However, for many writers at the time it was impossible to dissociate themselves completely from the war as it inevitably provided the background for all creative processes. Their attempts to focus on other aspects of life can hardly qualify as 'escapes'. Instead, these 'flights of fancy' rather served to repress the war experience in order to preserve one's sanity by concentrating on home and nature as symbols of peace and security, as well as memories of happier times. Ivor Gurney, for instance, like many others tried to detach himself from the war but in the end failed to preserve his sanity against the haunting spirits. Nevertheless, one of his poems is indicative of his attempt: 'The dead land oppressed me; I turned my thoughts away,/And went where hill and meadow/Are shadowless and gay.' Again and again, the poet was dragged back to the battlefield from which he tried to escape mentally but in the end failed to do.

Thus images of war – the barbed wire, the shells, or the wounds – are entwined with descriptions of flowers, animals or landscape impressions, suggesting the coming of new hope and joy, as will be shown in the following section. A second section will then concentrate on the important role of comradeship in constituting insider and outsider circles. Irony in this respect will be revealed as a way of dissociating oneself from ignorant outsiders as well as the only appropriate means to deal with personal loss. By their partial nature, these brief flights from the reality of modern warfare also highlight and intensify the individual attitudes of the poets towards the conflict. The large variety of emotions dealt with by the individual will be revealed as yet another trigger for irony in the sections on war at sea and in the air and on military technology. All three of these areas of military existence evoked a myriad of reactions ranging from pride and fascination to cool detachment, complete rejection and questions of personal guilt. As a distancing mode preventing the ultimate commitment of the self (Thurley, 1974, pp. 10, 16) to the world of war, irony served as a shield for the human psyche, enabling moments of beauty in the midst of chaos and destruction, as many of the following poems will show.

2.1 Nature and countryside

2.1.1 The Romantic tradition

Nature as a possible theme of war poetry is by no means far-fetched, as the war was an open-air event and death at the front reduced man to his original state of dust, thus reuniting him with mother earth. However, there is more to the relationship between nature and war

than the pastoral tradition of poetic language. The connection between war and nature in patriotic poetry published in national papers such as *The Times* during the early years of war initially helped to support the national cause by justifying the suffering as a necessary sacrifice for England and thus calling young men to join up. Both male and female poets saw England, especially its southern parts, as being worthy of sacrifice. Apart from Rupert Brooke's famous war sonnets and other popular poems by various male writers, Constance Ada Renshaw's poem *The Lure of England* and Lily Marcus's *In the Trenches* particularly stress this aspect by focusing on the beauty of the countryside as a healing contrast to the destruction wrought by war. Yet, at the same time, this connection provided a means of measuring the disastrous results of war for nature and the population alike. Additionally, nature served as a psychological refuge and a source of hope. One means of preventing war from dominating one's thinking was to focus more strongly than ever before on an ideal British model world with flowers, fields, sheep, birds, gardens, and valleys as opposed to the destroyed forests and upturned fields of France and Belgium. Especially in Blunden's and Gurney's poems the imaginary flight into pastoral idylls functions as implicit critique on the war or as an attempt to handle its consequences for the human psyche (Löschnigg, 1994, p. 31).[1] A similar effort can be traced in Rosenberg's work which asserts the 'humane spirit against the power of war' (Graham, 1984, p. 136).

England's rural past and the countryside of southern England had already been a frequent subject for the Romantics as a stabilising or even curative power for the individual troubled by industrialisation and progress. The English naturalists, however, had introduced a second viewpoint, namely nature as an indifferent or even hostile force in opposition to mankind. While many of the Georgians, in the search for a distinctly English identity, had concentrated on the Romantic heritage in order to find in nature a frequent source for the myth of a prewar golden age, Georgian diction was later rejected as inappropriate in the context of modern war in which artificial trees were positioned between natural dead trees as a hiding place for snipers. A sign of life thus became a symbol of death, even though the First World War did not alter the basic language of national representation. However, it led to the adaptation of romantic imagery to its circumstances.[2] The poets' aim was to place their new experiences and visual impressions in the context of the familiar as a means of both achieving reassurance and expressing bewilderment.

The general attentiveness to nature reflects the strong influence of Romanticism on popular thinking. The landscape of Flanders and

Picardy enabled the soldiers to draw parallels with home. Larks and nightingales were as common in England as they were near the Western Front, and they soon became associated with morning and evening stand-tos. Similar to birds, flowers also became part of the symbolism of the war. It was the colour red of roses and poppies that reminded soldiers and poets of the blood of their comrades. At the same time, the English rose stood for a specific form of female beauty[3] and as such linked the soldiers at the front with their loved ones at home. In other areas of war, the comparison of landscape and nature with England caused equally strong emotions. In Palestine, Mesopotamia and Egypt, the historical significance of the sites engendered deep awe, while at the same time the desert was often perceived as more life-threatening than any human enemy.

There were, however, some ironical twists resulting from war. While spring was the most loved season in England, it was also the time for the most fatal offensives at the Western Front. The same holds for the beauty of sunrise and sunset, usually the time of attacks. The frequent portrayals of the shifting colour of the sky have their origin in the fact that the trenches only allowed an upward gaze as in Sassoon's *The Redeemer:* 'And dawn a watching of the windowed sky' or Manning's *The Trenches:* 'And the sky, seen as from a well'. Furthermore, the dead remained on the surface whereas the living had to shelter underneath in holes hardly suitable as housing for human beings. It is the ironic conjunction of aesthetically appealing elements with the anxieties and horrors of war that finally transforms traditional poetic techniques. All of these ambivalent images provide a source for the concept of situational irony that is used by the authors of the poems to be discussed in the following pages. It is therefore necessary to briefly reflect upon this particular form of irony.

Although irony has always been used in various forms in literature, it is not primarily a literary term, but one of philosophical origin. Aristotle in his *Nicomachian Ethics* gave the first definition of irony as a particular way of thinking. His prime example, of course, was Socrates, whose whole lifestyle was described as ironic. Right from the start irony was thus more than simply a rhetorical means, as we know it today from the reflections of Quintilian or Cicero. This diversity was then further elaborated upon during the history of irony in which the term was applied to both literary and ontological forms. The problem that arises out of this multiplicity is that even today there is no single form of analysis that is able to cover all aspects of the phenomenon. In general, linguistics and psycho-linguistics are occupied with what Muecke (1969) and others

call 'verbal' irony, whereas all other forms of irony are mainly investigated by philosophy, psychology, sociology, or even history.

The easiest way to distinguish between the two forms of irony is by comparing the following two sentences: 'He is being ironical' and 'It is ironic that…'. Some readers might now think of Alanis Morissette's famous song *Ironic*. However, this cannot serve as an illustrative example here as she reports incidents which are merely coincidental, rather than ironic, and therefore lead to one of the most frequent confusions of terms. Yet 'a traffic jam when you're already late' might well become ironic if the speaker were late for a meeting concerned with the avoidance of traffic jams. The example is thus indicative of the important role of the context with regard to the interpretation of an utterance as ironic. Whereas 'he is being ironical' implies a human subject, an ironist, 'it is ironic that' refers to a state of affairs. The result of this absence of the ironist is the semi-personification of fate, or, in the case of the war poets, war itself. This implies that the victim of the irony, i.e. the soldier enduring his fate, remains ignorant of what is already predestined. If he survives, he is not necessarily distinct from the observer, the poet, who only interprets a situation to be ironic in retrospect.

The general problem in literature now is that the poet might be an ironist being ironical by showing something ironic happening. A combination of both verbal and situational irony in literary texts is thus not unusual. Indeed, they often work together in order to increase the ironic effect. However, although both verbal and situational irony was already prominent by the time of Socrates, neither kind was called irony for a long time. Even today secondary literature often talks about dark humour, ridicule or mockery when referring to the phenomenon. In order to ease a distinction of the two forms, situational irony in literature can furthermore be described as impersonal. In most instances, the ironist is absent as a person, and we only have his presentation of what he perceives as an ironical situation. This form of irony is therefore sometimes also called dramatised irony because of the ironist's presentation of ironic situations or events.

All forms of irony are determined by the context in which they occur, and they strongly rely on an incongruency recognised by both user and perceiver as constituting a field of ironic stress (Allemann, 1970, p. 34) on the basis of common knowledge. In literature, this incongruency can be established on several levels: (1) it can be based on the words used. The incongruency would then be purely verbal; (2) the words used may not fit into the context in which they are used, which would imply a mixture of situational and verbal irony; or (3) the fictitious situation

itself might contain oppositional or incongruent elements with regard to reality. This would best be qualified as situational irony, but one embedded in a literary context.[4] It is the last two forms that are of interest in this chapter concerning the strategies of evasion of many poets.

In their majority these ironic forms are ironies of gaps: by leaving out the action of war and instead concentrating on the essentials of human life (environment, basic needs, friendship, emotions) the poetry becomes charged with additional significance. What is describable begins to serve as a comment on the indescribable horrors of modern war by way of the perceiver. The irony as such is not inherent in a particular remark or situation, but it is the assumed general knowledge of the reader that leads to its discovery in a mutual understanding with the speaker. There cannot be situational irony without an observer who is able to perceive it. Based on this mutual understanding between poet and reader, irony reveals the absurdity of the war while strongly emphasising the meaningful elements of life by asking existential questions. Speculations on life and death, renewal, continuity, destruction and decay thus feature prominently in the following poems.

In order to prevent despair resulting more than once in madness or even suicide, as for instance in Sassoon's *Suicide in the Trenches*, many poets would subscribe to the idea that 'One must separate oneself from a world which is dead, illusory, unmanageable, contradictory, or absurd. But unless one commits suicide, one must also accept it. Accept it therefore ironically' (Muecke, 1969, p. 235). The resulting use of irony by many poets was not without parallel in real life, in which lovely summer nights were predestined for air raids and in which every autumn brought a harvest of casualties rather than crops. The following examples will reflect the various possibilities of combining war and nature to create an ironic potential.

For Edmund Blunden nature and countryside usually provide consolation and a way of escaping the war. However, in *Zero* (*Come on, my Lucky Lads*) he seems to negate this possibility altogether. Colourful sunrise is combined with the pyrotechnical effects of artillery fire during an attack. The poem's title *Zero* is indicative here as it refers to the 'zero hour' in military jargon. The result is a peculiar combination of awakening and death, a clash of images which is mainly responsible for the ironic effect of the poem.

Nature equally provides the material for an ironic reversal of romantic imagery in Owen's poem *Spring Offensive*. Man is still bonded to nature, but it is a violent, rather than a peaceful and harmonious, bond. The title of this longer poem is already charged with paradox. As a time of

growth and renewal, spring suggests innocence, maybe even eroticism, to which the military offensive provides a stark contrast. The poem is loosely based on the assault at Savy Wood in March 1917 which preceded Owen's shellshock. It begins with an accurate description of facts, then shifts to static watching in the next stanza, and later makes a transition from the Arcadian atmosphere of shelter back to the horror of an infantry attack. Contrary to Owen's other works, however, it is difficult to locate the setting of the poem in the First World War as the only markers can be found in the title and the soldiers' 'pack-loads'. Even the presence of a human enemy in the poem can only be deduced from the word 'bullet' marking the climax of the poem. Throughout the poem the men seem to fight the surrounding natural world rather than the Germans, as Hipp (2002, p. 41) suggests: 'The first line of the poem establishes the opposition that the poem as a whole will explore. The men are "halted against the shade of a last hill." The use of the word "against" posits the conflict between the men who exist within a natural landscape and the landscape itself which will act against their actions.' The hostile world of the trenches as opposed to peacetime nature is further marked by the syntactical isolation of the word 'exposed'. As a formal as well as syntactical caesura, the participle reveals the soldier's transition from the quiet resting place, as described up to stanza 5, into the hostile world of the war marked by the explosion of shells. 'Nature and her beauties are hardly more than ironic facts in this paradoxical interlude of relaxation before certain nightmare; it is not anthropomorphism, but the heightened awareness of the condemned...' (Lane, 1972, p. 138). In this life-threatening environment, however, the soldier takes an active part as killer and as victim who 'leaps' over the flying bullets, an action the young veteran in *Disabled* failed to achieve.

As in many other nature-centred poems of the First World War, the sky and the grass take on an important role in *Spring Offensive* (ll. 11f.). The image of the storm is usually used to convey war's destructive potential,[5] or the sky above the fighting men is blank and taciturn. In its mystery, it refuses to give an answer to the soldiers' questions concerning themselves and God. Here, the flashing sky and the long grass are symbolic of summer but at the same time evoke imminent danger with the enemy lying just a few yards away over the ridge of grass. The grass thus takes on the additional connotation of a killing blade. As a consequence, both images become signs of destruction and violence as the poem progresses. This dichotomy of nature as both a redemptive and a destructive force is further elaborated upon in lines 13–31 of the poem. The buttercups colour the men's boots as they march along and

the brambles cling to their trousers as if to hold them back. However, as the soldiers progress, the sky burns 'with fury against them' (l. 30) a moment later and the earth gratefully receives their blood. 'Nature is now unquestionably in its role as the men's enemy; its "fury" suggests an anger at the actions of the soldiers and punishment for their having disobeyed the implicit "command" not to have attacked' (Hipp, 2002, p. 42). In its ironic demystification of nature, the poem comes close to Charles Hamilton Sorley's earlier poem *All the Hills and Vales Along*, especially its penultimate stanza.

Other authors focused on daily life in the trenches which was not dominated by action but rather followed a fixed routine of stand-tos, cleaning of arms, sleeping, hunting vermin or simply waiting for the next attack. To pass the time, hunting rats turned into a favourite sport among soldiers at the Western Front and it is in this context that Isaac Rosenberg's poem *Break of day in the Trenches* can be situated. Rats were feared because they were disfiguring corpses by eating their eyes and livers. Furthermore, they spread infection and contaminated food. Yet hunting them was a futile business as one healthy rat couple could produce up to 900 offspring per year. Furthermore, they were ascribed prophetic qualities and many veterans swore that rats sensed the coming of heavy shell-fire and thus disappeared from view before the start of attacks. However, the speaker in Rosenberg's poem does not shoot the rat, but instead enters into an imaginative conversation with it. The focus on natural phenomena like the rat or a blossoming flower, however, reinforces the idea of the absurdity of war.

The first version of the poem was probably completed by the end of July 1916 but it was not until December that the poem first appeared in the Chicago journal *Poetry*. Its dialecticism might have been influenced by John Donne's poetry as the basic structure of the poem recalls that of *The Flea*: the soldier in the trench is juxtaposed between two modest natural objects, the rat and the poppy. The structure of the poem is subdued in favour of the imagination of the speaker pondering over the general nature of mankind and his own fate in particular. As such, Rosenberg's 'subject matter at last lends itself to his somewhat chaotic method of composition, where image is hurled upon image, the rhythms are highly irregular and form is not of prime importance' (Wilson, 1975, p. 211).

The pastoral background of the poem is furthermore reinforced by Rosenberg's choice of the aubade as the form of the poem. Accordingly, the poem begins quietly by mirroring the stillness of an ordinary morning in the trenches shortly before sunrise. Both the speaker and the

reader are left unsure as to what the coming dawn will bring, even if the morning begins like so many others before ('the same old druid time as ever'). The overall impression is one of resignation to the dangers of the coming day. But the general tranquillity of slowly waking up is interrupted by the startled movement of the rat involving a shift of focus, as does the poppy at the end of the poem.

The rat seems to be an unusual poetic subject, but an even more unusual addressee. However, during war, the rat was a chance companion of the soldier with whom he shared his living space. Traditionally rats were seen to be demonic creatures (see, for example, Fussell, 1975, pp. 251–253), but this one in particular appears less noisome than expected and rather charming, sophisticated and well-travelled. The speaker even seems to prefer the company of the rat rather than talking to his fellow soldiers. This peculiar preference possibly has its origins in the author's own experiences among his comrades. Rosenberg himself was a Jew from a rather poor immigrant family – and maybe as such used to rats in ordinary life – while at the same time his family had always been part of the London artistic and intellectual community. His father was a strong pacifist and member of the Workers' Friend Club in Jubilee Street, which was based on libertarian principles of access to knowledge for all. Before enlisting for financial reasons, Isaac Rosenberg had been on the way to becoming a painter. Despite his background, he had succeeded in entering the Slade School of Art, London, due to two wealthy benefactresses. Rosenberg's religious and artistic background, as well as his lack of patriotic feelings, seems to have set the author apart from his fellow privates, as the author's letters and diaries reveal more than once.[6]

The general tone of the poem is that of the sardonic outsider. The rat itself rises above both the ideological barriers and the physical obstacles of human beings and is therefore characterised as both 'droll'/'queer' and 'sardonic'. By a reversal of roles, the rat even serves as a negative foil to the soldiers and reveals war's absurdity. Normally it is man who ponders over animals and nature, now the rat wonders about the unnatural terror of mankind. And in its grin is reflected the mockery of man's fate as victim and potential killer. The rat even becomes a sort of silent objective judge of mankind. Rosenberg was well aware of this double role of the soldier as he once described himself as a man who 'killed with slaughter mad' (Rosenberg, 1962, p. 78).

Rats usually hide in holes to escape dangers, but in times of war it is the soldier who has to hide in trenches. If he dared stick his head out too high, he would inevitably be shot, whereas the rat is able to move

freely among the various fronts. According to Harold Bloom 'the rat's function is to emphasize by his very freedom the arbitrary separation between the two front lines, and by his low, ugly vitality to point up the fact of human death' (Bloom, 2002, p. 68. See also Löschnigg, 1994, p. 43). It is one of the absurdities of war that a measly rat is able to transgress boundaries at the face of which man fails. And furthermore: 'There is something ironic, too, in the idea that the two enemies – German and English – will be temporarily linked by their common acceptance of this measly rat' (Bloom, 2002, p. 75). War is reduced *ad absurdum* with the help of this imaginative conversation between rat and man strongly relying on situational irony (Simpson, 1990, p. 132).

With the verdict 'they would shoot you…' the poet returns to ordinary life again. This sentence with its many 'u' sounds echoing one another brings us back to the reality of trench life in which the rats – rather than the Germans on the other side of the trench – were the real enemies of the soldiers, spreading diseases, feeding on the dead and disturbing one's sleep. The question remains who 'they' are: in the context of Rosenberg's Judaism the righteous gentiles? In the case of war some soldier conspirators? Or the military leaders and politicians? While rats were usually shot by the soldiers for reasons mentioned above, the speaker of the poem gives us another reason for the rat's death sentence: its 'cosmopolitan sympathies'. In a context where it was strongly forbidden to meet the supposed enemy or even to enter into conversation with him the rat commits a serious crime. The word 'cosmopolitan' used here is richer in connotation than 'national' or 'allied' and it seems that the speaker, too, shares these sympathies and might just as quickly be shot down. 'In this perilous instant, rat, poet and poem take their lives into their own hands: this instant when the wakeful poet/soldier dissociates himself (by virtue of his sympathies) from the company of haughty athletes, of either side, and soliloquies (…) in front of a scampering unidealistic rat – the only being around in the breaking dawn alive and sympathetic enough to 'share' his tremulous humanity. The irony of this could hardly be more heartrending' (Simpson, 1990, p. 132).

The rat will 'do the same' to all enemies at the front, a fact which exposes the distinction between enemy and ally or between nationalities to be artificial. In the rat's eyes these differences do not exist and are therefore absurd. As the conversation is imaginative, however, the rat becomes the objectification of the soldier's mood and thoughts. As in other poems of the time, as for instance Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth* in which men are like cattle, or Robert Nichol's *Noon,* the distinction

between man and animal becomes blurred at the front; only the soldiers are less adjusted to life under the open sky than animals are.[7] It is one of the ironies of war that the rat has a greater chance of survival than the young athletes at the height of their youth, as is underlined in lines 14 and 15 of the poem.

In line 13, the poet uses the idea of sleep to suggest the possibility of peace. At the same time the reader knows that the 'sleeping green between' will soon be awake. As a euphemism for No-Man's Land it evokes the horror of exploding shells making sleep nearly impossible. A similar ironic device is the poppy. It grows on the parapet over which the soldiers climb to meet the enemy during an attack and would, in this case, be trampled down at once. By pulling it out and sticking it behind his ear, the speaker seems to save the flower from this fate. However, in doing so he already triggers the flower's dying process. The poppy is not safe at all, even without the occurrence of an attack. Like the flower, the soldier is pulled from the soil, separated from family and friends and located in a life-threatening environment. Just like the flower, he will soon turn into dust.

In popular myth poppies were thought to feed off the blood of the dead ('poppies whose roots are in man's veins'), turning their petals red. Additionally, poppies are short-lived flowers and thus mirror the life of the soldier at the front whose life expectancy during an attack was only a few minutes. The dust that covers the poppy recalls the literal dust of the hot summer of 1916 while at the same time it is the dust into which all men will turn after death according to the biblical image of Genesis. Furthermore, 'a little white' sounds very similar to 'only a little while (and then I'll be dead)'. The flower will soon be totally white as its blood runs out of it, just as it will run out of the soldier. 'Rosenberg announces his own impending death in these lines as clearly as if he had arranged to be shot in front of us' (Stephen, 1996, p. 217). Thus the most ironic word in the poem is the word *safe* in the penultimate line. In their fate, man and nature are inevitably bound together in the poem.

The effect of Rosenberg's poetry in large parts relies on his handling of nature images. As the previous example has shown, the poet focuses on details to highlight specific aspects of the war instead of elaborately describing landscapes. One of Rosenberg's first attempts at this technique originated in South Africa, *On Receiving News of the War,* in 1914. War in this poem is both a linguistic fact and part of nature symbolically expressed in the word 'snow'. As Kedzierska (1995, p. 22) points out, 'winter itself becomes metamorphosed' into a 'god-like ruler of the world' when it attacks in the middle of the hot summer of 1914.

While the poem is free of the initial euphoria expressed in many other poetic responses at the beginning of the war, its irony is not one of protest. It rather patiently accepts what is to come as a natural course of events which has to be endured, even though it might be ghastly.

In the following two poems, *Louse Hunting* and *Returning, we hear the larks* the poet again uses similar devices of fragmentariness by reducing the world of the trenches to its non-human inhabitants. These aspects distilled from nature function as a source for his irony. In *Returning, we hear the larks,* this irony is based on the dominant sound of birdsong in the midst of devastation and death. The sparse descriptions and the frequent enjambments create a fearful expectancy of danger. Suddenly a change occurs. However, this time it is not a flying shell or the explosion of a mine, but the sound of a bird that 'drops' into the silence and releases both soldier and reader from their heightened awareness. The poem represents one of the rare instances in Rosenberg's work where nature is represented as a friendly entity, represented by the Shelleyan lark.[8] However, the general impression is one of arbitrariness – nature as well as the outcome of every new day at war is unpredictable. Larks featured prominently in English poetry from Shakespeare onwards, suggesting the coming of a new day with new hope. In Rosenberg's poem, however, the bird serves as symbol for the fragility of the peacefulness that might just as well turn into horror again. The emotional response of the soldiers to the song of the lark creates the impression of safety which daily experience teaches them to be an illusion. 'Rosenberg can infuriate by not seeming to know what he is writing about; at times he can convert that and make himself the spokesman for all the ironies of war that can never be explained' (Stephen, 1996, p. 219). Sassoon's *Thrushes* even reverts this irony into bleak sarcasm as his bird rises over a field of corpses.

Instead of focusing on the misery of the men, *Louse Hunting* portrays their futile attempts to kill lice in a quasi-ritual dance around the fire. 'Without the typical orchestration of guns and political character, war emerges as a private affair of the hunters who in the course of their struggle become themselves hunted' (Kedzierska, 1995, p. 30). It is the grotesqueness of the hunters' futile battle against inhuman nature that brings home Rosenberg's critique of the war. As in many other poems, the vermin are presented as the real enemy of the troops on both sides of the trenches as they were spreading trench fever and fighting against them was as ridiculous as the whole war. At the same time, the 'lice, as Rosenberg sees them, are a comic definition of man's smallness because of the scale of the soldier's battle against them' (Graham, 1984, p. 150).

As such they also provide the subject of another of Rosenberg's poems, *The Immortals*, a poem which plays with a reversal of dimensions and perspectives on the verbal level. There is a general incongruency between the violent language of warfare and the insignificance of the enemy which increases the comic success of the poem. In stanza 2 'red', for instance, suggests the blood of the enemy but it is the blood the louse has sucked out of the members of the speaker's own army. Again, war is not mentioned at all and the reader is left in the dark regarding the nature of the enemy. To explain the verbal irony here speech act theoreticians would argue that the poem flouts the maxims of both coherence and relevance as set up in Grice's cooperative principle. Thus the traditional communication model has to be extended to two levels here: on the superficial level someone is talking about killing lice, on the underlying level the topic is war. In order to understand the content of the poem and perceive the irony, it is necessary for the reader to be able to distinguish between these levels on the basis of his or her background knowledge about the living conditions in the trenches of the Western Front during the First World War.

Throughout the poem, the speaker talks about a threatening and dangerous opponent, but only in the last line is the enemy identified as a tiny louse which serves as a symbol for the absurdity of warfare in general. While the Germans are reduced to artificial and therefore less frightening opponents, the natural enemy, the louse, rises to supernatural power in the description of the speaker. It is an immortal Devil from whom nobody can escape. Instead of saving their energy for the next attack, the soldiers constantly fight against the daily terror in their own trenches which takes the form of little insects and other vermin. It is only lice which the soldier feels a desire to murder, and thus the ideas of the militarists are mocked by experience. Graham (1982, p. 152) argues accordingly: 'For the central myth of "the enemy" we have lice, for the belief in the effectiveness of aggression we have a fury that is unending and impotent; for the celebration of the joy of killing we have the tormenting nightmares of slaughter. A wisdom has been gained but it is not the discovery of glory or nobility. It is the mastery of disgust.' Again, this can be identified as a typical instance of situational irony for the purpose of targeting war in general. The mystification of the louse thus serves to demystify the war.

However, although the irony becomes rather overt in the context of Rosenberg's other war-related works, a non-ironic interpretation of the poem might also be possible in retrospect. The title of the poem, *The Immortals,* may equally refer to the long-lived war memories of the

First World War veterans. Psychological studies of neurasthenia have revealed that even after the end of the war many of the soldiers continued the killing in their minds. Possible misinterpretation results from the reader being determined by the historical context of communication and background knowledge, and is augmented by the violation of the rules of ordinary conversation, which increases the readers' difficulties in understanding the text.

The experience of vermin was by no means limited to the Western Front, nor was the use of irony in order to deal with it. The overt irony of H. W. Berry's *Somewhere East of Suez* in this respect is surprisingly similar to that of the above poems by Rosenberg, although the poetic quality of the poem is no match for Rosenberg. Again, war provides the reason for the speaker's situation but is not the foremost topic of the poem. Indeed, the soldier is plagued by mosquitoes and sand-flies rather than the enemy, in this case the Turks. As in Rosenberg's poem, nature in the proper sense of the phrase gets the best of man, his blood. By sucking him dry and taking his most valuable essence, the insect is portrayed on the same level as the human 'profiteers'. They are neither better, nor worse. In both cases, resistance is futile as the sheer quantity of 'the enemy' is against the soldiers. For effect, the poem successfully combines biblical imagery with war slang, such as when the slain mosquito 'goes West' (l. 24) in order to create a peculiar synthesis of humour, anger and curse. As such, the poem shows that it was not the experience of trench warfare at the Western Front that led to the creation of a certain kind of 'ironic discourse', but that irony as a psychological means of dealing with the various war-related conditions and situations was far more widespread. It rather seems to have been part of a cultural system that was available to all classes in all areas of war and independent of poetic circles.

While the abovementioned poems represent the supremacy of nature over mankind, the role of earth is a different one in *Dead Man's Dump.* Especially its third stanza portrays earth as a jealous and hungry monster. The deaths of the soldiers seem to be part of a larger plan. In the end, enemy and friend lie identically together (see also Owen's *Strange Meeting*), with bones crushed by the limber rolling over them as if they were nothing more than dry branches randomly spread in the countryside. Even the single grave, preserving at least some kind of honour in an intact setting, is exchanged for a garbage heap of corpses in times of war. 'The earth that ought to have been (as in pastoral) a consoling home for the living and a regenerative grave for the dead had become instead a grave for the living and a home for

the dead' (Gilbert, 1999, p. 184). However, despite this bleak vision of the relationship between nature and mankind, in *Spring 1916* nature still seems to possess a regenerative potential for Rosenberg as it did for the Romantics. Flowers and bushes blossom every year although there are only few men left to appreciate the sight. On the other hand, this image of returning spring in the midst of destruction underlines nature's independence from all human affairs.

2.1.2 Rural life

While the above poems largely drew their ironic potential from both the continuation and reversal of romantic traditions, another option was to set (fictional) English rural idylls in sharp opposition to the world of war or to present war as an intruder into French/Belgian agriculture, as does Sassoon in the first stanza of *Battalion Relief*: with its double-edged title, the author already positions the poem in an ironic discourse in which the soldiers are going to relieve the troops, but at the same time will experience the opposite of relief once they arrive at the front line. The naïve talk of the recruit, as well as the impressions of summer in Flanders, furthermore provides a sharp contrast to the seriousness of the situation. Thus the phrase 'harvest soon,/up in the line' (l. 5f.) suggests more to the informed reader than just bringing in the crops. It will also be the time of bringing back the dead, cut like crops fully ripe at the height of their youth. When the poem was written in July 1918, it was still not clear who would win the war and when it would be over, but it was obvious that it would cost many more lives even if it were 'done/by Christmas-Day' (l. 6f.).

Indicative of the opposition of peaceful England to the world of war is the work of Edward Thomas. For a long time he had not been considered a real 'war poet' as most of his poetry was written in England before he went on active service in France. Robert Frost, however, recognised the subject of war in Thomas's poetry at a very early stage: 'Because all his poetry was written after the outbreak of war, it is all, in an important sense, war poetry. Behind every line, whether mentioned or not, lies imminent danger and disruption.'[9] When the war broke out, Thomas was already 36 years old and as such exempt from conscription when it was introduced in 1916. Nevertheless, he enlisted in 1915 as a private[10] and was commissioned as a second lieutenant a year later. Unfortunately he was killed after only three months of active service in France at Arras on 9 April 1917. Most scholars have argued that the war provided a release for Thomas in the sense that it freed him from his private troubles. Without the war, he probably would have committed

suicide as he had been suffering from depression for a long time before the war. His poetry suggests that he actively sought death or at least oblivion in the war. In addition to these private reasons for enlistment, his motives were not patriotic in a traditional sense, but he rather felt a deep love for English culture and the southern countryside (similarly to Rupert Brooke) which he was aiming to protect. Although his poem *This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong* ends with an expression of hatred for England's 'foes', Thomas does not share the notion of British superiority as spread in nationalist propaganda.

Thomas was often accused of indifference and complacency for his marginalisation of war and the absence of political themes in his poetry, but his contribution is a different one. By showing the (often indirect) effects of war on the agricultural or natural cycle, his poems contain an imminent critique of war as destructive, even without explicitly mentioning it. His poem *February Afternoon* represents the combination of nature, mythology and war typical for Thomas's art. At the same time the poem challenges Rupert Brooke's sonnet *Now, God be thanked who has matched us with His hour* in both structure and content. By the presentation of war as monotonous, the sense of resignation becomes ever stronger in the poem until it culminates in the accusation of God as blind and detached. His eco-centric vision of the world attributes an equal, rather than a superior, position to humanity with regard to nature.[11] Consequently, Thomas's conception of England is not based on its population or civilisation, but rather on its countryside and the poetry that it inspires.

Instead of commenting on the war by focusing on the action at the front, Thomas's most famous poem *As the Team's Head-Brass* centres on the effects of war on rural life at home. In doing so, however, he does not follow the pastoral traditions of his time. Thomas's portrayal of rural England is never idyllic or idealised, but rather a neutral one as it shows the hard work farming implies. This aspect is shared by the ironic poems of Rose Macauley, published under the collective title *On the Land*, in which the author deals with her experience as a land-girl. These poems reveal that 'farming was [only] romantic for those who had no real knowledge of it' (Khan, 1988, p. 97).

In *As the Team's head-brass* the speaker of the poem enters a conversation with a ploughman about life during war-time. Yet this conversation between the two is highly ironic, as speculations about losing a limb in a light-hearted tone are opposed by the bleak reality of the death of the farmer's friend. At the same time, this death seems to become insignificant in the context of nature's routine, represented by the blizzard

and the farmer's seasonal work, contrasting sharply with death at the front. At the same time, the poet uses ambiguous vocabulary in the last two lines of the poem, referring to the ploughman's work as well as the soldiers in France. While 'crumble', 'topple over' and 'stumbling' in the context of farming refer to means of increasing the fertility of the soil, they evoke death in the context of war. The plough turns up the soil as do shells and grenades. However, the overall statement of the poem is one of neutrality rather than critique – it 'denies the concept of war as making a monumental change'.[12]

Everything that happens is presented as having consequences, for better or worse. If the young man had stayed at home, the broken tree would have been removed, but at the same time this would have prevented the conversation from taking place, and consequently the poem probably would never have been written. The poem clearly states that human beings are denied insight into the whole picture and as a result it is not up to them to judge the war. Life and death are both part of the natural cycle and even this war of all wars cannot destroy this routine. There would always be lovers in the wood, just as there would always be farmers cultivating the land. The irony of the poem therefore does not serve the purpose of criticising the war, or at least the conditions under which the soldiers were spending their lives, as it does in some of Rosenberg's and Owen's poems. 'For Thomas, the war was evidently not political or moral; and he could not have done justice to it if it were' (Pikoulis, 1987, p. 127).

Both Edmund Blunden and Wilfrid Gibson used a similar technique of drawing parallel pictures of rural life at home and the reality of life at the front. But while Blunden focuses on specific natural details, showing his love for the English countryside, Gibson additionally combines his front-line descriptions with colloquial language and satire, as can be seen in *The Question*. Although the speaker's thoughts dwell on a rural world back at home while he himself is away at war, his musings are by no means consoling. Before he left for the front, an old cow of his had fallen sick, and so he had to leave it in the care of a man called Dick. Even when he is confronted with the enemy, the idea that he does not know the fate of the cow haunts him, just as the war will haunt him back at home should he survive it. The death of the cow at the same time sheds light on the millions of deaths at the front which often remained unknown. Especially the last stanza is heavily charged with irony when the speaker talks about his 'lucky chance of being shot' as if this were a minor incident compared with the death of the old cow. The life of man is no longer superior to that of farm animals, but they share

the same fate for different causes. And, while the cow fell sick because it was old, the soldier might never reach old age himself.

While nearly all of the poems discussed above perceive nature as either a place of refuge from the war, or in neutral terms as a parallel existence even in shell-cratered France and Belgium, the negative aspects of nature should not be forgotten. For those fighting on the Western Front as well as in the East, it was the weather that caused major problems. In Palestine, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Turkey, however, it was the heat and the resulting lack of water, whereas in France and Belgium too much water soaked the ground and turned it into knee-deep mud. In winter, the cold equally caused all sorts of illnesses from trench foot to pneumonia. Considering these facts, it is not surprising that country life largely lost its idyllic connotations but became suitable for ironic reversals when faced with the realities of war.

2.1.3 Anti-landscapes

These ironic reversals, however, were by no means limited to selected elements from natural life such as plants, animals, farming or the various times of the day. When extended to the soldiers' environment in its entirety, irony transformed it into the unknown, the unbelievable, the surreal. This otherness finds its most striking example in Owen's *Strange Meeting,* set in a hellish netherworld. The poem's ghostly tone largely results from Owen's extensive use of half-rhyme and an archaic diction. This diction especially clashes ironically with the image of war Owen wants to portray.[13]

Whereas 'chariot-wheels' and 'citadels' remind the reader of the Roman Empire or the Middle Ages with glorious knights and honest man-to-man battles, modern war rather resembles hell in both noise and sound. The reader is drawn into the speaker's dream-world, anticipating Eliot's *Waste Land*, during the first twelve lines of the poem only to learn that both protagonists are dead and all hope is thwarted. However, death is gradually presented in positive terms as the only possible release from suffering. While Geoffrey Thurley argues in *The Ironic Harvest* (1974) that all great literature must commit itself fully to its subject, and that no ironic vision can muster that commitment, I would argue that this is exactly the purpose of irony, to avoid total commitment to preserve one's sanity in the hellish world of modern war.

In the anti-world of war, the laws of nature are reversed and even the sun loses its creative power, as Owen's *Futility* demonstrates. The order 'move him into the sun' establishes the nature theme of stanza 1, which is then revealed as a futile and even childish idea in stanza 2. Significantly, the

poem ends with a question mark, as a final answer to the speaker's questions cannot be provided. These questions in the last stanza also show the importance of syntax as they raise awareness, reproach and protest. The irony of the poem rests on the notion of the sun as a major element of the creation process undone by war. We are thus dealing with what I would like to call 'existential' irony, an irony that is no longer limited to pointing out situational absurdities, but affects mankind as a whole. With the sun failing to wake up the speaker's dead friend, any harmony of nature and humanity is inevitably destroyed by war. Life cannot be restored the way it is restored in the natural cycle of seasons. The subtle rhyme scheme of the poem reflects this ironical situation. It is marked by a mixture of true and half-rhymes paired with consonant clusters. Additionally the rhythm and simplicity of diction reinforce the effect of despair and futility. In the second stanza the vowels lengthen and the rhythm is slowed down. However, despair is not the final tone. The poem rather ends with an outcry of protest and disgust established by the use of 'fatuous' in the penultimate line and thus characterises the shift from elegy to satire.

Robert Graves's *A Dead Boche* is again of a totally different nature. Graves had enlisted in order to take part in the defence of Belgium and for a long time considered it to be a just war. Even though he finally condemned its prolongation as a war of attrition[14] only a few of his poems are overtly critical; rather, they attempt to trigger further thought. 'For Graves, dread, conflict, the simplest daily worries, disgusts, and irritations are experiences to be tamed in allegory, personification, happening; then civilized by irony, so that the evil is neutralized and we are left with its power to shake complacency, to stimulate' (Grubb, 1965, p. 121). However, this might also be due to the fact that Graves's technique of survival was to think as little as possible about the war and the circumstances it entailed: 'Graves (...) seldom faced up to the ugliness of battle; instead, his artistic reaction was reminiscent of that of a child who is forced to study the conditions of his disordered room: he looks but he does not want "to see." '[15] Thus Martin Stephen argues: 'It is as if Graves is desperate to comfort himself with a vision of nature as it was, yet he suffers from the Georgian failing of finding an inspiration in nature's beauty that is not always conveyed to the reader, but which it is expected the reader will understand' (Stephen, 1996, p. 209). As a result, Graves never directly confronts the war, nor does he manage to ignore it completely, so that the two enter a disturbing symbiosis.

A Dead Boche is exceptional among Graves's work for its overt critique of the bloodlust of war for the sake of glory in stanza 1, but the second

stanza is typical for Graves's portrayal of a war-time 'idyll'. In its first stanza the poem addresses an audience distant in place and/or time before it thwarts the reader's presumed aesthetic expectations in stanza 2 by an alternative anti-rhetoric of pure description without metaphors or abstractions. The content of the poem centres on an incident (the vision of a solitary man leaning against a tree) in Mametz Wood during the Battle of the Somme. What would otherwise be a typical scene in nature poetry of the Romantic period here becomes a form of mockery: nature is still there, but war has added death to it. There are no more pleasant smells of flowers and the setting no longer provides an idyll for someone musing about the world. The only thing that is left of the tree after the shells have exploded nearby is its trunk – symbolic for the destructive force of war on both man and nature. War thus dehumanises nature, yet nature will survive whereas many soldiers will not.

The poem's focus consequently is not on the dead man, but on the issue of poetic style, questioned by the presence of corpses and shattered landscapes: war turns landscape into landscape-with-corpse. 'Like stones and trees, the dead became one of the materials of the earth, to be walked over or around, and even used, when necessary, in the construction projects of the war' (Hynes, 1997, p. 69). Thus Graves wrote to Sassoon on 13 September 1917: the ideal of writing 'is to use common and simple words which everyone can understand and yet not set up a complex by such vulgarities but to make the plain words do the work of the coloured ones...' (O'Prey, 1982, p. 83). The result is a new form of art, namely an art without tradition and without nature in which the countryside only features as a devastated anti-landscape.[16] 'The destruction devised by man has no counterpart in the world of nature' (Khan, 1988, p. 62). By way of its boundless violence, the world of war in the original sense of the word becomes supernatural.

2.2 Comradeship

2.2.1 Comrades and friends

The all-embracing power of comradeship features prominently in letters, diaries and poetry written by those serving at the front. Combined with the bravery of individual men it not only provided a frequent topic for the greater, middle-class poets like Owen or Sassoon, but also appears in minor verse published in the various trench newspapers. As a result of the large-scale rupture of individual prewar friendships, most poems concerned with the topic share the following characteristics: they tenderly describe short exchanges with strangers, they express heightened

emotions in particular situations, and they talk of shared experiences of suffering. Whereas the poetry of the time rarely speaks of 'men', a neutral term, it often talks about 'boys' or 'lads', a term heavily charged with emotions.[17] Through a focus on the physical details of the young men, their vulnerability to modern weapons is emphasised, especially in the poetry of Owen and Sassoon.

Due to the division between front and home, comradeship even seems to have included the enemy as a fellow sufferer with whom one felt solidarity. These sentiments found their most famous expression in Owen's *Strange Meeting*: 'I am the enemy you killed, my friend' but they can also be found in other poems such as Sassoon's *Night Attack*. The notion of 'enemy' itself appears in many poems as an artificial creation of war propaganda without any correspondent in reality even at the beginning of war. Thus Sorley had written very early in his poem *To Germany*: 'You are blind like us' and 'The blind fight the blind.' This was added to by the general acoustic presence of the enemy with whom verbal communication was possible, even though forbidden, over no-man's-land on days without fire. At the same time, however, war implied the transgression of humanistic boundaries, a fact that increased war's incommunicability.

Despite this closeness in both space and emotion, there were also times when the enemy remained invisible and close contact was limited to prisoners. Especially during the later stages of war, personal contacts with the enemy were rare, except when they were dead or terribly wounded. Read's interior monologue poems *Only a Boche* and *Meditation of a Dying German Officer* provide perfect examples for this kind of contact. Furthermore, the enemy was rarely perceived as an individual, for death made the corpses appear alike (even more so than a common uniform). Owen's *Strange Meeting* only may serve as an exception here, in which the individuality of the enemy is the result of the speaker's responsibility for his death.

It seems as if comradeship not only replaced absent friends and family, but also served as the major motivation to keep on fighting. 'With a few exceptions, what mattered to the men who fought in the Great War was not whether that war, or indeed any war, was just or justifiable. What gripped their imagination was rather the camaraderie of the trenches and the courage and sheer tenacity in the art of survival of the men with whom they served' (Winter, 1987, p. 292). The figure of the bereaved male friend therefore plays an important role in the context of comradeship and the Great War. Sarah Cole distinguishes between the two terms of 'friendship', as referring to individual relationships, and

'comradeship', as denoting a 'corporate or a group commitment' (Cole, 2001, p. 474).[18] In most cases, this group to which the soldier committed himself was the regiment or the division, and, in the case of the Navy, the crew of a particular ship. Yet it is important to note here that members of the Flying Corps were lacking this experience of comradeship due to the solitariness of air warfare. As long as they were on the ground pilots felt as close to their fellow soldiers as members of any other part of the army, including the experience of loss of comrades and personal feelings of guilt, yet as soon as they rose into the air pilots were alone with their fate, even though the end of the war saw an increase in group tactics and plane formations. However, pilots in general perceived themselves as a group, or a higher caste, and even extended this notion towards the enemy. Cole also points out that it was the term 'comradeship' that was preferred over 'friendship' in the official rhetoric of the war propagated by the staff, the government, and the Churches. In accordance with the public school ethos developed during the prewar years with its emphasis on group loyalty this is not surprising. However, this preference ignores the particular character of individual friendships among soldiers and the consequent impact of the loss of a personal friend on the individual perception of war. And, in addition to the fact that friends were killed during the course of the war, the bureaucracy of war did nothing to support individual friendships, as friends were arbitrarily separated in the restructuring processes of regiments following attacks with heavy losses. In the following both terms will be used interchangeably in order to convey the idea that comrades often became life-long friends even though their first meeting might have been coincidental; friends, on the other hand, often enlisted together and thus became 'comrades' according to military jargon.

The lives of Owen and Sassoon particularly illustrate this power of comradeship/friendship: 'Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon represent two of the greatest enigmas of the war. Both wrote bitterly effective poetry condemning the war and, by implication, those who supported it. And both won the Military Cross in actions where there could be no compunction about taking German lives. Owen and Sassoon were walking dichotomies, contradictions defying logic' (Stephen, 1996, p. 92). Both soldier poets lost personal friends during the war but at the same time felt an emotional attachment towards the men who were their inferiors. Although both poets had joined due to feelings of inevitability, in Owen's case war had also offered him a chance to better his status in society as his family's financial resources did not allow him to go to university. What is more interesting than these two poets' reasons

for enlistment, however, are their reasons for returning to the front after long periods of convalescence back in England. It was mainly a sense of duty towards their men, strongly enforced by a feeling of comradeship or even love which caused a strong desire to join them again. Together with their soldiers they shared an 'insider' perspective on the war which the population at home lacked for various reasons. With these sentiments, they were by no means alone. 'While they were in the trenches men longed for leave to escape their physical wretchedness, their fear and their misery, but at home they were unable to settle down and found themselves longing to return to France' (Spear, 1979, p. 90).

In Owen's case the idea of comradeship is transformed into what he calls the 'pity of war' in his famous preface for his first volume of war poems. 'By adopting the role of pleader for his suffering men, which would also involve the distinct possibility that he would be killed, he would fulfil what in terms of the sentiment of the time would give him a kind of Christian role, silencing any remaining scruples' (Pittock, 2001, p. 210f.). Sassoon expressed his idea of comradeship in a different way, namely in the hatred for all the wartime obstacles against it. From an insider perspective, however, there was nothing to be ironic about with regard to comrades and friends. For both men, the feeling of comradeship was stronger than their opposition to the war and it drove them back to the front after longer periods of absence. However, their desire to name the evils drove them, and many other poets, to experiment with various observer positions, of which the distinction between insider and outsider perspectives to be dealt with in the next section became the most prominent.

2.2.2 Outsider perspectives

Another influential factor was the soldiers' perception of wartime society. In their eyes the population of the time was divided into two – those safe behind the lines or at home and those suffering at the front. The self-indulgence of the civilian population back in England as presented in Owen's *The Calls* or Sassoon's *The Fathers* was set against the compassion for all the victims of war, most often identified as a large group of comrades. These comrades, as 'insiders' of war, gradually turn into 'outsiders' of civil society, an experience shared by many veterans of war to the present day. Owen's bitterly sarcastic poem *Smile, Smile, Smile* thus draws an ironic picture of comrades depending on the support of each other to prevent disintegration. While the poem primarily addresses the ignorance of the yellow press with regard to the war, its description of wounded men leaning together intimately to read the paper

into an otherwise peaceful world as in the non-ironic descriptions of air raids in Nancy Cunard's *Zeppelins* and Marian Allen's *The Raiders*. The result was texts by both male and female poets using the traditional method of satiric attack through degrading humour. At the same time, people were fascinated with the mechanical aspects of airships, as well as their beauty. W. H. Davies' poem *The Birds of Steel* thus catches the ambivalent effect of air raid noise on the population at home when death suddenly intrudes into the garden idyll with its apple tree and flying bees at night. The noise of the airships is so similar to that of the bees that the speaker at first confuses the two. However, while the bees fill their bags in the garden, the 'bags' of the steel birds will be emptied before they will rise up again 'nearer to God'. Ironically, the noise they make in doing so is even called a song. The poem shows the injustice of the attack on harmless and innocent children, while at the same time the notion of 'birds of steel' reveals an attempt to include them into an already existing concept of the natural world. The irony of the poem is thus established by oppositions and incongruencies on the levels of both diction and situation. As will be shown, the same ambivalent emotions of fascination, fear and anger feature prominently in poems concerning military technology.

2.4 Technology

As the first technological war in the history of mankind, the First World War entered the collective imagination as one massive 'Materialschlacht', a war of machines involving such new developments as smokeless gunpowder, machine guns, grenades, poison gas, tanks, aircraft and flamethrowers. The poetic treatment of weapons and war machinery consequently hovers between fascination and disgust. However, what unites all poems concerning the technology of modern war is the fact that they rely on traditional metaphors from all areas of natural life to describe the new phenomena. This results from the rapid development of the machinery, yet the rather slow adaptation of language. Another reason for the lack of technological terminology may lie in the background of the poets. Although many volunteers were highly educated young men, they were by no means professional soldiers or engineers, and as such had no previous experience with military technology.

Military technology, in general, implied a fragmentation of perception.[29] Similarly to the effect of the division of labour as a result of industrialisation, modern war technology required a high amount of specialisation of the soldier for its effective use. Furthermore, the

immobility caused by heavy armour limited the men's freedom, as did the fact that troops had to spend most of their time under surface level. Consequently, troop movements and positions were only visible via periscopes or the help of aviation. Men became part of the machinery which hindered them in their mobility, rather than the other way round. Instead of perceiving the totality of war with its long-term results, the soldiers' view, as well as their knowledge and experience, was limited to their area of action and their particular duty. Thus military orders given in a clear hierarchy inevitably replaced individuality as the source of identity of the common soldier. At the same time, war even at the front remained distant and anonymous, as death came suddenly, like an accident or the plague, rather than in a personal battle of man against man. Mary Habeck (2000) distinguishes three ways in which technology was perceived: (1) as superhuman and thus demonic, (2) as subhuman and machine-like, or (3) as human or at least connected with the human world. In literary texts, however, the representation of technology hovers between these three possibilities.

2.4.1 The beauty of armour

While the perception of technology as demonic and beastly outweighs all other forms of description,[30] one of the earlier poems of war sees the guns as part of the ordinary human world. In *The Sower (Eastern France)* by Charles Hamilton Sorley war and ordinary life meet on a spring day. While the second stanza of the poem focuses on the work of a local farmer 'sowing his children's bread', the first one describes the movement of a battery on the nearby road. And while the sight of the horses and guns is described in objective terms with the harnesses even making a merry sound, they are nevertheless identified as killing instruments. The fact that they 'make orphans' entirely ridicules the sower's work as described in stanza 2. After the guns have served their purpose, there will be no children left to eat the bread once the wheat is harvested. Nevertheless, the speaker experiences a certain fascination for the slow movement of the battery on the road as it seems to be part of the ordinary. The irony of the poem is thus mainly established by the striking contrast between the peacefulness of the situation envisaged and the killing potential of the guns once they have reached their destination.

This killing potential reached its climax with the introduction of shells and machine guns. Nevertheless, the bayonet, which had become obsolete in a war that was fought over long distances rather than face to face, retains its prominent position in many war poems such as

Gibson's *The Bayonet* and Sassoon's *The Kiss* (see also Stanzel, 1993, pp. 83–98). On both sides of the front, offensives with close combat remained the ideal despite, or rather because of, the disastrous results of trench warfare. In general, modern military technology increased the feeling of vulnerability and helplessness among the soldiers as 'men no longer made war; war was made on men' (Eksteins, 1989, p. 183). Just as war dehumanised nature, technology dehumanised war. The resulting sentiments of alienation were further increased by the confusing noises of technology which new recruits were unable to distinguish. In an attempt to deal with these unfamiliar auditive impressions, poets compared the noise of flying shells to the sound of trains, or that of machine-gun fire to a storm of hail. Most frequently, however, technology was transformed into a personified force of nature with the tank becoming a beast (as in Sassoon's *Attack,* l. 5: 'Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire') and the airplane a bird, populating the devastated world of war.

However, the passivity of the men, resulting from the immense usage of technology during the First World War, also diminished their personal responsibility and thus their worries. At the same time this implied dehumanisation in that it reduced men to mere tools of war, incapable of but also prevented from thinking and acting individually, as in former wars of man against man. For Ivor Gurney, among others, the technology of war was the result of a century of general technological progress and the Western Front was 'the modern industrial world in miniature' (Bogacz, 1986, p. 644. See also Leed, 1979, pp. 95, 193–194). His evaluation of this development remains an ambivalent one, as can be seen in his two poems entitled *First Time In*. There is an ironic tension between the poem's archaic vocabulary, especially the word 'lore', and the mechanical facts of modern warfare. In another of his poems, *The Mother*, the biblical image of the turning of swords into ploughshares from Isaiah 2:4 is ironically reversed to underline the effects of industrialised war on mankind: 'We scar the earth with dreadful enginry.'

While most poems concerning technology are free of irony but focus rather on either the mechanical facts or the killing potential of the weapons, Owen's minor poem *Soldier's Dream* envisions an ironical dispute over the guns between God the Son and God the Father. He had begun the poem at Craiglockhart in October 1917, and on 27 November had passed it on to Siegfried Sassoon so that he could send it to either the *Nation* or Cambridge. Owen later revised the poem at Scarborough but never considered it to be of good quality. Nevertheless, the poem is interesting for its use of technical particularities. The 'Mausers and

Colts' of line 3 are German and American brands of revolvers and the 'flint-lock' in line 6 is an old-fashioned gun still in use during the First World War but rarely appropriate for situations in which survival depended on speed. The use of 'pikel' in line 6 is unusual, as the *OED* definition reads 'hay-fork or pitchfork', but Owen might refer again to the bayonet already mentioned in line 4, as Jon Stallworthy suggests in his critical edition (Stallworthy, 2003, p. 159).

While the irony of the poem is established via the ideological differences between Jesus and his father, the poem at the same time reveals a fascination for the variety of weapons used by the different armies. Although Jesus even bothers to spoil the bayonets, they hardly played a role at the Western Front, as they were outdated by bombs, shells and machine-guns. Finally Michael, the archangel who according to Revelations fights Satan at the end of times, is given all power to repair the weapons.[31] Thus the soldier's vision of Jesus as the prince of peace has to give way to the continuation of the war as a battle of good against evil, of the heavenly 'English' armies against the German 'devil'. Owen's own position concerning the continuation of the war, at least so in this poem, remains ambivalent.

Another of Owen's poems that reflects on the beauty of some of the weaponry is *On seeing a piece of our artillery brought into action*. It describes the weapon as an aesthetically beautiful, but at the same time humanely reprehensible object as the grandeur of the big gun clashes with the death and pain it brings. Again, the religious influence on Owen's diction is obvious, but it is turned into 'a rhetoric pregnant with irony and sadness' (Lane, 1972, p. 48). The target of this rhetoric of irony in this case is the author himself having a bad conscience about his fascination for the killing potential of the gun. Thus in the end he asks God to destroy the weapon, but only after it has served its purpose in the war.

2.4.2 'Thick green light'

Of striking importance with regard to the corpus of poems evolving from the conflict is the fact that gas, the psychologically though not militarily most effective new weapon of the war, only rarely occurs in combination with an ironic voice. The ironic potential of *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Owen's 'gas poem' (Owen, 1967, p. 499), as he called it in a letter to his mother, and the poem most often recalled when talking about gas warfare, is overshadowed by its polemic message. However, the poem clearly shows that gas warfare destroyed all illusions of a purification of society through war.[32]

The poem's form consists of two sonnets, of which the first follows the Shakespearian rhyme scheme though the last two lines deliberately fail to provide the concluding couplet. The content of this first sonnet, however, resembles the Italian variant with its strong focus on physical detail. Yet while the sonnet originally celebrates love, war overwhelms the senses and hinders any emotion. As a result of constant exhaustion, the soldiers are 'all blind;/drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots/of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind' (ll. 6–8). In accordance with the structure of the Italian sonnet, line 9 establishes a change of tone and perspective and thus creates a difference between the speaking man – most likely an officer like Owen – and the rest of the weary men. From this group of soldiers, however, one man is further separated by his late reaction to the gas warning and the dreadful consequences of breathing in the gas. Although he is surrounded by his fellow soldiers, they can only watch him 'drowning' through the misty panes of their gas masks. They cannot, but of course they also do not want to, share this experience. Even 'the officer can only see, remember, and retell the event.'[33]

The second sonnet then begins with a couplet and continues as a 'reversed sonnet' representing the dead man on the wagon with his 'hanging face' in line 20 of the poem. According to Hipp, lines 15–16 are indicative of the poet's situation in Craiglockhart war hospital, the place of composition of the poem. The dying soldier haunts him in his dreams as 'Owen identifies with the sufferer on the basis of their common isolation from the collective body' (Hipp, 2000, p. 36). This identification is particularly underlined by the shift from past tense in the descriptive first sonnet to present tense in these lines. In both form and content *Dulce et Decorum Est* thus ironically negates Brooke's sonnets of 1914. Heroic death becomes an anachronism: modern trench warfare has nothing to do with dying in battle during the ancient times of Horace. Instead of directing his anger against the realities of war, however, Owen attacks the ignorant population at home. The realistic description of a gas attack serves to make them aware of the bitter truth of modern warfare with its haunting effects, but the poem itself is too overt in its rhetorical use of anger to tap the full potential of its ironic elements. It rather accuses other poets for their evasive, if not patriotic, lyrics.[34] Owen himself preferred to take a more critical position on the war in the tradition of Sorley and others, even more so after he had met and befriended Siegfried Sassoon in Craiglockhart War Hospital.

love has no man than this/That a man should die for his friend' as the intertextual basis for her irony in the last stanza. However, while expressing some moderate critique on the recruiting practice of the government, Orr's rhetoric could equally be read as supporting nationalism. This potential ambiguity originates in the fact that the poem emphasises the nobility of the soldiers remaining loyal to one another even though they are betrayed by their country.

It is the bitterness over this betrayal that finally dominates much of the poetry concerned with the government and its attempts to honour the dead. Seen from a personal situation of loss, any wreaths, memorial services or processions fail to console because they remain impersonal and thus dishonest, as indicated in stanza three of St John Adcock, *The Silence*. The mother in the poem, having lost a son, rather prefers private remembrance over politically dominated commemoration ceremonies. When considering the cost of the war, even irony no longer seems to be an appropriate means for the expression of critique. Instead, people seek a place 'where silence reigns, / Not for brief minutes, but through all the year'(ll. 31f.). With regard to religious affairs, however, the situation is a different one, as the following section will show.

3.1.2 The Church

Christian religion,[17] especially in its institutionalised (and national) forms of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, played a crucial role during the war, despite its frequent underestimation by both military and social historians.[18] This underestimation is partly due to the difficult definition of what 'religion' implied for the individual at the beginning of the twentieth century, and partly results from the largely negative representation of both religious practices and the clergy in the famous war memoirs of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Graves's *Good-Bye To All That.* Yet Christianity was by far the most dominant religious belief among the British troops despite spiritualist, fatalist or humanist tendencies and the participation of many young men from the colonies with their various religions. Religious responses during war, as well as during peaceful times, ranged from absolute faith in an all-powerful God to strict atheism.[19] None of these variants, however, seriously challenged the Christian doctrine as they were of an eclectic and pragmatic nature and thus remained marginal.

To begin with, both churches considered it appropriate for Christians to take part in the war. Thus Article 37 of the *Articles of Religion* reads: 'It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars.' This was especially so if fellow

Christians, in the case of the First World War the Belgian Catholics, needed help in their struggle against barbarous Germany.[20] Furthermore, Christian life was perceived by many as a continuous war against evil, this time embodied in the German Kaiserreich. The reactions of the free churches were more varied, but corresponded largely to those of the Anglican Church. However, conscientious objection to the war was proportionately more frequent among members of the free churches. Nevertheless, only the Quakers corporately remained pacifists. Other Christian Societies such as the S.P.C.K. and the various Bible societies published tracts for German prisoners of war and produced translations of devotional books in African and Maori languages for colonial troops. The Salvation and the Church Army provided tents for canteens and recreation centres, as well as ambulances for the wounded. As a reward for their effort, these groups never became targets of critique like the Anglican or Catholic Church.

It was an irony in itself that England suddenly became an ally to orthodox Russia, while English Protestants had always felt close ties to Germany as the home of the Reformation. Germany had been the source of biblical criticism and theological liberalism widely accepted and taught at English universities. While these ties were inevitably cut by the war, interdenominational links grew stronger (reformed Judaism in parts included), if not for theological at least for practical reasons. So pulpits were occasionally exchanged, non-Anglicans were admitted to Communion, or YMCA huts were used for services by all groups. Yet only when the war was over were international religious organisations able to resume their work.

One can speak of the mutual influence of both churches and state during the First World War, as the support of the churches was considered desirable by politicians with regard to several war-related topics, especially the recruiting of volunteers. Within English society at the beginning of the twentieth century, the churches still held a position of influence that could not be neglected by the state despite falling rates of church attendance. For the fighting generation of public school boys Christianity was deeply connected to their education and social fabric. Not only was the Christian service a major element of school life, but many public schools' headmasters were members of the clergy and thus enforced a Christian school ethos on the basis of duty, fair play, and sacrifice. This form of 'muscular Christianity' (Schweitzer, 2003, p. 4) attempted to fuse religious and civilian obligations by emphasising comradeship, loyalty and self-denial as preparation for the way to eternal life.

The clergy of all churches often voluntarily engaged themselves in the war for various reasons. Their predominantly rhetorical engagement, however, caused some contradictions, especially with regard to conscription from which the clergy was exempt. While praying for victory and arguing for the good cause of the war, most chaplains refused to take part in the killing itself, causing many to accuse the clergy of cowardice. Some chaplains, however, worked for ammunition factories, in agriculture, hospitals or other war-related services. The role of the churches and their clergy was thus a difficult one as they were criticised either for being too pacifistic or for not being pacifistic enough. Most bishops furthermore shared their social background with politicians and military leaders and thus close relationships traditionally existed between them. Their argumentation closely resembled that of government propaganda, namely that if England's war was just because it was a struggle of good against evil, it was the duty of all Christians to fight God's war as his chosen people.[21] Following this thought, Germany was the very incarnation of evil and Kaiser Wilhelm II the Anti-Christ who had to be destroyed. The just war thus soon became a 'holy war' (see Wilkinson, 1978, p. 252ff.) in terms of Christian propaganda. Consequently, the term 'holy war' was frequently used in sermons and implied that England was fighting on the right side with Christ supporting the British war effort.[22] On 6 September 1914 Winnington-Ingram, Bishop of London, preached a sermon entitled 'The Holy War', and on the same day H. C. Beeching, Dean of Norwich, proclaimed that Germany was no longer a Christian nation and that therefore this war was a war of Christ against anti-Christ, a battle for the cross. Of course, this brought God into a dilemma, as was ironically expressed by J. C. Squire among others. However, with increasing casualties it became increasingly difficult to portray the war as just. It was a matter of speculation both at the front and at home as to why God sometimes exercised his power to control events and sometimes seemed to refuse to do so. The interpretation of war had to change and so it gradually became a divine punishment for the sinfulness and decadence of the nation or, in other words, God's method of rousing England from its selfishness and complacency. This sinfulness included, of course, the refusal of wholehearted support for the war as a just cause. Yet there was a general hope that a better Church and a better society would be the outcome of war, especially as it seemed to unite Christianity again. Accordingly, the Churches propagated the traditional images of womanhood and motherhood as they proved particularly useful for recruiting. Furthermore, the churches provided the general biblical imagery that

lent itself easily to propaganda purposes. Even if this propaganda only reached a minority of the British population, its ideas were rooted in the moral and spiritual universe of the majority of British citizens at the time and created a common ground between the different denominations and classes despite their varying religious practices and beliefs.

The various concepts of suffering, sacrifice, redemption and renewal were most readily applied to a war in which the English soldier was the 'Christian soldier' following the example of Christ as declared in John 15:13: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'[23] It is therefore not surprising that the Church Lad Brigade, a Youth organisation within the Church of England, provided over 120,000 recruits to the British Army (Schweitzer, 2003, p. 8). Thus, despite the fact that before the war secularism had flourished in England (see Bruce, 1992 and Cox, 1982), the early months of war saw an increase in Church attendance and the numbers even fuelled hopes of a religious revival.

Among the soldiers, faith in a good God was a welcome means of dissipating stress, especially before offensives. In prayer, the ranks prepared themselves for the possibility of their own death while at the same time asking for protection against enemy bullets or gas. During battle itself, however, God was often perceived to be absent. Few soldiers had the time to think of God in the middle of combat. Furthermore, the idea of God in combination with battle always proved to be a difficult one as it inevitably raised questions of personal guilt for the violation of the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). Many Christian volunteers therefore asked for non-violent forms of active service, serving, for example, as stretcher bearers. In the reconstitution process after battle, religion furthermore functioned as a diverse means of honouring the dead, praising God for having saved one's own life and avowing one's sinfulness. It involved a special form of survivor's guilt, namely the question 'Why did I survive when my friend, brother or cousin had to die?'[24]

With regard to historical evidence for the role of faith during the war, it is important to note that it is unequally distributed among the various groups of participants. Among the upper classes, documentation of religious beliefs and practices was rare because Christianity was part of their social fabric and as such taken for granted. Junior officers, on the other hand, mostly came from upper-middle-class backgrounds in which religion had always played an important role in both education and family life.[25] Their religious response to the war is the most widely documented as many of these officers used to keep war diaries,

wrote about religious issues in their letters to family and friends, or left behind other written documents such as poetry or prose texts. Thus the most difficult evaluation of religion proves to be that of the working classes, due to a lack of documents. Even before the war the British clergy were frustrated by their failure to spread Christianity among the working poor. On the one hand, the pew system and the air of elitism had repelled the working classes from the Anglican Church. On the other, their lifestyle was perceived by members of the middle and upper classes to be largely immoral or even blasphemous. Yet 'although the documentary record is sketchier on the men's religious beliefs it is possible to conclude that many soldiers (...) held highly idiosyncratic religious beliefs. These beliefs were held deeply, despite the fact that many men did not usually participate in the public social dimension of organized religion. It can also be concluded that those men who (...) were religious (...) were more inclined to be Evangelical Christians' (Schweitzer, 2003, p. 117).

Yet once more, we have to differentiate between the population at home, who still found consolation in traditional religious rites, and the men at the front where the Church no longer enjoyed a strong position of power and respect, as 'pure Christianity [...] [does] not fit in with pure patriotism' (Owen and Bell, 1967, p. 461). For many serving soldiers, 'the windy spokesmen of the Established Church emitted a gas nearly as toxic as the substance more hideously encountered on the battlefield' (Gilbert, 1999, p. 187). Most serving soldiers therefore went on a religious journey from traditional Christian faith through scepticism or even atheism back to a highly individual concept of Christianity, distinct from the institution of the Church.

The poet and novelist Robert Graves might serve as a good example here. From his mother he had received a strict religious upbringing, but in 1914 he claimed that he was losing his religious faith. When Graves joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, however, his faith rekindled and he even claimed in letters home that religious services had more meaning to him in wartime. With the death of friends and Lieutenant David Thomas in particular on 18 March 1916, his religious faith seems to have been broken, judging from the poetry of the period. Despite the fact that he refused to attend religious services after Easter 1916, his letter to his brother on 14 October 1918 ends with the valediction 'bless you'. Religious faith thus mixes with periods of doubt and even anger.[26]

On the other side of the Channel, the stress of war with its air raids, food shortages and constant sorrow rather increased the appeal

of religion. As the same set of problems was shared with their parish members, the relationship between ministers and believers grew closer. Furthermore, most parish clergy were unaware of the statements of their Bishops, but rather expressed their own ideas about war in their teaching. Christianity's doctrine of resurrection here proved to be most useful as it suggested a possible reunion with loved ones after death in the near or far future. However, the long expected and hoped-for religious revival never set in. On the contrary, 'the war experience contributed to the decline of organized religion' (Schweitzer, 2003, p. 206)[27] that became characteristic of the twentieth century.

All of these factors have consequences for the literary legacy of war. The following analysis of irony in poems dealing with religious issues will largely be based on the poetry of middle-class writers, due to a lack of other documents, and will therefore portray a very specific and sometimes limited attitude towards institutional Christianity. Yet it is also possible to deduce the importance of religious elements for the common soldier, from anonymous poems or songs and the imitation of colloquialisms. It is debatable whether the spontaneous invocation of God's name may qualify as sincere prayer, but it shows the misery and fear among those facing immediate danger or death as in Hodgson's *Before Action*. Phrases like 'Oh God!' or 'Christ!' occur frequently throughout the poetry, in particular in combination with the verb 'to stop'. These invocations gain particular ironic potential when used without piety in conjunction with criticism of a distinctly Christian diction or even in blasphemous curses such as in Sassoon's *Redeemer*. At the same time they reinforce the motif of Christ as the prince of peace, rather than war. However, one of Sassoon's other poems, *Christ and the Soldier,* starts with a reproaching question: 'Lord Jesus, ain't you got no more to say?' and continues with an ironic interplay between the suffering of Christ and that of the soldiers only to show that Christ's death was irrelevant and does not prevent further suffering.

On the other hand, his deliberately transformed sonnet[28] *Attack* epitomises this faith, or rather faint hope in a divine intervention when nothing else can stop the killing. The poem presents war as collective suicide, after the mud of Flanders has drowned all hope. That the invocation of Jesus in the last line is an ironic one becomes clear earlier in the poem with the description of the destructive potential of modern weapons such as tanks and bombs, in front of which men – and God with them – are left entirely impotent.[29] This impression is reinforced by the form of the poem, an incomplete sonnet ending abruptly after the thirteenth line.[30] The poem's focus is the most desperate of all battle

procedures, namely the beginning of an attack, the 'going over the top' of the men, which might equally stand for their transition from life to death. The final cry of desperation is thus at once a blasphemous oath and a plea to a God who seems absent from what is actually happening. *To Any Dead Officer* uses the same cry, this time transformed into a question, thus reinforcing the scepticism inherent in the question itself.

A similar device in this respect is the quotation of hymns for the sake of both consolation and outcry. On the one hand, these hymns constituted a link with home and nearly every soldier knew some of them by heart. On the other hand, they easily lend themselves to satire by the composition of mockery verses to well-known tunes.[31] The humour of these verses was less directed against the faith expressed in the original hymns – although some of them were rejected for their heroism and romantic imagery – but was rather intended to mock both military and clerical authorities.

While the individual soldier could easily identify with the suffering of Christ, as Wilfred Owen's poem *Greater Love*[32] indicates, the Church itself was accused of spreading a wrong, i.e. non-biblical, image of Jesus. Only a God who was suffering with the men made sense to most soldiers – and comforted many women, as Eva Dobell's *Advent 1916* shows – and, through the strong love for their comrades, soldiers were re-enacting Christ's sacrifice for mankind, knowing that their own was to no purpose as it required ever more sacrifices. Yet it should also not be forgotten that in doing so they took life as well, and that their sacrifice was thus by no means a passive one. To avoid the criticism of misinterpretation, the nationalist clergy mostly referred to the Old Testament as better suited for pro-war propaganda with its passages on the vengeance of God, his jealousy and his power over Israel's enemies. This image of an angry God was difficult to combine with the peaceful Jesus of the Gospels and Paul's letters. From the New Testament only the Book of Revelation with its depictions of the coming of Christ, the last battle against evil and the renewal of God's kingdom after the furnace, was as frequently quoted in propagandist sermons.

Whereas the ancient stories of the Old Testament thus became a source of militaristic imagery and language in the hands of the war's supporters, many soldiers once in a while sought refuge in the Bible, especially in the book of Psalms and the gospel of John. However, even these most favourite passages sometimes served a satirical purpose. The destruction of biblical myths became a frequent technique of both professional and amateur poets. Reversals of psalms, biblical stories or Jesus's words are thus common elements of many trench poems.

Thus *The Pilot's Psalm*, an anonymous poem, effectively (mis)uses Psalm 23:

> The BE2C is my 'bus; therefore I shall want.
> He maketh me to come down in green pastures.
> He leadeth me where I will not go.
> He maketh me to be sick; he leadeth me astray on all cross-country
> flights.
> Yea, though I fly over No-Man's Land where mine
> enemies would compass me about, I fear much evil
> for thou art with me; thy joystick and thy prop discomfort me.
> Thou preparest a crash before me in the presence
> of thy enemies; thy RAF anointeth my hair with oil, thy tank
> leaketh badly.
> Surely to goodness thou shalt not follow me all
> the days of my life, else I shall dwell in the house of Colney
> Hatch forever.

Both the poem's archaic language and its form reveal it to be a parody of psalm 23, probably the most well-known psalm of the Bible and thus easily recognisable as the basis of the poem's irony by the author's contemporaries. In the poem biblical language is fused with pilot slang to create an effective blend. Yet, although the speaker expects the reader's knowledge of the Psalm's original form and content, contradictions of the biblical verses in every line of the poem and the constant negation of the psalm's positive content reveal the irony to such an extent that large parts of it might even be detected without background knowledge. However, as religious knowledge is constantly decreasing, a time might come in which readers will no longer perceive the intertextual irony of the poem.

The target of the poem's irony differs from other poems in this chapter as it is not directed at the clergy or the interpretation of the Bible by the Church. Instead, the irony focuses on the experimental character of the machinery and the lack of care of the mechanics resulting in the bad condition of the plane. Against the biblical negative, aviation is portrayed as a risky business: navigation was hardly possible, especially in bad weather, and crashes were frequent. In the context of war, it seems, God loses his omnipotence and fails to protect the pilots. At the same time, however, the poem questions man's right to transgress God-given boundaries.

While the psalms in other cases helped the soldiers to praise God's providence – for which the non-demolished crucifixes at roadsides and

Bibles protecting from bullets were often considered proof – the men also prayed for other causes, especially the welfare of their families back at home. The main obstacle, however, to prayer and to religion in general was neither a feeling of self-reliance, nor one of humility or guilt, but the idea that the Germans were praying for the same cause (Squire, *The Dilemma*), which turned the idea of God taking sides with the Allies into absurdity. At the same time, it was impossible to adhere to the Christian commandment to love one's enemy while war's main aim was to destroy him. Humanism in this respect also offered no real alternative because its principles equally encompassed all human beings and could not be limited to one's own side of the trenches.

Despite the poets' frequent identification with Christ – and accordingly France and Flanders with Gethsemane as in Kipling's *Gethsemane* – and thus their concentration on the New Testament, they also made use of the Old Testament, either to criticise the war for murdering innocent young men and thus creating the myth of the slaughter of youth still prominent today, or to revert the image of God fighting on the side of the Allies, as Robert Graves does in his poem *Goliath and David*. The David of Graves's poem strongly relies on the assumption that 'God will save' in a situation of unequal power, just as he supported David in the biblical story. In the poem, however, God's eyes do not see the boy's struggles and God's ears do not hear his cries, so that finally David is killed by the stronger Goliath, portrayed in the last two lines as a German soldier. The reversal of the names in the title is significant in this respect as it puts the emphasis on the victorious Goliath yet still names David as his brave opponent. Thus, despite the general pessimism and hopelessness of the poem, the English David dies as a hero, which sets Graves's poem apart from the ones to follow in this section.

Wilfred Owen equally uses Old Testament material, but for a more critical purpose with regard to heroism and England's military engagement.[33] In the case of his *Parable of the Old Man and the Young*, the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac provides the basis for the intertextual irony. Unlike in Graves's poem, it is not God who is accused of failure, but the older generation of warmongers[34] represented by the biblical figure of Abraham. These old men, according to Owen, prevent the divine will from being fulfilled and are thus an easy target for the irony of the poem. Owen's version of the biblical source is a non-rhymed sonnet to which a fully rhymed couplet is added as a conclusion, changing the biblical ending into one more appropriate for the description of war experience. In addition to the content, the form of the poem thus serves to underline the focus of the irony. As a parody, Owen retains

the logical structure of the original biblical story in order to reinterpret the material symbolically. Abraham insists on offering his own sacrifice of pride despite other alternatives. The irony of the poem thus 'emanates from the contrast between the relieved humanity of Abraham and the wilful homicide of the leaders of Europe' (O'Keefe, 1972, p. 79). Yet Owen emphasises his point by using intertextual allusions also on the level of language. Isaac's question on the 'fire and wood' in the original story in Genesis 22:7 is parallel to the 'fire and iron' of the battlefield in the poem, and, while the biblical Abraham only binds Isaac, Owen's Abraham 'bound the youth with belts and straps,/And builded parapets and trenches there' (ll. 7f.). With the appearance of the ram at the end of the biblical story, the blessing given to Abraham in Genesis 12:17 is fulfilled, and God will multiply his seed through Isaac. *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*, however, prophesies the opposite, namely sterility and destruction effected by the 'old man' in the last two lines of the poem.

Both form and content of the poem clearly show the influence of Sassoon's satires, with the author's critique being implicitly mentioned in the last lines. However, in the eyes of Owen's critics, the poem represents the view of the childless, single young man lacking insight into the feelings of parents who often felt that something of themselves died with their sons. Yet another less well-known example of a war poem dealing with the same material, Osbert Sitwell's *The Modern Abraham,* draws a similar wartime moral. Here Abraham is presented as a profiteer who takes as much as he can from the war by sacrificing others.

Siegfried Sassoon concentrates on Old Testament versions of useless slaughter, such as the story of Abel and Cain in which the young man loved by God is slain by his brother, which Sassoon interprets as God's (unjust) punishment rather than fratricide in *Ancient History*. The young men both fall victim to the desires and interests of others against which they are powerless. 'The idea of laying down their lives was accompanied in the minds of the soldier-victims by the idea of there being someone to perform the sacrifice who was not personally laying down his own life. The sacrificer was always older, always more powerful, always in a position of some authority' (Spear, 1979, p. 104). Accordingly, G. A. Studdert Kennedy ridicules or at least questions the idea of sacrifice by calling it a folly in stanza 2 of *Woodbine Willie*.

Unlike Christ's sacrifice of love, the soldiers' sacrifice is a foolish one representative of the churches' divergence from what Christ had originally taught his disciples, namely to love one's enemy. Wilfred Owen, who had grown up in an evangelical Christian household with

a strongly religious mother, and who had even considered becoming an Anglican priest, particularly focused on this point in his poetry. His position as assistant to an Anglican vicar at Dunsden had altered his view of organised religion and during the course of war Owen rejected official theology in favour of a deinstitutionalised 'primitive' form of Christianity (Owen and Bell, 1967, pp. 467, 534). In a letter to his mother in May 1917 he thus states: 'I am more and more Christian as I walk the unchristian ways of Christendom. Already I have comprehended a light which never will filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that of passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace; but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. (...) I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skilfully and successfully indeed' (Owen and Bell, 1967, p. 461f.). While himself an officer carrying arms and suffering from a 'seared conscience',[35] his war poetry often portrays Christ as a pacifist, the prince of peace.[36] While Jesus, the Son, was aligned with the soldiers in suffering, God the Father was to be found on the other side together with the staff, the government and the older generation in general. Father and Son were no longer one, but distinct entities with different interests.

Again his friend Osbert Sitwell's poetry shares the same ideas. *Rhapsode* focuses on the horrors of the crucifixion with words that could also be describing death in France. Jesus's cry 'why hast Thou forsaken me?' can easily be imagined as that of a dying soldier. However, the cry is renounced as unheroic by the Pharisees and Sadducees, the warmongers back at home arguing about a soldier's 'appropriate' last words. In Sitwell's second crucifixion poem, the bystanders do not therefore pity Jesus on the cross, but rather Joseph, his father, while Christ himself is criticised for his bitterness and despair.

While some of Owen's poems such as *Greater Love, At a Calvary near the Ancre* or his poem about the Virgin of Quivières admire Christ's sacrifice, they question its relevance in the context of war. These poems renounce any militant interpretation of the Bible as nothing less than 'selective ignorance'. However, it was only as a combatant that he felt he was able to ease and make public the sufferings of the men because he, too, 'saw God through mud' (*Apologia pro Poemate Meo*).[37] At the same time, he compared his work as a soldier to that of Christ's sacrifice. In *At a Calvary near the Ancre* Owen presents the soldier as a Christ figure: Christ died but rose again, so hopefully will the soldier. This concept of patriotic sacrifice in Owen's eyes, however, is none that the soldier accepts voluntarily, but rather one that is prescribed by official Christianity. The equation exposes the disparity between the ethics of

the Sermon on the Mount and the doctrines of hatred for the Germans (the Hun) as propagated by bellicose clergymen who only 'brawl allegiance to the state'.[38] As a result of his argumentation he denies the clerical nationalists the status of Christians: '[T]here are no more Christians at the present moment than there were at the end of the first century' (Owen and Bell, 1967, p. 483). Owen's attitude towards religion, however, despite the occasional bitterness in his poetry, is dominated by despair rather than rejection, as captured in the last line of the penultimate stanza of *Exposure*: 'For love of God seems dying.'

The resulting ironical view on organised religion reflects his experiences[39] but fails to provide answers to the most pressing questions, as it does not offer anything to replace it. Thus the subversive critique of hollow rituals in *Anthem for Doomed Youth* is indicative of Owen's opposition to religious traditions which he dismisses as mockeries.[40] Written in September or October 1917, *Anthem for Doomed Youth* is one of Owen's earliest poems showing the influence of Sassoon: Owen already felt that the war was destroying the world and began to question the validity of old rituals and traditional aesthetic norms. However, he had no ready answer at this point. Instead, he only felt that the mechanical sounds of the battlefield[41] were more appropriate for the funeral of the slaughtered soldiers than the harmonic melodies of hymns or bells. 'The hymn, a song of praise, has been swallowed into the discourse of elegy, a song of mourning' (Kerr, 1993, p. 298). As such, the poem questions the genre of the religious hymn as well as the consoling function of Christian faith.

Despite its ironic overtones, the sonnet was often criticised for relapsing into Owen's youthful Romanticism and unintentionally glorifying death at war (Silkin, 1972, pp. 210–211).[42] It continues the topic of *Greater Love*, namely the soldier's sacrifice. Owen chose the word 'anthem' for the title as it reminds the reader of 'The National Anthem' and thus suggests the close link between Church and State at the time. Additionally, the word underlines the seriousness of the poem's content by stressing the structural organisation of a choir piece. The ironic potential is underlined by the fact that, as a religious song, an anthem often expresses joy, for example about Christ's birth or resurrection. Here, however, it ironically refers to the celebration of mass 'sacrifice' in accordance with which the poem is dedicated to 'doomed youth'. When we consider Owen's draft of a Preface for his first volume of poetry, it becomes clear that the term does not only imply the dead young soldiers he mourns in the poem. Rather, it includes all young men of coming generations who might be endangered by wars. The purpose of the

poem is thus already established in the title: to warn against the horrors and consequences of war.

The poem starts off with a question about how to mourn the dead. By using 'these', the author deliberately creates an impersonal atmosphere. There are so many dead that it is impossible to care for the individual. Structurally, the second line gives the answer to the question of the first and thus establishes the unconsolatory direction of the poem by keeping the reader's attention on the condition of the death process. Ironically, the only mourning voices on the battlefield are the guns that at the same time create the cause for the mourning by killing the men in masses. This irony is continued in lines 4 and 10/11 of the poem. By uttering their 'prayers', the rifles constantly increase the number of those they will have to mourn and the light in the boys' eyes will soon die with them on the battlefield once they are old enough to go to war.

Owen suggests that the only appropriate response to death is awareness of it. The 'bugles'[43] halfway through the poem mark the transition of focus from the battlefield to home. Thus Part 2 of the poem concentrates on the traditional rites of mourning back in England, such as the 'drawing-down of blinds'.[44] Yet the difference between the octave and the sestet is not only one of content (front vs home), but also one of tone. Whereas the first part reproduces the aggressive sounds of battle as symbolic of the poet's anger, the second part is dominated by an ethereal atmosphere. While acknowledging the poetic effect, Jon Silkin sees an ambiguity here: 'The consolatory and decorous ceremonies of the religious and institutional mourning contrast with the brutal nature of their deaths. Yet there is ambiguity in the poem in that Owen seems to be caught in the very act of consolatory mourning he condemns in "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" – a consolation that permits the war's continuation by civil assent, and which is found ambiguously in the last line of the octet: "And bugles calling for them from sad shires"' (Silkin, 1972, p. 211). Geoffrey Hill has also argued that the sestet fails to provide an appropriate response to the war by trying to demonstrate an internal contradiction: 'The fact that Owen employs irony in this poem cannot alter the fact that he takes thirteen lines to retreat from the position maintained by one. If these men really do die as cattle, then all human mourning for them is a mockery, the private and the public, the inarticulate and true as much as the ostentatiously false' (Bloom, 2002, p. 37f.). But even if the poem stresses the uselessness of mourning, it does not deny its existence as a human reaction.[45]

Earlier drafts of the poem had contained more patriotic and sanctifying language, which Owen had removed under the influence of Sassoon in order to render religion as impotent and meaningless as possible when faced with war and its consequences. By doing so the remaining diction of the poem reinforces the opposition between the indignity of death at war and traditional, inappropriate ways of dignifying it. Even religion itself seems to become a mockery. The poem thus confirms our modern vision of warfare as a pointless slaughter. However, many soldiers did not want to perceive themselves as cattle going to slaughter, nor did they wish to be told that their effort was a waste of life.

As already expressed in the above poems, protest was directed not only against the churches' involvement in British war propaganda, but also against the ineffectiveness and cowardliness of the clergy. While at the outbreak of war there were 117 Anglican chaplains serving in the British Army, this number had dramatically increased to 3,475 when the war ended in 1918 (see Schweitzer, 2003, p. 63). Most of these men entered service without real preparation and only in 1916 was an initiation course established. Furthermore, at the beginning of war no provision had been made in the mobilisation plans concerning transportation, accommodation, payment or rations of chaplains and this situation only gradually changed. Whilst the majority of ordinary soldiers came from working-class backgrounds and thus knew hunger and hardship, the clergy were almost entirely of middle or even upper-class origin, a fact which separated them from the men right from the start.

Once they were at the front, the chaplains had to fulfil both secular and religious functions in the Army: superior officers often used them for running errands, for construction work, for censoring letters or as stretcher bearers. They also functioned as mediators between rank and officers in disputes, and between the battlefield and home. As such, they were often asked to notify families of soldiers' deaths. Furthermore, as a counterpart to the military parades, the clergy at the front were responsible for the so-called Church Parades, mandatory religious services behind the front lines, which were often described as hollow by both clergy and soldiers (see Schweitzer, 2003, p. 200).

Thus only little time was left for their 'proper' job, namely providing consolation, giving moral counsel, conducting burials or offering services. With regard to their religious duties, many chaplains were more concerned with preaching against gambling, alcohol and sexual immorality than with lifting the soldiers up spiritually. The clergy failed to provide answers to moral dilemmas, such as the distinction between right and wrong with regard to the treatment of prisoners or

reprisals for attacks, or that of Sunday work. As a result, respect for the clergy soon gave way to frustration and contempt as official religion did not meet the reality of war.

The combination of Christianity and nationalist propaganda in particular provoked some of Sassoon's most satirical poetry. Although Sassoon's poetry is by no means representative of the general mood, his criticism was shared by many soldiers. The poet had been raised as an Anglican by his mother despite the fact that his father was Jewish, and before the war he had been to Church occasionally and was on good terms with a number of parsons. With the prolongation of war, however, he became more and more disillusioned with organised religion. The most prominent example of Sassoon's critique of nationalist propaganda inside the Church of England can be found in his bitter anticlerical poem *They*, in which the satiric effect is mainly created through exaggeration: it is a satire targeting the limitations of institutionalised religion, especially its impersonality. As such, the poem expresses the poet's despair over the lack of the Church's humanitarian responsibility. As a satire, *They* combines amusement and contempt: on the one hand, the reader shares the poet's hatred for the ignorant bishop; on the other he inevitably has to laugh at the absurdity of the communication. The title of the poem already conveys this division between the clergy and the soldiers, representative of the general perspective of home as opposed to that of the front. The bishop refers to the soldiers as 'they' (four times), which indicates his lack of attachment and empathy. The soldiers remain anonymous and impersonal for him, as does their fate. In contrast, however, the reader finds himself as part of the group of soldiers by way of the pronoun 'us' in the first line. As such, one is aligned with the boys in the rejection of institutionalised Christianity.[46] This division between the two groups is further underlined by a division in the structure of the poem, which consists of two simple stanzas of six lines each. In both of them the initial quatrain is followed by a couplet which allows Sassoon to highlight his irony with the help of the rhyme scheme.

This structure of the poem is exemplary of the general structure of satires, which have largely remained unchanged throughout the long history of the genre. In most cases it follows a division into two parts, of which the first depicts the situation the satirist wants to criticise. The second part then presents things as they should be and it is usually shorter than the first. Satire thus served the purpose of contrasting two versions of society, a real and an ideal one. This division can be seen as the result of the idealistic aesthetics of the classicists, such as Schiller

and his contemporaries. In his essay 'Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung' of 1795 he comes up with the following description of the satirical:

> 'Satyrisch ist der Dichter, wenn er die Entfernung von der Natur und den Widerspruch der Wirklichkeit mit dem Ideale (...) zu seinem Gegenstande macht (...)' And:
> 'In der Satire wird die Wirklichkeit als Mangel dem Ideal als höchster Realität gegenübergestellt' (Schiller, 2002, 39f.).

Though not applied rigorously, this scheme can still be discovered in many satiric works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the case of the poem, the first part of the satire presents the reader with the words of the bishop, a representative of the nationalist clergy. By using pompous language, the poet maintains an impersonal air and thus further adds to the formality of the bishop's speech. The second part, one line shorter than the first in accordance with the traditional scheme, reveals the reality of war by focusing on its individual consequences. The contrast with part 1, i.e. the bishop's words, is further underlined by the word *some* in italics. The boys do not talk about what things should or might be like, but what they really are like in this war, and by doing so they reveal the inappropriateness of the bishop's ideas about war. Changes are taking place, but not for good. This contrast between the bishop's speech in part 1 and the reality of part 2 supports the satirical interpretation of the poem.

Sassoon then deviates from the traditional form by giving the bishop's answer in the last line. Instead of changing his notion of war on the basis of what he has just heard, the bishop chooses to withdraw into hollow Christian phrases. 'Confronted with these stark physical changes rather than the spiritual change he had anticipated, the Bishop replies with a hollow and wholly inadequate injunction that "the ways of God are strange!"' (Schweitzer, 2003, p. 164). However, the blindness, mutilation and insanity of the boys render the attitude of the bishop's patriotism outfaced by reality. At the same time, the Bishop's last sentence stresses God's helplessness and indifference with regard to the war, a conclusion which he ironically shares with the boys.

In addition to the division into two parts, the bishop's answer may again indicate a satirical interpretation based on the use of the unexpected as one of the main techniques of satire (Highet, 1962). As Patrick Campbell argues, 'the key to the poem's power resides in the ironic force of "they will not be the same." Intended by the Bishop as a comment

on the ennobling effect of war, the pronouncement acquires a different significance in the terrifyingly candid rejoinder of the boy soldiers. It is only when "they" recite a litany of personal disasters that the nature of the change is made starkly clear' (Campbell, 1999, p. 125). The Bishop's final sentence creates a surprise effect: the boys at first seem to accept the bishop's message, but the poem reveals that war did not transform them into heroes, but into maimed and pitiable objects. The Bishop's words are no real answer to the boys' needs. Thus the implications of the poem go beyond the ironic: there is nothing that can really console or heal, neither words nor counter-actions like good deeds to the disabled. As such, the irony is mixed with feelings of melancholy and compassion for the boys.

The poem effectively fires against religious hypocrisy, especially inside the Church of England, the largest denomination among the English soldiers. The war did not lay the foundation for an 'honourable race', nor did it 'buy new right'. In the jargon of the trenches, the expression ironically signified being blown to bits. Whether or not Sassoon's Bishop is aware of this connotation remains outside the focus of the poem. However, the shallowness of patriotic vocabulary is further emphasised by the fact that no-one wants to 'dare' death. Rather, the soldiers' main aim is to stay alive despite the mortal dangers of the front. And, even if they dared to face the enemy, modern warfare did not allow this. Instead of fighting noble bayonet fights, soldiers were confronted with long-distance weapons and the even more impersonal gas.

Whereas Owen often uses a sequence of images to build up tension, Sassoon successfully creates a dramatic interplay of voices for the same effect. It is this tension – culminating in the Bishop's final sentence – that renders the poem so successful. It was and still is, among Sassoon's poems, the 'most quoted by reviewers, both adverse and favourable' (Sassoon, 1973, p. 29). However, Sassoon's critique of the clergy did not imply a rejection of Christian faith. For Sassoon, especially in *The Redeemer*, Christ was constantly with the men in the trenches, as the son of man suffering the same tribulations of war.

Most pastors and priests had orders to remain behind the lines, mainly with the field ambulances, and it was this spatial separation of the clergy from the fighting soldier that caused the strongest resentments. The Anglican clergy especially were accused of constant absence from the fighting areas, whereas Roman Catholic chaplains often stayed with their troops in the most dangerous areas against official orders and sometimes even assumed military command after the deaths of officers

during battle. Additionally, and unlike their Anglican colleagues, most Catholic chaplains were of working-class background and thus closer to the majority of soldiers in both thinking and lifestyle. This seeming difference between Roman Catholic and Anglican clergy was furthered by Graves's account of Anglican chaplains in his autobiographical novel *Goodbye to All That*, which first appeared in 1929 and for a long time has shaped the historical perspective of the First World War chaplaincy. However, as Schweitzer (2003, p. 172) points out, statistics differ from the general perception: 'the relatively higher fatality of Anglican chaplains serving overseas should once and for all clear the reputation of the Anglican chaplains in the historical record'. The numbers suggest that at least those Anglican chaplains who stayed at the front with their men even seemed to have been more inclined to expose themselves to fire than their Catholic colleagues. The frequent conversion of soldiers might thus not only have been a result of Anglican 'cowardliness', but also of the Catholic concept of mystery that was perceived as more useful in explaining the tragedies of war than evangelical Anglicanism. Additionally, Roman Catholic churches were more accessible in France than Protestant ones and consequently had a special appeal for the soldiers as places of worship, the rosary had a special appeal for its simplicity, and the strict organisation of the Catholic Church rendered it more efficient in times of war (Allitt, 1997).

In addition to criticism of the clergy by the serving soldiers, there was a widespread sense of failure among the chaplains themselves,[47] so that many chaplains did not renew their contracts. Many chaplains had enlisted because they saw an opportunity to carry out missionary work among soldiers who would otherwise not have set foot into a Christian church but were now exposed to religious influence. However, not only was it difficult to create a 'churchy' atmosphere in the trenches, but the diffusive character of popular religion among the soldiers did not necessarily require clerical guidance. Thus, although the general primitivism of Christian army services often had a special appeal to many soldiers, the clergy suffered from what they considered to be obstacles to professionalism. Their contempt for constant improvisation was also accompanied by homesickness and poor wages. This again led to an increasing estrangement between chaplains and soldiers, who had no choice other than to stay once they had arrived at the front. The war furthermore exposed the need for Church reforms as it revealed and increased the several schisms among the clergy, especially between traditionalists and reformers and between the different generations, but also between denominations.

However, it would be unjust to call the soldiers godless. They continued to pray to the Christian God for protection before an attack, and, despite their fatalist creed with regard to God's distance and helplessness, the belief in life after death was widespread. Most of the time religious sentiments ceased after the immediate danger of attack was over and turned into anger for the loss of friends, who were nevertheless considered lucky to have exchanged this hell on earth for heaven. Thus the representation of prayer could equally well be used as a means of irony, as in Richard Aldington's *Battlefield*. While the first part of the poem describes a desolate landscape with the typical barbed wire and the rotting corpses, the focus then shifts to the only object that grows there in abundance, namely the crosses of the dead. The poem finally ends with the prayer of a French soldier for a German corpse presented by an English poet. Rather than expressing a mere critique of war, the irony of the poem helps to evoke new hope that religion and prayer will finally transgress the boundaries of nationalism in favour of community.

The longer the war lasted, the louder the voice of scepticism became. How could a humane God allow the war to go on like this? Criticism of the church more than once turned into that of the Christian God of love. Edward Thomas in his poem *February Afternoon* sarcastically suggests the possibility of an uncaring God: 'And God still sits aloft in the array/That we have wrought him, stone deaf and stone-blind.' Wilfred Owen's poem *Greater Love* similarly describes the front as a place 'Where God seems not to care'. God was rejected as wrathful, weak, non-caring, or even insane by large parts of the wartime population, who fled into various forms of doubt such as fatalism, atheism, agnosticism, or spiritualism.[48] In the most extreme of cases, God was even declared dead, as in Harold Monro's *The Poets are Waiting*, in which Lord is no longer spelled with a capital letter as in texts of devotion. While God only seems to be drowsing, in fact he is dead and will no longer listen to the soldiers' songs of battle. At least he was 'not exerting Himself to save the victims of war' (Spear, 1979, p. 104), nor was he offering any guidance, as Ivor Gurney lightly pointed out in *The Target*. On the other hand, the Church itself was perceived as preventing God from intervening by its distance from the reality of the soldiers, as Owen ironically points out in *Le Christianisme*.

Contrary to their male counterparts, most women did not question Christianity but rather identified with the ideas of sacrifice and suffering as presented by the churches. They found comfort in the faith that God would heal the wounds without being aware that institutionalised

religion largely sanctioned the slaughter. A further source of comfort for mothers in particular was their identification with Mary under the cross. Among the female responses to the relationship between war and Christianity, however, M. Sackville's poem *Sacrament* is notable for its direct mockery of official religion, especially so in stanza 3. Like Owen, the author focuses on a pacifist Christian agenda, embedded in the symbolism of Holy Communion. The enjambment between lines 2 and 3 creates a link between the lengthening casualty lists in the daily papers and the wine press as a container for the dead soldiers' blood. Yet this blood, unlike that of Christ, does not cleanse but rather pollutes and destroys. The poem finally even rejects Christianity as such because it provides too strong a support for militarist nationalism. Although 'Britain's historic Christian identity continued to console and support the nation' (Snape, 2005, p. 242), the war not only challenged religious ideas by setting up an array of moral problems, but also undermined the traditional Christian rhetoric that had dominated much of the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Phrases and metaphors became hollow when confronted with the horrors of the war; and especially during the later years of war authors struggled either to replace this Christian diction or to use it as a source of irony, as has been revealed in this section. The works to be discussed in the next section will again challenge wartime authority, this time that of the military leaders.

3.2 War leaders

A large portion of the poetry to be dealt with in this section expresses a critical position with regard to the military competence of the war leaders, especially the generals, and thus led to the creation of the image of the absent general unthinkingly sending his men to death. The generals were seen as having the ultimate responsibility, but using it inappropriately by planning campaigns on the drawing board instead of on the field. However, they were not only accused for their absence from the front lines but also for their lack of sympathy for, and interest in, the common soldier. Furthermore, medical treatment according to military ranks did not help to decrease feelings of betrayal among common soldiers as ironically presented by Siegfried Sassoon in *Arms and the Man*.

Probably to ease his own bad conscience as an officer, Sassoon critically confronts the elitist underpinnings of military life in this poem. 'The poem, written soon after the event [his visit to the Medical Board at Caxton Hall, Westminster, to hear whether he would be able to return

Smile, Smile, Smile, which implicitly connects the suffering of the soldiers to human agents.

Yet despite the injustice of the officer's reaction felt by the modern reader, we have to bear in mind that, while individuality and initiative were highly valued and appreciated features, they could only be established in the second phase of military training, for which there was hardly any time left. First of all, the recruits had to be taught how to aim, fire and clean a rifle, or how to handle grenades. Maintaining standards – also with regard to personal hygiene – inevitably required strict rules and army drill enforced by superiors even if they were not welcome among the men, as A. P. Herbert's untitled humorous poem about a general inspecting the trenches attempts to show.

As there was no mutiny among British troops during the First World War, one may conclude that the generals were not as stupid and incapable as much of the poetry wants to make us believe. Otherwise, the men would have refused to follow their commands. Even the charge of a lack of empathy for their men cannot hold, as officers often felt like fathers towards them, as does the speaker in Mackintosh, *In Memoriam Private D. Sutherland killed in Action in the German Trench, May 16, 1916, and the Others who Died* (l. 17). Most soldiers did consider their training to be relevant. It was to make them fit for active service and this inevitably included some pain. Due to the lack of alternatives most military decisions were perceived to be sound at the time, and it is only in retrospect that they have been evaluated differently. In most diaries and records there is not even any evidence to show that soldiers hated their generals, above all Sir Douglas Haig. On the contrary, the troops remained loyal to their leaders to the very end. The main reasons for the corpus of critical poetry have therefore to be sought in individual bad experiences, such as the loss of friends resulting from unsuccessful campaigns, and the misbehaviour of a few military leaders who by no means represented the majority of the staff.

3.3 Women

As the First World War was for Britain no total war, women, by reason of their sex, were exempt from war service. As Samuel Hynes puts it, 'a nation at war is a male nation' (Hynes, 1990, p. 88). Women consequently felt excluded from most war-related activities and mainly supported the war effort at the periphery, whereas men found themselves at the centre of war both as fighting soldiers and as decision-makers.[57] It is certainly true that the battlefield was a forbidden zone for women[58]

as they were not permitted within the firing lines, and for this reason both anthologies and critical studies of war poetry completely excluded women's literary responses for a long time.[59] The assumption behind this was that, without sharing the male experience of physical combat, women were not able to write about war nor did they have the right to enter the male-dominated discourse of war. The First World War, in affirming the gender dichotomies by reducing women to men's helpmates, at least partly silenced women as it destroyed a distinctly female culture that had developed during the decades before the war. However, women equally suffered during the First World War and many actively served near the various front lines. For this reason this section will not only deal with poetry written by male authors about women, but it will also critically consider female literary responses to war and their ironic potential. This entails questions concerning the influence of poetry by men. With regard to the irony of women's poetry one has to ask whether it results from male reports of battlefield experience or whether it has distinctively female origins. Furthermore, are the targets of the irony the same or do they differ from those of war poetry by men?

3.3.1 Women at work

When the war broke out, the women's suffragist movement[60] entered its third decade and had finally produced some results, namely in the education sector. With the war, however, the movement as such was threatened by interior disputes. The fight for the female vote in parts turned into nationalist militarism, a 'fight for king and country' (Byles, 1995, p. 25), and the movement split into pro- and antiwar groups. Those women inclined to peace, such as Silvia Pankhurst, Emily Hobhouse and Olive Schreiner as the most famous representatives of the pacifist wing, saw militarism as yet another version of patriarchy and argued for the vote for women to stop the war. It was perceived as a typically male method of solving conflict which women would not choose if they were in a position of power. Unfortunately, the majority of women were not prepared to take any action against the war despite the efforts of the Women's International Peace Conference that took place in April 1915 (see Byles, 1995, p. 30). The conference participants had insisted that militarism was antithetical to women's interests and even their very nature. S. Gertrude Ford's *A Fight to the Finish* (1917), *The Soldier's Mother* and *The Tenth Armistice Day*[61] provide good examples for this set of arguments, angrily rebuking the jingoistic patriotism of nationalist poets.[62]

By their militant fellows like Emmeline Pankhurst, her daughter Christabel, and Millicent Fawcett, who supported the war effort and nationalism although she rejected militarism,[63] the pacifist suffragettes were criticised as unpatriotic and even traitorous. They helped to organise recruitment meetings and handed out white feathers to men not wearing uniforms without caring for their reasons.[64] Most militant suffragists perceived their war effort as necessary to finally obtain the vote, while the pacifists argued for the vote as a means of preventing the war. Female militarism was mainly represented by authors of jingoistic poetry such as Jessie Pope asking for 'unselfish devotion' (*Profiteers*). She was accused of spreading lies about war not only by male soldiers like Owen, who dedicated the first draft of his *Dulce et Decorum Est* to her, but also by other women. However, one should not forget that women experienced a great deal of pressure from both the government (for instance with the help of recruitment posters) and each other to send their men to fight.

Yet the desire of some women to take an active part in the war was rarely based only on patriotic reasons. Cicely Hamilton's *Non-Combatant* expresses the misery of female passivity and boredom while the men are engaged in action. Rose Macauley's poem *Picnic*, written in July 1917, similarly shows the frustration, anguish and guilt of staying at home while the soldiers risk their lives and endure unimaginable pain. While the poem starts off by reporting the careless attitude of those taking part in the picnic when they hear the sound of the guns, the poem's following parts reveal this nonchalance to be a means of self-protection. On the one hand women are excluded from the war by way of their gender and are thus able to lead a life of pleasure safe at home. On the other hand, the symbolic walls around them by no means imply indifference on their behalf. The war continues to haunt their imagination in 'dreams of naked fear' as the walls can only shut out some of the worst impressions. On the whole it remains an ever-present reality despite the distance from the front.

In another of Macauley's poems, the ironic *Many Sisters to Many Brothers*, we can find the following lines: 'Oh, it's you that have the luck, out there in blood and muck:/But for me … a war is poor fun'. It is the 'blood and muck' that contradict the word 'fun', as the self-erected walls of ignorance contradict the lively imagination of what war was like. However, it is not entirely clear how ironic this poem is intended to be. Like Sassoon's *The Kiss* it lends itself to both readings and it is up to the reader to choose between the different interpretations. Once more, this decision has been and will ever be determined

by the social, cultural, political and personal context of the reading process.

Although many women were engaged in war-related activities and thus contributed immensely to the war effort, one has to bear in mind that everything they did was on a voluntary basis. They chose to contribute for various reasons, of which the first two also attracted their male counterparts: patriotism, money matters, the desire to ease the fate of loved ones, and the distinctively female aim of trying to improve the status of their own sex. In the years before the outbreak of war, an independent existence had hardly been possible for women as they were not supposed to take paid employment, especially not so as wives or mothers. Paid work was considered indecent, so that, if women worked at all, their area of activity was severely restricted due to prejudices and preconceptions. The most desirable types of employment in the early twentieth century were social work, nursing, teaching, weaving, dress-making and domestic service. All of these areas met with women's expected role as mother and keeper of a household. For the working classes, factory work was another area of employment, whereas the middle classes preferred secretarial work to pass the time until marriage, after which they were expected to quit their position. As women's contribution to the workforce was therefore only considered to be of a temporary nature, the majority of jobs offered to women were poorly paid and offered no career possibilities, so that women remained unable to support themselves (Wilson, 1986, p. 717).

War, however, did not necessarily change the conditions of female work or increase the possibilities of women in the workforce at once.[65] On the contrary, unemployment among women became more frequent as the upper classes started to economise. Furthermore, there were enough men remaining in England at the beginning of war to fill vacancies. Thus women were not yet needed to replace them in factories and in the service sector. Women working in the textile industries in particular suffered from unemployment, as the war, especially in its early months, interrupted the pattern of supply and demand for cotton, linen and silk. Only when the supply of alternative male workers began to run out did employers extensively resort to female labour. Yet they only did so reluctantly as 'a threat to the special position of women was a threat to the values they stood for'. It was feared that women's new liberty would hinder them from providing a safe haven at home for returning soldiers. However, as the war continued, women's role changed and was no longer considered to be that of homemakers[66] and childbearers only. War brought a liberating social change, offering relief

from a largely meaningless existence, and women adjusted themselves quickly to their new positions. Nevertheless, recent scholarship agrees that war represented an isolated moment in women's history, and, even if it momentarily resulted in greater mobility and independence, this liberation was not to survive after the war.

Officially, the role of women was to ease the decision of men to enlist by making sure that concern for the family did not hinder their husbands and sons in giving their lives for their country. There was, indeed, considerable pressure put on women poets to represent national honour as women.[67] In this role, women participated in the public recruiting campaigns, something which attracted harsh criticism from poets like Sassoon. However, 'this cheerfulness, which men attributed to women's keenness to get rid of their husbands, was regarded by women as a necessity' (Khan, 1988, p. 160). As the war took its toll, women were even allowed to join the military. However, their fields of activity remained behind the lines, replacing men as typists, cooks, cleaners, mechanics or chauffeurs. In order to get closer to the front lines, in 1917 and 1918 more than 100,000 women enlisted in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) (Wilson, 1986, p. 712).

Despite the restrictions on female labour mentioned above, war had created one sector in which women were desperately needed, namely the production of ammunition. Especially after the introduction of conscription in 1916, many working-class women replaced men in the munitions factories in order to guarantee constant supply. This latter form of employment in particular led many women into a moral dilemma, as they enjoyed their new financial independence and freedom on the one hand, whereas on the other they felt that by producing lethal weapons they were not only contributing to the prolongation of the war but also maybe even responsible for the death of their husbands, sons or friends. For many women, self-respect and independence thus had a high price.

Yet most of women's war-related activities were still of a private nature or were rooted in the social sector. Women were engaged in seeking homes and employment for Belgian refugees, in providing First Aid, or in knitting socks for the soldiers in France. And, of course, they were bearing and educating the future generation of soldiers. In this position especially women's influence was decisive in shaping the next generation's position towards war by either encouraging or forbidding war games with toy soldiers and guns (Claire Ingledew, *The Song of the Children,* and Pauline Barrington, *Education*). Middle and upper-class

women trained as doctors and nurses in order to care for the maimed, or as policewomen to uphold the social order. Others became ambulance drivers either in France or back in England. Before the war, female doctors had been restricted to caring for women and children, whereas policewomen had been totally unknown before the war, but their numbers in both branches rose quickly with the increasing demand.

Although some women had trained as nurses and doctors before the war, the wounds they had to face were a novelty inspiring a large variety of responses, from awe to fear and disgust. These emotions, however, found their parallel among their patients, who both feared and admired them for their work. The anonymous poem *Little Sister* humorously reflects this ambivalence from the perspective of a wounded soldier:

Have you seen our Little Sister?
Officers can ne'er resist her.
She will flay and burn and blister
Someone every day.
Does she tend poor wounded wretches?
No! Their wounds she probes and stretches
Till the brandy flask she fetches
When they faint away.

Not for them the gentle touches
Of a Matron or a Duchess –
Little Sister simply BUTCHERS
Everyone she gets.
Rubber gloves her hands adorning
Give to us a daily warning
That the bone she cleans each morning
Never, never sets.

Though our misery's unending,
Though with pain our wounds she's tending,
Yet with courage still unbending
We can bear the strain.
But if once we woke and missed her
We should cry with tears that blister,
'Have you seen our Little Sister?
Send her back again!'

While this male evaluation of nursing focuses on the wounds and the pain, it also reveals the nurse's seeming cruelty as a necessity. Even

though she 'butchers' (l. 11) the men – a logical continuation of the slaughter taking place on the battlefield – gentleness would hinder her from successfully dealing with the masses of wounded soldiers. The courage mentioned in the last stanza (l. 19) as a prerequisite of the wounded is thus also greatly needed among nurses and doctors as an antidote against despair.

In contrast to the description of nursing procedures by male authors, female poetry on the nursing profession strikes a different and far more serious note, as it reveals the fear for loved ones away from home as the main motivation, as for instance in Mitchell's *The Nurse*. Eva Dobell's *Night Duty* on the one hand realistically describes the situation in a field hospital at night with the silence of sleep interrupted by terrible dreams, revealing the psychological damage the front line service had inflicted on the men. On the other hand, the last stanza begins with the image of joyful laughter only to be revealed as a memory of a peaceful past now destroyed forever. 'The transition from the menacing and traumatic dreams of battle to the wish fulfilment dreams of the last stanza give the poem its ironic last line' (Byles, 1995, p. 58).

Furthermore, women's poetry largely focuses on the results of war for the individual (sorrow, wounds, disability, blindness, widowhood etc.) rather than on themes such as comradeship, nature, religion, sexual desires or the violence of fighting itself, as reserved for male authors. More than once a romantic note is added, though not always without self-irony, as for instance in the case of Stella Sharpley's *Mariana in Wartime*. The title of the poem refers to Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Mariana,* the romanticism of which provides the intertextual basis of the irony employed in the poem.

Notwithstanding the fact that most women were engaged in the background of both economic and war-related activities, some women became immensely successful public figures: the music hall stars and actresses. They were even regarded by government and military leaders as indispensable for the war effort as they were responsible for the nation's favour. Sassoon's '*Blighters*' can be read as a harsh critique of this entertainment culture of the time, which for many of the serving soldiers was the epitome of the superficiality and deliberate ignorance of the population at home, especially because the working women were now able to afford this sort of public enjoyment with their husbands away at the front. Although the poem's two quatrains mirror the structure of *They* as discussed in the last chapter, with the first stanza focusing on the nation at home and the second on the front, it lacks the element of satirical humour. *Blighters* seems to be entirely dominated by the

speaker's own bitterness over the thoughtless self-indulgence (see also Gibson's *Ragtime*) as described in stanza 1 and his distaste for women evident in the description of the chorus girls as 'harlots' (l. 3). While 'tier beyond tier' in the first line reminds the reader of the disciplined ranks of soldiers marching forward into death (i.e. the 'show'), here they refer to a vulgar audience that 'grins', 'cackles' and is 'drunk with din'. The choice of vocabulary harshly rebukes the ignorance of the audience with regard to the reality of war. 'They respond by indulging in the sentimental claptrap of some vapid music hall number' (Campbell, 1999, p. 135). On the other hand, words with military connotations – show, ranks, shrill – strongly enforce the inappropriateness of this behaviour in times of war. The title of the poem 'blighters' is significant here as it simultaneously denotes what blights, and those who stay in 'blighty' and profit from the misfortunes of others. This clearly refers to civilians for whom others give their lives in places like Bapaume, Haig's objective on the first day of the battle of the Somme. Rather than ending in a glorious victory for the English, the result of this day was that 20,000 men were killed and 40,000 wounded. It is worth noting that the place name ironically rhymes with 'home'. With the tanks 'lurching', the poet wishes the audience a nightmare vision of war to cure their complacency.

However, the critique of popular entertainment culture was not only a male point. Edith Sitwell's *The Dancers. During a Great Battle, 1916* sarcastically rebukes the civilian population for dancing while soldiers are dying. Their dance is a dance of death, an unusually strong image in female antiwar discourse. The image of women in this poem is a thoroughly negative one. They are 'the dull blind carrion-fly' (l. 11), vermin living on the dead. But who are they? Female patriots sending their loved ones to death? Or the female population in general trying to forget for a short while the sorrow and grief of wartime? The poem expresses both critique and despair (God dies at the sight of the horror), as well as a certain relief about the relative safety at home that still allows the continuation of a prewar entertainment culture ('God is good'). Surprisingly, the poem mirrors the typical division established in 'male' poetry between those who stayed at home and those who went to fight and suffer on the continent.

3.3.2 Anger and grief

As we have already seen in the above paragraph, women's literary response largely consists of mourning – the devastation of war and the loss and grief it implies. May Wedderburn Cannan's *Lamplight*, for instance, accuses war and the desire for heroism and glory of being a

destructive force. The crossed swords against the name of the soldier in the first stanza would have indicated bravery in battle and service under fire, but it is only a torn cross for his death that he receives. The female speaker's heart 'was broken by the war' when she lost her fiancé and the only thing that remains for her are bitter memories of some youthful plans that were suddenly disrupted. However, although May Cannan, like Vera Brittain, had lost the young man she loved, her fiancé, she believed that despite her loss she had kept much. According to her father's Clarendon Press publications of propaganda series, the poem does not question the war as such but rather reinforces the idea of British Imperialism.

For statements such as these, many trench poets perceived an increasing gulf between their front-line experience and the absence of such in the population at home.[68] The longer the war lasted, the more serving soldiers were annoyed by the outcry about the discomfort imposed on civilians by air raids and food shortages as they seemed to ignore the far worse privations at the front. Thus Rose Macaulay, *The Shadow,* gives an apocalyptic vision of a zeppelin air raid in an attempt to link this civilian fear of the raids with the soldier's fear at the front. Both civilians and serving soldiers are presented as victims of the same man-made horror, yet the population at home was accused of showing an increasing indifference to the experiences of the soldiers. However, despite the harsh criticism of women by many serving soldiers, women were not unaware of the barrier between genders. Thus Margaret Sackville, *Home Again,* Edith Sitwell, *The Dancers*, or Helen Hamilton, *The Ghouls*, portray and accuse the insensibility or indifference the soldiers had to face when returning home on leave or wounded. Neither was the female population spared acute suffering. Despite the censorship system they were able to perceive and comprehend many aspects of the war. However, in order to be able to speak of trench warfare, women largely had to rely on their imagination based on what they saw and heard in the hospitals. Thus Ruth Comfort Mitchell, *He Went for a Soldier,* focuses on the horrors of trench warfare in a rather general and abstract way due to the lack of experience, but inspired by a real compassion for the dying man. Only from the end of March 1917 onwards did women replace soldiers in the communication lines and thus came closer to the actual fighting so that poems like *The Hill* or *The Song of the Mud* by Mary Borden are based on a close observance of the conditions at the Western Front.

With their husbands away at war, married women had to cope with problems for which they were ill-prepared, such as dealing with accounts, managing businesses, caring for the education and welfare

of children. Unmarried women were deprived of male company during the war and later of any hope of a future marriage with its connotations of security, motherhood and the social status attached to it. Furthermore, all women had to live with the daily fear that their sons, brothers, fiancés or friends would be killed or missing, or return home severely maimed by war. Most women were thus outraged by what they saw as a pointless waste of a generation while at the same time feeling politically powerless. May Herschel-Clarke's *For Valour* therefore rejects posthumous medals as inadequate payment for a life, while questioning women's patriotic duty: why should she bear and nurture children if they are then slain for nothing?

This distinctly female experience of grief, fear and anger is reflected in much of the poetry written by women at the time,[69] which is in parts as ironical, satirical or sarcastic as that of their male counterparts, but based on a different experience and perception of the war. Irony and satire, however, are often used to a different end. Thus Byles points out: 'Satire was for the men poets who could ridicule the war in all its preposterous ramifications; women, by and large, did not make fun of the war – to them it would have seemed like making fun of their menfolk. When they did use irony, it was mostly for tragic or elegiac effect rather than satiric ends (...)' (Byles, 1995, p. 57).[70] For this tragic effect, Rose Macauley's and Alice Meynell's poetry provides perfect examples.

War's incommunicability, on the one hand, resulted from the difficulties many soldiers experienced in articulating their traumas of war, and who therefore sought refuge in neurotic reactions. Women's resulting inability to understand the physical facts of war due to the lack of communication, on the other hand, increased the constraint on what men felt they could reveal about their experiences. Therefore we have to distinguish clearly between the deliberate ignorance of some civilians and the charge of ignorance articulated by such major authors as Sassoon and Owen. Some women might really have enjoyed the glamour of men in uniform and the idea of war as a great adventure, but it was women's general reaction to war's consequences that repelled many soldiers. Many women did not consider wounds as degrading, but as signs of heroism that simply had to be nursed. This idea provides the background for Owen's ironic comment in *S.I.W.*: 'Perhaps his mother whimpered how she'd fret/ Until he got a nice safe wound to nurse.' The main accusation was that it was a pleasure for women if they managed to nurse a soldier back to health so that he was able to return to the front – perhaps to be killed there. At the same time, 'to nurse back to health a deserter who was to be court-martialled and shot, "truly

that seemed a dead-end occupation"' (Tylee, 2000, p. 97). However, two points are important here. First, the position of women should rather be qualified as one of resigned acceptance rather than patriotism. Second, there is an overt misogyny in many of the famous war poems for various reasons. Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Graves and many of the other young war poets did not have children themselves, nor were they married at the time of the war. As a result, it was an easy though not entirely convincing idea to put the blame on parents, and mothers in particular, or as Martin Stephen put it: 'All too often women are merely a convenient punch-bag' (Stephen, 1996, p. 191).[71] Sassoon, for instance, bitterly accused women's chivalric ideas and their self-deceit in *Glory of Women* as he had already done in poems like *The Hero*, *Their Frailty* and *Supreme Sacrifice*, but this time it is 'more satirically charged than these earlier efforts' (Campbell, 1999, p. 169). The sonnet consists of an octave and a sestet both following the regular Italian rhyming pattern, while many of Sassoon's other sonnets rely on final couplets with epigrammatic character. With regard to the content, however, the argumentative volta takes place in the middle of the sestet so that the last three lines can be seen as a similar epigrammatic ending. As for the poem's form, the poet himself considered it to be a 'very good sonnet' (Hart-Davies, 1983, p. 188). Its charge, however, is highly unfair as it is based on unrealistic generalisations.

While strongly opposing women, the poem shows compassion for all male victims of the war. Its argumentative effect is largely based on alliterations (e.g. 'blind with blood'), its concision and the accusatory 'you'. By combining opposing images, Sassoon achieves a sardonic perspective, such as when 'laurelled' is connected with 'memories': they are anything other than pleasant. According to the speaker, all glorious reports are patriotic inventions of the press, and, as a result of this propaganda press, women do not realise what kind of hell they are sending their boys or husbands to die in. As Patrick J. Quinn points out: 'In "Glory of Women" and "Their Frailty", he [Sassoon] ambushes the blind nobility of the female population who refuse to see behind the façade of war and continue to send their "glum heroes" out to die' (Quinn, 2001, p. 191).

It is the image of the German mother that finally takes the reader by surprise and thus reinforces the content of the poem. Her ignorant optimism that her son is still alive is revealed to be misplaced when faced with reality, but her knitting of socks[72] is less condemned than the English women's love for decorations and heroism. However, this last part also reveals the pointlessness and absurdity of any female war

effort, be it making shells or knitting socks. This pointlessness furthermore is universal as it affects both the allied nations and the German enemy and can therefore be extended to refer to the whole war as an absurd undertaking.

In *Their Frailty* we find a similar message but one that is less effectively conveyed. The poem mocks those women who still urge a conventionally benevolent God to send their sons back home again. Another aspect expressed and ridiculed here is the rivalry between mothers and sweethearts for the affections of the soldier, who, ironically, might never come back to them anyway. While Sassoon limited his hatred and ridicule for women to a few poignant poems, in Owen's work this bitterness is more widespread and influences a large number of his poems, for example *Disabled*; *Anthem for Doomed Youth;* or *Dulce et Decorum Est*, without being the dominant charge.

Yet many female authors have not only vitiated this male prejudice of female ignorance and flippancy, but they have proved capable of imagining and expressing war's horrors right from the start. Even as early as 1914, the Georgian images of pastoral England, gentleness, fertility and growth are turned into images of rage and pain. The typical English rain proves particularly useful here: it suggests more blood-soaked mud in Flanders and France. Anna Akhmatova's poem *July 1914* ironically transforms the peaceful image of summer rain into a vision of hell. In the last stanza 'warm red rain soaks the trampled fields'. The rain thus no longer stands for renewal, but for death. Furthermore, the bloody rain is fused with the image of mud prominent in male war poems. Yet, while rain first of all implied wet boots, trench foot and slimy decaying bodies for the soldier, the female image is more abstract for lack of combat experience, though no less realistic.

Sara Teasdale in *Spring in War-Time* equally protests the coming of spring with its suggestions of hope and regeneration by confronting the conventional imagery of spring with the effects of war in each stanza. The repetitive structure of the stanzas mimics the ever-returning seasons as opposed to the nature of war which prevents the soldiers from returning home. This ironical twist reinforces the elegiac effect of the poem. England, again and again, is presented as a blossoming or fertile garden in ironical opposition to the war on the continent, destroying not only Europe's landscape, but humanity itself. The flowers and fruits even turn into a mockery of mankind, as Alice Meynell suggests in her poem *Summer in England 1914*. And, even if it is rare, some women did use satire, such as Ruth Mitchell in her poem *He went for a Soldier,* which parallels Owen's *Disabled* as a young boy leaves for war under the

cheers of some girls. The boy does not know what will await him in the trenches or what the war is all about until his painful death on the field. War turns from a joke and adventure into bitter reality summed up in the sarcastic questions of the last stanza.

Though traditional demarcations cannot hold any longer in modern criticism, especially the gendered dichotomy between male soldiers and female civilians safe at home, women's poetry about the war has for a long time been considered backward-looking in style and subject, as it was seen only to enforce women's home front experiences of waiting and mourning, of which Margaret Sackville's poem *A memory* is representative. The poem's last lines express women's typical experience of war, namely the loss of relatives and friends rather than the sights and sounds of battle. Its main focus is on the so-called side effects of war, its civilian victims, yet at the same time it portrays the sorrows of the survivors of the attack. Not only are they haunted by the memory of the dead, but they have to struggle for their existence; hence the line from the Lord's Prayer gains special importance. Furthermore, the poem differs from official discourse in that it rejects the language of sacrifice: there can be no pride of conquest for those who remain (l. 9). Sackville protests the idealisation of heroism and glory by focusing on the scene from a distinctively female perspective in which soldiers, both English and German, do not play a role. However, this distinctly female view led to a marginalisation of women's literary responses to the war as they did not qualify as 'war poets' in the strict sense of the term. 'We have fallen into the trap of believing too often that the only valid experience of war is that of those who fought it' (Stephen, 1996, p. 184).

Female poetry on the First World War, as we have seen, largely excludes the violence of war, yet this does not render it less valuable.[73] 'They [women poets] did not seek to adopt either the masculine traditional vocabulary or the realism of the soldier poets. (...) The soldier poets saw the violence done to nature and to man as it was happening through the vile machinery of war; the women saw this violence as it affected them as nurses, mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, and activists. Both accounts are necessary for a full understanding of the significance of war for men and women' (Byles, 1995, p. 49f.). By questioning gender stereotypes, women's poetry pinpoints how these preconceptions helped to support the war policies of the time. Many of the works discussed here tried to imaginatively overcome the gulf between those who fought and those who could not for reasons of gender. And, more than their male colleagues, female authors focused on the difficult task of surviving the survival and the question of guilt. As we have seen,

much of women's poetry focuses on the social consequences of war, in the portrayal of which irony played a major role. At the same time it values female achievements during the war which otherwise would have remained unnoticed. Feminist criticism on the literature of the Great War has done much to bridge the gap between male and female responses to war, as did Catherine Reilly's (1981) important anthology of female poetry of the First World War.

3.4 Journalism

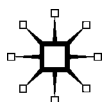
One of the main aims of newspapers and journals is to bridge the gap between the place of immediate action and the readers back at home. As the First World War was mainly taking place on the continent rather than on the British Isles there was a constant need of this sort of mediation. However, instead of bridging the gap between those at the front and those back at home, the effect was in many cases counterproductive. The First World War was a conflict in which propaganda played an important role at the home front.[74] In the first place it served to convince the British population that the war was a just one, and in the war's later stages it attempted to secure both moral and financial support for the troops. On an extended level it countered the large-scale propaganda campaigns of the Germans in neutral countries. One must distinguish between official propaganda launched by the National War Aims Committee and the Department of Information, and the non-officially inspired forms of propaganda mainly emanating from the newspaper press. The latter often reduced war to a struggle between a good and a bad side with no regard for the cost. As such, the press did not attempt to give a faithful account of the situation at the front. Instead, it published anecdotes stressing the heroism of the soldiers and the glory of their deaths. Yet, even if journalists aspired to tell the truth about war, they were prevented from visiting the front lines by war officials. Reporters and photographers were regarded as threats to national security and therefore banned from the front. Similarly excluded from the area of battle were cinema cameramen and non-official war painters. Only official army photographers (officers without photography training) were allowed to approach the action. Photographing the dead was strictly forbidden, as well as actual scenes of combat. Yet these photographs still showed the conditions of fighting, the ruined landscape and the wounded, especially after control loosened in the second half of the war.

In contrast to the simplification and disinformation of the press, many poets saw their work to be a journalistic alternative. However, as

Irony and the Poetry of the First World War

Susanne Christine Puissant

palgrave
macmillan



© Susanne Christine Puissant 2009

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2009 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978–0–230–57693–3 hardback
ISBN-10: 0–230–57693–1 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Puissant, Susanne Christine, 1977–
Irony and the poetry of the First World War / Susanne Christine Puissant.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978–0–230–57693–3
1. English poetry – 20th century – History and criticism. 2. World War, 1914–1918 – Literature and the war. 3. War poetry, English – History and criticism. 4. Soldiers' writings, English – History and criticism. 5. Irony in literature. I. Title.

PR605.W65P85 2009
821′.9109352403—dc22 2008042703

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne