditional love poem to a woman with a *greater* love poem to soldiers, the «you» addressed as «O Love», who has red lips, a slender attitude, a soft, gentle voice and a pale hand, is clearly a woman. By extension it seems that Owen also has a woman reader in mind to be informed by his *Apologia* that true love has nothing to do with the conventional ideas of joy, beauty, ribbons, or the glee and shining face of a child. Mary Magdalene was not to touch the body of the resurrected Christ; the modern woman may not touch Owen’s soldiers. The cross which is trailed «through flame and hail» is apparently *woman’s* cross and Owen’s aim is

most *unlovingly* to reduce women to tears of shame: «Weep, you may weep»-«These men are worth your tears» for having been blinded in *women's* stead. The grief displayed by many women may have found its public expression somewhat theatrically; their adulation of heroism may have seemed vicarious compensation for the enforced gentleness of their own lives; but I cannot myself characterise Owen's overt contempt as «sublime» or «magnificent». Life became absurd enough for women too, without men's «power» that «was on us as we slashed bones bare/ Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder». I wouldn't wish to be included in such a happy band of blood-brothers, myself. Herbert Read's satiric picture of *The Happy Warrior* is a sufficiently nauseating account of what women were being protected from seeing, let alone sharing: «Bloody saliva/ Dribbles down his shapeless jacket». Most of the poetry written from the Front was written by young officers, unmarried men straight from school, most of whom seem not to have had girl-friends, although they must nearly all have had a mother. Officers were issued with revolvers rather than bayonets. They were not expected to «slash bones bare» or stab other men in the guts. In *Annals of Innocence and Experience* Herbert Read claimed: «During the whole war I never deliberately killed an individual man»⁶⁵.

We would have to turn to that popular writer of doggerel, Studdert-Kennedy, to find what the common soldier might have said to his wife, in verse, «shamed and sick» at having stuck a bayonet through a man's belly⁶⁶.

In *Eye-Deep in Hell*, John Ellis suggested that the letters of the rank and file would be of little interest, since they were ill-educated, semi-literate and unused to expressing themselves in writing. This is to repeat the patronising attitude of the junior officers whose task it was to censor such letters, an attitude that is voiced in Owen's poetry although modified by Graves in his introduction to Frank Richards's autobiography. Fortunately the Imperial War Museum has collections of such letters, some of which have recently been edited and published by Michael Moynihan⁶⁷. I have not been able to find any account at all of bayoneting, an experience that was probably repressed because it was so horrific. In Sassoon's *Remorse* a soldier remembers Germans running terrified while «Our chaps were sticking 'em like pigs»:

... «O hell»

He thought — «there's things in war one dare not tell
Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads
Of dying heroes and their deathless deeds.»

Nor did one tell poor mother or one's poor wife, apparently. Among Moynihan's collections a letter from one soldier seems to justify Owen's representation of sadism, until one reaches his concern for his wife:

I have thought just lately what a lot of savages war turns us into, we see the most horrible sighs of bloodshed and simply laugh at it. It seems to be nothing but blood everywhere you go and on everything you touch, and you are walking amongst dead bodies all day and all night, human life seems to be of no value at all... My dear Scrumps, I don't know whether I'm right in telling you this, because you worry so⁶⁸.

And he seems to have been typical in being torn between his concern for his wife «living in a terrible agony in the old home» and his need to unburden himself of «these terrible times». Among the collections are some replies from the wives (who had kept the war-letters all their lives, which they have only recently been made public). They explain their apparent reticence. Private McGregor's wife, «darling Jen», wrote: «I could say more than I do, but I am afraid lest I make you more homesick than ever if I pour out too much of my loving feelings»⁶⁹. How were men to reconcile the two worlds, or convey one to the other? In fact the constant reiteration of the tag «Greater Love» with its emphasis on laying down one's own life simply disguised the fact that war turns men into blood-butchers (however reluctant) of other men. «Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done». No one lay down mildly.

Some women were as critical of their own sex's apparent callousness as Sassoon or Owen had a right to be. May O'Rourke contemptuously addressed *The Minority: 1917*, «gay, as a painted flower» who quite forgets the boys that «to save her light blue eyes dreadful scenes» died, or were injured, or «stare with dark and witless eyes that brood/ Dumbly, upon the panic of an hour/ When all the world was red»⁷⁰. Pauline Barrington in «Education» tried to shake women out of the mindless apathy they fall into while mechanically sewing, letting their thoughts drift and dream while their children play at toy-soldiers, rehearsing the war of tomorrow. On the other hand in *Socks*, Jessie Pope herself re-enacts the way in which the activity of knitting helps to «check the thoughts that cluster thick», to suppress the strain of worrying about her son fighting at the Front. Pope was that «Certain Poetess» to whom Owen dedicated his *Dulce et Decorum Est*, addressing her sarcastically as «My friend». She was one of those jingo-women so detested by Helen Hamilton: «Can't you see it isn't decent,/ To flout and goad men into doing,/ What isn't asked of you?» *The Call*, with its insufferable refrain, «Will you, my laddie?» is sufficient example of what Hamilton and Owen were reacting against. Pope's fatuous emphasis on 'grit' and the euphemistic references to

«hard-won Flanders' ditches» remind us how difficult both civilians and soldiers found it to give adequate expression to a reality that conflicted so utterly with «the fire-side's sheltered peace» of 'civilisation'. Yet even when recognised how sheltered they were, it was difficult for them to come to imaginative grips with just what they were sheltered from. Poems such as Harriet Monroe's *On the Porch* exemplify how society protected young women, who screened in, roofed in, from the rain, from the seas of war. She may fancy that the billowing, roaring seas wash over her, indulging in the emotional frisson, but nevertheless she remains securely «snug and dry», insulated from real horror. Nora Bomford manages to be dedicately humorous in her expostulation «So dreadfully safe! O damn the shibboleth/ Of sex!» when awakened by conscripts marching off to «God-knows-where, with songs of Blighty,/ While I'm in bed, and ribbons on my nightie». She exclaims against the «sheer accident» of gender, which decides the biggest difference of all: «Men face the dark while women stay/ To live and laugh and meet the sun each day». The poem's persuasiveness is much weakened when she decides that it doesn't matter «whether we live as women or we die as men» since, together with the seagulls, «We're all one Life». — Try telling *that* to the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

It was not only women who were evasive about death. The way in which bourgeois conventions camouflaged the intolerable reality of death and suffering, and deprived even men of adequate language or behaviour in response to it, was trimly satirised by Winifred M. Letts in *Screens*. Sanitised by hospital routine and the screens placed round a dying nineteen-year-old, the men may not play the gramophone, «And so we played at cards instead/ And left him dying there alone». Once the Union Jack has been spread over him, to disguise the corpse as the words disguise the boy's death: «when he goes away», «Another» man will get his bed,/ We'll make the row we did before/ But —Jove!— I'm sorry that he's dead.» The row and the cards are distractions from the need to mourn so weakly expressed in that final line. Poets recognised that not only ordinary language but the heightened language of poetry embodies the cultural life that engenders it. The screening, censoring function of poetic conventions themselves is neatly embedded in Gurney's *To His Love*: «You would not know him now... cover him soon!/ And with thick-set/ Masses of memorial flowers —/ Hide that red wet /Thing I must somehow forget.» The irrelevance of the English poetic tradition to contemporary war-experience was mocked by Edgell Rickword in *Trench Poets*. Here a soldier tries to rouse his dead chum by reading him random things from Tennyson and Donne, but «His grin got worse and I could see/ he sneered at passion's purity.» Blunden expressed a similar perplexity in *Premature Rejoicing*, introducing the Fairy Queen into a contemplation of Thiepval

Wood: «There sleeps Titania in a deep dug-cut... That's where the difficulty is, over there.» A. G. West was more explicit in his denunciation of those «cheerful young men,/ Whose pious poetry blossoms» on their own graves, camouflaging the «sickly foetor» of the dead.

Few women had smelt «the rank stench of those bodies» that so haunts the men's poetry. They had to do their best with hearsay. From the other side of the sexual divide Helen Hamilton addressed *The Romancing Poet*: «I wish you would refrain from making glad romance/ Of this most hideous war... You and I, try as we may/ can only faintly vision it.» In all honesty, women simply could not 'see' the War. Most of them had never had to look it full in the rotting face, had never come across a head «Smashed like an eggshell and the warm grey brain/ Splattered all bloody on the parados». Nor did they have any resource beyond the range of the genteel to help them envisage experiences that they knew were driving men mad. With no other traditional imagery for the horror of that War, poets of both sexes fell back on the nearly empty concept of hell. «War's hell» was the other great cliché of the war. Graves tried unsuccessfully to illustrate it in *Dead Boche*. Recounting the death of a boy who put a bullet through his brain, in *Suicide in the Trenches*, Sassoon recommends the smug-faced civilian to «pray you'll never know/ the hell where youth and laughter go». In *Picnic* (July 1917), Rose Macaulay examines the way in which the reports of the hell of war, Flanders mud, the pain of Picardy and the blood that ran there, had become commonplace, lost what force they had had: Once «we started and peered dizzily/ Through the gates of Hell./ But now hell's an old tale». In an unconscious satire of Grenfell's idea that war's a picnic, she describes lying quite still on «Hurt Hill», drowsy, «ringed around by guarding walls» that muffle the sound of the guns across the Channel:

We are shut about with guarding walls:
 (We have built them lest we run
 Mad from dreaming of naked fear
 And of black things done).

Her sense of the maintenance of these mental defences to shut out the nightmare of «hell's last horror», the necessity not to listen or look «lest, battered too long, our walls and we/ Should break» explains the evasiveness of much of the women's writing: «You took the road we never spoke of», «A myriad men/ Were swept like leaves beyond the living's ken», «pursue the flying foe». The fragility of mental defences was the theme of Rose Macaulay's war-time novel *Non-Combatants and Others*: «What they can bear to go through... but they can't, they can't, they can't... we can bear to hear about... but we can't, we can't, we can't. When

Ingram talks to Alix Sandomir about the suicide of her younger brother Paul in the trenches, he advises her: «The thing is... not to think. Not to imagine, Not to remember... it's over.» But Alix finally concludes, «One can't really put the war out of one's mind: it can't be done. It's hurting too many people too badly; it's no use trying to pretend»⁷¹.

In her poem, *The Shadow*, Rose Macaulay does try to listen and look, to think, imagine and remember. She tries to envisage naked fear and death by using her own experience of fear and people dying in an air-raid, in order to gain some faint understanding of what war was like for soldiers. Comparing «the hot rubbish heap/ With people sunk in it» to which the square where she lives is reduced by bombs, with the Plain where «dreams and brains to set the world a-fire/ Lie tossed in sodden heaps of mire», she ironically queries conventional poetic metaphors by contrasting the life-blood of smashed people with fire and wine. This experience of the fear of death gives her some shadowy idea of the fear and pain that break «the world's young men», as if she stood at the rim of their hell, which is too bright for her poetic vision. Her poem presents itself as a shadow of the real thing, as indeed it was. Rose Macaulay was trying to reject the mental walls, the conventional verbal screens that, using some «foreign language», tried to pretend Alix's brother's death was «a noble end, dearie... not a wasted life»⁷².

But what language or verbal picture would be adequate? The crude language used at the Front was considered too obscene to be printed until after the next War⁷³. The social rules of civilised, feminine decorum forbade «ladies» the use of such words, even as expletives. Most women would not have been able even to think the images that men finally conscripted into their service. Women's attempts to shock seem virginally timorous, not only Harriet Monroe's «lunges and plunges/ The huge gun with its one blind eye» but even Ruth C. Mitchell's.

The Thing that was Billy lies a-dying there,
Writing and a-twisting and a-crying there

by comparison with Owen's orgasmic «Your slender attitude/ Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed... till the fierce love they bear/ Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude». Such sexual imagery, like Rosenberg's Daughters of War, rapist Valkyries who dance naked with man's spirit naked, «my sisters force their males», was simply unthinkable by ladies. Even had they been thinkable, no woman could have published verse consisting of such words as 'belly', 'damned' or 'bitch' that Rickword used to describe that anti-Romantic moon, whose «little belly/ Shone like a bladder of lard», in his query: «Why does this damned entrancing bitch/

Seek lovers only among them that sleep?» It was not until long after the war that David Jones could put more force into Blunden's idea that Seraphina, angelic Nature, had «turned to harlotry»:

But sweet sister death has gone debauched today and
stalks this high ground with strumpet confidence,
makes no coy veiling of her appetite but leers from you
to me with all her parts discovered⁷⁴.

At that time a girl such as Dolly Scannell shocked her mother merely by referring to the fact that a man's pants were on back-to-front: «What had I done now? Of course I had mentioned the 'opening', always a necessary, and apparently evil, part of a man's apparel»⁷⁵. Of course she had not 'mentioned' it; merely implied that it existed. Even to allude to the screens, even before another woman, one's own mother, was indecent.

The revolution in what was sayable or thinkable was partly brought about by the war considered 'poetic'. What Wilfrid Gibson was getting at in *Bacchanal*, where Trafalgar Square on Armistice Night becomes «the midnight hills of Thrace», is expressed more succinctly by A. J. P. Taylor in 1965, when he informs us that «Total strangers copulated in doorways and on pavements. They were asserting the triumph of life over death»⁷⁶. In *The Dancers*, where «in a senseless dream» of «shattering black shells that hurtle overhead» peacock dragonflies become «dainty dancing demoiselles/ Above the dreamless dead», Gibson has daintily censored all connection of dancing with sensuality, let alone with lust. All the more remarkable then is Edith Sitwell's *The Dancers (During a Great Battle, 1916)*. To swell their music, these dancers on «floors slippery with blood» suck the dying breath of «those who hourly die for us»: «We are the dull blind carrion-fly/ That dance and batten». It was such images of perversion that Vera Brittain needed to call on in *Testament of Youth*, to depict what she called «nocturnal orgies». Instead, to describe the hectic reactions of the post-war generation frantically dancing (jitterbugging?) under pictures of soldiers' agony, she can only quote from Alfred Noyes' slightly priggish lines: «And the dancers walk;/ With long silk stockings,/ and arms of chalk» (p. 469).

Another Great War survivor, J. Brophy, said: «War certainly coarsens and perhaps debases the mind, it is both sadistic and futile»⁷⁷. We can see the male-poets struggling against that coarsening, particularly Blunden who regained the sweetness of his mind. I think Owen failed, as he himself recognised in *Strange Meeting*, killing himself as a poet through the brutality of his experiences. For women the danger of war was not that it might make them sadistic, but that it might make them callous, as Sassoon suggested. Both men and women were haunted by the ghosts of the dead.

Although never allowed in the trenches, some women lived very close to the Front. Mary Borden called the «collection of fragments» which were her legacy of war-experience *Forbidden Zone*, after La Zone Interdite, the strip of land behind the firing-line where she was stationed in a mobile field-hospital in Flanders⁷⁸. That zone is the area where emotions are prohibited. What is happening to the young men is so insane, so grotesque, that to respond sympathetically to the horror would lead to breakdown. The sketches express her 'nervousness' of giving way to compassion. She was one of the women who did have to look at the unspeakable, the indescribable. It is hard to categorise these «fragments» as she calls them (which I suppose is why they seem to have been ignored, forgotten; even Reilly does not anthologise them). Some are in long, Whitman-esque lines of verse; the others are somewhere between poetry and prose. 'Lyrical prose' one might call them were they not so emotionally blank. The language itself at times expresses in its brutal practicality the only attitude possible for survival in such a hospital:

There was a man stretched on the table. His brain came off in my hands when I lifted the bandage from his head.
When the dresser came back I said: «His brain came off in the bandage».
«Where have you put it?»
«I put it in the pail under the table».
«It's only one half of his brain,» he said, looking into the man's skull. «The rest is here».
I left him to finish the dressing and went my business. I had much to do⁷⁹.

The repetition of «It was my business» indicates the impersonality she is forced to adopt in order to cope: «I didn't worry. I didn't think. I was too busy, too absorbed in what I was doing»⁸⁰. «Looking back» as a distant observer, she regards «that woman — myself» with that woman — myself» with the same incredulous bewilderment with which she treats the whole insanity of the War. The only 'sane' explanation would be that the hospital is a laundry, or a warehouse for the flotsam and jetsam salvaged from a new deluge. How could the bundles of wreckage actually be men:

What do you mean by telling me they are men?... You do not expect me to believe that inside that roll there is a man, and in that one, and in that one?/ Ah, dear God, it's true! Look!⁸¹.

The insanity comes from the apparent rationality of a system by which she is expected to mend men like socks: «again and again just as many times as they will stand it. And then you throw them away. And we send men out to the war again and again, just as long as they will stand it;

just until they are dead, and then we throw them into the ground... It is all carefully arranged»⁸².

Looking back, she thinks «that woman, myself, must have been in a trance... She does not seem to notice the wounds or the blood. It's like a dreadful game of hide and seek among the wounded» fighting death, «the unseen thing that scurries and hides and jumps out of a corner on to the face of a man... All her faculties are intent on it. The other things that are going on she deals with automatically»⁸³. In a kind of delirium she thinks she is happy in this dream-hell until she is awakened out of it by a blinded man whom she had left waiting: «In his case there was no hurry, no necessity to rush him through to the operating-room. There was plenty of time. He would always be blind»⁸⁴. Called upon to comfort him, she suddenly becomes aware of the hell he is surrounded by that he cannot see: «I was awake now, and I seemed to be breaking to pieces»⁸⁵. She runs away from him, «down the long dreadful hut and hid behind my screen and cowered, sobbing, in a corner, hiding my face»⁸⁶. There was so very little that one person could do for another there.

Part of the unbearableness she screens herself from is that she is part of a system that dehumanises and violates the young men:

Bundled into vans they were, all mangled and broken, carried back over the sliding mud through that flimsy gate where the flag is flapping, to be saved. To be hauled about and man-handled, to have their broken, bleeding nakedness uncovered, to have their bodies cut again with knives and their deep wounds probed with pincers, and to have the breath choked back in their sobbing lungs, so that they may be saved for this world⁸⁷.

Stanley Cooperman has written about the sense of helplessness, of impotence, that scarred the psyche of American Great War Soldiers. Their sense of their very manhood was continually assaulted⁸⁸. The male English poets such as Rosenberg, Rickword, Jones and Blunden expressed this in sexual metaphors that suggest that they felt that the experience of trench warfare violated their most intimate personality, forcing them to participate in and to remember horrors that even sleep could not protect their minds from. War was, for them, a spiritual rape. Mary Borden uses similar sexual imagery to portray the obscenity of the physical suffering which warfare entails. If the horror of bloodshed violates a man's mind, pain violates his body as well. Pain is a «monstrous paramour», «a harlot in the pay of war», «insatiable, greedy, vilely amorous, lustful, obscene —she lusts for the broken bodies we have here. Wherever I go I find her possessing the men in their beds, lying in bed with them... she consorts with decay, is addicted to blood, cohabits with mutilations, and her delight is the refuse of suffering bodies»⁸⁹.

Enid Bagnold hints at this in *Diary Without Dates*⁹⁰; Mary Borden is explicit. But war also deprives women of their sexual nature. A nurse's heart is dead, her ears are deaf. She makes herself blind, «so that she cannot see the torn parts of the men she must handle. Blind, deaf, dead — she is strong, efficient... a machine inhabited by the ghost of a woman, soulless»⁹¹. Mary Borden explains:

There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? There are heads and knees and mangled testicles. There are chests with holes as big as your fist, and pulpy things, shapeless; and stumps where legs once were fastened. There are eyes — eyes of sick dogs, sick cats, blind eyes, eyes of delirium; and mouths that cannot articulate; and parts of faces — the nose gone, or the jaw. There are these things, but no men; so how could I be a woman here and not die of it?... It is impossible to be a woman here. One must be dead⁹².

Man's only mistress here is Pain, who plies her trade shamelessly: «She lies in their beds all day. She lies with the Heads and the Knees and the festering Abdomens. She never leaves them. Even she has exhausted them, even when at last worn out with her frenzy they drop into a doze, she lies beside them, to tease them with her excruciating caresses, her pinches and twinges that make them moan and twist in sleep». They may hope to escape her «obscene antics» in sleep, but «when they dream that they are again clean, normal, real men, filled with a tender love for women, then she wakes them. In the dark she wakes them and tightens her arms round their shrivelled bodies»⁹³.

Vera Brittain was ten years younger and far more immature than Mary Borden, an American who had already been married and divorced before she found herself in France at the start of the War and set up the hospital unit. Nor was Vera working in a mobile field-hospital. But *Forbidden Zone* fills the gaping vacancy in *Testament of Youth* with regard to Vera Brittain's hospital experience and the wretchedness of her existence between 1915 and 1918, from which the correspondence with Roland Leighton and her romantic dreams about him were some compensatory fantastic escape. By comparison with the older woman it is almost an understatement to say she was hampered by mental petticoats. Yet Mary Borden claims in her introduction to have «blurred the bare horror of the facts and softened the reality» because she was «incapable of a nearer approach to the truth». Over and over, nurses and other women testified to their admiration for the courage with which men endured pain, and made light of it⁹⁴. Some of the most moving poems in Reilly's anthology concern such testaments to man, who is «master of his flesh,/ And has the laugh of death and pain» as Eva Dobell put it; or, as Alys Fane Trotter

said, «if their lips have quivered when they spoke,/ They've said brave words, or tried to make a joke». But as both men and women knew, men could not always master their pain or fear. Mary Borden revealed the more vile reality behind the facade of self-control men maintained as far as they were able, and that women collaborated with. *Forbidden Zone* was not intended as a betrayal of that admirable pretence; the prose sketches end with a tribute to the fortitude manifested in a wry remark, which is all the more telling after the account of the grotesque dream-hell she has just been staring back at. She presents the phrase as an example of a peculiar British type of courage. During the four years of that absurd War, amongst all the French wounded and dying only two Tommies passed through her hands, and that was later the same night that the blinded man had been brought in. One was dying. All the other one said to him was «Stick it», but he died on the operating table. The next day on her rounds she spoke to his pal: «Good morning. How are you?» Without expression he replied: «AI at Lloyd's, Madam». Years later she remembers the phrase, wonderingly⁹⁵. Borden closes her sketches with that extraordinary verbal screen. Without surrendering to the propaganda that glamorised war, without pretending that death in war was anything but squalid, she manages to reaffirm the self-respect that an ironic screen may uphold. That too is part of our cultural heritage. We should not be kept in ignorance of it.

Notes

1. Antonia White, *The Sugar House* (1952; Fontana paperback, 1982, p. 44).
2. Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London, Faber 1956); see e. g. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, O. U. P. 1975); E. Stillman, «Saravejo: The End of Innocence», *Horizon* VI 1964; Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England* (London, Weidenfield 1983); Nicola Thorne, *Never Such Innocence* (London, Granada 1985).
3. Arthur Marwick, *The Explosion of British Society* (London, Pan 1963).
4. Cf. J. W. Robertson Scott, *England's Green and Pleasant Land* (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1925, rev. ed. 1947); Raymond Williams, *The Country and The City* (London, Chatto & Windus 1973).
5. Brian Bond, *War and Society in Europe, 1870-1970* (London, Fontana 1984); Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight* (London, Macmillan 2nd ed. 1980); I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984* (London, O. U. P. 1966); Caroline E. Playne, *The Neuroses of Nations* (London, Allen & Unwin 1925).
6. Vera Brittain, *Honourable Estate* (1936), p. 11.
7. Duff Cooper, *Haig* (1936) Vol. 1, p. 327.
8. Theatre Workshop (London, Methuen 1965), first performed 1963.
9. John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell* (London, Croom Helm 1976), p. 205.

10. Antonia White, *Frost in May Books 1 & 2* (London, Fontana 1982).
11. Flora Sandes, *An English Woman-Sergeant in the Serbian Army* (London, Hodder 1916); Alan Burgess *The Lovely Sergeant* (London, Heinemann 1963).
12. Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London, Gollancz 1933).
13. Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth* (London, Gollancz 1981), p. 427.
14. Arthur Marwick, *Women at War 1914-1918* (London, Fontana & I. W. M. 1977).
15. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (N. J., Princeton 1957), p. 346.
16. e. g. James Reeves, *Georgian Poetry* (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1962), p. XIX.
17. *New Statesman*, 28 August 1964, p. 282.
18. e. g. Fredegond Shove's «The Farmer, 1917» and Mary Morison Webster's «Gallipoli (Aniversary)» in *Twentieth Century Poetry*, ed. Harold Monro (London, Chatto 1929); Amy Lowell's «Pattern» in *The Albatross Book of Recent Living Verse*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (London, Collins 1933); May Cannan's «Rouen» in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse*, ed. Philip Larkin, (London, O. U. P. 1973).
19. *Life and Letters Today*. Nos 25-6, June—August 1940.
20. Fussell, *op. cit.*; Bergonzi, *op. cit.*; E. Blunden, *War Poets 1914-18* (Harlow, Longman 1958); M. Bowra, *Poetry of the First World War* (London, OUP 1961); John H. Johnston, *English Poetry of the First World War* (N. J., Princeton 1964); M. Greicus, *Prose Writers of World War I* (Harlow, Longman 1973); Jon Stallworthy, *Poets of the First World War* (London, OUP 1974); A. Bannerjee, *Spirit Above Wars* (Delhi, Macmillan 1975); J. M. Gregson, *Poetry of the First World War* (London, Arnold 1976); Holger Klein ed., *The First World War in Prose* (London, Macmillan 1976); Hilda Spear, *Remembering, We Forget* (London, Poynter-Davis 1979); J. Lehmann, *The English Poets of the First World War* (London, Thames & Hudson 1981); D. Hibberd, *Poetry of the First World War* (London, Macmillan 1981).
21. «War Poetry», *Poetry and Drama* II N° 8 (December 1914).
22. Cf. Ch. Wordsworth, «See the Conqueror Mounts in Triumph», *Songs of Praise*, No 173 (Oxford, OUP 1936).
23. *Op. cit.*, pp. 21-3.
24. Cf. Frederick V. Branford, «Secret Treaties» in F. Brereton, *An Anthology of War Poems* (London, Collins 1930).
25. T. S. Eliot, introduction to *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (London, Faber 1941).
26. H. W. Massingham, «Indignation», *Nation* (16 June 1917), p. 278.
27. Charles Morgan, «Robert Nichols» in *Reflections in a Mirror*, 2nd series (London, Macmillan 1946), pp. 203-212.
28. Fussell, *op. cit.*, p. 297; Bergonzi, *op. cit.*, p. 64; Douglas Goldring, «The War & Poets», *Reputations; Essays in Criticism* (London, 1920), pp. 110-111; David Craig and Michael Egan, «Historicist Criticism» in Peter Widdowson ed., *Reading English* (London, Methuen 1982), pp. 212-216).
29. *Op. cit.*, p. 29.
30. Herbert Strang, *With Haig on the Somme* (Oxford, Milford 1917); Percy Westerman, *A Lively Bit of the Front* (London, Blackie 1916).
31. *Op. cit.*, p. 75.
32. George A. Panichas ed., *Promise of Greatness* (London, Cassell 1968).
33. Catherine Reilly, *English Poetry of the First World War; A Bibliography* (London, Prior 1978).
34. Brian Gardner, *Up the Line to Death* (London, Methuen rev. ed. 1976), p. XX.
35. *Op. cit.*, p. VI.
36. *With a Machine-gun to Cambrai*, (London, HMSO 1969), p. 107.
37. Brigadier General F. P. Crozier, *The Men I Killed* (London, 1937).
38. *Post of Honour* (London, Hodder 1966), pp. 214-220.
39. Introduction to F. Brereton ed., *Anthology of War Poems* (London, 1930), p. 15.
40. *The Spectator* (4 October 1963), p. 419.

41. Cf. V. de Sola Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry* (1951), p. 142.
42. *Op. cit.*
43. *Good-Bye To All That* (London, Cassell rev. ed. 1957), p. 188.
44. *Ibidem*, p. 215.
45. «The War Films», reprinted in Gardner ed., *op. cit.*, p. 75.
46. *Le Feu; Journal d'une escouade* (1916, trans W. Fitzwater Wray London, Dent 1916).
47. Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier* (London, Nisbet 1918), chapter 1.
48. Cf. Strang, *op. cit.*
49. Eleanor Farjeon, *Edward Thomas; The Last Four Years* (London. OUP 1958).
50. *Chronicle of Youth*, p. 344.
51. *Ibidem*, p.345.
52. Quoted in Graves, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-4.
53. *Chronicle of Youth*, p. 220.
54. *Ibidem*, p. 391.
55. Quoted by D. Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen* (London, Chatto 1973), p. 36.
56. Donald Hankey, *A Student in Arms* (London, Andrew Melrose 1916); cf. Frank Richards *Old Soldiers Never Die* (London, Faber 1933) and Coppard, *op. cit.*
57. Letter 634 quoted by Hibberd, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
58. Reilly Scars, *Upon My Heart! Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London, Virago 1981), p. 52.
59. Graves, *op. cit.*, (1957), pp. 188-191.
60. Robert Graves, *Occupation Writer* (New York, Grosset 1950), p. 146.
61. Quoted Arthur Marwick, *op. cit.*, (1977), p. 32.
62. «Chronicle of Youth», pp. 377-8.
63. *Ibidem*, p. 252.
64. C. H. Sisson, *English Poetry 1900- 50* (London, Methuen 1971), p. 83; Donald Davie *op. cit.*, p. 282; J. F. McIlroy, *Wilfred Owen's Poetry* (London, Heinemann 1974), p. 36; John Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 419; David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry* (Cambridge Mass., 1976), p. 285.
65. Herbert Read, *Annals of Innocence and Experience* (London, Faber 1963).
66. 'If you knowed what I'd been doin',/ Could yer kiss me still, my Jane?' «What's the Good?» in 'Woodbine Willie', *Rough Rhymes of a Padre* (London, Hodder 1918), pp. 75-80.
67. Michael Moynihan, *Greater Love* (London, Allen 1980).
68. *Ibidem*, pp. 46 and 51.
69. *Ibidem*, p. 32.
70. Reilly (1981); the following poems by women are all taken from this collection.
71. Rose Macaulay *Non-Combatants and Others* (1916, reprinted London, Methuen 1986), pp. 102, 140.
72. *Ibidem*, p. 69.
73. Cf. Introduction by Michael Howard to Frederick Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (London, Peter Davies 1977); and Richard Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake* (New York, Viking 1941), p. 346.
74. David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London, Faber 1937), Part 7.
75. Dolly Scannell, *Mother Knew Best* (London, Macmillan 1974), p. 177.
76. A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914- 45* (London, OUP 1965), pp. 256-7.
77. *Songs and Slang of the British Soldier 1914- 18*, eds. John Brophy and Eric Partridge, (London, Partridge 3rd ed. 1931), p. 19.
78. Mary Borden, Preface to *Forbidden Zone* (London, Heinemann 1929); quotations from the following stories are all taken from this volume.
79. «Blind», pp. 142-3.
80. *Ibidem*, p. 144.
81. «The City in the Desert», p. 144.

82. «Conspiracy», p. 117.
83. «Blind», pp. 151-2, 102.
84. *Ibidem*, p. 141.
85. *Ibidem*, p. 158.
86. *Ibidem*, p. 159.
87. «The City in the Desert», p. 116.
88. Stanley Cooperman, *World War One and the American Novel* (London, Hopkins 1967), p.64; see also Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land; Combat and Identity in World War One* (Cambridge, CUP 1979).
89. Borden, «Moonlight», pp. 54-63.
90. «There is a certain dreadful innocence about them too, as though each would protest 'In spite of our tasks, our often immodest tasks, our minds are as white as snow» Enid Bagnold, *Diary Without Dates* (London, 1918 reprinted Virago 1978), pp. 34-5.
91. Borden, «Moonlight», pp. 59.
92. *Ibidem*, p. 60.
93. *Ibidem*, pp. 62-3.
94. Lyn Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land* (London, Joseph 1980).
95. Borden, «Two Gunners», p. 172.