Both during the war years and afterwards, the dead returned to the living in prose and poetry. In Britain, France, and Germany, many writers used verse to keep the voices of the fallen alive, by speaking for them, to them, about them. Soldiers developed their own form of this genre. Their soliloquies were sad, evocative, often moving, and rarely either simply patriotic or straightforwardly pacifist. Much of this verse was written by men who continued to serve even when they knew the madness of doing so.

In one sense, therefore, war poetry is a set of meditations on the dead and their passing. To privilege this facet of war poetry is to highlight its fusion of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’. Some poems were experimental; others were written in conventional forms. Much of it arose out of the perceived need not to reject out of hand traditional languages about the dead, but rather to reformulate and reinvigorate older tropes about loss of life in wartime.

Much war poetry was reactive. What many soldier-poets could not stomach were the loftier versions of civilian romance about war. Those too old to fight had created an imaginary war, filled with medieval knights, noble warriors, and sacred moments of sacrifice. Such writing in poetry and prose, the ‘high diction’ of the patriots,¹ was worse than banal; it was obscene. In its place, war poets set before our eyes the faces, words, and gestures of once-living men. Some were those with whom they had served; others, their erstwhile enemies. The dead were their companions and entered their verse as companions were wont to do.

Some went further still. True, they protested at civilian lies and self-deceptions. But they also went on to recast older romantic traditions to express at one and the same time the dignity of the men who had fought and the degradation to which they had been subjected. More than a few war poets thereby found a language half way between lyricism, on the one hand; and realism, bitterness, and anger, on the other.

War poets have become both the psalmists and the prophets of our century. It is no accident that Benjamin Britten turned to Wilfred Owen’s ‘Anthem for doomed youth’ as the sacred text around which he
framed his *War requiem*, written after the Second World War but as much a meditation on the Great War. The music captures the dialectical relationship of the old and the new in war poetry, and its quest for the sacred, even in the midst of war.

This chapter makes no pretence of being a general history of war poetry. Its purpose is simply to explore one theme which war poets explored alongside those who worked in other languages in the arts, in films, painting, sculpture, prose, as well as in conventional and unconventional religious forms. That theme is the return of the dead from the field of battle.

The structure of this chapter is in three parts. First I point to the civilian motif of the mobilization of the ‘glorious dead’. Secondly, I discuss some soldier-poets’ reactions against this conceit. Thirdly, I describe the ways the resurrection of the dead in poetry opened up a sacred space for meditation on the war, and on those who died in it. Here traditional elements of romanticism were redefined and reaffirmed.

**Patriotic myth: ‘Debout, les morts!’**

An insignificant encounter on the Western Front in 1915 occasioned one of the most widely disseminated patriotic myths of the early years of the war. It is a story of magic and mystery, found in many forms. Perhaps the best known is that of Maurice Barrès. His version was given to him first-hand, by an obscure Lieutenant Péricard. He told of a clash at Bois-Brûlé, during which French soldiers had suffered terrible losses. The death of one ‘hero’ opens the narrative:

We had fought for three days; all that were left in the trench were a few harassed men, completely isolated, with a shower of grenades falling on our heads. If the Boches only knew how few we were! Their artillery thundered. A lieutenant (his name escapes me), who came to reinforce the position, smoking his cigarette and laughing at the bombs, was hit in the temple. He was propped up in the parapet, his two hands behind his back, his head slightly tilted. Blood spurted from his wound, in an arc, like wine squirming out of a cask. His head tilted more and more, then his body slid, and suddenly fell.

The men in this unit were isolated, exhausted, and terrified. One man, Bonnot, ‘took no notice’, and ‘continued to fight like a lion, alone against how many?’ This example helped to restore Péricard’s will to resist. He surveyed the position, realizing that they were in a desperate situation. He walked down the line of trenches, which were

full of French bodies. Blood everywhere. At first, I walked hesitantly, alone among all the dead... Then little by little I got my courage back. I dared to look at the corpses, and it seemed to me that they were looking at me.

205
Péricard's men thought he was mad. Then the Germans renewed their attack:

Their grenades flooded down like an avalanche. I retreated among the outstretched bodies. I thought, 'Well, is their sacrifice going to be for nothing? They fell in vain? And the Boches will come back? And they will steal our dead? ...' I got angry. I don't remember precisely my words or actions. I only recall that I cried out something along these lines: 'Arise! Why are you flung on the ground? Get up and let's throw the pigs out!'

Here was the moment of the miracle:

Dead men arise! A touch of madness? No. Because the dead answered me. They said, 'We follow you.' And rising at my call, their souls mixed with my soul and stoked a mass of fire, a large river of fused metal. Nothing was able to astonish or to stop me. I had the faith that moves mountains. My voice had got hoarse shouting orders during these two days and that night; but now it came back, clear and strong.

... I don't know what happened after that. There is a gap in my memory; action devoured memory. I have simply the vague idea of a disorderly battle, in which, in the front line as always, Bonnot got separated. One of the men in my section wounded in the arm, continued to throw grenades covered with his own blood on the enemy position. I had the impression that my own body had become the body of a giant, with endless energy, a clarity of thought that gave me the power to see on ten sides at once, to shout an order to one, while giving another order by hand, to shoot and at the same time duck a grenade.

The dead provided arms as well as inspiration:

Twice we ran out of grenades, and twice we found at our feet sacks of grenades, mixed with sacks of earth. All day long, we had passed by without seeing them. But had it been the dead who had placed them there?

In case we had missed the point, the tale makes explicit the religious character of the episode. Péricard told Barrès that

All through the night and for several days thereafter, I kept the religious emotion which had taken me over the moment I had recalled the dead. I sensed something similar after holy communion. I knew I had lived hours which I would never know again, during which my head, having broken through the low ceiling, had come up against a mystery of the invisible world of heroes and gods.

The miracle was not an individual experience. It was the expression of the 'soul' of France, the fusion of the living and the dead so beloved of romantic patriots like Barrès. Here is the way Péricard ended his story:

At that moment, certainly, I had gone beyond myself... I know that I am not a hero. I shake with fear each time I have to go over the top... It was the living who had provided the example and the dead who had led me by the hand. The
cry had not come from the mouth of a man, but from the heart of all those who lay there, the living and the dead. A single man couldn’t find that tone of voice. There had to be the collaboration of several souls, raised by the circumstances, several of whom had already soared into eternity . . .

It would be a lie to say that I pretended to monopolize the glory of our regiment that day. The cry was not mine, but it was of us all. The more you place me in the mass, the closer you come to the truth. I was only a tool in the hands of superior powers. ²

‘Voilà les faits’, Barrès concluded, in retelling the story (in French) to the British Academy in 1916.³ His subject was ‘The ancient heraldry of France, or its eternal traits displayed in the present war and in old epics.’ The song of Roland and other medieval texts were placed alongside this modern tale of heroism, and presented a seamless web of Gallic nobility, rooted (as he wrote time and again) in the soil and blood of France.⁴

Poetic reactions

The same story was told by dozens of journalists, hack poets, politicians, and graphic artists. It was enshrined in a ‘best-selling’ image d’Epinal,⁵ and developed in pamphlets and orations throughout the war.

It also occasioned a passionate outburst by one serving soldier who did not survive the war. Marc de Larreguy de Civrieux was a young Catholic, who passed through the ranks of French conservatism and royalism, via Action Française, before joining the army in 1914. His military service led him to reject violently the patriotic shibboleths of Barrès. To those who echoed the cry ‘Debout, les morts!’, Larreguy replied:

Let them sleep in peace,
The dead! After all, what harm have they done you
That you pursue them into their gloomy refuge?
After having carried the load
Of so many evils and so many heinous crimes
After being damned for your civilian hatreds,
Having sacrificed their youth and their blood,
Don’t they have the right that the passer-by,
Sympathising with their sins,
Lets them finally to decay in tranquillity.

Let them sleep in peace,
Beneath the frozen earth and the thick grass,
In the happy oblivion of their supreme pose!
So that they will never feel
The worm feasting on them
And through which their flesh decomposes!
So that never again will they open their eyes,
And forget this stinking world,
Cultural codes and languages of mourning

For the compassionate and eternal nothingness
In which their corpses rest!

Barrès came in for abuse in another piece of his poetic invective, entitled ‘Epistle from a monkey in the trenches to a parrot in Paris’. There he fumed against Barrès’ ‘eye-wash’ in the Echo de Paris, and decried his disgraceful ardour for war. In another fiercely angry poem, ‘To those for whom life is “dear” and who hold the life of “others” so cheap’, he is the unnamed target, Marianne’s pet parrot, whose cries were heard in the slaughter-house where she swung her cleaver ‘dripping with blood fresh tapped’. Larreguy could accept none of Barrès’ certainties about why the war had to be fought. Instead, as he wrote in what could have been his epitaph, ‘The Soldier’s soliloquies’:

Better for me to just keep mum
And, when it’s my own turn to die
Depart this life for kingdom come
But never know the reason why.

He was killed near Verdun in November 1916.

Luckier was the French poet René Arcos, who was older than Larreguy, and a prominent figure in the group around Jules Romains and the journal La nouvelle revue française. He survived the war and worked alongside Romain Rolland in the propagation of the European idea. His anger was as marked as that of Larreguy. In his collection of essays published in 1920, Pays du soir, he reiterated the attack on the Barrèsian vision of the mobilization of the dead:

After having pursued with zeal and method the extermination of obscure living people, our leaders invented the mobilization of the dead. The dead were their property, . . . their imperial guard.

‘The dead must be served’, ‘we must not ignore the voice of the dead’, became catch phrases in the effort to sell whatever politicians wanted to sell. The dead became a ‘silent army’ needed ‘to guard their banks, parliaments, racing stables, and their prostitutes’ diamonds’. They voted ‘en masse for the government’. At every turn, the dead were invoked to legitimate the status quo. Was it really true, he asked rhetorically in Pays du Soir, that by 1920 the dead of Flanders and Artois, who had given their lives freely, had become ‘our enemies’? No, the dead were beyond nation and beyond class:

Leaning one against another
The dead, without hatred and without a flag
Hair matted with dried blood,
The dead are all on the same side.

There is an uncanny resemblance between these sentiments and those of an English poet equally distant from the heroic illusions of
civillian journalism.\textsuperscript{12} Charles Hamilton Sorley was born in the same year as Larreguy, in 1895. His immunization from virulent nationalism may have come as a result of a visit to Germany in 1914. Early in the war, he expressed unease at Rupert Brooke’s war poetry for turning duty into high sentimental melodrama. Brooke was the English equivalent of Barrès, though at least he had served. Sorley too knew of what he wrote. After he was killed in October 1915, this poem was found in his papers:

When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you’ll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes are not your tears flow.
Not honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, ‘They are dead.’ Then add thereto,
‘Yet many a better one has died before.’
Then, scanning all the o’ercrowded mass, should you
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
Great death has made all his for evermore.\textsuperscript{13}

In ‘Two Sonnets’, Sorley describes death as ‘no triumph, no defeat: / Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clear, / a merciful putting away of what has been’.\textsuperscript{14} Just as in the work of Larreguy, here is a poetic plea for rest, not resurrection.

A fourth, younger poet who was too young to fight, picked up the theme of the mobilization of the dead in a much more sardonic manner. Bertolt Brecht’s early poetry was closer to René Arcos’ biting wit than to Sorley’s quiet manner, but the theme was the same. In his ‘Legend of the dead soldier’, written in 1920, Brecht brought the rhythms of music hall to the demolition of the Barrèsian school of thought:

And when the war reached its final spring
With no hint of a pause for breath
The soldier did the logical thing
And died a hero’s death.

The war however was far from done
And the Kaiser thought it a crime
That his soldier should be dead and gone
Before the proper time.

So a medical board dug up what was left of him, passed him fit for service, as a man who ‘merely lost his nerve’, ‘filled him up with a fiery schnapps’, ‘shoved two nurses into his arms / And a half-naked tart’, hid his stench by a priest’s incense, and marched him back to war, so
that for a second time he could go off ‘to a hero’s death / Just like the manual said’.  

The poem is a raucous rendition of a theme treated by Georg Grosz in a cartoon showing a German medical board passing a skeleton for military service. This is probably the most vicious caricature of the theme of the mobilization of the dead, though it was mirrored by the notorious ‘trial’ of Barrès by the surrealists for ‘crimes against the safety of the mind’ in May 1921. The poet Benjamin Péret marched around as the German unknown soldier, spouting meaningless verse, thereby spreading the accusation across the Rhine. This form of politics as theatre succinctly captured the revulsion felt by radical poets and artists at the nationalist mysticism of ‘Debout, les morts’.

Conversations with the dead

Most poets who wrote about the dead were not politically active people. Their verse was not placed in the service of a political cause, though most preserved some vestiges of the loyalty to nation or community which impelled them into the army in the first place. What they try to offer is compassion in place of political commitment. Ambivalent about the war, they retained their loyalty to their former comrades who, in many cases, lay by their side. Their evocation of the fallen frequently took the form of giving the dead the capacity to speak or see or go home again.

Consider the work of the German poet Heinrich Lersch. He had volunteered in August 1914, very much the patriot, but he was turned down initially on grounds of ill health. He finally got into the army, served in Champagne, where in May 1915 he was buried alive during an artillery bombardment. That ended his spell of front-line service, and tempered his ardent patriotism.

Lersch’s poem ‘Wenn es Abend wird’ (‘When night falls’) is characteristic of one form of this romantic vision, the return of the dead to their homes:

When the last shadows of the setting sun slip across the battlefield,
From graves in woodlands and glens, the dead arise,
From graves in woodlands and glens,
From graves in heath and dune,
They stand beside their knolls praying,
Facing home, on foreign soil.

A bird sings in the night.
Then they fall out, rise up, glide homewards,
Over ruined towns, over fields laid waste,
War poetry, romanticism, and the return of the sacred

Over armies still fighting,
Past shimmering rivers, away, away to their homeland.

The image is one familiar to the spiritualist community (see pp. 54–77). Wartime photography and memoirs also present many such instances of military units at prayer, before or after battle. But instead of thanking God in their hour of victory, as Hindenburg had done after Tannenberg, or rejoicing in their safe return from the battlefield, these men are dead. What they want is to go home:

There when night begins to fall,
Shadows draw near from the frontiers of the Fatherland,
From mountains and oceans,
Like shadows, clouds, red at sunset, sinking like larks
into their nests.

Everywhere.

Over there, at the edge of the wood,
Where between ripening cornfields a footpath,
Bordered by poppies and cornflowers,
Winds upwards.
There are figures; happy gestures of outstretched arms;
Blessing hands touching nodding ears of corn,
Bowed necks lower eyes full of pained joy
Into the sea of stems, and raise to their pale lips
The bright red and blue of wild flowers.
Kneel, arms stretched out towards the golden riches of life,
In the flowering clover.18

This poem is in two parts. The first touches on soldiers at prayer and the sacred; the second descends to the sentimental. It is as if their sacred status is compromised the closer to home they come, and instead of building up to a crescendo the poem disintegrates into conventional verse about pastoral pleasures. It is an attempt to move away from patriotic certainties, but a failed attempt, because the poet can’t quite escape from the natural beauty and call of the Fatherland.

Anton Schnack could. He explored the same motifs as Lersch, but brought to them a more powerful sense of compassion. He was a veteran of Verdun and the great battles of 1918, and brought to his verse the need to explore ‘whatever mourns in man’.19

One of his poems, ‘Der Tote’ (‘The dead soldier’) revives the dead of the Great War, but imagines the unfulfilled promise of their lives in a more indirect way than did Lersch. He observes a dead German soldier, ‘Head still full of memories of the other side of the Rhine’:

That mouth had many things left to say;
Maybe about gardens strolled through in autumn,
Cultural codes and languages of mourning

Maybe about ochre-coloured cattle,
Maybe about the poverty of his grey old mother
Or that ear, pale, small, still full of thunderstorms,
Of deep waves of sound,
Enjoying hearing again the blackbirds
In the pear-tree of spring,
The shouting of the city children out in the country;
In his eye this:
A net full of white fish, bluish-looking stars;
Was not a Gothic doorway overgrown with ivy,
Gleaming in the dark, once reflected in it?20

The romantic repertoire of images is here, but it serves to highlight what the dead soldier could no longer do, not how beautiful the Fatherland was. Who killed him? Someone with the same local sympathies and rhythm of life. Now, Schnack observes, his dead comrade

is just a dark shape, a death, a thing, a stone, destroyed beyond measure, filling the night with its outrage at man's cruelty.21

That cruelty was the poet's responsibility too, one which he did not shrug off. This is what makes Schnack's verse so similar to that of Wilfred Owen. Both understood what soldiering meant, and knew that they were killers as well as victims. Consider Owen's 'Strange Meeting' in the context of this international theme of the poetic resurrection of the dead of the Great War:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, –
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

The setting is battle itself, and in place of a bucolic reverie, Owen presents a descent into hell, this time with an unusual guide. His Virgil was a German soldier he, the poet, had killed.

'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'
'None,' said the other, 'save the undone years,
The hopelessness.'

'Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also', says the ghost, and then lists, as Schnack did, the catalogue of pleasures lost, laughter not heard, courage and wisdom thrown away.

212
‘I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.’

But he was ripped from life by the poet, the man by chance he met in hell:

‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend.  
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned  
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed  
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.  
Let us sleep now . . .’

How far we have travelled from the poetic forms of romantic love of the Fatherland. None of Lersch’s sentimentality here, though the affinities with Schnack’s harder verse are apparent.

There is also a striking similarity to a poem written by Siegfried Sassoon, ‘Enemies’, about a dead English soldier, confronting dead Germans, killed by the poet. He took their lives in anger, enraged like Achilles after the death of Patroclus. Here the poet looks on at the scene of the dead on both sides trying to understand what had happened to them.

These men in their own ways faced their responsibility for killing, for filling the ‘cess of war’. Through images of the dead (in a sense) living ‘normal’ lives, or having still-human sensibilities, they acknowledged their own sense of guilt at their complicity in the monstrous crimes of war.

The poetic motif of the dead among the living was used in other ways. One of the most prominent is the absorption, the ingestion of the dead by those still alive. The living are half dead, and the dead half alive; both in a liminal world, full of images most of us fortunately never manage to see.

One war poet who suffered from a surfeit of such memories was Ivor Gurney. In ‘Ballad of the three spectres’ he captured the nightmarish quality of these visitations of the dead, and the likelihood of joining them:

As I went up by Ovillers  
In mud and water cold to the knee,  
There went three jeering, fleering spectres,  
That walked abreast and talked of me.

One predicted he, the poet, would get a ‘nice Blighty’ wound; the second said no such luck, ‘he’ll freeze in mud to the marrow’; but the third, the worst of all ‘spat venomously’ and prophesied:

‘He’ll stay untouched till the war’s last dawning  
Then live one hour of agony.’

The poet called the first two ‘liars’: he wasn’t lightly wounded, and still unfrozen, but awaited the day before deciding whether the third spoke
the truth. This poem is a rare example of malice or jealousy among the dead for the living. It is an example of what Robert Jay Lifton, in another context, has called ‘the guilt of the survivor’. The dead in Gurney’s poem are sardonic and positively hope for his demise. And why shouldn’t they? After all, he had been spared.

In the hands of other poets, this theme was treated without Gurney’s biting morbidity. The Italian war poet Giuseppe Ungaretti wrote of the ‘barely heard whispering’ of the dead, ‘No more than the increase of grass, / Happy where no man passes.’ No biting asides here, or indeed in most other invocations of the voices of the dead.

Some even adopted a kind of fond playfulness with this set of images. One powerful example is the poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire, whose military and literary career I have already considered in chapter 1. Consider his poem, ‘Bleuet’ (‘Cornflower’). The cornflower (already evoked by Lersch) is again the equivalent of the English ‘poppy’; the flower appropriate for wreaths and commemoration.

Young man
You are joyous and your memory is bloodied
Your soul is also red
With joy
You have absorbed the life of those who died close to you
You have decision in you
It is 5 o’clock and you would know
How to die
If not better than your elders
At least more piously
For you know death better than life
O sweetness of other times
Immemorial slowness

As in all the verse of Apollinaire, this poem expresses an ambivalence, a strong undercurrent of irony, a powerful dialectical sense of contradiction. Not for him the heaviness of Gothic imagery, the solemnity of Owen. But the terrain is the same, the invocation of piety, and so is the bitter-sweet memory of the men who had already died and those soon to join them. They, like the flowers, absorb the living matter in the soil, flourish, and then fade away. This is the language of evanescence, echoing Biblical passages, but with Apollinaire’s lightness of touch.

Mourning for the dead, whom the poet bears like a cloak on his shoulders, is treated even more directly in ‘Ombre’ (‘Shadow’):

Here you are near me once more
Memories of my comrades dead in battle
Olive of time
Memories composing now a single memory
As a hundred furs make only one coat
As those thousands of wounds make only one newspaper article
Impalpable dark appearance you have assumed
The changing form of my shadow
An Indian hiding in wait throughout eternity
Shadow you creep near me
But you no longer hear me
You will no longer know the divine poems I sing
But I hear you I see you still
Destinies
Multiple shadow may the sun watch over you
You who love me so much you will never leave me
You who dance in the sun without stirring the dust
Shadow solar ink
Handwriting of my light
Caisson of regrets
A god humbling himself

This poem, written in 1917, brings the fallen to life, and within his poetry they are seen as part of the ‘changing form’ of his shadow. Much of Apollinaire’s poetry has a disarming panache, which, however, does not fully obscure his intention both to explore the sacred and to resist the elevated tone other poets adopted in its presence. Consider the poems ‘Voici le cercueil’ (‘Here is the coffin’) and ‘Vive la France’, characteristic calligrams, or image-poems:

Here is
the cof
fin in which
He rested
rotting
and p
ale

Long live France!
He sleeps in his li
ttle soldier’s bed
My resuscitated
Po e t

Where is the emphasis in this poem: on the ‘resuscitated poet’, ‘rotting and pale’ or on ‘his little soldier’s bed’ or even on the patriot’s salute? Apollinaire offers us all of them, and in the mocking form of a drawing of a casket on a bier. The gallows’ humour of the soldier tempers the seriousness of the subject.
Cultural codes and languages of mourning

Not so in ‘Endurçis-toi, vieux coeur . . .’ (‘Harden, old heart’), where he loses his jaunty manner and listens

\[
to~the~piercing~cries
that~the~wounded~in~agony~utter~a~long~way~off
O~men~lice~of~the~earth~O~tenacious~vermin^{32}
\]

Or in his earlier poem about the outbreak of war ‘La petite auto’ (‘The little car’), where he imagines sardonically that ‘Nations were rushing together to know each other / through and through’, only to bring us up with a Gothic start in the very next line, which tells us that ‘The dead were trembling with fear in their dark dwellings.’\(^{33}\) Eros and thanatos, erotic associations and images of death, are liberally blended in Apollinaire’s poetry. The jarring mix of opposites is also apparent in a mid-war poem ‘Exercice’:

\[
\text{All~four~Class~of~1916}
\text{Reminiscing~not~prophesying}
\text{Prolonging~the~ascetic~life}
\text{Of~those~who~exercise~the~art~of~dying.}^{34}
\]

Here is the voice of the soldiers’ songs, the barrack ballads that caught the emotion and swagger of the men at the front. Apollinaire captured the mixed mood of these men, not far from the dead, yet clinging defiantly to life.

Apollinaire was an iconoclast with a flare for tradition. Romantic elements abound in his work. Paradox was his métier, and his stance halfway between the modern and the conventional gives an added dimension to his war poetry.\(^{35}\) He never questioned his patriotism, wore his uniform with dash, but did not ignore the ugliness of the war. His experiments in form provided a visual component to his delight in contradictions, to the mix of metaphors of love and war, of horses’ flanks and women’s thighs, of the profane in the midst of the sacred. He aimed to mediate between opposites and antagonists, as in his well-known poem ‘La jolie rousse’ (‘The pretty redhead’):

\[
\text{Here~I~stand~before~everyone~a~man~full~of~sense~.~.~.}
\text{Who~has~seen~war~both~in~the~Artillery~and~the~Infantry}
\text{One~who~has~been~wounded~in~the~head~and~trepanned~under~chloroform}
\text{One~who~has~lost~his~best~friends~in~the~terrible~slaughter}
\text{I~know~as~much~about~what~is~old~and~what~is~new~as~a~single~person~could~know}
\text{And~without~troubling~now~about~this~war}
\text{Between~ourselves~and~for~our~own~sakes~my~friends}
\text{I~sit~in~judgment~on~this~long~quarrel~between~tradition~and~invention}
\text{Between~order~and~adventure}^{36}
\]
The modernists were not the enemies of ‘order’, but exuberant <i>bons vivants</i> who ‘want to bequeath to you vast and strange domains’. He asked his shocked elders for pity, the last thing in the world one would expect from a modernist:

Pity on us who are always fighting on the frontiers  
Of limitlessness and the future  
Pity our mistakes pity our sins<sup>37</sup>

How much of this was mocking, how much straight is impossible to tell. But the force of his verse served as a bridge between the old and the new, between the sacred and the profane, between the patriot and the man of the world. His friend André Billy described Apollinaire as ‘the man best qualified to represent the Baroque in modern times’,<sup>38</sup> full of rich styles, moods, and images. His poetic resuscitation of the fallen shows one way in which he breathed life into ancient metaphors about the return of the fallen in wartime.

War poetry and the Bible

Naturally, images of the Passion of Christ abounded in war poetry. Pre-war verse prepared the way. Consider ‘Mankind’, by the Austrian poet Georg Trakl:

Round gorges deep with fire arrayed, mankind;  
A roll of drums, dark brows of warriors marching;  
Footsteps through fog of blood, black metals grind;  
Sad night of human thought, despair high-arching;  
Here fall’s Eve’s shadows, hunt, red coin consigned.  
Cloud, pierced by light, and the Last Supper’s end;  
This bread, this wine, soft silence have in keeping.  
The Twelve in number here assembled stand;  
Cry out at night, under branched olives sleeping.  
Into the wound Saint Thomas dips his hand.<sup>39</sup>

This poem was written in 1911–12, in anticipation of violence.<sup>40</sup> Trakl committed suicide early in the war, after a painful period of service as an officer in Galicia with the Austrian Medical Corps. His verse is full of romantic images, as in ‘Grodek’, where ‘the night embraces / Dying warriors’ and ‘The sister’s shade now sways through the silent copse / To greet the ghosts of the heroes’, or ‘Im Östen’ (‘Eastern Front’) where ‘Ghost of the fallen are sighing.’ Here spiritualism and a dark spirituality merge in a familiar and gloomy romantic haze.<sup>41</sup> The same dark glow illuminated the verse and prose in <i>Der Wanderer zwischen beiden Welten</i> (<i>A wanderer between two worlds</i>), written by Walter Flex, who was killed in October 1917.<sup>42</sup>
At the early stages of the war, French soldier-poets made similar gestures towards the sanctification of the trenches. This was the signature of Charles Péguy, killed in late August 1914, as well as that of Jean-Marc Bernard, a neo-classical poet, killed in 1915. Bernard dedicated ‘Nos Clochers’ (‘Our church spires’) to Barrès, and in ‘De Profundis’ he proclaimed that dead soldiers lie ‘Clothed in their sacramental blood’. Mystical Christian verse in Breton was among Jean-Pierre Calloc’h’s contribution to the war effort. ‘I know that You will come. I know that you are near. I believe in the mystery of Grief’, he wrote in 1915, while serving in the infantry. He died on the Western Front two years later. These poets were not alone in the world of French literature in spiritualizing the war and the comradeship of suffering in the trenches. Their advantage over civilians like Barrès was obvious: they had the moral authority to say quietly what he shouted from the rooftops of Paris, far from the killing fields.

English war poets employ other kinds of romantic rhetoric. Some are embittered; others, straightforwardly lyrical. Most do not escape from a spiritual framework which, with qualifications, their poems reaffirm. Siegfried Sassoon’s poetry is a case in point. It is a mistake to interpret his war service as a time when he escaped from romanticism and spiritual simplicities after a spell in the trenches. In November 1915 he drafted a poem ‘The Redeemer’. Christ appears in the trenches not with a ‘thorny crown’ but only the ‘woollen cap’ of ‘an English soldier, white and strong’. He joins men struggling along a ditch. The original ending was maudlin and conventional:

But in my heart I knew that I had seen
The suffering spirit of a world washed clean

By March 1916 this had been transformed into:

And someone pitched his burden in the muck
Muttering, ‘O Christ Almighty, now I’m stuck!’

The second couplet is, of course, better poetry, but its existence does not constitute proof that the poet had moved into a different, demystified, register. For example, in March 1917, a full year later, Sassoon wrote ‘In the Church of St Ouen’. It is quintessentially romantic:

Time makes me be a soldier. But I know
That had I lived six hundred years ago
I might have tried to build within my heart
A church like this, where I could dwell apart
With chanting peace. My spirit longs for prayer,
And, lost to God, I seek him everywhere.
No irony here, though it can be found in abundance elsewhere in his writing.

The same refashioning of romanticism in religious form marks much of Wilfred Owen’s poetry. Consider his ‘Soldier’s dream’, begun at Craiglockhart in October 1917, and reworked through the next year:

I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;  
And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;  
And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts;  
And rusted every bayonet with His tears.

Alas, the miraculous disarmament is foiled, because ‘God was vexed’ who ‘gave all power to Michael’, content to put the instruments of death into working order. Owen’s meditation on Christianity is a complex theme, well beyond the limits of this chapter. But this poem, among others, points to the persistence of romantic traditions in war poetry as a whole.

The split is between Old Testament and New Testament motifs in war-poets’ writing. While the Old Testament theme of sacrifice was challenged and reshaped, New Testament parables and images still retained their force. Even Isaac Rosenberg, the one Jewish soldier-poet among those whose verse has lasted, adopted this motif. In an early war poem, ‘On receiving news of the war’, he writes:

Red fangs have torn His face.  
God’s blood is shed.  
He mourns from His lone place  
His children dead.

Hardly consonant with Jewish teaching, this sentiment was echoed in much other christological verse produced during the war. In contrast, Rosenberg’s style was entirely different when he meditated on Moses the killer and on King Saul, who died in battle after consorting with the witch of En-Dor. For what Owen called ‘the pity of war’, poets turned to New Testament images, though there is much in the Psalms, Lamentations, and the Prophets on which they could have drawn for the theme.

Some exceptions should be noted. The divine order was not accepted uncritically, and some flirted with angry, iconoclastic images. Ivor Gurney’s ‘amazed heart’, confronted by a world of pain, ‘cries angrily out on God’. And Herbert Read went well beyond the sensibilities of most of his fellow-poets in ‘The crucifix’:

His body is smashed  
through the belly and chest
Cultural codes and languages of mourning

the head hangs lopsided
from one nail’d hand.

Emblem of agony
we have smashed you!\textsuperscript{53}

The exclamation at the end of the poem removes the possibility of a sad reading of the first stanza. It is an accusation, a cry of anger at the emptiness of the religious framework so many other poets accepted.

A similar anger is active in Richard Aldington’s poems, but its echoes are almost all Old Testament in character. Here his work was symptomatic of a broader sensibility at work among English soldier-poets. The accusation that the young had died while the old stood back was a commonplace during and after the war.\textsuperscript{54} Aldington voiced it in ‘The blood of the young men’, where he presents soldiers

Crying for our brothers, the men we fought with,
Crying out, mourning them, alone with our dead ones;

who point an accusing finger at the ‘old men’ who ‘will grow stronger and healthier’ feasting on the ‘Blood of the young, dear flesh of the young men’.\textsuperscript{55}

The image of human sacrifice is unmistakably that of the ‘Akedah’, the legend of Abraham and Isaac. Three well-known war poems transformed the story. The first is ‘The parable of the old man and the young’, written by Wilfred Owen at Scarborough in July 1918. The preparation of the sacrifice is made, following Genesis. Then the ‘Ram of pride’ is offered in place of Isaac.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.\textsuperscript{56}

The second is Osbert Sitwell’s ‘The modern Abraham’, also written in 1918. It tells of the pride of the patriarch who ‘Loves his country in the elder way’ and sent ten sons to be killed in the war. In Sitwell’s ‘The next war’, written in November 1918, the Akedah is similarly transformed, this time as a repeated human sacrifice, in which the sons of the fallen are sacrificed in their turn.\textsuperscript{57}

We have few poems which speak of the fathers’ reaction to this accusation. One of the most disturbing, and most elusive, is a simple couplet ‘The common form’, by Rudyard Kipling, whose son was killed at Loos in 1915:

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.\textsuperscript{58}

It is one of Kipling’s ‘Epitaphs of the War (1914–18)’, and can be read in two ways. The phrase ‘because our fathers lied’ can be seen as the
answer to the question in the first line of the couplet. But it is also possible that Kipling is suggesting that the answer to the question 'why did they die?' lay in the mind of the reader. Only he or she can do better than the lies told by the fathers.\textsuperscript{59} In either case, the old are indicted, and someone else must speak the truth.

In reworking the legend in Genesis about the sacrifice of Isaac, English poets challenged religious conventions and an entire idiom of praise of the ‘noble dead’. But we see here the recasting of older themes, not their supersession. At this point Kipling, the poet of Empire – and the man who chose the emblem from Ecclesiasticus, placed on Lutyens’ ‘great stone’ in British and Imperial war cemeteries: ‘Their name liveth forevermore’ – joined Käthe Kollwitz, who sculpted the enduring war memorial of herself and her husband on their knees in front of the grave of their son in Belgium. They, the elders, had failed to stop the sacrifice, and their sons had paid the price.

Conclusion

This exploration of one – and only one – aspect of Great War poetry lends weight to the view that far from ushering in modernism, the Great War reinforced romantic tendencies in poetic expression about war. For most, it was not the romanticism of Barrès, to be sure; his posture had been discredited by its own excesses. But what took its place was a different kind of romanticism, a refashioned set of ideas and images derived from a range of older traditions.

The soldier-poet was in the end a romantic figure. He was the upholder of moral values, the truth-teller \textit{par excellence}, the man who faced fear and death and spoke about them to the yet unknowing world. He ventured into the domain of the sacred, the no man’s land between the living and the dead, and acted as interlocutor between communities in mourning: soldiers and civilians, men and women, young and old. It was (and remains) his voice which reaffirmed the values of the men who fought, their loyalty to one another, their compassion for those who suffered on both sides, their stoical acceptance of fate. At times, he expressed outrage at the injustice at the young being slaughtered while the old looked on. But most of this body of verse was an affirmation, even when cataloguing the awfulness of war.

A complex process of re-sacralization marks the poetry of the war.\textsuperscript{60} Over time, many romantic celebrations of sacrifice were indeed rejected. But war poets did not turn away from the sacred. Theirs is not the poetry of ‘demystification’. Many sought to reach the sacred through the metaphor of resurrection. What better means of evoking feeling for the brotherhood of the living and the dead than by hearing them speak again?

Admittedly, this kind of poetic spiritualism was disturbing rather
than reassuring. Most writers who engaged in this dialogue with the
dead offered no solutions to the moral problems posed by the war. Indeed, their ambivalence is perhaps their most striking common characteristic. Soldier-pacifists, militant bearers of a message of peace, patriots of more than one country, Christian free-thinkers, their mixed messages puzzle as much as they move the reader. As in the poetry of Apollinaire, dialectical, rather than directly patriotic or pacifist statement, was their strength. Their poetry ministered; it didn’t preach. Their ‘modernism’ was the product of a recasting of traditional language, not its rejection. They are the first in a long line of twentieth-century romantics, who walk backwards into the future, struggling to understand the chaotic history of this century.61