

# A DEAD POETS' SOCIETY: RUPERT BROOKE'S AND AUGUST STRAMM'S WAR POEMS

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## ABSTRACT

Among the millions of casualties of World War I, there were hundreds of poets, some of them quite well known when they enlisted, while others only found – and tragically lost – their literary voices during the war. It is the latter group of poets who are often regarded as 'War Poets' proper – War Poets, moreover, whose poems appear to express distinctly anti-war attitudes. Two of the most famous literary casualties of 1915 were Rupert Brooke and August Stramm. This article will discuss some of their war poems and will use these poems to illustrate the enormous formal and thematic range war poetry can, and does, cover. In the process, it will also suggest that recent comparative approaches to British and French World War I poetry, and to the presence or otherwise of an identifiable group of War Poets in national literatures, should be extended so as to include German examples.

*Keywords:* War Poetry; comparative approach; Rupert Brooke; August Stramm; poetry translation

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OF THE HUNDREDS OF POETS, playwrights, novelists, artists, architects and composers who served in the First World War and who are listed as among its 'Lost Voices' in the appendix to the anthology of that title, edited by Tim Cross to coincide with the 1988 Armistice Festival, around 150 writers died in the year 1915.<sup>1</sup>

Although it may seem a somewhat frivolous exercise to single out, from among the millions of casualties of that war, a small group whose common denominators are that they were published authors and that they passed away in the same year, it can easily be shown that, in their way, these writers are quite representative, both of their (male) fellow victims and of the literary professions in the first decades of the twentieth century: like the first cohort, they fought on either side of the conflict, in a number of theatres of war; they wrote – and of course spoke – in a Babylonian variety of languages, from Armenian to Provençal, and from Polish to Hungarian; and, finally, their fates are illustrative of the kinds of death one could, and did, die in World War I – of diseases and one's wounds, of sheer exhaustion, in a silly accident, during one's first flight in an airplane, or when one's ship was torpedoed by a German submarine. Others simply vanished without a trace.

As to these writers' professional standing, some of them were quite well known when they enlisted or were drafted, while others' budding careers were either brutally cut short, or else only took off posthumously: whereas the former continued to publish in a variety of genres, not necessarily war-related or war-themed, it is the latter, those who only found their literary voices during the war, who are often regarded as the 'War Poets' proper; war poets, moreover, whose poems expressed, or appeared to express, distinctly anti-war attitudes.

Two of the most famous literary casualties of 1915 were Rupert Brooke, who died of blood poisoning on his way to Gallipoli on 23 April, and August Stramm, killed at Brest-Litovsk on 1 September. Where and how the two died already indicates that, prior to their untimely deaths, their war experiences had been quite different: when, on 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany, Brooke started to explore various ways of joining up – as a war correspondent, as a volunteer – but discovered, to his dismay, that it was not as easy to get to the front as he had expected it to be. Writing to a friend as early as 6 August, he complains:

One can't 'go and fight' in England. Volunteers are admitted neither to the Navy nor the Army. If one joins the Territorials now, they give you six months' training, and then let you garrison the chief port and sea towns, *if* the Expeditionary Force leaves England. It *might* be worth doing, *if* the Expeditionary Force *does* leave England.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, due to his pre-war acquaintance with Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, Brooke and his friend Denis Browne were enrolled as sub-lieutenants in a new unit called the Royal Naval Division. In this capacity, Brooke crossed the Channel in October 1914 for Antwerp, where his unit was to relieve the Belgian army in its trenches but had to withdraw immediately before the advancing Germans. On its way back to re-embarkation at Ostend, the British contingent found itself in the midst of a vast number of refugees but managed to reach the coast safely and was evacuated back to Britain. Over the next few months the Royal Naval Division was kept in reserve until, at the end of February 1915, Brooke's battalion departed for Gallipoli, stopping off first at the Greek island of Lemnos, and then at Port Said. It was during a visit to Cairo that Brooke, in addition to contracting dysentery, was (most probably) bitten by a mosquito on his lip; he did, however, manage to return to his unit and was taken initially to Mudras Bay and then to the island of Skyros, where he died on a French hospital ship. As his comrades were to embark for Gallipoli the following morning, 24 April, Brooke was interred immediately and a cross erected with an inscription stating in Greek that he had died 'for the deliverance of Constantinople from the Turks'.<sup>3</sup>

When, on 1 August 1914, Germany declared war on Russia, August Stramm was called to active service; after his mandatory year of duty in the German Army, he had become a reservist and achieved the rank of *Hauptmann* (Captain: the highest rank available to civilians). He first saw action in Alsace in mid-August, where he also served in an administrative capacity for a few months. In January 1915, Stramm

was transferred to the trenches of Picardy on the Western Front and finally, in April 1915, to the Eastern Front. Unlike the stalemate in the West – which, for the individual soldier, allowed for periods of physical and mental recuperation behind the lines – the frontline in the East could and did shift rapidly: as is evident both from the official records of his battalion and from Stramm's own letters, he was continually on the move from the end of April 1915 to early August and then again, after a brief leave which took him home to Berlin, from mid-August onward. On 1 September, he was killed in hand-to-hand combat in the Rokitno Marshes, now in Belarus; the following day, he was buried in the Jewish cemetery of Horodec.<sup>4</sup>

August Stramm was born in Münster, Westphalia, on 29 July 1874. After school he joined the German imperial postal service and steadily rose through its ranks, which also involved taking part in extensive vocational training and further education programmes, within and outside the postal service. He attended lectures on law, economics, the history of transport, and geography at the Berlin Postal Academy and later at the Humboldt University, and in 1909 was awarded his PhD from the University of Halle for a dissertation on unified worldwide postal charges. In 1902 he had married Else Krafft, a journalist and popular novelist, with whom he had two children; from 1905 the family lived in bourgeois comfort in Berlin. Stramm's spare time was devoted to a variety of artistic pursuits: he was a gifted musician, he painted, he wrote – predominantly unsuccessful plays after the manner of Maeterlinck, Hauptmann or Strindberg, once he had inherited his father-in-law's extensive library, with its focus on contemporary drama. It was only in late 1912 or early 1913 that Stramm came into his own as an author – or, as his daughter later put it: 'Über Papa war das Dichten plötzlich gekommen.'<sup>5</sup> This sudden burst of creativity which, over the next two-and-a-half years, resulted in a number of plays, two major collections of poetry and several stand-alone long poems and prose pieces, can be traced back to Stramm's encounter with Expressionism and, specifically, to his friendship with Herwarth Walden, editor of the Expressionist magazine *Der Sturm*, in which, from April 1914, his work began to appear. After Stramm's death, his memory was kept alive in the pages of *Der Sturm* in obituaries and elegies by, among others, Franz Marc, Alfred Döblin and Kurt Heynicke, while Walden continued to promote him as a mentor to younger Expressionist poets.<sup>6</sup> It was also in *Der Sturm* that Stramm's first war poems were published in January 1915; in 1919 Herwarth Walden collected these poems in a volume entitled *Tropfblut. Gedichte aus dem Krieg*.<sup>7</sup>

Photographs of Stramm show a rather unprepossessing, portly gentleman with glasses, a handlebar moustache and a receding hairline, the epitome of the prosperous German citizen of his day and age, or else of a – middle-aged rather than young and dashing – Prussian officer. Photographs of Rupert Brooke, by contrast, show an extraordinarily handsome young man, whose physical beauty and charismatic personality inspired devotion as well as sexual desire in both men and women. Although some of his admirers would in later life retract their more extravagant statements about Brooke's physical charms – and although

more recent biographies such as John Lehmann's have tended to focus on the contradictions in Brooke's personality and on its misogynistic, homophobic and anti-semitic tendencies – it was the image of Rupert Brooke as 'a sunny, forever-laughing youth of flawless beauty and many-sided genius, the adored of all with whom he came into contact, of pure heart and stainless character'<sup>8</sup> that resonated most strongly with his contemporaries. As his close friend and fellow poet Frances Cornford wrote:

It was a continual pleasure to look at him fresh each day – his radiant fairness, beauty of build, his broad head with its flung-back hair, deep-set frowning eyes. The clear line of his chin and long broad-based neck on broad shoulders were so entirely beautiful that he seemed like a symbol of youth for all time [...]. To watch him putting on his boots, frowning and groaning, with the absorbed seriousness of a child, with which he did all practical things – he would look up with a pink face and his pleasant hair tumbled and his sudden sharing grin which always had the loveliness of a child.<sup>9</sup>

It was also this image, as exploited rather cynically by Churchillian war propaganda, which turned Brooke – who after all had died on St George's Day – into 'all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is that which is most freely proffered'.<sup>10</sup>

Born in 1887, and thus thirteen years younger than August Stramm, Brooke was educated at Rugby and Cambridge and had, by the time war broke out, already published a volume of poetry, *Poems 1911*, which had attracted a great deal of (not always favourable) critical attention but which would become a commercial success only after his death. In 1912 Brooke had also contributed to the first volume of the *Georgian Poetry* series; this volume included, in addition to a small selection from *Poems 1911*, the poem for which, apart from his war poems, Brooke is best known today and which illustrates most strikingly, alongside E. M. Forster's *Howards End* of 1910, the attempt, on the part of Edwardian and particularly Georgian poets and novelists, to reinvent the English nation as rooted in the 'imaginary Arcadia of rural England':<sup>11</sup> 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester'.

Brooke's war poetry consists of five sonnets written in late autumn and winter of 1914: 'I. Peace', 'II. Safety', 'III. The Dead', 'IV. The Dead', and 'V. The Soldier'. They first appeared in the magazine *New Numbers* and were then republished in May 1915 (and thus, of course, posthumously) in *1914 and Other Poems*, an edition which had gone through fourteen impressions by the end of 1916 and remained hugely popular over the next couple of decades.<sup>12</sup> However, even before Brooke's death, his war sonnets had begun to circulate among a much wider audience than that of *New Numbers* when both 'IV. The Dead' and 'V. The Soldier' were quoted in full in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 11 March, and when the latter was read from the pulpit of St Paul's Cathedral on Easter Sunday (3 April).

Brooke's war sonnets not only reflect some of his pre-war preoccupations – including, in such poems as the 1913 'The Funeral of Youth: Threnody', a strong sense of ending<sup>13</sup> – but are also, in a way, prefigured in an essay which he wrote in

August 1914 and which was published in *The New Statesman* of 29 August 1914: 'An Unusual Young Man. Reflections on the Outbreak of War'. In the essay Brooke sketches the mental and psychological processes of coming to terms with the fact that England is at war with Germany, a country in which his eponymous young man, clearly an alter ego of Brooke himself, has spent a great deal of time and where he has many friends.<sup>14</sup> The young man also feels resentment because the war will change things – music will be neglected, he will not be able to camp out, he may have to volunteer for military training, his friends may be killed. At this point, however, he notices that his thoughts keep returning to two periods of his life in which he has felt completely helpless: the death of his mother and his first estrangement from his beloved. This is followed by the epiphanic realization that he now feels the same helpless love towards England – an England feminized into mother or lover and an England which (or rather, who) is now endangered and must be defended. In his influential study of World War I literature, *Heroes' Twilight*, Bernard Bergonzi comments on 'An Unusual Young Man' as follows:

Brooke was having to fake up an emotional attitude precisely because the experience of England being involved in a major war was so alien and ungraspable. There was, too, a curious interplay between the literary cult of rural England fostered by the Georgians, and the degree of patriotism that it is traditionally proper to feel when one's country goes to war: Brooke's feelings are very literary indeed in their mode of expression, but are not thereby prevented from being genuine.<sup>15</sup>

In a sense Brooke's five sonnets take the narrative of his 'unusual young man' from when he has made up his mind to fight for England to when he calmly acknowledges that this may entail laying down his life for his beloved. Initially, in 'I. Peace', the alternative title of which is, appropriately, 'The Recruit', Brooke's speaker describes a kind of secular baptism: soldiers, upon entering the war – 'as swimmers into cleanness leaping' (l. 4) – wash away the evils of modern life. Cleansed of the corrupting influences which have weakened, indeed emasculated, English culture, they will be able, paradoxically under conditions of war and even in death, to find the peace of 'the laughing heart'.

Whereas the collective voice in 'I. Peace' supposedly articulates the feelings of a generation – 'Now, God be thanked Who has matched *us* with His hour, | And caught *our* youth, and wakened *us* from sleeping' (ll. 1–2) – the 'we' in 'II. Safety' is a plurality of two only, that of a pair of lovers who have found emotional and spiritual 'safety' in their union, a 'safety' which cannot be destroyed, and may in fact be preserved, by death.<sup>16</sup>

The two sonnets entitled 'The Dead' address the dead in the third person: while 'III. The Dead' apostrophizes the bugles which sound over them – 'Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead' (l. 1) and again 'Blow, bugles, blow!' (l. 9) – in 'IV. The Dead' the poem itself becomes one of those bugles. The fallen soldiers in 'III. The Dead' are young men who have given their blood, 'the red | Sweet wine of youth' (ll. 4–5), together with the joys of a productive adult life and a serene old age, and – perhaps their greatest sacrifice – the immortality they could have achieved by procreation:

‘and those who would have been, | their sons, they gave, their immortality’ (ll. 7–8). However, through their sacrifice, which is implicitly compared to the sacrifice of Christ, who also gave his blood for his people, the young soldiers have gained for their compatriots a chance to fulfil themselves (the collective voice here is presumably that of England): ‘And nobleness walks in *our* ways again; | And *we* have come into our heritage (ll. 13–14, my emphases).

In ‘IV. The Dead’ Brooke once again returns to pre-war themes, in this instance, as Laskowski has pointed out,<sup>17</sup> to the topic of capturing and conserving the moment: in death, the speaker asserts, the joyful moments of life, rendered through a series of sensual impressions, which are listed in the octave, are ‘stayed’ as if by frost which

with a gesture, stays the waves that dance  
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white  
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,  
A width, a shining path, under the night. (ll. 11–14)

The clearest link to Brooke’s pre-war poems such as ‘The Old Vicarage, Grantchester’, with its extended meditation on the spiritual qualities of the English countryside, and to ‘An Unusual Young Man’, is established in the fifth and most famous of his war sonnets, ‘V. The Soldier’. For the only time in the sonnet sequence, the frequently quoted opening line of ‘V. The Soldier’ – ‘If I should die, think only this of me’ – introduces a subject speaking in the first-person singular, who, however, immediately after this act of individuation, vanishes again from the poem;<sup>18</sup> or rather, in imagining his posthumous existence, he (re)enters into a symbiotic relationship with Mother England. Buried abroad, his remains will continue to represent the essence of England, an England who has borne and nurtured him. At the same time, England – who, reading back from the sestet, can now be identified as the addressee of the opening line when, in lines 10–11, ‘a pulse in the eternal mind, no less | Gives somewhere back the *thoughts* by England given’ (my emphasis) – becomes, in her turn, the beneficiary of the dead soldier’s pure-hearted devotion: as a result, the soldier *and* England are redeemed from ‘all evil’ (l. 9). Henceforth, the ‘English heaven’ of the closing line – ‘In hearts at peace, under an English heaven’ (l. 14) – will be found both in this life and in the life beyond.

As has already been mentioned, August Stramm’s thirty-one war poems were printed in Herwarth Walden’s magazine *Der Sturm*, in the January, February, May, July and September numbers of 1915, and in the September edition of 1917.<sup>19</sup> They can be divided into three groups: poems about periods of comparative rest; poems about aspects of combat; poems about wounds, the fear of dying, death.<sup>20</sup> As the poems do not contain any dates or place-names, it is next to impossible to establish the precise order in which they were written, or to read them as direct reflections of Stramm’s experiences in different theatres of war.<sup>21</sup> In fact, as Lothar Jordan has pointed out, Stramm’s war poetry does not contain any proper names at all – and thus no allusions whatsoever to the Western literary

canon (or for that matter to classical mythology), and no personifications of War, or Death or Victory either.<sup>22</sup> Neither are there any references, in any of the poems, to the causes of the war or to the reasons it was fought, and very few to the enemy. Instead, in poem after poem, Stramm tries to render, as precisely and as viscerally as possible, the impact of modern warfare upon the individual soldier – less upon his consciousness than upon his subconscious, more upon his body and his senses than upon his mind. Hence the external reality of war is, in Stramm's war poems, never described objectively but only in how it is experienced by the individual – the dynamism and incoherence of whose emotions are displaced on to this external reality but never articulated in the first-person singular.<sup>23</sup>

One of the best introductions to Stramm's poetic technique is provided by 'Schlachtfeld' ('Battlefield'):

Schollenmürbe schläfert ein das Eisen  
 Blute filzen Sickerflecke  
 Roste krumen  
 Fleische schleimen  
 Saugen brünstet um Zerfallen.  
 Mordesmorde  
 Blinzen  
 Kinderblicke.<sup>24</sup>

In Michael Hamburger's translation, this reads as follows:

Yielding clod lulls iron off to sleep  
 bloods clod the patches where they oozed  
 rusts crumble  
 fleshes slime  
 sucking lusts around decay.  
 Murder on murder  
 blinks  
 in childish eyes.<sup>25</sup>

Although Hamburger's translation does contain linguistic features which are unusual in English – for example the two plurals 'bloods' and 'fleshes' – it fails to do justice to the radically innovative aspects of the German original (and of course it cannot be expected to reproduce its sound patterns). Thus the first word of the poem, 'Schollenmürbe', is a neologism, namely, a compound of the nouns 'Scholle' ('clod') and 'Mürbe'; as a noun the latter is less common than its synonym 'Mürbheit', but as an adjective 'mürbe' is very common indeed, meaning (among other things) 'crumbly' as well as 'fatigued' or 'exhausted'. In other words, the 'Schollenmürbe' which, in Hamburger's phrase, 'lulls the iron off to sleep' alludes to both the condition of the soil (of the battlefield) and of the soldier who fought there. Another neologism (technically a conversion) is the verb 'krumen' in l. 3 – Hamburger's 'rusts crumble': whereas in English the cognate 'crumble' can be used as a verb and as a noun, in German only the noun 'Krumme' exists. As this word is most frequently encountered in the compound 'Ackerkrume' ('tilled soil'),

‘krumen’ recalls the ‘Scholle’ (‘clod’) of the opening line. Andreas Kramer, in his perceptive reading of the poem, has remarked: “‘Schlachtfeld’ pictures the battlefield as a primal scene where the breeding and killing of life, in both natural and industrial worlds, are paradoxically intertwined.”<sup>26</sup> In parenthesis, it is worth noting that, although the natural world in ‘Schlachtfeld’ has apparently begun to reclaim the battlefield for its own purposes – which would consign the battle which took place there to a more or less distant past – Stramm, here as in all his war poems, only ever uses verbs in either present or infinitive forms. Finally, we have yet another neologism in the compound ‘Mordesmorde’: as in the previous examples, this neologism is again normalized by Hamburger into ‘murder on murder’.

For the rest of the poem, it is not individual words – with the exception of the plurals ‘Blute’ (l. 2) and ‘Fleische’ (l. 4), which are as uncommon in German as they are in English – but their collocations, or their syntactical order, which are startlingly unusual. Two examples may suffice: the literal translation of ‘filzen’ in l. 2 would have been ‘to felt’ so that ‘Blute filzen Sickerflecke’ suggests that the blood[s] which flowed so copiously on the battlefield has [have] given the (blood-)stains which have seeped into the soil a felt-like texture. As to Hamburger’s final three lines – ‘Murder on murder | blinks | in childish eyes’ – one may of course question the wisdom of his decision to opt for ‘childish’ rather than ‘childlike’, when he could have avoided this thorny issue by simply using ‘children’s’; more interestingly, however, the German sentence is grammatically ambiguous while the English is not – in the German original, it is not only the children’s eyes but the murder on murder that can do the blinking, so that either murder on murder gazes with child-like innocence or else children have lost their innocence by gazing at murder on murder. Or rather, Stramm’s poem oscillates between these two readings. To quote Andreas Kramer once more: ‘the numbing horror of mechanized warfare and industrial-style killing [...] makes its participants and victims regress into primal infancy, their gazes fixed on the horror they and the poem are unable to comprehend.’<sup>27</sup>

As may have become evident from the above, Stramm’s innovative linguistic devices touch upon every aspect of language, from morphology (as in noun-verb conversions or his tendency to strip words of their affixes) to syntax (for example in the way in which he exploits the potential ambiguities of a synthetic language like German) and semantics (for instance his neologisms). The focus in Stramm’s poems is thus on the individual sentence – often a sentence reduced to a basic subject-verb or subject-verb-object combination – or else on the individual phrase, which, as in the case of the quasi-portmanteau word ‘Schollenmürbe’, requires very careful unpacking. Throughout, Stramm’s poetry shows a marked preference for Germanic words – it is thus no coincidence that ‘Fleische schleimen’ should have presented less of an obstacle to Stramm’s translators than some of his other phrases: in all three ‘Schlachtfeld’ translations examined for the purposes of this paper, this becomes ‘fleshes slime’ (which, of necessity, still loses the /at/ in ‘Fleische’).



Stramm's use of language has been traced back first to his reading of Fritz Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* ('Contributions to a Critique of Language', 1901–1902) and of Hans Vaihinger's *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* ('The Philosophy of "As If"', 1911), and second to his reception of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* ('Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature'). From Mauthner, Stramm may have derived the notion that reality cannot be known through language. Language, then, is not a cognitive tool but at its best 'Kunstmittel' ('vehicle for art') because in art the question of (cognitive) 'truth' does not arise: instead, the poet expresses emotions or moods and may invent words which fit these moods, while conventional syntax is merely arbitrary – codified custom – and can therefore be abolished. Likewise, Vaihinger's *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* posits that reality does not exist as a fixed, independent entity and that it is only sensations which are accessible to the individual and expressible through what Vaihinger calls fiction; communication, for him, becomes possible when a word expresses a 'sensation-complex'.

Against this background, Stramm's encounter with Marinetti's *Manifesto tecnico* – which among other things stresses the need to abandon syntax so as to liberate words, which can then be reconnected according to their inherent logic – would have taught him, as Patrick Bridgwater has argued, how to translate his philosophical ideas into poetry:

It was, I suggest, because [Stramm] had already accepted Vaihinger's view of reality that Marinetti's technical advice (for that is what it amounted to) was so welcome; if Stramm had not accepted Vaihinger's theory of fictions, he would have had no need of Marinetti. [...] In other words, Stramm accepted Marinetti's basic argument (about the 'unlinking' of words) simply because it provided the answer to a personal need, and he used it in order to produce poetry that was fundamentally different to Futuristic 'free-wordism'.<sup>28</sup>

However, while this critical engagement with contemporary philosophy and Futurist aesthetics places Stramm firmly within the literary avant-garde, he also, somewhat incongruously, appears to have held a highly conservative set of beliefs about language which was left intact by his reading of Marinetti – and, indeed, of Mauthner and Vaihinger. According to Richard Sheppard, this set of beliefs, of which Stramm's preference for German words may serve as an indicator, revolves around the – essentially Platonic – notion that words have fundamental and original meanings: on the one hand, words designate particular objects or categories of objects; on the other hand, they point towards the infinite, the essence of which may be perceived through them. Thus, while

Marinetti's almost chemical notion of *dinamismo universal* (*universal dynamism*) may, metaphysically speaking, have been a long way from Stramm's more Platonic views, [...] at another level, Stramm was totally predisposed to receive Marinetti's idea that language, once stripped down to its basic syntactic components, enabled the poet to penetrate further into the essence of matter.<sup>29</sup>

In either case – that is, whether the radicalism of Stramm’s poetic language is only a surface phenomenon or whether it reflects a radically sceptical attitude towards the representational potential of language – his thirty-one war poems are indeed, as critics and literary scholars have claimed, quite unlike any other poetry produced during the war: ‘His premise is, clearly, that description as such is not poetry and that retrospective poetization [*sic*] is not honest.’<sup>30</sup>

If one compares the posthumous reception of Brooke’s and Stramm’s war poetry, the first difference, as has already been indicated, is that Brooke’s sonnets were, and remained, immensely popular throughout the war and into the post-war period, while Stramm’s poems were (and remained into the 1920s and 1930s) all but inaccessible – and incomprehensible – to anyone outside a tiny circle of like-minded intellectuals, poets and artists. The second, and perhaps more important, difference is that although both Brooke’s contemporaries and later critics do pay attention to the formal aspects of Brooke’s war sonnets, these more strictly literary concerns have always been overshadowed by two other interrelated questions: if Brooke had seen more action than during his brief stint in Belgium – say, in Gallipoli or on the Western Front – would his attitude towards the war have changed and would this change have left its trace in his poetry?<sup>31</sup> Or, to put it bluntly, would Brooke have been able to recognize the bitter irony of his ‘swimmers into cleanness leaping’ (‘I. Peace’, l. 4) when faced with the mud and gore of the kind of trench warfare which August Stramm, for instance, experienced first-hand?

Yet, in spite of these experiences, there is no evidence that Stramm considered himself to be writing anti-war poetry or that his poems were regarded by his contemporaries as critical of the war. Nor did any of these poems fall foul of censorship regulations: of all the Stramm war poems published in *Der Sturm*, there was only one, ‘Feuertaufe’, which caused a (storm-in-a-teacup) scandal in the press, and not because of its political attitudes but because of its alleged incomprehensibility, to the point of meaninglessness or ‘Blödsinn’.<sup>32</sup>

Even so, and quite *against* the evidence of at least some of the poems, as well as of some of Stramm’s letters to his family and to Walden and his wife, Stramm’s war poetry has frequently been read as exposing the horrors of war: in contradistinction to the reception of Brooke, that of Stramm is dominated by discussions of the formal aspects of his poetry, often divorced from the – extremely varied – expressive uses to which they are put.<sup>33</sup> It is, then, the presumed correspondence between the (perhaps only surface) disintegration of Stramm’s poetic language and the disintegration of the traumatized self in the face of modern industrial warfare which accounts for these – retrospective rather than contemporary – readings of Stramm’s war poems, together with a sense that Stramm’s more conservative beliefs did come under increasing pressure as the war progressed. However, as Thomas F. Schneider has convincingly argued apropos of German First World War literature in general, neither texts supposedly critical of the war nor those which support the war effort ever tell the ‘truth’ about what the war was ‘really’ like:

Es gibt nur eine 'Wahrheit' der Ideologie, und jene gründet sich – unabhängig von der politischen Couleur – in dem Verlangen, in den Beschreibungen des 'Krieges', der in Anführungszeichen gesetzt werden sollte, das bestätigt zu finden, was man zuvor schon gewusst hat. 'Irritationen' können problemlos integriert werden, da lediglich solche Darstellungsmodi sowohl auf 'traditioneller' als auch auf 'avantgardistischer' Seite zur Verfügung stehen, denen ein spezielles Kriegsbild bereits eingeschrieben ist und die jederzeit instrumentalisiert werden können.<sup>34</sup>

Even so, the question remains as to why poets who wrote about the war in English rather than in German, and did so explicitly to expose the horrors of war and the disintegration of the self when confronting them, did *not* – unlike Stramm and to a lesser degree other German (and French) expressionists – draw upon a repertoire of avant-garde modes of representation. This is not to negate the evocative power of, for instance, Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum' nor to ignore the fact that in 'Dulce et Decorum' alliterations and enjambments do brush up against constrictions of iambic feet, alternating rhymes, and quatrains. Nevertheless, Owen's poem adheres to these formal conventions and at least intermittently still exhibits the kind of poetic diction (as in 'ecstasy of fumbling', l. 9) – together with the first-person (plural and singular) poetic voice – which is characteristic of Brooke's sonnets and thus of the 'Dulce and Decorum' school of war poetry which it explicitly denounces.

By and large, the poetry of the First World War has not been discussed from a transnationally, or trans-linguistically, comparative point of view. The most recent work in this area has been done by Jay Winter but is rather limited in scope, while for more nuanced discussions, and for tentative answers to the problem of the linguistic and formal conventionality of British war poetry, one may turn to Elizabeth Marsland's 1991 book on French, English and German war poetry and to Margot Norris's 2005 article 'Teaching World War I Poetry – Comparatively'.<sup>35</sup>

Taking her cue initially from critics like Michael Hamburger and C. M. Bowra, who have tended to emphasize the similarities – amounting to cross-cultural homogeneity – between war poetry from different countries, Elizabeth Marsland first establishes a distinction between 'public' war poetry written predominantly for propagandistic purposes and 'private' or 'personal' war poems; of the latter there are, again, two distinct and stylistically complementary types, namely the 'poet-centred' and the 'poem-centred' text. While the poet-centred text is often confessional in nature and traditional and easily understood in its form, the poem-centred text strives for detachment by employing experimental literary techniques; additionally, it demonstrates 'an obvious conscious concern with the functioning of the medium as an art form'.<sup>36</sup> From this perspective, and although Marsland also insists that poems of both tendencies may well serve the same purposes – namely to explore a given situation and its implications and to achieve a modicum of control over it – Rupert Brooke's war sonnets are clearly poet-centred poems, as is Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum', while Stramm's poems are equally clearly poem-centred. At the same time, and here Marsland

follows in the footsteps of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* of 1975, war poetry is shaped less by the reality of war as experienced by soldier-poets than by their literary education or, perhaps more broadly, by their cultural environment – which, as we have already seen, in the cases of Brooke and Stramm was very different indeed. These differences are further highlighted in Norris's article, which demonstrates persuasively that for British poets the newly emergent aesthetic tradition of, for example, Futurism not only displayed innovative literary techniques – as it did for the likes of Stramm – but also carried the ideological baggage of a fascination with energy, technology, violence. This was something the war poets – unlike, say, the Vorticists of Wyndham Lewis's *The Blast* – found unacceptable:

However [...], if the war killed the Vortex, it was because the war imitated the Vortex too dramatically and too destructively. It thereby produced a kind of collateral damage by depriving the British soldier poets of an avant-gardism that could have given them the reality-altering forms they needed to express their experiences of combat.<sup>37</sup>

Yet even for Winter, Marsland and Norris, to approach First World War poetry from a comparatist point of view is to restrict oneself to English, French and – daringly – German poems. What is perhaps needed is a much broader perspective – one which can encompass the work of, for instance, the Hungarian poet Békássy Ferenc, like Rupert Brooke a member of King's College Cambridge and of the Apostles, who was killed in action on 22 June 1915, or the Armenian scholar-poet Daniel Varoujan, murdered by Turkish policemen on 26 August 1915, or the Italian essayist Scipio Slataper, who died in the hills of Gorizia on 3 December 1915.

For all of them August Stramm's poem 'Krieggrab' is a fitting obituary – certainly a more appropriate one than Churchill's for Brooke, or Walden's for Stramm – or for that matter than Brooke's 'Soldier' for himself:

*Krieggrab*

Stäbe flehen kreuze Arme  
Schrift zagt blosses Unbekannt  
Blumen frechen  
Staub schüchtern.  
Flimmer  
Tränet  
Glast  
Vergessen.

*War Grave*

Sticks imploring crossing arms  
Writing timid pale unknown  
Flowers cheek  
Dusts shy.  
Flickers  
Tear  
Glare  
Oblivion.<sup>38</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Lost Voices of World War I: An International Anthology of Writers, Poets, and Playwrights*, ed. by Tim Cross (London: Bloomsbury, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in John Lehmann, *Rupert Brooke: His Life and his Legend* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 118. Lehmann's biography has been consulted throughout for facts relating to Brooke's life and death.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148. For Lehmann's account of Brooke's war experience, see pp. 123–31 and 141–49. Lehmann draws on Denis Browne's letter to Edward Marsh for details about Brooke's last days and the funeral.

<sup>4</sup> On Stramm's war experiences, see Jeremy Adler, '“Kämpfen, Wirren, Stürmen”: Bemerkungen zu Stramm's Biographie im Kriege und zur Entstehung seiner Werke', *August Stramm: Beiträge zu Leben, Werk und Wirkung*, ed. by Lothar Jordan (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1995) pp. 7–43; see also *August Stramm. Alles ist Gedicht. Briefe, Gedichte, Bilder, Dokumente*, ed. by Jeremy Adler (Zurich: Arche, 1990): in letters dated, respectively, 27 and 30 June 1915, Stramm states that he is completely run-down mentally ('Ich bin seelisch völlig runter'), that he is intensely lonely – 'and it cannot possibly get any worse' ('Schlimmer kann es nicht werden'). Even so, when his publisher, during Stramm's August 1915 leave, tried to arrange for his discharge from the army, Stramm refused to sign the requisite documents, and returned to his company.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Adler (ed.), *Alles ist Gedicht*, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Walden's obituary for Stramm: 'Hauptmann August Stramm ist am zweiten September [sic] in Rußland gefallen. Der Soldat und Ritter. Der Führer. Du großer Künstler und liebster Freund. Du leuchtest ewig' ('Captain August Stramm fell in Russia on 2 September. The Soldier and Knight. The Leader. You, the great artist and dearest friend. Your light shines eternally'). See *Der Sturm*, 6, Nos. 11/12 (September 1915). For easily accessible editions of *Der Sturm*, see <[www.library.princeton.edu/projects/bluemountain](http://www.library.princeton.edu/projects/bluemountain)> [last accessed 4 January 2015].

<sup>7</sup> For editions of Stramm's work, see *August Stramm. Das Werk*, ed. by René Radrizanni (Wiesbaden: Limes, 1963), and *August Stramm. Die Dichtungen. Sämtliche Gedichte, Dramen, Prosa*, ed. by Jeremy Adler (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 1990). Both editions include extensive bibliographical material on the (complicated) publication history of Stramm's work. The title *Tropfblut* (blood drip/dripping blood) for the war poems, incidentally, was inspired by Stramm himself: in a letter to Walden from 27 June 1915, he writes that, if ever he returned from the war, he would collect his war poems and call the collection *Tropfblut* ('Sollte ich mal heimkommen, werde ich sie sammeln und "Tropfblut" nennen'; quoted in Radrizanni (ed.), *August Stramm*, p. 461).

<sup>8</sup> Lehmann, *Brooke*, p. 156; for yet another recent biography of Brooke, see William E. Laskowski, *Rupert Brooke* (Boston: Twayne; 1994; TEAS 504). See also Jonathan Rutherford, *Forever England: Reflections on Race, Masculinity and Empire* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997), particularly pp. 39–69. The most elaborate representation of Brooke as 'golden lad' can be found in the Memoir by his literary executor Edward Marsh which the latter appended to his 1918 collected edition of Brooke's poetry. This volume included two of the famous Brooke portraits by photographer Sherrill Schell.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Lehmann, *Brooke*, pp. 50–51.

<sup>10</sup> The quotation is from Churchill's obituary, published in *The Times* on 26 April 1915. Quoted in Lehmann, *Brooke*, p. 151.

<sup>11</sup> Rutherford, *Forever England*, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> Rupert Brooke, *1914 and Other Poems* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1915). See pp. 11–15 for the sonnets and pp. 59–63 for 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester'.

<sup>13</sup> Rutherford, *Forever England*, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> It is, of course, somewhat ironic that 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester' should have been written while Brooke was in Berlin; it is, after all, subtitled 'Café des Westens, Berlin, May 1912'. For an on-line version of Brooke's essay, see <[www.newstatesman.com/node/136266](http://www.newstatesman.com/node/136266)> [accessed 30 December 2014].

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (London: Constable, 1965), p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> On the basis of 'An Unusual Young Man', it is, of course, tempting to apply the emotional structure of the love relationship between two actual human beings to that of an English patriot for his country.

<sup>17</sup> Laskowski, *Brooke*, p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Laskowski (*ibid.*, p. 62) suggests that it is not least because of this act of individuation that Brooke's poem became so popular: 'death had become so anonymous (this war originated the memorials to the unknown soldier) that any means that could personalize and localize sacrifice was seized on.' See also, on 'V. The Soldier', Rutherford, *Forever England*: "'The Soldier'" was Brooke's own epitaph, a lament for a life gladly handed over to the obedience and compulsion of war, a joyful abandonment of individuality. In the end what brought him peace of mind was the knowledge of his own death' (*ibid.*, pp. 65–66). For a critical commentary on the use of the rural idyll in war, see also Keith Grieves, 'The Propinquity of Place: Home, Landscape and Soldier Poets of the First World War', in *British Popular Culture and the First World War*, ed. by Jessica Meyer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), pp. 21–46. See also Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>19</sup> For the publication history of Stramm's war poems, see Radrizanni (ed.), *August Stramm*, pp. 461–63; Walden's 1919 edition *Tropfblut* contains twenty-seven of the *Sturm* war poems plus a war poem which had not previously been published, and in addition six poems which predate the war.

<sup>20</sup> See Lothar Jordan, 'Zum Verhältnis traditioneller und innovativer Elemente in der Kriegsliteratur August Stramm's', in *Das Tempo dieser Zeit ist keine Kleinigkeit: zur Literatur um 1800*, ed. by Jörg Drews (Munich: Edition Text und Kritik, 1981), pp. 112–27 (p. 116).

<sup>21</sup> For a tentative, and not altogether convincing, attempt at this, see Adler, "'Kämpfen, Wirren, Stürmen"'.

<sup>22</sup> Jordan, 'Zum Verhältnis', pp. 118–20.

<sup>23</sup> On the non-representational character of Stramm's war poetry, see the chapter on Stramm in Georg Philipp Rehage, *Wo sind Worte für das Erleben?: Die lyrische Darstellung des Ersten Weltkrieges in der französischen und deutschen Avantgarde* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003), pp. 163–209. However, Rehage insists that, for instance, the way in which WWI soldiers experienced the passing of time – either in impossibly fast or else in equally impossible slow motion – is reflected in the rhythms of Stramm's poetry (*ibid.*, p. 182).

<sup>24</sup> In Radrizanni (ed.), *August Stramm*, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Hamburger, *German Poetry 1910–1975* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977), p. 11. For translations of this poem by Jeremy Adler and Alistair Noon, see Appendix 1 below.

<sup>26</sup> Andreas Kramer, "'Schrift sagt blosses Unbekannt": The Poetry of August Stramm', *Oxford German Studies*, 42 (2013), 38–56 (p. 52).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Bridgwater, 'Sources of Stramm's Originality', p. 45; apart from the 'unlinking' of words, there are several other features of Marinetti's *Technical Manifesto* which can be found in Stramm's poetry: the use of the infinitive, the abolition of adjectives and adverbs, along with punctuation, the 'destruction' of the 'I' – and, perhaps particularly interestingly, innovative compounding. According to Marinetti, '[e]very noun should have its double, that is, the noun should be followed, with no

conjunction, by the noun to which it is related by analogy. Example: man-torpedo-boat, woman-gulf, crowd-surf, piazza funnel.' This, I think, accounts for compounds like 'Schollenmürbe'. For a link to *Technical Manifesto*, see <<http://digital.uncg.edu/390/futurist.html>> [accessed 24 July 2015].

<sup>29</sup> Sheppard, 'The Poetry of August Stramm', p. 271. Sheppard cites several of Stramm's letters to Walden as evidence of these conservative attitudes towards language.

<sup>30</sup> Patrick Bridgwater, *The German Poets of the First World War* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 39. This, incidentally, also goes for German Expressionist poetry, which is quite unlike Stramm's; see, for instance, one of the most famous German World War One poems, Georg Trakl's 'Grodek'.

<sup>31</sup> See for example Robert Giddings, *The War Poets* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988): 'It is not difficult to imagine how [Brooke's] beliefs would have faltered if he had lived longer, but it is futile to speculate' (pp. 37–38). See also Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight*, pp. 44–45.

<sup>32</sup> On the contemporary reception of 'Feuertaufe', see Radrizanni (ed.), *August Stramm*, p. 462, and Walden, 'Die Mücke', *Der Sturm*, 6, Nos. 17/18 (December 1915), which also includes another Stramm obituary.

<sup>33</sup> On the problems of reading Stramm's poems as 'anti-war', see Thomas Anz, *Literatur des Expressionismus* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010). Anz discusses Stramm's prose sketch 'Der Letzte', as well as Stramm's letters to the Waldens. See also Frank Krause, *Klangbewußter Expressionismus. Moderne Techniken des rituellen Ausdrucks* (Berlin: Weidler, 2006), pp. 271–75, and for a general survey of Stramm criticism, see Sheppard, 'The Poetry of August Stramm', pp. 262–68.

<sup>34</sup> 'There is only the "truth" of ideology, and this – independently of one's political persuasion – derives from the desire to find, in representations of "the war" (which should be put in inverted commas) what one has always known about it anyway. "Irritations" can be integrated without any problem, because either side, the conventional as well as the avant-garde, uses forms of representation into which a specific attitude towards the war has already been inscribed, and which can therefore be instrumentalised at any time.' See Thomas F. Schneider, 'Zur deutschen Kriegsliteratur im Ersten Weltkrieg', in: *Kriegserlebnis und Legendenbildung. Das Bild des 'modernen' Krieges in Literatur, Theater, Photographie und Film*, Vol. 1, ed. by Thomas F. Schneider (Osnabrück: Rasch, 1999), pp. 101–14.

<sup>35</sup> See Jay Winter, 'Beyond Glory: First World War Poetry and Cultural Memory', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, ed. by Santanu Das (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 242–53; Elizabeth A. Marsland, *The Nation's Cause: French, English and German Poetry of the First World War* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Margot Norris, 'Teaching World War I Poetry – Comparatively', *College Literature*, 32 (2005), 136–53.

<sup>36</sup> Marsland, *The Nation's Cause*, p. 204.

<sup>37</sup> Norris, 'Teaching WWI Poetry', p. 140.

<sup>38</sup> Translation by Jeremy Adler. See Appendix 2 below for a survey of Stramm translations.

## APPENDIX 1

### *Battlefield*

Lumpish-mellow lulls to sleep the iron  
 Bleeding filter oozing stains  
 Rusts crumble  
 Fleshes slime  
 Sucking lusts around decay.  
 Murders' murders  
 Blinking  
 Child-like eyes. [Jeremy Adler]

*Area of Operation*

Steel crushes dustily to sleep.  
 Crimson fur the sprawled stains.  
 Rusts run to soil  
 tissue sheds its membrane  
 and amputations wink to the worms.  
 In adolescent eyes  
 the squint  
 of killing beyond killing. [Alistair Noon]

## APPENDIX 2

*Some Translations of August Stramm's War Poems*

Jeremy Adler: 'Schlachtfeld Wunde', 'Abend', 'Sturmangriff', 'Signal', 'Gefallen', 'Urtod', 'Im Feuer', 'Haidekampf', 'Granaten', 'Zagen', 'Krieggrab', in Tim Cross (ed.), *The Lost Voices of World War I: An International Anthology of Writers, Poets, and Playwrights* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), pp. 139–43. For his translation of 'Schlachtfeld', see Appendix 1 above.

Isham Cook: <<http://ishamcook.com/2011/11/23/august-stramm-poems-translated-by-isham-cook/>> [accessed 6 January 2015]; 'Wache', 'Signal', 'Wecken', 'Wunde', 'Vernichtung', 'Werttod', 'Abend', 'Gefallen', 'Sturmangriff', 'Frostfeuer', 'Krieg', 'Wacht', 'Patrouille', 'Feuertaufe', 'Schrapnell', 'Urtod', 'Im Feuer', 'Schrei', 'Krieggrab', 'Frage'.

Michael Hamburger: 'Schlachtfeld', 'Frostfeuer', in Michael Hamburger (ed.), *German Poetry 1910–1975* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977), pp. 10–11.

Alistair Noon: <<http://intercapillaryeditions.com/alistair-noon-the-last-drop-versions-of-august-stramm>> [accessed 6 January 2015]: 'Wecken', 'Schlachtfeld', 'Wunde', 'Vernichtung', 'Abend', 'Gefallen', 'Frostfeuer', 'Wacht', 'Schrapnell', 'Patrouille', 'Krieggrab', 'Wache'. Noon's edition also includes a commentary on the choices he has made as a translator. For his translation of 'Schlachtfeld', see Appendix 1 above.

There is also a volume of Stramm translations by Patrick Bridgwater which I have not seen: August Stramm, *Twenty Two Poems*. Translated by Patrick Bridgwater, Drawings by Rigby Graham (Wyndham: Brewhouse Press, 1969).