

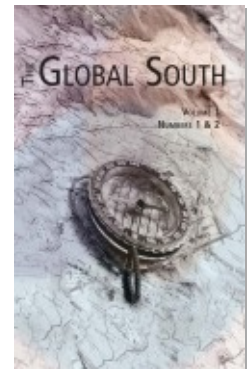


PROJECT MUSE®

The Great War and the Female Elegy: Female Lamentation and
Silence in Global Contexts

Margaret Higonnet

The Global South, Volume 1, Numbers 1 & 2, 2007, pp. 120-136 (Article)



Published by Indiana University Press

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/398263/summary>

The Great War and the Female Elegy: Female Lamentation and Silence in Global Contexts

Margaret Higonnet

ABSTRACT

In the last decade, cultural historians have debated whether the literature of World War I constituted a modernist break with the past, or rather nostalgically attempted to sustain “traditional values” in order to shape incomprehensible experience into meaningful forms of memory and mourning. Within the context of this debate, however, little attention has been paid to the vibrant and varied war poetry of women such as the Comtesse de Noailles, Berta Lask, or Eleanor Farjeon. Beyond these major figures, however, lies another cohort of elegists, including Anna Akhmatova, Zinaida Gippius, and Mary Borden whose work is especially provocative in its modernist rupture with poetic conventions in order to express their loss of faith, their despair, and their rage about a war that they had no political voice to oppose. And geographically removed, but touched by the “world” war, lie yet other mourning women in the colonies, some of them illiterate and therefore never considered as participating in the literature of war. These women, such as the Bambara and Malawi women’s songs I discuss in the essay, speak across national boundaries of a rupture that has broken down speech itself and has thus turned them into what we may call female modernists. Thus war as a force of globalization at once unifies women who mourn their losses by drawing on traditionally assigned roles and forms, and also locates them at a fissure in literary history.

In the last decade, cultural historians have debated whether the literature of World War I constituted a modernist break with the past, or rather nostal-

gically attempted to sustain “traditional values” in order to shape incomprehensible experience into meaningful forms of memory and mourning. This debate is central for our understanding of war elegies, as well as for our understanding of the relationship between world war and world literature. The literature of war necessarily demands a comparative approach, and when war spreads around the globe, the grief it unleashes also spreads around the world. That globalization, in turn, demands fresh approaches from comparatists.

Pastoral elegy, with its movement from grief to consolation and traditional images of resurrection through the natural cycle of the year, points to modes of belief that were under assault during the war. In 1975, Paul Fussell’s groundbreaking *The Great War and Modern Memory* proclaimed that war’s “symbolic status is that of the ultimate anti-pastoral” (231). Pastoral allusions, he argued in his chapter on “Arcadian Recourses,” function in Great War elegies to assist “ironic perception” (238). More recent students of the elegy such as Jahan Ramazani have concurred that in response to the worldwide calamity of 1914–1918, received elegiac form and religious rituals seemed “no longer adequate to the complexities of mourning for the dead” (ix). For Ramazani, the “modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation” (xi). Borrowing Celeste Schenck’s term “anti-elegy,” he gathers evidence from Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Ivor Gurney, Isaac Rosenberg, and Wallace Stevens that the elegy became “a more disconsolate and discordant genre—a genre less contaminated by its likeness to the compensatory discourse of patriotic propaganda” (71).

In reaction, Jay Winter in his 1995 book *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, rejects as “misleading” the “modernist hypothesis” that has linked war elegies to iconoclasm (5). For Winter, “the search for an appropriate language of loss” is central to our understanding of the war’s legacy, and he argues that traditional forms (unlike the paradoxes and ironies of Modernism) had power “to mediate bereavement” for those struck by catastrophe throughout Europe (3, 223). Winter concludes that most war poetry was an affirmation and “re-sacralization”: “[W]ar poets did not turn away from the sacred. Theirs is not the poetry of “demystification” (221).¹ This debate continues in Patricia Rae’s collection *Modernism and Mourning*, in which contributors ask whether the elegists of the First World War write experimental, politically progressive forms (not that the two necessarily coincide), or turn to nostalgic, normative mourning rituals that aim to restore the social status quo. In her work on war elegy, Sandra Gilbert reaffirms the force of disillusionment in the war poems of Owen and Stevens: “even while the war poets did indeed yearn for the symbolic resurrection promised by traditional forms, they were forced in the rats’ alley to which history seemed to have led them not just to demystify but to desacralize” (182). Clearly, the debate about elegy is also a debate about politics and modernity.

Within the context of this debate, little attention has been paid to the vibrant and varied war poetry of women such as the Comtesse de Noailles, Berta

Lask, Eleanor Farjeon, Alice Meynell, Louise Bogan, or Edith Södergran.² Beyond these major figures, all of whom wrote elegies within traditional modes, lies another cohort of elegists whose work is even more provocative in its modernist rupture with poetic conventions in order to express their loss of faith, their despair, and their rage about a war that they had no political voice to oppose. As European writers, Anna Akhmatova, Zinaida Gippius, Henriette Charasson, Margit Kaffka, Vida Jeraj, and Mary Borden share a legacy that is both Biblical and classical in inspiration; at the same time, they forge an art that incorporates some features of local oral culture in order to speak for the people and to break out of institutional confines. Geographically removed, but touched by the “world” war, lie yet other mourning women in the colonies, some of them illiterate and therefore never considered as participating in the literature of war. In the colonies, as I have argued elsewhere, “the phenomena of ideological breakdown fed a literature of resistance, whose double-voiced elegies ironically rework the tropes of war” (“Whose” vii).

The narrow optic through which “literature” has been studied explains why Paul Fussell asked, “Why haven’t more women written good ‘war poems’? From Homer’s Andromache to Vera Brittain . . . bereaved women, next to the permanently disabled, are the main victims in war, their dead having been removed beyond suffering and memory. . . . Yet the elegies are written by men, and it’s not women who seem the custodians of the subtlest sorts of antiwar irony. That seems odd, and it awaits interpretation” (*Thank* 137). This essay will argue that women contributed substantial lamentations to a literature of war that should include not only sardonic deviations from established genres of mourning but women’s oral songs from regions outside Western culture. Like the exclusion of the colonies from histories of the World War (there had not yet been a “Second”), the exclusion of women in the colonies from consideration as part of “world literature” blinds us to voices whose grief and rage would lead eventually to major political changes, and would force us to listen to the polyphonic world with new attentiveness.

To answer Fussell and Winter, I focus here primarily on selected women’s responses to the war that draw on the traditional forms of the pastoral elegy and the Bible to pour out bitter sorrow and even blasphemy. This startling group of poems invokes traditional forms, and thus might appear to fit Winter’s thesis, as well as the stereotypical linkage of women to religious rhetoric. But they break with conventional modes of consolation in an anguished drama of lamentation that becomes an accusation against divine power and against those political powers who might be responsible for the war. While their authors come from very different social and national backgrounds, they share a set of Western literary traditions confronted by an experience of war that broke down the rituals and rhetoric of bereavement. They speak across national boundaries of a rupture that has broken down speech itself and has thus turned

them into what we may call female modernists. Thus war as a force of globalization at once unifies women who mourn their losses by drawing on traditionally assigned roles and forms, and also locates them at a fissure in literary history.

World War I was a defining event for collective trauma in world history, with over 9 million soldiers killed and perhaps 30 million civilians dead from hunger, violence, and the Spanish influenza. Inevitably the war left its mark as well on literary history. In Sandra Gilbert's succinct formulation, "although the experience of World War I was of course radically different for those at the front and those on the home front, the war tore such a gaping hole in history that the generic form as well as the consolatory function of pastoral elegy was permanently contaminated for combatants and noncombatants alike" ("Rats" 184). Like the male elegists analyzed by Fussell, Ramazani, and Gilbert, women too responded forcefully to their losses, adapting a centuries-old "female funeral aesthetic" (Schenck 23) to what Gilbert has called a "defiant contemporary poetics of grief" (*Inventions* 27).³ While Virginia Woolf's Bernard in *The Waves* calls for "only private dirges and no conclusions" (157), a number of the poems I consider here wrestle with the problem of articulating public dirges for a worldwide catastrophe that required the fabrication of empty cenotaphs and memorials dedicated to men whose bodies had been vaporized without leaving identifiable remnants.

Springing from an experience of collective trauma, the elegy underwent a dramatic shift in this period. Indeed, one could argue that the poetry of trauma (typically marked by both the erasure and the intrusion of memory) is inherently problematic. To borrow Dominic LaCapra's observation on the Holocaust, the casualty rates in July 1916 of 60,000 in a day made "death so extreme in its unjustifiability or transgressiveness that in certain ways it exceeded existing modes . . . of mourning" (215). Such trauma resisted translation into language, its patterns of repetition-compulsion, stuttering or numbness generating a fractured mode of writing about the war. Under these circumstances, how can one write a dirge? When Owen drafted a "Preface" to his poems, he acknowledged that the conventions of pastoral elegy—natural beauty, honor, heroism, and the compensatory triumph of poetry itself—were worn out. The sublimation of loss into poetic transcendence had become impossible, he wrote: "these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory . . . [true] Poets must be truthful" (192). His "Anthem for Doomed Youth" resists conventional tropes, converting the dead shepherds of pastoral elegy into "cattle" for whom the only "passing-bells" are "the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" (76, l.3). As Ramazani points out, mechanical, stuttering sounds have replaced human voices, fallen silent. Owen piles up negatives: "No mockeries . . . no prayers nor bells; / Nor any voice of mourning" (76, ll. 5–6) to underscore the breakdown of speech for this grief over mass slaughter.

The stereotype of the female poet, by contrast, established at the time by Siegfried Sassoon and others, has been that even if prolific, she was unable to write “truthful” war poetry. In “Glory of Women” Sassoon complains, “You crown our distant ardours while we fight, / And mourn our laurelled memories when we’re killed” (ll. 7–8). Sassoon denounces women’s poetic abstractions as “distant ardours”—due to their protected (and perhaps virginal) status on the homefront. Even more important, he implies that their “laurelled” mourning is incompatible with the unadorned facts of being “killed.” In fact, he implicitly makes women responsible for those deaths: “You make us shells” (l. 5). Accused of jingoism and poetic inferiority, women were held to be incapable of writing elegy, because they were protected from actual combat and thus blinkered. Modern critics recapitulate this judgment. Simon Featherstone, for example, in his critical reader of British war poetry, explains the absence of women’s writing by their lack of any direct experience of fighting: “because it was unavailable to women,” he writes, “there can be no women’s war poetry” (95). Ramazani more surprisingly generalizes that, despite (or perhaps because of) the 19th-century “feminization of grief” (20), “none of the preeminent modernist women poets made a bid for literary ascendancy in the genre of elegy” (21).

Even feminist critics have doubted the possibility of powerful poetry by women. Nosheen Khan affirms that “women poets, restricted by their noncombatant status from direct experience of warfare, were dependent solely on newspaper reports and on hearsay for any knowledge about life in the trenches” (21). In her thematic classification of women’s writings, including many she deprecates as sentimental or propagandistic, she highlights conventional topics such as purification from sin (41), Christian “consolation” (53), and pastoral motifs of unity with nature (64–68). Women’s commemorative poetry serves “to exorcise a personal sense of loss” (145), she argues, by following “the traditional light out of darkness movement characteristic of all elegiac writing” (146). That thesis is resisted by the powerful poems I discuss here. While the poets I examine often express despair, their ironies differ as well from the contradictory self-deprecating strategies exposed in poetry by “quasi-modernist” women gathered by Jan Montefiore. Montefiore exposes “the fantasy of an all-powerful, devouring mother who consumes her children,” in sado-masochistic imagery that allows women “to represent and to obscure their own relation as women to the male-dominated killing fields” (“Blind” 376, 377). Like Winter, who emphasizes “ambivalence” (222), Montefiore finds troubling ambiguity in a lyric contrast between the mourning poet as Mater Dolorosa and the “unconscious symbolism” of abject, viscous, feminized mud greedy for male corpses (“Blind” 383). Different ironies spring to light in the lamentations presented here. In these texts, the poets make pointed use of traditional texts to find ways to reject tradition itself. While anger and defiance are stock moments in the

elegiac calendar of successive forms of grief, the poems I analyze here thrust their pain forward and cut off the possibility of transcendence.

This modernist pattern emerges in their elegiac writing at the intersection of tradition and rupture. Contrary to the widespread assumption that women as non-combatants had nothing to say about war, they were called to do so by female tradition, since lamentation over the dead has been a female task in oral cultures, one that continues today in Irish keening or in the *ex tempore* yet complex funereal poetry recited in Greece and elsewhere.⁴ Excluded from acting politically or militarily (with rare exceptions) they nonetheless had cultural authority to speak indirectly about human responsibility for the war. I therefore suggest that we enlarge the notion of elegy to encompass the more general concept of lamentation, which will allow us to consider not only literary laments but oral lamentation, not only European elites but (where texts have been recorded) women from around the world.

Second, I suggest that some female poets, like their male compatriots, explicitly wrench the rhetoric of the pastoral elegy. They may do so in part to mark their distance from classically trained writers of the past, since many lacked such education. Virginia Woolf famously resented her lack of Greek. Moreover, the focus in elegy on the poet himself as a transcendent Orphic voice left little room for female writers. Thus Melissa Zeiger finds that the implicitly mute role of Eurydice as passive (ultimately dead) muse crowded out female elegists (64). One of my arguments here will be that women poets turn the theme of silence into poetic capital.

Third, women often anchored the language of lamentation in Biblical discourse, in the books of Job, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Jeremiah, a religious tradition shared across national, European boundaries. Confronted with an extent of suffering and loss for which no one had been prepared, they at times invoke a language that may appear blasphemous. Several of the writers presented here echo Psalm 22 in its fusion of appeal with accusation.

1: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?

2: O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.

As Freud puns, “Alle Klage ist Anklage”: All lament is complaint (“Trauer” 420). These women, like the men Sandra Gilbert discusses, exposed “the bankruptcy of both religion *and* genre as sources of comfort” (Gilbert “Rats” 188, original emphasis).

These complications of poetic form in order to shape a critique of the war are brilliantly exemplified by one of the greatest writers of the century, Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), who displaces the pastoral elegy through her depiction of a silenced nature that implies the death of God. Just as she discards the

theme of a restorative natural cycle, she casts aside the conventions that war or flood serve divine purification. In “July 1914” [“Iyul 1914”] Akhmatova encapsulates a devastated pastoral world through the line “even the birds haven’t sung today” (“July” 468–69, l.3). The animating breath of God has vanished: “the aspen no longer shivers” (l.4). Akhmatova prophetically preempts the “antipastoral deathscape” that so often figures in soldiers’ poems from the front. Burning peat, windless trees and the absence of rain foreshadow the advent of war. Just as Jeremiah and other Biblical prophets foresee calamity as retribution for social error, a passing one-legged cripple “alone in the courtyard” foresees “horrible times”:

Expect famine, tremors, death all around,
eclipsing of the heaven’s lights. (ll. 11–12)

Only “the Mother of God,” the cripple believes, will shelter the land. Hope for an end to war, many women writers imply, must rest on the shoulders of women themselves.

In the second section of this poem, the fire in the bogs finds an echo in burning juniper woods, evoking the destruction of a resonant Russian landscape. The cripple’s prophecy has materialized: “wives are wailing, / widows’ moans ring through the fields” (ll. 19–20). Ironically, the women’s “public prayers” for rain and “for their soldier boys” have been answered by warm red blood that soaks the “trampled” fields—whose harvest is human, not the fruits of nature. Nature no longer guarantees rebirth and resurrection, the conventions of pastoral. An anonymous voice prays: “They wound Your holy body, / they gamble for your robes” (27–28). By analogy, the military sacrifice of the body of the nation is a mockery of Christ’s sacrifice; the soldiers who cast dice for his robes have been translated into gamblers for geo-political gain. Prayers under an “empty sky” cannot ward off an absent God’s wrath.

By May 1915, Akhmatova reshaped the prayer form, again invoking Biblical allusions, to renounce speech itself. Her bitter “Prayer” [“Molitva”] offers to exchange her health, her own child, or even “my secret gift of song,” for peace that would lift the “stormcloud” from “dark Russia.” Individual loss, the focus of traditional elegy, here gives way to the losses of the nation:

Give me bitter years, sick,
gasping, sleepless, fevered,
take away my child, my friend,
my secret gift of song— (“Prayer” 469, ll. 1–4)

The lyric speaker’s readiness to offer up her child, the human equivalent of her poetic gift, is a breathtaking variant on the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, an especially painful one in light of Akhmatova’s later laments for the loss of her husband and her son in the Stalinist era. The prayer form permits this abject

surrender of her creative powers. Her stance is antithetical to that of the traditional elegy, “a resolutely patriarchal genre” of poetic initiation, in which ritual laments effectively demonstrate the capacity of a younger poet to replace his predecessor (Schenck 13).

Similarly, the elegy “In Memoriam, July 19, 1914” [“Pamyati, 19 iyulya 1914”], written in 1916, speaks on behalf of the people (“we”) who aged in an hour, as the summer was dying and “smoke rose from the plowed plains’ body” (“Memoriam” 469–70, ll. 1–4). The agricultural practice of burning stubble to prepare for the next season of planting now prepares instead the planting of bodies and firing of country homes by troops on the move. The poet recalls that “I covered my face and begged God / to kill me off before the battles began” (ll. 7–8), citing the “ringing” lament of her earlier blasphemous prayer:

Like a load now unneeded, songs’ and passions’
shadows have vanished from memory, which
the High One has ordered emptied, to become
a terrible book of calamities to come. (ll. 9–12)

These litanies of self-destruction echo the suicidal impetus of the Book of Job, in which Job “cursed his day,” asked “Why died I not from the womb?” (3.11), and threatened, “My soul chooseth strangling and death rather than my life” (7.25). Akhmatova’s laments, however, address collective rather than individual suffering—and in this they differ from the model of the elegy or even from the personal language of Psalm 22, where the poet asks, “My God, My God . . . why hast thou forsaken me?” (22.1).

In these poems Akhmatova adapts pastoral devices to lamentation about collective trauma, interpreted through dark, truncated natural symbolism modified from the promise of the natural cycle in the traditional elegy. Already in 1914–1917 we hear her assume the role of spokeswoman for the people, which she would articulate fully in “Requiem” (1937), where she describes herself as a “tormented mouth / Through which a hundred million of my people cry” (25–26). She points inexorably toward the silencing of the poetic voice that prepares the collapse of poetry after World War II.

Her older contemporary Zinaida Gippius (1869–1945) also confesses her incapacity as a poet to articulate the war’s losses, a theme that Margot Norris has addressed in *Writing War*, as a problem of the “relationship of form to numbers” (12). Gippius picks up the Modernist questioning of the poetic vehicle itself, specifically addressing God as “Thou who shattered the words on the tablets” (“Adonai” 472, line 5). Facing a mother whose son has been killed, the poet abjures her task: “Don’t talk about it” (“Today” 473, 1.2).⁵ Like Akhmatova, whose “July 1914” opposes a punitive God to the charitable Virgin who unfurls the folds of her robe over our griefs, in “Adonai” (1914), Gippius contrasts the apocalyptic punishments poured out by a “bloody God of

vengeance and wrath” (472, l.8) to the suffering of the Virgin under the cross, for whose sake the poet implores relief. The opening line, “Thy peoples wail: for how long?” (472, l.1) echoes the poet of Psalm 13, “How long will thou forget me, O Lord?” (13.1). Paradoxically, a battering repetition of direct address gives the deity presence at the same time that the accusation of absence indicts his moral failure: “Thou hast poured smoke and flame along the seas, / Thou hast garbed the land with scarlet water. / Thou destroyeth the flesh” (ll. 9–11). These startling antinomies subliminally convey the contradictions and chaos that divine irresponsibility has unleashed. Gippius thus harks back to the theme of Deus absconditus, the silent, hidden God, that has recurred throughout centuries of suffering, and recasts it in an exclamatory rhetoric of cannibalism and filicide that is sharply gendered.

Gippius’s most dramatic poem, “Without Justification,” renounces faith and embraces battle against God, reversing the religious paradigms on which it draws (*Lines* 472–3). Each line assumes an extreme stance of denial, at first leaving unstated the specific thrust of her denial: “No, I shall never be reconciled. / My curses are genuine. / I shall not forgive, I shall not fall / Into iron clutches” (“Without” 472–3, ll 1–4). The second stanza is even more disturbing in its vows that the poet will “die,” “kill,” “destroy myself” in order not to “stain my soul.” Finally, the third stanza gives meaning to the title and the outré rhetoric of the first two stanzas: “There is no justification for war.” This idealistic belief, in turn, drives her to blasphemy. If war is God’s “command” (as political and religious leaders at the time maintained), “My spirit will go into battle even against Him, / I will line up even against God.” Known in St. Petersburg circles for her surprising modernist diction and gender bending, as a kind of Russian Orlando, her defiant stance fuses a feminized pacifism with the masculine role of a combatant, turning the soldier of God into a soldier against God. Such acute denial of traditional faith marks out the labor of mourning as one of the instruments of change that shaped the modern world.

Not all poets who explored despairing and even defiant forms of prayer were social radicals. Henriette Charasson, a conservative French journalist, devoted an entire book of poems (*Attente*, 1914–1917) to her brother, a soldier mobilized in the French army. Her first set of prose poems rehearses her dread that he will die, while the later poems, written after she received news that he was missing in action, burst out in sorrow and denial. Charasson’s proleptic lamentations accord with the claim by feminist critics that later modern women often reject the sacrificial structures of female submission that had been inscribed in elegies leading to transcendence and acceptance (Zeiger 63, Schenck 22). In a variant on the Old Testament allusions in war elegies, for example, Charasson exploits a gendered New Testament allusion in her early poem entitled “Evening of 25 September 1914” [“Soirée de 25 septembre 1914”] (*Lines* 457–58). She cites the example of Rachel weeping in Rama, after the “scarlet”

slaughter of the innocents by Herod. The symbolic wife and mother of Israel, Rachel wept “and would not be comforted, because they are not” (Matthew 2:18). “The eternal voice of mothers” in wartime, Charasson writes, still resounds “day after day” (457 ll. 4–5): that sorrowful voice implicitly rejects the consolation of elegiac convention, just as Rachel’s “lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning” rejected all comfort (Matthew 2:18).

Like Job, whose wealth and children were destroyed by Satan, or the prophet Jeremiah, Charasson concedes that if “we have not weeded the garden of our souls enough” (“Evening” l. 18), we may have brought divine wrath down upon ourselves. Nonetheless she pleads insistently to a “distant” God who seems indifferent to the sad clamor from below: “Do you not hear?” (“Evening” ll. 3, 24, 31). Like Job, who exclaims, “Behold, I cry out of wrong, but I am not heard: I cry aloud, but there is no judgment” (19.7), the poet demands again, “Dost thou not hear, my God?” (457 l. 24). From the first line, Charasson wonders whether God exists, or whether any system of cause and effect explains human events. “O my God, if you exist”—this is the existential leap she must take at the outset of her poem. In the landscape the “hidden” moon (7) and “the fixed silence” of a night during which “my brothers fight and die” (10) echo the hidden God’s “distant” unresponsiveness.

Buried in the middle of this poem lies the most sinister turn in Charasson’s wrestling with God. There she links his distance to her own selfish desire to preserve her brother’s life: “the atrocity of the wish . . . that it be *the others* who die” [sic] (“Evening” 457 l. 23). Deep within a “poor egoistical voice” rises up weeping: “Not mine, O Lord, not mine!” (“Evening” ll. 24–25). The speaker lacks the language to pray in phrases “consecrated” (l. 23) by time, and her gestures of prayer are “unaccustomed” (458 l. 35). As she phrases it near the end of the poem, this moral test “spatters” her soul “with the blood of the brother dear to me” (41). Prayer itself has become contaminated by the violent emotions of war. Ironically, it is the very prayer of a non-believer on which the existence of God depends: “My God, you must exist, because I am there calling you” (457 l. 30). The act of her prayer, she hopes, will materialize God, leading to her final wishful performative repetition of the prayer: “Our Father who art in Heaven!” (l. 45). What conventionally is the opening of the Lord’s prayer has become a hortatory close—an inversion that challenges the premises of the religious prototype.

An even darker, more Manichean version of prayer to a hidden God figures in “1914,” a poem by the Slovenian Vida Jeraj, a modernist poet and playwright who moved when she married to Vienna.⁶ Folded within the funereal imagery, where berries stand for blood, is a realistic reminder of the harshness of death:

Black berries in a rose wreath,
each a dead man’s skull,

each a drop of blood,
May God have mercy! (554 ll. 1–4)

Jeraj underscores death through her macabre transposition of the funereal wreath into blood drops in a skull, perhaps an allusion as well to the crown of thorns. Displacing imagery of fruition and beauty that symbolize life in death, the wreath reinscribes death. The syntax is curtailed: a brief evocation of the wreath and skull prepares the supplication for mercy. As Jeraj continues her prayer, she points to a distant God who seems to have forgotten us.

Pray, pray, O Slovene,
perhaps God remembers you!
He who does not pray, shall curse:
May Satan have mercy! (l. 5–8)

The apparent disappearance of God leads her to equate God with Satan. In a defiant “poetics of grief” (Gilbert 182) the parallel between prayer and curse in Jeraj’s condensed poem chillingly approaches blasphemy. Shattered poetic articulation short-circuits the logic of war, in a characteristically modernist tactic.

One of the most explicit experiments in blasphemy in this small group of poems is a set entitled “On the Somme,” published in August 1917 by the American war poet Mary Borden. A wealthy Chicago heiress and budding novelist, friend of Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis, Borden brought a modernist sensibility to her experience at the front. She had established a mobile hospital under the direction of the French military, and she sets her poetry in the Somme’s wrecked landscape of mud that seems to recapitulate the Biblical destructions wrought by the “God of Wrath.” According to Khan, “Borden emerges as the most impressive female poet of the battlefield among those who wrote out of direct experience of it” (123). Like Gippius, Borden draws on the tradition of complaint in the Psalms in her free-verse poem of 1917 that asks “Where is Jehovah?” (Borden 183–88). As in the poetry of Gippius, Jeraj, and Charasson, Jehovah has hidden himself: “Tell them He’s wanted—the Great God, the Jealous God, the God of Wrath who drowned the sinful world of men and sent the seven plagues on Egypt, and led His people out of bondage to scatter them again like dead leaves in a storm” (183–84 l. 9). Borden exhorts her readers to “tell Him” that the national body—that is, Picardy—is “wounded and broken,” and that its agony offers an occasion for “miracles” (184 ll. 11, 13, 16). How can this slaughter be a holy offering of “hosts of men” on burning altars (184 l. 19), she implies, “since no Lord of Hosts shows himself?” (185 l.22)? Here Borden may also point to the story of Abraham and Isaac, but stripped of angelic reprieve.

God has been displaced from the center of the universe, in an echo of the general modernist rejection of established authority. In a dramatic gesture of

despair, the poet turns for help from “anyone”: “Bring someone, some mighty God, Baal, Beelzebub, the Powers of Darkness—anything, anyone—anyone who will put an end to this” (188 l. 60). By stretching out her lines of exhortation to Jehovah and to the “Powers of Darkness,” Borden rejects the confines of regular verse to suggest the howl of horror. Her blasphemous equation of God and Beelzebub resembles Vida Jeraj’s succinct parallelism between God and Satan. Borden’s appeal to “anyone,” Nosheen Khan argues, implicitly denounces “those responsible for the ruin and desolation caused by war” (121). We can invert Carol Stone’s thesis: “(F)or women, political protest—in which they mediate between public and private worlds—offers a solution to the problem of how to deal with grief” (84). Grief can also offer an encoded form of political protest. Prohibitions against women’s political protest turned the elegy into an ostensibly innocent form in which “they could mourn and protest simultaneously” (Stone 88).

Although the battle scene presents an appropriate theater for divine intervention, with what Borden ironically calls the “pet properties” of thunder (185 l. 26), lightning, clouds and fire, each man exposed to the cracking of sky and shaking of earth remains “alone” (186 l. 35):

Where is the Good Shepherd?...
 If this is His world, if it is He that made it,
 Let Him come and put an end to it. (188 ll. 54–56)

God is absent, and so are all his prophets: “Moses is dead—Joshua, who led His people into the promised land is dead, and there are no more prophets to cry through the wilderness to comfort these people— / They must look after themselves” (185–86 ll. 33–34). The only solution she can foresee is not pastoral rebirth in the cycle of seasons but an apocalyptic flood that marks the end: “Let the waters cover the earth again. Let there be an end to it—an end” (188 l. 65). With this closure Borden avoids the moralizing imagery of deserved punishment that we find in Charasson. Borden’s equation of power for good and evil depicts a world abandoned by God as well as by its prophets and leaders.

Borden’s much admired Whitmanesque “Song of the Mud” is an anti-pastoral in which the vegetation deity has been replaced by mud, an inhuman force in a landscape where nothing grows (506–507). This elegy masquerades ironically as a hymn to the mud whose viscous treachery was first deliberately deployed by the Belgians to help immobilize the Germans in the winter of 1914. Borden opens, as Khan and Montefiori have argued, by ascribing elegance, beauty, and dynamic power to the mud:

This is the song of the mud,
 The pale yellow glistening mud that covers the hills like satin;
 The grey gleaming silvery mud that is spread like enamel over the valleys . . .
 The invincible, inexhaustible mud of the war zone. (506 ll. 1–6)

Having become a universal presence, mud has usurped pastoral beauty, not only covering the natural world but erasing the soldier's individuality, becoming his uniform, and even his crown—a parodic variant on the crown of thorns and antithesis to the crowned monarchs who declare war.

His head is crowned with a helmet of mud.

He wears it well.

He wears it as a king wears the ermine that bores him. (l. 14–16)

These analogies deliberately shock the reader and challenge conventional consolation. The anthropomorphic enemy of the soldier and enemy of battle itself, the mud

Soaks up the power of armies;

Soaks up the battle.

Just soaks it up and thus stops it. (507 ll. 30–32)

By attributing fatalistic power to this force of nature, Borden ironically evacuates human agency as well as divine. Borden's final stanza echoes the first, with its attributes of gold, satin, silver, and enamel. But she puts the speaker's fatalistic voice in question by noting that "mud" is "the *disguise* of the war zone" (line 52) as well as "the smooth fluid grave of our soldiers" (l. 54). The final line—"This is the song of the mud," a refrain repeated seven times in the course of the poem—masks its own tribute to the soldier who is erased in total war under the "disguise" of mud that he carries. Read as an ironic lament, this "hymn" challenges the dehumanization of the soldier who is absorbed into mud and treated as disposable. Instead, Borden calls upon us to recognize the soldier's strength and dignity in the face of the brutalizing circumstances of trench warfare that leave "not a trace," "no mark," and a "mute enormous mouth of the mud" that had "closed over them" (ll. 46–47). Silence reigns in this world of fire, noise, and shouting, crashing destruction.

That strategy of contrast also governs a companion piece printed in *The Forbidden Zone*, in which the soldier is celebrated as "Unidentified" (193–99). With analogous irony, Borden interpellates the ghostly philosophers of the past to "look well at this man," an "unknown" soldier, who is dying (193 l. 1). Ugly, "planted in the mud," he watches death approach—burrowing, screaming, exploding (l. 16). Only one thing is motionless: this man. Sky and earth have been torn and set adrift in convulsions. This "ordinary man" (196 l. 61), clumsy and hungry for life, "fornicator, drunkard, anarchist" holds firm (197 l. 78), she tells us: "A single rivet driven down to hold a universe together" (199 l. 105). The poem fuses his ordinariness with his unique role as "single rivet"—a role shared with all the other soldiers. Drawing on her experience as surgical nurse who has explored the fibres of the wounded under her care, she describes the moment about to come:

Look at the stillness of his face.
 It's made of little fragile bones and flesh, tissue of quivering muscles
 fine as silk;
 Exquisite nerves, soft membrane warm with blood,
 That travels smoothly through the tender veins.
 One blow, one minute more, and that man's face will be a mass of
 matter, horrid slime and little brittle splinters. (198 ll. 85–89)

The art of this narrative lies in the contrasts between the importance and the unimportance of the average soldier, in the contrast between the “exquisite” creation of the almost erotic living body and the “horrid slime” into which it can be turned in an instant. Like so many other modern elegies, this lament is an anti-elegy that counts the ritual gestures that have become meaningless: no lamp can show the way, no recovery and recitation of this “unidentified” soldier's name can “restore his lost identity” (199 l. 110). The ghosts must “go back into your graves”—for it is philosophy that is truly dead (199 l. 106). Once again, the poet proclaims the death of the ideologies that have shaped European culture. The litany of departure displaces the ritual lamentation of pastoral:

Leave him the great loss of his identity.
 Let the guns chant his death song down the world;
 Let the flare of cannon light his dying;
 Let those remnants of men beneath his feet welcome him mutely when
 he falls beside them in the mud.
 Take one last look and leave him standing there,
 Unfriended—Unrecognised—Unrewarded and Unknown. (199 ll.
 110–115)

The repeated terms “leave” and “let” fuse departure and death with a meaningless freedom. Like “the monstrous anger of the guns” and “stuttering rifles' rapid rattle” in Owen's “Anthem” (written in September to October of 1917), Borden's “Song” (published in August 1917) closes on negation and human blindness as the task of chanting a “death song” falls to the guns.

Each of the laments I have discussed is squarely located within (and against) European traditions. What happens when we consider laments embedded in oral traditions from Africa? At the level of theme, most obviously, the European war is subordinated to local conflicts and losses—in effect, the collateral damage of the colonial masters' political agendas. Collected by French anthropologists, a Bambara song published in 1917 gives voice to a woman's lament and complaint about her own men's involvement in a Bamako insurrection against the French, which led to harsh reprisals in 1915. “Where did you leave your men? / Where did you leave your warriors?” calls out the old woman in this dialogue (qtd. in Riesz 199). For the Bambara leader Diossé has

abandoned his people rather than surrender, committing suicide. Just as European dissidents such as Henri Barbusse interpreted the Great War as a suicide, so too the Bambara women's song uses questioning to imply their critique of war and its leaders.⁷ Only in 1989 did it resurface in a study of African perceptions of the "tirailleurs sénégalais."

Similarly, a Malawi women's lament recorded in 1973 is cast as a series of questions that imply the senselessness of a war that carries young men off from their local community to the British camp at Karonga, in order to fight for a cause that is not their own. Olivia Tambala's lament was chanted at the end of the war when the few survivors from her village of Chimwendo straggled back:

At Karonga
People perished there, at Karonga
Why did they perish? ("Song" 556, ll. 1–3)

Repeated with variants three times, this song was preserved for 55 years, testimony to the power of an oral tradition to inscribe the baffling experience of violent colonization in universal terms. Yet the simple syntactic device of the question serves much the same function as the dialogues with an absent God in the poems of their European counterparts. Only when we begin to acknowledge the stark power of such oral forms will we be able to reconsider our strategies of periodization and genre study.

The poetic structures we note in these lamentations echo traditional forms of repetition with variation; they also, however, balance appeals against curses, and pair statements with questions. Their formal ambivalences undercut the possibility of consolation, purification, or redemption—the traits that so often contaminate trite verse of the period. The poet's voice echoes the voices of mothers and wives, speaking for the collective and resisting the individual case, in the face of hecatombs. In the words of Leigh Gilmore, "remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history. Insofar as trauma can be defined as that which breaks the frame, rebuilding a frame to contain it is as fraught with difficulty as it is necessary" (31). In effect, the impossible situation of the poet that Gilmore describes is doubled by the impossible situation of the woman poet, the survivor whose lament cannot cure the loss, and continues therefore to be sung 50 years later.

Notes

1. Although Winter concedes an "overlap of languages and approaches" that he characterizes as the "traditional" and the "modern," or "the conservative and the iconoclastic," he also casts himself as a historian interested in mentalities, or the attitudes of populations generally, and thus opposed to

literary critics interested in the power of individual poems written by the “elites.” See Winter 3 & 2, respectively.

2. The critics of women’s World War I poetry drawn on in this essay include Claire Tylee, Nosheen Khan, and Jan Montefiore. Far more attention has been paid to women’s poetry devoted to World War II.

3. Schenck does not discuss female war poets, but she does argue that “refusal of consolation . . . is perhaps the female elegist’s most characteristic subversion of the masculine elegiac.” See Schenck 24.

4. See Alexiou.

5. The poem “Today on Earth” is dated Sept. 20, 1916.

6. Vida Jeraj was the pseudonym of Franciska Jeraj, 1875–1932. In a study of East-Central European women’s war poetry, I discuss Jeraj and Margit Kaffka. See Higonnet “Women.” Their blasphemous declamations, like those of Gippius, seem to revive a tradition of iconoclastic responses to calamity that call God to account. See Roshwald 93.

7. For a further discussion of this Bambara poem and of Olivia Tambala’s song, see Higonnet “Whose.”

Works Cited

- Akhmatova, Anna. “In Memoriam, July 19, 1914” [“Pamyati, 19 iyulya 1914”]. In Higonnet *Lines*. Trans. John Henriksen. 469–470.
- . “July 1914” [“Iyul 1914”]. In Higonnet *Lines*. Trans. John Henriksen. 468–469.
- . “Prayer” [“Molitva”]. In Higonnet *Lines*. Trans. John Henriksen. 469.
- Alexiou, Margaret. *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*. 2d ed. Rev. Dimitrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.
- Bible, The*. King James Version. Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia. <http://etext.virginia.edu/kjv.browse.html>. 5 July 2007.
- Borden, Mary. *The Forbidden Zone*. London: Heinemann, 1929.
- . “The Song of the Mud.” In Higonnet *Lines*. 506–507.
- . “Unidentified.” In Borden *The Forbidden*. 193–9.
- . “Where is Jehova?” In Borden *The Forbidden*. 183–188.
- Charasson, Henriette. “Evening of 25 September 1914” [“Soirée de 25 septembre 1914”]. *Lines of Fire*. Ed. and Trans. Margaret R. Higonnet. 457–458.
- Freud, Sigmund. “Trauer und Melancholie.” *Gesammelte Werke*. London, 1946. 10: 420.
- Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia” [“Trauer und Melancholie”]. 1917e. *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1953–1974. 14: 239–258.
- Fussell, Paul. *Thank God for the Atom Bomb*. 1988. New York: Ballantine, 1990.
- . *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1975.
- Gilbert, Sandra. “Introduction.” *Inventions of Farewell: A Book of Elegies*. New York: Norton, 2001. 23–29.
- . “Rats’ Alley’: The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti)Pastoral Elegy.” *New Literary History* 30.1 (1999). 179–201.
- Gippius, Zinaida. “Adonai.” In Higonnet *Lines*. Trans. Temira Pachmuss. 472.
- . “Today on Earth” [“Segodnya na zemle”]. In Higonnet *Lines*. Trans. John Henriksen. 473.
- . “Without Justification” [“Bez opravdanya ”]. In Higonnet *Lines*. Trans. Temira Pachmuss. 472–73.
- Higonnet, Margaret R., ed. *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*. New York: Penguin Plume, 1999.

- Higonnet, Margaret R. "Whose Can(n)on: World War I and Literary Empires." Presidential Plenary. *Comparative Literature* 57.3 (2005). vi–xviii.
- . "Women of 1918." *History of the Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Vol. 1. Ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2004. 191–202.
- Higonnet, Margaret, ed. *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*. New York: Plume, 1999.
- Jeraj, Vida. "1914." In Higonnet *Lines*. Trans. Ellen Elias-Bursač. 554–55.
- Khan, Nosheen. *Womens' Poetry of the First World War*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988.
- Montefiore, Jan. "'Blind Mouths': Oral Metaphor, Literary Tradition and the Fantasy of the Mother in Some Women's Elegies of the Great War." *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 21.3 (1998). 376–90.
- . "'Shining Pins and Wailing Shells': Women Poets and the Great War." *Women and World War I: The Written Response*. Ed. Dorothy Goldman. New York: St. Martin's, 1993.
- Norris, Margot. *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*. Charlottesville: UP Virginia, 2000.
- Owen, Wilfred. *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*. Ed. Jon Stallworthy. London: Chatto and Windus, 1990.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric." *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*. Ed. Albert Gelpi. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985. 41–64.
- Rae, Patricia, ed. *Modernism and Mourning*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2007.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning. The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994.
- Riesz, János. "Der Tirailleur Senegalais in poetischer Darstellung aus Französischer und Afrikanischer Sicht" ["The *Senegalais Tirailleur* in Poetic Representations from French and African Views"]. *'Tirailleurs Sénégalais': Zur bildlichen und literarischen Darstellung Afrikanischer Soldaten im Dienste Frankreichs—Présentations littéraires et figuratives de soldats africains au service de la France. [Literary and Figurative Representations of African Soldiers in the Service of France]*. Ed. János Riesz & Joachim Schultz. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989. 195–211.
- Roshwald, Ariel. "Jewish Cultural Identity in Eastern and Central Europe during the Great War." *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914–1918*. Ed. Ariel Roshwald and Richard Stites. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 89–126.
- Sassoon, Siegfried. *Counter-Attack, and Other Poems*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1918. <http://www.bartleby.com/136/index.html>. June 30, 2007.
- Schenck, Celeste. "Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 6 (Spring 1986). 13–27.
- Stone, Carole. "Elegy as Political Expression in Women's Poetry: Akhmatova, Levertov, Forché." *College Literature* 18 (1991). 84–91.
- Tambala, Olivia. "Song." In Higonnet *Lines*. Trans. Melvin E. Page. 556.
- Winter, Jay. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. New York: Harcourt Brace World, 1959.
- Zeiger, Melissa. *Beyond Consolation*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997.