THE CANADIAN POETRY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN ENGLISH

THE CANADIAN POETRY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN ENGLISH: A THEMATIC STUDY

By

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Abstract

The Canadian poetry of the Great War in English has been critically neglected. This thesis offers an overview of that poetry, and attempts to provide a basis for further study.

Like the British poetry of the First World War, the Canadian poetry of that era in English is marked by a struggle between abstract systems and realistic depictions of the war. While the poetry can be classified according to themes, each of these, and the poems that embody them, can be placed on a scale of abstraction and realism. Many poems include elements of both. Chapter I is a general examination of this dialectic in the British and Canadian poetry of the war. Chapter II shows how several Canadian poets employed abstract systems, obscuring reality. The denial of death's finality, as in John McCrae's influential "In Flanders Fields", is the most marked of these abstractions. Chapter III is a consideration of the motherhood motif which operates on colonial, personal and natural levels, as well as of the poetical depiction of the natural world, both based to some degree on abstract concepts but also often containing elements of realism. In

the poetry considered in Chapter IV, this interaction remains important, but an almost pure form of realism characterizes the poetry of trifles. Chapter V explores direct, realistic poetry which looks forward to more modern poetic endeavours. The epilogue examines the final abandonment of abstraction following the war.

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CHAPTER I:

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WAR, ITS LITERATURE, AND THE DAWN OF MODERNISM

Eighty years after its beginning, the Great War still needs little introduction. The new realities it helped to create, the ironies it spawned, the uncomfortable era it introduced all profoundly affect the contemporary world. These effects are not surprising in light of the conflict's physical and psychological severity. Not only was the death-toll enormous, but the conditions under which battles were waged were foreign to anything the world had experienced. Mechanization made defences all but impenetrable. Rather than replacing human losses with monetary and mechanical ones, technological innovations made annihilation frighteningly efficient, distant and anonymous. The war, which was supposed to end quickly and decisively, became bogged down in a quagmire of mud, gas, blood and feces; and victories could often be measured in yards gained, losses in thousands killed. Psychological perspectives were permanently altered by the Great War. Never again were soldiers heading into battle to be cheered quite so boisterously as they were at the war's outset.

Various types of certainty fell victim to the war.

Literature, an accurate barometer of social reality, reflects this loss of faith. Modern and postmodern patterns of thought reveal uncertainty as a twentieth-century phenomenon. Thus, M. H. Abrams writes of modernism,

> The modernist revolt against traditional literary forms and subjects manifested itself strongly after the catastrophe of World War I shook men's faith in the foundations and continuity of Western civilization and culture.

And T. S. Eliot explains that literature came to reflect "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Abrams 109). In the twentieth century, scepticism and insecurity have largely replaced certainty.

Many works of fiction, particularly those dealing with the psychology of warfare, reflect the change in attitude the Great War helped to cause. Tarnished forever were previously unquestioned terminology and ideals. Thus, Ernest Hemingway writes in A Farewell to Arms (1929),

> I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain....and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it....Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.
>
> (Hemingway 185-186)

The response to the war in some German fiction is remarkably similar to fiction in English. Indeed, the work perhaps

most often noted for its realistic and sceptical treatment of the war in general, and its leaders in particular, is a German work about the German experience: Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front (1928).

English Canadian fiction of the Great War also embodies a movement from certainty to insecurity, faith to scepticism. The sarcastic sentiments expressed in the title of Charles Yale Harrison's chronicle of the First World War, Generals Die in Bed (1928)--a title likely inspired by the last line of Siegfried Sassoon's "Base Details"--are self-explanatory. Another Canadian, Timothy Findley, has more recently written a similar, if more complex, account of the war. The Wars (1977) not only questions the assumptions of authority but also confronts the concepts of heroism, sexuality, comradeship and historical perspective from a problematic, uncertain viewpoint that was largely unavailable to those writing prior to the Great War.

During the war itself, poetry was a more common way for soldiers and civilians to vent personal sentiments. In the early twentieth century, poetry was widely appreciated, and intense feelings about the war naturally produced it. A poem could be composed quickly and have an immediate impact on both writer and reader. For many, writing poetry provided a necessary emotional relief. It was a vehicle well-fitted to the expression of patriotism, propaganda,

dissent and despair.

Any contemporary consideration of World War I poetry must be stationed against the backdrop of the most commonly remembered British poets of the era who set the standard for such literature and shape current recollections of the era. This poetry is not a mono-thematic mass. Thus, it is impossible to make a definitive statement that neatly encapsulates the nature of the British poetry of the period. Nevertheless, various commentators, including I. M. Parsons, Paul Fussell and Jon Silkin, have made insightful categorizations. The most dominant trend observable in the British poetry of the war, and the societal realities that it reflected, is a movement from romantic visions of heroic sacrifice, steeped in jingoistic rhetoric, to a more realistic, cynical, ambiguous and frightening vision of the war, mixed with a desire for change. It is for this reason that Fussell asserts, in The Great War and Modern Memory (1975), that, to some degree, all poetry written after the First World War is war poetry (Fussell 325), for there was during the war an overall alteration in perspective among poets and much of the general populace.

Most noted today are those British poets who anticipated the postwar period thematically and stylistically: Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, and others like them. They are perhaps more often

discussed than their more romantic counterparts because they seem so relevant to the contemporary world. But the diversity of British material is undeniable. Compare, for example, what likely was then, and perhaps is still, the most influential British poem of the period, Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier", reminiscent of nineteenth-century poems, with what Fussell calls the best poem of the war (Fussell 250), Isaac Rosenberg's much more modern "Break of Day in the Trenches". Here is Brooke's poem:

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is for ever England. There shall be
> In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
> A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
> Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
> A body of England's, breathing English air,
> Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
>
> And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
> A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
> Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
> Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
> And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
> In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.
>
> November-December 1914
> (Silkin Penguin 77)

Now, here is Rosenberg's:

> The darkness crumbles away--
> It is the same old druid Time as ever.
> Only a live thing leaps my hand--
> A queer sardonic rat--
> As I pull the parapet's poppy
> To stick behind my ear.
> Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
> Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
> Now you have touched this English hand
> You will do the same to a German--

Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver--what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe,
Just a little white with the dust.
(Silkin Penguin 203)

The differences between the two poems are striking. Brooke writes in a traditional, controlled sonnet form. His rhymes are regular, his meter varied only enough to project some sense of the zeal with which he has approached his subject. He also employs traditional regenerative imagery: "Flowers...air...rivers...suns... dreams...heaven". All of these suggest, not the violence of war and finality of death, but rather some abstract gain to be attained by sacrificing one's life. In dying, Brooke's Soldier will perish only in a bodily sense. He will become dust and be reunited with the English soil that spawned him. Death is viewed as a cleansing experience, leaving a "pulse in the eternal mind" to think of England. The collective good of his country is of foremost importance to the Soldier, and his grave is "for ever England...A body of England's, breathing English air"--death is a trip home. Such a poem

exudes the abstract and the collective. Viewing himself as part of the land of his birth, Brooke's speaker ignores, even hides, the individual and the reality of war's effect on the individual. This poem presents, essentially, a romantic, patriotic perspective on warfare.

Contrarily, Rosenberg's free verse discards the constraints of Brooke's sonnet form, emphasizing Rosenberg's rejection of the traditional patriotism and heroism that Brooke upholds. Like Brooke, Rosenberg includes some conventional imagery and subject-matter. However, he does so in an ironic fashion. Shocked to find life on the battlefield, Rosenberg celebrates it. However, the life he exalts is, ironically, that of a rat. The "green between" the trenches sleeps because it is out of bounds in an unnatural war. There is no regeneration here. Poppies, "whose roots are in man's veins", are like blood running from a wound and seem to drain the life out of men. And whiteness obscures, rather than reveals, in a world where the light of day means an increased chance for death. Even in death, Brooke's speaker will feel at one with the earth. Rosenberg's sees himself "Sprawled in the bowels of the earth", a sort of death in life. While Brooke's poem contains a strong collective element, Rosenberg's speaker's only sense of comradeship is not with the English people at home but, ironically, with the German to whom the speaker is

connected by the rat.

Brooke and Rosenberg are obviously operating under different sets of assumptions. A comparison of the two poems begs the question, What is the legitimate poetry of the war? Of course, the answer is subjectively based. But it is difficult to disqualify any poem which deals with the conflict. The poetry's diversity is a function of its characterizing a plurality of sentiments and social and political viewpoints present within British and other societies. Thus, one can categorize the poetry according to authorial perspective, that is, whether a certain poem or poet seems to look backward, into a realm of relative certainty, or forward, into Hemingway's, Harrison's, Findley's--perhaps our--modern world of disquietude.

Among the English, there were certainly strong contingents of both the backward- and forward-looking. For instance, Herbert Asquith's "The Volunteer" differs from Sassoon's "Suicide in the Trenches" in terms of perspective. Here is Asquith's poem:

> Here lies a clerk who half his life had spent
> Toiling at ledgers in a city grey,
> Thinking that so his days would drift away
> With no lance broken in life's tournament.
> Yet ever 'twixt the books and his bright eyes
> The gleaming eagles of the legions came,
> And horsemen, charging under phantom skies,
> Went thundering past beneath the oriflamme.
>
> And now those waiting dreams are satisfied;
> From twilight to the halls of dawn he went;
> His lance is broken; but he lies content

With that high hour, in which he lived and died.
And falling thus he wants no recompense,
Who found his battle in the last resort;
Nor need he any hearse to bear him hence,
Who goes to join the men of Agincourt.
(Parsons 41)

Now, here is Sassoon's:

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crimps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

* * *

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.
(Parsons 86)

Poetically, there is little to choose between the two poems. Both are essentially simple, sonnet-like creations in two parts, with a turn coming after eight lines. Both might also be based on the same youth thrown into the war.

But the poets' perspectives are fundamentally distinct. Asquith's reflects an essentially prewar mentality, Sassoon's, a more realistic, modern outlook. "The Volunteer" perpetuates many romantic myths associated with warfare prior to the twentieth century, and particularly those connected to the dawn of the First World War. War represents for the Volunteer a release from the urban boredom that characterizes his mundane existence while

"Toiling at ledgers in a city grey". As is so commonly the case with romantic visions of the war, the conflict is gloriously chivalric. The bookkeeper needs a "lance" to participate in "life's tournament", a lance which seems less intimidating--and certainly more personal and heroic--than the gas and machine guns faced by real volunteers. Writing with a `Tennysonian' flavour, Asquith confuses twentieth-century warfare with Arthurian adventure. Romantic but wholly unrealistic imagery colours the Volunteer's perception of the conflict. "Gleaming eagles" and even "horsemen" had little to do with waging trench warfare, and a "phantom sky" has little connection to reality. Even death is romanticized, for the `fallen' retains a sublime consciousness, and all his "waiting dreams are satisfied".

Sassoon also writes of a slain soldier. But the poet's subject is not a clerk in need of excitement. He is, instead, a "simple soldier boy". Rather than carrying the chivalric lance, the boy finds "crumps and lice and lack of rum". Rather than `falling' to a comfortable death, a death which allows the dead a degree of consciousness, Sassoon's soldier boy exchanges "The hell where youth and laughter go" for an undefined and unheroic oblivion: "No one spoke of him again". Reflecting what is to come, Sassoon's soldier more accurately anticipates Harrison's nameless protagonist than he represents a Tennysonian hero. Sassoon's is a more

cynical, sceptical, modern view of war.

In terms of perspective, the Canadian poetry of the First World War in English is similar to the British. A consideration of two Canadian poems is illustrative. John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" is undoubtedly the best-known Canadian poem of the Great War. McCrae shares a primarily nineteenth-century mentality with a number of Canadian and British poets of the period:

> In Flanders fields the poppies blow
> Between the crosses, row on row,
> That mark our place; and in the sky
> The larks, still bravely singing, fly
> Scarce heard amid the guns below.
>
> We are the Dead. Short days ago
> We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
> Loved and were loved, and now we lie
> In Flanders fields.
>
> Take up the quarrel with the foe:
> To you from failing hands we throw
> The torch; be yours to hold it high.
> If ye break faith with us who die
> We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
> In Flanders fields.
> (Silkin Penguin 81)

This poem has much in common with Brooke's "The Soldier", including its formal construction and regular rhythmic and metrical patterns. McCrae also uses regenerative imagery in a traditional manner--the soul in the form of a lark, the poppies growing out of men's deaths in the name of renewal. Also similar is the abstract quality that dominates the poem. The dead have retained life-like awareness. The fight is not with other men but with "the foe". Not a gun,

but a torch is passed to the succeeding generation. The collective, rather than individual, nature of sacrifice is also a conspicuous part of McCrae's vision.

Quite different from McCrae's poem, the following, written by Canadian serviceman Smalley Sarson, is evidence that the Canadian perceptions of the war were, like the British, diverse:

"R. B. M. W., Reported Missing at Passchendaele"

My boy is dead: for how long have I toiled
Through dense, black night? You do not understand.
You take no heed! I saw, was it yesterday?
Girls laughing in the street; an organ played
Jingly, discordant sounds; and men cried out
In harsh, sharp monosyllables the news,
And sold their papers.
Someone spoke to me,
I felt--but then my boy is dead. Now all
The tiny pleasant memories of our lives
Come flooding back to me; how he would laugh
And cheer me; I remember, when he was four
He fell and bruised his head against a chair,
Then cried until I kissed the tears away;
Now, he is dead.
No! You will not sheathe
The sword until your honour is avenged;
People must trust the government, believe
What we are told, but will that bring him back?
The day he got his Blue how proud I was;
He knew it too and teased me.
Yes, of course
You do not think it would benefit
The Allies' cause: I know, I read it all;
I must read something to benumb my soul,
For I am mourning, mourning for my boy;
My happy, fair-haired boy.
(Sarson 41)

With a free form reminiscent of Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" and a cynicism like Sassoon's, Sarson undermines the mythology of poets such as McCrae and Brooke.

Parts of his poem sound like a direct, sarcastic rebuttal of McCrae's: "No! You will not sheathe/ The sword until your honour is avenged". The poem's frame encapsulates Sarson's rejection of the abstract in favour of the concrete, his emphasis on the individual as more than part of the collective: "My boy is dead...My happy, fair-haired boy".

Like the tension between these two poems, in the English Canadian poetry of the Great War there is an almost constant struggle between the forces of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of abstraction and realism, patriotism and dissent, perhaps even the forces of self-deception and honesty. This interaction often marks individual poems, making categorization difficult. Even McCrae's poem, which in many ways is representative of the abstract school of World War I Canadian poetry in English, has some foundation in reality. It does, to some degree, confront the frequent deaths caused by the war. And it is set in a graveyard. Thus, the poetry of abstraction and the poetry of reality come in various degrees and often overlap. By considering the poetry thematically, one gets a sense of the dynamic between abstraction and reality in the English Canadian poetry of the Great War, and a sense of the poetry as a whole.

A thematic analysis is appropriate also because there has been so little critical attention paid to this

poetry. By discussing themes and tendencies, a foundation can be set for more extensive critical considerations. The thematic approach also allows for detailed contemplation of individual poems and passages from a representative variety of poets.

The obvious alternative to a thematic structure is a chronological one. But the rationale for recommending such a strategy breaks down under scrutiny. Most Canadian poems of the Great War cannot be dated specifically enough to legitimize a chronological study. The period in question is less than five years in duration and evolved rapidly. While one can assume, in most cases, that poems were composed near to their dates of publication, the study of such a brief literary period requires more specific dates. A poem published, for example, in 1918, might have been written in 1914. To speculate would open a scholarly `pandora's box'. A discrepancy of a month or year could make a huge difference in such a study.

Even the anthologies on which this paper draws seldom provide specific dates. Nevertheless, they are valuable tools in a study of this nature, especially when considered together, for the poetry included in the respective volumes is generally dissimilar. The various other poems cited in this paper, which are found in journals and various individual volumes of poetry, combine with the

anthologies to form a wealth of verse. Many poems are individually weak, but all are valuable in the context of defining the English Canadian poetry of the Great War.

CHAPTER II:

REMNANTS OF AN ABSTRACT TRADITION

i) A Code of Verbal Evasion

Some sixty years after the war, Ted Plantos wrote that Canadian society at the time of the Great War was characterized by "Civilian ignorance, fuelled by a first-class propaganda machine" (Plantos "Introduction" 9). Propaganda was manifested in complex ways in much of the poetry of the period. There seems to have been a general unwillingness or inability among many Canadians writing in English to discuss the war's more disturbing facets. Numerous English Canadian poets of the Great War avoided the perception of the war's reality by constructing a rhetorical, alternative, more acceptable system of events.

One poetic method used to evade reality was to equate the war with an athletic contest. Indeed, for centuries war had been little more than sport, especially compared to what it became in the twentieth century. In hand-to-hand combat, warriors tested their skill, and casualty numbers were minuscule compared to those in the First World War. Still, many poets persistently denied that

war's realities had changed. In "Mud", Jack Turner writes that "We're getting used to Fritz's little game" (Turner 56). Similarly, A. C. Stewart tells, in "The Mongrel at Vimy Ridge", of a dog named Nipper who "played the game" (Stewart 12) of war and was killed. The attack on Vimy Ridge was no game, as any of the thousands of Canadians who participated could attest, but in this case, poetic convention treats it as one.

Labels were also an integral part of the rhetorical system of abstractions employed by many English Canadian poets of the Great War. These labels dehumanized the enemy. It was certainly easier to kill a `hun' or `Fritz' than to kill another individual who was as frightened, unhappy and helpless as his assailant. Mary Josephine Benson's speaker in "War's Aftermath" speaks in terms of logistics, groups and nations, not individuals: *"And the Huns had only Canada between them and Calais"* (Benson 81).

Part of abstraction's appeal in wartime is that it lessens the brunt of individual deaths and the guilt felt over killing. The rhetoric of categorization perhaps made victory sweeter. What could be more just or invigorating than defeating some horde of barely-human tyrants? Violet Alice Clarke's speaker rejoices on November 11, 1918, that "felled to Earth is Hunnish tyranny,/ And ours the Victory" (Clarke 65). Without a human dimension, victory was not

diminished by impurities brought on by remorse or empathy.

Such labels were not always vindictive nor slanderous, just impersonal. Thus, the word `foe' became part of the English Canadian poetic vernacular during the war. The term barely suggests individual, human opponents, and shrouds conflict in an aura of chivalry and honour. Lines like the following were remarkably common in the English Canadian poetry of the day: "And the foeman found Britain prepared" (Ashmead 30). Here, a nation meets an abstract, hostile entity.

Part of the reason for this verbal obscurity is a dependence on nineteenth-century poetic convention. The elevated language and styles of poets like Alfred, Lord Tennyson set the standard for verse in the early twentieth century. One purpose of poetry was to transcend the mundane, and elevated, figurative language was a major part of this mandate. But, while figurative language is designed to elucidate, in some cases its employment does more to obscure. Duncan Campbell Scott's "At Sea" exemplifies this camouflage. He writes, "Thou in thy vivid pride hast reaped a nation...wearing/ Thy valor stainless in our heart of hearts" (D. C. Scott 96). Scott certainly uses eloquent language, but in metaphorically `reaping a nation' with his `stainless valor', the soldier has died. This fact has been lost in the poem's impressive, but misleading, rhetoric.

Such literary convention, and the abstractions it spawned, had political implications. It is a seldom-disputed position that nineteenth-century nationalism led to early-twentieth-century cataclysm. Nations and nationalism have abstract foundations. Often, hypothetical concepts unite nations and separate one nation from another. Mix these factors with the concept of honour, and one can begin to reasonably account for the war. Lilian Leveridge combines these two abstractions, nation and honour, in her "The Way of the British":

> There isn't a lad in the army,
> There isn't a lad on the sea,
> Would dim the light of his honor
> By a deed of infamy....
>
> [England] fights for `a scrap of paper',
> She dies for `an old colored rag',
> When the one is her word of promise,
> And the other her blood-stained flag.
> (Leveridge 113)

Nationalism was combined with the rhetoric of abstraction by many English Canadian poets of the Great War to justify and explain the war. Some went so far as to use phraseology like `the triumph of democracy' and a `victory for the entire world' (Bain 13) in attempting to make the war acceptable. Canada's geographical distance from the reality of the conflict could only enhance this trend. But abstract poetry was by no means rejected by all those who served in the trenches--for example, John McCrae was in active service when he wrote "In Flanders Fields".

McCrae and others made dead men into fallen heroes. Henry Ashmead tells the story of the doomed captain of a ship in "Faithful Unto Death". The dying man is transformed into a hero of almost superhuman stature and fortitude. As the ship sinks, the speaker says of its Captain, "If he could not save his gallant crew,/ He could show them how to die" (Ashmead 32), as if death were more meaningful when put in the context of heroism.

In other, fundamentally similar cases, poems hinged on a hypothetical concept of manliness or on paying homage to a flag. Hale's "The White Comrade" is illustrative. Her speaker says,

> Each man I think who was in truth a man,
> Felt the old life slip from him in those days
> And a new purpose take the place of self...
> (Hale Comrade 6)

Her "Comrades Awake" embodies a similarly abstract concept:

> We hold as dower old England's power,
> The flag that must prevail.
> Live for your flag, O Builders of the north.
> Canada, Canada, in God go forth.
> (Hale Grey 6)

Even the latter poem's rhythm and meter add to the jingoism of its message. In these poems, a man is more than flesh and blood, a flag more than fabric.

Often strains of other myths or legends were incorporated into the English Canadian poetry of the Great War in attempts, once again, to structure a largely unstructured phenomenon. In "A Song of Peace", Violet Alice

Clarke says that the "God of Battles" (Clarke 63) has blessed Canada. Henry Ashmead puts the war into a historical and mythological context in "With it or on it". This poem manipulates the Spartan myth that depicts women sending their men into battle insisting that they return either with or on their shields (Ashmead 6). Not only does such a poetic pose demand bravery of those who are fighting, but it also places modern war in the framework of thousands of years of tradition, regardless of how unworthy the Great War was of such categorization.

The mythological system of Arthurian England is arguably the abstraction most fitted to the war, and it was employed by many, including Mabel Stuart, who wrote, "For Canada":

> Here in the dim forgotten past
> Rode valiant knights and true,
> Searching amain with glittering spears
> For daring deeds to do.
> But I have seen as gallant knights
> As ever couched a lance,
> Die in the sodden trenches,
> On the war-scarred fields of France.
> (Stuart 6)

Arthurian legend encompasses what many observers of the war hoped the conflict would be, full of chivalry, honour and courage. It gelled with the nineteenth-century, Tennysonian tradition. Unfortunately, it was also perhaps the mythological system of abstraction which was farthest from, and did most to obscure, the reality of the Great War.

Stuart herself subverts the legitimacy of her speaker's image of the past by admitting the existence of "sodden trenches" and "war-scarred fields of France".

Many poets turned to the ultimate abstraction, God, to rationalize the conflict and keep discussion of the war above the mundane, individual, human level. Hale's "The Departure" is a typical example of a poet's imagining God's approval of the war:

> ...through the snowflakes sped a rift of light,
> Keen as pointed sword-blade and intensely bright--
> Like the Lord's hand resting on the ranks of right.
> (Hale Comrade 23)

Such religious faith was an integral part of some poets' war effort.

Other elements of Christian mythology were also commonly employed in the English Canadian poetry. Poets regularly compared the war to hell through simple description of the battlefield or, as in the following poem, through more complex means. In "Invasion", the Reverend William Tucker utilizes the Christian framework as a metaphor for the conflict he depicts in poetry, but he also frees his allies from responsibility for the war by blaming the devil, who may be a stand-in for the enemy:

> It was, and is, and will be evermore
> The devil's deed, the devil's ruling hand;
> The very hell wherein our brave boys stand
> I say, again, write it--`The Devil's Score.'
> (Tucker 2)

Religious systems are often used to explain life, to give it

meaning. Some English Canadian poets used elements of Christianity to explain and universalize the war.

So pervasive were such systems, abstractions were often incorporated automatically into poetry. Albert Ernest Stafford Smythe's "Hymn for the Peace" merges several abstractions--glory, country, God--into a single poem:

> Land of our heritage,
> Glory of earth,
> Haven of Liberty,
> Home of new birth;
> Mother invincible,
> True-hearted, tried,
> Canada, Canada,
> God be thy guide.
> (Smythe 82)

Seemingly unconsciously, Smythe has utilized a series of abstractions and has managed to avoid tangible truth.

ii) <u>The Undead</u>

The most common and important instance of abstraction found in the English Canadian poetry of the Great War is arguably the denial of death's potential meaninglessness and finality. Of course, this was superb propaganda. This denial also camouflaged one of the most disturbing facets of war, that those who sacrifice most are also those who reap the least benefit from victory. Death was a reality, but by using terminology of the `undead',

poets and their speakers were able to obscure its finality.

In the figurative rhetoric used to circumvent the idea of death, death was often analogous to sleep. F. O. Call's "In a Belgian Garden" reflects this motif:

> For here brave lads and noble,
> From lands beyond the deep,
> Beneath the small white crosses
> Have laid them down to sleep.
> (Garvin 39)

Call's "Gone West" seems to admit that there is a hypothetical structure being imposed on death:

> I do not think of them--our glorious dead--
> As laying tired heads upon the breast
> Of a kind mother to be lulled to rest;
> I do not see them in a narrow bed
> Of alien earth, by their own blood made red,
> But see in their own simple phrase,--`Gone West,'
> The words of knights upon a holy quest,
> Who saw the light and followed where it led.
>
> Gone West! Scarred warrior hosts go marching by,
> Their longing faces turned towards the light
> That glows and burns upon the western sky.
> Leaving behind the darkness of the night,
> Their long day over and their battle won,
> They seek for rest beyond the setting sun.
> (Garvin 41)

Of course, writing such a poem requires a particular evasion on the part of the poet, or at least of the speaker in the poem. The phrase "I do not see" is instructive. One could avoid pain by filtering and manipulating one's perceptions.

A variation on the sleep-not-death motif can also be found in T. A. Girling's "Far Away". In it, a dead speaker who "sleep[s]" makes plans for his own burial (Canada In Khaki, [CIK], Vol. 2, 6). Warnford Moffatt, in "On the

Canadian Soldiers...", mixes an emphasis on honour with the sleep-not-death motif. The dead, "Though cold and still can speak from homes of peace" (Moffatt 22). The poem offers the comfort of repose to the dead, despite their actual lack of sentience: "Sleep on and rest beneath War's lowering sky,/ You lived like men, you taught men how to die" (Moffatt 23).

English Canadian poets of the Great War found numerous other ways of referring to death while implying life. One of the most common verbal means has timeless origins and is tied to the abstract concepts of heroism, chivalry and sacrifice: the dead were said to have fallen. Theodore Goodridge Roberts writes, in "A Canadian Day (Sept. 15, 1916)", of a Canadian contingent who held their positions bravely, overcoming their fear with thoughts of what they were accomplishing. Despite Canadian casualties, it was "a day of glory". And it was certainly easier to depict it as such by explaining that some unfortunate Canadians "fell", rather than died (CIK, Vol. 1, 72). Falling also implies the potential to rise. Colonel Lorne Ross' speaker in "At Peace" says of a soldier, "Fearless he fought and fell" and now awaits resurrection in peace "with his God" (CIK, Vol. 2, 172). Similarly, Lillian Forbes Gunter's "Somewhere in France" never admits the finality of death:

> Go! help our fallen heroes live,
> Yes! live again for that glad day
> When Kaiser Bill has passed away.
> (Gunter 128)

In the English Canadian poetry of World War I, death is often construed to be another state of consciousness, sometimes a dreamy or heaven-related one. J. J. Conn's "A Soldier's Last Letter" is a typical example of this abstract construction. The poem's speaker explains that "The blood from my wounds just flows down in a stream./ I must hurry and write or I'll pass away in a dream" (Conn 5). Minnie Hallowell Bowen's "The Victorious Dead" espouses a belief in the tradition of the afterlife. The dead have gone to both glory and rest:

> How should we weep--beholding the white light
> Of those young spirits--joyous--unafraid?...
>
> Eternal vistas opened--life beyond breath!
> In man's extremity--in the last sleep--
> The immortal spirit would not be denied
> Triumphing gloriously! How should we weep?
> (Garvin 29)

One would be hard pressed to find a more emphatic endorsement of life after death. It seems better than life itself.

In similar cases, strong religious belief directly contributes to the phenomenon of the `undead'. The constant threat of death no doubt enhanced the appeal of life after death. But a belief in such a concept is also part of Christian and other religions. Religious faith likely

melded with the war's influence to produce poems of the undead. "Prisoners of Hope" was written by W. J. Armitage, Rector and Archdeacon of Halifax (Garvin 16), who certainly believed in life after death. The poet's speaker, by denying death's finality, encourages soldiers to reject fear:

> Into your stronghold turn, God is your refuge sure;
> Fear not the foe; his cruel hate, his ruthless wrong
> Thy true life cannot touch; in God it rests secure;
> Wait, with long patience wait, His time will come ere long:
> In prison drear, hope's star shall brightly burn,
> Brave heart and leal unto your stronghold turn.
> (Garvin 16)

Sometimes, death is not only construed to be lifelike and, therefore, not so terrifying, but also to provide a degree of triumph over war's awful reality. Gertrude Bartlett's "The Gunners" depicts death as an ultimate victory, rather than an ultimate defeat:

> The shining dead men, rank on rank, appear,
> Their voices raised in one great cry, to hail
> The gunners prone, for whom reveille clear
> Their silver bugles blow in morning pale.
> Your battle, God! to make men great; and here,
> In that cause, dead, unvanquished, we prevail.
> (Garvin 18)

R. M. Eassie's "Canada" expresses similar sentiments in a romantic, hyper-heroic fashion. The following poem was supposedly inspired by a twenty-year-old Canadian soldier, whose dying utterance was, "Canada". Those killed become the "glorious dead", because "Who falls in Freedom's cause/ Triumphs o'er the grave!" (Eassie Christmas 21). In the

minds of poets such as Eassie, death was not final.

Some even imagined that the dead could take an active role in the lives of the living. In Gertrude Bartlett's "The Blessed Dead", they continue to fight and influence the world of the living:

> Thine unseen warders they, the valiant dead,
> Defending still thy walls against the foe:
> To dim frontiers, untried of wings, they go
> And battles wage where never ranks are led.
> The while through them unspoiled thy roses blow,
> For thee unstained the hawthorne's snow is spread,
> Through their mute lips the soaring skylark sings--
> Their still hands keep for thee all lovely things!
> (Garvin 17)

It was, no doubt, comforting to believe in supernatural assistance.

While all these manifestations of life in death in English Canadian poetry are notable, perhaps the dominant motif among poets who utilized the undead in their verse is the use of the voices of the dead to spur the living into battle. This jingoism made up a significant part of the agendas of many English Canadian poets of the Great War. Appeals depicted as from beyond the grave could, it seems, cause a particularly acute prick in the flesh of those still living, especially those who were not contributing as much to the war effort as was expected of them. "The Roll Call", published anonymously, is characteristic. In it, the dead speak and call on others to take their places (La Vie Canadienne, [LVC] 31). Ronald Kenvyn's "Only a Year Ago

(August 4, 1915)" expresses nearly identical sentiments. His speaker gives the dead a voice by maintaining that the dead call others to continue the war's struggle:

> There are graves which we must honor (will you e'er forget his face?
> Don't you think that he is calling YOU to go and fill his place?)
> (Kenvyn 41)

It would have been pressure enough to be pestered into action by the living. Voices of the dead could only enhance the effectiveness of such appeals.

iii) John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields": Striking a Universal Chord

John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" may be less than a perfect poem, but its importance to any study of the English Canadian poetry of the Great War is undeniable. "In Flanders Fields", according to James A. Ross, one of McCrae's imitators, "struck the chord" (Ross 80) among soldiers, among poets and among soldier-poets. The poem's far-reaching significance is likely due, in part, to its careful blending of abstraction with just enough reality to legitimize the poet's vision--a lark with the dead, life after death with a graveyard. This complex balance does not entirely deny the war's horrible destructiveness, but does

not fully admit or confront it. Whatever the cause of its success, "In Flanders Fields" had a profound effect on, and provoked diverse responses from, numerous Canadians.

Occasionally, poetic responses to "In Flanders Fields" were entirely supportive of McCrae. Ross discusses his subject's immortality and significance in "John McCrae": "so in our mind/ Your words will live, and, living, find/ Response in all, with one accord" (Ross 80).

Several other poets mimicked McCrae's structure or use of language, even in poems the messages of which did not entirely gel with McCrae's sentiments. For John Locke Bradford, "In Flanders Fields" provided a suitable model for the expression of his troubled feelings about the war:

> In Flanders Fields our men lie dead
> Who for their country fought and bled;
> And all the crosses, row on row,
> Are buried deep beneath the snow
> That lies upon their earthen bed.
> They are The Dead. The winds that blow
> Disturb them not who lie below,
> Disturb them not who nobly bled
> In Flanders Fields.
> The earth that once with blood was red,
> Torn up with iron shells and lead,
> Is cleansed with sparkling drifts of snow,
> Though now no scarlet poppies blow
> Over the graves of the sleeping dead
> In Flanders Fields.
>
> (Bradford 11)

Bradford at the same time adopts and manipulates McCrae's vision. In Bradford's poem, only McCrae's weather has changed, and apparently the war is over in this poem of seeming reassurance to McCrae's speaker that his wishes have

been realized. But Bradford also implicitly undermines McCrae's romanticism by obscuring a graveyard's poppies with snow. In addition, Bradford adds a hint of realism--"The earth...Torn up with iron shells and lead"--that was harsher than anything in McCrae's poem.

Even in poems which were not direct responses to McCrae, his influence could sometimes be felt. Wilson MacDonald's "Peace", written on November 7, 1918, just four days before the armistice, has a theme different from that of McCrae's poem. Nevertheless, MacDonald alludes to "In Flanders Fields":

> One grief alone we have; blow, bugle, blow;
> The crosses stand in Flanders, row on row.
> They shall not watch with us tonight nor fare
> On our bright bugle's blare.
>
> (Garvin 123)

In "Faith", Stuart Martin employs similar "White crosses, row on row" (CIK, Vol. 3, 61). Violet Alice Clarke's "Our Fallen Heroes" sounds nearly identical:

> Their burial ground with maples bound
> Anon the world will see:
> Those simple crosses, row on row,
> That mark Canadian dead, they'll show
> To men from war-pangs free.
>
> (Clarke 78)

Not all Canadian poets concurred with McCrae's view of the war. Nevertheless, as is evidenced by poems such as Clarke's, McCrae's way of expressing himself became part of a nation's way of expressing itself.

CHAPTER III:

CHILDREN AND PARENTS: ENGLISH CANADIANS' POETIC WARTIME OBSESSION WITH MOTHERHOOD AND THE NATURAL WORLD

i) A Connection Across the Ocean

At the time of the war, less than fifty years had passed since Canadian Confederation. For many Canadians, the war was an opportunity to prove Canada's loyalty to Britain. For others, World War I represented a chance for the former colony to demonstrate its worthiness of national status. In the minds of many Canadians, Britain remained the `mother country', Canada and Canadians, her children. Foremost among this group were those of British descent. Since these people were wealthier and better educated in the arts than members of most other ethnic groups, they were also those most likely to write, and especially publish, poetry. The literary position of those of English heritage is perhaps the main cause of Canadians' repeated poetic depictions during the war of their nation's close connection with England. Reference to this national mother/offspring relationship is a recurrent and noteworthy motif in the Canadian poetry of the Great War in English and is perhaps

the most `Canadian', or at least colonial, characteristic of the poetry.

In "Canada to England, July 1st, 1917", Horace Bray, who was a Second Lieutenant in the R. A. F., encapsulates many of the sentiments expressed in the period's Canadian poetry in English by using familial terminology. His speaker relishes the opportunity for his young nation to prove itself, and emphasizes Canada's duty to its imperial mother:

> Now we are proud, and thankful that the Day
> That saw your testing, gave to us our trial,
> To pay the debt our fathers fain would pay
> And chalk the even score upon the dial....
>
> And you, mayhap, have learned a little too,
> Of eager youth, impetuous to aid,
> Impatient of delay, and quick to do,
> Too young, too ignorant, to be afraid.
> O little Mother of the Island Race!
> O Mother-Mistress of the distant seas!
> We heard your call, and proudly take our place
> Now by your side, no longer at your knees.
>
> (Garvin 35-36)

Bray's speaker's ultra-patriotic tone is obvious, for no one but a patriot would welcome the opportunity to have thousands of compatriots killed in war. But Bray's poem also says much about what many English-speaking Canadians considered to be their duty during the war. The needs of the mother, and the need of `the child' to impress favourably the mother, were paramount in Bray's speaker's

mind. Although Bray had seen combat, his speaker retains a romantic view of his duty as a son of the Empire.

Many other English-Canadian poets expressed sentiments similar to Bray's. In "Canada", using familial terminology, Pte. Albert William Drummond echoes Bray's poem in terms of the role of a young nation: "We have come to thy side, our mother....We have claimed in our pride that birth-right" (Drummond 8). Similarly, S. Rupert Broadfoot's speaker feels "We're ready then to play the big son's game/ And aid our Motherland by deed and word" (Broadfoot 8).

Eighty years later, this may all sound slightly absurd. However, in the early twentieth century, many of these poets, and Canadians in general, operated under a set of assumptions foreign to the contemporary mind. Often references to the mother country were made in passing, almost unconsciously, as if both poet and, implicitly, reader took for granted the parent/child nature of Canada's imperial bond with England. The mother/offspring model became a central metaphor which was unquestioningly appropriated into the speech, and especially the poetry, of the early twentieth century. Take, for example, lines from T. A. Browne's "The Battle Call":

> Blow, British bugles, blow!...
> Till all thy children, all,
> Leap to thy martial call,
> For freedom hurled....
>
> From o'er the western sea,

Mother, we come to thee--
Come o'er the foam.
(Browne 16)

In this poem, the reference to "Mother" seems casual, as if it was not included for any particular effect. The poet expects the reader to accept such terminology as part of the national vernacular.

In utilizing this parental metaphor, poets had a tendency to personify nations, to speak of the collective as an individual. Through this process, actual individuals are enveloped and lost. Douglas Leader Durkin's "The Call" chronicles a discussion between Canada and England:

Came once a call on the midnight,
Rose once a cry from the sea,
`Daughter of mine in my day-pride,
Art thou still daughter to me?'
Spoke then the heart of a nation,
Clarion-voiced from the hill,
`Lo, in our day thou hast long been our stay,
Mother art thou to us still!'
(Garvin 56)

Such interaction between nations rather than individuals makes abstraction the norm and links naturally to patriotism. Thus, poems of the motherland and her offspring were invariably patriotic. The mother never `calls' in this poetry without being `answered' in the affirmative, and Canada, a nation eager to prove itself, seldom questioned, at least poetically, the wisdom or righteousness of entering the conflict on its mother's behalf.

ii) The Mothers Left Behind

Balancing patriotism with the desire to protect their children was difficult for many parents during World War I. The complexity of the issue did not prevent many poets from using the relationship between mothers and soldiers, usually, but not always, from the mothers' perspective, as material for their work. It did, however, contribute to the diversity of sentiments expressed regarding mothers, sons and the war.

Many soldiers were too young to have cemented extra-familial romantic bonds stronger than those they naturally shared with their mothers, and there was a tendency at this time for young men to deify and worship their mothers. It was considered a sign of sound character. Many did so in a cult-like fashion without fear of ridicule. Thus, soldiers freely lamented the loss of home and its matriarchal stability, security and unconditional love. Mothers, too, discussed in poetry their sons' absences, and the pain of their separations was exacerbated for both parties by the youthfulness and inexperience of many of those who served. Still, much of that poetry which deals directly with the relationship between mothers and sons is of a patriotic, romantic, even jingoistic, nature. Only occasionally does a more humanistic element emerge, betraying the real emotional

strain placed on families during the war. In this group of poems, the conflict between abstraction and reality is acute.

The mother/offspring relationship offered some poets an opportunity to express extreme patriotism. After all, what could be more selfless than sacrificing one's son? L. M. Montgomery's "Our Women" is a powerful and somewhat disturbing, even twisted, depiction of a patriotic wartime ideal:

> Bride of a day, your eye is bright,
> And the flower of your cheek is red.
> `He died with a smile on a field of France--
> I smile for his sake,' she said.
>
> Mother of one, the babe you bore
> Sleeps in a chilly bed.
> `He gave himself with a gallant pride--
> Shall I be less proud?' she said.
>
> Woman, you weep and sit apart,
> Whence is your sorrow fed?
> `I have none of love or kin to go--
> I am shamed and sad,' she said.
> (Garvin 158)

From a late-twentieth-century perspective, the poem's third stanza seems grotesque, and seems to require an ironic reading. But there is nothing in the poem to suggest such a reading. Actually, according to the speakers of many of the English Canadian poems of the war, to have a son conduct himself with "gallant pride" and be killed was better than to have a less heroic son survive the war. S. Frances Harrison's "The Mother" illustrates this perspective.

Patriotism and idealism are worth human life, even the life of the speaker's son:

> Stiff in the trenches, and stark;
> Dead ere the battle was won:
> For that which is Right, for Love and Light,
> Freely I gave my son.
>
> After the bitter, the sweet;
> After the pain, the joy--
> I will not falter, nor flinch, nor faint;
> Proudly I gave my boy.
> (Garvin 80)

It was common for poets to stress that hypothetical goals were of greater importance than familial ties. Isabel Ecclestone Mackay's speaker sends her son to war so "that a dark and wicked thing may die" (Garvin 134). Jean Blewett's speaker in "The Woman Patriot" is proud that her son is fighting "For God, and Right, and Canada" (Blewett 107). And, in "The Sad Christmas", Rupert Broadfoot's speaker urges women to think of their dead sons, sacrificed for humanity, as "princes with the Man of Galilee" (Broadfoot 51). All of these poems share a basis in abstraction. A sacrifice is made for a blatantly patriotic ideal.

However, some poems dealing with mother/son relationships meander into the realism of emotional conflict. The speakers of these poems generally have difficulty reconciling love of country with love of individuals. In one poem, "The Mothering Heart of Empire", Blanche E. Holt Murison juxtaposes seemingly contradictory passages: "The Mothering Heart of Empire/ Is proud of its

sons today" and

> Dear God! Give peace, and bring them back,
> The sons to their mothers' arms.
> The glamour and glory of War! O Men!
> The cost of it who can say?
> For only God and the mothers know
> The price that the mothers pay.
> (Garvin 163-164)

Such conflicting sentiments are fairly common. Many poets seem trapped between a sense of duty and the reality of war's devastating toll. In a powerful poem, George H. Maitland's speaker attempts to console grieving parents, but his words collapse under their own weight, leaving him to face a bleaker truth:

> How shall a nation render the thanks in its heart
> this day?
> Whistle and horn and clamour, trumpet and shout
> and song--
> But the boy who lies out yonder...he will sleep
> long.
> And the Father and mother who lost him steal up to
> an empty place,
> The mother with lips a-tremble, the man with his
> stony face--.
> (Garvin 139)

Similarly, Grace Blackburn's "Epic of the Yser" questions the high cost of patriotism:

> For glory he died--
> So ring out the church-bells! Float the flag
> high!...
>
> But this woman beside me?..The boy was her son!
> (Garvin 19)

In addition, rare Canadian voices of dissent and pure sadness mark poems about mothers and their reactions to the war. In such cases, romanticism, jingoism, and

patriotism disappear when confronted by familial loss. In "The Crimson Year: Christmas, 1916", T. A. Browne attacks the philosophy of war in the context of mothers losing sons. Describing war as a "Vampire", Browne's speaker takes a nonpartisan view of the conflict. To him, those who die are not Canadian, English, German, or even soldiers, but rather "sons of the mothers of the world" (Browne 35). Like Browne, Alfred Bryan uses the maternal motif to promote his anti-war views. "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier" was a popular song around 1915 (Colombo 107). Although it seems lighthearted, its sentiments are serious:

> There'll be no war today, if mothers all would say,
> I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier....
> What victory can cheer a mother's heart
> When she looks at her blighted home?
> What victory can bring her back
> All she cared to call her own?
> Let each mother answer in the years to be,
> "Remember that my boy belongs to me."
> (Colombo 106-107)

For those like the speaker of this poem, no collective gain could offset the pain of personal loss. Elspeth Honeyman's speaker in "Motherhood, 1916" demonstrates an even more cynical view of the war as she wonders "What will they buy with the blood of men?...Victory, Honour,--and War Again?" (Garvin 93).

In addition to the poems written from mothers' perspectives, there were some composed from the viewpoint of the man in the trench. Patriotism is an important element

of many of these poems. Grace Blackburn's "In a French Hospital" chronicles a dying soldier's feelings toward his mother:

> And oh, how good
> Death is...death and the roses of the sky.
> On me has come the spirit of a kiss
> To fill for me the gap of this gaunt year:
> I was her gift to France...she bade me go,
> And when she bade me go she sealed her gift
> With kisses. I have kept them for this hour.
> Ah! You must tell her that I died for France,
> But that I kissed my mother with my soul;
> Kissed back her son. Roses! Eternity!
> (Garvin 20)

Such melodrama was not uncommon. It emerged even from combat situations, where a more realistic attitude to death might be expected. In "Mother", Pte. Albert William Drummond writes of a dying soldier whose last words are "My Mother! God, my Mother!" (Drummond 12). Despite the theatrical quality of these examples, they do dramatize a major emotional struggle affecting many in the war. A fairly realistic poem, published anonymously in R. M. Eassie's A Christmas Garland, "The Lone Sentry" captures the trauma caused by the contrast between life with mother and life in the trenches. A profound sadness descends on the soldier at night:

> Memories of childhood days,
> Prayers at my mother's knees,
> Kind words and loving ways
> All now come back to me.
> (Eassie Christmas 32)

Even mythological motherhood could be significant.

In light of the strong feelings about their mothers shared by many soldiers, it is no wonder that poems were repeatedly inspired by the leaning statue of Mary and Christ, mother and son, which hung perilously from its spire atop "Notre Dame de Brebières" at Albert. The war's violence had nearly, but not entirely, knocked Mary and Christ to the ground, but its fall seemed imminent. Sergeant W. M. Scanlon sees the statue as representative of all that is being threatened by the war, including, one would think, his own relationship with his mother (Eassie Another 14). T. A. Girling also comments on this "pitying form divine" (Girling 14). It seems to have comforted many soldiers to have such a mother watching over them even when so far from home. That this statue captured the imagination of numerous English Canadian poets adds weight to the assertion that for many involved in the war, the relationship between mothers and sons was central and complex.

iii) The Wounded Matriarch: Mother Earth

English Canadian poets often wrote of the earth and the natural world in terms of mothers, a phenomenon which has a Canadian flavour. That is not to say poets of other nations never employed such imagery or earth-related

figurative language. Certainly, they did. However, there seems to be an element in the Canadian national psyche, and it was, no doubt, there in the early twentieth century, which leads Canadians to define themselves in terms of their physical environment. As a people, Canadians take pride in the severity of their weather, the harsh beauty of their landscape and plenitude of their natural resources. Thus, it is understandable that numerous English Canadian poets of the Great War expressed horror at the war's destruction of the physical environment and a reverence, sometimes a craving, for the Canadian landscape left behind. That these feelings were sometimes put in maternal terms shows the strength of Canadians' bond to their country.

Mother nature, the giver of life, seems to have stood for eternal renewal and provided hope that even death could be transcended. The natural cycle is a perfect metaphor for humans seeking transcendence--a thought which is developed further in section iv of this chapter. In D. M. Matheson's "Langemark", it is not only mother nature's regenerative capacity but also its motherly nurturing that comforts the dying soldier:

> And mother nature, gentlest nurse,
> Will ever nightly lave
> Your lowly grave with kindly dews
> While weeping willows wave[.]
> (Matheson 122)

Angus MacKay similarly utilizes the terminology of

motherhood in consoling the dead. In "Over the Top", a soldier who tries to save a comrade under hopeless conditions is "from the clod set free" by returning to it to be eternally nurtured:

> Poor bleeding, broken bodies
> To mother earth consign--
> The spirit of the laddies
> Ye cannot more confine.
> (MacKay 128)

In other cases, English Canadian poets of World War I looked at the war's destruction of the physical, natural landscape, and were horrified. The mother metaphor once again seemed an appropriate one to express shame at the destructiveness of the war. Douglas Leader Durkin, in "The Mother Soul", gives mother nature a voice, one which condemns the animal-like behaviour of human beings. Tired of people's abuse, "the Mother, Life-giver" (Durkin 29) asserts that she will no longer help humanity. What could be a greater disgrace than harming one's mother and thus being rejected by her?

Duncan Campbell Scott expresses almost identical sentiments in "New Year's Night, 1916". Once again, humans, particularly men, are the harmful parasites on the innocent, wounded body of the earth:

> The Earth moans in her sleep
> Like an old mother
> Whose sons have gone to the war,
> Who weeps silently in her heart
> Till dreams comfort her.

The Earth tosses
As if she would shake off humanity,
A burden too heavy to be borne,
And free of the pest of intolerable men,
Spin with woods and waters
Joyously in the clear heavens
In the beautiful cool rains,
Bearing gladly the dumb animals,
And sleep when the time comes
Glistening in the remains of sunlight
With marmoreal innocency.
(D. C. Scott 77)

The connection here between actual mothers and the earth as mother is significant. Both truly are `old mothers' "Whose sons have gone to the war". The contrast between an idyllic, peaceful, humanless world and the implicit description of what humans have created during the war is striking. If the world is a better place with no animate life but "dumb animals", humans are necessarily beneath animals on the ladder of creation. Isaac Rosenberg's "queer sardonic rat" could fittingly appear in this poem. `Injuring a mother' is metaphorical, but it emphasizes the brutal reality of war.

iv) The Realistic and Metaphoric Treatment of the Natural Environment

More common than even maternal characterizations were various other treatments of nature in the English Canadian poetry of the Great War. Certainly, the regular

occurrence of natural imagery can be attributed partly to poetic convention. For hundreds of years, the natural world had inspired bards to poesy. But the origins of this phenomenon in Canadian war poetry run deeper than poetic tradition. The same factors that contributed to maternal/nature constructs in the poetry--an agrarian heritage, potential metaphorical applications of natural regenerative cycles, love of a harsh but beautiful Canadian landscape--likely helped to inspire a much broader fascination with the natural world, as did the glaring contrast between the world of nature and the world of war.

The poetic use of natural imagery often involves contrast. Rose E. Sharland's "The Destroyer" juxtaposes the pastoral with the destroyer that helps to protect it, expressing, at the same time, regret for war's destructiveness and the necessity of using force to protect the pastoral and all it represents:

> All the sea lies spun in opal, pink and purple, blue
> and gold,
> Silver flashing in the sunshine, green within the
> crested fold....
>
> Then across the water gliding,
> Like black Death the ocean riding,
> Low and seething through the waters with a boiling
> trail in tow,
> The Destroyer comes, defending
> With a vigil stern, unending,
> All the fair green-girdled country that her children
> cherish so.
> (Sharland 41)

The microcosmic irony of the line "The Destroyer comes,

defending" emphasizes one of the war's central ironies. One must be willing to destroy in order to protect, to sacrifice in order to gain. The natural environment is part of what must be protected. Hartley Munro Thomas' "The Somme" also uses contrast involving nature:

> There's a valley by the road
> Beyond Albert,
> The perfume of the hay, new-mowed
> And trees and grass were pleasant there.
> But since the German seed was sown
> Into the world and now has grown
> There is but death where once was known
> Our Pozières.
>
> (Thomas 84)

The contrast is a simple one. What were once lush fields are now fields of crosses.

Similarly, some Canadian poets also expressed a heightened awareness of Canada's beauty in contrast to the devastation in Europe. In "Dear Old Canada", J. J. Conn reveals Canada's largely agrarian heritage by celebrating Canada's good produce prices and contrasting the moderate destructiveness of hail with the reality of the demolition that his speaker was experiencing in Europe (Conn 16).

Accordingly, many poets believed Canada's physical environment to be a haven to be treasured, something concrete for which to fight. Florence Sherk expresses such sentiments in "The Sword of Empire":

> And o'er Canadian mountains and from prairies of the west,
> From roses and from shamrocks, from the thistle's hardy breast,

From fleur-de-lis and maple, faithful to the sacred soil,
Came a cry to those guarded treasured blessings by their toil--
`Leave the plowshare and the harrow! Brain and brawn must bend to yield
Greater harvest for the Empire on the blood-red battle field!'
(Sherk 7-8)

This poem, although steeped in trite symbols, is based on the concrete, the Canadian landscape. While the poem has not totally abandoned the realm of abstraction--"sacred soil" does not bring Hemingway to mind--there is at least a movement away from the abstractions of heightened language commonly found in other poems. Other Canadians wrote in the same vein. Isabel Ecclestone Mackay's "From the Trenches", despite its heightened tone, illustrates an emphasis on the concrete:

Smile upon us, Canada! None shall fail who love you,
While they hold a mem'ry of your fields where flowers are--
High the task to keep unstained the skies that bend above you,
Proud the life that shields you from the flaming wind of war!
(Garvin 135)

That is not to say that realism dominated this poetry. Several poets used the natural world in a figurative capacity. There was a Great War code of symbolism in operation. The speaker of Frank Prewett's "The Somme Valley, 1917" describes how a "sweet lark", emblematic of immortality and the supernatural (Cirlot 26), "beats on high,/ For the joy of those who sleep" (Prewett "Poems" 9),

and thus employs it as a symbol of regeneration.

Canadian poets utilized several other natural symbols, such as roses and skylarks. Gertrude Bartlett, in "The Blessed Dead", contrasts hostile nature with the natural benevolence, purity and perfection (Cirlot 275) of roses and a skylark:

> Gather thy dead, O England, to thy breast!
> Wide are they strewn, the countless slain, that lie
> Beneath grey seas and battle-riven sky:...
>
> ...unspoiled thy roses blow,
> For thee unstained the hawthorne's snow is spread,
> Through their mute lips the soaring skylark sings--
> Their still hands keep for thee all lovely things!
> (Garvin 17)

The skylark, as well as the rose and the perfection it represents, could be comforting reminders of a world without war.

Lilacs are also important in the Canadian poetic scheme of the Great War. While roses imply bravery and perfection, lilacs have a more plebeian connotation. They are peaceful symbols of the Canadian landscape left behind. Thus, in "Going Over", Charles G. D. Roberts, combines the domestic dream of a girl's voice and a lilac's scent. They unite to make the war seem unreal, for they represent everything that the war is not--peace, domesticity, leisure, beauty:

> What was the sergeant saying?--I passed it along.--

Did *I* pass it along? I was breathing the breath of the lilacs.
For a girl's voice in the night troubled my heart.

Over! How the mud sucks! Vomits red the barrage.
But I am far off in the hush of a garden of lilacs.
For a girl's voice in the night troubled my heart.
Tender and soft as a sigh, clearly I heard it.
(Roberts New 41)

The Khan views the lilac as the ultimate symbol of Canada's emerging national identity. In "From Stoney Creek to Langemark", he writes of his speaker's wish to transplant a lilac from Canada to the ground above the graves of Canadian dead in France. To do so, thinks the speaker, would make the dead (or undead?) feel as though they had been brought home, and it would also encourage the growth and development of a Canadian-like pastoral landscape, replete with Canadian birds:

Across the sea a bird might wing
His way, and sing perchance
The Maple Leaf Forever in
Our lilac tree in France...

A lilac tree like those that grow
By Barton's shaded rills,
Like those that grow where breezes blow
Through Blue Ancastrian hills.
Such trees do fill our world with bliss
In Wentworth's wide expanse;
How sweet to have a tree like this
Above our graves in France!
(Khan 7-8)

William Pike Osborne, in "Langemark, April 23rd, 1915" uses the maple tree in a similar, specifically Canadian capacity (Garvin 176).

One flower, however, stands above the rest in its

suitability to poetry of the Great War. It is the poppy. The reasons for its special place in English Canadian literature are numerous. The poppy was common to the battlefields of Europe, and its red colour begged comparison with the blood being spilled where it flourished. Its metaphorical strength likely increased after McCrae's famous poem made the poppy into part of Canada's national identity. And that opium, and the forgetfulness it provides, are distilled from the poppy could only enhance its attractiveness as a symbol for English Canadian poets of the Great War. "Remembering McCrae", by Mary Josephine Benson, comments on the poppy's capacity as an opiate:

> Red poppies ne'er again shall fan
> My spirit to forgetfulness,
> What though their fumes since Earth began
> Breathed sloth and slumber passionless.
> (Benson 83)

However, the poppy-as-opiate was not its predominant symbolic meaning in relation to the war. Grace Murray Atkin, in "Poppies", views the flower as the ultimate embodiment of peacefulness. Perhaps the poppy's capacity as an opiate has contributed to this perception, but the poem's speaker also seems to be expressing a longing for death and the escape it provides:

> Oh! Some want rosemary
> And others call for rue,
> And the wise ask pansies
> With their gentle thoughts, too:
>
> But give me a poppy

> And a deep peaceful sleep,
> When the heart stops aching
> And the eyes cannot weep.
> (Atkin 56)

Thus, poppies stood for repose and rebirth. Katherine Hale, in "Soul of the Earth", mixes a belief in eternal life with natural regeneration. The poppy is part of this blending:

> And all the while a wondrous bloom was springing
> Above the fields where lie these broken boys,
> Thousands of souls like butterflies upwinging
> In troop of radiant troop of shining joys.
> Host upon host they seek eternal breath
> Above the little mounds of lonely death.
>
> "Thus" saith the Earth, "my poppies pass in splendor,
> Flame of young hearts, for still my world is young,
> And in great Ages, wise because more tender,
> The passion of their passing shall be sung.
> Ask of these Ages! For the soul of me
> Knows endless blooming--vivid, changing, free".
> (Hale White 21)

Nature's regenerative powers appealed strongly to Canadian war poets writing in English.

Indeed, as in Hale's use of the poppy, the most common poetic application of nature in war poetry is as a metaphor for, and source of, regeneration. Many English Canadian poets of the Great War looked to nature for a model, one which emphasized the possibility of rebirth and reconstruction after the war. Grace Blackburn's speaker asks the reader to "Sow the seed of the blooming of blood" (Garvin 21) and uses a lone peach tree as a symbol of the potential for regeneration in a wasted landscape:

> White roads with trees flung over,
> And deep dyked pools by the sides of the way.

Lap after lap of stubbled field and stagnant pasture.
A desolated church with shattered roof and ruined
arches.
Only one glad thing in the whole wide wilderness,
A peach tree in blossom...pink on pink kissing the
trellis.
(Garvin 20)

Others also find hope in the natural world and its cycles. Jean Blewett's "Mount Cavell" dispels "grimness". And, as the sun sets, "one silver star" of hope remains (Garvin 25). Alice Lighthall highlights the regenerative potential of the land in "Forêt de Rouvray". The charm of the French forest will long outlast the war: "There will enchantment find thee, when the years/ Have dimmed the terror of thy land at last!" (A. Lighthall 1). The seasons could be employed as metaphors for war and peace. In nature, winter is never more than a passing condition which always leads to spring. Alfred Turner's "The Dead Won't Hurt the Spring" (CIK, Vol.1, 172) expresses a belief in the rebirth that will emerge from the war, just as does James A. Ross' "The Fallen Hero":

He slumbers now in foreign soil,
The crimson war-flowers guard his grave;
We reap the harvest of his toil,
Which marks the freeman from the slave.
(Ross 23)

In seasonal metaphors, even the coldest winter is a prelude to spring. The destruction of nature was real and disturbing, but it also offered irresistible metaphorical possibilities to poets, potential that was repeatedly fulfilled.

CHAPTER IV:

AN ELEMENT OF POETIC REALISM

i) The Vilification of the Kaiser

In some quarters, a nineteenth-century view of the role of rulers persisted, one which associated a country's leader directly with the nation he represented. In Thomas O'Hagan's "I Take Off My Hat to Albert", the King of Belgium is allotted the praise that is owed mainly to his subjects:

> Albert, King of Belgium, is the hero of the hour;
> He's the greatest king in Europe, he's a royal arch and tower;
> He is bigger in the trenches than the Kaiser on his Throne,
> And the whole world loves him for the sorrows he has known:
> so I take off my hat to Albert.
> (Garvin 173)

In one sense, viewing nations and kings as interchangeable is a concept based on abstraction, that is, the symbolic substitution of an individual for a group. Nevertheless, focusing on an individual implies a subtle movement toward realism, for individuals are tangible. An entire genre of Canadian war poetry emerged from this leader/nation association. The Kaiser was the embodiment of the enemy and so of evil. Thus, a number of English Canadian poems of the

Great War directly attack `Kaiser Bill'.

Many poets seemed to take great pleasure in threatening and mocking the Kaiser. Simply calling him Bill or Willie implies disrespect. But in other cases, entire fictions were created based on hatred of that one individual. In "The Kaizer's Dream", by D. M. Matheson, the Kaiser is anointed by the clergy and made ruler of earth and sky. But "the boom of allied cannon/ Woke the Kaizer from his dream" (Matheson 132). Similarly, W. A. Fraser's "The Day" savages the German leader:

> Here's to the day, Kaiser, when you shall die
> And pass into that living death that outlasts life.
> There is not glory, but eternal gloom for you:
> For you the gourd of life has held but poisoned wine;
> Its ashes of regret lie crusted on your lips.
> Beside the leper of the world you stand outcast--
> Beside the Turk.
>
> (Garvin 62)

In such instances, those frustrated by the war found vent by targeting an individual.

Numerous other poets attacked the Kaiser personally. In John Watson's "The Kaiser", Wilhelm is summarily blamed for the war:

> Who is the cause of all this strife,
> These monster cannon booming rife,
> And butchery of human life?
> The finger points to Kaiser.
>
> (J. Watson 79)

Violet Alice Clarke's speaker calls him "The Royal War Maker"(Clarke 64). And Pte. Albert William Drummond's "Kamarad! My Kamarad!" (Drummond 23) depicts the Kaiser

begging for mercy for his transgressions, which are then recounted. The poem concludes with the refusal of mercy to the Kaiser. Abner Cosens, also known as "Wayfarer", expresses like sentiments regarding the Kaiser's devilishness. In "Satan's Soliloquy", Satan thanks the Kaiser for being his best agent (Cosens 9). A similar poem, Capt. W. A. Inness' "Prophesy", is among the most effective of the English Canadian poems of the Great War to attack the Kaiser. His poem depicts the devil's concern over hell's difficulty in accommodating all of the freshly damned Germans, including the Kaiser:

> `Now open the flood gates and let them all in,
> Bring the Kaiser and Hindie this way;
> Here's Rasputin, the Monk who's one of our chums,
> And old Austrian Joe, by the way.
> Here! Herod, get up and give Wilhelm your seat--
> He has murdered more children than you--
> And Pilot, shake hands with von Hindenberg!
> Who has crucified more soldiers too!'
> (Inness 43)

Such poets put the Kaiser, and in this case some of his contemporaries, in despicable company of historic proportions.

Cosens utilizes to similar effect a convention that became moderately popular during the war, particularly in military journals and low-brow publications. He dedicates a section of his book, War Rhymes, to poems with mock-German accents, sarcastically attacking the Kaiser. Angus MacKay's "Holy Willie's Prayer or the Hollerin' Hohenzollerin" is a

good example of this type. MacKay, as the Kaiser, writes that:

> Democracy disturbs my dreams
> Und leaves thy Villiam veak and vorn;
> Der worldt iss upsite down, it seems,
> Since Chermany was made to mourn.
> (MacKay 91)

The idea that rulers, particularly the Kaiser, were to blame for the war is one that John Garvin supports in his poem "World War, September, 1914". While it does not involve any malicious attack on the Kaiser or `Willie', it does display the perceived schism between the influence of individuals and groups in the war and reflects a cynicism that would grow out of the conflict: "check-mating kings play the game" (Garvin 64).

ii) Compatriot Targets: Jingoism, `Slackers', and `Doing Your Bit'

Some of the poems of English Canadians written during or around the time of the Great War called Canadians to action. These poems often utilized the abstractions which permeated the poetry as a whole. However, real people and real political ends were the focus of these abstractions. In Florence Sherk's "The Sword of Empire", she writes,

`Leave the plowshare and the harrow! Brain and brawn
must bend to yield
Greater harvest for the Empire on the blood-red battle
field!'
(Sherk 8)

Here, the metaphoric use of the "harvest" and the concept of empire are abstractions. But it is a poem pointed at a specific group of people to specific political ends.

In this poem and others, the war defines values for society. D. M. Matheson's "The Man Who's Needed Most Today (1916)" exhorts the populace to advance the war effort:

So learn, you, how to fly,
Or shoot a true bull's eye
Or these deadly chlorine gasses to assay,
Or discover how to cope,
With the dreaded periscope
For you're needed in the firing line today.
(Matheson 119)

The poem is a call to action but, in the abstract tradition, it makes the war sound like sport.

Some poets, rather than trying to sell the war's allegedly positive dimensions, took the opposite route and threatened `slackers'. Warnings that stressed the shame of non-service were a common means of pushing people to action. Blanche E. Hold Murison expresses this idea in "The Call". She asks those who do not volunteer, "How shall your story down the years be told,/ Unto your glory--or your lasting shame?" (Garvin 165). It was shameful to be among those F. O. Call terms "The Indifferent Ones":

Unmoved they sit by the stream of life
And its blood-red tide to the sea goes down,

While the hosts are borne through the surging strife
To a hero's death and a martyr's crown.

They pay no toll of their gold or blood;
From them 'tis a pageant and naught beside;
So they calmly dream by the reeking flood,
While the sun goes down in the crimson tide.

(Garvin 41)

So strong was this cult of honour that some poets decided that it would be better to die than not to do one's part. An anonymous poem found in La Vie Canadienne succinctly expresses this sentiment. The speaker of "Stay at Home, Hearts are Best" says that life is easy at home, but "For me, by God! my conscience clear,/ I think I'd rather die out here" (LVC 12).

Specific terminology emerged which labelled those who failed to serve, and thus clouded the reality of war by obscuring the significance of individual lives. The catch-phrase for volunteering was `doing your bit'. Those who failed to do so were termed, among other things, `slackers'. "Bill", the story of "Bill, the bomber", chronicles the life of a man who has given up hunting and fishing in favour of "doing his bit" (Turner 35). "Fall In", by the Reverend William Tucker embodies a number of key words and phrases. His speaker tells his fellow-soldiers not to be "slackers":

Do your bit for home, boys,
Say `good-bye' to home joys,
Put away your child toys,
Strike the trail for war to-day.
Stand up to it one and all,
Let no fear your heart appal,

Let your manhood crown the call
For your country fighting, dying in the fray.
(Tucker 8)

Here, the abstract concept of "manhood" and an overall heightened tone contribute to the call for action. Capt. W. A. Inness echoes these sentiments in his poem "Patriots", which deals with those already in the service:

The tea is cold, the fish is scarce,
Tough beef, I must allow,
But carry on and do your bit,
You're in the Navy now!
(Inness 10)

In stressing manliness, Abner Cosens is particularly critical of slackers, dedicating several poems to attacking them. In "The Loyal Blacks", he writes,

When these refuse to go and fight
It is a burning shame;
I think they should be forced to go,
Conscription is the plan
To catch these chaps so very slow
And make them play the man.
(Cosens 55)

Appealing to abstract manliness could apparently have a strong effect. One of Cosens' most powerful poems, "The Slacker's Son", depicts a conversation between a father and son. The son assumes that his father fought in the war twenty years earlier, but wonders why he never reminisces about the war or shows evidence of having participated. The reason is that his father was a `slacker' who never `did his bit', and so his father hangs his head in shame (Cosens 22). Such poems may have caused some to enlist.

iii) The Seemingly Mundane

Particularly among those poets who did not aspire to literary greatness, the mundane aspects of wartime existence became the stuff of verse. Serious readers might tend to ignore this poetry for its apparent frivolity. But it is more significant than it appears. While this poetry may have functioned primarily as an escape, in that it has the effect of obscuring war's more horrifying details, it can be instructive regarding the real nature of the war and how that reality was perceived. In discussions of glory, `the hun' and `the mother country', it is possible to forget individual soldiers. But the poetry of `trifles' (a term coined by R. M. Eassie in his volume Odes to Trifles [1917]) reasserts focus on the individual soldier, and departs from the clouds of abstraction.

Such poetry, reflecting what was important to soldiers, usually appeared in soldiers' publications. In the trenches, small pleasures and everyday pains were often more relevant than the hypothetical concepts of glory and honor, or even the real danger of the front. Robert Service's "A Song of Winter Weather" is illustrative:

> It isn't the foe that we fear;
> It isn't the bullets that whine;
> It isn't the business career
> Of a shell, or the bust of a mine;
> It isn't the snipers who seek
> To nip our young hopes in the bud:

No, it isn't the guns,
And it isn't the Huns--
It's the *mud*,
mud,
mud....

Oh, the rain, the mud, and the cold,
The cold, the mud, and the rain;
With weather at zero it's hard for a hero
From language that's rude to refrain.
With porridgy muck to the knees,
With sky that's a-pouring a flood,
Sure the worst of our foes
Are the pains and the woes
Of the *rain*,
the *cold*,
and the *mud*.
(Colombo 96)

The poem's reference to heroism is somewhat sarcastic. After all, true romantic heroes must not use vulgar language under any circumstances. Heroism is farthest from the mind of the cold, wet, dirty speaker.

Edgar McInnis celebrates a seeming trifle, but, like warmth and dry skin, "Our Dug-Out" (Colombo 97) is by no means something to be taken for granted. For McInnis's speaker, the dugout is a replacement for the domestic world left behind. For one who has nothing else it becomes an invaluable haven. The war taught those it afflicted not to take comfortable domesticity for granted. This explains W. P. Johnston's dedication of a poem to a seemingly insignificant "Petrol Tin" (Colombo 98). In fact, this tin was most important. It could be used for carrying water, cooking, as a card table, "for a hundred things" important to the mundane aspects of soldierly life.

In a time when death was imminent, it is noteworthy that the mundane often became the stuff of poetry. In "The Perennial Plum", a soldier laments, not that he might be killed any moment, not that he is separated from his family and country, but that he and his comrades are always issued plum rather than any other kind of jam (CIK, Vol. 1, 65). Sergt. W. D. Dodd's speaker's biggest concern is not with the enemy but with his failing socks, hence the poem "`Darn Those Socks'" (CIK, Vol. 3, 39). Expressing similar sentiments, W. M. S. writes "Crumbs":

> You can talk about your whizz-bangs, your Jack Johnson shells and such,
> And the other things that make the Tommy grouse.
> You can talk of bombs and bullets, but they don't amount to much
> Beside the festive, crawling little louse.
> (Eassie Another 46)

Perhaps the strongest feelings were reserved for alcoholic beverages. Apparently, many soldiers would have traded much of their food ration for extra rum, for a mental escape from the war's reality. Lieutenant Jack Turner writes the "Ballad of Booze", in which he laments to Bacchus that he is drinking muddy water rather than rice wine (Colombo 100). And J. Gordon Smith, O.M.F.C. writes "S.R.D.", a poem dedicated to ascertaining the meaning of "The mystic letters sometimes seen on jars containing rum for soldiers" (CIK, Vol. 2, 70).

All war poetry of trifles elevates the seemingly

inconsequential. This is true not just of domestic items, but of certain types of service as well. W. D. Dodd's "The Ammunition Column" (CIK, Vol. 1, 65) celebrates the valor of those who keep the line of ammunition supply unbroken, a job the importance of which might be lost in the context of the rhetoric of heroism, valor and courage. Similarly, "The Runners", by Sergeant L. McLeod Gould, was "Inspired by the Runners of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion". Such under-appreciated functionaries are brave, fast and act "with a semblance of glee" (CIK, Vol. 2, 20).

Certain poets reminded their readers that human relationships could not be taken for granted in war. W. M. Scanlon writes, in "The Old Estaminet" (CIK, Vol. 1, 92), of a man whose romantic interludes are always interrupted by a call back to the line to fight. Similarly, Geoffrey O'Hara wrote "K-K-K-Katy", a light-hearted poem about the love of a stuttering soldier and a civilian woman. Their wedding plans are disrupted because he must go "off to France the foe to meet" (Colombo 121). Although this poem is presented in a comic fashion, it also carries the sting of remorse, just as all the poetry of trifles carries a message of implicit importance. These poems can be, in their often light-hearted, comic presentation, diversionary, but all reflect a reality neglected in most of the war's poems constructed with beautiful, artful language.

R. M. Eassie was perhaps the Canadian who captured most precisely the spirit of this genre of poetry. A discussion of his own brand of realism is a fitting way to close this transitional chapter and open a chapter on the war's most serious, realistic poems and poets. R. M. Eassie was a sergeant, editor of a wartime literary journal, as well as a poet. Although much of his poetry is comic in tone, what he says of his experiences deserves to be heeded. That he had witnessed grave horrors and still chose to write about war's more trifling aspects is significant in itself.

Eassie did write some rather serious poetry. But most of his notable poems deal with almost nothing at all. His ode "To a Ration Biscuit" is a good example:

> Oh, twice-cooked One!
> Twice-cooked and overdone!
> Oh, hardest tack!
> My teeth--both front and back--
> Are sorely put to it, in vain assailing
> Thy stony substance--every effort failing
> Until, imagining thy name is Fritz,
> I bare my bayonet, and thou art--bits!
> (Eassie Trifles 9)

Certainly, every soldier had a similar reaction to his rations. Thus, Eassie expresses the sentiments of his comrades. He appears to make light of the biscuit problem, but when tough biscuits are the only available food, they could become a serious issue. Eassie himself pays subtle tribute to the real importance of these biscuits, after savaging the biscuit in a variety of ways:

'Gainst hunger's prick
True thou hast proved a brick.
Oft hast thou saved
A life or two, and staved
Starvation off...

How true thou wert a comrade after all!
(Eassie Trifles 11-12)

The poem's language is somewhat satirically elevated, but there is an authentic quality about such poetry, reflecting Eassie's experience in war.

All of Eassie's odes are similar. Odes "To a Lachrymatory Shell", "To a Glass of French Beer", "To an Issue Cigarette", "To a Pair of Sheets" show their apparently trivial nature. Yet, each expresses human emotions and desires. "To a German Helmet" is a lighthearted but somewhat gloating discussion of a soldier's plans for a German helmet that has come into his possession. The lines "Say, were you comfortable on his brow?...Was he a *fairly* decent citizen? Somehow/ He didn't look it quite" (Eassie Trifles 6) show curiosity and scorn for the enemy. The sentiments expressed in "To a Green Envelope" are important on an individual human level. As the speaker muses about a letter that he is about to send home, he seems relieved that he is not required to write about the war, that to do so is, in fact, forbidden. The poem is perhaps even a comment on heightened, unreal poetry:

In thee there's not a hint of great deeds done,
No purple patchwork effort at description;
There's just a mention of some cigarettes,

My sort--the Melachrino-ish Egyptian.

Thou dar'st not tell my dear one where I am,
Thou must not mention trenches that we've taken;
But really, really, does she give a damn
So that thou prov'st my love is her's unshaken?
(Eassie Trifles 18)

Most of Eassie's poems are emblematic of a strain of realism that ran through much of the English Canadian poetry of the Great War. Here, cigarettes are more important than "great deeds done".

CHAPTER V:

ANTI-ABSTRACTION

i) Scepticism of Elites

For some individuals, the Great War brought into question the normally `black and white' concepts of good and evil. This uncertainty manifested itself in some poets' growing sense of the humanness of the enemy. Some poets also questioned the motives of their leaders and supposed allies.

During the war, there emerged a suspicion that monied interests, more than the enemy, were responsible for the war. Cynicism was replacing idealism. The Reverend Robert Norwood's speaker demonstrates this change in "A Song of Battles":

> Why?--Why?
> Because a few men sold their souls
> For little heaps of minted gold--
> Round pieces stamped with Caesar's face
> Or Alexander's awful brow--
> Gold pieces whose possession gives
> Command of battle ships and legions armed for enemies,
> Raised up because of gold! gold! gold!.
> (Norwood Piper 67)

Clearly, the blind acceptance of duty that characterized so much of the English Canadian poetry of the First World War

did not inform all visions of the conflict.

Voices of dissent were often directed at war leaders. As the senselessness of the war became apparent, those in dangerous positions came to resent those who put them there. Douglas Leader Durkin's, "Thanksgiving" satirically undermines the rationale behind wars. The poem is certainly directed at the Germans, but it does not exclude his own side in the conflict:

> A war-lord sat in his place apart
> And smiled to himself in his ease;
> The struggle was over, the victory bought,
> The guns were all silent, the battles all fought,
> And he felt of himself in his pride, and he thought,
> `I have lengthened my shores--I have widened my seas!'
> *And he thanked his good God from his heart.*
>
> A woman sat in her place apart
> And sobbed in her sorrow alone;
> The men of the town had come home from the fray--
> Not all of the men--it is ever the way;
> And she mused to herself in the gloom of her day,
> `I have still got my soul--I will keep it my own!'
> *And the good God thanked her from His heart!*
>
> (Garvin 61)

Durkin's speaker puts a human face on abstraction and implies that, by sacrificing lives for his own petty gain, the warlord has forfeited his soul.

Many poets and their speakers realized that they had been duped into believing falsehoods. Isabel Ecclestone Mackay's "War Maker" is one such speaker:

> `O God, blind the eyes death has cleared,
> Blind the soul that has seen!
> I have entered thy temple of war
> With a spirit unclean.

I have fought without faith, without flame,
For a fair-sounding lie;
For pride have I slaughtered my brother,
O God, let me die!'
(Garvin 137)

Perhaps part of the `lie' is that the sacrifice of individual lives can be worth political gain.

Cynicism often found targets closer to the battlefield than distant rulers or war grafters. In numerous instances, the speakers of poems feel abused by those who are supposed to lead them. The mysterious R. R. N., in "The Ballad of the Pump" (CIK, Vol. 1, 106), calls officers "blithering brass-hats". And numerous other poets' speakers have some less-than-complimentary things to say about their officers. In "The Major", submitted anonymously to one of Eassie's collections, a commanding officer is seen as an adversary:

Who is it that gets our "goats" every night
With a sharp little cough,
And a big torch light?
The Major....

Who is it that sees, and jumps down your throat,
When you've slipped your equipment off
Under your coat?
The Major....

Who is it that chuckles when, after correction,
The Officers mention
Machine Gun Section?
The Major.
(Eassie Christmas 68)

The subject of George Palmer's "Pay-day in France" is the unreasonableness of some officers. When a soldier is paid,

"Perhaps you buy some polish your kit to keep in shape,/ You have to keep your buttons clean, though shirts may be like crepe" (Palmer 27). Not only does this passage hint at the conflict between nineteenth-century perception and twentieth-century reality in the war, but it also reveals the real attitude of some men toward some of their superiors. There is no abstract quality here, just personal conflict.

ii) Rejecting the War, the Past and the Constructs that Marked Them

The movement from abstraction to realism or irony is generally considered to be the major tendency in British literature of the Great War. Some see the turning-point as the year 1916. Others specifically view The Battle of The Somme as the literary watershed of the war. Although such a movement is more pronounced in British poetry, this trend seems generally to hold true for the English Canadian poetry of the Great War. Certainly, many Canadian poets shifted to various modes of realistic poetry once they had experienced the trenches or felt their repercussions. While such poetry was by no means the norm during the war, certain poets writing at that time occasionally escaped from their

nineteenth-century, romantic personae to express more modern, realistic sentiments.

While it is difficult to date much of the Canadian poetry, it is likely that poems of cynicism, irony, realism and dissent emerged primarily out of the second half of the war, when twentieth-century war's reality had been horribly experienced, at least by those at the front. In some cases, the wartime webs of abstraction, utilized to varying effect in countless poems, give way, partially or entirely, to a new emphasis on the individual human condition as it really existed.

Sometimes English Canadian poets specifically attacked the reliability of once near-universally accepted codes of abstraction. Virna Sheard's "Lament" confronts the metaphorical construct of nature's regenerative capacity echoed in human experience. She also takes issue with the cult of the undead, so popular during the war. In her poem, nature's spring is not enough to overcome death, and it is the living, not the dead, who are her main concern:

> Here in my garden where the tulips grow
> I walk alone;
> Dim are my eyes with tears, my feet are slow
> My heart is stone;
> Though all the lovely earth again for me
> New sweetness yields
> It matters not,--only the dead I see
> On battlefields.
> (Sheard 23)

To some, such as Frank Prewett, the concept of the

empathetic `mother earth' was absurd. His "Burial Stones" reflects an aloof arbitrariness of nature, a view that has come to characterize the twentieth century:

> Only these stones to tell
> The deadly strife,
> The all-important schemes,
> The greed for life.
>
> For they are gone who fought;
> But still the skies
> Stretch blue, aloof, unchanged,
> From rise to rise.
> (Prewett 9)

The natural world has no sympathy for the human condition.

Other poets, looking beyond the nineteenth-century concepts of bravery, chivalry and honour, questioned the rationale of war. J. J. Conn does this as he admits the humanness of an enemy that had so often been labelled and negated as `the foe' or `Fritz'. He presents the enemy as a father in "The Disabled Soldier":

> To leave some children fatherless
> No doubt I've done my best,
> And now you see me as I am:
> I'd rather be at rest.

All that he can do is,

> look around and think
> Of that great blood war;
> And wonder in my very heart
> What they kill each other for.
> (Conn 12)

A small group of poems, dispelling myths constructed by the bulk of other Canadian war poems, add to the realization that war had some awful, senseless consequences

that had nothing to do with honour, heroism or regeneration. Minnie Hallowell Bowen's ironic look at "The Dawn" might remind readers of the perversion of a hopeful sunrise in "Break of Day in the Trenches". She also uses the traditional symbol of the rose ironically:

> The flowers forget to bloom--no roses blow--
> Only the Rose of Sacrifice is born
> Rooted in sorrow, like the stars aglow--
> Is this the Night? Behold! it is the Day!
> (Garvin 30)

If cynicism and scepticism are especially modern characteristics, then the war truly did much to introduce the twentieth century, at least for a select group of poets. Old systems of belief were dying in the face of new conditions. The Great War put a large dent in the theory of constant human betterment, for 1914-1918 seemed to have been more than a small aberration on a continually escalating graph of human achievement. Loftus MacInnes' "Evolution: A. D. 1918" rejects the nineteenth-century concept of positive human evolution:

> Listlessly wending
> Each to the ending,
> Omens portending
> Grim Nemesis near.
>
> Through regions where sadness
> Commingles with madness,
> We find less of gladness
> Each desolate year.
> (Garvin 132)

Such a poem could hardly be more contrary to nineteenth-century schemes of belief or more prophetic of a strain of

thought that emerged in the later twentieth century.

By expressing pure pity, other poets undermined the patriotic, abstract philosophies that coloured the English Canadian poetry of the Great War. In Ernest H. A. Home's "The Place Where Our Roses Grew", victory and nation mean little to those mourning the loss of their son:

> `For my Marie and I are old--
> Much older than young m'sieu'--
> And our hope and our strength lie cold
> In the place where our roses grew.'
> (Garvin 90)

The poem's rose garden has a perhaps-unintentionally ironic quality. A rose's beauty and regenerative capacity are denied. Roses cannot grow through "that heap" which marks what seems to be their dead son's place of burial. Similarly, C. J. Bunbury's speaker, in "The Widow", is deeply hurt by the harsh news of her husband's death:

> The troops were slowly filing,
> On a transport lying nigh,
> She kissed him, bravely smiling--
> He waved a bright good-bye.
>
> To him the din of battle,
> To him the joy of strife,
> To her the baby's prattle,
> To her the lonely life....
>
> `Dear God, I've been so lonely,
> My very best I've tried,
> And is this my answer only,
> The news that he has died.'
> (Bunbury 22)

For all his bravery and all her fortitude, she receives not glory, not the defeat of the foe, but a dead man.

The war's demand that soldiers repress their identities, and its destruction of lives, are the subjects of a poem by R. M. Eassie. "Odes to Army Forms, to a Report on a Self-Inflicted Wound A. F. W. 3428" shows its speaker's character demolished by the war. He no longer considers himself even a number. He has become mud; he has become nothing:

> My name's not Dawkins, Geoffrey, Archibald.
> My name is mud, the mud of Salisbury Plain,
> The mud of Flanders after riotous rain,
> The mud of No Man's Land, of Black Mud Land,
> The mud that oozes from the name I'm called.
>
> My number is not one, six, four, five, nine;
> It's zero, aye, it's fifty-six below;
> It's countless frozen cyphers in a row;
> It's minus millions, twenty-five or so;
> It's double blank--this number now of mine.
> (Eassie Another 34)

Alice Lighthall, in "The Route d'Elboeuf", illustrates the de-individualizing forces of war in a subtle poem that, on the surface, seems to be little more than description:

> Throbbing tramp of their feet--
> A column of men for the Line.
> Phantom passing of forms,
> Flash of a lantern by.
> A face for a moment seen,
> Voices you cannot define:
> So they pass out in the night--
> Back to the Line.
> (A. Lighthall 6)

However, the flash of the lantern acts as a moment of illumination, an insight into the life of an individual who to most eyes makes up only part of a line. Most poets chose to obscure that flash.

While many of the poems quoted in this section seem to hinge on a more modern sensibility than do many other English Canadian poems of the Great War, if only because they reject some nineteenth-century constructs, the authors of the following poems consciously mark the dawn of the modern age and reject the nineteenth century. Jack Turner's "Shell-Shock" deconstructs the war's terminology, especially the terms and concepts of heroism and honour:

> I'm scared, by God! I'm good and scared--my nerves are all gone smash--
> I'm scareder than I ever was before--....It feels about a century--it's really just a year,--
> Since I started on the "Death or Glory" stunt.
>
> I've seen mighty little Glory an' an awful lot of Death.
>
> (Turner 87)

The speaker has, essentially, had his naiveté dispelled. Similarly, the speaker of John Crichton's "Christmas" mourns the loss of naive innocence caused by the war:

> You sit on the floor, my baby,
> And stare at the Christmas tree,
> That glitters with silvery tinsel
> And candles and sugarplums: we
> Can smile in our cynical wisdom
> At the awe of a baby or two,
> For we've passed from the age of illusion
> And Christmas is only for you.
>
> (Crichton 2)

Initially war was coated in "tinsel", "candles and sugarplums". Experience soon dispelled this sugarcoating. An increasingly modern awareness was becoming part of the canon of Canadian poetry of the Great War in English.

Smalley Sarson is a good example of a Canadian writing in a modern style during the war. While Sarson was not a Canadian by birth, he served with the Canadian Forces and had several of his poetic works published in the Canadian war journal, Canada in Khaki. His is one of the most sophisticated and progressive voices of the Canadian poetry of the First World War. His poetry powerfully encapsulates many themes of the shift to modernism, particularly the movement from naiveté to experience, increased emphasis on the individual and the rejection of nineteenth-century codes of assurance.

Often this power comes from Sarson's use of ironic contrasts. Not all English Canadian poets were so cognizant as Sarson of the ironies endemic to the war. In one of Sarson's more striking poems, "The Shell", he uses irony to expose war's absurdity:

> Shrieking its message the flying death
> Cursed the resisting air,
> Then buried its nose by a battered church,
> A skeleton gaunt and bare.
>
> The brains of science, the money of fools
> Had fashioned an iron slave
> Destined to kill, yet the futile end
> Was a child's uprooted grave.
>
> Elverdinghe, April 1915
> (Sarson 51)

Thus, Sarson takes a cynical and sceptical view of supposed progress.

In "The Village", Sarson again demonstrates his

penchant for irony and his interest in stripping gloss from reality. The poem hinges on simple description without abstract rhetoric. In section one, "1914", a peaceful, pastoral scene in France is described. Part two, "1915", is a shocking and realistic contrast. The second part of the poem is simply a bleak description of a landscape decimated by war:

> The road itself is seamed, pock-marked with holes,
> Where you might hide ten men, nor see their heads.
> Those near the tiny stream filled to the brim
> With dank and turbid water, in greening slime,
> The bloated body of a puny kitten
> Floats, decayed and foul.
> So everywhere
> When yesteryear found peace and happiness
> Now death prowling lurks in gruesome power;
> The thrushes sing no longer in the woods,
> Whilst over all there meditates and broods
> The sovereign cruelty of war.
> (Sarson 58)

The abstractions in this poem have more to do with the reality of war's death and destruction than they do with intangibles like honour, courage or glory.

Other of Sarson's verses cleverly attack nineteenth-century structures. In "The Refugee" (CIK, Vol. 1, 170)), the speaker recounts the story of a young woman whose existence has been shattered by the war. She is carrying all her worldly possessions in her arms, and recounts her once happy life with her betrothed, from whom she has been separated by the war. Thus, Sarson confronts the effects of the war on individual experience, a confrontation which many

poets were unwilling to make. A brief verbal exchange at the end of the poem points most directly to the alteration in perspective caused by the war. As consolation for the woman's loss, the poem's speaker offers a nineteenth-century construct, reflecting one of many standard systems of language and belief in operation during the war, and especially before it: "I told her, `God will set your country free.'" But in one line of speech, the young woman rejects centuries of abstract fabrications: "`God! There is no God,' she answered me." This leaves her as one of "The crowd of refugees that search in vain", not only for a place to live but also for something in which they can believe.

Perhaps Sarson's most insightful work is a short poetic drama entitled "The Swored"(sic) (CIK, Vol. 2, 108). It stands as a testament to the poetic move from naiveté to knowledge. In it, a young man going to war buys a sword, quite an archaic weapon for the conflict he is about to enter. Naively, he proclaims,

> O, I am a soldier exalted and fierce,
> I can parry in quatre, I can parry in tierce,
> And leave every rival in love in the shades
> As Captain Courageous of sixty odd blades.

The sword acts as a phallus, and the man's pride and courage are connected to his alleged sexual prowess. Stage directions explain that he "*extricated the weapon from between his legs*". Having done so, he sings,

I can handle my man with the veriest ease,
A lightning twist of my elegant wrist--
So; I've skewered his heart and he drops to his knees;
One moment to feel
The keen edge of my steel,
Then I sever him close to the waist, if you please.

The brave lad continues this posturing for some lines but the audience is then interrupted by bleak reality, emblematic of the schism in the world's perception of the war and the war itself:

"SCENE TWO
TIME--Some two months later in trench 321 B. S.

Stage directions--LIEUT. X. *discovered groping at 3 a.m. in two feet of water.*

LIEUT. X.: Where the...did I leave my stick? We're due to go over in seven minutes!

Slow curtain.

EPILOGUE:

A MODERN POETIC LEGACY

Several Canadian poets continued writing, or began to write, poetry of the Great War in English long after the conflict's end. By the late nineteen-twenties, abstract, jingoistic poetry of the war had mostly disappeared. Probably, literary modernism had much to do with its demise, just as the war helped to spawn literary modernism.

Even cultural idol John McCrae was taken to task. A poem of dissent directed toward McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" was published in 1932. Robert T. Anderson's "Comrades of the War Years" attacks the jingoism of McCrae's dead. To continue living is more difficult than dying peacefully:

> Ye comrades of the war years
> Who sleep so sound and still,
> The sun is on the crosses,
> And the Lark is on the hill,
> We still have bitter memories
> Of nights of rain or frost,
> But ye left the battle early,
> Ere we counted all the cost....
>
> We tread again the home trails
> The trails that once ye knew,
> And now no glory waits us
> But only tasks to do,
> And still new conflicts face us
> And still we `carry on'
> But we must face the twilight

And you left in the dawn....

Old faces come about us
In silence of the night
Old forms that we remember
Were with us in the fight,
But the men with haggard faces
We meet with every day,
Are the ones who bring us anguish
That will not pass away.
(Anderson 121)

It is this kind of reaction to traditional modes of abstraction, like those employed by McCrae and his undead, which appears regularly after the war.

In 1933, Harry Amoss commented on the modernizing effect of the war. Here is a passage from the retrospective "Passchendaele 1917", published in 1933:

...war has stripped illusions Buddha-wise
Has tossed the tinsel on the winds astrew,
And with gaunt fingers rent the robes of pride
Till life in naked worth confronts the eyes[.]
(Amoss 7)

Fifteen years after the war, the constructs of abstraction had been demolished, perhaps permanently. In 1967, Alden Nowlan writes of a realization similar to Amoss'. He subverts several of the myths of the heroic soldier and transcendent leaders. Nowlan's speaker makes an effort to see things as they are, not as they were supposed to be. "Foye Bukner of Hainesville, New Brunswick, Recalls His Service with the Connaught Light Infantry 1914-1918" embodies this emphasis on reality:

They told us afterwards we'd been in France;
hell take that place, it rained continually.

> The Northrup girl who hears but cannot speak
> squawks like a German and as shamelessly.
>
> London was where we vomited, the beer
> warmer than piss, the girls like carpeting;
> and once, astonished that he looked so small
> on his high balcony, I saw the king.
> (Colombo 126)

The constructed myths of war are rejected here, and replaced with less-appealing truths. The battlefield was a dreadful place, not a field of glory; soldiers often did not know where they were, let alone why they were there; many soldiers liked to drink and carouse; and the king was not a demigod but a human being. His balcony, an elevated stature, was an artificial construct.

Similarly, in a poem written in the mid-1970s, Raymond Souster demonstrates the concern with simple reality that marks some modern poetry. "Passchendaele, October 1917" recounts an experience of the speaker's father. In the poem, there is no abstract moral, and no one dies or is saved. It merely attempts to tell the truth. During a gas attack, the speaker's father's friend, Fred,

> wasn't buying it this time,
> he was sick to death of false alarms,
> so didn't budge until the first yellow cloud seeped in
> a minute later....
> Six months or so later he was back,
> his lungs almost good as new.
> (Colombo 114)

There is no explicit message here, and implicit ones are left to the reader to infer, just as the meaning of the war itself is subject to individual interpretation.

David West's collection, Trenchmist(1983), is another modern example of a post-war poet dispelling illusions about the war. His "Attar of Death" may have been inspired by the experience of Timothy Findley's Robert Ross. It both depicts the reality and confronts the mythology of war in a free verse form that seems to mock the structures of traditional poetry:

> in the mud
> face up, a frozen rag
> soaked in urine
> held to the face
> the dead man
> has missed the rum ration
> has received instead
> more than his share of gas
> mustard green and grey
> sinking over the rim
> of the mud-bottomed mine crater
> where the forward trench used to be
> now only 12 yards
> from the enemy line
>
> twelve men creep forward
> in the grey of dawn
> flat in the mud
> peering at the rim
> where nothing moves
> where nothing at all
> smells
> like lilacs or roses
> (West 43)

Here, twelve disciples of death experience hell on earth, a hell in which the abstract symbols of hope, peace and regeneration--lilacs and roses--seem absurd.

Continuing what was by then a pattern among English Canadian poets of rejecting the assumptions of the past, in 1983 Ted Plantos wrote Passchendaele. It is another

realistic look at the war through retrospection. Most of its poems denigrate aspects of the abstract creation of war. Often, attacks are made subtly through vivid description, and the war's fundamental ironies are repeatedly dramatized. Plantos displays anti-heroism to be as endemic to war as heroism. He dispels illusions and rejects traditional poetic form in "Crucifixion: November 17, 1916":

> Yesterday behind the lines, I passed a soldier
> being strapped to a service wagon, its big spoked
> wheels
> He was no Christ, just a common soldier
> receiving Field Punishment No. I
> --pride crucified before his passing comrades
> I wanted to untie him,
> but I'm no Christ either and kept on walking
> (Plantos 46)

Cynicism, scepticism, anti-heroism all mark this poem. "The Somme" also dramatizes the schism between abstract principles and reality by contrasting a short prologue with the body of the poem:

> `you must know that I feel every step in my plan had
> been taken
> with the Divine help' *Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig*
> *in a letter to his wife....*
>
> For these few acres of mud and shit, twenty thousand
> dead
> and twice that many wounded before noon
> when Sir Douglas Haig sat to lunch
> fifty miles behind the lines
> (Plantos 33-36)

In such poems, reality conquers illusion, and cynicism reigns over trust.

Reflecting a poetic tradition more reminiscent of

Plantos than John McCrae, Marilyn Bowering wrote Grandfather Was a Soldier in 1987. This is the story in verse of a young man who returns to the scene of his grandfather's war. The work is a painfully realistic view of the conflict, and confronts the issues of remembrance, death, cynicism, pain and healing: A horse hangs in a tree,

> The hooves hang neat as gloves,
> one crossed over the other, a foot or two above
> the ground.
> The nostrils are flared, the head
> larger than the tree trunk that has been scraped clean
> by fire.
> In a second tree,
> draped over a branch like a tea-cloth, is a man,
> complete
> except for one hand.
> He is abandoned there
> as after a flood.

The speaker's thought seems to continue:

> Language fails, as you knew it would, lacks evidence
> of touch.
>
> I leave this note
> beside you while you are sleeping
>
> It is my Will.
>
> Everything not crossed out is
> what I wanted to say.
>
> Image: men hauling artillery through waist
> deep mud,
> uphill.
> (Bowering 8-9)

If "language fails" to depict the truth in the poetry of realism, it at least does not obscure it. Like poetical systems of abstraction, traditional poetic forms are crumbling. Bowering's simple description brings her as

close to the truth as possible.

Of course, despite the changing emphases of English Canadian poets, absolute truth is still an elusive and subjective concept. Those writing after the war have the advantage of the perspective that comes with time's passage. But they lack actual experience, and perhaps project modern agendas onto the past. Many wartime writers were directly involved in the war, but they also had codes of abstraction to negotiate. Realists make a marked effort not to impose structure on the structureless. In simply describing, they attempt to approach the truth. Those English Canadian poets of the Great War who relied heavily on various codes of abstraction imposed structure and hindered individual interpretation of events. The school of poetry one prefers depends primarily on whether one wishes to absorb constructed certainties, or have the freedom, together with the insecurity, of more realistic depictions. The English Canadian poetry of the Great War offers both, as it provides a view of two sides of a social and literary watershed.

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