Poetry Remembers: Contemporary Poets and the First World War

Poetry has played an inestimable role in keeping alive the memory of the First World War. In Britain, in particular, the works of the major First World War poets have long entered the literary canon and been widely taught in schools and universities. Carol Ann Duffy, Britain's current Poet Laureate, has pointedly stated that the works of Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg and others are "part of the English poetry reader's DNA, injected during schooldays like a vaccine" (2009). For historian David Sheffield, "a strong case can be made that it is teachers of English, not history, who have had the greatest impact on the shaping of views on the First World War through the teaching of war poetry" (2002, 18).¹

However this may be, interest in the First World War and its poets has continued unbroken to this day. This is evident not only from reading lists and syllabi, and from a proliferation of anthologies and scholarly publications, but also from the fact that there has been a considerable amount of poetry on that war written long after the event, remembering the war from a distance in time and responding to the works of the original war poets themselves. Salient examples of such poems by Philip Larkin ("MCMXIV," 1964), Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Michael Longley have met with ample resonance and critical attention (cf. Brearton 2013; Kendall 2006). Longley's "Wounds" (1973) provides a historical perspective on the Troubles in Northern Ireland by reaching back to the First World War (in which the poet's father participated), thereby illustrating the fact that later poets have sometimes drawn on the 1914-18 war in order to reflect on the conflicts of their own times.

This essay discusses selected poetry collections on the First World War written from the 1980s to the present. These poems are no longer based either on individual remembrance or on that of the parent generation, but on (family) history and the cultural memory of the war – a memory which they reflect and at the same time help to shape and to anchor in the collective imagination. I shall proceed chronologically, first dealing with two collections dating from the 1980s by Canadian poets Ted Plantos (Passchendaele, 1983) and Marilyn Bowering (Grandfather Was a Soldier, 1987). By way of comparison, I shall then discuss two examples from the 'other side' in the war, as it were, and from the late 1990s, the cycles "Gebirgsfront 1916-18" (1998) by the Austrian Raoul Schrott and "Der Erste Weltkrieg" (1999) by the German experimental poet Thomas Kling. Finally, I shall discuss two British collections published in 2013, heralding the 2014 centenary: Carol Ann Duffy's anthology 1914: Poetry Remembers,² and a volume entitled To the War Poets by British poet and critic John Greening, whose annotated edition of Blunden's Undertones of War was published by Oxford University Press in 2015. The poems by Bowering, Plantos, Schrott and Kling originate from the participation of grandfathers in the war. The two German-language collections in particular may also have been motivated by a desire to revisit the 'semi-

¹ On the cultural memory of the war in Britain see Korte, Schneider, and Sternberg (2008).
² It is interesting to note that Duffy's predecessor as Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, too, edited a collection of First World War poems, including some examples from the later 20th century (Motion 2003).
nal catastrophe' of the 20th century as that century was drawing towards its close, while Duffy's and Greening's collections were clearly inspired by the upcoming centenary. In general, however, they all express what Jon Silkin referred to as a "sense that [the First World War] is our problem still, and recognizably our kind of warfare" (1981, 16). My discussion of these collections will therefore concentrate on three aspects: 1) persistent images of the war, 2) intertextual and meta-poetic elements and 3) the sense of a crisis of linguistic representation, which already pervaded some of the poetry written during and shortly after the First World War and which contemporary writers have empathically related to and engaged with.

1) Images. My British and Canadian examples in particular draw on an iconography of the Western Front which derives not least from the works of the original war poets themselves: soldiers huddled in trenches, choking on poison gas, being blown to pieces by high explosives, or 'going over the top' to be mowed down by machine guns, in battles over yards of mud. Perpetuated by present-day poetry written on the First World War, such images have profoundly influenced our conceptions and attitudes towards war, and have left their imprint on the cultural memories of nations. In his poem "The Great War" (1962), Vernon Scannell, a participant in the Second World War, emphasised the power of the inherited memory of the First World War, including its iconography, as follows: "Whenever war is spoken of / I find / The war that was called Great invades the mind: / […] / And I remember / Not the war I fought in / But the one called Great / Which ended in a sepia November / Four years before my birth" (1971, 40). Similarly, Martin Stephen, in the introduction to his anthology of First World War poems, suggested that in spite of the far greater death-toll of the Second World War, the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, it is images of the First World War rather than of later wars which crop up in modern writing about war and violence (cf. 1993 [1988], 289). Indeed, it seems that the iconic images associated with the first large-scale industrialized war in human history have acquired the function, in Western culture, of symbolizing the murderous absurdity of war in general.

2) Intertextual and meta-poetic elements. Like hardly any other event, war raises questions about the function of poetry in the face of crisis, and of the relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic in art. Explicitly or implicitly, contemporary poets have dealt with these questions also by engaging in inter-textual dialogues with the earlier war poetry – most conspicuously so in Duffy's anthology, where contemporary poetic responses are grouped with 'classic' poems from the war, and in Greening's collection, where a number of poems explicitly address major First World War poets and their works. These poetic dialogues are set within culturally specific frames of remembrance, as manifested for instance in anthologies and in canon formation. Contemporary poems thus draw upon and also feed back into the 'poetic memory' of the 1914-18 war at the same time, thereby continuing a process which can already be observed in the British poetry of the Second World War. Poets like Keith Douglas "found models in the work of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and others, yet also felt constrained and overshadowed by them" (Potter 2012, 21), as illustrated for instance by the speaker's exclamation "Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying —" in Douglas's 'Desert Flowers' (1987, 102). In the collections by Duffy and Greening, the influence of First World War poetry on later representations of war is evident especially in a number of poems dealing with the British involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.
While intertextuality is thus a hallmark of present-day poetic responses to the First World War, it is well to remember that it is also an important device in the works of the First World War poets themselves. Popular assumptions have held that their poems were written in order to convey, as urgently and immediately as possible, the actual experience of battle. However, this is only part of the picture, especially since those poets had come to the frontline not as professional soldiers, but mostly as nascent (and sometimes already published) poets – well-educated volunteers, in any case, who had read much literature. Struggling for words to express their experience of a war that was in many ways so different from everything they had read and heard about war, they scrutinized the poetic tradition; they turned against that which appeared inadequate and adopted what might be useful. This applies for instance to the ironic contrasts created by the numerous references to the pastoral in the war poems of Edmund Blunden, or to the Romantics in those of Owen.

3) Language. First World War poetry often reflects a crisis of language which had already been expressed in literature and the thinking about language before the war, yet which had been forced by the events of 1914-1918. As it seemed, "[t]raditional language and vocabulary were grossly inadequate […] to describe the trench experience," (Eksteins 1989, 218) and increasing distrust of the propaganda served to further a skepticism about the 'big words' and language in general. Informed by modern linguistic and philosophical views on language, and in front of the background of an ongoing history of warfare, contemporary poetry has seized on the doubts expressed in First World War poems in a kindred spirit. It thus illustrates, in the words of Randall Stevenson, "the extent to which later decades continued to live, and write, in ways the war shaped, remaining troubled by stresses in the modern world it first made inescapably evident" (2013, 225).

The Canadian examples in the following discussion stand in the tradition of the long narrative poem prominent in Anglo-Canadian literature, and both were inspired by family history. Ted Plantos's *Passchendaele* is dedicated to the memory of the poet's grandfather, who served with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment in the First World War. The text re-enacts, in chronological order, a soldier's experiences on the Western Front, culminating in the slaughter at Passchendaele. In the preface, Plantos states that his aim was to create an "internalized" rendering of historical events through the imaginative depiction of individual experience (1983, 7). The collection is based on ample research, and Paul Fussell's seminal *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) in particular stands behind some of its themes. The narrator's diction echoes the cynicism of Siegfried Sassoon, including numerous instances of soldiers' slang, and visceral images abound. There are other literary echoes, too, like that of "[t]he cold, our most savage enemy./Send[ing] its troops bayonetting" ("Fire," 28), which recalls the "merciless iced east winds that knive us" in Owen's "Exposure" (Owen 1985, 162), or the frequent depiction of war as the ultimate anti-pastoral, with reference to Blunden: "The only hedges here are wire, and those are wounds,/not roses, twisted on the metal-woven thorns./ Someone should tell the larks/ that this land belongs to death,/ …" ("The Somme," 33). Besides evoking the horrors of war, however, the poems also reflect on Canada's public commemoration of the First World War as a milestone on the road to nationhood. Thus, "Vimy Ridge" (49f.) revisits the most important Canadian site of memory from the First World War, the
speaker/narrator articulating a national self-confidence and pride in the Canadians’ achievement there.\(^3\)

Marilyn Bowering’s *Grandfather was a Soldier* (1987) was originally broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland; the text is based on the service records of the poet’s own grandfather, Edward Grist, who volunteered in 1915. In the poems, however, it is a fictive grandson who tours the battlefields of Flanders, where Grist, who survived the war, had seen action and been wounded. As he does so, he is accompanied by his grandfather’s ghost, a device which allows for a double perspective on the past. An additional perspective is provided by an elderly French couple running a museum at Sanctuary Wood, whose exhibits, like the grandfather’s service record, represent an objectivized form of memory. The poem thus illustrates the passing of the First World War from what Jan Assmann has called “communicative memory,” i.e. an inter-generational memory based mainly on oral tradition, into "cultural memory,” i.e. a form of collective memory which is based on symbolic objectivation, including museum exhibits, the visual arts and literature (cf. Assmann 1999 [1992], 48-66). Above all, however, Bowering’s poem renders the memory of the war as encoded in places:

Where a red brick house stands, horses nibbling at hay
by the fence, was Vine Cottage.
He had returned from convalescence to fight there.
It was nothing he would speak of, even if he could,
although the name has been passed down through generations
like a code.

Passchendaele. (57)

The reasons for the grandson’s journey are "[t]he sound of artillery in dreams/A few brown photographs./A silence two generations old" (2). However, this silence will last, as "[l]anguage fails, as you knew it would, lacks evidence/of touch" (8); instead, there are the images which flash upon his mind ("Image: men hauling artillery through waist deep mud,/uphill," 17) as he meditates on memorials and relics, and the worlds of the living and the dead blend:

The landscape is fresh, green and ripe,
the progress of valley and river as relentless
and constant as love.

The orders alone have lost meaning:
advancing, retreating over the same ground,
digging in,
or routing the enemy from once-wheat fields
and woods, over and over. (69)

The notion that the landscape around the former frontline still holds the memory of the war is also prominent in the cycle "Gebirgsfront 1916-18" by the Austrian poet, essayist, novelist and translator Raoul Schrott. The landscape, in this case, is that of the Southern Alps, the scene of fighting as terrible, in its own way, as that on the Western Front. Except in Austria and Italy, however, the war in the mountains has

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\(^3\) On Canada’s national commemoration and mythology of the war see Vance (1997); on the cultural memory of the two world wars as expressed in Canadian literature and art, see Sherrill Grace’s *Landscapes of War and Memory* (2014).
become something of a forgotten war. Schrott explores the memory of that war, also with a view to its symbolic significance in contemporary culture, in a loosely episodic series of poems. Without a central consciousness, these poems render views from both sides, the Italian and the Austro-Hungarian. The poems form part of the last section in a volume entitled *Tropen* (1998), which provides a combination of historical reflections and poetic meditations 'on the sublime,' thus the subtitle. Indeed, Schrott's depiction of the war in the archetypically sublime landscape of the Alps sometimes seems to render concrete Kant's conception of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*, according to which the incapacity of the mind to apprehend the full significance of an object engenders a deep-reaching affective response. However, finding words for this affect becomes difficult, if not outright impossible, as Schrott seems to imply. This becomes apparent, for instance, in the following description of a bombardment, which must rely heavily on metaphor and the typographical rendering of fragmentation in order to express its subject:

FÜR DEN rest der nacht des 18. Mai
war der sattel
zwischen Col Santo und Col Santino
*Domberg* wie er hieß
das niemandsland des windes
und der granaten
die breschen schlugen in ihn
schutt an der mauer eines himmels
der herabbrach auf den berg
und die fresken der wolken bloßlegte (191)4

"Gebirgsfront 1916-18" is divided into three sections, each with an epigraph from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and there are numerous references in the individual poems especially to the Inferno – very appropriate in view of the Alpine rock faces, glaciers, and avalanches they describe. These intertextual references create an emotional distance which balances the empathy and sometimes even pathos of the poems, thus adding to a range of responses to the war.

Intertextuality as expressed for instance in numerous references to Georg Trakl, is also the hallmark of a cycle entitled "Der Erste Weltkrieg" by the German poet Thomas Kling, included in his volume *Fernhandel* (Long Distance Trading), published in 1999. Kling, who died in 2005 at the age of 48, was an experimental poet known for performance poetry and sound installations. In comparison to much of his other work, "Der Erste Weltkrieg" is only moderately experimental, rendering fragmented chains of associations with the places (especially Verdun) and memorabilia of the war, like sepia-tinted photographs. The poems work in two ways, recontextualizing these items while also lifting them out of the historical to meld them with the contemporary, as for instance in the several almost flippant evocations of a live media coverage of events by "CNN Verdun." Kling's intention in the First World War poems is archeological, yet the poems also foreground the struggle to find a poetic form for the horrors of war. Kling thus continues the formal experiments of the

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4 For the rest of the night of 18th May/ the saddle/ between Col Santo and Col Santino/ Domberg, as it was called/ was the no man's land of the wind/ and the shells/ which breached it/ rabble on the wall of a sky/which broke down upon the mountain/ and laid bare the frescos of the clouds (my translation).
German expressionist poets who wrote about their experience of the First World War in a fragmented, yet extremely concentrated style, like for instance August Stramm and other poets grouped around Herwarth Walden's expressionist serial Der Sturm. Such avant-garde poems, incidentally, are almost entirely missing from the English language poetry of the First World War, and it is interesting to see that these differences still seem to be reflected in the contemporary poetry I am dealing with. Here is Kling's description, toying with conceptions of the photographic image, of how a sister lives with the memory of her brother's death in the war:

\[\textit{der kopf des bruders im kopf} \text{ wird ihr, in einigen monaten, zerschilfert zu platten.}
\text{und immer tritt der schwester, nie gesehen, die kugel in den ältern bruder ein.}
\text{und über jahrzehnte wieder aus. Auf innerlich durchsichtig gewordener platte.}\]

Carol Ann Duffy's \textit{1914: Poetry Remembers} places poems and extracts from memoirs of the First World War as chosen by contemporary poets alongside pieces written by these poets, in many cases originally for the anthology and in response to their choices. The First World War texts themselves include international examples by Apollinaire, Akhmatova, Ungaretti, Benn and Trakl, yet there are also poems like Yeats' "The Second Coming," written in 1919 under the impression of the war and the revolution in Russia. The contemporary poems thus represent examples of intertextuality, also in the narrower sense of the term used by Gérard Genette. At the beginning, there is Duffy's own "Unseen," a poem on separation and the dying of love inspired by Owen's "The Send-Off;" at the end there is her "Last Post," written upon the death of Britain's last veteran of the First World War, its title referring to the bugle call used at British ceremonies to remember the dead in war. The epigraph from Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," surely one of the most forceful anti-war poems ever written, sets the tone for Duffy's retrospect on a war 'long past,' yet whose images of "mud" and mechanized slaughter are still vivid in the British collective imagination:

\begin{quote}
\textit{In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,}
\textit{He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.}
\text{If poetry could tell it backwards, true, begin}
\text{that moment shrapnel scythed you to the stinking mud …}
\text{but you get up, amazed, watch bled bad blood}
\end{quote}

5 A most recent volume by Canadian Sean Howard, entitled \textit{The Photographer's Last Picture} (Gaspe- reau Press 2016), was not available to me when writing this essay. In the author's words, the book consists of "a series of experimental reflections in prose and poetry on 20 photographs from World War I" (private e-mail). Thanks to Sherrill Grace for bringing this to my attention!

6 "In her head her brother's head is flaked away in a few months into plates, and for the sister the bullet is forever entering, unseen, her older brother, and exiting again over decades on a [photographic] plate that has become transparent inside her" (transl. by Karen Leeder). For a detailed comparison of Kling and Schrott and a discussion of the aspect of 'historicity' in their First World War poems, the reader is referred to Leeder's 2004 essay.

7 For most scholars (cf. Broich and Pfister 1985), 'intertextuality' is the generic term used to refer to the presence of a text in another text. For Genette, "intertextuality," defined as a "relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts" (1) is one of the five categories of "transtextuality," i.e. "[…] all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (1997 [1982], 1). 'Intertextuality' is the most explicit category, comprising quotes, allusions or even plagiarism (cf. 2). Other categories which apply here are "metatextuality," a text's often critical reference to another text without explicitly mentioning it (cf. 4), and "hypertextuality," when a text is taken as a template by another, in imitation, parody or adaptation (cf. 5-6).
run upwards from the slime into its wounds;
see lines and lines of British boys rewind
back to their trenches, kiss the photographs from home –
mothers, sweethearts, sisters, younger brothers
not entering the story now
to die and die and die.
Dulce – No – Decorum – No – Pro patria mori.
You walk away. (Duffy 2014, 112)

"Last Post" is like a war film rewinding in fast motion, as it were: all the dead re-
vive, pick up their rifles and return home, "released from History" (113). The poem
goes on to mention what would have happened to the thousands of young men had
they not died in the war, "love, work, children, talent, English beer, good food" (113).
A "poet," too, who may be identified as Wilfred Owen, has been "released from His-
tory," and from the sad task of writing about the deaths of the soldiers; he may "tuck
away his pocket-book and smile" (113).

"If poetry could truly tell it backwards,/ then it would" (113): "Last Post" is a self-
admitted fantasy, a piece of wishful thinking. Ultimately, it acknowledges the fact that
history is irreversible, and that we shall have to live with the memory of wars like that
of 1914-18. Poetry cannot turn back the wheel, it "makes nothing happen," to cite
Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1994, 248). However, Duffy's poem seems to
remind us that it is important, all the same, to have such fantasies, and to cling to the
belief that there may always be alternatives to the 'inevitable,' and possibilities for
things to work out differently – if not regarding the past, then the future.

The contributions to Duffy's anthology connect the past and the present, either by
engaging in poetic dialogues with war poets like Rupert Brooke, Ivor Gurney, Wilfred
Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, or by dealing with the sites of First World War battles,
like Paul Muldoon's commemoration of Gallipoli ("Dromedaries and Dung Beetles")
or Sean Borodale's "High Wood. 15th September 1916," which is coupled with one of
the most grimly humorous soldiers' songs from the First World War, about the men
"Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire." Several pieces take First World War poems as a
point of departure for addressing contemporary conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. A
memorable example here is Imtiaz Dharker's "A Century Later," on a schoolgirl shot
by Taliban, clearly inspired by the case of Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala
Yousafzai. The title of that poem's match, Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth," and
the notion of a 'lost generation' evoked by Owen reinforce the later poem's message,
providing a bitter summary of Dharker's theme. Wilfred Owen is also the point of
reference for what is the most explicitly intertextual poem in the collection, Billy
Collins's "Futility," here quoted in full:

John Donne tells the sun where to go,
Blake's flower is busy counting its steps,
and nothing like it
are the eyes of Shakespeare's girl,
but this one over France
is as real as the soldier's body lying there –
not a metaphor this time,
unless the sun is the court of last appeal.
And what we call the speaker
is really young Owen saying

his hinged poem, which quickly slips
from hope to a knot of a question

then swings us back to the title
that we knew from the start,

a thorn we carried through the poem,
but takes us still by surprise.

If only he knew that in world wars
we are only up to number II

and have a long way to go
before we show our final colors on a torn flag. (Duffy 2014, 68-69)

In Wilfred Owen's "Futility," the speaker, a frontline subaltern officer like Owen himself, commands that the body of a soldier be moved "into the sun." This soldier is dead or dying, whether from wounds or maybe even from the cold is not made clear. In any case, however, the speaker's hope that "the kind old sun" can restore the body to life is futile, merely expressing his helplessness. In the second part of the poem, the notion of 'futility' widens beyond this individual act to refer to a general lack of purpose or meaning. Without the sun, there would be no life on earth, yet what has been the good of it, the speaker asks, if the story of humankind, the "clay [grown] tall," has led to "this," i.e. to war and destruction. Would it not have been better, therefore, if "fatuous sunbeams" had never troubled to wake "a cold star" from its "sleep" (Owen 1985, 135)?

Collins builds on the significance of the sun in Owen's poem, first referring to earlier well-known literary examples. In contrast to the rhetorical usages by Donne, Blake and Shakespeare, however, the sun is a 'real' presence in Owen, and from the pressing 'reality' of the situation depicted in his poem there arises a desperate statement about a world at war. Collins evokes the response of a present-day reader; he summarizes the internal development of Owen's poem, reminding us of the shift in the meaning of its title, from the futile attempt at reviving a dead or dying soldier to the futility of all life on earth in face of a history of wars. Collins is as bitter as Owen: in spite of two world wars, mankind has still not learned this lesson. Most likely, the story of man will continue to be a story of wars and violence until we may eventually come to our senses and recognize what 'being human' (or showing our "final color") should really mean. Until then, however, how much more violence, suffering and destruction tearing humanity's "flag"?

Irony and the elegiac blend in Elaine Feinstein's commemoration of Isaac Rosenberg, later included in a collection of poetic Portraits (2015) of personalities from Raymond Chandler, Joseph Roth and Edith Piaf to Louis Armstrong. Rosenberg, who was also a visual artist, is now widely regarded as the finest English poet of the war beside Owen. He was the son of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, and he grew up in poverty in London's East End. Unlike most of the other major British First World War poets, who were middle or upper middle class, he served not as an officer but as a private soldier. Feinstein's poem is entitled "April Fool's Day," as Rosenberg was killed on 1 April 1918, in a foolish war, as the title suggests, and indeed the first line of the poem asks the question: "Does anyone know what it was all for?" Feinstein's
poem thus reflects the dominant narrative about the First World War in British cultural memory, that of disillusionment and the "obscurity of any purpose" (Stevenson 2013, 195). "April Fool's Day" runs through Rosenberg's biography, drawing the picture of an anti-hero baffled by his own participation in the war. Its third and final stanza, as quoted below, reverberates with characteristic images and motives of First World War poetry, as well as with echoes of Rosenberg's own poems (in particular "August 1914" and "Break of Day in the Trenches"):

You died on April Fool's Day on patrol, beyond the corpses lying in the mud, carrying up the line a barbed wire roll – useless against gun fire – with the blood and flesh of Death in the Spring air. Yours was a life half lived, if even that, and the remains of it were never found. But we remember your iron honey gold. Your cosmopolitan rat. (Duffy 2014, 75; original emphasis)

John Greening's To the War Poets contains a number of pieces addressing the poets of the First World War, including Rosenberg, Blunden, Sassoon, and others. In addition, there are Greening's own translations of poems by Georg Heym, Ernst Stadler, Georg Trakl and August Stramm. The pieces on English First World War poets are associated with places on the Western Front; indeed, as Greening notes in his "Acknowledgments," many of these "verse letters," as he refers to them, were drafted on battlefield trips. In the poem "To John McCrae," author of "In Flanders Fields," this gives rise to a satirical depiction of modern battlefield tourism: "[…] Here, your poem./There, parked tankers. The coach/driver is pacing, tie over/beer belly. No larks./Just the passing of traffic./And no chance of a poppy that isn't paper or plastic" (26). The natural scenery along the former frontline calls to mind the First World War poet whose preferred technique was to evoke the horrors of war by contrast with the natural scene: "Dear Blunden, here's a pastoral you'll appreciate" ("To Edmund Blunden," 29). Like some of the contemporary poems in Duffy, Greening, too, comments on earlier and later conflicts, thereby illustrating the persistence of war and violence through the ages. Above all, however, Greening explores forms of remembrance and the cultural memory of the war, as for instance in the poem "To Julian Grenfell: Sanctuary Wood:" "Whatever your chances of survival as/a poet, those scenes on Brighton Pier/In Oh, What a Lovely War! remain/your legacy. […]/ […] Your view of Ypres as one 'big picnic'/shapes our view of it as a slaughter" (54). Oh What a Lovely War, a musical comedy by Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Company first performed in 1963, satirizes the stupidity of the war to the tunes of its popular songs. It was made into a highly successful film by Richard Attenborough in 1969, and both the original play and the film have significantly contributed to the popular image of futility and absurdity which the war has especially in Britain. Julian Grenfell, a member of the landed gentry and a professional officer, was killed in France in May 1915. His poem "Into Battle" celebrates the war as a great outdoor adventure; in a letter to his mother he speaks of it as being like "a big picnic," but "without the objectlessness of a picnic" (to Ethel Grenfell, 24 October 1914; qtd. in Mosley 1976, 239).

8 See Silvia Mergenthal's contribution in the present volume.
Greening's poem on Rosenberg renders the theme of passage and of the liminality of war as the troop-ship is crossing the Channel to France. Alluding to Rosenberg's deprived social background, to pencilled drafts of poems and perhaps also to Rosenberg's several pencilled self-portraits as a soldier, it reflects on the impossibility of faithfully representing the actual experience of the war:

The white cliffs are like all the paper they could not have –
the men who were not rich enough to be officers –
and that steady grey horizon is a never-ending pencil-lead.

The channel is shifting with misty shapes of things that were said
but never written, for lack of paper, for want of pencils,
and beneath it currents and sands of what they really meant. ("To Isaac Rosenberg," 20)

Greening's lines are reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's emphasis on the ambiguities of language in "Burnt Norton," where Eliot, too, seems to evoke images of the trenches on the Western Front: "[...] Words strain,/Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,/Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,/ Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,/Will not stay still" (1963, 194). In the last resort, Greening's poem to Rosenberg seems to imply that, in spite of the poet's endeavors to create empathy through the reader's imaginative attempt to understand, the individual truth of the war experience will always remain inaccessible to others.

The poems discussed in this essay are 'spaces of memory' (cf. Assmann 2011 [1999]), reflecting and perpetuating aspects of the cultural memory of the First World War. In their different forms and styles, they also re-enact the search for expression that characterizes the works of the First World War poets themselves. Their dialogic relationship with these works creates a decided self-consciousness, yet this self-consciousness, too, was shared by their forebears, who were struggling with their dual role as soldiers and poets, and with obsolete images of war in the dominant discourse. What emerges, therefore, in the works of the contemporary poets is an interplay between the past and the present, and between tradition and innovation. This interplay is more pronounced in present-day poetry on the war, it seems, than in the numerous historical novels which have also appeared, especially in English-speaking countries, since the 1970s. In general, these tend to show fewer intertextual references to the 'classic' (anti-)war novels of the late 1920s and 1930s, but are rather indebted to cultural-historical studies like Paul Fussell's influential The Great War and Modern Memory (1975) and others. In this context, it may appear as symptomatic that the best-known recent novel on the war, Pat Barker's Regeneration (1991), was inspired by the lives of poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. The 'dialogue' between the poetry that emerged from the war experience itself and its contemporary progeny may thus be said to constitute a unique way in which poetry has remembered, and still remembers, the war.

Works Cited


World War I Poetry - Veterans Day, November 11, 2018, marked 100 years since the end of World War I, which lasted from July 28, 1914, to November... World War I, also known as The Great War and The War to End All Wars, left more than 16 million soldiers and civilians dead, destabilized the European economy, and caused a large-scale shift of power on the international stage that would ultimately become one of the causes of World War II. Among the great figures of the war were its documentarians - the poets who served in the war as soldiers or witnessed its effects in their time and responded with their personal accounts. Lawrence’s First World War poetry doesn’t fit easily into any category but his own. Notwithstanding the fluidity of the poetic world pre-war, there is no doubt that high modernism in this formative stage, and as it developed throughout the First World War and beyond, inhere in particular poets: Yeats, Pound, H.D., Eliot. While this strand is predominantly American in origin, the émigré or outsider nature of these writers signalled their commitment to a European rather than an American tradition. Poetry by Heart has compiled this showcase selection of poetry to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. There are plenty of anthologies of First World War poetry in existence. POET, cast your careful eye Where the beached songs of summer lie, White fell the wave that splintered The wreck where once you wintered, White as the snow that lair Your freezing hair. Captain, here you took your wine, The trees at ease in the orchard-line, Bonny the errand-boy bird Whistles the song you once heard, While you traverse the wire, Autumn will hold her fire. The poetry of the First World War is often regarded as peculiarly English, but many of the soldier-poets had a conflicted relation to Englishness: Sorley was Anglo-Scottish, Rosenberg and Sassoon (on his father’s side) were Jewish, Ledwidge was Irish, while Owen, Jones and Thomas could trace their recent family history to Wales. Robert Graves observed The war poet and war poetry, were terms first used in World War I and perhaps peculiar to it. From Anglo-Saxon times to the Boer War, war poetry in English was written largely by civilians and did not have a clearly defined identity; with the extraordinary outpouring between 1914 and 1918, it established itself as a. In her 1917 essay Contemporary British War Poetry, Music and Patriotism, Marion Scott World War One more than any other war is associated with the so-called war poets. The poems written by men such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke, amongst others, is as poignant today as it was both during the war and immediately after it. World War Two did not produce such a flow of poetry targeted at the lifestyle of those who fought in the war. They put onto paper what many others thought. Sassoon wrote about the Gate and the men who marched through it to go and fight in the Battle of Ypres or in the battles that surrounded the town. There was no standard blueprint for a war poet even if the common perception is that they were all officers from a privileged background.