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REVERSAL OF ROLES BETWEEN MEN AND MACHINES IN WILFRED OWEN'S POEM "THE LAST LAUGH"

Abstract

The present article examines "The Last Laugh" by Wilfred Owen from the perspective of utopian studies. It explores the fact that, in this poem, the roles of men (soldiers) and machines (WWI mechanical weapons) are reversed compared to what they should be like according to the Baconian view of what a proper relationship between humans and machines should be like in a utopia. The said role reversal is based on the personification of weapons and the passivisation of soldiers. The author of this article argues that "The Last Laugh" victimises the three passivised, dying soldiers it presents and simultaneously makes their deaths seem futile. The latter, nihilistic message is particularly important because it is closely related to the poem's anti-utopian aspect which, basically, boils down to the idea that mankind's machine-making genius does not guarantee the creation of a perfect society but that it may instead only amass the quantity of human suffering.

Keywords: Wilfred Owen, Francis Bacon, utopia, WWI, personification, nihilism, soldiers, mechanical weapons.

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1. Introduction

Utopian thinking is an integral part of humanity. From time immemorial, human beings have dreamed of living in a perfect and flawless society (i.e., utopia) or at least in a society that would be better than the current one. While in the earlier epochs of human civilisation there was a tendency to imagine utopian worlds either as belonging to a long-gone mythical past and being unreachable (e.g., Hesiod's Golden Age or the Bible's Garden of Eden) or as existing elsewhere, on earth or in a transcendental realm, and being reachable through acts of heroism or a highly moral life (e.g., the Isles of the Blessed/Elysium in Graeco-Roman mythology or the Judeo-Christian heavens), from Francis Bacon's early modern period, utopia started to be imagined as a practicable future world, one that would be created on this earth, not owing to divine intervention, but by human beings themselves and through the application of science and technology (Đergović-Joksimović, 2009: 29–36, 48–53, 89–92, 140–141).

In the following centuries, science did indeed prove to be a major society-changing factor and, at least in the beginning, the changes effected by science looked like a sure sign that Bacon's utopian prophecies – most notably advanced in his book *The New Atlantis* (1627), “the founding document of technological utopianism” (Craig 2019: ch. 3) – would come true and that technologisation would turn the earth into a utopian, blissfully happy and peaceful, garden of the human species. Spurred by an apparently incessant series of novel, ever more advanced scientific discoveries, the rise of liberalism, and the relatively peaceful life in the world during the so-called epoch of *Pax Britannica*, the number of advocates of Baconian technological utopianism particularly rose during the 19th century, with the Englishman Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) being, perhaps, the most prolific and famous among them. Following in the footsteps of his 17th-century compatriot, who devised a microcosmic¹ technological utopia governed by a highly moral political elite (moral in Christian terms), Spencer predicted a future in which the militant type of society, still not gone in the late 19th century, would entirely give way to the industrial type of society, characterised by world peace, intense economic activity, and, in general, mankind's full enjoyment of the fruits of its high scientific and technological prowess (Dawkins, 2015: 1–2; Miller, 2000: 502–503).

However, these optimistic hopes were turned to ashes because, in 1914, the year that saw the outbreak of World War One, the first mechanised war in history, it became clear that science could be used for evil purposes as well, not only as a means of ennobling the world and bettering the human condition (Đergović-Joksimović, 2009: 141). As the twentieth century went on, the number of ways in which science could be abused only increased, so much so that by the early twenty-first century it looked as though science would lead the world to a dystopian hell rather than a utopian paradise, and it seemed that Baconian faith in technological progress needed to be redefined.

So, given that the scientific secular concept of utopianism has turned out to be as impracticable as the earlier, Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian, transcendental utopian concepts, there can be little doubt that 1914 represents an important historical milestone, a moment that ultimately showed that, for an honest and objective-minded intellectual, there was no longer to be much space for utopian thinking. In other words, it would be possible to say that World War One ushered in a new era of philosophical thinking, an era that would be predominantly marked by existential nihilism, a notion which had already been created in the second half of the 19th century, in the works of Nietzsche and based on the second law of thermodynamics and the Darwinian and Freudian insight into man's beastly and egotistic nature, but which only now, in the 1914–1918 period, gained widespread popularity.

One of the most significant voices of World War One, a great historical milestone, was that of Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), a British poet-soldier who witnessed firsthand all the atrocities of the world's first global armed conflict and used his bleak experiences from the Western Front to create a nihilistic but extremely valuable poetic opus. Owen's anti-war poetry challenged his country's official attitude that World War One was an apocalyptic battle between good (Britain) and evil (Germany) and that there was a higher purpose to it (the decisive triumph of the "just" British side over the "unjust" German one) (Karsten 2012: 7, 23). His poems, rife with irony and compassion, victimised the young soldiers fighting in the war and vilified the politicians who had started it and kept it going from the safety and comfort of their lavish palaces and ministerial cabinets, and, perhaps even more importantly, Owen's works revealed the futility of a corrupt civilisation in which the life of a common modest human being had no value at all (Petrović, 2020: 58–59). The worthlessness of a common

human life was certainly best seen in the crazy indiscriminate carnage of history's first mechanised war, one that was carried out by machine-guns, huge artillery pieces, poison gas, airplanes and tanks, state-of-the-art weapons of mass destruction at the time, and in the form of static trench warfare, with tens of thousands of men regularly dying for the conquest of just several hundred yards of enemy-controlled territory. It is interesting to note that, according to H. G. Wells, "[m]ore lives were wasted by the British generals alone on the opening day of what is known as the Somme offensive of July 1916, than in the whole French Revolution from start to finish" (Wells 1931: 919). It is precisely this mindless wasting of British youth that Owen raged at in his overall poetic oeuvre, and, specifically, in "The Last Laugh" (1918), the poem that I will be analysing here. In my analysis, I will strive to show how the poem reverses the typical roles of men (soldiers) and machines (weapons), with the former being presented as passive targets of the personified latter, rather than vice versa, with human beings as animate users and masters of inanimate machines, which would have certainly been considered proper by Bacon's Bensalemites from *The New Atlantis* and, if we take the Bensalemites as exponents of Bacon's own beliefs, also by Bacon himself.² I will argue that this role reversal essentially victimises the young British soldiers and subtly criticises various members of British society who spent the entire war at home, expressing patriotism only in verbal terms. Even more importantly, I will argue that the overarching message of this poetic text is existential nihilism. Finally, I will argue that "The Last Laugh" suggests that Bacon's dream of creating a scientific utopia, where machines would be loyal servants to men and their chief tools for attaining undiluted happiness, would, if not forever then at least for a very long while, remain only that – a dream and nothing more.

2. Reversal of Roles Between Men and Machines in "The Last Laugh"

"The Last Laugh"

'Oh, Jesus Christ, I'm hit', he said; and died,
Whether he vainly cursed or prayed indeed,
The Bullets chirped – In vain, vain, vain!

Machine-guns chuckled – Tut-tut, tut-tut!
And the Big Gun guffawed.

Another sighed – ‘Oh, Mother, – mother, – Dad!’
Then smiled at nothing, childlike, being dead.
And the lofty Shrapnel Cloud
Leisurely gestured – Fool!
And the splinters spat, and tittered.

‘My Love!’ – one moaned. Love-languid seemed his mood,
Till slowly lowered his whole face kissed the mud.
And the Bayonet’s long teeth grinned;
Rabbles of Shells hooted and groaned;
And the Gas hissed. (Owen, 1994: 55)

As one can see, “The Last Laugh” consists of three stanzas, three different pictures showing three different soldiers in the moment of their dying on the frontline. In each of the stanzas there are two different parts – one, initial, made up of the first two lines, depicting the death of a soldier, and the subsequent one, made up of the latter three lines, depicting the behaviour of the weapons killing the soldier(s). Each of the depicted soldiers utters a different thought at the moment of death, while the different weapons killing them, being clearly personified and given the attributes of either human beings or at least (predatory) beasts (Simcox 2001), speak in unanimity. They either laugh in the face of the dying soldiers and mock them (stanza 1) or taunt them on account of the alleged futility of their participation in war (“in vain, vain, vain” from the first stanza; “fool” from the second stanza) or maliciously grin and hiss at them (stanza 3). The reaction of the personified weapons is that of arrogant laughter, self-satisfied criticism or aggressive threat-making – in one word, that of malicious triumphant joy over the killing of the unfortunate soldiers. The names of all the weapons – whether fire arms or cold weapons – are capitalised, which only adds to their animate qualities.

On the other hand, the last words of the soldiers, who are obviously shown as powerlessly meeting their end, are related to religion (the first soldier exclaims: “Oh, Jesus Christ, I’m hit”), parents (the second soldier’s “Oh, Mother, – mother, – Dad”), or a sexual partner, that is, wife or girlfriend (the third soldier’s “My Love!”). They are obviously mentioning

the ones they hold dearest at the moment of their demise, perhaps even calling them for help in their most critical hour, but no help ever comes and they all die in a humiliating manner, ridiculed by their steel executioners who are not only literally made of steel but, being personified, also have hearts of steel, cold and merciless. The image of the slain soldiers is, altogether, extremely pitiable because they die without being given any respect and their deaths are presented as purposeless. This is, no doubt, related to Wilfred Owen's personal view of the Great War, as of a war in which innocent young people went to fight and sacrifice themselves not for the salvation of the world and the fulfilment of God's will, as it was insisted by the media in both Britain and Germany (both sides famously believed that God was on their side) (Karsten 2012: 9–23; Sharp 2012), but for the interests of their respective leaderships who started the war and, though having others fight it for them, stubbornly refused to put an end to it because they were not ready to give up even the slightest portion of their colonialist wealth, insisting on nothing less than total victory and the enemy's unconditional surrender.³ So, the poem's three images clearly convey a twofold message, the message of victimisation on the one hand and the message of nihilism on the other.

³ It is interesting to note that, initially, Owen was guided by the idea that he should, just like so many of his peers and compatriots, enlist and fight for the salvation of Western civilisation and the whole world, which, as the British media and clergy insisted, was gravely threatened by German militarism (Bouyssou 2021: paras. 11–12). Although, in the early years of the war, before his first enlistment, Owen had qualms about whether he should serve his country as a poet away from the frontline or as a soldier in the trenches, he eventually opted for the latter but ended up being both a poet and a soldier because, in the end, his experience in the trenches inspired him to create a poetic oeuvre of sheer excellence (Bouyssou 2021: para. 11). However, what happened later, during the first part of Owen's service on the Western Front in 1917, is that he became "a conscientious objector" and a spirited critic of the war, but his newly acquired strong anti-war stance would not stop him from returning to the frontline in 1918 to help his fellow soldiers, with whom he frankly empathised, and to speak on behalf of them in a way that they themselves were not able to (Bouyssou 2021: paras. 17, 28, 29). So, between 1915 and 1918, Wilfred Owen experienced a change in his attitude to war, from a man willing to aid the British war effort to a "conscientious objector" returning to the frontline solely for the purpose of helping his suffering comrades and being their champion, and this is very aptly summarised by Ronald Bouyssou (2021: para. 28): "In 1915, Wilfred Owen had longed to be a saviour of Western civilisation and a redeemer of mankind; in 1918 his second enlistment was dictated by humane values only". This change in Owen's attitude to war was paralleled by a change of his attitude to religion, as will be explained in one of the subsequent footnotes.

As far as victimisation is concerned, all the three soldiers presented in “The Last Laugh” are seen in a wretched, hopeless state, and their role is unmistakably the role of victims. The first soldier mentions Christ in the hour of his doom (apparently, the metaphysical figure that he holds particularly dear), probably expecting help from God, but that help never arrives, making the soldier an obvious victim of the chirping bullets and chuckling machine-guns. The second soldier calls his mother and father in the hour of dying, but neither of the two appear on the battlefield to save him – there are only derisive shouts and insolent giggling on the part of the shrapnels tearing the flesh of the British soldiers to pieces. This soldier is shown as dying with a childlike smile on his face, a manner of death that does not only emphasise the soldier’s youth but also his pure ethical goodness, Christ-like innocence, which is a motif that also appears in some other poems of Owen’s, such as “Arms and the Boy”, “Has Your Soul Sipped”, and “At a Calvary near the Ancre”.⁴ So, this young man, too, is a victim of the mighty weapons that have killed him. The third soldier dies with the memory of his wife or girlfriend in his mind and he is shown as kissing the mud with his whole face. This scene, coupled with the evil beastly grinning of the bayonets, the owl-like hooting, and viperine hissing of the poison gas in the background, represents perhaps the most victimising situation of all of the three in the poem. In other words, the atmosphere is hellishly eerie (including both visual and auditory aspects) and we see the dying soldier slowly falling and immersing his lips and face

⁴ The poems “Arms and the Boy” and “Has Your Soul Sipped” contain the same element of a childlike soldier, explicitly referred to as a boy, being about to die or actually dying a martyr’s death on the field of battle. In both poems, emphasis is laid on the soldier’s innocence – for example, in “Has Your Soul Sipped”, the murdered soldier is described like this: “Though from his throat / The life-tide leaps / There was no threat / On his lips” (Owen 1994: 9). In “A Calvary near the Ancre” the battlefield is referred to as Golgotha, and a clear distinction is made between the priests there who are described as being on the side of “the Beast” (i.e., the Devil) and the soldiers who are described as those “who love the greater love” and “lay down their life” rather than hate (Owen 1994: 23). According to Roland Bouyssou (2021: para. 24), “it is a commonplace for war poets to identify the soldier on the battlefield with Christ on Golgotha”, which is exactly what Wilfred Owen did, clearly casting a shadow of blame on all those who glorified the war (the politicians, priests, and pro-war writers in Britain) and exalting the soldiers, whom he often gave a saintly aura of childlike or Christ-like immaculateness (speaking of the connection between childlike and Christ-like immaculateness, one should call to mind the following message of Christ from the Gospel: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”) (Matthew 18:3).

in the dirty mud while thinking of his wife or girlfriend whom he used to kiss before the war. The scene is symbolic, it merges the happy past and the horrifying present through the symbol of love and kissing and blatantly reveals the nastiness of mechanised war. Again, as in the case of the previous two unnamed soldiers, this one is also terribly unfortunate, a victim of the heartless weapons of mass destruction from World War One.

Although it is obvious that the three soldiers are victims of the personified mechanical weapons, based on the aforesaid, it would be also possible to argue that the poem does not only criticise the leaving of young, innocent soldiers at the mercy of immensely powerful and destructive weapons, against which they will have little to no chance of surviving, but that it also criticises all the members of the British society that Owen's protagonists (and, in fact, real comrades on the frontline) mention in their last words. What I mean to say is that it would be possible to understand the tragic soldiers' last exclamations as not only mere references to what, for them, has been of greatest value throughout their lives but also as desperate pleas for help or even very subtle critiques of those they have loved the most and from whom, possibly, they have not received the same amount of love in return (the soldiers' feeling of abandonment by all those who idly sit in Britain, unaware of the horrors of the warfare in northern France). This possible semantic aspect of "The Last Laugh" is most clearly observable in the case of the first soldier who shouts the name of Christ with, as Owen tells us, an undecided state of mind in the sense that it is not quite clear whether the shot man curses the Son of God for being gravely wounded or prays to Him for survival against all odds. The scene expresses existential nihilism because it shows a soldier who, above anything else, wants to live but receives no help from the deity that he has probably believed in all his life, and so the poem may be interpreted as reflecting Owen's newly found secularism (if not atheism) and apotheosis of soldierly martyrdom, ideas that he acquired as a result of his exposure to the horrors of the Western Front's trench warfare and that he expressed in his other poems as well.⁵

⁵ Already in 1913, when he left Dunsden (where he had worked as a lay assistant to the local vicar), Wilfred Owen "broke away from the Church" and started to seek God outside of it, but it wasn't until May 1917, after he had finished his first part of military service on the Western Front, that he found the kind of faith that he felt was right for him (Bouyssou 2021: para. 17). It was not in the Church, to which his mother had affiliated him as a child, but in a secularised version of Christianity, in pacifism, passivity, and sacrifice for one's neighbour (Bouyssou 2021: paras. 2, 17, 24). Owen's faith, thus,

In the second and third stanzas one may also see an implicit criticism, a criticism of the soldiers' family members, and I base this interpretation on bringing this poem into close connection with "The Dead-Beat", a poem that Owen wrote just a few months earlier than "The Last Laugh", and in which a mentally deranged dying soldier is shown as being hateful of his unfaithful wife and his wealthy uncle back home because they have used and are using his deployment on the frontline to engage in different kinds of war profiteerism (his wife betrays him by finding a richer husband even before his actual death, and his uncle "smiles ministerially" because he knows he will have many soldiers, or scapegoats, like his nephew to send to the frontline and, by means of them, win the war and keep his reputation and budget constantly growing) (Owen 1994: 31; Petrović 2020: 55). It is also possible to bring "The Last Laugh" into connection with "The Fathers" by Siegfried Sassoon, a poem in which this great friend and poetic tutor of Owen's ironically ridiculed the, at that time not uncommon, custom of British fathers to be overjoyed at sending one or more of their sons to the hellish battlegrounds of Flanders and northern France, thinking that their children were going on an easy chivalric adventure where they would certainly defeat "the Huns" and even have a lot of fun while doing so (Sassoon 1919: 55). The Great War, as it turned out, was everything but a chivalric adventurous undertaking, because this war involved an entirely new form of warfare, with both cavalry and infantry charges becoming crazy runs to almost certain death with, at most times little to no results achieved, and this was due to the enormous firing speed and destructive

lost all metaphysical layers, such as the belief in resurrection and divine miracles, and became centred merely on practical Christian virtues – his God became "a secular Christ, the icon of brotherhood, compassion and love" (Bouyssou 2021: para. 24). It was the selfless soldier, sacrificing himself not only for his comrades on the field of battle but also for all the insufficiently grateful British civilians across the English Channel, that became the embodiment of Owen's new faith (Bouyssou 2021: para. 24). The apotheosis of soldiers as martyrs is present in a large number of Owen's poems – for instance, "Greater Love", "Apologia pro Poemate Meo", "At a Calvary near the Ancre", and "Has Your Soul Sipped". Perhaps the finest example of this can be found in, again, "Has Your Soul Sipped", where the sight of a young dying soldier, with a boyish smile on his face, is described as "[a] strange sweetness / [a]ll fancy surpassing / [p]ast all supposing" and exalted as the most sublime aesthetic experience on earth (Owen 1994: 8). This sublime, almost religious, experience can furthermore be aptly brought into connection with Owen's initial verses from "Apologia pro Poemate Meo" – namely, "I, too, saw God through mud – / The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled" (the wretches are, of course, the suffering soldiers) (Owen 1994: 18).

capabilities of newly developed machine-guns, howitzers and artillery weapons. The Western Front was almost literally a huge graveyard – “a titan’s grave”, as Owen himself called it in his “Imperial Elegy” (Owen 1994: 83) – on which the soldiers, in addition to being mowed down by bullets and torn to pieces by shells, were also dying of the poison gas, and where there were also hundreds of thousands of shell-shock cases, cases of a war-caused psycho-somatic illness that would later on become known as the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Harvie 2014; Llewellyn & Thompson 2017). So, there was no glory in fighting on the Western Front, but only humiliating death as in a slaughterhouse, with trenches full of rats and unceasing massive explosions making one’s body uncontrollably shake and twitch even long after returning home or leaving the frontline (Harvie 2014; Llewellyn & Thompson 2017). In general, WWI frontlines, and especially the Western Front, were a hell on earth, both mentally and physically, where men died wretchedly and in anonymity rather than gallantly and with songs of glory sung around them, and, as a result, it is no wonder that Owen saw the horrors endured by myriads of young soldiers as unjustifiable by any kind of political cause, no matter how truly or just rhetorically noble. It is from this sentiment that Owen’s existential nihilism is derived.

The nihilistic message of “The Last Laugh” is evident from the reproachful words and gestures with which the personified weapons react to the suffering of the dying soldiers. The weapons, judging by the sounds that they produce at the sight of the crying soldiers, are in a jubilant mood – they are celebrating the downfall of their passive, helpless targets. They are in no way touched by the death cries and agonies of their victims, but rather ridicule the soldiers, calling them fools for taking part in the war and referring to their war effort as being in vain. Their loud mockery of the dying soldiers is similar to a dissonant orchestral performance with all kinds of different notes produced – from bird-like chirping to human-like guffawing – an orchestral performance that is not characterised by good taste, primarily because of the fact that jubilant tones are quite inappropriate as a musical accompaniment to someone’s death.

In the context of utopianism, this cacophony reveals one simple truth – that World War One essentially brought about an unthinkable perversion in the form of the fact that in it millions of human beings (i.e., soldiers) were mere cannon fodder for the mighty mechanical weapons that both sides were using. There are actually few other poems in the history of

literature that bring home this awful truth about World War One as aptly as “The Last Laugh”, and Owen’s skilful use of personification for mechanical weapons to show the ease with which these tools of destruction annihilated the soldiers is to be given much credit for this. In other words, Owen makes his weapons look like half-human, half-animal beings, like mythological monsters, simultaneously endowed with destructive power and (evil) intelligence, while his soldiers look like helpless victims calling for God, who will never appear to save them (the implicit absence, or at least disinterestedness, of God (the Church’s God),⁶ who does nothing whether one prays to Him or curses Him is a very strong nihilistic element in the poem). The weapons, so to speak, are more alive than the soldiers, which clearly goes against the usual, normal relationship between machines and humans, because one normally imagines machines as inanimate servants of human beings, not as animate killers thereof. The usual roles of machines as servants and men as masters are here reversed, and with devastating consequences for humanity. In other words, instead of seeing machines obediently carrying out the orders of men and making their lives better, we see them as a scourge of humanity, as blood-thirsty takers of human lives. The machines here have the initiative and they seem to be the aggressive masters of the situation, whereas the humans assume the role of passive targets or, conditionally speaking, servants (they serve as “kicking bags” for the personified murderous weapons). Actually, the relationship between machines and men in “The Last Laugh” may be understood as one that belongs to a hunt setting, where there is a hunt going on with weapons (machines) hunting down soldiers, and not for food as the term ‘cannon fodder’ would imply, but for sheer fun, because the wicked minds of those

⁶ It is not quite possible to conclusively discern, based on Owen’s overall poetic oeuvre, whether he entirely negated the existence of the Church’s, the clergy’s metaphysical God, or whether he just thought that the metaphysical God was not a beneficent creator, but rather an aloof one, disinterested in the suffering of human beings, even moral ones. Sometimes, as in “The Last Laugh” or in “Futility”, where the sun, not God, is viewed as the supreme holder of life-giving power, God seems to be absent altogether, but in other poems, the impression is that God exists but is not interested in the ongoing gruesome human affairs (e.g., in “Greater Love” God is explicitly referred to as seeming “not to care” about the dying soldiers on the battlefield) (Owen 1994: 45, 53). In one poem entitled “Soldier’s Dream”, God or, more accurately God the Father is even portrayed as a war-loving deity, an evil god who repairs the rifles, pistols and big guns that his peace-loving son Jesus previously disabled wishing to bring about the reconciliation of the two confronted sides on the front (Owen 1994: 69).

personified machine-like monsters enjoy taking the lives of those who have by no means harmed them.

Interestingly, this same motif is present in “Arms and the Boy”, another poem of Owen’s that has already been mentioned earlier in this article. In this poem, a certain unidentified third party (the identified two parties are the poet as the speaker and the soldier as the one spoken about), probably a representative of the British military authorities, is ironically invited by the poet to let “the boy”, that is, the soldier, take and stroke different types of weapons used in World War One (a bayonet, bullets, cartridges), all of which are personified and given a menacing appearance (Owen 1994: 41). The poem ends in a stanza that, with its compassionate tone, inserts a powerful tone of victimisation into this ironic work of art:

For his [the boy’s] teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls (Owen 1994: 41).

Obviously, the intention is not only to criticise the military authorities for their insensitivity to the boy who is about to be sacrificed but also to make the reader empathise with the young soldier who is to be thrown into the hell of modern warfare despite his childlike innocence and the softness and fragility of his heart and physique. The boy is made to look passive and less animate than the personified weapons that are described as mad and eager to kill young men, and the last stanza clearly alludes to a hunt setting, as the boy is described as not being a game animal with either claws (a bear, for instance), talons (a game bird, such as a pheasant) or antlers (a deer) to be hunted by the personified bullets and bayonets. As in “The Last Laugh”, so here, there is a reversal of roles between men and machines, to the detriment of the former, but “The Last Laugh” turns out to be richer in meaning than “Arms and the Boy” because it contains both nihilistic and victimising elements, as opposed to the latter poem which, as it seems, conveys only the message of victimisation. Another superior quality of “The Last Laugh”, compared to “Arms and the Boy”, is the fact that its ideas are not conveyed indirectly, through someone’s speech or descriptions, but rather directly, through painfully vivid pictures and shrieks that make the reader truly feel all the pain and humiliation of the suffering soldiers as though he or she were there, on the very field of battle, in person.

In relation to the eagerness and enjoyment of certain aggressive beings or personified objects in killing or contemplating the killing of other, passive beings, there is one more poem that needs to be mentioned because it contains a similar scene of wanton infliction and futile experiencing of pain. The poem that I am referring to is “The Conqueror Worm” by Edgar Allan Poe, which uses the metaphorical domain of theatre to present human life as being nothing else but purposeless suffering with someone or something (in this case, the Conqueror Worm as a metaphor for mortality) always drawing pleasure from human death agony (Poe 2004: 942–943). This, essentially Darwinian idea,⁷ is what binds Poe and Owen. Owen, in other words, is as convincing as his American fellow poet and predecessor in depicting the suffering of men (in this case, WWI soldiers) as both excruciating and futile (nihilistic), and he also presents the suffering of men as affording great pleasure to those deliberately killing them. The only difference is that Poe uses an abstract, religious and rather general context to convey a nihilistic message of human life’s futility (i.e., the context of angels sitting in a theatre and watching a play that shows some kind of heavenly actors or “mimes”, which are a metaphor for humanity, being eaten by a crawling “conquering worm”) (Poe 2004: 942–943), whereas Owen does so using the concrete example of WWI soldiers being mown down by unforgiving, extremely lethal, barrages of fire.

Speaking of nihilism as the chief semantic layer of “The Last Laugh”, and of victimisation as another very important semantic layer thereof, one should not forget to pay some attention to the very title of this poem, because it is symbolical and suggestive of both of these meanings. First, it would be possible to view this title as stemming from the idiom “the man who has the last laugh”, which has the meaning of winning in the end in spite of being on the verge of defeat and ridiculed at first (Dalli, n.d.). In the context of this idiom, the phrase “The Last Laugh” in the title may, as argued by Dalli (n.d.), refer to the fact that the boisterous laughter of the personified guns is the last laugh, or, more accurately, that it is the personified weapons that have the last laugh, that are victorious in the

⁷ Although he never openly stated that there is no God, Charles Darwin argued that the immense misery (i.e., pain and suffering) of various life forms in nature makes the belief in “a beneficent and omnipotent God” hardly defensible from a purely logical, scientific point of view (Darwin 1911: 105). The idea that suffering is the main characteristic of this world is easily comparable to how the French expert on English WWI poetry Roland Bouyssou (2021: para. 22) described Owen’s overall opus as “concerned with a doomed humanity under the sway of Evil and Death”.

end. This interpretation would rely on the nihilistic aspect of the poem, an aspect that could not escape Owen's critical eye, given that the Western Front's everyday massacres of thousands of soldiers from both sides of No Man's Land literally gave the impression of this war having been started so that the weapons might test their own lethality against the flesh of European youth, and one did not have to be a genius to see this and the absurdity of a war in which a weapon was virtually worth as much as or even more than a human being. However, ingeniousness certainly was required for writing wonderful poetry, in terms of both form and content, which is exactly the reason why not so many participants of WWI managed to turn their frontline experience into sublime poetry, a thing that Wilfred Owen, a man of poetic genius, did accomplish beyond any doubt.

The manner in which the title "The Last Laugh" conveys the message of victimisation is closely related to the way in which the second soldier from this poem dies on the battlefield, smiling at nothing, in a childlike manner. It is easy to see the contrast between the monstrous, evil laughter of the victorious guns and the innocent last laugh of the victimised defeated soldier, just as it is not very difficult to conclude that of the two semantic, by no means non-complementary, elements of this poem – namely, nihilism and victimisation – it is the former that strikes the reader as more powerful. Certainly, one of the reasons for this is also the fact that the referred to soldier from the second stanza smiles "at nothing" at the moment of his dying, which, in itself, clearly intensifies the nihilistic atmosphere of the poem created by the weapons' monstrous laughter and shouting of the phrase "in vain" (it is not only the personified weapons that see the soldiers' death as futile but this second soldier also seems to implicitly admit this by his act of smiling at nothing).

In conclusion, the unnatural domination of steel weapons (inanimate machines) over living human beings in "The Last Laugh", together with its image of unchivalrous death in the form of a soldier kissing the mud instead of his beloved female partner, essentially points to the erroneous nature of Baconian technological utopianism as an idea that was central in Western civilisation over the course of the 19th century and in the early 1900s. The three pictures from this poem reveal the absurdity of mechanised warfare, the godlessness of the world, and, most importantly, the falsity of the belief in technological progress, the idea that the machines would help man create a utopia on earth. This work of Owen's, through its use of the reversal of social roles between men (soldiers) and machines (mechanical

weapons), challenges the idea that science is solely a positive factor in human lives and shows what it looks like when technology, instead of being a subservient helper, turns into an aggressive master, a very vicious and murderous one. The fact that “The Last Laugh” does not futuristically foresee the detrimental impact of science on human life, as did some authors who wrote anti-technology works before World War One,⁸ but rather uses vivid images and imaginative language to depict what was already happening on the battlefields of the Western Front from 1914 to 1918, makes this poetic text all the grimmer and more realistic.

3. Conclusion

“The Last Laugh”, as a poem that depicts the death of three British WWI soldiers at the hands of personified weapons of mass destruction, is one of many bleak war poems by Wilfred Owen. It conveys two messages – a message of victimisation and, more importantly for this article, a message of nihilism – and both of these messages stem from the fact that, in this poem, the roles of men and machines are reversed. Instead of machines obediently serving their human masters and creators, as would be expected, “The Last Laugh” shows World War One’s mechanical weapons, that is, machines, annihilating passive and helpless soldiers, that is, human beings, which, in itself, is an unnatural perversion. The three dying soldiers are victimised not only in the sense of being mercilessly slain by personified weapons of mass destruction (machine-guns, gun shells with the poison gas, etc.) but also in the sense of being shown as, in the hour of their death, remembering God and their dearest ones and calling them to help, which, of course, does not happen. Their abandonment on the frontline and their tragic loneliness in a war that they are not even fighting for themselves but for their political leaders furthermore creates an impression of futility, because the personified murderous weapons are shown as boisterously ridiculing the soldiers’ self-sacrifice, as even jubilantly and unchivalrously celebrating

⁸ Perhaps the 19th century’s most noteworthy authors of fiction who pointed to the possibility of science and technology negatively impacting human society are Samuel Butler, the author of *Erewhon* (1872), William Morris, who authored *News from Nowhere* (1890), and, of course, H. G. Wells, who wrote a whole array of dystopian novels, such as *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), etc.

their victory over a far weaker adversary. In this way, the soldiers' deaths are presented as purposeless, and, in the poetic imagery of Wilfred Owen, World War One emerges as an artistic embodiment of a Darwinian world in which there is only suffering, without any kind of teleological purpose in the form of attaining either a worldly utopia or a transcendental one. Such bleak imagery from "The Last Laugh", a poem whose very title is suggestive of its twofold message, derives directly from Owen's personal mindset from the days of his service on the frontline. The most important element of this poem from the perspective of literary interpretation, is the fact that it can be viewed in the context of utopian studies. In this sense, the reversed relationship between humans and machines compared to what is considered proper by technological utopians in this respect creates the impression of the ultimate impracticability of Baconian technological utopianism. "The Last Laugh" essentially tells us that the path of constant mechanisation and technological progress does not guarantee the creation of a utopian world, because the machines can easily turn into destroyers of their human creators, instead of being humanity's chief helpers, as it was envisaged by Bacon in the 17th century and all the other technologically and industrially minded thinkers following in his footsteps, such as Herbert Spencer. "The Last Laugh", therefore, is to be read as a true Frankensteinian, anti-utopian text. It is a poem that engages with big philosophical ideas (i.e., the relationship between man and the machine, and 19th-century mankind's firm belief in a machine-based utopia) and one that warns mankind against creating monstrous mechanical weaponry, which is a warning that resonates particularly well today, in the time of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict, with growing tensions between the United States and Russia making the possibility of nuclear warfare more realistic than at any other moment over the past sixty years, ever since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

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