"Knowing you will understand":
The Usage of Poetry as a Historical Source about the
Experience of the First World War

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ABSTRACT

For the last century, historians of the conflict have not systematically used the poetry of the First World War as a source. Whether reduced to a canon established *a posteriori* or excluded from literary periodisation altogether, this corpus needs to be considered from a transdisciplinary perspective and be used as a document about the experience of war itself, and not just about the conflict's remembrance. The present article aims to present the French and British landscape of research about the poetry of the Great War and to establish a theoretical framework combining literary history, anthropology, literary criticism, and linguistics, which will allow for the usage of poetry as a historical source. Finally, the article will discuss two digital humanities projects which draw upon the Centenary to contribute to the establishment of a relation between History and Poetics in the context of the sources available to the cultural historian looking at how individuals internalised a culture shared by all those who experienced the war and at how the poetic gesture shaped the experience of war itself.

Keywords: Poetry, English, French, Culture, History

In April 1915, Roland Aubrey Leighton, in France with the 7th Worcestershire Regiment, sent Vera Brittain the following poem:

> Violets from Plug Street Wood,
> Sweet, I send you oversea.
> (It is strange they should be blue,
> Blue, when his soaked blood was red,
> For they grew around his head:
> It is strange they should be blue.

Think what they have meant to me -
Life and hope and Love and You
(and you did not see them grow
Where his mangled body lay
Hiding horrors from the day;
Sweetest, it was better so.)

Violets from oversea,
To your dear, far, forgetting land
These I send in memory
Knowing you will understand

The final verse represents not only Roland's belief that the feelings he and Vera had for each other were enough to breach the distance between the fighting front and the home front and between civilian and military experiences of the conflict, but may also be perceived as a metalinguistic statement of poetry's capacity of communicating the ineffable character of war. This vision has been echoed elsewhere. In 1916, Collin Ross, a German soldier at the front, claimed that the story of the war would someday be told by a poet. According to Modris Eksteins:

> Without saying so outright, Ross was suggesting that, despite the contributions of historians, only the poet-artist would in the end be able to cut through the shibboleths of the war experience to capture a higher meaning. And if ever there was an event that cried out for sublime interpretation, it was the horrific war in which Ross found himself in 1916. Ross was evoking a grand Western tradition, going back to at least Aristotle, that venerated the artist as a seer, a man of grace who could perceive and express truths that remained hidden from mere mortals. Ultimately these truths could be captured only through superior intuitive and imaginative effort, not through normal observation and analysis. (see Winter et al., 2000: 331)

The English war poetry canon has been widely discussed, both in terms of its placement within Anglophone literary periodisation and of the role it plays in the remembrance politics of the conflict. This canon, however, is restricted to a handful of poets who do not represent the totality of the wartime practice of poetry writing. Moreover, the crystallisation of such a corpus and the narrative accompanying it, often centred around the notion of "pity" put forward by Wilfred Owen on his preface and around the idea of irony brought about by a standard trajectory going from enthusiasm to disenchantment through irony (Fussel, 1975), has earned the suspicion of scholars specialising not in war literature but in the conduct and the experience of the conflict: the "actual killing", as Samuel Hynes puts it (1997). This has artificially broadened the distance between History (capital H) and literary history, and the gap between both disciplines has evolved into mutual distrust and lack of constructive dialogue. On the other side of the English Channel, French poetry of the First World War has the particularity of being excluded from both literary periodisation and from the corpus of legitimate historical sources. Regardless of its treatment or lack thereof within literary history or literary criticism, the trend to silence poems as legitimate sources about the experience of war permeates transnational cultural and military histories. Whether

focused on a well-established canon or excluded from literary periodisation altogether, poetry still has not made its way into the corpus of sources available to the cultural historian of the Great War. Even when First World War historians do look at poetry, they either do it in order to point out the biased nature of the canonisation process in the English-speaking world or perceive poems as sites of memory (Winter, 1995) rather than 'sites of History'. The distinction implies that poetry is regarded by some cultural historians as a legitimate source to shed light on the way the conflict has been interpreted diachronically instead of on how contemporaries bestowed meaning upon their experience, even though these spheres are actually intertwined. Poems are seen as capable of shaping remembrance rather than knowledge about the conflict, and poetry endures a process of "exoticisation" when compared to either official sources or memoirs and novels and is placed below any of these within a hierarchy of historical sources. This very diverse corpus has not benefited from historiographical developments which place memory within History (Le Goff, 1988) and shared cultural values - expressed through these poems - within the core of the experience of war itself (Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 2000) in either Britain or France.

Furthermore, according to Jay Winter, "in Britain, France, and Germany, many writers used verse to keep the voices of the fallen alive, by speaking for them, to them, about them" (1995: 204). Poetry is therefore a *locus* for dealing with the absent dead[1], a figural and versified set of points of reference to aid in the process of grief and remembrance. The widespread use of figurative language in poetry can ensure a symbolic and imaginary presence for the absent dead, whether missing, unidentified, or geographically distant. One of the hypotheses for a larger presence of poetry in collective remembrance in British and Commonwealth memory is hence the fact that those countries' cemeteries and memorials are located in a different country or in a different continent, creating the need for a symbolical presence which poetry and its figurative language are well-equipped to create. This is paired with a British tradition of verse and with the patriotic identification of poetry as the one art in which English surpasses all other languages and in which Britain defeats its enemies. Poetry sets the tone for remembrance in Britain, and there have been recent attempts to include poetry in the French collective memory of the First World War, such as the reading of Guillaume Apollinaire's "*Si je mourais là-bas*" at the funeral of the last surviving poilu in 2008, but the French landscape is still overbearingly dominated by prose. The possibility of concentrating images in a reduced space and of using versified form and metre to create effects of symmetry allow for an expression of the oxymoronic character of the war and its memory. According to Santanu Das (2013), poetry has represented but also constructed the image of the soldier as both damaged and resistant. This illustrates the dialectical construction in Britain of the national narrative of pity and the canon of war poetry which has entered the public domain instead of a more nuanced image of the conflict. While the lack of an equivalent canon in France gives cultural and military historians the possibility of using heuristic comparison in order to interrogate this relation between canonicity and collective national narrative, it has also been responsible for excluding the poetry produced during the war from literary periodisation and prevented it from being treated as a single corpus with relatively homogeneous distinctive traits.

In Britain, the current research landscape seems to offer a reversal of John H. Johnston's assertion that

> These poets form a natural group by virtue of the fact that they were the first to deal with the kind of war peculiar to modern civilization; they were the first to attempt some assessment of the physical and spiritual effects of that kind of war. Their verse, consequently, has both a historical and a critical interest. The historical aspects of World War I poetry—that is, the general relationships between the conditions of twentieth-century warfare and the type of poetry those conditions inspired—are by now fairly obvious. No special effort, however, has yet been made to examine the literary and critical implications of that poetry: the relationships between tradition and innovation, between theory and practice, between attitude and technique, between form and materials. (Johnston, 1964: ix-x)

One should question the notion of "natural group" applied to ten poets whose inclusion in the book is itself justified tautologically as "poetry that is most likely to be granted, according to its varying quality some place in literature" (Johnston, 1964: ix). Moreover, a quick glance at Johnston's bibliographical references makes it clear that by "historical aspects" he actually means literary history, as most of the works cited are actually diachronic reflections by literary scholars. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that at the occasion of the conflict's 50th anniversary little was being said about the war poets' impact on the literature of the 20th century. Fifty years later, literary critics have changed the way war poetry is perceived and are now going beyond not only a restricted corpus like Johnston's, but also beyond some of his insights. All the while, most historians have not revisited the "historical aspects of World War I poetry" in light of recent developments on the way we study the experience of the conflict. The current academic landscape in terms of First World War poetry and its focus on literary criticism and on the poetry as a site of memory is also a partial inversion of the celebrated quotation by Wilfred Owen: "I am not concerned with poetry, my subject is war" (Owen, 2013: 535). Poems written by Owen and his peers are now perceived as concerned mostly with poetry and with remembrance. In reaction to initial attempts by the poets themselves to present their work as an immediate access to the truth about the experience of the conflict, war poetry is now recognised as the object of study of literature specialists and schoolchildren, and generally not of historians who have relentlessly tried to remediate the "high jacking" of the war by a restricted canon. Furthermore, the construction of a mythical trajectory from patriotic enthusiasm to ironic disillusionment followed by poets of a certain class (Spear, 1979), today known as the old paradigm (Vandiver, 2010), has led to the questioning by historians of the representativity of the poetic canon and its utility as a historical source. The historical criticism of the canon and of the myth created around Owen's and Sassoon's experience of war, though valid, has become a refusal of poetry as a source in general. The idea of a new language created to express the sense of disillusionment experienced by poets confronted with the realities of industrial warfare has therefore been continuously questioned, with historians resisting poetry as a potentially simplistic source. In their efforts, they have seemed to forget that, just as in physics the study of the way light changes direction when moving from one medium to the other reveals a lot about the different materials and their interaction, so can a study of the poetry of war shed new light not only on that poetry and its placement in time, but

also on the war itself and on the interaction between it and artistic creation. This article's main purpose is not to return to the treatment poetry was granted before this critical return and thus rehabilitate the canon, but to offer a theoretical justification for the study of that refraction by historians whose subject is war and who may or may not be concerned with poetry either, thus leading to a deeper questioning of that canon.

Without disregarding the role poetry plays in collective memory and the processes involved in canon building, this article aims to present epistemological hypotheses for the usage of poetry as a historical source about the experience of the First World War, providing potential answers to the question of why poems can and should be used as primary sources for a cultural history of the First World War. It will present theories arising from the Social Sciences, from History, and from Literary Criticism, aiming to construct a theoretical framework capable of defending the usage of First World War poetry as a source by cultural and military historians. Subsequently, it will compare two digital humanities projects, The First World War Poetry Digital Archive based at the University of Oxford, and the *Poésie Grande Guerre 1914-2018* database, under construction at the *Université Paris Nanterre*, in order to show that the lack of a French canon can serve as a laboratory for historians and help raise new questions about the canonicity of British war poetry, enabling poetry as s source for a transnational military and cultural history. This enterprise places itself within the framework of the cultural history of the Great War, a paradigm inaugurated in the late 1990's, which argues that all people involved in the conflict shared a culture, understood as a symbolic repertoire that informed their experience (Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 2000). Furthermore, cultural historians defend a transnational approach of the conflict and the diversification of the types of sources used by historians. Studying the war as a cultural phenomenon implies not only approaching the conflict from the individual's point of view, in a continuation of developments in military history in the 1970's brought about by John Keegan's seminal work *The Face of Battle* (Keegan, 1976), but also using sources other than official documents. This usage should not, however, reduce poems to purely transparent documents, and poems should not be fully appropriated by historians aiming to simply look through them to find a narrative of historical truth. In order to fully live up to their potential for historical revisionism, poems written during or about the First World War must be considered in their materiality, as a social and economic wartime practice, as discourse, and as artistic creation. In other words, the construction of the poetry of the Great War as a source by military and cultural historians demands an active and open dialogue with its literary counterparts.

1. A brief *Tour d'horizon*

While the reader may be familiar with the presence of the poetry of the First World War in British remembrance and secondary education, the situation in France is quite different and deserves to be briefly outlined. The only poets with combat experience still read are those who had been writing before the conflict broke out or who have had significant literary importance after the fighting ceased, as members of the surrealist movement or as resistant poets after the 1940 armistice. Their inclusion is usually based on the formal innovation they offered, with which they had often experimented before the war,

especially during 1913 when the *avant-gardes* had a very impactful year, with Guillaume Apollinaire publishing "*Alcools*" and his anti-Futurist manifesto and Blaise Cendrars's "*La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France*". Even when it is known that the poet fought (and sometimes died) in 1914-1918, teachers and students seldom establish a link between war experience and poetic writing. This is part of a larger context of French schoolchildren being taught a formal approach to poetry, where they are expected to memorise and recite poems, and from a programme organised thematically rather than chronologically. The programme thus divides the four years of lower-secondary (*collège*) French poetry teaching: initiation to poetry, language games, lyrical poetry, and poetry in the world and in the century. It is noteworthy that First World War poets are suggested as case studies for all themes, but for the first three the approach necessarily focuses on forms they experimented with before or after the war. On the latter theme, the poets are read in terms of their political engagement during the Second World War and their experience of the previous conflict is treated as merely anecdotal, if at all.

University level education also disregards the context of the war in the production of the poetic works. The *Dictionnaire de poésie de Baudelaire à nos jours* (Jarrety, 2001) seldom mentions the poet's war experience, ignoring particularities of that experience and disregarding the impact of combat on poetic creativity even when acknowledging the conflict as a context of production. The war years are seen as both an end and a beginning, but never as a literary period in its own right. 1914 marks the end of a very productive period for the Parisian *avant-garde* and the shattering of the pan-European modernist dream. The post-war years mark the beginning of the surrealist period, and André Breton's silence about his war experience sets the tone for most of the surrealists' poems. The importance of surrealism in French 20th century poetry and an association of pacifism (which set the tone for important poems in the late war years and in the early 1920's) with either communist or collaborationist politics during the Second World War have led to a refusal of the poetic memory of the Great War.

Furthermore, the poetry written between 1914 and 1918 seems to have been excluded both from literary periodisation and from the memory of the conflict itself. The seminal work *Témoins*, by literary critic and *ancien combattant* Jean Norton Cru, was published in 1928 and aimed at classifying the literary works according to their documental quality. Though Norton Cru advances one of the central arguments of the present article in recognising that the literature written by those who fought in the First World War would be a determinant primary source for future historians (something historians themselves only put in practice after the shift from military and social to cultural history [J. Becker, 2006]), he completely excludes poetry from his typology. In a framework where only autobiographical novels and memoirs are considered documents, poetry is a non-source. Cru perceives artistic imagination as an obstacle in his search for a positivistic and objective 'truth' about the experience of the war, and while he disapproves of civilians' accounts of the conflict he also deems some soldiers' works too 'literary' to be taken into consideration. Norton Cru's quest in search of a true testimony of the war which can be used as a source is a product of an essentialist view of the *poilu* (French soldier) that equates the whole reality of war to his own reduced experience of it. Jean Norton Cru's work and his focus on prose have notwithstanding influenced French scholarship,

especially literary historians, who have dedicated several works to the relation between writers' experience of the conflict and the novels they have written to transmit it.

Nonetheless, one of the most important archival collections in France dedicated to the First World War tells a much more nuanced story of this exclusion and shows an early valorisation of poetry as a document. Though the objective approach offered by the *Bibliothèque Musée de la Guerre* (later the *Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine* and currently *La Contemporaine*), where poems are archived with no bibliographical support to elucidate the poet's experience of war, for example, is no longer possible after literary history and criticism has argued against the consumption of poetry as a purely transparent means to access the true war and historians have resisted the usage of poetry as a source, the early collection of poetry as documents and potential sources shows that it is possible for poetry to be treated and, more importantly, constructed as a source by military historians. Originated from a collection dating from 1914, when Louise and Henri Leblanc, an industrial Parisian couple, started to acquire documents pertaining to the on-going conflict, *La Contemporaine* today houses over 850 published poetry volumes. Nearly half of these were acquired before the Leblanc donated their collection to the French government in 1918, demonstrating the preoccupation with poetry of contemporaries who were quite aware that the event they were living through and/or witnessing would pass into the realm of History and that sources needed to be amassed for the future generations. Furthermore, the type of poetry selected indicates that this consciousness was independent of aesthetic criteria, and that the Leblanc and those who continued their work operated with a definition of poetry not based on literary quality, economic success, or formal innovation. As a result, nearly half of the volumes forming the collection are not present in the *Anthologie des Écrivains Morts à la Guerre* or in Jean Vic's *La literature de Guerre*, nor are they related to the war in the catalogue of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*.[2] The collection offers insight into the great diversity of the poetry produced during the war, as well as into the relationship people with their own war experience valued poetry as a source worthy of being preserved for future historians.

Recently, cultural historians have revisited Norton Cru's work (Smith, 2007; Prochasson and Rasmussen, 2004) and tried to apply his belief in literary sources without his positivistic quest for a singular truth, though still preferring testimonies in prose in detriment of poems. Other developments have attempted to include 1914-1918 as a specific period in French literary history. The most prominent of these is Michelle Touret's chapter in a broader work about literary periodisation in the 20th century (Touret and Dugast-Portes, 2001). Touret claims the war years have all the characteristics of a defined literary period, being a homogeneous and clearly different from the pre-war and the post-war years, and constituting a moment whose analysis demands the comprehension of singular data and of a specific perspective. Touret not only enables scholars to research and teach war poetry as a set event in French literature, but also posits a diachronic view of the poetry of the Great War, analogous to the British scholarship on the matter. Her focus, however, is on how literary history excludes a whole period, rather than on how a restricted canon can inform both literary and collective memory, as in studies from across the English Channel.

A group of historians and literary critics who subscribe to the idea of a culture shared by all those who experienced the conflict has nonetheless tried to conciliate History and Poetics over the past twenty years. Carine Trevisan (2001) has used poems as primary sources for her work on the narrative of mourning, especially texts written by women who expressed in verse their quest to retrieve the bodies of their sons and husbands. Nicolas Beaupré (2006) posits that literature is the gateway for historians wishing to penetrate soldier's mental universes and establishes a connection between the usage of literary sources and historiography based on the notion of a culture of war. Beaupré also introduces some of the present article's argument in his 2013 article *La Guerre comme expérience du temps et le temps comme expérience de guerre*, in which he demonstrates a particular perception of time for the war years and claims that poetry is the most adequate source for historians to investigate the way individuals internalised this specific temporality. Beaupré argues that, more than any other source, poems allow for a plural consciousness of time, which can be, in the same poem, perceived and represented as cyclical and slow through a form that is cyclical itself, and as an element of the distance between experience and expectation.

Though Beaupré is, to our knowledge, the first French historian to advocate explicitly for poetry as a source, albeit specific to the perception of time, and a major influence for this article, the strongest claim for a potential connection between historical research and poetic creation in France is Laurence Campa's 2010 book *Poètes de la Grande Guerre*. Campa offers the first French definition of war poet: those who saw combat and who were so profoundly artistic that this experience becomes a writing issue. She also claims poets give the war and the collective destiny its highest and most perfect form of artistic expression, establishing poetry not only as a viable but as an indispensable primary source. Campa unites her literary perspective and the questions being asked by cultural historians of the Great War, and though her work focuses exclusively on texts written by 'professional poets' and not on the poetic activity arisen from the conflict in general, her transdisciplinary effort should be considered ground-breaking for the usage of poetry as a primary source.

This general vision of the research landscape about the poetry of the First World War has no pretention of being comprehensive, and leaves out works straying from the genealogy of the central arguments put forward by the present article. Nonetheless, it is enough evidence of the lack of a systematic usage of poetry as a historical source both in France and in English-speaking countries, regardless of the different contexts in which this overlook takes place (the lack of canon and the restricted canonicity based on a single war narrative, respectively). Though further investigation can and should be conducted on the way other belligerent countries mobilise their war poetry, we can affirm that it has been neglected as a source, either by being defined exclusively as a component of the collective memory of the war or by being excluded from both History and literary history. Despite cultural historians' opening towards new sources, there has not been a systematic, general and consistent approach of the poetry of the Great War used as a source neither in Britain nor in France.

2. Poetry as a source: An epistemological framework

Using the 'blank canvas' which is the silenced French poetry of the First World War as a starting point, we would like to present theoretical foundations for the usage of poetry as a primary source within the context of cultural history. This will allow for an interrogation of the way the war poetry genre has been constructed in Britain and for a critical reversal of the perspective, enabling a revisionist cultural history which includes poetry as a source. Consideration of the culture of the Great War as a cultural pattern, in the terms proposed by Clifford Geertz, can place poetry and the culture of war in the broader context of the individual internalisation and signification of culture in general. Geertz's definition of culture as a historically transmitted framework of meanings embedded in symbols which convey this symbolic repertoire and is "expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (Geertz, 1973: 89) is in accordance with what cultural historians have called the culture of war. Cultural patterns are therefore systems of meaning through which one gives form to one's life. Poetry can be interpreted as one of the symbolic forms that allow the communication, perpetuation and understanding of culture, not only in relation to the First World War and the rhetorical destruction and reconstruction it entailed, as Sherry demonstrates (2003), but also in general terms. Furthermore, Geertz argues that symbolic information sources are not only models of "reality", representing it, but also models for "reality", shaping experience all the while shaping themselves. Regarding war poems as cultural patterns, which are at the same time models of and models for experience, is one of the epistemological foundations for scholars using these poems as primary sources, for the anthropological acceptance of this double aspect allows to place the poetic gesture within the core of the individual experience of the conflict and its culture. Geertzian anthropology justifies using poetry as a document about war experience and thus its usage as a historical source because it deems poetry not only a potentially accurate model of the experience of the conflict, but also the poetic gesture as one capable of changing that experience itself and therefore worthy of study as a practice as well as a discourse.

Concepts mobilised by experts in the field of Gender Studies can also justify the importance of looking at poems as primary sources about the experience of war, especially as an element that actively constitutes that experience. Joan Scott (1991) claims that the written transmission of knowledge about an experience is key against the essentialisation of both individuals and the experience itself. Furthermore, Scott's vision converges towards Geertz's when she claims the individual does not precede the experience, and they construct each other mutually, echoing the anthropologist's theory of model of/for reality. If experience ceases to be the legitimation for knowledge, becoming rather the object of knowledge and scientific investigation, then any source is welcome which places the individual within the experience instead of naturalising this experience as a legitimating factor, and reading for the literary ceases to be contrary to historical methodology. It is noteworthy that Joan Scott's theory of experience has already been used to justify the usage of literary sources in the study of the First World War: Leonard Smith (2007) argues that testimony is what creates the idea of the "true *poilu*" and vice-versa in Jean Norton Cru's typology of sources. This importance

bestowed upon the consideration of the stories one tells and of the way they are told as a fundamental component in the construction of identities and therefore as a legitimate object of study is echoed by Margaret R. Somers, who reconfigures the study of identity through the concept of narrative. The interpretation of narrative as being ontological rather than representative and the recognition of any discourse which places the individual within the world around him as a story told allows the historian to consider poems as narratives.

Literary criticism and literary history also equip the historian with methodological tools that enable the usage of poetry as a primary source. The subjective character of poetry, though detached from traditional lyric in the early 20th century, constitutes an attempt to bestow meaning upon the poet's individual experience of warfare and to produce on the reader sensations analogous to the poet's physical perception of his or her experience. Poetry's subjectivity ceases to be a barrier for the historian willing to write a historiography based on representations, on the reframing of meaning, and on the reappropriation of the symbols associated with a given event. Thus, in the context of cultural history, poetry should be considered an important source allowing to gain access to the symbolic realm of war experience: not just a legitimate source but a singular one. Considering how recent cultural history of the Great War is in comparison to military and social history of the same conflict as well as the abundance of official sources for the 20th century which give little insight into individual perceptions, and taking into account how hermetic to scientific comprehension the individual experience of conflict can be (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2008 ; Keegan, 1976), poetry bears what Todorov (1997) calls "the truth of unveiling" and should therefore be explored in depth not only for its literary value but also for its particular kind of documentary value. Nonetheless, Todorov evokes the specificities of this kind of truth, warning that it is not subject to ordinary processes of verification and that it is intersubjective rather than referential. Consequently, using poetry as a source is necessarily accompanied by an epistemological reflection about what defines History as a science, how historical knowledge is produced, and what interactions do historians establish with their sources.

This methodological analysis must also include an interrogation of the frontiers between particular and general interpretations of experience, and of the role micro-history plays within cultural history. According to Jerôme Thélot (2013), writing a poem is an act of resistance of an "I" against the world, because, contrary to prose writers who often want the story to appear as telling itself, poets want their work on and with the language to be seen and recognised as a speech act. This unapologetic presence of the poetic "I" is consequential for cultural historians examining mechanisms through which individuals relate to the symbolic framework specific to the war experience. Moreover, Thélot argues that the poetic work is essentially prosodic, and when each poet constructs their own language, which aids them in materialising sensory and emotional perceptions into speech, this act changes the very nature of language. Consequently, the poem is itself a witness and a document regarding its own construction, and a primary source of unmatched potential when it comes to elucidating the processes through which individuals assign meaning to their war experience and materialise it into words. Hence, each individual poem is a metonym of the culture of war itself, elaborating an original range of possible images within a symbolic framework specific to the conflict.

The particularities of the poetic language, such as the primacy of the significant, the exploration of formal and acoustic realities to enable multiple *strata* of meaning echoing the verticality of the poem itself, create a polysemy that is crucial in the context of a paroxysmal and pivotal event such as the First World War. Historians should take into account the trope's capacity of not only representing reality but also redirecting speech towards it (Jenny, 1990) and thus recreating it, as it gives access to both symbolic perceptions and to the way in which these perceptions become speech. While cultural historians of the Great War argue for an increased consideration of the materiality of documents as a source itself, independent and complementary to the document's content (Becker, 2005), the interpretation of poetic sources should actually be tri-dimensional and consider materiality and content, but also form as capable of producing meaning.

Linguistics may also offer theoretical contributions to the defence of poetry as a primary source. According to Laurent Jenny (1990), enunciation is an event because it cannot be reduced to either its conditions or to the subjectivity of the speaker. Poems, as linguistic statements, are organised around the placement of the poet's "I" within a specific time and space, and therefore the interpretation of a poem can reflect this time and space, but not be limited to it. The use of poetry as a historical source goes beyond the unveiling of personal experience, which can be more or less generalised, and must account for the act of choosing to enunciate in poetic form. In other words, historians must place the poetic gesture and the poetic speech, in all its singularity, within the history of the conflict, as, according to Oswald Ducrot (1980), every linguistic statement is a testimony to the conditions in which this statement was made. Each poetic gesture must be seen as a foundation for the possibility of communication, as an attempt to transcend the ineffable and to communicate the experience of war. This implies the comparison between poetic and non-poetic sources and between poems written during or about the war and those written by the same poets in different contexts, and the heuristic value of this comparison makes it a paramount aspect of the usage of poetry as a primary source. The implications of this presupposition for corpus selection and its relation to canon establishment should be the object of historical critical thinking, or *critique du témoignage* (Bloch, 1950), in all research using poetry as a primary source. An interesting attempt to create a convergence between history and linguistics with regards to the poetry of the First World War is the 2016 article "*Témoigner en poésie. Le cas de Marc de Larreguy*". According to Marion Carel and Dinah Ribard, the foundation for the acceptance of testimonial sources (an identity between the subject uttering the speech and the biographical subject who actually experienced the events being narrated) is not a linguistic necessity, but rather a construction the text operates and which should be interpreted in terms of meta-poetics. This approach, which considers what the text says about itself and how it establishes itself as a war poem and places both the enunciating actor and the poet within wartime social structures, is the foundation of the anthropological semiotics involved in using poetry as a source for a cultural history of the Great War. The example of Leighton's poem illustrates that, as the poem both establishes the possibility of a communication in knowing the reader will understand and accomplishes that communication itself. Apollinaire's poem "*Fête*" similarly establishes the poet's identity as a soldier and therefore poetry as a source, all the while constructing that identity for Apollinaire himself, who, three years before painting the picture of a poet

holding his gun in a forest and dreaming about the romance and literature killed by the war, had written a letter claiming that he was no longer a poet, only a soldier.

Finally, a defence of poetry as a historical source must also consider the limits of the poetic text. Though it is clear that poems, even when dated, will seldom express chronological and factual realities of the war, given the subjective and figural nature of poetry itself, there are other shortcomings to consider. One of them is the implication that the singularity of speech in a poem can also mean a singularity of circumstance in its production, and a prosopographical study must be undertaken to identify who are the people who chose to communicate their experience in the form of a poem and how their profile relates to general army demography. Though this may reveal a restricted character of the war experiences communicated, this kind of study is crucial if historians are to go beyond the voices of the established poetic canon of the Great War and have a more comprehensive, albeit not generalizable, view of the poets' experience of the conflict.

3. Poetry as a source in the digital era

Over the last decade, two digital humanities projects are making considerable advancements towards interdisciplinarity and towards the usage of poems as primary sources. The First World War Poetry Digital Archive[3] was launched by the University of Oxford on November 11, 2008, marking the 90th anniversary of the Armistice. It collects works from ten of the major poets of the 1914-1918 period: Edmund Blunden, Vera Brittain, Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, David Jones, Roland Leighton, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon and Edward Thomas. From this roster, one deduces that the definition of war poetry used to constitute the corpus of the archive relates to the physical presence at the fighting front and to a public demand for sources built upon pre-established notions of what the canon is. The archive also includes digitised photographs and objects that help elucidate the context of the war, educational resources, and the products of a public engagement effort to digitise private collections relating to the war. Special features allow the user to place the poets' writings within a timeline of the war and to suggest thematic pathways for the exploration of the archive. Despite the remarkable efforts of digitisation operated by the War Poetry Digital Archive, the organisation of the collection, which should itself be interpreted as a discourse about the usage of poetry as a source, indicates that the critical approach of the pre-established canon is not one of the project's preoccupations. Despite the importance of the digitisation enterprise, this archive seems more oriented to the general public who already identifies war poetry with the established canon, or towards historians establishing biographies of the poets, but it does not interrogate the construction of the canon by diversifying the archive`s roster or by enabling the establishment of relations between the poets. The new theoretical framework we have tried to establish in the previous section of this paper is hardly applicable to the collection, as it is an illustration of the essentialist view of individual experience criticised by Scott. The restricted selection of poets who are only sporadically linked with other poets and the different search engines which separate poems and "other items" (correspondence, photographs, diaries) make it difficult for the dialectical relation (model of/for) between poetry and experience to be established. Though this experience is now remotely accessible thanks to the Archive's remarkable

digitisation efforts, the separation between poems and "documents" offers little novelty and does not allow for an immediate view of how the individual places itself within the wartime culture through the act of poetry writing.

On the other hand, this theoretical framework has been foundational for another, more recent project combining History, Poetic and Literary Studies and the digital humanities in an effort to use poems as sources about the Great War is the project *Poésie Grande Guerre*,[4] an online relational database under construction at the *Université Paris Nanterre – Université Paris Lumières*. Contrary to the First World War Poetry Digital Archive, which concentrates on documents illustrating individual war experiences, the *Poésie Grande Guerre* database consists of variables of three orders: individuals (prosopography of published poets), military situation (including regiments and time-place precisions), and productions (information of published works). Each of these attributes receives an identifier which is then attached to the other two categories, indicating the project is oriented by the belief that the study of poetry must take into account mutual interactions between the author`s biography, his or her position with wartime social structure, and the final literary production. Though not offering as many digitised documents as its British counterpart, this database will establish a list of all published French poets having written during or about the war, whether civilian or in uniform, and thus establish a national definition of war poetry, albeit excluding non-published authors. Furthermore, the possibility to search using other variables, such as Battle or front sector by year, allows the historian to establish relations between production and experience or between different poets who may have integrated the same social circles or whose experiences of war coincided. The definition of poetry orienting the archive is an "indigenous" one, based on meta-poetics and on the way poets define their own work as war poetry, such as formal conventions or paratextuality and architextuality. In other words, any text presenting itself as poetry (in the many ways one can do that) or having been presented as poetry by contemporaries in either archives or anthologies is included in *Poésie Grande Guerre*. This definition, based on self-identification rather than on canonicity, contributes to scholarship which considers the broad spectrum of wartime poetry in all its diversity of intertextual inspiration, formal innovation, and publication support. It goes to show that poetry writing was a diffused wartime practice spanning across different ranks and military experiences, and that though poetry was seen as a highly intellectual reaction to war when read from the point of view of the *avant-gardes* or of the formal innovations related to irony (Fussell, 1975) or modernism (Sherry, 2003), it was also a more visceral and culturally diverse response to the conflict (perhaps even a natural instinct as the interaction between poetry and folk songs during the war shows), related directly to the experience of warfare without necessarily requiring the mediation of sophisticated formal or tonal innovation. This direct link ensures poetry can be used as a source without being considered a shallow and transparent document.

In conclusion, though the usage of poetry as a primary source is becoming more frequent amongst cultural historians of the Great War, and the theoretical framework presented should initiate the discussions leading to a systematic usage of this source, the digital humanities offer a solid platform to diffuse this shift in the way historians interact with poetic sources, enabling the establishment of a new canon stretching beyond the names retained by Literary History. Furthermore, online resources permit the

identification of trends and relations between the experience and the poetical production, as well as between poets themselves. These resources also allow for international and comparative researches that corroborate the existence of a wartime culture which the conflict spread across national borders. Heuristically, thinking about war poetry in the terms of web-semantics, as one must when constructing or utilising platforms such as those discussed above, entails a reflection about concepts specific to the conflict or to poetry and their interoperability with other digital humanities projects, leading to a potential redefinition of war poetry itself. There is a need for poetry to be used systematically and coherently as a source, and the existence of digital humanities projects initiating from that premise confirms that the current research landscape and the recent and approaching Centenary commemorations are the perfect conditions for the long-due understanding Leighton believed in over one hundred years ago.

Notes

1. The concept of "absent dead" has been drawn to our attention by Hanna Smyth's DPhil research at the University of Oxford – Globalising and Localising the Great War Research Network, and we would like to thank her for allowing us to use it in the present article. The typology of the absent dead, including the missing, unidentified, and geographically distant is also issued from Hanna Smyth's research and 2019 unpublished thesis.

2. We would like to thank Data BNF, a partner of the *Poésie Grande Guerre* project, for sending us a spreadsheet with all of the items of their catalogue related to the war. This has not only enriched the project's census of Great War poetry in France, but has also enabled the projects members to interrogate the relation between the literary field, the editorial market, the veteran's construction of their own literary identity in the immediate aftermath of the war, and the avant-garde poets who have earned their place on the roster of the great names in French literature.

3. We would like to thank Dr. Stuart Lee, from the University of Oxford and creator of the First World War Poetry Digital Archive, for being kind enough to answer questions about the project.

4. We would like to thank Prof. Dr. Laurence Campa, from the *Centre des Sciences des Littératures en Langue Française – Université Paris Nanterre*, who coordinates the project, as well as the rest of the *Poésie Grande Guerre* team for allowing us to discuss the database while it is still under construction. It is evident that, given the ongoing character of the project, some of the details we have discussed are still evolving and are subject to change, and may not be retained for the final version of the database.

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