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“He’d seen it in the words of Owen and Brooke”: The Influence of Great War Poetry on Post-Millennium Soldier Poets

Abstract: To this day, the term “soldier poetry” is still predominantly associated in popular perception with the 1914–1918 trench poets, such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, or Isaac Rosenberg. And yet, the dawn of the new millennium, marked by the rise of the global War on Terror, saw a significant revival of the genre in Britain. One of the most noteworthy indicators of this is John Jeffcock’s anthology *Heroes* (2011), which has collected a hundred poems written by British soldiers who fought in recent conflicts – Iraq and Afghanistan in particular. While these poems are framed within the shifting military, socio-demographical, and political dimensions of war in our time, they simultaneously exhibit strong roots within the context of a specific literary tradition that originated in the First World War. This article sets out to analyse a selection of poems from *Heroes*, focusing on the way these poets construct a network of intertextual citations, borrowings, and allusions to connect their texts – quite deliberately – with the much acclaimed generation of poets from the Great War. The article argues that, by doing so, the poets facilitate the transposition of a set of broader myths and emotions that are typically associated with the Great War onto the new (con)text, thereby adding new literary, cultural, and social meanings to the texts.

Keywords: contemporary soldier poetry, the Great War, the War in Afghanistan, intertextuality, mythical transposition

1. Introduction

In the first two decades of the new millennium, there has been a significant resurgence in the publication of British soldier poetry. There are several online blogs that feature poems written by contemporary soldiers, such as *All Poetry*,

War-Poetry LiveJournal, or *Leaves and Pages*.¹ Soldier poems have been posted on social media, twittered, and circulated via email (Kiesel para. 6; “British Soldier’s Scathing Poem” para. 1). Other poems have also appeared in newspapers and magazines, albeit only occasionally.² Surely, the internet has become a major distributor for that kind of poetry. However, the bulk of contemporary soldier poems stems from a handful of seminal anthologies. One of the most noteworthy examples of this is the former British Army Captain John Jeffcock’s *Heroes: 100 Poems from the New Generation of War Poets*.³ The poems in *Heroes* were written by members of the British Armed Forces who fought in the Falklands (1982), Northern Ireland (1969–1998),⁴ Bosnia (1992–1995), Iraq (2003–2011), and, most prominently, Afghanistan (2001–2021).⁵ In *The Telegraph*, former Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, who was also engaged in the editing process, advertises *Heroes* as “a humbling project, allowing the voices of those whose lives have been changed by war to speak to us with the raw directness of feeling and experience” (qtd. in “Modern War Poetry” para. 6). And yet, despite the poets’ undeniable focus on personal “feeling and experience,” these poems are not *sui generis*. As already indicated by the subtitle of the collection, they set out to rejuvenate a literary tradition that is not exclusively but is most commonly associated with the First World War.

This article explores the connection between this “new generation of war poets” and their well-known predecessors from the First World War, whose lyrical accounts of the trench war continue to influence and shape British memories until the present day. As I intend to show, the poems in *Heroes* often bear distinct markings of reference to the Great War canon, both explicit and implicit: ranging from the naming of specific authors to the presence of certain features of poetry that either originated in or took on new significance between 1914–1918. In so doing, the poems unravel a network of intertextual motifs, poetic tropology, and lyrical modes traceable to the absorption of the so-called poetry of the Western Front while referring to other contexts. While the old-style romantic eulogies of the Georgian poets who wrote at the beginning of the Great War – Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley, Lawrence Binyon, etc. – maintain some influence, contemporary soldier poems show themselves particularly drawn to the unapologetic realism of poets like Owen and Sassoon. Former SAS Officer Theodor Knell, who contributed a number of poems to *Heroes*, underscores this impression when telling *The Independent*: “Most of us [sc. the soldier poets] have read our Wilfred Owen, our Siegfried Sassoon” (qtd. in Duerden, para. 7).

Given the fact that remembering World War I has arguably become a fundamental aspect of the national identity of all of these poets, their tendency to borrow from the poetic vernacular of the Great War poets may seem little surprising. Nonetheless, considering the striking political, military-strategical, and topographical disparities between the First World War and the conflicts of the present day, the poets’ distinct use of Great War templates warrants further discussion. Therefore,

this article pays attention not only to the way these poems integrate the poetic language of the First World War into their depictions of wars that are in many respects different from large-scale mass-slaughters of 1914–1918, but also discusses the broader implications of the intertext for the wider meta-textual efficacy of the poems. I argue that the poetry of the First World War has not only become one of the most readily available linguistic repositories for contemporary soldier poets but, by aligning themselves with the Great War tradition, the poets also enhance the socio-cultural authority of their texts within their wider framework of war remembrance in the present day. Yet, in order to be able to properly evaluate the way intertext adds an additional layer of meaning to the poems at hand, it seems helpful to establish a brief intertextual catalogue of the discursive practices of the new soldier poets, based on the analysis of chosen poems from *Heroes*. The article conducts a close-reading of the poems "Courage" (written by an anonymous British Army Major who served in the Royal Artillery Regiment), "Remembering" (by Corporal Cameron Jowett of the Mercian Infantry), "The Journey" (by Dave Stenhouse, a Sergeant in the Light Brigade Combat Service), and "The Last Supper" (by Captain James Jeffrey of the Queen's Royal Lancers). All of these authors have served in Afghanistan at some point during the last two decades. However, to broaden the scale of the analysis, the article also references a selection of other soldier poems that pertain to similar issues.

2. In-Between Rupert Brooke's Patriotism and Wilfred Owen's Poetry of Pity

In the anonymous "Courage," the speaker's reflection about the legitimacy of young men's dying on the battlefield of Afghanistan is accompanied by a clash of intertexts. Out on the battlefield, he begins reminiscing the "words of Owen and Brooke, the toil of war / and the life it took" (55), thus juxtaposing two of the most acclaimed representatives of antagonistic literary ideologies that formed during the First World War: i.e., Rupert Brooke's perception of the war as patriotic and glorious versus Wilfred Owen's poetry of terror and pity. The allusion to the opposing lyrical worlds of Owen and Brooke sets the stage for a poem that is primarily marked by an inherent undecidability on how to interpret the nature of war. The speaker navigates back and forth between his first-hand observation on the battlefield in Afghanistan and pre-existing scripts. The second verse continues the Owen/Brooke dichotomy: whilst starting off with an emphatic tribute to "Brave young men in far-off lands," the concept of bravery is instantly toppled by the insinuation of battlefield-anxiety as implied in the phrase "praying to keep their legs and hands" and the oxymoron "exhausted courage" (55).

The impact of Owen looms up in multiple ways during the first half of the poem and is furthermore bolstered by a series of embedded allusions to some of

Owen's most famous poems. The speaker repeatedly invokes the myth of doomed youth in relation to the war in Afghanistan: "Young Tommy Atkins," "brave young men," "for one so young a / dreadful cost" (55–57). In addition to that, he borrows Owen's imagery of toxic gas from "Dulce et Decorum Est" in order to illustrate the angst-ridden atmosphere of the battlefield: "A constant air of toxic fear, the unseen threat ever near" (55). By extension, the way he describes the "rattle" (56) of the machine-guns echoes Owen's use of onomatopoeia in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (1917): "only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" (1965a, 44). One might even go as far as to characterise the middle section of the poem as little more than a wild paraphrase of Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," in which seeing the plight of the battlefields makes the speaker wonder about the morality and legitimacy of the war. Reminiscent of Owen's poem, "Courage" reaches its lyrical summit in the description of the painful death of a young soldier on the battlefield. Again, there is no exultation, only the "dreadful [...] scream" (56) and blind panic of a young soldier in agony. These are brought to life in the speaker's unflinchingly vivid depiction of the protagonist's dying breath:

Then the dreadful sound of his mate's scream, that one day will
haunt his once sweet dreams,
Young Tommy Atkins has lost a leg, "I wanted my mum" he hears
him beg. (56)

As in Owen's palimpsest, the sight of the slow death of his comrade makes the speaker scrutinise the reasonableness of battlefield sacrifice. However, formulated as a question, the verse: "Is it worth it, this human cost" (56), lacks the matter-of-factness of Owen's scathing condemnation of the prevailing patriotic doctrine.

As opposed to the trench poets' vilification of the patriotic Victorian/Edwardian "lie" (Owen 1965b, 66), "Courage" depicts the supposed moral fibre of War on Terror as simultaneously more complex and more opaque than ever, exceeding the relatively simple virtue of fighting for proverbial "King and Country":

And then he thinks of Tommy's wife and wonders if it's worth
the price,
Is it about defending against evil creed, or drugs or money
or human greed,
To make this country a better place, or defend corruption
and avarice? (56)

Here, the speaker ponders several socio-political subtexts of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, such as humanitarianism, liberation, capitalist ventures, and corrupt politics; and, similar to poets like Owen and Sassoon, the verses reveal significant disbelief in the political and ideological backgrounds of the campaigns.

There is no doubt that Owen, whose “words” the speaker recollects at the outset of the poem, have imprinted heavily on the poet’s consciousness. And yet, the conclusion seems to abandon the previous alignment with Owen’s uncensored realism, being instead more evocative of Brooke’s laudations to the grand-sacrifices of the British, which the speaker recalls equally in the beginning of the poem:

Innocence, youth and friends he’s lost; for one so young a
a dreadful cost.
No medals or money he will expect, just what he merits,
your respect.
For he has done this for you and I, to keep us safe in this
precious isle,
And when it comes to next November, be sure to ponder and
the lost remember. (57)

Praising, to an extent, the unrecognised heroism of the British soldier, the ending of poem appears somewhat anachronistic. The speaker gets past his previous wonderings about the greater causes behind the soldiers’ agony by embarking on a well-trodden path: interjecting the notion of fighting for the safety of Britain and urging the reader to honour the fallen in November, which is a reference to the annual Remembrance Day ceremonies. In effect, the poem reimagines the death of its protagonist as a patriotic sacrifice. Like in Brooke’s “The Dead” (1915), the loss of innocence and youth seems to become more acceptable when viewed against the backdrop of a higher collective cause: “For he has done this for you and I, to keep us safe in this precious isle” (57).⁶ In that sense, the speaker’s noisy admiration for the selfless deeds of British soldiers on the battlefield – the display of affection rather than pity – effectively supplants the sinister resonance of “the words of Owen” (55).

The impact of Georgian poets like Brooke reflects occasionally in other poems. Cameron Jowett, for instance, closes his poem “Remembering” (2011) by quoting Lawrence Binyon’s conclusion of “Ode of Remembrance”:⁷

I try my best to think about why they were such good friends,
I think about what I would say if we could meet again,
But I won’t tell you what I’d say, it’s ‘between me and them.’

We will remember them. (Jowett 157)

Jowett maintains the patriotic flavour of the template, dedicating the poem to the memory of his fallen comrades, “Sandy,” “Wrighty,” and “Hilly,” and praising their sacrifice, bravery, and fighting spirit (156). As in “For the Fallen,” there is no regret, just a deep sense of affection for the soldiers’ dutiful sacrifice. This is underlined,

amongst other things, by the speaker conjecturing: “He tried hard whatever he did; he’d always go the extra mile / but it’s bye for now young comrade, until I meet my ‘fate’ / just promise me one thing Tom, you’ll meet me at the gate” (156). Furthermore, the repeated references to “St Peter’s Gate” (156) support the poem’s effort to imbue the soldiers’ death with deeper heroic meaning, exhibiting a firm conviction in the righteousness of the War on Terror.

One of the most distinct counter-narratives to the Georgians’ enduring belief in the meaningfulness of sacrifice was the myth of a generation of doomed youth, which has been etched into the British national memory by Owen’s celebrated “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” Admittedly, the notion of doom, which usually requires a kind of intangible force and a sense of involuntariness, might have less foundation in the reality of a Britain that has moved on from the military draft to having a professional army of volunteers. However, the motif routinely emerges in the texts of the new soldier poets: “Is it worth it, this human cost, young blood spilt and / innocence lost,” (56) wonders, for example, the speaker of “Courage.” Dave Stenhouse succinctly underpins this impression in “The Journey” (2011), a ballad about the death of a young soldier in the Afghan desert:

The young soldier you see
Has been cut down in his prime
Hit by an explosion
He hasn’t got much time
[...]
He’s crying for his mother,
Daughter and wife
Far away from his family
Only moments left of his young life. (84–85)

Similarly to Owen’s “The Young Soldier” (1915), the incessant emphasis on the soldier’s youthfulness, which is repeated no less than four times throughout the poem, seems almost obtrusive; yet, the idea of squandered youth serves to intensify the poem’s overarching sense of tragedy, and places this new generation of British soldiers crucially in the tradition of the much revered young men who followed the country’s call to arms in the war of 1914–1918.

3. The Use of Traditionalised Imagery and Symbolism

Along the lines of the grand-narrative of doomed youth, the poppy, with its connotations of slaughter and remembrance, turned into one of the most striking and persistent symbols of the First World War (Bellamy 300). As demonstrated by Isaac Rosenberg’s in “Break of Day in the Trenches” (1916), the Flanders poppy

became a telling symbol for the colossal bloodshed during the war: "What quaver – what heart aghast? / Poppies whose roots are in man's veins / Drop, and are ever dropping" (2004, 128). It was equally identified with commemoration, a connection which John McCrae established as early as in 1915 in his famous poem "In Flanders Fields": "In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row, / That mark our place" (173). Whilst, interestingly, the literature of the Second World War became almost entirely devoid of this symbol (Bellamy 301),⁸ contemporary soldier poets have recently re-introduced the poppy in the context of Afghanistan, where a different type of poppy is a characteristic feature of the landscape as well. "Courage" harks back to the poppy as a metaphor for bloodshed when metonymizing the battlefield as a poppy farm: "Adorned like some medieval men at arms, to run the gauntlet in the poppy farms" (55). Even though the Afghan opium poppy does not feature the blood-red colour of its European relative, by drawing deliberately on the pre-established literary connection between poppies and death, the speaker turns the Afghan battlefield, yet again, into the locus of futile tragedy. This notion of senseless slaughter is further emphasised by the use of the idiom "to run the gauntlet" (55), which accentuates the idea of soldiers marching into certain, unnecessary death.

Furthermore, Corporal Danny Martin, who served two tours to Iraq during Operation Telic, returns to the poppy as an emblem of remembrance in his anti-war poem "Lessons" (2008), published on the *Leaves and Pages* blog on Remembrance Day 2012. The poem sets out to desecrate the symbolic value of the poppy, turning it into little more than a postposterous cliché of sentimentalised traditions:

Do away with medals
Poppies and remembrance parades
Those boys were brave, we know
But look where it got them. (para. 2)

Albeit not denying the bravery of the men who have died for their nation, both in the past and in the present, the speaker disparages the poppy as part of an (over-)romanticised remembrance cult that tends to undermine the tragic aspect of war – of young men being "reduced to line after perfect line / Of white stones" (para. 2).⁹ Martin twists McCrae's idea of the remembrance poppy and directs his ire at the civil sector and their perpetuated belief in commemorative propaganda, which may prompt us to recall Sassoon's lambasting over whitewash-remembrance practices in later poems such as "On Passing the New Menin Gate" (1927) or "At the Cenotaph" (1933). Against the grain of so-called "poppy fascism,"¹⁰ the speaker of Martin's poem reminds us that "kids [...] haven't yet learned / That bullets don't make little red holes [here alluding to the wearing of poppies on a garment] / they rip and smash and gouge / And drag the world's dirt behind them" (para. 2). He thereby debunks the poppy as a dangerous euphemism for the physical and psycho-emotional wounds inflicted by war.

Nevertheless, although perceptions of war as useless slaughter grew implacably during the Great War, the era also saw, as Dawn Bellamy notes, the reformulation of Christian myth, particularly the old theme of sacrifice and crucifixion (301). For example, in his late 1918 poem “Spring Offensive,” Owen identifies the presence of “thousands” of Christ-incarnates on the battlefields. Halfway through the poem he echoes the words of Christ at the Last Supper, when saying “earth set sudden cups / In thousands for their blood,” before letting his soldiers be sacrificed “on that last high place” (1965c, 52). The image of soldiers dying on a high ground might also be read as a reference to the hill Golgotha, which the Gospel of Mark identifies as the place of the crucifixion of Christ (*The Bible* Mark 15, 22–24). The crucifixion trope turned into commonplace analogy. As Hilda D. Spear puts it in her study of the poetry of the First World War, *Remembering, We Forget* (1979):

The soldier victims were identified with Jesus; His lot was theirs: they suffered agony, bore their crosses, frequently endured a cruel and undeserved death; the older generation were identified with God and the Pharisees; they believed in the need for sacrifice and by their acts enforced it, yet it seemed not to touch them personally. (101–102)

Again, contemporary soldier poets have demonstrates the continued relevance of the biblical imagery of sacrifice and crucifixion, such as James Jeffrey in his elegy to an unknown bomb disposal engineer titled “The Last Supper” (2011). As already suggested in the title, the poem allegorises its protagonist, who has already died but is implied by means of apostrophic address (“you”), as Jesus. The first stanza continues the title’s allusion to the last supper, describing a group of soldiers dining “[s]ecure beside the bomb-blast walls” (170). Putting himself into the position of a disciple, the speaker perpetuates the allegory of the story of Christ’s passion: from bearing the cross, which is referenced during the second stanza: “I remember your humour the polite bearing / Explaining that insane job with zeal / Each day spending hours defusing bombs / Lying on dirt tracks, staring through sweat at wires,” to the protagonist’s ultimate (self-)sacrifice in the course of “protecting others”: “All the way to where you could not turn back / From blinding hot blast demanding sacrifice / Taking away the scruffy cheerful calm” (170). However, the last verse, singled out from the preceding quartet verse paragraphs by a blank space, exposes a rather ambiguous stance on the idea of sacrifice. Emphasized through their position as a coda, the speaker’s final words: “Leaving another picture in a morose mosaic” (170), emerge like a saddened restatement rather than a benign conclusion of the preceding homage to the saviour-like stoicism of the soldier(s). That is to say that the ultimate insinuation of deceased soldiers as nothing more than another number in the statistics contrasts with the biblical salvation trope, foregrounding instead the futile aspect of military conflict.

4. Pastoral Recourses: Horror and Romanticism

The affinity between the new soldier poets and their Great War predecessors further reflects in the adoption of certain more general lyrical modes of representation. One of the most characteristic examples of this is the somewhat counterintuitive juxtaposition of the poets’ depictions of realistic horror and neo-Romanticist imagery in the context of the battle. Although the soldier poets of the modern age began to concentrate more closely on the gruesome actualities of war and its effects on the individual, their texts often reveal a strong penchant for rewriting Romantic concepts in the context of battle. The use of pastoral technique became a somewhat oxymoronic feature of industrial war literature. Being convinced that the ‘myth of the War’ was at least in part the result of it being written in the English Pastoral tradition, Paul Fussell comments on this inherent contradiction in his chapter on “Arcadian Resources”: “If the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral. Since war takes place outdoors and always within nature, its symbolic status is that of the ultimate anti-pastoral” (231). Yet, every so often, the descriptions of the Great War poets appear to withstand the ultimately anti-pastoral nature of war.

Typically, the Great War poets’ detections of beauty amidst the bedlam of battle took two principal forms. The first was the sublime. Elaborating on the 1st-century philosopher Longinus’ initial discussion of sublimity, the sublime has been defined by early-modern theorists as an artistic effect: a complementary, and sometimes an antithetical, category to beauty. In difference to critics like Joseph Addison or Immanuel Kant, who focused more on the overwhelming sensation of magnitude, scale, and incomprehensibility, Edmund Burke, in his classical theory of aesthetic sensualism, emphasises the idea of sublimity as a somewhat antithetical pleasure derived from “danger and pain” (27). Inspired by John Dennis’ description of the sublime as “a delightful Horror, a terrible Joy” (qtd. in Ashfield and Bolla 59), Burke identified terror as “the ruling principle of the sublime” (41). In his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), he summarises this as follows: “When danger and pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving delight and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications [...] they are capable of producing delight [...] a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror” (27). Through his emphasis on “distance” and “modification,” Burke turns the sublime into a representational type – “a tribute to the power of mimetic art” (346), as Andrew Sanders puts it in *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (1994).¹¹ Following that, the soldier poets’ lyrical recollections of World War I often evince distinct traces of Burkean sublimity, unearthing a somewhat odd fascination with the terrors of the war. This is shown, for example, by Ivor Gurney’s description of a “strangely beautiful entry to war’s rout” (198) in “First Time In” (1916), or Owen’s oblique mesmerisation with the destructive forces of modern

war-technology in “Dulce et Decorum Est,” which manifests itself, amongst other things, in the speaker’s picturisation of the vapor of toxic gas as “thick green light, / As under a green sea” (55).

Secondly, to return to Fussell’s thesis, many trench poets seemed to watch out for a piece of Arcadia on the battlefields. In that sense, the poets’ falling back on pastoral modes of depiction also became a prominent expression of escapism, trying to drown out the noise of battle. Owen, for example, displays this in his appraisal of the spontaneous beauties of spring amidst the “superhuman inhumanities” (52) of the war in the aforementioned “Spring Offensive”; and some of the most telling examples of this derive, of course, from the pastoral meditations of Edward Thomas. Further adapting the lyrical catalogue of the Romanticists, the sudden appearance of birds turned into a popular motif of natural beauty on the battlefields, which is exemplified by poems such as Rosenberg’s “Returning, We Hear the Larks” (1914), Sassoon’s “Before the Battle” (1916), or Grenfell’s “Into Battle” (1915). In Rosenberg’s poem, the speaker returns to pastoral modes, contrasting chaos with quiet. The poem describes the battered soldiers’ trance-like enchantment with the calming song of larks:

Death could drop from the dark
 As easily as song –
 But song only dropped,
 Like a blind man’s dreams on the sand
 By dangerous tides;
 Like a girl’s dark hair, for she dreams no ruin lies there,
 Or her kisses where a serpent hides. (2012, 80)

Whilst birds have attained various connotations in literature – from Chaucer to Shakespeare – one might argue that Rosenberg’s mindful listening to the birds typifies particularly a recontextualization of the Romanticist tradition: for British Romantics, the song of bird became not only a “personification of the idea of spontaneous creativity” (Doggett 551), but also a symbol of liberation and salvation from the physical world, allowing the poet to explore themes of restriction, freedom, and spirituality. In that sense, reminiscent of, for example, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Skylark” (1820), Rosenberg’s speaker appears to seek temporary relief from the harrowing, physical reality of battle in the “unbodied joy,” the “unseen, but yet [...] shrill delight” of the birds’ song (Shelley 35).

Such bizarre, sometimes even sardonically-mannered pastoral recourses, becoming an element of either sublime sensation or longing for Arcadia, resound with similar poignancy from the works of the new generation of soldier poets. Aptly enough, of all of the British wars of the post-1945 era, the conflict that is perhaps most apt to evoke pastoral imagery in a more tangible connection to the battlefields is Northern Ireland. As a case in point, birdsong remains a popular means to

illustrate soldiers' desire for imaginary respite. For instance, in Lt. Colonel Roger Ayer's "Incident Report" (2011), which was inspired by the author's deployment in "The Troubles," the speaker likewise returns to the pastoral mode when balancing his portrayal of the drastic consequences of a "bomb's burst" (79) with a number of allusions to the pristine beauties of spring and the song of a bird:

We stopped, and getting clear
Of vehicle and headphone noise
I stood and listened to a bird that sang.
The notes rang
Quelled, and then dispelled
Clouds in my mind.

The sky, too, cleared and the bird sang on, while
The ground, green dressed,
With recent rain caressed,
Warmed in the sun's slow smile. (78)

Hyper-aware of his natural surroundings – the blue skies and green pastures of the Northern Irish landscape – the speaker configures an idyllic peacefulness within the desolation of the battle-zone. Once again, attentive listening to the soothing song of the birds constitutes a bucolic escape, counterbalancing the noise of the headphone, which, in this case, functions as an extension pipe to the turmoil of battle. And yet, by the time the reader hears the birds clearly, they are already gone: eclipsed by "the ops room telephone," "radio chatters, and shatters," "The ready engines roar," and, eventually, the smell of "Fresh / Dead flesh" (78–79) – which may remind us also of the fading song of the nightingale at the end of Keats' famous poem 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819), throwing the speaker back into a world of mortal existence.

Aside from pastoral escapism, contemporary soldier poetry likewise saw the return of the sublime as a prominent literary *topos*. For example, in "Daisy Cutters" (2009), Jeffcock metaphorically reworks bombs that are dropped during an airstrike in Iraq as "asteroids" and "stars [that] jump down and wreck the earth" (25):

Tomorrow is G+3
When we must cross the Rubicon of War
Tonight the stars jump down and wreck the Earth
Like Samson, blinded, or the fatal asteroids
That bring destruction to the worlds that will not change
It was tonight the Daisy Cutters fell.(25)¹²

Besides stressing the extra-terrestrial force of industrial weaponry, the speaker's use of stellar imagery reveals a somewhat cathartic attraction to the scene of

destruction; the supernatural power of the bombardment, absorbing all earthly physicality, engenders – to recycle Rosenberg’s words – a “strange joy” (2012, 80) that enthralls the speaker and captivates his gaze.

5. Mythical Transposition

Besides occasional references to other canonical texts of English literature,¹³ and the adoption of certain themes that have been more relevant in the poetry of the Second World War, such as the impact of war on romantic relationships, the poetry of the First World War remains undoubtedly one of the most important touchstones for soldier poets today. At first glance, the reasons for this may seem relatively straightforward: as already insinuated above, the poetry of the First World War has long become an indispensable constituent of English literature and retains a central place in the national memory. Moreover, as Robert Jeffcoate reminds us, a selection of poems from the Great War remains “a staple of the national curriculum [...] at least [since the 1960s]” (151).¹⁴ Jeffcoate even goes as far as to state that “[t]he poetry of the First World War may be virtually the only serious adult poetry many pupils encounter in the classroom” (152), which turns these texts into the most accessible resource for present-day soldier poets. By extension, contemporary culture has done much to construct and preserve the status of chosen war poets as potent symbols of a “cultural trauma” that – to cite Jeffrey Alexander’s definition of the concept – has left “inedible marks” upon the British national consciousness, “marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Building up to the grand centennial of the First World War, the last two centuries have seen yet another wave of historical publications on the subject – in literature, cinema, television, etc.

In line with that, also the unprecedented literary output of the First World War has been constantly reworked in contemporary memory. For instance, while almost entirely ignoring the soldier poets of World War II, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2012) dedicates a whole section to the “Voices from World War I” (Greenblatt and Abrams 24-27).¹⁵ There are numerous individual collections of Great War soldier poetry available on the market: Jon Stallworthy’s *Three Poets of the First World War* (2012),¹⁶ Time Kendall’s *Poetry of the First World War* (2014), or *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (2007) are just some noteworthy examples. Apart from the school curriculum, the poets’ position as “a sacred national text” (Motion xi) is underscored, amongst other things, by a memorial stone in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey, which features the names of the sixteen most memorable soldier poets of the Great War.¹⁷ Museums, such as the Imperial War Museum, have staged special exhibitions on Great War poetry on a regular basis (Lyon 4–5). Poets like Owen and Sassoon have repeatedly featured in recent (historical) fiction, as shown, for example, by the British novelist Pat Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy*

(1991–1995) and its film adaptation (1997), or Terence Davies' latest filmography of Siegfried Sassoon called *Benediction* (2021).¹⁸ Thus, given the fact that the current generation of soldier poets has been virtually brought up on the images of the Great War as conveyed in the poetry of Brooke, Owen, or Sassoon – not only in school, but also in various other cultural contexts – drawing on their poetic bequest might appear almost instinctive, if not habitual for them.

It is certainly important to understand the empirical manifestations that enable this close intertextual relationship between contemporary soldier poets and the poets of the Great War in order to gain deeper insights into the historical and imaginative consciousness of the poets, and to place them within the context of a broader cultural framework of remembrance. However, it might be even more important to evaluate the effects of this extensive, and sometimes slightly anachronistic network of intertextual referencing, and to interpret the way in which the intertext adds a new layer of meaning to the texts. Without doubt, remembering World War I has become an essential element of national identity not just for the soldier poets but also for many potential readers of contemporary soldier poetry. That being granted, recent reader-response-theories of intertextuality and adaptation provide additional insights into why contemporary poets might seek to connect their works – quite deliberately – with the Great War tradition: i.e., in an attempt to reshape and refocus the public memory of the so-called "New Wars"¹⁹ and to put the spotlight (back) on the sacrifices of soldiers in our times, the poets seem to not only adopt specific linguistic, semantic, or semiotic patterns that sprang from the poetry of that era; they also demonstrate a strong resolve to imbibe the durative cultural and historical legacy of the Great War generation of soldiers. This process of mythical transposition, as we might call it, can be explained best with regard to Linda Hutcheon's *Theory of Adaptation* (2006).

It might be generally wrong to use the terms "intertextuality" and "adaptation" interchangeably, as the latter is usually considered to be a more specific form of the former (J. Sanders 1; Hutcheon 8): "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works [...] with variation" (Hutcheon 7–8); and whilst certain poems may seem indeed very close to becoming mere adaptations, contemporary soldier poetry cannot be classified as adaptation in the proper sense of the word. Nevertheless, by examining the poems through Hutcheon's lens, particularly through her principle of "interpretive doubling," we can gain a deeper understanding of how the concept of mythical transfer operates. In her theory, Hutcheon moves beyond common fidelity theorems of adaption and characterises adaptations and appropriations quintessentially as an "ongoing dialogue with the past" that "creates the double pleasure of the palimpsest: more than one text is experienced" (116). In other words, the mutual engagement between the two texts, the present and the past, becomes an indispensable part of the reader's experience with the former. Furthermore, underlining, as Leo Braudy puts it, the "continuing historical relevance [...] of a particular narrative" (311), adaptation and/or appropriation

also allows for the transmission of myths that are originally connected with the source texts onto new (con)texts. In accordance with that theory, it can be argued that by aligning themselves – often quite overtly – with the Great War tradition the poets incorporate broader national memories that originate from the Great War as a central element into their texts, thereby adopting both the suffering and ultimate sacrifice of the Great War generation as their own and potentially moving the audience to an inherited set of hermeneutical and emotional responses.

To be more precise, whilst the 19th century already saw the slow rise of a cult of the soldier in Britain, the First World War has been the first to properly turn simple soldiers into the heroes of realistic catastrophe. Unlike the Second World War with its marked focus on the home-front and the just cause of the war, the memory of the First World War has always been to a great extent centred around the torment and bravery of the soldiers in the trenches. In the introduction to *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (1990), Samuel Hynes succinctly summaries what he calls the “myth of the war”:

A brief sketch of that collective narrative of significance would go something like this: a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory, and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance. (10)

Hynes’s emphasis on the evolution of the “generation of innocent young men” underscores the notion that, in contrast to other wars, the story of the First World War could only be told from the perspective of those went to fight in it; and, surely, the fact that this was the first time that poetry from soldiers in the war really resonated with huge swathes of the population has played an important part in the creation of that memory. In that sense, aiming to form a similar kind of “myth of the New Wars” and to (re)direct attention to the soldiers who are, once again, bearing the brunt of oftentimes questionable political decisions, the poets’ intertextual evocation of the “sacred national canon” of Great War soldier poetry appears to crucially augment the socio-cultural bearing of their texts. Doing so, the poets foster the transfer of a specific collection of traditionalised myths and meta-narratives that are typically associated with the Great War onto the 21st century: the tragic slaughter, heroic suffering, stoic endurance, ultimate martyrdom, and eventual rejection of the home-front. This, by extension, is likely to facilitate the projection of certain internalised reactions and emotions on the part of the audience, inviting the reader to develop similar feelings of grief and appreciation for those who serve today.

6. Conclusion

This article has aimed at providing a brief overview of how the famous soldier poets from the Great War have become an integral part of contemporary soldier poetry, visible through a close-knit network of intertextual citations, borrowings, and allusions. The article has furthermore argued that this impression of affinity between the “new generation of war poets” and the much remembered and revered poets of the First World War is likely to manipulate the hermeneutical act – the precepts that drive textual reading and interpretation – to the extent that it guides the reader into a prescribed realm of interpretation. This might also give a hint at the broader social and political objectives of these poets: based on what has been analysed before, it feels safe to state that the poets’ ability to invoke internalised myths and emotions while referring to different contexts becomes a powerful tool to increase public empathy for soldiers in the present day. This unearths an overarching desire to reclaim the soldier’s place in an age that is incrementally marked, as scholars have constantly reminded us, by a decreasing taste for militarism and patriotism, as well as profound political ambiguities (see also: Coker; Pickarill and Webster; Scheipers 2014; Shaw).

Nevertheless, one might be also tempted to ask in how far the poets’ appropriation of canonical registers affects the aspired originality and authenticity of their text as testimonies of current reality. That is to say that even though the overall effects of war on the individual might stay the same, sometimes the use of conventionalised codification seems to obscure the resemblance between the texts and the reality of the historical field. As a case in point, one could easily associate Royal Nursing Corps Officer Barry Alexander’s description of the post-millennium battlefield, which he metaphorizes as a “gallery of hellish images” (30), with the chaos of the 1914–1918 trench war; an uncoordinated attack in one of the Great War “No Man’s Lands” rather than a war fought by highly trained professional troops:

The village is shrouded in smoke as the company fights
for its life
Surrounded by comrades in this maelstrom of battle I am alone
Sheltering in the lee of a compound wall as if from a mighty
storm, ignoring the chaos
I kneel between the two living corpses and start my battle for
their lives. (31)

The speaker’s depiction of the “hell” of the battlefield, the “maelstrom of battle,” the “chaos,” and the “mighty storm” seems, again, starkly imbued by the representational vernacular of the Great War (30–31). However, while the fragile existential dimension of war, including the terror, fear, and pain, may remain constant, the shifting nature of contemporary warfare challenges the applicability of that sort of traditionalised

imagery: i.e., the poet's seemingly unfiltered use of canonical language evokes the impression of a large-scale, "mighty" fight between mass armies rather than of what some people might refer to as "Small War," operated by means of thoroughly coordinated "small unit tactics" (Hoyt 439; see also Scheipers 2018).²⁰

One might therefore argue that the overall efficacy of the texts hinges not only on the reader's capacity to connect them to an established literary tradition, but also on his/her ability to recognise their relevance within the historical context from which they originate. Following that same logic, Hutcheon, too, locates the special appeal of adaptation "in the mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty" (114). It is only fair to say that while often relying heavily on inherited myth, the new soldier poets have equally set out to generate new myth and to offer an original take on the soldier's experience of war in the present age. This becomes manifest, for example, in their strong focus on PTSD and trauma. As Jones et al. explain in an article on *Shell Shock and Mild Traumatic Brain Injury* (2007), even though combat trauma might be as old as war itself, PTSD has somewhat become the "signature injury [...] of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts" (1641). Additionally, the analysis of "Courage" has also given a preliminary insight into the way contemporary soldier poets react to the changing political dimension of war in our time. In line with that, while patriotism prevails as a literary motif, many of these poets also evince traces of an incessant cosmopolitan ideology, in which "international commitment has replaced patriotic duty and loyalty as a primary civic ideal" (Frisk 910). Sergeant John Lewis demonstrates this in "Shame," which was also published in *Heroes*, when characterising the soldiers as the "liberators of Iraq" who "forced the change of regime" (130) – albeit with a doubtful undertone. And there are numerous other examples of such more contemporary themes, discourses, and discussions in the collection.

Notes

1. To view blogs, visit: www.allpoetry.com, www.war-poetry.livejournal.com, and www.leavesandpages.com. While the former examples focus more specifically on poetry, *Leaves and Pages* is an anonymously run blog on a variety of subjects that on the occasion of Remembrance Day in 2012 released, amongst others, two poems by the contemporary soldier poet Danny Martin, who was also published in John Jeffcock's *Heroes*.
2. Amongst these were, for example, Lt. Colonel J. B. Brown's "The Great Debate" and "The Promise of to Come" (*The Sunday Times*), an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's famous marching song "The Young British Soldier" (1895), (re-)written by an anonymous British combatant, and another poem called "Repatriation," in which British staff sergeant Andy McFarlane points an accusatory finger at the fatalities of both campaigns by portraying the return of a British soldier's coffin to a small-town in Wiltshire (*Daily Mail*).

- 3 Similar anthologies include Ryan Gearing's *Enduring Freedom: An Afghan Anthology* (2011), Susie Campbell's *'My Teeth Don't Chew on Shrapnel': An Anthology of Poetry by Military Veterans* (2020), and Gina Allsop's *Military Memories* (2021).
- 4 Periodisation is disputed among historians. These dates refer to the first official deployment of British troops in 1969 and the so-called "Good Friday Agreement" of 1998.
- 5 The collection also includes a number of poems written by veterans of the Second World War and soldiers stationed abroad during the Cold War.
- 6 Brooke ponders similar thoughts in one of his most famous poems when saying: "But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold. / These laid the world away; poured out the red / Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be / Of work and joy, and that unhop'd serene"; Brooke 81.
- 7 "The Ode," commonly refers to the fourth stanza of "For the Fallen" (1914).
- 8 The lily has come to play a more important role in this.
- 9 An allusion to another aspect of commemorative practice that originated in the Great War: i.e., the burying of dead soldiers on military cemeteries made up of uniform gravestones placed in regimented lines.
- 10 The term was coined by the Chanel 4 newsreader Jon Snow in 2006 and has since become a popular trope that criticises the (felt) obligation to wear poppies during public performances and remembrance events.
- 11 Other relevant theories referenced in this paragraph include Longinus: "On the Sublime" (*Peri Hupsous*; first-century BCE); John Dennis: "The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry" (1701) and "The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry" (1704); Joseph Addison: "The Pleasures of the Imagination" (published as a series of articles in *The Spectator*, namely the articles no. 411–421; 1712); Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*; 1790).
- 12 Military code for a particular type of bomb.
- 13 Shakespeare and Kipling range among the most prominent examples of these.
- 14 The original quote runs "at least as long as I have been involved with secondary schools, which is now getting on for thirty years," which translates to 1960–1990.
- 15 The section includes Brooke, Thomas, Sassoon, Gurney, Rosenberg, Owen, Cannan, and Jones.
- 16 The anthology focusses on the poems of Gurney, Rosenberg and Owen.
- 17 The memorial bears the names and life-data of Richard Aldington (1892–1962), Laurence Binyon (1869–1943), Edmund Blunden (1896–1974), Rupert Brooke (1887–1915), Wilfrid Gibson (1878–1962), Robert Graves (1895–1985), Julian Grenfell (1888–1915), Ivor Gurney (1890–1937), David Jones (1895–1974), Robert Nichols (1893–1944), Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), Sir Herbert Read (1893–1968), Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918), Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), Charles Sorley (1895–1915), and Edward Thomas (1878–1917).

- 18 Baker's novel series consists of the novels *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), and *The Ghost Road* (1995).
- 19 The term "New Wars" was coined by Mary Kaldor in her study *New and Old Wars* (1999) to distinguish a series of wars that emerged during the post-Cold War era, from the Gulf War and the new outbursts of violence in Northern Ireland to the global War on Terror.
- 20 The term "Small War" was coined by Carl von Clausewitz in a series of lectures and essays that focus intensely on the manoeuvres of small units and the proper use of infantry in defensive tactics in the 19th century. Today, the term has obtained a variety of meanings, one being wars that "are most often waged between asymmetrically empowered adversaries – one larger and more capable, one smaller and less capable when measured in traditional geostrategic or conventional military terms – [and often involving] limited resources and small units"; N. Williams para. 2.

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