

Scars upon my Heart and Soul:
Religious Belief in Women's Poetry of World War I

Vicky Simpson (University of New Brunswick)

World War I, like many other cataclysmic events, sparked a renewed interest in religion that is demonstrated clearly in the literary discourse of the period. In *Goodbye to All That* (1929), for instance, Robert Graves comments on the presence of priests in the trenches, the inability to bury and service properly the dead soldiers, the rumours about legends and spiritual encounters, and the men's superstitions in the trenches. In *Testament of Youth* (1933) too, Vera Brittain's fiancé, Roland, converts to Roman Catholicism when he is at the front, and even Brittain, who proclaims herself a non-believer, describes some of her 'ministrations' on the men in terms of, as Sharon Ouditt points out, 'something resembling a religious rite' (1994, p.35) and wonders if Roland might return from the dead to show there is an afterlife. As women were, for the most part, the ones left behind during World War I, they were the ones who worked to make sense of the slaughter of war, and the religious iconography in many of their poems details this attempt. In this paper, I will begin by establishing the popularity of religious belief during the war. I will then introduce Freud's 1928 essay, *The Future of an Illusion*, as a means of opening a new perspective on faith during the early twentieth century. Freud situates religion in the larger context of human culture, and he sees belief in God as a wish-fulfilling illusion. His perspective will help to explain why, rather than tacitly subscribing to the religious fervour of the period, many women's poems in *Scars upon my Heart* (1982) reveal an ambiguity, a questioning of belief. I will argue that religious iconography became such a popular discourse, used for support, protest, and a variety of messages in between, that it ultimately devalued itself and destabilized the very ideals it sought to reinforce. Thus, those who wanted or needed to

believe the most, such as the women, were left with less to believe in than ever before.

One tends to think of the years in England before the war as following a path of increasing secularization. Matthew Arnold famously evokes this sense of the disappearance of faith in 'Dover Beach', when he describes the retreating 'sea of faith' that 'was once, too, at the full' (ed. Damrosch, 2000, p.2020, ll.21-22). Certainly, the mid-nineteenth century developments in the theory of evolution made it clear to a number of educated people that the Bible could no longer be trusted in terms of historical fact and accuracy. But with the advent of the First World War came the need to unite the country in a common cause, to justify the war as something necessary and good, and the religious doubt of the preceding years provided the moral framework for this. Indeed, Nosheen Khan suggests that the war was then seen 'as a means adopted by God to jolt England out of selfishness and complacency, in which the long years of peace had enveloped her' (1988, p.41). She explains:

A nation going to war passionately believes in two things: the essential justice of its own cause, and that God is on the side of the Right. At the popular level, the British illusion of being 'the agent of a divine power' was sustained through comparison of the conflict with a 'Holy War', which image [...] helped establish the maleficent Antichrist character of Germany and its Kaiser. (1988, p.37)

If it was a religious battle, then soldiers could be aligned with Christ, which would quell all doubts concerning sin and damnation which the thought of killing might produce and would, in addition, offer the consolation of martyrdom. Women, in particular, were seen as the repository of traditional English values and an embodiment of Mother England that would live on to ensure such values were preserved. As an example of the religious rhetoric directed towards women, Ouditt quotes an article that was written by a parson and published in *Everywoman's* magazine, which states:

It is the destiny of humanity to rise until the great and wonderful plan of the Creator is crystallized into perfect harmony, and woman, on account of her finer fibre, her higher moral endowment, her sweeter and purer sentiments, and her more clarified moral vision, is ordained by Him [...] to carry the banner of progress towards its ultimate goal, whilst her brothers, husbands, sons, and lovers attend to grosser things, and wrestle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. (1994, p.94)

The comparison of English women with the Virgin Mary also attempted to establish the virtues of self-sacrifice and resignation, useful qualities in time of war, and to reconcile mothers to the loss of their sons using religious justification.

The shift from doubt to belief is articulated in Lucy Whitmell's poem 'Christ in Flanders,' which first appeared in September 1915 and, according to the anthology *Scars Upon My Heart*, was one of the most popular and reprinted poems based on a religious theme (ed. Reilly, 1982, p.140). The juxtapositions of 'then' and 'now', and 'we' and 'you' in this poem play up the revival of religious belief, the rediscovery of God, in the wake of the war. Whitmell's poem argues that the English took God and their way of life for granted until such ideals needed to be defended; like God, she calls upon her reader to support the war, and the English values that it represents. There can be no uncertainty about God's support, for in Whitmell's poem he appears in Flanders, in the trenches with the men, telling the best jokes, and listening sympathetically to the men's complaints. The end of Whitmell's poem asks for 'courage, strength, and pardon -- / Especially, I think, we ask for pardon' (ed. Reilly, 1982, p.128, ll.40-41), not only for doubting the existence of God but also for unmentioned sins committed in the name of war.

Mary Henderson's 'An Incident' is another poem that uses what Janet Montefiore reductively labels 'religious schmaltz' (1993, p.57). This poem relates a nurse's encounter with a boy who is 'wounded more

pitifully / Than [...] Christ, on Calvary' and is likened to 'a child at the breast' (ed. Reilly, 1982, p.52, ll.7-8, 12). In the second stanza, the speaker feeds the boy and, in doing so, is likened to 'Mary, Mother of God' (l.15). Thus, while Whitmell's poem tidily juxtaposes time, Henderson's stanzas juxtapose gender, and the poem concludes with the knowledge that all are suffering for 'the Mother Land' (l.24). These poems are, in fact, representative of the popular literary discourse during the war. Paul Fussell's parody of phrase-book definitions using the evasive chivalric rhetoric suggests replacing, for example, 'dead bodies' with the more poetic 'ashes' (cited by Montefiore, 1993, p.56). Fussell focuses on men's poetry, but, as Montefiore points out, women's poetry uses similar rhetoric:

The symbolic languages of pastoral and of Christian sacrifice likewise tend to distort or censor the realities of war as much as articulating them: the pastoral mode by representing dead bodies as flowers; the rhetoric of Christianity by identifying the mass slaughter of the troops with the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. (1993, p.56)

Many of these poems were intended for the widest audience possible, including children and uneducated people. Mass readership was assured if a writer used heavy repetition, a standard rhyme scheme, and religious iconography. Religion was already part of the public discourse, and its images were available to all; as Khan explains, 'it offer[ed] an established canon of thematic sources in addition to providing a firmly acknowledged reference for human conduct' (1988, p.39). Furthermore, the fact that such poems appeared to conform to the dominant discourse of the period helped to secure publication: poems that openly expressed an anti-war sentiment would likely not be printed. Thus there were reasons to play into the religious discourse, whether one personally believed in God or not.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud closely examines how religion serves certain cultural needs. To begin with, every culture demands compulsory labour and instinctual renunciation from its members, which

inevitably evokes opposition. Freud emphasises that these demands make communal existence possible, necessary because individuals cannot exist in isolation. It is to be expected that ‘the neglected classes will grudge the favoured ones their privileges and that they will do everything in their power to rid themselves of their own surplus of privation [instincts that cannot be satisfied]’, thus ‘it is intelligible that these suppressed classes should develop an intense hostility to culture, a culture whose existence they make possible by their labour, but in whose resources they have too small a share’ (Freud, 1928, p.20). In other words, culture may be seen as something imposed on a resisting majority by a powerful minority. The laws, institutions, organization, and coercive measures are meant to reconcile individuals to their culture and to recompense them for their sacrifices, to defend culture against the individual, but also to establish a certain distribution of property and maintain it (Freud, 1928, pp.9-10). Religious belief helps to serve these purposes in fundamental ways and it indicates the value of a culture. First, religion represents the extent to which the cultural rules have been internalized, the moral level of the members. It is also, however, what Freud calls a ‘heritage of ideals’, or the judgements of the loftiest and most ambitious accomplishments, ‘the first achievements that the cooperation of internal ability and the external circumstances made possible, and that now these first achievements are merely held fast by the ideal as examples to be followed’ (1928, pp.21-22). This heritage gives a narcissistic satisfaction to the members of the culture, a pride in what has already been successfully achieved, and acts as a powerful force to counteract hostility towards culture because it can be shared not only by the favoured classes but also by the suppressed, since ‘the right to despise those that are outside of it compensates them for the wrongs they suffer in their own group’ (Freud, 1928, p.22).

Religion serves the needs of the individual too. When the dangers of nature threaten us with floods, storms, diseases, and death, we are reminded

of our weaknesses that culture and civilization are unable to alleviate. Our first defence (and Freud notes that almost all cultures are the same in this respect), is to humanize nature:

Nothing can be made of impersonal forces and fates; they remain eternally remote. But if the elements have passions that rage like those in our own souls, if death itself is not something spontaneous, but the violent act of an evil Will, if everywhere in nature we have about us beings who resemble those of our own environment, then we can breathe freely, we can feel at home in the face of the supernatural, and we can deal psychically with our frantic anxiety. We are perhaps still defenceless, but no longer helplessly paralysed [...] We can try to exorcise them, to appease them, to bribe them and so rob them of part of their power by thus influencing them. (Freud, 1928, pp.28-29)

This is, of course, also how we perceive God: with the form or shape of the human, as a 'he' (or even a 'she') but not 'it'. Freud explains that we make God into a father-figure because we have been in this state of helplessness before, as children, when our relationships are characterized by the same fear but also admiration and a sense of protection. When we grow up and find that we are destined, in a sense, to remain children forever and are unprotected against the world, we invest that world with the traits of the father-figure, we create for ourselves the gods, whom we seek to propitiate or influence, and to whom we entrust the task of protecting us. Freud stresses that these are 'illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most insistent wishes of [hu]mankind; the secret of their strength is the strength of these wishes' (1928, p.52). Yet it is in culture's best interest to have its members believe in religion too:

If they are taught that there is no almighty and all just God, no divine world order, and no future life, then they will feel exempt from all obligation to follow the rules of culture. Uninhibited and free from fear, everybody will follow his [or her] asocial, egoistic instincts

[...] Chaos, which we have banished through thousands of years of the work of civilization, will begin again. (Freud, 1928, pp.60-61)

Freud's theories are certainly provocative, and they lend a new perspective to the war years in England. Our need for 'father-figures' both in culture and in religion translates on the battlefield to the officers and other individuals who set an example, whom the masses recognize as their leaders, and who influence the masses to submit to the labours and renunciations on which the existence of culture depends. However, there are three key problems that culture would face, particularly during a period of war, which may contribute to the ambiguity in much of the women's writing of this period. Firstly, by declaring that God, rather than culture, is the author of our moral laws, society risks making the observance of those laws dependent on belief in God. Secondly, while individuals usually obey the most serious laws within a culture, the culture itself is sometimes above the same laws, going to war with other nations, hoping to defend themselves against enemies by extraordinary strength or advantageous alliances. Thirdly, and most significantly, many members of a culture end up asking whether their culture is worth defending at all. As Freud points out:

If [religion] had succeeded in making happy the greater part of [hu] mankind, in consoling them, in reconciling them to life, and in making them into supporters of civilization, then no one would dream of striving to alter existing conditions. But [...] we see that an appallingly large number of men [and women] are discontented with civilization and unhappy in it. (1928, p.65)

Poems that adopt the dominant ideological discourse positing soldiers as Christ figures and women as Mary figures, like Whitmell's 'Christ in Flanders' and Henderson's 'An Incident' may at first appear to support Ouditt's argument that 'a religious certainty replaces the confusions and fragmentations of the pre-war period' (1994, p.108). However, there is an

underlying ambiguity consistent with Freud's theory. To return to Whitmell's poem for a moment, the reader is able to question the surety of God's presence in the war. It is curious that Whitmell does not just place God in a position to watch over the men, but places him in the actual trenches, a position which at other times might be construed as sacrilegious instead of patriotic. Such a manoeuvre does not permit the reader to gloss over God's non-partisan nature, an impediment that frustrates the confident claim of 'God on our side,' because it suggests that God too is taking up arms. Moreover, in the last stanza, as soon as the speaker affirms that God 'will not forget us --' (ed. Reilly, 1982, p.128, l.37) she then calls it into question with the subjective quality of the next line, 'We feel so sure that You will not forget us' (l.38). Likewise, in Henderson's poem, the Mary figure, like all of 'Womanhood' is 'striving to ease His pangs' (ed. Reilly, 1982, p.52, l.20) but she is unable to do that: the boy, a symbol for Christ, is significantly '[w]ounded to death' (l.24). The maternal power is revealed as deceptive, an illusion based on how pitifully infantilized the boy is in comparison. Furthermore, this is posited as 'an incident', perhaps to emphasise the simplicity or purity of the moment, but it implies this is one incident of many, that there are similar incidents happening as long as the war continues. The individual here is subsumed by the allegorical figures, who lose their ideological power by being commonplace rather than extraordinary. The effect of this, whether intentional or not, is to turn the incident into a wide-ranging comment on the nation itself.

Certainly, in the poetry written during the early part of the war, women wanted to believe that the loss of their husbands, brothers, and sons was necessary for moral reasons, a 'guilt offering' of sorts for the previous years of doubt. The word 'sacrifice', literally meaning 'to make sacred', refers to an offer made to the gods as an act of propitiation or worship. Gods traditionally require sacrifice in order to sustain themselves and their power. Thus, as the death toll of the war continued to mount, the doubt rose

accordingly as people began to question the difference between sacrifice and murder, and religious belief began to seem like an illusion, an illusion that no longer fulfilled the wishes of the individuals. In the introduction to *Scars upon my Heart*, Judith Kazantzis suggests that ‘to question the Sacrifice itself [was] impossible. For then his death must become not only horrible but also meaningless. Therefore, as [...] the bitterness grows in place of enthusiasm, it grows only against the enemy’ (1982, p.xix). I would argue, however, that it was not only possible but also probable that the women began to question the sacrifice, but, because of the sensitivity of the cultural climate and the men still actively fighting, such dissent had to be disguised in a politically acceptable form.

Helen Hamilton’s poem ‘The Romancing Poet’, expressly about women’s war poetry, offers a study in the ‘acceptable’ form. Hamilton tactfully rejects the symbol of Mary for women because it,

[Bids] us to plume ourselves
 For being of the self-same breed
 As these heroic souls,
 With the obvious implication,
 We have the right to take the credit,
 Vicarious credit,
 For their immortal deeds! (ed. Reilly, 1982, p.50, ll.31-37)

She complains that women use ‘usual stock-in-trade’ words ‘of tags and clichés’ (p. 49, ll.13, 14), yet she subscribes to the same religious language of which she complains but restricts it to descriptions of the men. She asserts that the only ‘glamour’ of ‘this most hideous war’ (ll.7, 6) is ‘man’s courage, / His indomitable spirit, / His forgetfulness of self!’ (ll.8-10), and that we should ‘hymn such greatness’ (l.15) for the men ‘[d]oomed to be crucified each day, / For us at home!’ (p.50, ll.28-29). Hamilton’s poem comments on the gratitude and guilt that were important parts of the women’s experience of the war: gratitude and guilt for the sacrifice of men’s

lives, but also guilt mixed with pleasure in the experience of wartime liberation. However, her poem also obliquely comments on the inability of language to represent accurately either the horrors or the glories of war. Margaret Sackville's poem 'Sacrament' is arguably the least ambiguous of these poems as she sharply delineates between religious rites and war, playing with the perception of the 'awful sacrifice' (ed. Reilly, 1982, p.95, l.9) as both something to be revered or wondered at, and something unthinkably atrocious. The pastoral scene of 'shimmering seas' (l.5), fields of plentiful crops, and happy little children are replaced by 'stricken lands' (l.13), the 'green time of the year' (l.13) changed to a 'purple flood' (l.14). Sackville uses the religious iconography of bread and wine, as well as a standard rhyme scheme (a, b, a, b), repetition, and archaic language, to offer an ironic critique of the war massacre. She transforms the illusion, the symbolic convention of 'bread of life', into the realistic 'human lives' (l.10), reminding her reader that there is nothing abstract or idealized about war. She exclaims that 'the Press / Is overflowing, the Wine-Press of the Lord!' (ll.11-12), pointing out the preposterous rhetoric that suggests such death is a necessary sacrifice. The ellipses at the end of the line make the reader further question how this could not be enough. The following line, 'Yet doth he tread the foaming grapes no less' (l.12), astutely uses a lower-case letter for the masculine pronoun, implying that humans, not God, are to blame for the bloodshed. And finally, the repetition of words like 'overflowing', 'wasted', and 'sodden', accentuates that the 'sacrifice', consisting of 'flesh (our flesh) crumbled away like bread, [...] blood (our blood) poured out like wine' (p.96, ll.19-20) has been entirely purposeless. Finally, Olive E. Lindsay's 'Despair', told in the first-person from a soldier's perspective, points to the inevitable spiritual death that follows war. The contradictions inherent in the soldier/Christ metaphor are dramatized in Lindsay's poem, as the soldier experiences a split in his sense of self, the spiritual part of him dying at Bapaume and the rest of him reduced to 'a log' (ed. Reilly, 1982,

p.64, l.2). The poem argues that the battlefield is no place for religion, condemning men to an interminable state of purgatory. The language, especially in stanzas two and three, is particularly haunting: playing with the military sense of 'desertion', it is the soul that commits this act of abandonment in being 'torn' (l.20) from the man, and the half that is left is simply 'a thing in the mire' (l.12). Such a condition is so unbearable that it leaves the crippled soldier asking an unnamed 'sir' to put him out of his pain. Lindsay's starkly realistic poem places her within the religious debate by women writers of the period, but marks her stance apart from them as she demonstrates how religious language could be manipulated to express a variety of convictions and to accommodate all manner of war experience.

When read as a group, these five women's poems clearly demonstrate the ambiguity and the variety of messages that accompanied the religious discourse in World War I literature and are discussed in Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*. Regardless of what the women writers' intentions might have been, the prevalence of the religious discourse in literature and the changing perception of culture's role in the war destabilized the imagery that, before the war, was considered iconic. With all of the British army being likened to Christ, all of the British women being likened to Mary, and the individual sacrifices mounting daily to a cultural sacrifice, the very meaning and, by extension, the effect of the historical memories were undermined. Ultimately then, the war can be seen as evidence of the failure of western cultural traditions. These traditions inspired the idealism of the young who fought, but the glorification of war also functioned as a shield that covered the true interests of power and facilitated the manipulation of the people to the service of those interests. The end result, as Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* shows, was the sacrifice of the living present to illusions of the past.

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