

A Poet Laureate's Front-lines: How to Wage a War of Words for Peaceful Purposes

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Biography

Cathy Parc, who defended her thesis on the works of Elizabeth Jennings at the Sorbonne and passed the *agrégation* in Linguistics, has published articles on 20th-century poetry, translation studies, linguistics and *Calvin et Hobbes de Bill Watterson, La philosophie au quotidien* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013). She has translated E. Jennings's *Collected Poems 1953-1985* into French (publication forthcoming). She teaches grammar, translation, literature, oral and written English at several universities, including the Catholic University of Paris, and works with the TRACT research group (Sorbonne Nouvelle).

Abstract

The writer's struggle with nationalism and pacifism will be traced in the words themselves around the comparison of John Masefield's and Robert Bridges' prose and poetical works. How did these poets deal with the realities of war and to what extent did their status as Poet Laureate influence their styles? To try and suggest answers to this question, emphasis will be put on their ways of depicting the enemy, the striking and elusive figure that is both a blind spot and a dazzling mystery encapsulating through its very duality both the Self and the Other. In the mirror where realism and symbolism, myth, the epic and the *chanson de geste* come to be superimposed, the better to delineate the features of such an inverted ego, the reader will catch a glimpse of the unfathomable depths pointing to the invisible, the unsaid, the unheard. On the page, which may just appear as another front-line, the focus will be on the deafening clash between the verbal medium and silence in the desperate attempt to find a meaning at the heart of meaninglessness and create a coherent image in the middle of destruction, so as to pay homage to the better, brighter, side of the human psyche.

Resumé

La lutte de l'écrivain aux prises avec le nationalisme et le pacifisme sera retracée dans les mots eux-mêmes autour de la comparaison entre les écrits poétiques ou en prose de John Masefield et ceux de Robert Bridges. Comment ces poètes ont-ils appréhendé les réalités de la guerre et dans quelle mesure leur statut de Poète lauréat a-t-il influencé leur style ? Pour essayer de répondre à cette question, l'accent sera mis sur leur manière de dépeindre l'ennemi, cette silhouette frappante et insaisissable qui constitue tant un point aveugle qu'un mystère éblouissant comprenant dans sa dualité même et le Moi et l'Autre. Au miroir où réalisme, symbolisme, mythes, épopées et chansons de geste se superposent pour mieux donner trait à cet ego inversé, les lecteurs apercevront les profondeurs insondables

qui pointent vers l'invisible, l'inaudible ou le non-dit. Sur la page, qui peut apparaître comme une autre ligne de front, l'attention se portera sur l'affrontement assourdissant entre les vocables et le silence dans la tentative désespérée de trouver du sens au cœur du non-sens et de renvoyer une image cohérente au milieu du chaos, afin de rendre hommage au bon côté de l'âme humaine, son côté lumineux.

Keywords

John Masefield, Robert Bridges, Poet Laureate, Front-lines, Nationalism, Pacifism, the Self, the Other, the Enemy, Realism, Symbolism, the Word, Silence, Tributes, *Gallipoli* (1916), *Letters from the Front 1915-1917* (1984), *The Old Front Line* (1917), *October and Other Poems, With Occasional Verses on the War* (1920).

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How did John Masefield and Robert Bridges deal with the realities of war in their prose and poetical works and to what extent did the latter's status as Poet Laureate from 1913 to his death in 1930 influence his writings?¹ The moral dilemma between partisanship and neutrality, which supposed to conciliate the politics of war and nationalism with the humanist urge to promote peace, will be traced in the words themselves, as they feature the enemy. The emphasis will be put on the way the relationship between the self and its deadly Other moulded a new definition of identity as it turned it into a form of bondage in the very defence of liberty. The interplay of realism and symbolism shall also be brought to the fore around such themes as grief, death, loss, mourning and survival, as well as the transposition of personal experiences into the universality of myth, the epic and the *chanson de geste*. Did these poets use words as mirrors to give graphic descriptions of inner and outer waste lands or as shields pointing to the unsaid, leaving it to silence to build up a meaning out of meaninglessness? On the page, which may appear as just another front-line, our attention will be focused on how they battled with words against words themselves and their limitations, every time those failed to reflect the sheer horrors of war and forced them to come to terms with *aporia*. In listening to the silence of their verse and prose, we shall hear them relate their fight against this repository of oblivion and this other side of the Word, which enabled them to erect cenotaphs in memory of the victims of war, as many literary shrines bearing witness to man's contradictory nature, the better to pay tribute to the redeeming facets of humanity.

1. "The topography of the battlefield"²

One of the most striking features of John Masefield's prose writings about war is the emphasis he puts on the lie of the land, which gradually becomes the main focus of attention, not to say the main character. As Robert Bridges suggested in his poem "The West Front. An English Mother, on Looking into Masefield's 'Old Front-Line'," J. Masefield could have declared "No country know I so well / as this landscape of hell" (Bridges 1920, 31.1 1-2), so precise are his descriptions of what he called "*the*

front," a phrase set within quotation marks, if only to point out the quasi-fractal quality of this line whose tangibility means war while its intangibility does not necessarily mean peace. Whether his topic is the first two years of WWI in general, the Battle of the Somme or the Gallipoli campaign in particular, such recurrent phrases as "signs of war" (Masefield, *Letters from the Front 1915-1917*, 49, 154), "the signs of a struggle" (*The Old Front Line* 1917, 141), "the marks of war" (1917, 84), "the marks of our occupation" (1917, 141), partake of a kind of concrete, visual semiotics whereby he chooses to mention the consequences of the battle rather than the battle itself, which thus remains a kind of blind spot. The following extract is typical of this approach:

Our old front line runs almost straight across the crest parallel with the enemy front line, and distant from it forty to one hundred and fifty yards. (...) Between the lines at both these points are the signs of a struggle which raged for weeks and months for the possession of those lumps of hill, each, perhaps, two hundred yards long, by fifty broad, by five high. Those fifteen feet of height were bartered for with more than their own weight of sweat and blood; the hill can never lose the marks of the struggle. (1917, 141)

To him, the landscape is nothing but a text to be read and deciphered through its "hieroglyphs" (*Gallipoli* 1916, 169-70), like the Rosetta stone itself, in order to be finally interpreted. Though he describes by inference, dealing with most events in an indirect manner, he always proceeds logically when it comes to putting into words this ordnance survey map of his. The following extract is characteristic of his way of setting the scene in great detail, the better to guide the readers across the foreign lands he mentions, so that they may visualize what happened, "picture" it, as he says³:

From Albert four roads lead to the battlefield of the Somme:

1. In a north-westerly direction to Auchonvillers and Hébuterne
2. In a northerly direction to Authuille and Hamel
3. In a north-easterly direction to Fricourt and Maricourt. Between the second and third of these the little river Ancre (...) cuts the English sector of the battlefield into two nearly equal portions. (1917, 79-80)

He diverts from its primary function such a complex device as the *ekphrasis* and redefines its codes by transposing them round a hermeneutic chiasmus into a military context where it is no longer the creation of a work of art which is at stake but the destruction of a whole country through man's deliberate actions.

Although his *Letters from the Front 1915-17* are arranged in chronological order, they are not day-to-day reports from the combat zone, nor do they follow a strict linear progression. Likewise, *The Old Front Line*, which was written "three years" (78) after the Battle of the Somme, relies on the rhetorical feat which allows the narrative to end at the very beginning of this famous offensive on the Western front, with the last lines "The men of the first wave climbed up the parapets, in tumult, darkness, and the presence of death, and having done with all pleasant things, advanced across the No Man's Land to begin the Battle of the Somme" (160) anticipating and possibly influencing T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.⁴ Even if J. Masefield is keen on pointing out the quick succession of events in both books through the constant use of time markers like "now", "presently", "not yet", "till",⁵ of the

phrases "were to", "were going to" and of the preterite progressive,⁶ his main goal is not to keep the reader in suspense. As if treading in the footsteps of the mystics who could not but go down the *via negativa* and hint at God through negation, he tries to define the present through its contrast with the past and the future,⁷ opposing war to peace, that is to say death to life in a protracted ontological equation where both are irreducible unknowns (1984, 146). One such comparison can be found in a passage from *The Old Front Line*, where it is left to the reader to imagine the fight which took place in order to fill in the ellipsis where it has sunk:

Until the beginning of the war, this spur of ground was corn-land, like most of the battlefield. Unfenced country roads crossed it. It was quiet, lonely, prosperous ploughland, stretching for miles, up and down, in great sweeping rolls and folds (...) Before the war, all this spur was a smooth expanse (...) To-day, the whole summit (...), for all its two hundred yards, is blown into pits and craters from twenty to fifty feet deep, and sometimes fifty yards long (...) It was all mined, counter-mined, and re-mined, and at each explosion the crater was fought for and lost and won. (98)

This diptych hinges on the forceful repetition of time shifters at the beginning of a sentence, as well as the stylistic discrepancy between lyrical and factual utterances. The former make the most of the rhythmic pattern based on the juxtaposition of adjectives and the combination of assonances and alliterations to convey a feeling of freedom and serenity while the latter create a sense of urgency peculiar to the front through the blunt enumeration of figures, the accumulation of past participles derived from the same radix and the coordination of antonyms. Even if he acknowledges that it is difficult to conjure up images of the fruitful past,⁸ J. Masefield cannot refrain from projecting himself into a pre-war landscape, which he assumes to have been beautiful, so poignant is the paradox which, in wartime, correlates a sense of history with the laying waste of a village, a town or a whole region: "It [Thiepval] was a little lonely mean place, built of brick and plaster on a great lonely heap of chalk down land. It had no importance and no history before the war, except that a Seigneur of Thiepval is mentioned as having once attended a meeting at Amiens." (123). Along with the ripple effect of the adjectives "little" and "mean," the repetition of "lonely" emphasizes the strange irony of fate, which made the spot famous by turning it into an overnight vantage ground, however isolated and insignificant it might originally have been. Prolepses which mostly originate in the repetition of the expression "to be to," both in the affirmative and the negative, make it clear that the outcome of the battle was a foregone conclusion: "Sari Bair, where the decisive blow was to be struck", "It was not to be. The guns behind them backed them" (*Gallipoli* 124, 138).⁹ Whether it remains implicit in these sentences, which recur like so many burdens ringing the changes on the same theme, or explicit in its conventional personification as an omnipotent woman playing with men's lives, Fate appears as another figure of the enemy: "All through that day of the eighth of August Fate waited to see what would happen between Suvla and Koja Chemen. She fingered with her dice, uncertain which side to favour; she waited to be courted by the one who wanted her" (150).¹⁰ In making it embody the inevitability of defeat, J. Masefield tacitly excuses the British forces by shifting responsibilities on this third party, the eternal feminine whose supernatural power, though far exceeding men's abilities, is described as being likely to influence their attempts at seducing her. However symbolic it may be, such a displacement from the literal to the figurative, from the

battlefield of soldiers to that of lovers, introduces the issue of determinism the better to justify deliberate choices, which, from the outset, had nothing to do with it. This argumentative sleight of hand is perpetuated by two devices which do away with the formal linearity of chronological reports: visual, material analepses give us retrospective clues that facilitate our interpreting of history while brief summaries functioning as so many narrative shortcuts focus our attention on the turning points in the battle. By highlighting the gist of the matter and artificially quickening the pace of events, they add poignancy to J. Masefield's accounts of the different lots apportioned to combatants in the numerous fierce struggles they put up without any claim to fame: "La Boisselle, after being attacked by us in our attack, was destroyed by enemy fire after we had taken it, and then cleared by our men who wished to use the roads" (1917, 133).

2. "My job will seem like an archeology, moving there in the mud of forgotten events" (*Letters*, 223)

While defining himself as a historian in *Letters from the Front 1915-1917* (287), and one who took an active part in the war by going to the front to "do the story of the battle" (189), J. Masefield equates his task as a writer with that of an archaeologist delving down into the past so as to retrieve from it the most significant facts. Although he gained first-hand experience, as he readily acknowledges,¹¹ and does not shy away from fulfilling his duty by bearing testimony as an eye-witness,¹² he cannot but pass a derogatory comment on the predatory instinct which, in his opinion, guides the *literati*.¹³ As for him, he cannot be blamed for adopting such a ghoulish posture, so convinced he is that art has a role to play in our understanding of life - "a work of art (...) is a thing which makes one understand what life is, and the result is a living memory"— whenever the artist sets himself the difficult task of getting at facts in an objective way, just as a "painter at his easel making an official record, in the right way, of truth, with neither sentiment or judgment added" (1984, 143). While endowing his texts with several strata of temporality and meaning, J. Masefield's paradoxical stance as a chronicler of both time past and time present in *Letters from the Front Line* also gets him into a quandary: the horror he has to cope with cannot but arouse his personal feelings, whether of hatred, anger, "fury" (188), "shame," "agony" (280) or "pity" (275), feelings which sometimes run counter to his attempt at impartiality. "Still, who am I to judge?" he asks (154).

"What's in a name?"

Though his hatred is mainly directed at war itself—"Day by day, the month has made me hate the war & curse it more & more bitterly; but it is no use cursing. I'm afraid we must just grit our teeth & prepare for another two years" (1984, 233)—he happens to be taking sides and expressing a nationalist or even jingoistic sentiment whenever he has to speak of the enemy. As a rule, the term "enemy" is much more frequently used in *Gallipoli*, *The Old Front Line* and *Letters from the Front 1915-17*, either as an adjective or a substantive, than are the words "German/s," "Turk/s" or "Turkish." Though the latter refer to a particular nationality, they paradoxically preserve a sense of anonymity since individuals are very rarely mentioned, and when they are, their patronyms are not specified. In *Gallipoli*, we are thus told twice about "the Turkish commander" at a two-page interval (35, 58) without ever learning his name, as though he were to remain a kind of abstract entity. The same holds for the adjectival positioning of the noun "Turk" in "the Turk attacks / advance / position," for example (68, 59, 125-6), which gives an even more abstract turn to these expressions than the adjective "Turkish," as in "an ever-growing Turkish army" (49). Likewise,

the repetition of the synecdoche "the Turks' fire" (55, 68) tends to conceal the individuals behind their actions, the better to imply the value judgment a phrase like "the hordes of fresh Turks" (69) makes explicit, as opposed to "the Turks were in force" (78), which remains neutral.

This semi-deprivation of identity is a side effect of the fundamental contrast which is drawn between "the (old) English front line" and "the (old) enemy front line" (1917, 83, 208): the fact that no nationality has been mentioned in the second quote endows such a reference with a disquieting vagueness. This recurring rhetorical device triggers an overall distancing process, which is also based on the pivotal discrepancy brought about by the use of phrases in the plural for the English side and mainly in the singular for the German or Turkish one. As a consequence, the reader gets the feeling that there is a disproportion in numbers, not to say in might, between the two parties at war. On the one hand there seems to loom nothing but an impersonal figure, mostly hinted at in the third person singular - "the enemy" (1917, 138), "nearly 50 of the enemy" (1917, 108)—, even in the genitive as in "the enemy's ground" (109), "the enemy's fire" (1916, 44), "the enemy's hands," "his men," "his lines of supply and support" (1917, 138) or "the Turk and his ally" (1916, 31). When used attributively as in the synecdoches "the usual black enemy wire" (1917, 117), "the enemy barrage" (1984, 208), or more strikingly still, "enemy flesh" (209), or in combination with the nominalized adjective "the dead" in "the enemy dead" (206) or with a quantifier as in "a lot of enemy dead" (221), the effect of such a clinical approach is even more laconic and unsettling. On the other hand, the personal pronouns "we" and "us," the possessive determiner or pronoun "our" and "ours"¹⁴ implicitly encompass the British military, a community in which J. Masfield naturally includes himself, as well as the reader in a way, his account being necessarily one-sided owing to this specific viewpoint: "our line passes over the spur slightly below it, the enemy line takes in as much of it as the enemy needed. From it, he has a fair view of Albert town and of the country to the east and west of it. From our line, we see his line and a few tree-tops" (1917, 129). Such an extract demonstrates how important a role, whether deliberate or not, the wording may play in arousing the reader's sympathy for one army only, especially when it is depicted as the victim of sheer brutality: "Under this cover the Turks fired at our men through loopholes, often with their rifles touching their victims" (1916, 127). One of the most striking passages may be found on page 52 of *Gallipoli*, where a verbal front line is traced between "the men," "these men," "a great many men" on one side and "large forces of Turks," "the Turks," "about one battalion of Turks" on the other, as though the latter were devoid of any humanity as exemplified by the following lines: "The men jumped out, waded ashore, charged the enemy with the bayonet, and broke the Turk attack to pieces. The Turks scattered and were pursued, and now the steep scrub-covered cliffs became the scene of the most desperate fighting."

There are some exceptions though to this dehumanizing way of referring to the enemy, which seems to be in keeping with his strangeness as an alienated alter ego whose identity can sometimes be reduced to the mere mention of a place: "every now and then a shell [came] from Ismail sending the sand in clouds over corpses, wounded men, and fatigue parties" (1916, 144). Dwelling in "that unknown land" (1917, 90) beyond "that No Man's Land" (91-97) which always already draws the line between humanity and its opposite, the many avatars of the enemy appear to regain part of their corporeity and identities as human beings through such rare plurals as "armies," "these armies" (1916, 28-9) and above all "their multitudes of men," and its anaphoric variations - "their multitudes," "in multitudes" (59-60) - not to mention the phrase "fellow-man" in the following outstanding extract: "Many things are

possible in this war, and the darkness is strange, and the heart of a fellow-man is darkness to us. There were things in the Turk heart very dark indeed to those who tried to read it" (185). But more often than not, even though "Our men felt that now, in a few minutes, they would see the enemy and know what lay beyond those parapets and probe the heart of that mystery", the latter "remained mystery and unknown" (1917, 90), their effect being that of "an enormous mass" (1916, 151), "a monstrous mass" (159), "a form" in the likeness of a caterpillar (1984, 211), and all the more so at Gallipoli. There, the Turk was most of the time "an invisible enemy, safe in some unseen trench expecting [the British] " (1916, 81), which, naturally enough, rendered him ever more daunting: "in all his waking hours he [the British soldier] has been fighting for his life, often hand to hand in the dark with a fierce enemy" (80). As though the shift from denotation to connotation was too difficult for him, J. Masefield does not use many adjectives to describe the opponents of the Allied forces in either *Gallipoli* or *The Old Front Line*, one exception being his description of Turkish houses as "dirty" or the Turks' trenches as "filthy" (1916, 102).

The straightforward tone he adopts in his *Letters* as compared to the distancing at work in both *Gallipoli* and *The Old Front Line*, is much more peculiar to his style of writing. Not surprisingly, these reports from the front addressed to his wife have a conversational dimension to them, which the other two retrospective accounts lack. In these differed written semi-dialogues, which were not at first supposed to be published, he does not deny himself the use of colloquial or even slang words and phrases even if these are sometimes snippets of reported speech, as in the following excerpt: "For all their bloody talk, the bastards couldn't bring it [the church tower] down" (1917, 114). Other conventional hostile terms in *Letters from the Front*, such as "the brutes" (148, 271), or "the Bo(s)ches" (52, 59, 68, 72), "these sales Bosches" (86, 89), "one lousy Boche" (262), "Fritz" (228-9, 253) accumulate across the pages of his correspondence to draw the portraits of so many anti-heroes, whom he goes so far as to downgrade to another ontological status, the better to bring out their innate bestiality: "the beast/s" (124, 212, 271), "the blonde beasts" (252) under the command of "the chief gorilla Hindenburg" (224) are no other than "these damned dogs" (229) whose "tails" he hopes "will be down" (281), and whose military attributes are themselves "beastly sous-marins" (127), just as the Turks' tanks at Gallipoli were like "ante-deluvian animals all speckled and mottled, and without eyes: that makes them more horrible still" (141). Pushing far beyond the rather trite comparison of the maze of trenches to a rabbit warren (276; 1916, 173; 1931, 507-8), J. Masefield does not back away from the issue of race either, identifying as he does the British to a single race and assimilating the Germans to "a sort of cormorant Japanese" who "has plenty of the adventurous criminal in him, as the world has reason to know" (1984, 274). It does not come as a surprise then that he even imagines a war fable in which men, having apparently lost what made them such, have literally turned into animals on account of their patterns of behaviour, with some of them outranking the others: "the weasel jumped, missed his tip, & the rat squealed & fled, shouting Kamerad" (264). But he then thought the better of it when he preferred to forget about this analogy, which he must have found unfair to the animal kingdom since it could not be reduced to "wild beast lust" (79) solely: "I can understand mental degenerates doing these things, but not men. These are not the acts of men. They are not the acts of beasts." (223). Having been an ocular witness to "indecentcies of the most outrageous kind," including those spawned by the utmost cowardice (1917, 150), till his feeling of alienation was so strong that he could not but "long for a familiar face" (1984, 224), he finally confesses his "loathing of Germany" in the *Letters* (278),¹⁵ a stance he never makes so explicit in either

Gallipoli or *The Old Front Line*. There, he just mentions the British soldiers' scorn for the Turks (1916, 173), but never expresses such an overwhelming hatred and never cries out so vehemently and desperately for vengeance as in the following sentence: "You feel that you could cut a Boche throat & desecrate a Boche grave & bomb a Boche town, & get a Boche officer down & gouge his eyes out" (1984, 290).

Hence, it is clear that the genre is a deciding factor in the presentation in events: as opposed to his more distant reports in *Gallipoli* and *The Old Front Line*, and to his true-to-life near-immediate kaleidoscopic views in his *Letters*, his poetry is characterized by indirection, his main means of expression being the transpositions inherent in symbolism, whether it is left to the images of the hunt or of poaching to represent war (1978, 66, 639, 669). Though they also reflect a strong commitment to the British cause, Robert Bridges' poems are steeped in realism and fraught with nationalism, a contrast which is not surprising, given that as a Poet Laureate, he must have believed his role was to call his compatriots to arms and inspire the nation with confidence and hope in a better future. For instance in "Our Prisoners of War in Germany. October 1918" and to some extent in "Britannia Victrix," the poet dares express in unequivocal terms his response, not to say his gut-reactions, to the horrors his fellow-men have had to endure (Bridges 1920, 39, 47).

Even if John Masefield's fervent patriotism can be read in his prose more than in some of his epic poems where it appears between the lines, in the filigree of allegorical figures such as Ram and Man (1978, 142), his writings feature the same religious references as Robert Bridges'. Their views inevitably hinge on a Manichean division between the nations at war, with Masefield in *Letters from the Front* equating "that German part of His creation" with "these dirty devils the Boche" (290), or simply "the devil" (221), while their misdeeds are "the very devilry" (295), "dirty devilry and malice" (290). Masefield also curses "William," whom he twice calls "Guillaume" (153, 160), "his streak of unbalancedness" (187) and the "Kultur" (230, 252) he and "the scum of his army" (238) embody through "the cult of the supermen" (252) because in his eyes, they leave nothing but a trail of damage behind them, as their "filthy tide recedes" and uncovers "filthy ruins" (217-8). As for Bridges, he remarks "such devilish aims had they," the better to justify England's intervention in the name of good and justice: "Nor trouble we just Heaven that quick revenge be done / On Satan's chamberlains highseated in Berlin (...) on such sin / Follows perdition eternal ... and it has begun" (1920, 39). The blemish they both hint at has religious as well as racial, if not racist, undertones, the German's "impurities" (1984, 213), resulting from a curse (1931, 503), appearing as the sole reason for this inhuman behaviour. However, in *Gallipoli*, Masefield differs from Bridges in that he points out how difficult it is to give an impartial assessment of opponents when one is both judge and judged so much so that there may well be another version of the story: "Some day, long hence, when the war is over, the Turk story will be made known. Until then we can only guess why it was that..."; "Let us wait till we know their story..." (1916, 180, 186). In his endeavour to be as fair as possible to both warring parties, unrealistic though it may be, he also ascribes words to the enemy within some dramatic monologues, but it goes without saying that this narrative tour-de-force is merely an excuse for singing the British soldiers' praises:

... and some day, when the truth will walk clear-eyed, it will be known why we did not [win the Peninsula]. Until then, let our enemies say this: ' They did not win, but they came across three thousand miles of sea, a little army without their reserves and short of munitions, a band of brothers, not half of them half-trained, and nearly all of them new to

war ...' (189)

In a similar vein, the authorial "we" in such an utterance as "we will take the landings in succession" (1916, 43), the impersonal "one" used in *The Old Front Line* "as one travels" (111), "one sees" (112), "when one stands" (116), "as one climbs up" (128), "one can look down at the enemy position" (128), as well as the phrase "a glance" in "it is plain from a glance that...", "a glance is enough to show that..." (113, 135), are supposed to be anonymous props that enable the narrator to express the Allied point of view in a seemingly objective way, while in fact, just like the pronoun "you" and the determiner "your" (126), they cannot but include the reader and rally him to the cause he should naturally commit himself to:

One can only answer, that in modern war it is not easy to carry a well-defended site by direct attack. In modern war you may not know, till fire breaks out upon you, where the defence, which you have to attack, is hidden. You may not know (in darkness, in a strange land) more than vaguely which is your 'front,' and you may pass by your enemy, or over him, or under him without seeing him. (1916, 77)

Like the subtle handling of pro-forms, the descriptive remarks which seem to have been made just in passing, are actually as many empathy shifters under the terms of the reading contract that aims at putting every one of us in the British soldiers' place: "Against this position, held by at most 8,000 of our men, who had had no rest and had fought hard since dawn under every kind of fire in a savage rough country unknown to them, came an overwhelming army of Turks to drive them onto the sea" (1916, 55). J. Masefield sometimes appeals to our imagination in a more straightforward way by using not only the present tense for his narrative (1917, 139, 142) but also such recurring anaphoras as in *Gallipoli*: "Let them picture/ imagine themselves..." (1916, 14), "Let the reader imagine himself to ...," "Let him say to himself that ... " (79), "Let him see ... Let him think that... Then let him hear..." (80), which indeed render the account more lively but, more significantly still, partake of a symbolic dramatic projection. The readers gradually become one of "those marvellous young men (...) the flower of this world's manhood" (55) who fought on the sea and on dry land to try and find out more about "the heart of things" (42), "the bloody game of the catch" which too often leads one straight into "the jaws of death" (85). For they cannot but identify with all those anonymous combatants whose gradual progress in space finally determined the outcome of the war and to whom Masefield decided to pay homage in the opening piece of his *Collected Poems*, "Consecration" (1931, 3). So precise are his numerous evocations of the British army's successive advances and retreats in its attempts at gaining ground that the modern readers may get the feeling they are watching a film like Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* or are even part of the action. Indeed, they find themselves groping their way mound after mound, hill after hill, in some unknown land, literally struggling against blindness in *The Old Front Line*: "our soldiers could see a great expanse of chalk downland, though the falling of the hill kept them from seeing the enemy's position" (106); "one sees little of the enemy position from the English line" (110); "All the way of the hill, the enemy had the stronger position. It was above us almost invisible and unguessable (...) it was impossible for us to see anything of his position or to assault him." (139). For "the power to see" (144), is a privilege only to be enjoyed once one has gained a better strategic position than one's enemy. The near-stasis entailed by these minute topographical and tactical dramatizations is an

effect Masefield strives for via the literary device of mimesis: as he declares, the monotony characteristic of some passages in *The Old Front Line*, which echo one another through the same repetitions, derives from the very monotony of the setting and of the fight itself: "If the description of this old line be dull to read, it should be remembered that it was dull to hold" (77).

Besides dealing with "the art of warfare" (1916, 24), many a paragraph, especially in *Gallipoli* and *The Old Front Line*, is interspersed with phrases that were coined by each side to refer to some strategic places which did not have any names in peace time. The soldiers' speech, which is by turns comical,¹⁶ ironical,¹⁷ even incongruous,¹⁸ or inspired by faith,¹⁹ renders J. Masefield's accounts more graphic and colourful while defusing part of the tragic tension from the battleground. By putting the reader *in medias res*, within a linguistic environment, which is unique in that it is inscribed in a historical period and defined by a particular group of people, be they soldiers or officers, he aims at the authenticity provided by verisimilitude. His goal is to make us empathize with these men—"our men," as he repeatedly says—, who waged that war for freedom's sake, more than with the enemies, naturally enough, though he does mention some of their positions through the German referents they were given: "the Leipzig spur/salient/Hills/" or "the Hollenzern" for instance (1917, 125). We as readers coming ever closer to the battlefield cannot but be, just as the soldiers, constantly aware of the front line since it materializes through and between the words themselves. As the christening of a place depended on the armies' respective positions at the time, a nickname could hold for only one side—which explains why J. Masefield keeps repeating the phrase "was known to / by our men as ..." (1916, 133; 1917, 96, 101, 109)—or more than one side, provided those were allies: "These forks give it the look of a letter Y upon the maps, for which reason both the French and ourselves called the place the 'Ravin en Y' or 'Y ravine'" (1917, 107). These place-names, "now likely to be printed on all English maps" replaced the "rough Turkish" ones at Gallipoli or the French ones at the Battle of the Somme and entered history as well as posterity by marking each "a great passage of arms" (1916, 61).

The physical aspect of the British soldiers' ordeal is also taken into account and described in full detail, however gruesome the facts (1916, 67-8, 80, 85; 1984, 58, 63, 66-70), the better to make us see what they saw (1916, 80, 132), hear what they heard (1916, 57), feel what they felt (1916, 132), in a word, suffer what they suffered in the grip of heat, hunger, thirst, dirt, pests, fear and sleeplessness, as they were mere "cannon fodder" (1984, 265) "in this savagery there" (1916, 132). Until the confusion was so great that no distinction could be made between the Allied Forces and their enemies, theirs being "human flesh" even though they were not always perceived as truly human: "At midnight the wounded were lying all over the trenches; the enemy dead were so thick that our men had to walk on them, and bombs were falling in such numbers that every foot in those galleries was stuck with human flesh" (1916, 129). J. Masefield does not turn a blind eye either to the psychological aspect of these "bodily hardships" (1916, 104), even less so in his *Letters*, where, guided by a feeling of love for these men (54) and a sense of brotherhood which he defines as "the community feeling" (1984, 60), he devotes part of his thoughts to "paying heed to the individual character" (78). Whenever he happens to praise the enemy, whether the Turks in *Gallipoli* or the Germans in *The Old Front Line*, through the use of appreciative adjectives or past participles like "strong," "neat," "vigorous," "first-rate", "well-wired, "well-armed" (1916, 24, 137, 145, 179), comparatives like "the stronger position" (1916, 139), superlatives like "the smartest" (1917, 138), "the finest mine" (1917, 134), nouns (nominals) like "the skill

and craft" (1917, 137), "resolute courage" (1916, 73), "good shots" (1916, 146), prepositional phrases like "in force/ in very great force" (1916, 93, 148), "in too great strength" (1916, 138), or adverbs like "strongly" (1916, 50), "securely" (1916, 146), "solidly" (1917, 137), "cunningly" (1916, 78, 84), "cleverly" (1916, 146), he does so mostly to reflect on the heroism of the British soldiers who sometimes managed to have the upper hand on their foes (1917, 108,113), to beat or "end" them, as he says crudely in *Gallipoli* (37).

This strong bias of his towards the Allies also relies on more conventional devices, which are to be found in Robert Bridges' poems as well, for instance in "*Der Tag*" (1920, 54). The recurrence of the adjective "brave" and its synonyms ("gallant," "wonderful," "great") which qualify the noun "men," or through synecdoche, the nouns "attack" and "ships," have a cumulative effect which is enhanced by the many superlatives and even hyperboles extolling the Allied, especially the British, troops' qualities, sometimes even praised by their enemies (1916, 90, 94). Though Masefield sometimes underlines those only indirectly, in the passive voice as in "Great skill and much dashing courage were shown in these assaults," the reader quickly sees through his rhetorical ruse without even having to make any deductions from the repetition of the phrase "dashing courage" further down the page: "The Manchester Brigade and two companies of the 5th Lancashire Fusiliers advanced with the most glorious and dashing courage, routed the Turks ..." (1916, 93). Those outstanding features, which are hinted at in a more abstract way in *The Old Front Line* through the contrast between the present of the Battle of the Somme and the peaceful past, are summed up in *Gallipoli* in a paradox whereby a mimetic clash of words comes to celebrate the gruesome realities of war: "The work of the beach parties in that scene of burning and massacre was beyond all praise" (59). He insists on putting the individual and collective feats in a historical perspective by resorting to generalizations which sound like so many aphorisms (77), and by drawing parallels in his *Letters* with Pompey (161), Napoleon (279) or Nelson and his sailors at Trafalgar (in *Gallipoli* 151-3), the latter being also a key-figure of Bridges' "*Der Tag*." Both poets set archetypal standards of achievement against which to measure the succeeding military exploits on the ground as well as in the enemy's mind, whose pride the Allied Forces tried to abase (Masefield 1917, 136). Although Masefield tells anecdotes and gives statistics to prove his point (1916, 50; 1984, 205, 215-6), he also alludes to some legendary feudal past and, at times, endows the British army with a mythological or even sacred dimension²⁰ by using the intertextual reference to *The Song of Roland* as the backbone to *Gallipoli*: "No such gathering of fine ships has ever been seen upon this earth, and the beauty and the exultation of the youth upon them made them like sacred things as they moved away", "strange, sunburned, half-naked men moved at their work with the bronze bodies of gods" (39, 171). While his acute sense of history makes him wax lyrical even when the outcome is defeat (1916, 49, 57-8, 118, 183), keen as he is to narrate if only "one hundredth part of the deeds of heroism" done on what he calls "paths of glory leading to the grave" (1917, 87-89), he also allows himself to criticize the faulty tactical schemes which entailed the loss of human lives without granting the men any victory. For his aim is to get at a better understanding of what actually happened, especially when the battle in question, Gallipoli escapes any stereotyped definitions—"it was not a battle in the military sense: it was a fight man to man, between two enemies whose blood was up" (124)—and even more so as it appears to have been lost because of "a want of fresh men in reserve" (97). As he declares:

the giving of praise or blame is always easy, but the understanding of

anything is difficult (...) the understanding of anything so vast, so confused, so full of contradictions, so dependent on little things (themselves changing from minute to minute, the coward of a moment ago blazing out into a hero at the next turn) a modern battle is more than difficult. (142)

His writings therefore are to be read both as testimonies to and as analyses of the various situations he and others had to cope with, all of them being justified by their contributing to the drawing of lessons in view of any future conflict (1916, 73). Thus, if he blames the British military tactics both at Gallipoli and at the Battle of the Somme, because they did not, in his eyes, always grant enough importance to strategy, especially when it came to winning vantage grounds and seeing to the practical aspect of things (1917, 98, 100; 1984, 267), he further condemns the late involvement of the U.S. and Australia. This viewpoint is also shared by Robert Bridges though he resorts to allegory where John Masefield is clearly outspoken (Bridges 33, 38, 42). His main purpose being to write history and even rewrite it whenever "legends" force him to re-establish the truth (Masefield 1917, 137; 1916, 70). We see Masefield in *Gallipoli* defend the British general in charge and brush aside the objections made by his detractors, symbolically subsumed under the pronoun "they," which he usually employs to refer to the enemy (26, 65, 69, 77). Standing his ground, he counterbalances the British army's failure at Gallipoli with the "great human effort" and "lack of resources" which in themselves seem to justify his tribute to "the unsung heroes" (54, 105) whose familiar spirits, the very "souls of a race" (152), he celebrates in all his war writings, building for them as many literary shrines.

3. On the other side of the Word

John Masefield's aesthetics reflect a fundamental duality, which originates in his involvement in the scenes he describes. His accounts are realistic to the point of being graphic, especially when he conjures up the most haunting images of the war, depicting the bodies of English soldiers killed in action, "buried once, and then unburied by the rain" (1917, 111) or some English graves and the field testaments found in the mud which read like prophecies (1916, 111), or even more movingly, the graves of "unknown British heroes" (1917, 118). But, characteristically enough, both in *The Old Front Line* and in *Gallipoli*, the vividness of these evocations is proportionate to the subdued quality of his tone, which derives from a deceptive simplicity of style. Whether it is based on unobtrusive repetitions, like that of the past participle "broken" to refer to bodies, crosses or tombs (1917, 119, 132, 139), or on the originality of an impression,²¹ his deft handling of words enables him to convey a sense of utter desolation where no or very little mourning could take place. He gradually builds it up by recalling other obsessive memories, those of "a lonely white cross which stands out on the highest point of the enemy parapet like a banner planted by a conqueror" (126), or, more remarkably still, of a woman who "walked steadily along the whole front of the Schwaben and then jumped down into her trench" only to be found later "lying in the ruins dead" (120). Maybe it is this art of suggesting the grim realities on the front line, and in the rear, which is most effective since it touches the reader's imagination in a way the shock tactics inherent in his unmediated realistic accounts cannot equal. Through the indirection of a consecutive link that allows him to mention "the bloody woodland" (86), "the bloody shelter of our trenches" (91) or "a kind of bloody dust" (160), he achieves a subtlety of presentation his more explicit *Letters* do not always attain, as he acknowledged to his

wife (1984, 228, 230). As for his poetry, it strikes a balance between these two tendencies: haunted by death though it may be, his verse is rife with images of decomposing cadavers but such a macabre process is related to an underlying belief in metempsychosis and only represented through the transmutations provided by symbolism.

Being unable to use such resources in his prose works, he sometimes has no other alternative than to resort to understatement and conventional biblical phrases (1984, 91, 288), notably when dealing with death, but more often than not he is confronted with *aporia*. He then finds himself at such a loss for words that he can only use the most common of them as pointers to the unsayable, whether he is recounting the Dardanelles campaign at Gallipoli—"Nothing can be said of that fight, no words can describe nor any mind imagine it, except as a roaring and blazing hour of killing" (1916, 160)—or the Battle of the Somme: "the following pages may help some few others, who have not already formed that image, to see the scene as it appears today. What it was like on the day of battle cannot be imagined by those who were not there" (1917, 91; see 158; 1916, 74; 1984, 206). However hard he tries to transcribe the soldiers' perceptions and states of mind through the direct projection of the reader into those scenes of slaughter as he asks him to "hear the intermittent crash and rattle of the fire augment suddenly and awfully in a roaring, blasting roll, unspeakable and unthinkable" (1916, 81), he knows only too well that he wages a battle with syllables and sounds, and against them, to their very death on the brink of silence. Just as J.M.G. Le Clezio has written: "*Les mots ne sont pas assez nombreux pour courir aussi vite que la guerre*" / "Words are not numerous enough to run as fast as war" (124).

That is why John Masefield's prose is rich in so many analogies while his poetry abounds in allegories, in ways similar to Robert Bridges' war poems (17, 30, 34). Masefield compares the French landscape to some parts of England, Scotland or Ireland, the better to help British readers figure out what it looked like in wartime (1917, 98, 106, 140, 142), even if the cratered surface of a moon "made of filth instead of beauty" (1984, 206) or the mouth of a volcano (209) or even the havoc wrought by "the passing of a cyclone" (1917, 121) seem to be more appropriate. And he also lets us catch glimpses of the *danse macabre* which any battle becomes, through the prism of virtual scenes which reflect the real "obscene" ones. Whether he urges us to imagine a gold rush (1916, 168), a rapid (45), tidal waves, the comb of rollers on a reef (1917, 120), a wreck²² (1916, 178), the plague (1917, 81) or to recollect the most nightmarish aspects of the fairy-tale world of our childhoods where "a swollen toad" suddenly turns into "enemy trench-mortar" while shrapnel bullets are "as thick as plums in a pudding" (1916, 59), he shows us the subjective perceptions endured in the face of horrors no one could possibly come to terms with. His animal fables where one might encounter "the skeleton of the village of Hamel" while "Bapaume points like a sword through the heart of the enemy positions" (1917, 82-3), where "the scream of shells is like great cats of death in the air", the wandering cats themselves looking like "evil spirits" (81), where a machine gun sounds like "a bird-like croon" (1916, 82), and the enemy position is "saddle-shaped" and "spread aloft like a toadstool" (1917, 106) unveil the other, inner side of the big picture. There, men are no longer human beings but like rats fighting in a sewer (1916, 128), seeing the world "as the rabbit sees it, crouching on the ground, just their own little patch" (81), unable to flee even in their dreams since nothing comes to them but "dogs' nightmares" (87). Likewise, the long-drawn out metaphors which assimilate a place to a human hand (1917, 121-31) and the bearings one may get in it to its fingers, the enemy position to "evil-looking quarries," "evil eyries" or "a hawk's nest" (118-127),

the Anzac one to "an open book to every Turk aeroplane" (1916, 115), the British one to "the engine of death," (147), "the hills of their destiny" (132), "the hill of death" (89) which reminds us of Golgotha, "death door" (103), "that gallery of the mine of death" (130), combine with such leitmotifs as the tide of the war (1917, 81), the turn of the tide (1917, 78; 1984, 245), the graves and the sea giving up their dead (1984, 255) to draw a picture of gloom and doom, itself fated to remain approximate, tentative and incomplete in its desperate attempt at signifying nothing through everything it is not.

Faced with so many mindscapes, the reader is finally blind to the intractable realities those are supposed to re-present. Even the religious references, among which "Hell" and its synonym "Baal or Ashtaroth" (1984, 292) are naturally the most frequent, only deepen the gap between denotation, an ever-receding medium when "deeds unspeakable" are concerned (Bridges 1920, 39), and connotation, which then appears as a hopeless last resort, another avowal of powerlessness on the author's part. Such a stereotypical phrase as "Sodom and Gomorrah," which keeps recurring in the *Letters* as the double of "Hell" and its derivatives (210, 256, 273), acts as a blank screen which points to that which it cannot show. It is as though the signifiers of these proper nouns appealing to our collective memory as members of a Christian culture, were enough to present how war always reduces to absolute senselessness. When no comparison or metaphor holds any longer if only because the referent too often happens to be "like nothing else on God's earth", the sole medium left is either the verbal *deixis* provided by demonstrative phrases as in Masefield's utterance "I saw the projectile go up into the sky, *comme ça*" (1984, 192) or, simply and more forcefully, the visual *deixis* of his sketches in his *Letters* and the black and white photographs included in *The Old Front Line*, which let us figure out the scene for ourselves: "I wish that I could describe these things, so as to make people see them" (1984, 211), or "but it cannot be described. This desolation and damnedness must be seen" (248). Whether words fall short of the scale of inner and outer damage, the vanishing lines in the picture one gets all lead straight into the absurd: the relentless succession of battles, in which men are all enemies, and roles, constantly reversed between the besieged and the attackers (1917, 78), till "the prize" is nothing but a waste land (1984, 176), underlies a vision of history as being cyclical and consequently meaningless—"Chalk, wire, stakes, friends, and enemies seem here to have been all blown to powder" (1917, 133). By putting in perspective in *Letters from the Front*, the Gallipoli campaign (149) with the Ancre battle (213) or the Battle of the Somme, itself balanced against that of the Marne (47, 116, 173, 184, 209, 242, 247, 258, 266), Vimy (242) and Verdun (130, 133, 143, 146, 150, 158, 209), and projecting all these war scenes into the future, when they are but tourist attractions in *The Old Front Line* (87, 92), Masefield emphasizes, consciously or not, the pointlessness of it all. Even the references to Pompey the Great and Roland at Roncevaux "defending Christendom against Islam" (1984, 141) like Sir Ian Standish Hamilton,²³ cannot in any way defuse this tragic tension, though they endow the portraits of some contemporary historic figures with an aura of romanticism, the better to justify a political stance: "the poem, in its romantic simplicity and tragedy, had lifelong appeal to Masefield, who saw in it some evidence for his own justification, not of war in general, but for Britain's support for Belgium in 1914" (1984, 159). These prose equivalents of the frequent detours through myth and history he takes in his poetry, just as Bridges forays into the territories of Norse mythology or chivalry in some of his war poems (Bridges 42-44), are the backdrops of a folly to which men have given a name, though its reality eludes the logic of any linguistic structuring.²⁴ This is evidenced by the startling oxymorons which

nevertheless fail to grasp entirely what war is, such as "The final stage of the battle was a sight of stirring and awful beauty" (1916, 87), or "It [the early part of the war] all seems a marvellous kind of nightmare which happened to work out luckily for us" (1984, 187). So do the various definitions Masefield ventures as he paradoxically equates war with life,²⁵ a championship (1916, 95, 11, 161), a race (1916, 142, 152), a conquest (1916, 148), sometimes resorting to the grim humour²⁶ also to be found in his poetry, even if his own more or less conscious versions of Rimbaud's "*Dormeur du Val*" are probably more telling:

They lie scraping in the roots of daffodils and lilies, while bullets sing and shriek a foot or two over their heads. A man peering from his place in the flowers may make out that the man next to him, some three yards away, is dead and that the man beyond is praying, the man behind him cursing, and the man beyond him out of mind from nerves or thirst. (1916, 83)

As a Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges could come across as more explicitly involved in the defence of peace, which he considers to be part of the English tradition of promoting freedom across the world (Bridges 24-7, 42-9) than John Masefield, who has chosen a more descriptive stance in his narratives, where his "whole theory of life" (1984, 127) leads him to adopt a less clear-cut if not less resolute attitude. Even if he relates it to "the general soul of the world" (89), "the healing and elevating influence of the world" in Woodrow Wilson's words (170), peace to him is a more elusive concept than to Bridges, though he manages to catch glimpses of it even in the heat of the fight - "between the bangs there was peace" (136)— sharing as he does Tolstoy's belief that "no man can conduct a war or a battle, but that Providence works through a sort of blindness and welter to a kind of justice" (187). When he resists the temptation of resignation and does not say "but *c'est la guerre*" (88) or "Well, *c'est la guerre*, and must be endured" (125), it is just to state that on this earth peace can only be "comparative peace." And all the more so as peace all too often seems impossible to attain (82), which leads him to declare with the poet "who alone knows the uncertainty of life": "' The end men look for cometh not, / And a path is there where no man sought /For that is what the end of this war will be" (1984, 165).

Though he imagines the enemy calling for "an end, any end to the shelling" (1917, 159) and he himself looks forward to the end of "this wicked war" (1984, 89), which is "an affair of carriers and trenches" (262, 288), he is all too aware that the cost is "pretty high," so tragic are its modalities: "the bloodiness and savagery of the end will be without parallel" (279). This is probably why he can write such amazing statements as, "I'm afraid we must just grit our teeth and prepare for another two years before the real danger, the peace, can begin" (233) or "I really don't see how there can be peace before 1919. People here say 1920. And thinking that, I don't see how any peace could be more disastrous, so there we are" (278),²⁷ so frightened was he that "a compromise" would be reached in the end, "a sort of victory of the lukewarm, which English law so often is" (91). Because his moral outlook on the war consisted in holding the Germans responsible (86), his prayer for peace could not go without an urge for revenge (81, 86, 94), hence the paradox whereby peace comes to justify war (1916, 17-8, 153). If life is sometimes "madness" (1984, 134), "war is a degradation of life" (234), "an accursed kind of life" (212), which does not prevent it from being at times more intense than the common life supposed to give us a sense of the real: "the cities of those camps where not cities of the dead, they were cities of intense life, cities of comradeship and resolve, unlike the cities of peace" (1916, 171).

Always more on the sensory than on the cerebral side of events, as exemplified by the comparison of victory to the opening of a door and the bursting of the bars of a prison (161), as well as by the original definition he suggests ("by bloody pain they won the image and taste of victory," 161), Masefield cannot but rank the heart over the intellect, which he blames for having triggered the conflict by making men lose touch with any human feeling (1984, 86). He draws from those values he saw put in practice during the war the lesson that "it is our duty to watch each human soul alike unceasingly and lovingly, or God knows what may happen" as "one sees the folly of anything but love and courage" (1984, 84, 90). In his prose, where traditionally enough, it is synonymous with happiness and symbolized by light (1916, 119, 169), peace marks "the definite end" that war, "like a work of art," must have (1984, 252). In his poetry (1931, 507-8) on the contrary, it is a new page, (reminiscent of Hegel's blank page?), whose purity blinds men once they have forgotten it dwells in their own selves, an inner strength in the likeness of "the Peace of God."

"Let be old sins and spoilings. Let us start / Another page" (1931, 508).

Through his stereoscopic vision, which is supported by straightforward didacticism, John Masefield aims at clarity, stating generalities about war, while at the same time getting down to specifics. His immediate or mediated analytical presentation of events, whose sequence unfolds and then folds again via numerous analepses, prolepses and synopses, thus appears both argumentative and picturesque, realistic and symbolic, in its attempt at pertaining to what Nietzsche called "critical history, that is to say, which judges and condemns," (Nietzsche 237), even though it cannot but be one-sided. As if providing an answer to the rhetorical question he asks in *Gallipoli*, "Who will ever write the story of even one half-hour of that (...) day?" (89), he manages to inscribe the front line in and beneath the words themselves, his prose and poetry books being like so many committed epitaphs to the anonymous soldiers who had to defend their country in the worst conditions imaginable, or unimaginable rather, so deep is the gap between the war couched on a paper battleground and that fought on a three-dimensional one. If to him, Nature, as though hungry for men's flesh (1931, 10), can be a more cruel enemy than the Turks or Germans whenever sun and dust or rain and mud combine to increase the ordeals of combatants, it also offers a contrast with the evil nature of men and highlights by its indifference the paradoxical dimension of war as it bestows "a kind of daze of beauty" on the battlefield (1984, 262). Yet, as it becomes in its turn a victim whose face is defiled, it also gives back a reflection of the trials both sides have to endure in their obsessive confrontation with the enemy: enslaved²⁸ to the Other in an antagonistic relationship, the ego loses the freedom gained from positive self-assertion in peacetime.²⁹ "Still alive" whenever they are able to hold their own, just like an army, the trees especially are objective correlatives to the men in their conquest for "debateable land" (1984, 150), "the Promised Land" (208-12; 1917, 142) suddenly turned god-forgotten, i.e. hellish in the reversal of all values which has led it to be sown with shells and shrapnel bullets so that it seems to bear the scars of pox or leprosy (144-6). The moment it finally dies, it dis-embodies death itself, exposing what survives from the "tug of war" (50): only remains and graves. Once "razed," "obliterated" (225), the land leaves nothing behind but a "beastly, horrid" waste to the power of two, the real look of war, the wreck of war, with its "air of desecration and desertion" (1917, 114), whose beauty, if any, is to be found in corruption. Within an aesthetics of ruins inspired by romanticism, a vision moulded by existentialism³⁰ in which life is "a few short hours of blindness shot by gleams" (1931, 763), "a beauty chased by tragic laughter" (757), John Masefield's "inky way" traces a *vanitas* whose

meaning is that of a *memento mori*, if only to let the figure of the Beautiful Woman who haunts his poetry turn the page from time to eternity.

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¹ John Masefield was Poet Laureate from 1930 to 1967.

² The quotation is from Masefield, *Letters from the Front 1915-17*, 199.

³ "Such was our old front line at the beginning of the battle, and so the travellers of our race will strive to picture it when they see the ground under the crops of coming Julys." (Masefield 1917, 148)

⁴ T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", V: "What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from "; "East Coker", I: "In my beginning is my end."

⁵ For example: "now" (Masefield 1916, 42, 45, 155), "presently" (1916, 41, 155; 1917, 108), "not yet" (1916, 154, 155; 1917, 115), "till" (1916, 47), "were to" (1916, 36, 43), "were going to" (1916, 38).

⁶ For example, in *Gallipoli* (1916): "the big guns on Asia were now shelling the River Clyde" (45, see also 138, 156).

⁷ In *Gallipoli*: "Long after the war, the goatherd on Gallipoli will lose his way in the miles of trenches which zigzag from Cape Helles to Achi Baba. Long after we are all dust, the goats of Gallipoli will break their legs in those pits and ditches, and over their coffee round the fire, the elders will say that ..." (166).

⁸ *The Old Front Line*: "It is hard to imagine that only three years ago that hill was cornfield, and the site of the chasm grew bread." (105)

⁹ Other examples in *Gallipoli* : "they had fought the first stage of the battle, the next stage was to be decisive" (140), "the storm was to be pushed from the north, and would, if successful, clear the way for the final thrust" (141, see also 95, 161).

¹⁰ "Knowing this, our soldiers made a great struggler for Sari Bair, but Fate turned the lot against them." (1916, 112).

¹¹ "I probably know more of the Somme field than any of the soldiers who fought there. Parts of it do not attract me, parts repel me, some of it is romantic, some

strange, some unearthly, some savage" (1984, 293); "I have been fairly often under shell-fire, once very heavy, and it is a devilish thing, & it makes good troops, bad troops & it drives bad troops mad." (263)

¹² "I'm fed up with mud & cold; but I'm on here to see this stunt through. I couldn't miss this stunt for anything." (1984, 206).

¹³ "We literary men have been very evil, writing about war. To fight is bad enough, but it has its manly side, but to let the mind dwell on it and peck its carrion and write of it is a devilish unmanly thing, and that's what we've been doing, ever since we had leisure, circa 1850." (1984, 79)

¹⁴ In *The Old Front Line*: "our men" (13); "many men of our race" (78,85,87) "our people;" (76, 87), "our troops" (24), "our army" (31), "our side" (53, 77), "our front" (87), "our line" (77), "our lines" (129); "our attacks" (46, 55), "our hold" (51); and in *Gallipoli*: "our attacking columns" (136).

¹⁵ "I don't feel that I can ever think quietly of Germany again. They are guilty of this crime & folly & misery, & if there is such a thing as injustice, there is such another thing as righteous anger, & it is that that one feels." (1984, 245); "Everyone agrees that the Boche have been everywhere harsh, cruel, pitiless & outbearing, & that their rule has been a rule of terror. (...) The legacy of hatred left in France by them is something you cannot realise until you meet it." (1984, 86).

¹⁶ "a redoubt or earthwork fortress called the 'Haricot' on the left of the French sector." (1916, 95), "the lump called Chocolate Hill" (1916, 109), "a convexity or salient known as The Pimple" (1916, 125), "the heights known as Baby 700 and Battleship Hill" (1916, 112), "a curious wooded bank or slope, known (from its shape on the map, which is like a cocked hat) as the Chapeau de Gendarme." (1917, 146).

¹⁷ "a high ground known as Johnston's Jolly, which was, alas! neither jolly nor Johnston's, but a strong part of the Turk position." (1916, 125)

¹⁸ "a long, curving shallow valley, known as Sausage Valley, famous, later in the battle, as an assembly place for men going up against Pozières." (1917, 134).

¹⁹ "these steps gave to all this part of the line the name of Jacob's Ladder"; F 96: "copses, which our men called the four Evangelists, John, Luke, Mark and Matthew." (1917, 102).

²⁰ Cf. his reference to Troy (1984, 279, 285); the quote in a nostalgic tone: "the English works look old and noble, as though they were the foundations of some castle long since fallen under Time" (1917, 99).

²¹ "It is difficult to stand in the old English line from which those men started without the feeling that the crosses are the men alive, still going forward, as they went in the July morning a year ago." (1917, 129).

²² His poetry abounds in shipwrecks, which could well symbolize a country at war.

²³ Commander of the Anglo-French forces at Gallipoli, to whom Masefield dedicates his account of the campaign.

²⁴ See: a Roman Context (Masefield 1931, 40), the Battle of Lepanto in "Philip the King" (332), Cain and Abel (406), the myth of Atlantis (441), the myth of Diana, the huntress (639, 669), which all question the origin of evil and strife.

²⁵ "war (like life) consists of a struggle with disadvantages" (1916, 101); "In war, as in life, the unusual thing, however little, betrays the unusual thing, however great."

²⁶ Instead of defusing the tragic tension in the *Letters*, it has the opposite effect (cf. 91-4, 159, 167, 169, 183, 193, 213).

²⁷ One may perhaps draw a parallel with Victor Hugo here: "*La guerre, c'est la guerre des hommes; la paix, c'est la guerre des idées*" / "War is War among men, peace is a war of ideas" (2:5)

²⁸ Lagneau noted: “Man is ensnared in his own chains, as both slave and tyrant, compliant with all the violence that he undergoes” *“L’homme est dans ses propres fers, esclave à la fois et tyran, complice au moins des violences qu’il subit.”*(11). For Clausewitz: “War is an act of violence destined to make the adversary accomplish our will” *“La guerre est un acte de violence destiné à contraindre l’adversaire à exécuter notre volonté”*(51)

²⁹ Sartre wrote: *“La violence se donne toujours pour une contre-violence, c’est-à-dire pour une riposte à la violence de l’autre”* / “Violence always presents itself as counter-violence, that is to say as a response to violence from the other” (210). Max Weber hints at the monopoly of legitimate physical violence (*“le monopole de la violence physique légitime”*) that a state thinks it has when it is at war. (Weber, 124).

³⁰ “Fate, that is given to all men partly shaped, / Is man’s to alter daily till he die.” (1931, 613).