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Under the shadow : women's poetry of the Great War

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UNDER THE SHADOW. WOMEN'S POETRY OF THE GREAT WAR

The quantity of English poetry and verse written during the Great War is not only impressive but is, in fact, a phenomenon in the history of English literature. According to one piece of bibliographical research, more than 2200 British citizens, of whom one fourth were women, wrote verse connected thematically with the Great War¹. The heartrending suffering, not only on the battlefields, but in the homeland, seems to have found its outlet in a poetical rendering whose vastness is indeed unparalleled. Any thorough survey of the poetry of the Great War will reveal "...a range of war poets who may be grouped in various ways – professional poets and amateurs; ...those who leapt on a bandwagon of popular ideas writing clichés to please the crowd; imagists, Georgians, simple versifiers, innovators" (Roberts 1999:17). Inevitably, some of this output was of inferior quality, often written out of misplaced enthusiasm by armchair poets who displayed "...a strange inability to grasp the nature of the war" (17) as well as an inadequacy of technique, but there are numerous collections and anthologies which contain outstanding poetry written by such icons of the period as Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke or Siegfried Sassoon, who have been the focus of attention of literary criticism for decades.

At the same time, the poetry of the Great War written by women seems to have been neglected by literary critics, who often imply, or indeed claim, that the essential validity of war poetry resides primarily in its being born out of the suffering in the trenches and on the battlefields by those who were most directly involved, i.e. men². One might easily conclude that there is no genuinely perceptive female poetic voice on the theme of war, and

¹ See Reilly, Catherine W. 1978. *English Poetry of the First World War: A Bibliography*. London: George Prior.

² In 'A Note to the 1996 Edition' of *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, Jon Silkin writes: 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? (Silkin 1996: 13).

This seems to be a most glaring example of the negative aura surrounding women's poetry of the period.

that women's attempts to come to grips with the theme would at best be those of armchair poets, highly inconsistent with the predominantly macho ethics of war, or that women's war poetry epitomises ignorance and limits the scope of poetic expression to sentimental doggerel. Nosheen Khan claims that "...ignorance displayed towards women's literature of the First World War ...is hard to understand unless it is seen as flowing from the atavistic feeling that war is man's province and one which has no room for woman..." (Khan 1988: 1). Such an approach "...marginalises women's war poetry in terms of the male canon..." (Featherstone 1995: 100) and often springs from the common belief that war is predominantly a man's prerogative, and that women's awareness in this matter is limited to romantic ignorance³.

However, the truth is that in time of war, women do "... go to battle; they battle with the slow torture of fear and suspense, the long agonies of anticipation; the sleepless nights and fevered imagination; the pitiless hours usurped by visions of battered bleeding bodies" (Khan 1988: 138). In an untitled poem, terse as well as allusive, Irene McLeod seems to touch upon the very essence of this anguish:

Men battle and die on a breath,
But women who love them must wade
Up to the lips in a sea
Bitter as death; (166)

McLeod leaves the heroic militaristic aspect of war to the combatants, and presents its reality from another perspective. She accentuates a different facet of war: the suffering endured by women, which was as unbearable as the agony in the trenches. A similar picture, drawn by Emily Underdown in "Woman's Part", poignantly reveals the anguish of those who are left at home, watching the theatre of war from afar:

To smile with lips which hide a bleeding heart,
To show calm courage through all stress and strain,
To watch unflinching those she loves depart,
And face not death, but life's far greater pain. (144)

The torment of life at home encompasses a variety of emotions, ranging from horror, hate and wrath to a sense of isolation and solitude, and reflects the fate of women during the war. Similar in vein, but decidedly more laconic, is Diana Good's untitled poem:

War, to me,
Is the still woman
With eyes of stone
Who lives alone. (30)

Life on the battlefields is often juxtaposed with the quiet suffering of those left at home as in "The Farmer" by Fredegond Shove (Parsons 1987: 162) or Gabrielle Elliot's "Pierrot Goes to War":

³ In point of fact, this is not entirely true, for there were women who worked just behind the firing lines in the WAAC (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps), QMAAC (Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps) and many other auxiliary units.

Only shadows linger, for love does not forget –
 Pierrot goes forward – but what of Pierrette? (Khan 1988: 35)

It is a fact that the closest encounters the civilians in Britain had with the war were the occasional zeppelin raids⁴, but the impact the war had on the life at the Home Front inevitably affected people's consciousness, resulting in "...the intense sharpening of all the senses..." (Brittain 1999: 291). The outcome of this sharpening often finds its shape in the form of verse.

Nevertheless, in the majority of critical works as well as in anthologies⁵, women poets are either non-existent or, if they are mentioned, "...tend to figure as sweetly uncomprehending aunts, flighty flappers or bloodthirsty xenophobes, and to merit a few, not always complimentary, lines about their war work" (Marlowe 1999: 1). This is a rather selective frame of mind, and the arguments are indeed double-edged, if only for two fundamental reasons. First of all, a substantial number of poems written by the male poets of the 1914-18 war were undoubtedly of inferior quality. Alongside recognised male poets, there were countless poetasters and rhymer whose verse, labelled by Martin Stephen as "...inane babbling"(Stephen 2001: 3), remained rightly unappreciated, unacclaimed by literary critics and generally unpublished. Occasionally, poets such as William Watson or Harold Begbies⁶, who can easily be labelled as *minorum gentium* in terms of their contribution towards the poetry of the Great War⁷, are included in anthologies only because their poetry "...has an interest for the light it throws on situations, beliefs and attitudes..." (Roberts 1999:15). Secondly, one needs to bear in mind that the majority of the poets who experienced the terrible carnage of trench warfare "...lacked the perspective and knowledge to see clearly into another whole area of suffering" (Stephen 2001: 256). What this means is that the vision presented in the male poetry of the Great War is usually confined to what is customarily regarded as the experience of trench warfare, and thus inevitably lacks the vista of war as seen by the women poets. As it is, such shortcomings can be an impediment to a full understanding of the *truth* of war, and the poetry of the period is therefore devoid of an additional dimension⁸, which, howe-

⁴ See e.g., "The Shadow" by Rose Macaulay (Reilly 2000: 67-68), or Nancy Cunard's "Zeppelins" (26).

⁵ Occasionally, one might find either a poem or a mention of just a few poets such as Charlotte Mew, May Wedderburn Cannan, Alice Meynell, Margaret Postgate Cole, or Fredegond Shove. See Parsons (1987), Silkin (1996).

⁶ See, for example, "Fall In" by Harold Begbies (Roberts 1999: 51-52), or "The Half-Man" by William Watson (228).

⁷ See Stephen, Martin (ed.). 2001. *Poems of the First World War: 'Never Such Innocence'*. London: Everyman.

⁸ It would be hard not to agree that there is an absolute necessity of salvaging "... from oblivion the experience of the muted half of society as rendered in verse, and document as far as is possible the full range of the impact the First World War made upon women's poetic sensibility" (Khan 1988: 1-2).

ver "...peripheral to the major work of male poets..." (Featherstone 1995: 97), is undoubtedly a noteworthy constituent of the literary legacy of the First World War. In fact, this *gulf* between the perception of war as seen from the point of view of the combatants and those who watched it from afar is a common theme in the poetry of the Great War⁹.

Negative iconographies were also attributed to women by various male poets of the period. In fact, "...some of the most celebrated poems of the First World War are characterized by overt misogyny" (Featherstone 1995: 95). Among the most merciless male poets in this matter was Siegfried Sassoon, who, in "Their Frailty" (Hart-Davis 1983: 101), and even more so in "Glory of Women" (100), attacks "... female romanticism and ignorance of the reality of the carnage" (Gregson 1976: 38). Sassoon was not the only poet to react against popular verse written by women. Owen's famous "Dulce Et Decorum Est", in its first version, was dedicated to Jessie Pope, who "...had not actually said that dying was 'dulce et decorum', but [who] did write some silly verse urging men to enlist" (Williams 1993: 78). A sample of Jessie Pope's verse, such as "The Call", might help towards an understanding of the rationale behind Owen's dedication:

Who's fretting to begin,
Who's going out to win?
And who wants to save his skin-
Do you, my laddie? (Reilly 2000: 88)

There were, of course, many more "...deservedly forgotten poems, in fact truly vomitorial ...literary curiosities" (Roberts 1999: 15) written in a similar or even more nauseating vein, but it ought to be emphasised that doggerel was also written by the male poets of the period. Still, verse such as Jessie Pope's must have seemed provocative to most of the trench poets. Wilfred Owen was as scathing as Sassoon in his attitude towards women poets and the civilians back at home, and attacked what he felt to be a misguided and erroneous perception of war¹⁰. This is particularly overt in "The Dead-Beat":

Dreaming of all the valiant, that *aren't* dead:
Bold uncles, smiling ministerially;
Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun
In some new home, improved materially. (Stallworthy 1998: 121)

At the same time, however, similar bitterness can be found in verse written by women. A number of female poets expressed their outrage against typical civilian attitudes. Nosheen Khan claims that "Even the soldier poets did not manage to create quite so effective and striking an image to register their disapproval of the war-crazy older generation as is conjured up by Hamilton" (Khan 1988: 9). The poem in question here is "The Ghouls" by

⁹ See, among many others, "Suicide in the Trenches" by Siegfried Sassoon (Hart-Davis 1983: 119), or "The Veteran" by Margaret Postgate Cole (Reilly 2000: 22-23).

¹⁰ There are several poems by Wilfred Owen which touch upon this matter, such as "The Send Off" (Stallworthy 1998:149), "SIW" (137-138), "Insensibility" (122), "Whereas Most Women Live" (58), "Greater Love" (143) or "Disabled" (152).

Helen Hamilton in which she launches an attack on old men, who, close to death themselves, seem to find pleasure in gloating over lists of dead soldiers:

You strange old ghouls,
Who gloat with dulled old eyes,
Over those lists,
Those dreadful lists,
Of young men dead. (Reilly 2000: 47)

Hamilton exposes the Home Front complacency, which was often reviled in the poetry of the Great War. In fact, women were writing protest poetry somewhat earlier than Owen or Sassoon. Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est" as well as "The Dead-Beat" both date from 1917 as do Sassoon's "Glory of Women" and "Their Frailty". A fine example of women's protest verse is Ruth Comfort Mitchell's "He Went for a Soldier", written in 1916, in which she discredits delusions concerning the grandeur of war:

There are braggart attitudes we've worn so long;
There are tinsel platitudes we've sworn so long... (Khan 1988: 15)

Not only did many women poets share a similar disgust for the faulty perceptions of war, but their poetry, in fact, very often contains references to verse written by men. Obviously, such intertextuality is inevitable as poetry does not exist in a literary void: there are always recurrent strands and themes which appear in verse composed by different poets. It may sometimes be difficult to decide on the extent to which one poem percolates through another. On many an occasion, there seems to be a straightforward allusion, such as a reference to the first line of Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" (Abrams 1986: 813-814) as in "Invitation Au Festin" by Aelfrida Tillyard:

Oh come and live with me, my love (Reilly 2000: 113)

However, there are multifarious cross-references and similarities in the poetry of the Great War written by both women and men¹¹. Anna Bunston De Bary's celebration of the early enthusiasm for war in her "Youth Calls to Youth":

Come, it is springtime
Life's at the morning,
Come, come and die. (Khan 1988: 11)

is reminiscent of what Khan calls "...the idealistic euphoria intrinsic to poems such as Grenfell's 'Into Battle'" (11):

¹¹ Among many other fine examples are "Rouen" by May Wedderburn Cannan (Reilly 2000: 17-18) and Siegfried Sassoon's "Aftermath" (Hart-Davis 1983: 143); Helen Hamilton's "The Romancing Poet" (Reilly 2000: 49-50) and Wilfred Owen's "Insensibility" (Stallworthy 1988: 122-123); "The Darkest Hour" by Irene Rutheford McLeod (Khan 1988: 34) and Robert Graves's "Two Fusiliers" (Gardener 1988: 148); "The Shadow" by Rose Macaulay (Reilly 2000: 67-68) and "The Dead" by Rupert Brooke (Keynes 1970: 22); "What Reward?" by Winifred M. Letts (Reilly 2000: 63) and Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (Stallworthy 1988: 76); "Dulce Et Decorum?" by Elinor Jenkins (Reilly 2000: 57) and Wilfred Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est" (Stallworthy 1988: 117).

The naked earth is warm with spring...
 And life is colour and warmth and light...
 And he is dead who will not fight... (Silkin 1996: 83)

The endless hours of overnight waiting, which for some resulted in inevitable death, rendered in Constance Renshaw's "All Quiet on the Western Front":

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'. (Khan 1988: 22)

seems to find its equivalent in Wildred Owen's "Exposure", although in this case Renshaw's poem was written earlier:

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us
 Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.
 The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
 Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
 But nothing happens. (Stallworthy 1988: 163)

There are instances in which the themes and images are similar, but the purport is entirely different. Winifred M. Letts in her "The Deserter" seems to take pity on a soldier who could no longer bear the pressure of war:

He stood there in a place apart,
 The shots rang out and down he fell,
 An English bullet in his heart.
 An English bullet in his heart! (Reilly 2000: 61-62)

while in Gilbert Frankau's poem of the same title, there is no trace of understanding or compassion:

'Fire!' called the Sergeant-Major.
 The muzzles flamed as he spoke:
 And the shameless soul of a nameless man
 Went up in the cordite-smoke. (Gardner 1988: 85)

It is most conspicuous that the problem of desertion is depicted in a harsh manner by a combatant poet, while the very same theme is viewed from a different angle by a non-combatant, whose Home Front perspective in this case softens the image. Winifred M. Letts is not as one-sided and unyielding in her judgement as Gilbert Frankau, for whom the deserter is only a soldier who has failed to carry out his duty. Letts views the deserter's death more in terms of yet another loss of life, which is even more painful as it is inflicted by compatriots. This different perspective in women's poetry sometimes takes the shape of an exact reverse of a similar theme or image in poetry composed by men. In "The Mother" by May Herschel-Clarke, the opening line, much as the rest of the poem, seems to mirror Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" (Keynes 1970: 23):

If you should die, think only this of me... (Roberts 1998: 112)

Paradoxically, it appears to be an answer to Brooke's poem, so to a certain extent it is in dialogue with "The Soldier".

Even a short overview of several war poems written by women poets reveals their significance and diversity. Therefore, it seems at least surprising that most editors and literary critics have adopted such a one-sided approach to this matter, for the range of themes and their poetical representation in women's poetry of the Great War confirm that the female voice is frequently profound and moving, and need not be separated from the mainstream of the poetry of the First World War. While some women's poetry is undoubtedly inferior in calibre, and characterised by jingoistic euphoria or melodramatic poeticisms, much is highly accomplished and shows both discernment and insight. The imagery and diction of many of the poems situates them among the most refined verse of the period¹². What is of special value, however, and must be emphasised here, is the fact that this poetry opens up a new vista into the nature of war, which in most cases is nowhere to be found in the poetry of the period written by men. As Nosheen Khan puts it: "Taken on its own terms, this body of poetry offers a variety of perspectives upon the female mind in time of war" (Khan 1988: 4).

The value of these perspectives is threefold: first of all, it presents the poignant suffering of those who watched the war from afar; secondly, it bridges the gap between the Home Front and the male agony of the trenches; thirdly, it supplements the descriptions of warfare by male poets. There are numerous poems in this supplementary mode replete with images of women working in hospitals, kitchens, munitions factories¹³ and the like. It is a fact that the Great War "...brought a vast unlocking..." (Marlowe 1999: 42) of women's energy. This energy was used in an obvious way in all the aspects of professional life where women had to replace men, even in traditionally male-dominated fields such as heavy industry, but also in seemingly simple skills which at that time were normally possessed by men: "How speedily they had learnt to drive! It was truly amazing! One scarcely saw women driving before the War" (41). It would not be unreasonable to suggest that significant part of this energy was channelled into the composing of verse about the war. The language as well as imagery of this poetry is often typical of war euphoria as in M. Winifred Wedgwood's "Christmas, 1916: *Thoughts in a V.A.D.*¹⁴ *Hospital Kitchen*":

We've got to keep on with the grind:

Just cooking for Britain's heroes.

But, bless you! we don't really mind. (Reilly 2000: 124)

At the same time, however, such platitudes and clichés are rejected and ridiculed by other women poets. In "The Romancing Poet" Helen Hamilton mounts an attack on war hysteria and sentimental heroism, and repudiates any form of superficiality or hypocrisy:

¹² To mention but a few women poets such as Vera Brittain, Charlotte Mew, or Edith Sitwell.

¹³ See, for example, "Women at Munition Making" by Mary Gabrielle Collins (Roberts 1998: 81).

¹⁴ Voluntary Aid Detachment.

Don't make a pretty song about it!...
We are not glory-snatchers! (50)

In fact, she seems to launch a crusade against the jingoistic mode employed by some women poets, the "The Jingo-Woman" being a prime example:

Jingo-woman
(How I dislike you!)
Dealer in white feathers,
Insulter, self-appointed (47)

Very different in its mood as it is, Edith Sitwell's "The Dancers" provides tangible evidence of how much the women's poetry of the Great War differs in skill, form, and atmosphere. Here, war hysteria is given an entirely different dimension as Sitwell creates a sinister picture of war fatigue through the use of stirring imagery:

We are the dull blind carrion-fly
That dance and batten. (100)

Both Helen Hamilton and Edith Sitwell belong to that group of women poets who reveal an acute and penetrating analysis of war hysteria, and who counterbalance the jingoistic moods of many Home Front poets. Indeed, the diversity of women's war poetry is continually surprising. Along with doggerel verse, the epitome of which is Nina Macdonald's "Sing a Song of War-Time":

Sing a song of War-time,
Soldiers marching by,
Crowds of people standing,
Waving them 'Good-bye. (69)

there are memorable gems, such as Charlotte Mew's "May, 1915", with its beautiful alliteration:

Wait with their old wise patience for the heavenly rain,
Sure of the sky: sure of the sea to send its healing breeze ... (72)

or Amy Lowell's "Convalescence" (65) with its terseness, typical of Imagist poetry¹⁵. A similarly valuable contribution to women's war poetry can be attributed to Hilda Doolittle¹⁶, who "...doesn't write openly about the war at all, hence her omission from anthologies of war poetry" (Featherstone 1995: 101). Her poetry is saturated with sharp imagery and mythological elements as in "After Troy":

We flung against their gods,
invincible, clear hate;
we fought;
frantic, we flung the last
imperious, desperate shaft
and lost ... (165)

¹⁵ Amy Lowell was not only involved in the Imagist movement but also introduced a new form called Polyphonic Prose. See Jones (1972).

¹⁶ Hilda Doolittle was, in fact, American. She moved to London and became one of the leading members of the Imagist movement. She was married to Richard Aldington. See Featherstone (1995).

A large part of the poetry of the Great War written by women is elegiac in mood, even though the picture of loss may occasionally smack of sentimentality¹⁷. Vera Brittain's modest manifestation of sisterly affection in "To my Brother":

Your battle-wounds are scars upon my heart (15)

is a telling testimony of enduring anguish. Similarly, a demure picture of bereavement in "Perhaps" (14) is a characteristic example of the grief and mourning which is a recurrent motif in so many of the women's poems of the Great War. However, the elegiac, while a characteristic theme of war poetry, is but one of many elements in women's First World War verse, and does not overshadow other themes. A great number of poems are characterised by a typically Georgian focus on nature. The pastoral world, set beside the atrocities of the Great War, has several functions. First of all, the image presented offers protection, and a feeling of the snugness of home. Secondly, it serves as a counter-balance to the horror of war. Thirdly, pastoral references suggest nature's ability to revitalise and recreate itself. And lastly, the invocation of the pastoral brings hope and comfort to those at the Home Front. As Nosheen Khan puts it: "Pure patriotism, the Georgian celebration in rich sentimental tones of the sights and sounds of rural England, could be exploited in order to argue the necessity for sacrifice and the need to keep the home fires burning" (Khan 1988: 56). This, however, is just one function of using nature imagery in war poetry, but not necessarily the primary one. The safety and protection, along with the beauty and tranquillity of the English countryside, is often contrasted with the proximity of war. Rose Macaulay's wistful reminiscence of a rural backwater with its safe and calm atmosphere in "Picnic":

Drowsy, and quiet, and sweet ...
When heavily up the south-east wind
The great guns beat. (66)

is presented against the sinister backcloth of trench warfare, looming over the physical safety of country life. But, in "Leave in 1917", by Lilian M. Anderson, the war's proximity is distanced by the security of the English countryside, which is viewed as a refuge, a haven into which no horror can intrude:

Here was England, stripped of mail and weapons,
child-sweet and maiden-gentle. Here was Spring,
her feet frost-bright among the daffodils. (3-5)

This somewhat escapist manner, where nature is presented as a counterbalance to the atrocities of war, is characteristic of many poems of the period and takes a variety of forms. In poems such as "There Will Come Soft Rains" by Sara Teasdale (110-111), nature is seen as a force which possesses magical healing potential. This is also beautifully exemplified in Charlotte Mew's "May, 1915":

Let us remember Spring will come again
To the scorched, blackened woods, where the

¹⁷ See, for example, Muriel Stuart's "Forgotten Dead, I Salute You" (Reilly 2000: 104-105), or "A Memory" by Margaret Sackville (95).

wounded trees
 Wait with their old wise patience for the heavenly rain,
 Sure of the sky: sure of the sea to send its healing breeze,
 Sure of the sun. (72)

Other recurring images, in the poetry of the Great war, are poppies and red roses. In quite an obvious manner, red roses epitomise sacrifice, while poppies are not only emblematic of the cost in blood of the war as such, but are shown metaphorically as being nourished on the blood of the dead soldiers. This is intrinsic to many poems such as Elizabeth Daryush's "Flanders Fields"¹⁸, or "Revision" by Eileen Newton, who writes of "...poppies dipped and dyed in human blood..." (81). Some poets present the destruction of nature in war-time. On the one hand, the picture of war presented in a pastoral manner is softened and mellowed by viewing it as a part of natural cycle, or, contrarily, the horror of the war is intensified by representing it as a force far mightier than nature. Delineating the war as a destructive power strengthens the image of its barbarity and shows it as an utterly annihilating force. In "Nature in War-Time" by S. Gertrude Ford, this representation takes the form of rhetorical questions:

Grieve not those meadows scarred and cleft,
 Mined with deep holes and reft of grass,
 Gardens where not a flower is left,
 Fouled streams, once clear as glass? (38)

In "July 1st, 1916" by Aimee Byng Scott the manner in which destruction is depicted resembles a press headline and sounds as if it were an announcement of yet another atrocity:

War in his might
 Has passed; Nature lies prostrate there
 Stunned by his tread. (97)

Such reference to the pastoral world not only reveals the irony of war, but also emphasises its utter abnormality by setting it beside nature, whose function and value is pictured as almost sacred. The pastoral element has an utterly different dimension in Margaret Cole's "The Falling Leaves", in which she juxtaposes the world of nature and the carnage of the trench warfare:

I saw the brown leaves dropping from the tree
 In a still afternoon,
 When no wind whirled them whistling to the sky,
 But thickly, silently,
 They fell, like snowflakes wiping out the noon;
 And wandered slowly thence
 For thinking of a gallant multitude
 Which now all withering lay,
 Slain by no wind of age or pestilence,

¹⁸ The poem not only contains a popular theme, but also has a title used by other poets. Cf. Edith Nesbit's "The Fields of Flanders" (Khan 1988: 79) or "Flanders" by Willoughby Weaving (Gardner 1988: 46).

But in their beauty strewed
Like snowflakes falling on the Flemish clay. (21)

Autumnal decay, which is part of a natural cycle of transformation, is contrasted with the soldiers dying *en masse* on the fields of Flanders. This juxtaposition magnifies the futility and unnaturalness of the human sacrifice. Autumnal transmutation is the result of a natural process: the leaves fall because their organic development has reached its final stage. By contrast, the soldiers are wiped out regardless of the fact that they are still in their prime.

The women's verse of the Great War contains many other typical themes with a variety of images: poverty and shortages, in poems such as "Munition Wages" by Madeline Ida Bedford (Reilly 2000: 7-8); hospitals and wounded soldiers, especially in Eva Dobell's "Night Duty" (32-33), or "The Nurse" by G. M. Mitchell (Roberts 1998: 237); mothers awaiting sons, such as in "The Mother" by May Herschel-Clarke (112); and finally, love, which is almost inseparable from the ubiquitous farewells, with martial music and girls throwing flowers. These farewells, where intimate partings mingle with official send-offs and whose most typical scene is a railway station, are ever-present in poems such as "Last Leave (1918)" by Eileen Newton (Roberts 1999: 229) or "Train" by Helen Mackay (230-232), but are particularly poignant in Eleanor Farjeon's "Now That You Too":

But oh, let end what will, I hold you fast
By immortal love, which has no first or last. (233)

The range of themes in the women's poetry of the Great War and their poetic representation¹⁹ are far too wide to be thoroughly investigated in a short article, but even a brief insight into the variety of contexts and images employed is conducive to drawing a more complete picture of the corpus of poetry written during the Great War, and can be seen as a prolegomenon to a subsequent exhaustive literary analysis. All in all, it is difficult not to agree that "...more good poetry came out of World War I than is generally recognised...." (Parsons 1987: 13). By the same token, and contrary to popular belief, there exists a considerable legacy of women's war poetry, so long "under the shadow of the wings of war"²⁰ cast by the male poets of the period. The female voice is often quiet but the palette of imagery and the verbal range of some of the poems are indeed impressive. Jingoistic euphoria and sentimental clichés are sometimes in evidence but exist alongside striking pictures of hollowness, suffering and futility. The female apprehension of war is as weighty and indispensable a testimony as the mainstream verse of the period. Martin Stephen seems to take a very clear view when he writes that the poetry of the Great War "...has been allowed to appear as a man's world. The involvement of women in it was more passive, but no less significant" (Stephen 2001: 256).

¹⁹ Women's poetry of the Great War is not only varied in terms of its content but also form. See, for example, "A Letter from Ealing Broadway Station (From E.M.W.T.)", an epistle by Aelfrida Tillyard (Reilly 2000: 113-114).

²⁰ "Under the Shadow" by Edith Nesbit (Roberts 1999: 230)

The virtual absence of a thorough literary dissection of women's war poetry provides an opportunity for reconsidering critical frameworks concerning the poetry of the Great War. One may confidently assert that without the poetic contribution of those who were observers of the military campaigns rather than combatants, the poetry of the Great War would be lacking an important component, the importance of which does not diminish in value when considered in the broader context of the total poetic output of the Great War.

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