DEATH'S KINGDOM: POETRY OF THE GREAT WAR

DEATH'S KINGDOM:
A CONSIDERATION OF THE POETRY AND POETS OF THE GREAT WAR, 1914 - 1918

BY

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PREFACE

Each researcher must find at some point that his particular study poses problems worse than those experienced by any student or writer in the history of the race. With this consideration in mind, I will ask for the normal amount of sympathy on the part of my readers and the slight nod that should be a response to my perception. My interest in the Great War goes back to the interest that Owen knew small boys found in guns and knives and swords. My reading has gone beyond the bounds of literary material, and, I fear, my paper mirrors that bent.

I believe that poetry written by men on active service, especially poetry of this war, because of the set of circumstances in which they find themselves, reflects the nature of 'War'. I am not concerned with the physical, or material, variations that make each war unique but rather with the reactions of men who must face violent death in social settings and moral atmospheres both strange and repulsive to them. The Great War is unlike any other because it is War at its logical extreme - the attempt,not to conquer, but to annihilate. As well, the men who record their reactions to it are not at a remove of miles and years from the action, but caught up in the process of killing and being killed. For these reasons, the conclusions drawn about War by these men are 'valid' as no others before them had been. They paint a picture that is at once true and horrible, and their perspectives are close enough to ours in the

present day for their judgments to be correct for us as well.

If one grants these premises, the themes I develop are drawn from the poetry of men who probably could not consciously state the underlying beliefs they held while on active service. Several of them have become more aware of their real opinions about the events of 1914 - 1918 in after years, but it is the poetry written at the time that one sees most clearly the rejection of militarism and the ideal of the warrior. This is my thesis, and the ensuing pages will elaborate on it.

I wish to render sincere thanks to Professor B.W. Jackson for his patient reading and rereading of first and second and third attempts to present things clearly and logically, and also for the tactful comments that smoothed over manic loops and dives in a student's first sustained attempt to be scholarly in prose.

I have also come to understand why many, many books are dedicated to wives and sweethearts, and my thanks are hereby registered to Miss Mary Greenwood for the hours spent on eliminating the mistakes that keep appearing in the most meticulous work.

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INTRODUCTION

Because the term 'war-poetry' can be used to delineate a genre of literature as well as a subject of poetry in general, it is important to establish initially the several senses in which I intend to use the term. Poetry written by combat troops can be 'war-poetry' and take as its subject something apparently unrelated to combat or acts of war. An example of such a poem is Herbert Asquith's "Night-fall":

> Hooded in angry mist, the sun goes down:
> Steel-gray the clouds roll out across the sea:
> Is this a Kingdom? Then give Death the crown,
> For here no emperor hath won, save He. [1]

This poem makes no reference at all to the war, yet it is a war poem and relies for its meaning almost entirely on the frame of events that took the life of its author and a million of his countrymen.

"Mesopotamia"[2] is the title of a poem written by a civilian on a theme that is essentially political - the needless deaths caused by political inefficiency and carelessness in a phase of the Great War which would probably never have needed to be fought. In this instance, as well, one is dealing with 'war-poetry' although it does not describe battles or tell about the deeds of heroes in combat.

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[1] Herbert Asquith, "Nightfall" in Brian Gardner, ed., Up The Line To Death, (Methuen:London , 1964), p. 81. (Where possible, I have attempted to use illustrative quotations from this work. I will refer to it hereafter by its initial capitals, U.T.L.T.D.)

[2] Rudyard Kipling, Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition, (Hodder and Stoughton Ltd: London, 1960), p. 300.

The subject of my paper is the poetry of the First World War, and if it is difficult to define 'war-poetry' in terms of subject matter or the poet who wrote it, then it would seem that historical limits could be imposed to restrict the material I must deal with. But this guideline is denied me as well. Poets, both soldiers and civilians, have turned to the War for themes and images that are still incorporated into their current work. And, in this consideration, one cannot ignore Thomas Hardy's prophetic "Channel Firing"[3] or Henry Newbolt's "In The Time Of War And Tumults"[4], for both pieces are as much a part of the War as many of the poems written by trench soldiers, although both were published before war was declared.

Is one to consider Sassoon's "A Prayer From 1936"[5] not a 'war-poem' while his "Song-Books Of The War"[6] somehow qualifies because it was written during wartime while the poet was on active service? Both poems deal with man's inability to avert war - the one view seen from the centre of the situation, the other in retrospect - and they move by almost the same pattern to the same conclusion that Man will make war again despite his cries for peace and his claims to reason and experience.

. . . Out of the nothingness of night they tell
Our need for guns, our servitude to strife.

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[3] Thomas Hardy, "Channel Firing", U.T.L.T.D., pp. 3 - 4.

[4] Sir Henry Newbolt, Collected Poems 1897 - 1907, (Nelson: London., undated), pp. 254 - 256.

[5] Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, (Faber & Faber: London, 1947), p. 250.

[6] Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, p. 86.

O heaven of music, absolve us from this hell
Unto unmechanized mastery over life. [7]

. . . In fifty years,when peace outshines
Remembrance of the battle lines,
Adventurous lads will sigh and cast
Proud looks upon the plundered past.
On summer morn or winter's night,
Their hearts will kindle for the fight, . . . [8]

The theme of both these pieces is war and the tragedy of war, and both qualify as war poems.

The real artist is the War itself. It elicits a response from all men who are caught up by it, and when it is regarded as a 'World War' that number is large indeed. The only real records of war poetry are anthologies, for they can include the single and double pieces of poetry that are the only poetic expressions evoked in some men over a lifetime. This is another reason for my contention that much of this work must be evaluated initially in terms of the period and the conditions under which it was written. In addition, many of the poems in these categories have never been published. Because their authors did not regard themselves as poets, they have been left in diaries, biographical sketches, reminiscences and memoirs still to be collated and brought forth as the soldier's view of the war.

I have given three types of poetry which I feel must be considered in this paper; poetry written in wartime by soldiers and civilians about particular aspects of the war, poetry whose subject is not directly connected to war experience, but which gains an added effect by its association with the events of the war - an effect usually ironic, as in Robert Graves's poem, "Dead Cow Farm", [9] and finally, the series of poems written chiefly by soldiers in combat

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[7] Sassoon, p. 250.

[8] Ibid., p. 86.

[9] Robert Graves, Poems (1914 - 26), (Heinemann: London, 1928), p. 49. and also U.T.L.T.D., p. 129.

almost as a release from the grimness of the war. These poems[10] have themes removed as far as possible from events in Flanders and their subjects are usually pastoral and reminiscent of earlier happier days; but they are 'war poems' in that they have been written because of conditions imposed upon a poet in a situation so demanding that it forces some response. In the preface to The Poems Of Edmund Blunden the poet, in speaking of this selection of his work, says:

> If there were any others /referring to the poems/ that I should like to have had before me in making my choice, they would be the numerous pieces which I remember to have occupied and diverted me in the summer of 1917, . . . The labours of that summer, however, down to my neat transcripts of "ode, and elegy, and sonnet," vanished in the mud. [11]

Mr. Blunden left enough evidence, however, to give me reason to refer to these poems in a special category and I will discuss them in an ensuing chapter.

I have chosen the period of the First World War for two reasons. Although it cannot limit the time span of this subject, it does **provide** the material from which patterns can be drawn in the poetry. Secondly, and of probably greater importance, it marks a turning point in the development of Western culture. The more one reads of this period, the more one sees the profound changes that mark off the time before the war from the time after. The First Battle of Ypres does much more than simply end the Victorian period. In its indifference to human life, its acceptance of brutality and its adoption of any means to an end, it reaffirmed in several weeks the cynical view that man had progressed not at all - that the highest

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[10] Edmund Blunden, The Poems Of Edmund Blunden, (Harper & Bros: London, 1933), sections entitled "The English Scene" and "Experience and Soliloquy". I would also recommend Robert Nichols's "A Faun's Holiday" in Ardours And Endurances and several poems in the section entitled "Tipperary Days" in U.T.L.T.D.

[11] Edmund Blunden, The Poems Of Edmund Blunden, p. v.

of God's creatures had no claim to life that could not be repudiated by his actions in France. Human dignity and individual worth disappeared at this time and, I feel, have not been successfully re-established to the present day.

I have outlined some of the difficulties I face in defining my topic. Because many of my considerations are social, I find that I must refer to peripheral sources which a strict adherence to the poetry might allow me to ignore. Histories of the War, contemporary accounts, and especially the newspapers and the memoirs of writers I consider in detail are invoked to show either the contrasts in social opinion between the poetry and the other media or the close proximity of the poetic response to the feelings of other men caught up in the conflict.

My purposes in writing are to attempt to outline the response of the British civilian-officer in poetry to the several facets of the war with which he was not prepared to cope - the indifference of senior officers to the loss of life, the sense of stagnation that three years of war had bred, and the loss of identity that a combat soldier underwent. A large part of my paper will be devoted to outlining, and in part, explaining these conflicts between his own views and the code of behavior that the war imposed upon him. And, if a value is to be found in this paper, I would hope that it lies here, for, in his gropings for the 'right' moral position one finds the first attempts to answer questions of individual worth and the relation of national and cultural aims to each man's hopes which have not been solved in the present day. Because of the dedication and commitment that 'total' war calls forth, any deviation from the agreed-upon national response constitutes a kind of treason. Poets of the War were the first to realise the threat of the totalitarian state and the corresponding loss of freedom that such a concept entails.

Either through oversight or inclination, anthologists have ignored or played down the wealth of socialist literature that came out of the war. A real concern for 'the little man' is one of the

hallmarks of 'trench poetry'.

In an attempt to keep the topic within limits, I have chosen six writers whose work embodies most of the major themes of the War and shows a relationship between the individual writers beyond any personal contacts or undue influences. All of them have published volumes of poetry and they are major figures in a group of minor poets. Owen and Rosenberg both died in action in the last year of the War. Graves, Blunden and Read have attained to no small honours in fields associated with literature and all have published poetry in varying degrees of popularity. Sassoon is both poet and critic and is probably the best known figure for his war-time verse.

Once again, I am frequently at a loss in attempting to separate the poet of today from the soldier of the Great War, for of all the living figures, each has modified his original work, either by a supression of the war poems as Graves has done, or by a prose commentary like Blunden's Undertones Of War[12] which provides a considered background to the verse and presents a different reaction to the War than the poetry does.

Another major consideration is that all of these writers are men of the New Army. None of them saw action before 1916 by which time much of the disillusionment that is taken for granted as being a common experience of all British troops had set in. None of them reflect the wild enthusiasm and high ideals that marked the early phases of the War up to the summer of 1915, and because of this, they are not representative of all the major phases of the conflict. This distinction is important in one's understanding of the bitterness that characterized the latter stages of the War.

A final general point that should be noted is that no overall plan either for the conduct of the fighting or for the goals to be sought in victory was ever really established. Many methods followed

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[12] Edmund Blunden, Undertones Of War, (Kemp Hall Press: Oxford, 1928). This seems to me one of the finest of the autobiographies of the war-poets.

national or political desires. The men I am considering saw most of the faults that the War entailed and frequently spoke out for any real attempts to settle grievances or to stop the killing. Their view is British and their complaints and criticisms are uniquely British. The faults that they saw cannot be applied 'de facto' to all belligerents, or even, for that matter, to England's allies. The problems often exist for Englishmen alone and arise from conflicts between national interest and the alleged national purpose. I offer this as another reason for considering my topic in its social aspect.

The trends that I will point out in the poetry occur, not at the fighting front, but in the mind of the poet. This is not the history of the War, but rather the picture of human beings pushed to the limits of endurance by conditions which they can neither alter or avoid. War poetry is the capturing of this experience and it seems to indicate a consistent 'breakdown' of spirit in the man who writes.

One could predict the attitude of a man at the Front more accurately by a knowledge of how long he had served in the trenches than by knowing at what particular time he had entered the War or the personal views he might entertain towards combat and the reasons for his being in France. This to me is the horror of the War, and it is this horror which the poetry seeks to describe.

Far from the last word has been written on this subject for several reasons. Most of the problems that these men faced are still with us today and many remain unsolved. Their currency makes a categorizing of them almost impossible. We are not really objective enough ourselves to put aside questions of national honour and the loss of kinfolk to view these men with the lack of passion that we could bring to an assessment of writers of even a century ago. In addition, much of this material remains to be collated and reviewed before a clear picture of the age can emerge.

Because of these considerations, this thesis can only indicate avenues of approach without showing the conclusions that lie at the end of them.

II

THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE WAR

Like all poetry, that of the Great War had to be written from an individual viewpoint. Each of the soldier-poets I wish to consider brought something unique from his background to his particular sector of the Front- his family experiences, his social class, his schooling and his hopes for après la guerre. Each expected something different from the War in terms of the men he would meet, the experiences he would have and the effects that the War would have on him as a man. This difference in standpoint and opinion applies, of course, to the millions from many nations involved in the conflict, and to lose sight of individual views in the attempt to generalize about 'national' or 'allied' war aims is to miss an essential part of war-poetry, for one of the definitive points of this poetry is its personal and individual quality. The writers frequently select as subject matter their responses to events which pass unnoticed by their fellows, or they express feelings that are no more than their personal opinions on war, politics, the enemy, trench-life or death.

But it is the purpose of this paper to find areas of experience common to all the poets, and to discover what topics, if any, they all felt compelled to comment on. A further consideration is whether these were matters of general concern or whether they appealed only to people of a poetic temperament - some rather random phenomena of interest to unusually sensitive individuals alone.

The major figures, and these include Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, Herbert Read and Isaac Rosenberg, are all men who gained their war experience between the years 1916 and 1918. They share a common entry date from the autumn of 1916 through the early winter of 1917. All wrote over a period of two of the most depressing years of the War. The full significance of this becomes clear when one attempts to understand the soldier's view of the Allied cause over that time. My intention in this part of the paper is to indicate the dominant moods about the conflict by men actively engaged in it. I am not suggesting that this poetry can have a value judgement placed on it from its accuracy as social history. I wish, rather, to sketch in the milieu in which the poetry was written and to indicate some the influences it had on the verse.

Disillusionment must be the dominant theme of the period, no matter how much or how little of the War we consider, but in the writings of these men it reaches its greatest proportions. The reasons for this lie in the tragedy that is World War One.

Cenotaphs, memorial plaques and two minutes of silence on the eleventh of November remind a later generation of the sacrifice in lives that marked this war. An annual funeral recalls the fact that this was the most costly war in history as well as being one of the longest. But the memorial service stops there. English war-poetry notes other defeats beyond those suffered by all belligerants.

In a military sense, the War was a loss. The sheer numbers of dead made England almost a pacifist nation, and the image of the infin-

itely capable and resourceful man in scarlet passed forever. A consideration of the role of the military is an important factor in an attempt to indicate the differences between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Somehow, although Britain had emerged on the winning side, her position as a world power had declined rather than risen. Her resources, both military and material, had been strained to the limits and this was apparent to the world at large. A second, and probably greater loss, to British minds, was the increased autonomy of the Dominions - not only Ireland, but Canada and Australia as well, asked for freedoms that split the Empire; and the pride that spurred British civilians to 'do their part' in 1914 had to be reconciled to a loss of unity in a world body whose head was England. Suggestions of this impending rupture were obvious in the attitudes of governments and Colonial troops long before 1918, and served as the first indictions that no common bond cemented the men of one nation with those of the Motherland.

Of even greater effect, however, was the 'betrayal' and 'deception' practised on the fighting man by the agencies of the State - the Press, the Cabinet, the General Staff, war profiteers, and civilian shirkers who avoided the dangers of the Front and lived better lives safely at home. Even the clergy was not exempted in this indictment. To document this reaction on the part of the trench-soldier falls beyond the limits of this paper. It is sufficiently large to merit a study to itself and any reading in this field will document my claim that it was a general belief on the part of the volunteer

that he had been taken advantage of by his country, or, at least, by the worst elements in it who were enjoying positions of power and security at his expense. This is the theme of most of the literature published during the last years of the War and immediately afterwards. Books like England, Their England, and C. E. Montague's Disenchantment or All Quiet on the Western Front use this theme almost exclusively. I will be pointing out these beliefs in the poetry of the men I intend to discuss, but, here again, beyond showing that the poetry has dealt with facets of the War common to many fighting men, it is difficult to establish poetic evaluations in other than a social context.

Because of the position of these men between the upper levels of command and the lowest level of obedience, they were able to see many of the worst characteristics of bureaucracy. In their objections to the system of absolute control that was the Army, they particularly disliked the aura of perfection and invincibility that surrounded a senior officer. To anyone who has dealings with a large branch of government on a low level, the indifference, the lack of initiative, and the general attitude of passing problems to someone lower in the chain of command will be familiar and hated examples of an overly complex machine whose main concern is self-perpetuation.

As well, the loss of civil liberty and the corresponding rise in the powers of the State involved in total war were understandably frightening to men with democratic tendencies who witnessed them for

the first time in a situation where their very lives depended on the wishes of a man who might never have been himself at the Front or whose notion of the War was a Europeanized version of South Africa.

The arbitrary handling of affairs involving human lives and the fantastic atmosphere of lies built up to keep public indignation under control could be seen for what it was by a second lieutenant of infantry, and this is a major field of war-poetry - the attempt to explode the myth of 'Dulce et decorum est'.

The points I have discussed are further extensions of the tragedy of the War; one tends to overlook them in the rows of epitaphs and the grieving of kinfolk for their dead men. They were not overlooked by the soldiers who survived several years of France and had a chance to tell their observations to people back home.

This intention is yet another reason for my desire to consider war-poetry as a social phenomenon. All of the poets I wish to refer to attempt to point out the human, as well as the unavoidable, failings of this particular War. They are making a testament that is meant to be read and acted upon. Without really realizing it, they had witnessed the birth of the totalitarian state and many of them saw that the peace did not bring with it the prospect of new freedoms and hope, but rather an extension of what they had been fighting in the figure of the Kaiser back to sit in power in Britain. Their work is often a warning as in Owen's "The Next War"[1] or Sassoon's "Aftermath".[2]

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[1] Wilfred Owen, The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, (Chatto & Windus: London, 1964), p. 86.

[2] Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, (Faber & Faber: London, 1947), pp. 118 - 119.

The group of poets, whose work makes up so much of the poetry of the First War, is composed of men who have much more than a service record in common with each other. With the exception of Isaac Rosenberg, all of these men were officers of junior rank, relatively well educated, with a good literary background. They all served as infantry and enlisted as civilians-turned-soldiers 'for three years or the duration', as their papers said. None of them had any intentions of following a military career beyond the scope of the War. In effect, they were 'New Army' material, far removed from the regular army and its traditions and limitations. Initially, they showed the usual surprise and confusion that the civilian undergoes when he becomes a part in an organization with principles and methods so contrary to those of private life - the loss of individuality, the dependence on the group, the refusal to alter or modify known courses of action. When the prospect of their taking a commission was suggested, most reacted with a becoming humility and the hope of making a success of a new and undreamt-of opportunity.

Graves's attitude may be taken as typical. The light, almost carefree, mood of something new to do pervaded England at this stage of affairs. The idea that Germany's mobilization would change the world in a grim and costly struggle existed with Lord Kitchener and parts of the sensationalist Press, not with the nation at large.

> I had just finished with Charterhouse and had gone up to Harlech, when England declared war on Germany. A day or two later I decided to enlist. In the first place, though the papers predicted only a short war - over by Christmas at the outside - I hoped that it

> might last long enough to delay my going up to Oxford in October, which I dreaded. . . . In the second place, I was outraged to read of the Germans' cynical violation of Belgian neutrality. [3]

Sassoon's comment, when the time to decide about active service came, has even less glamour than Graves's decision to play truant:

> Also, the idea of me being any sort of officer in the Army seemed absurd. I had already been offered a commission in my own Yeomanry, but how could I have accepted it when everybody was saying that the Germans might land at Dover any day? I was safe in the Army and that was all I cared about. [4]

Nevertheless, all five men, Graves, Sassoon, Blunden, Read and Owen, took commissions and became 'officers and gentlemen' in His Majesty's Army. Then the period of waiting, and training, and waiting began. For over two years these men, along with several thousands of their fellows stayed at the large military bases in England, preparing to cross over to France. In this period they had many opportunities to re-examine their positions and shine their buckles. The early glamour of the War faded, worn down by the grim preparation and the accounts of the happenings in Flanders brought back by the wounded and the lists of dead and missing. It is easy to underestimate the importance of this period, for it was in these years that the War took on the sinister look that it was to retain after even years of peace, and it was at this point that these men, poets and soldiers, began to realize that there was a great discrepancy between reports

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[3] Robert Graves, Goodbye To All That, (Penguin:London,1960), p. 60.

[4] Siegfried Sassoon, Memoirs Of A Fox-Hunting Man, (Faber & Faber Ltd.: London, 1955), p. 244.

in London papers of great victories and the stories of returned men about German efficiency, courage and discipline, and the sometimes sorry state of British preparedness and ability to cope with the deadly stalemate that was the Western Front.

Blunden's statement of his feelings when the order for his transfer to France finally came through is not a coward's rationalization, but rather, the credo of a man who was no longer approaching blindly what he believed to be a mildly dangerous adventure.

> I was not anxious to go. An uncertain but unceasing disquiet had been upon me, and when, returning to the officers' mess at Shoreham Camp one Sunday evening, I read the notice that I was under orders for France, I did not hide my feelings. . . . There was something about France in those days which looked to me, despite all journalistic enchanters, to be dangerous. For a fortnight or so I had been in charge of a squad of men nominally recovered from wounds and awaiting their next transmigration. . . . In that brief fortnight I began to love these convalescent soldiers, and their distinguishing demeanour sank into me. They hid what daily grew plain enough - the knowledge that the war had released them only for a few moments, that the war would reclaim them, that the war was a jealous war and a long-lasting. 1914, 1915, 1916. . . . [5]

In Disenchantment, C.E. Montague sums up the initial attitudes of most young Britishers of this era:

> Most of these volunteers of the prime were men of handsome and boundless illusions. Each of them quite seriously thought of himself as a molecule in the body of a nation, that was really, and not just figuratively,'straining every nerve' to discharge an obligation of honour. Honestly, there was as little about them as there could possibly be of the coxcombry of self-devotion. They only felt that they had got themselves

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[5] Edmund Blunden, Undertones Of War,(Kemp-Hall Press: London, 1928), p. i.

> happily placed on a rope at which everyone else was, in some way or other, tugging his best as well as they. [6]

Between the attitude expressed above and Blunden's comment is a gap of no small proportions. And the early optimism and good faith was to slip much further once the men of the New Army became actual combat troops. The feeling of doing a very difficult job well never passes from the poetry of these men - the same lack of coxcombry that Montague saw at the outset lasts through the War. The reader seldom finds, except in the work of minor poets (and I do not use the term pejoratively; these are writers whose thinking on the War was never developed to the point where their utterances touched on either great issues of the moment or major themes of war verse. The men I have in mind are people like Herbert Palmer, and,to a lesser extent, Robert Service), the vituperation for the enemy that civilian, or 'British' writers and poets chose to publish.[7] The themes of glory and heroism were not for the men who actually fought. The difficulties of the trenches and the possibility of a speedy, inglorious, unrecorded death did much to cool even the hottest ardour or blood-lust.

Before 1916 few poets then at the Front were really in a position to comment on the War and even fewer felt obliged to. In many ways no new pattern was discernible until the battles of the Somme. Headquarters Staff still talked and planned for the vast sweep

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6 C.E. Montague, Disenchantment, (p. 3).

7 The Poetry Review, Vols, III - V, (London, 1914 - 1916).

of co-ordinated armies that was to bring the 'Russian Steamroller" and the French - British alliance into Berlin, but at this point the man in the trenches began to realize that he was in for a long, dreary war, halted almost indefinitely by either side's ability to defend against the most stalwart attack.

What early poetry exists is written either by civilians like Hardy or Kipling, more with a view of raising English feeling to back the war effort than in an attempt to comment either on conditions in France or the motal issues of war, or by returned soldiers whose re-enlistment had more to do with memories of India and North Africa than with thoughts of France or Germany. Such a writer is Edward Shanks.

> We come from dock and shipyard, we come from car and train,
> We come from foreign countries to slope our arms again,
> And, forming fours by numbers or turning to the right,
> We're learning all our drill again and'tis a pretty sight.[8]

The separation between the old men who had known war before and the new men who set out to fight for England's honour was to narrow to a nothingness after 1917 when the only new men were new recruits or drafts, and the old men were all dead and the boys from 1916 were now old men.

For the officer-poets, as for the rank and file of the New Army, the halo worn by a Regular soldier underwent considerable change. Initially, the Regulars were to be the saviors of Europe, backed up by soldier-civilians more to swell the chorus than to be

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[8] Edward Shanks, "The Old Soldiers" in Brian Gardner, Up The Line To Death, (Methuen: London, 1964), p. 16.

equals with the conquerors. As Montague comments:

> Dearest of all the New Army's infant illusions was the Old Army - still at that time the demi-god host of an unshattered legend of Mons. To the new recruits any old Regular sergeant was more - if the world can hold more - than a country cricketer is to a small boy at school. He had the talisman; he was a vessel full of grace by which everything was to be saved; . . . How could he err, how could he shirk, now that the fate of the world hung upon him? [9]

But shirk and err he did. The almost supernatural powers with which these men were invested really existed only in the minds of boys just out of school. Being far from god-like, they failed to meet the images that had been erected of them. Regular officers were not the best of Britain's manhood as a general rule. Failure to enter university qualified one for military service with rank, and military colleges, while adequate by Continental standards, lacked either the thoroughness and efficiency of the German or the élan of the French. For many years Britain had needed a strong navy and a good government service. Her Army, while not being neglected, had not had the careful grooming and preparation of the other two great powers.

So, after the initial hurdles of basic training and officer school had been passed, most of the poets found themselves alongside of very mortal people with peculiarities and failings frequently more severe than their own. Prolonged contact with these men bred little love or admiration. Suspicion made the next step in the chain that leads from mild disillusionment to wide and complete disgust.

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[9] C.E. Montague, Disenchantment, p. 14.

If junior officers, as qualified leaders of men, lacked both the intelligence and the imagination to be more than dull-witted robots, or simplified sportsmen, what hope was there for the Senior staff, who, in addition to being trained as officers, had many years on their heads and much old out-dated teaching to overcome?

Like most of the assumptions of the officer-poets, this was correct in outline, and if it did not apply to all cases, the events of 1915 bore out their worst imaginings. Sassoon's thumbnail sketch of men on non-active service was to be a working hypothesis of many volunteers when they had dealings with Regular officers for the duration of the War. If it was unfair, it had been provoked, and it is difficult to convince a man who has lost friends and messmates in an impossible attack that the man who ordered it is both intelligent and capable.

> There were several more majors; three of them had been to the Front, but had remained there only a few weeks; the difference between a club window and a dug-out had been too much for them. Anyhow, there they were and there was the War, and to this day I don't see how things could have been differently arranged. They appeared to be unimaginative men . . . . [10]

Another factor that detracted from the career soldier's ability was the rapport which sprang up between the officers and men fresh from civilian life. The tradition-encrusted place of rank in the Army somehow never took hold with these men. They had shared their training and their waiting; they had enlisted often for the same

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[10] Siegfried Sassoon, Memoirs Of A Fox-Hunting Man, (Faber & Faber Ltd.; London, 1955), p. 265.

reasons; they had sometimes been school-mates. In many senses, the New Army was democratic beyond the worst nightmares of the Regulars, and, had they fared badly in combat, many of the old guard would have been happy to say "I told you so!" In contrast, however, they were frequently as good, and sometimes better than, the older regiments.

Again, the poet, seeing this change from the expected, was forced to ask if somehow, something wasn't badly wrong somewhere. If new men could fight as well as regulars, might not new officers plan as well as old men? At least they could do no worse! Thus the relevance of Sassoon's poem,"Base Details" with all the connotations of 'base':

> If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
> I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
> And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
> You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
> Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
> Reading the Roll of Honour. 'Poor young chap',
> I'd say - 'I used to know his father well;
> Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.'
> And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
> I'd toddle safely home and die - in bed. [11]

To produce a poem as bitter as this, more than a feeling of detached superiority is necessary. Had the War been shorter, the losses fewer and the liaison between the line officers and the staff better, this situation would not have developed. Once again, I find social considerations influencing the poetic response to the War.

Added to the sense of incompetence at the top was a physical situation which did little to inspire courage in the footsoldier.

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[11] Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, p. 75.

The descriptions of trench-life are as numerous and as well documented as those of complaints about the joys of civilian life at home. I wish to point out several features that I feel have been ignored in other writing, but which influence the soldier's view of the War.

Isolation is the prime difficulty that these men had in attempting to keep a perspective on the world around them. Once a man found himself within a hundred yards of the Front-line trench, his life changed as drastically as it had when he entered the Army. The rest of society was denied to him. His idea of mankind became the members of his company; his time was counted by the routine of the Front from morning 'stand-to' to the last sentry change at night. In the void left by the cutting of old ties with family, school, and all the things that made up his life before the War, he had time to examine those institutions and to see them in new and varied lights. Just as a man came to doubt officers and pressmen from the examples of known lies, he came, in his solitude, to question all of the old and trusted things that two years before he had accepted as absolutes. This again, was not a totally fair evaluation, but the mind under combat stress with no outside constants to refer to, can fall prey to horrible imaginings. Owen's poem, "The Dead-Beat"[12], is a case study of just this reaction:

> He dropped - more sullenly than wearily,
> Lay stupid like a cod, heavy like meat,
> And none of us could kick him to his feet;
> Just blinked at my revolver blearily;

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12 Owen, p. 72

- Didn't appear to know a war was on,
Or see the blasted trench at which he stared.
"I'll do 'em in," he whined. "If this hand's spared,
I'll murder them, I will."
A low voice said,
"It's Blighty, p'raps, he sees; his pluck's all gone,
Dreaming of all the valiant, that aren't dead:
Bold uncles, smiling ministerially;
Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun
In some new home improved materially.
It's not these stiffs have crazed him; nor the Hun."

We sent him down at last, out of the way.
Unwounded; - stout lad,too, before that strafe. . . .

The mind of Williams,[a hypothetical name for a particular type of soldier] in the Front line, worked with a surly zest on the contrast between the two hemispheres of an army - the hemisphere of combatancy, of present torment, of scant reward, of probable extinction, and the hemisphere of non-combatancy, of comfort, of safety, of more profuse decoration, the second hemisphere ruling over the former and decimating it sometimes by feats like the Staff work of 1915. . . . If all that you know of an alleged brother of yours is that he is having the best of a deal while you are having the worst, you have to be a saint of the prime to take it on trust that it really did please God, or any godlike human authority, to call him to a station in a dry hut with a stove . . . and you to a wet burrow full of rats and lice and yellow or white mud and ugly liabilities. [13]

Was the lad with a 'touch' from a friend of Father's any less exonerable than the general who got him the position, or the man who didn't fight at all, or the man who not only avoided the Front but made money at home, or the priest who distributed socks and read the funeral service for a battalion two miles behind the lines?

The Bishop tells us:'When the boys come back
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
In a just cause: they lead the last attack

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[13] Montague, pp. 32 - 33.

On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought
New right to breed an honourable race,
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
Poor Jim's shot through his lungs and like to die;
And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.'
And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!' 14

The feeling of isolation and rejection that the Front instilled led to a hatred of the civilian world which the poets blamed for desertion and disloyalty. Somehow, the willingness and the purity of the early sacrifice had become tainted by the actions of those not making the sacrifice. There was little reason for going and being shot if the people back home thought you were an obliging fool for doing it. It is with this approach to the subject that war-poetry begins to take as its theme butchery in place of death in battle.

With the breaking of home-ties, men were forced to rely for all their values on the other people in their situation. The company replaced the family, the church, and the nation. Company benefit was the man's benefit, company good, his law, and woe unto the man who did not fit into his company, for he had no one to turn to but himself. The sense of comradeship and group loyalty is a major subject to writers on the War. Some of his friendship came from a shared closeness to death, some from the good-feeling that a group of men can generate simply by being together in the out-of-doors, and some stem-

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[14] Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, "They", pp. 23-24.

med from the sincere respect felt by officers for the men of their commands. Blunden's tribute, written after the winter campaigns of 1916 - 1917, must stand as one of the best portraits of the soldier in English literature.

> Man, ruddy-cheeked under your squat chin-strapped iron helmet, sturdy under your leather jerkin, clapping your hands together as you dropped your burden of burning-cold steel, grinning and flinging old home repartee at your pal passing by, you endured that winter of winters, as it seems to me, in the best way of manliness. I forget your name. I remember your superscriptions, . . . your perpetual copying-ink pencil's 'in the pink', 'as it leaves me'; you played House, read Mr. Bottomley, sang "If I were a tulip", and your rifle was as clean as new from an armoury. It is time to hint to a new age what your value, what your love was; your Ypres is done and you are gone; we were lucky to see you 'in the pink' against white-ribbed and socket-eyed despair.
>
> We suffered much from death and wounds, but still there existed a warm fraternity, a family understanding . . . [15]

To miss this brotherhood of the initiate is to miss the bright side of the War, which is as important, in its way, as the gloom which makes up so much of the war-poet's song. New experiences, new scenes, new friends, - these did much to make the fighting endurable in a bleak and shattered France.

The affection that an officer could have for his men led, often, to a hatred for anyone or anything that threatened their welfare. The feeling that sometimes had to be choked off in the line of duty finds expression in a poem, "In Memoriam", by E.A. Mackintosh:

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[15] Edmund Blunden, Undertones Of War, p. 178.

. . . And the Bosches have got his body
And I was his officer.

You were only David's father,
But I had fifty sons
When we went up in the evening
Under the arch of the guns,
And we came back at twilight -
O God! I heard them call
To me for help and pity
That could not help at all.

Oh, never will I forget you,
My men that trusted me,
More my sons than your fathers',
For they could only see
The little helpless babies
And the young men in their pride.
They could not see you dying,
And hold you while you died.

Happy and young and gallant,
They saw their first-born go,
But not the strong limbs broken
And the beautiful men brought low,
The piteous writhing bodies,
They screamed 'Don't leave me, sir,'
For they were only your fathers
But I was your officer. 16

The respect and group loyalty generated, worked, in its way, to increase the displeasure felt towards the world outside the War, for any loss in the company was attributable, by a subtle logic, more to the countrymen who were not there than to the German gunners and riflemen who were. Any delay in transporting equipment, food or reinforcements, because it could be calculated in lives, was expensive, and the enemy was only doing his job, while someone behind our lines was not doing his. Sympathy could more easily be extended, and frequently was, to the enemy who suffered in the same way, than to those

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16 E.A. Mackintosh, "In Memoriam", in Brian Gardiner, (ed.) Up The Line To Death, pp. 94 - 95.

of one's own countrymen who had the good fortune not to be there.

But, if sympathy for the enemy existed, it was on a quite abstract level. This was a war of little bodily contact, and 'Jerry' or 'Fritz' was known more often as a corpse or a prisoner than as a rifle-carrying entity.

> The German field-gray seemed to us more than a mere colour. It seemed always to call up the gray wolf of Nordic literature. To watch those gray shapes moving elusively among the bleached breastworks or emerging from between broken tree stumps was a sight to powerfully impress us, and was suggestive to us of something of what was expressed in those lines from the Ericksmal . . . 'It is not surely known when the gray wolf will come upon the seat of the Gods.' It would be interesting to know what myth-conceptions our own ochre coats and saucer hats suggested to our antagonists. [17]

Another element that cut the infantry soldier off from his world was the ability of the War to kill from afar. From the earliest stages to the cease-fire in 1918, World War One was an artilleryman's war. Infantry became the first line of defence in the sense that they were targets for highly accurate and destructive guns. Artillery barrages, shell-fire and machine-guns were the real enemy, and the men who manned them were seen more as servants and agents than as satanic killers out to perform genocide on Britain.

I am trying to indicate that the world of the trenches was a depersonalized area of death, not only human death, but a dead world of emotion as well. The best soldier was a man who could not feel - who could be as like his machine as possible. Owen catches

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[17] David Jones, In Parenthesis, (Faber & Faber, Ltd.:London, 1937), footnote 16 to part 4, from page 67 on page 204.

this in a satiric ode entitled, appropriately enough, "Insensibility".

II

And some cease feeling
Even themselves or for themselves.
Dullness best solves
The tease and doubt of shelling,
And Chance's strange arithmetic
Comes simpler than the reckoning of their shilling.
They keep no check on armies' decimation. [18]

These strange conditions are of the soul as well as of the body, and every device to threaten and intimidate the enemy was used by both sides in an effort to gain a tactical advantage no matter how small or what the price in lives or consciences might be.

There is no way of understanding this new world but by experiencing it; writers maintain that no description of it can compare to the actual conditions, and the reader begins to realize that the human elements enter into, and cloud, the picture that is being painted. Jones, in a brief conclusion, touches on the completeness of the break between the Front-line soldier and his past - it is a doorway into another world:

> Until dim flickerings light across; to fade where the revetment changes direction, and overhead wire catches oblique ray cast up, and you know the homing perfume of wood burned, at the termination of ways; and sense here near habitation, a folk-life here, a people, a culture already developed, already venerable and rooted. [19]

Owen also claims that this experience cannot be communicated to someone outside the War. He places the trench soldier outside and

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[18] Owen, p. 37.

[19] Jones, p. 49.

above the society which betrayed him:

> . . . Nevertheless, except you share
> With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,
> Whose world is but the trembling of a flare,
> And heaven but as the highway for a shell,
>
> You shall not hear their mirth:
> You shall not come to think them well content
> By any jest of mine. These men are worth
> Your tears. You are not worth their merriment. [20]

The question of the relation between poetry of the First and Second World Wars is another one that falls beyond the limits of a book, much less this paper. But any approach to this subject would have to include among its major considerations the novelty of the First War. I have already dealt with many facets of this. Secondly, one would have to consider the matter of 'place'. The Great War had a setting that did not vary much from the English channel to the Swiss border. Barring spectacular geographical changes, the trench line was a monotonous, static, continuous line of death right across France. The impact of moving from one section of it to another and finding, except for surface details, exactly the same horror, corruption and decay as one had left behind is difficult to imagine. In his 'Memoir' to the poems of Wilfred Owen, Blunden quotes a long section from one of Owen's letters that states in brief just this sentiment. I quote in part:

> I suppose I can endure cold and fatigue and the face-to-face death as well as another; but extra for me there is the universal perversion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language, and

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[20] Owen, p. 40

> nothing but foul, even from one's own mouth (for all are devil-ridden) - everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night - and a week later to come back and find them still sitting there in motionless groups, THAT saps the 'soldierly spirit'. [21]

To round out the picture I wish to give of the world of the soldier-poet, a definition of the term 'total war' is necessary. I would recommend the section of Denis de Rougemont's book, Love In The Western World, entitled "Love And War",[22] for the concept I am attempting to explain on the social level gains clarity by his views on the psychological.

Total war is a term reserved for a conflict on a national level, the outcome of which will be complete uncompromising victory or clear unbargaining defeat. The goal of the war is the defeat of the enemy on every front, and his bondage, assimilation or annihilation. The weaponry and numbers of the Great War made this concept viable for the first time in history. A war of this nature does not move by agreed-upon conventions. Defeat or retreat in the field might have no connection with overall victory and a series of brilliant campaigns may destroy the winning army by an over-extension of national resources. To engage in a war of this kind, a nation must be unified in its purposes and aims and sufficiently

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[21] Owen, p. 162. The section of letters from France runs from page 159 to 168 and is a good example of war-diary material.

[22] Denis de Rougemont, Love In The Western World, (Pantheon: New York, 1956), 2nd ed. pp. 243 - 271.

in control of all its members to meet any threat from any direction with a maximum of efficiency in a minimum period of time. If one adds to this the replacement of the individual by the machine in all areas of combat from weaponry to communications, to transport and production, one will have a fairly complete picture of Modern War.

I have already outlined most of the objections of the poets to the War. Many of them are directly attributable to the type of warfare that was being waged. Once Britain decided to engage Germany, the struggle was on German terms and Britain had to adopt them or perish. Industrialists were more important than infantrymen; the Press did lie, and knew it lied, and lied again to keep both the British public and the enemy unaware of the real condition of the Front. Officers did make errors, but often what seemed impossible blunders were human sacrifices made with a full knowledge of their results. Cynical murder was often mistaken for stupidity by men who refused to believe that their countrymen,least of all human beings, could act in this manner. This, not the number of War dead, is the tragedy of the War. To win, one not only had to meet the enemy on depraved terms, but had to develop still more fiendish methods than his. In this sense, honour was dead and evil was flourishing.

Once again, I must apologize for not going more fully into this view of European history. In a sense, it falls outside my topic but it is fundamental to an understanding of many of the moods of these men. One finds in their poetry hints and insights into problems still current. Their work is the 'common man's' view of the

birth of the totalitarian state of the present day. They stand as the last of an army of idealists, caught in the moment of revelation. As one follows the development of their viewpoint through the War, one sees illusions stripped away, one by one, to the final forced admission that their sacrifice was in vain - by 1918 it had become obvious to the most optimistic that they had been victims of cowardly and vicious men who had used their sense of honour and duty to achieve personal positions of power and wealth; that far from being 'a War to end War', the struggle had placed petty and vindictive men in control of national destinies - men whose goals were self-glory and the subjugation of a gallant and worthy foe.

Herbert Read, in a poem strangely mystic for its setting, touches on some of the doubts and fears that marked the end of the War.

> . . . In excess of horror
> war died. The nerve was broken
> frayed men fought obscenely then:there was no fair joy
> no glory in the strife, no blessed wrath.
> Man's mind cannot excel
> mechanic might except in savage sin.
> Our broken bodies oiled the engines: mind was grit.
> . . . . . .
>
> So I have won through. What now?
> Will faith rise triumphant from the wreck
> despair once more evaded in a bold
> assertion of the self . . .?
> . . . . . .
>
> When first this fury caught us, then
> I vowed devotion to the rights of men
> Would fight for peace once it came again
> from this unwilled war pass gallantly
> to wars of will and justice.
> That was before I had faced death
> day in day out, before hope had sunk

to a little pool of bitterness.
Now I see, either the world is a mechanic force
and this the last tragic act, portending
endless hate and blind reversion
back to the tents and healthy lusts
of animal men: or we act
God's purpose in an obscure way.
Evil can only to the Reason stand
in scheme and scope beyong the human mind. . . .[23]

I must leave this chapter without having said all there is to say about the background of the War. I have touched on the salient features in the dreary existence that these men eked out for four years in France, and I believe that I have stressed several points of complaint that are sometimes glossed over or ignored. It is important to note that the War is an essentially negative affair. Beyond the somewhat hypocritical political denunciations of it from all corners, few men really thrive in a war setting, and the initial glow of romance passed from this war more quickly than from most. I have already pointed out that the War was set against the normal routine that these men call living. Of those who returned, all have had to make a difficult social readjustment, and few have succeeded completely. Sassoon and Read now live in veritable seclusion and both Graves and Blunden have become self-made exiles. In a sense, the War made them too much a part of itself.

Like the early dreams of romance, the high social hopes for after the fighting have faded. The world carries on despite the fears and warnings of these men, but in their 'wanhope' one catches the baptismal service of the twentieth century.

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[23] Herbert Read, Poems 1914-1934, (Faber & Faber:London,1935), pp. 68 - 73.

III

THEMES AND SYMBOLS IN THE POETRY OF THE GREAT WAR

Three dominant symbols give a particular character to the poetry of the First World War. Simply defined, they are a sense of violated and ravaged nature and culture, an identification of the common soldier with a familiar sacrificial or suffering figure, frequently some aspect of the person of Christ, and, finally, some particularized action or event which points up the alienation of the poet from his society, and former ways of life, and his bond with the other men in his situation.

Most war-poetry turns to these symbols for its subject matter because they are links held in common with the audience at home - they are either known figures from cultural myth or facets of Nature which, by their alterations, reflect some essential fact of the War in a manner that gives it immediacy and point to a person who has little or no knowledge of the conditions in France.

I have mentioned the negative nature of war - the reversal of all the social and ethical conventions of normal life. This complicates the poet's task, for he must describe the very object he loathes in terms that imply some positive values. He must write as a member of the world outside the War about a new world that both draws and repels him - the sights, the sounds, the tastes that offend one's sensibilities and stand against everything that one had been taught to regard as wholesome, decent or human. In opposition to this, he

must attempt to explain new values he has discovered - friendship deeper than he believed could exist, a feeling of belonging to a group and a cause more important than one's part in it, strange and grotesquely beautiful natural effects in a grim, dark world. Some war-poetry is more an attempt to work out these feelings than any desire to pass them on to others.

> Now if you saw my village
> You'd not think it beautiful,
> But flat and commonplace -
> As I'd have called it half a year ago . . . .
>
> But when you've pondered
> Hour upon chilly hour in those damned trenches
> You get at the significance of things,
> Get to know, clearer than before,
> What a tree means, what a pool,
> Or a black wet field in sunlight.
>
> You get to know,
> In that shell-pierced silence,
> Under the unmoved ironic stars,
> How good love of the earth is. . . . [1]

It is the novelty of the 'contrary experience' along with the accentuated and accelerated forms of that experience that make it at once a thing to flee from and a magnetic and compelling attraction. The novelty and scope of the War make it an object to be explained and inexplicable at once. "Total war eludes both man and instinct; it turns upon passion, its begetter. And it is this, not the scale of the massacres, that is new in the history of the world." [2]

In approaching this group of symbols, the function of each is

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[1] Richard Aldington, Collected Poems, (Allen & Unwin:London, 1933), 2nd ed. p. 79.

[2] de Rougemont, p. 265.

most clearly seen in relation to the theme behind it.

Four terms for death describe the progressive stages of dismay and disgust that war poetry moves through. Initially, the soldier is seen as the Hero - the warrior who faces a potent foe to preserve, by force of arms, the society which looks to him for deliverance.

> Now in thy splendour go before us,
> Spirit of England, ardent-eyed,
> Enkindle this dear earth that bore us,
> In the hour of peril purified.
>
> The cares we hugged drop out of vision,
> Our hearts with deeper thoughts dilate.
> We step from days of sour division
> Into the grandeur of our fate. [3]

This is the period before the cost of battle must be reckoned and C.E. Montague describes it this way:

> Whenever a war is declared you may say that now, in a sense, it is over at last; all the votes have been cast; the examination papers are written; the time has come for the counting of votes and the adjudging of marks. Of course, we may still 'do our bit' but the possible size of our bit had its limit fixed long ago by the acts of ourselves and our fathers and our rulers which made us the men that we are and no more. No use now to cadge favour with any ad hoc God of Battles. For this, of all gods, is the most dourly Protestant. No squaring of him on the deathbeds of people who would not work while it was yet light. [4]

But Montague's comment could be made only after the War had opened peoples' eyes to the truth about national readiness. After four years many would have admitted that, no matter how justified

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[3] Laurence Binyon, from "The Fourth Of August" in Brian Gardner, ed. Up The Line To Death, (Methuen:London, 1964), p. 7.

[4] C.E. Montague, p. 152.

a cause might be, the final victory was usually to the strong and the winning race was to the swift. Proud sentiment and a feeling of justice were to mark the British cause through the conflict, but they had to be earned by grim, dirty hard work - hardly a case of 'as swimmers into cleanness leaping'[5].

Poetry of the early stages of the War, then, draws its images from young men going forth to win honour and fame in a war for ideals. There is a certain sadness in the abruptness with which this pleasantly thrilling picture passed for the trench soldier:

> . . . He'd asked to join. - he didn't have to beg;
> Smiling they wrote his lie; aged nineteen years.
> Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilt
> And Austria's did not move him. And no fears
> Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
> For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes
> And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
> Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.
> And soon he was drafted out with drums and cheers.
>
> * * *
>
> Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
> Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
> Thanked him; then inquired about his soul.
>
> * * *
>
> Now,he will spend a few sick years in institutes
> And do what things the rules consider wise,
> And take whatever pity they may dole. . . . [6]

This is the verdict of a later part of the War on its early stages. Like so much of this work, it is not entirely fair, but it contains enough truth to be difficult to refute.

The second stage of the soldier's view of himself is the more

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[5] Rupert Brooke, The Collected Poems Of Rupert Brooke, (McClelland & Stewart: Toronto, 1961), p. 101.

[6] Owen, "Disabled", pp. 67 - 68.

realistic, but rather egotistical,Christ figure. At this point the theme of sacrifice becomes important, for soldier and civilian both began to realize that the war was going to be long and bloody. The idea of sacrifice implies some goal beyond the worth of the individual, a value higher than the single human life. This is an extension of the warrior figure with two additions. In the sacrifice, the victim must die, and he must die blessing his fate. In effect, though these men are doomed, they accept their roles, glad in the knowledge that the world will be renewed by their action and suffering.

> One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
> In this war He too lost a limb,
> But his disciples hide apart;
> And now the Soldiers bear with Him.
> . . . . . .
>
> The scribes on all the people shove
> And brawl allegiance to the state,
> But they who love the greater love
> Lay down their life; they do not hate. [7]

These men realize their reward in the epitaphs that their nation writes for them - the reminders to a free generation what that freedom cost. Henry Newbolt's "Farewell" is such a poem.

> Mother, with unbowed head
> Hear thou across the sea
> The farewell of the dead,
> The dead who died for thee.
> Greet them again with tender words and grave,
> For, saving thee, themselves they could not save.
>
> To keep the house unharmed
> Their fathers built so fair
> Deeming endurance armed
> Better than brute despair,

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[7] Owen, p. 82.

They found the secret of the word that saith
"Service is sweet, for all true life is death." [8]

This is the voice of England, 'calling its young to save'. From the trenches, the view was not much different. Some of the tinsel and fine phrasing was left behind, but the soldier-poets had essentially the same view of their purpose as did the civilians at this point in the war. The soldier, then, becomes the focus of the moment. His greatest fear is that something will intervene between his giving of himself and the new world's creation.

O Guns, fall silent till the dead men hear
Above their heads the legions pressing on:
(These fought their fight in time of bitter fear,
And died not knowing how the day had gone.)

O flashing muzzles, pause, and let them see
The coming dawn that streaks the sky afar;
Then let your mighty chorus witness be
To them, and Ceasar, [sic.] that we still make war. [9]

In a homelier vein, Ford Madox Ford's ruminations in poetry on his reasons for being in France say essentially the same thing.

So, in the Flanders mud,
We bear the State upon our rain-soaked backs,
Breathe life into the State from our rattling lungs,
Anoint the State with the rivulets of sweat
From our tin helmets.
And so, in years to come
The State shall take the semblance of Britannia,
Up-borne, deep-bosomed, with anointed limbs . . .
Like the back of a penny. . . . [10]

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[8] Henry Newbolt, St. George's Day, (John Murray:London, 1918), p. 13.

[9] John McCrae, "The Anxious Dead", in Brian Gardner, ed. Up The Line To Death, p. 48.

[10] Ford Madox Ford, On Heaven,(Lane:London,1918), p. 65.

If the soldier is to die for a cause greater than himself, and if he must pass through a period of preparation to learn his 'mission', and if he must depart into a wilderness of death and decay, there to be slain for the greater good, the mythic parallels are only too obvious.

> I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;
> A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,
> And lit the face of what had been a form
> Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;
> I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare,
> And leaning forward from his burdening task,
> Both arms supporting it; his eyes on mine
> Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
> Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine.
> No thorny crown, only a woollen cap
> He wore - an English soldier, white and strong,
> . . . . . .
>
> He faced me, reeling in his weariness,
> Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.
> I say that He was Christ, who wrought to bless
> All groping things with freedom bright as air,
> And with His mercy, washed and made them fair. [11]
> . . . . . .

This is probably the best example for my argument, incorporating, as it does, the national appeal of "an English soldier, white and strong", the parallels to Hell and the Cross, and the face lit by its mission. Herbert Read says almost the same thing in a poem that establishes a close rapport between officer and man. The turn from an address to a civilian audience to direct speech with the subjects of the poem occurs frequently in this work.[12]

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[11] Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, "The Redeemer", p. 16.

[12] I have in mind Read's "My Company", Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est" and A.P. Herbert's "After The Battle", all in U.T.L.T.D.

My men go wearily
With their monstrous burdens.

They bear wooden planks
And iron sheeting
Through the area of death.

Then a flare curves through the sky
And they rest immobile.
Then on again,
Sweating and blaspheming -
"Oh, bloody Christ!"

My men, my modern Christs,
Your bloody agony confronts the world. [13]

Several writers use analogies less striking than these, but extensions of the 'sacrificed-god' theme, none the less.

Cast away regret and rue,
Think what you are marching to.
Little live, great pass.
Jesus Christ and Barabas
Were found the same day.
This died, that went his way. [14]

Sorley's rhyme scheme leaves something to be desired, but the connection between the soldier and the savior is made. Robert Nichols, like Sorley, does not develop the comparison beyond its primal state as simile. He does not replace the traditional figure with the modern man.

. . . O people who bow down to see
The Miracle of Calvary,
The bitter and the glorious,
Bow down, bow down and pray for us.

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[13] Herbert Read, Collected Poems 1914 - 1934, "My Company" pp. 43 - 46.

[14] Charles Sorley, Marlborough And Other Poems, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1916), p. 71.

Once more our anguished way we take
Toward our Golgotha, to make
For all our lovers sacrifice.
Again the troubled bell tolls thrice.

* * * * *

Entreat you for such hearts as break
With the premonitory ache
Of bodies, whose feet, hands, and side,
Must soon be torn, pierced, crucified. . . .[15]

The second modification in the image of the soldier corresponds fairly closely with the soldier-poets' entry into actual combat. By 1916 the War had moved into its third stage - the horrible world of the trench line. The conditions, beside the physical considerations, had about them an air of permanency, of eternal 'stasis'. The War could go on indefinitely, or at least until the words on every enlistment paper, 'three years or the duration', ceased to have a meaning. The War, at this time, takes on the shape of Hell. It is seen entirely in static terms - descriptions of place:

Dim, gradual thinnings of the shapeless gloom
Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals
Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky
Haggard and hopeless. They, who have beaten down
The stale despair of night, must now renew
Their desolation in the truce of dawn,
Murdering the livid hours that grope for peace.[16]

This is a purgatorial wasteland from which, somehow, the Christ has failed to rise. The savior has not redeemed his society.

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15 Robert Nichols, Ardours And Endurances, (F.A. Stokes, Co.: New York, 1917), pp. 33 - 34.

16 Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, "Prelude:The Troops", p. 67.

Not only has the initial burst of patriotism failed to quell the foe, but now, apparently, the period of sacrifice has somehow been accomplished with no better results. The third image of man in this War is that of the soul in Hell. There is neither release nor hope in this vision, and the haunting fear that somehow his own unwitting actions have brought him to this impasse begins to dawn. No poet is sure, at this point, that he is redeeming another's fault, and not his own.

> We only, watching, seemed
> The battlefield, if we were not deluded
> By dreaming ecstacies; could we have seen
> The ordinance of eternity reversed,
> And night disdained and dazzled into day,
> And day shot into gulfs of glaring gloom?
> Man in our time, and with our help, grew here
> A pale Familiar; here he struck the Sun,
> And for a season turned the Sun to blood;
> Many such nights as this his witch and he
> Unmasked their metal, and with poisonous work
> Broke the fair sanctuary of this world's rest
> And circumvented God. . . . [17]

Here, for the first time, the task becomes too hard, and the values at its conclusion too small:

> Can we, by any strength of ours
> Thrust back this hostile world
> That tears us from ourselves,
> As a child from the womb,
> A weak lover from light breasts?
>
> Is there any hope?
> Can we believe
> That not in wild perversity,
> In blinding cruelty,
> Has flesh torn flesh,
> Has soul been torn from soul?

---

[17] Edmund Blunden, Collected Poems, "Inaccessibility In The Battlefield", pp. 191 - 194.

Must we despair?
Throw back upon the gods this taunt
That even their loveliest is at best
Some ineffectual lie? [18]

Owen takes three of the early-war themes and puts them in a comic-dramatic setting. The hell created by the machine is triumphant, and man's guiding principles are powerless.

'O 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, - 'O Mother, mother! Dad!'
Then smiled at nothing, childlike, being dead.
And the lofty Shrapnel-cloud
Leisurely gestured, - Fool!
And the falling splinters tittered.

'My Love!' one moaned. Love-languid seemed his mood,
Till, slowly lowered, his whole face kissed the mud.
And the Bayonets' long teeth grinned;
Rabbles of Shells hooted and groaned;
And the Gas hissed. [19]

This suspicion that man was the slave of the machine and the soldier a dupe of capitalist and political powers led, by extension, to the realization that his highest ideals were merely the tools by which he was being manipulated - that far from being a savior, he was only a savior-fool. E.A. Mackintosh's "Recruiting"[20] touches on this attitude and goes on to list all the agencies back home who try, for their own comfort and safety, to keep up the "vulgar songs -/ Washy verse on England's need" - old men, rich men, cowardly men.

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[18] Richard Aldington, "Doubt", pp. 101 - 102.

[19] Owen, "The Last Laugh", p. 59.

[20] U.T.L.T.D., pp. 111 - 112.

The final descent of the human being in war poetry is the level of the madman and the corpse, for neither of these can be recalled to their duties, neither need suffer any longer the wrongs and guilt of the War, and each has achieved his release, at least from the physical side of the conflict. But neither is to be envied. The dead men are no longer the glorious heroes of Loos or the Marne, and the shell-shock cases were the anomalies of the War. The General Staff refused,until almost 1918, to admit that a man could be subjected to too many shellings and snipings, and endless periods of fear. Somehow, it seemed an act of cowardice to go crazy while on duty. The mentally disturbed soldiers had the most difficult burdens to bear, for theirs were not honourable wounds, and treatment, when it existed,was incomplete and haphazard. In his poem,"The Chances",[21] Owen catalogues the possible 'escape hatches' from the 'jealous' war - death, a bad wound, a Blighty (an honourable wound, severe enough to disqualify one from active service, but not serious enough to interfere with a normal civilian life), capture by the enemy and the unadulterated good luck to be spared for another 'Show'. His five examples pass through the various possibilities, but the man unscathed goes mad, and becomes, in his war-ridden imagination all four less appealing possibilities. Blunden also notes [22] the death of a man from a flesh wound and weeks of dugout life.

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[21] Owen, p. 71.

[22] Blunden, "Pillbox", p. 157.

But the poem that must rate as the finest on this theme is Wilfrid Gibson's "Mad": [23]

> Neck-deep in mud,
> He mowed and raved -
> He who had braved
> The field of blood -
> And as a lad
> Just out of school
> Yelled - April Fool!
> And laughed like mad.

Some of the interest in such psychic phenomena is explainable because of their novelty. Never before in the history of man had any one developed a series of circumstances that created enough stress within the individual to turn men mad by groups! War neurosis is a term that does not exist before 1917. But the sense of madness in the poets stems from another source as well as the tensions of trench life. Always, in the background, sometimes almost as a steadying force, is the schizophrenic dichotomy between the world of the British Army in France and the British nation in England. There is the basic problem of trying to reconcile two opposing sets of values - the belief that men could act in honour for a principle and the more cynical, but equally valid,view that any one who tried to live this way deserved to be used.

Sassoon's "Survivors"[24] tells of this resentment.

> No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
> Have caused their stammering,disconnected talk.

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[23] Wilfrid Gibson, in U.T.L.T.D., p. 84.

[24] Sassoon, Collected Poems, p. 90.

Of course they're 'longing to go out again,' -
  These boys with old,scared faces, learning to walk.
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
  Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died, -
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud
  Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride . . .
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
  Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

Even actual combat no longer dispels the spectres, for Herbert Read's "The Happy Warrior"[25] is a man so reduced in his faculties that he has lost all contact with his surroundings and all sense of purpose in his task.

His wild heart beats with painful sobs,
  His strained hands clench an ice-cold rifle,
His aching jaws grip a parched hot tongue,
  His wide eyes search unconsciously.

He cannot shriek.

Bloody saliva
Dribbles down his shapeless jacket.

I saw him stab
And stab again
A well-killed Boche.

This is the happy warrior,
This is he . . .

And the ghosts that these men see are not the people of some other world attempting to influence men in this - these are not funereal figures who haunt ancestral houses. Rather, they are elements of a past that lives on in a surfeit of guilt and terror. These men stand self-condemned and must suffer out a sentence more severe than any court could devise.

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[25] Herbert Read, pp. 39 - 40.

The final stage of the descent is marked by the figure of the corpse - the unknown, uncared for, indifferent bundle of rags that is the last mute reminder of the glory that was the War.

The Effect

The effect of our bombardment was terrific. One man told me he had never seen so many dead before. - War Correspondent.

'He'd never seen so many dead before.'
They sprawled in yellow daylight while he swore
And gasped and lugged his everlasting load
Of bombs along what once had been a road.
'How peaceful are the dead.'
Who put that silly gag in some one's head?

'He'd never seen so many dead before.'
The lilting words danced up and down his brain,
While corpses jumped and capered in the rain.
No, no; he wouldn't count them anymore . . .
The dead have done with pain:
They've choked; they can't come back to life again.

When Dick was killed last week he looked like that,
Flapping along the fire-step like a fish,
After the blazing crump had knocked him flat . . .
'How many dead? As many as ever you wish.
Don't count' em; they're too many.
Who'll buy my nice fresh corpses, two a penny?' [26]

And the difficult point to understand about a corpse is its inability to regain life, its stubborn refusal to respond, as it used to, to the things of this world:

Move him into the sun -
Gently its touch awoke him once, . . .
Think how it wakes the seeds, -
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved - still warm - too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all? [27]

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[26] Sassoon, Collected Poems, p. 73.
[27] Owen, "Futility", p. 58.

Beyond the physical disgust in the dead thing is the theme of death. I have traced in the symbol of the warrior, the savior, the man and the fool, the poetic re-evaluations of the War. This is not a war seen historically, or socially, or economically; it is total war seen as it effects the individual. There is no concern here for war as victory or defeat, or a way of life, although there are signs that men began to see it that way. Rather, this is the War as it affects man - not a particular man, nor yet a group of men, but each man as he is exposed to it. This is the theme of the 'War novels' like Disenchantment and The Patriot's Progress[28]. War is not a vitalizing force; it does not stir men to deeds of courage and love; it does not stimulate virtue. In a moral sense, the work I have just dealt with preaches the message 'Thou Shalt Not Kill!', but even this is not the greatest charge levelled against the War. Poetically, war is a turning, not so much from progress as from life. It is not only a dead thing, but a killing force as well - it lacks all ability to renew those who serve it - it is a parasite that lives off the cultures that support it, and eventually, it will destroy them in an agony of horror, claiming first the most fit and finally the old, the feeble and the helpless as well.

In one of the finest, to my mind, of insights that a poet has had on this subject, David Jones touches directly on this point.

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[28] Henry Williamson, The Patriot's Progress, (Geoffrey Bles: London, 1930). The book concludes with the crippled 'hero' having the knowledge that his generation is a page of national history marred at its roots. "We are England", said John Bullock, with a slow smile. The old gentleman could not look him in the eyes." p. 194.

He draws from all the sources of English culture, rituals of birth and manhood, and refutes each in turn by negating it with the picture of non-regenerative, dying men.

> The First Field Dressing is futile as frantic seaman's shift
> bunged to stoved bulwark, so soon the darking flood perco-
> lates and he dies in your arms.
> And get back to that digging can't yer -
> this aint a bloody Wake
> for these dead, who soon will have their dead
> for burial clods heaped over.
> Nor time for halsing
> nor to clip green wounds
> nor weeping Maries bringing anointments
> neither any word spoken
> nor no decent nor appropriate sowing of this seed
> nor remembrance of the harvesting
> of the renascent cycle
> and return
> nor shaving of the head nor ritual incising of these <u>viriles</u>
> under each tree.
> No one sings: Lully lully
> for the mate whose blood runs down. [29]

This is the fatal vision of the War. There is no answer to it because the question is never stated directly, and the values appealed to are those of personal and racial preservation. This is not a matter of either cowardice or bravery, and it cannot be settled in a discussion of moral right or wrong. It is the force which makes a man respond to a call to arms despite his rational self, or any emotionalism of the moment; and with the knowledge that he will go to war is the knowledge that he may be destroyed. I have pointed out the over-theme of that destruction as it was understood by the poets of the Great War.

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[29] David Jones, <u>In Parenthesis</u>, p. 174.

Closely related to the theme of sacrifice is the pattern of death and renewal that one finds in the natural world. Poetry has always pointed out the relationships between man and the vegetable world around him, and poetry of the Great War turned to this comparison with more than passing interest. Several factors combined to make bucolic scenes much more than mere diversions from the rugged grimness of war. All of the soldier-poets had had their poetic tastes fashioned, to a large extent, by the dominant work of the age - the writing of the Georgians. I am not implying that the people I am considering were either Georgians themselves, or unduly influenced by Georgian poetry. Lawrence Durrell's description of the purposes of poetry at this time is as sweeping a generalization as mine, but he also is attempting to catch the major moods of an era. "They /the Georgians/ were content with brief impressionistic sketches of nature, a clear scholarly enumeration of day to day affairs in the countryside. Their gift was precise observation."[30]

In effect, poetry in this style, and with this subject matter, would be acceptable to the reading tastes of the British public. A description of war in terms of the landscape in which the conflict took place would elicit a much more knowing and favourable response than an imagistic interpretation of a man's emotions in combat.

As well, several of the poets, notably Blunden, Aldington and Graves, chose this way of seeing the world because they found it

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30 Lawrence Durrell, A Key To Modern British Poetry, (University Of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1964), pp. 122 - 123.

both suited to their temperaments and expressive of their feelings. The pastoral world provided the most complete release from the tedium, sordidness and fear of war; it became a vicarious return to happier, greener days. Most of the poems that Blunden wrote at the Front were of this kind, and "The English Scene"[31] is rural England seen from a Front-line trench in Flanders. In none of this work is the War allowed to intrude. A poem like Graves's "The Last Day Of Leave (1916)"[32] is a nostalgically beautiful piece which catches the effect of two worlds - the English countryside of a summer's picnic with the host of memories that it could call forth and the limits of a redoubt in France which had all the possibilities of becoming one's last home and resting place.

Memory provided one of the few forms of release from the War, and the memories of soldiers were those of home and homely things:

> Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,
> Drawing no dividend from time's tomorrows.
> In the great hour of destiny they stand,
> Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
> * * * * * * * *
> Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
> They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives.
>
> I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
> And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
> Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
> And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
> Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
> And going to the office in the train.[33]

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31 Edmund Blunden, "The English Scene", pp. 53 - 137.

32 Robert Graves, Collected Poems 1959, (Cassell:London, 1962), 3rd. ed. pp. 84 -85.

33 Sassoon, Collected Poems, "Dreamers", pp. 71 - 72.

In two ways, then, poetic descriptions of England were to be expected in poetry of the Great War. They served both as a release from trench life, and they were the expected convention of the day in serious poetry. As well, England of the woods and pastures stood as a symbol of England free. While it is rather difficult to stir a man's feelings about an industrial city or a seaport, unless they happen to be places where he was born or lived, most people can be moved by a beautiful rural landscape, be they city men or farmers: "Oh beautiful for azure skies, for amber waves of grain/ For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain" would lose all its appeal by the transposition of images of highways, factories and miners' houses. Men who had never crossed a down or 'clambered up a knoll' still had the knowledge that these things were there for them should they desire their use. Now a threat was apparent, and these things might be denied them, or given out as favours from an enemy when, by right, they belonged to Englishmen alone:

> Ah! we have dwelt in Arcady long time
> With sun and youth eternal round our ways
> And in the magic of that golden clime
> We loved the pageant of the passing days.
>
> The wonderful white dawns of frost and flame
> In winter, and the swift sun's upward leap;
> Or summer's stealthy wakening that came
> Soft as a whisper on the lips of sleep.
>
> * * * *
>
> And these were good; yet in our hearts we knew
> These were not all, - that still through toil and pains
> Deeds of a purer lustre given to few,
> Made for the perfect glory that remains.

> And when the summons in our ears was shrill
> Unshaken in our trust we rose, and then
> Flung but a backward glance, and care-free still
> Went strongly forth to do the work of men. [34]

The most succinct but complete statement of this feeling is Rupert Brooke's famous sonnet, "The Soldier"[35] which brings together the love of the countryside with the national feeling of the day.

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is forever England. There shall be
> In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
> A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
> Gave,once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
> A body of England's, breathing English air,
> Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
> * * * * * *

This mood of sad farewells and pensive sighs is an extension of the picture of the warrior in 1914. The times ahead would be hard but the goal was eminently valuable - the saving of his world.

The second note that enters the theme of'man in nature'is the more realistic, less emotional, description of the great out-of-doors as it was experienced by the men in the training camps:

> Who of all those who were in the camp at that time, and are still alive, will not remember until he dies the second boyhood that he had in the late frosts and then in the swiftly filling and bursting spring and the early summer of 1915? The awakening bird-notes of Reveille at dawn, the two-mile run through auroral mists breaking over a still inviolate England, . . . the long intent morning parades under the gummy shine of chestnut buds in the deepening meadows; the peace of the tranquil hours on guard at some sequestered post, alone with

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[34] W.N. Hodgson, "The Call", in Brian Gardener ed. U.T.L.T.D. pp. 9 - 10.

[35] Rupert Brooke, Collected Poems, p. 105.

> the sylvester midnight, the wheeling stars and the quiet breathing of the earth in its sleep. . . .[36]

This was the reawakening to natural pleasure, and it was more than a passing feeling noted by a few soon-to-be-dead poets. It seems to have an appeal for all ranks and castes of men. Richard Aldington's "Field Manoevres" describes the indifference to war and the games of war induced in a young trainee by an afternoon in the woods in summer:

> . . . I am 'to fire at the enemy column
> After it has passed' -
> But my obsolete rifle, loaded with 'blank',
> Lies untouched before me,
> My spirit follows after the gliding clouds,
> And my lips murmer of the mother of beauty
> Standing breast-high, in golden broom
> Among the blue pine-woods! p. 15, U. T. L. T. D.

A poem by Herbert Read, written at the same period of experience has exactly the same point. "Champ De Manoeuvres"[37] is the idyll of a young man more in love with the world around him than with the rather mundane, repetitious life of a recruit.

But English scenes gave way to new experiences in France, and the poetry turned to yet more realistic attempts to describe scenes and events with no efforts to draw conclusions from them:

> "Movement Of Troops"
>
> We entrain in open trucks
> And soon glide away
> from the plains of Artois.

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[36] C. E. Montague, Disenchantment, pp. 8 - 9.

[37] Herbert Read, Poems 1914 - 1934, p. 23.

With a wake of white smoke
We plunge
Down avenues of silent trees.

A watcher sees
Our red light gleam
Occasionally. [38]

or else the poet might set out a personal rumination on war and his role in it:

Before Action

By all the glories of the day
  And the cool evening's benison,
By that last sunset **touch** that lay
  Upon the hills when day was done,
By beauty lavishly outpoured
  And blessings carelessly received,
By all the days that I have lived
  Make me a soldier, Lord. [39]

* * * * *

The world of nature is seen as neither evil nor good. It simply exists to be described, to be caught in memories, to be compared in its differing hues and facets in this new country. The initial image of the Mother has passed in the realities of preparation and transport, as the vision of the conquering hero was modified to become the more workable image of an English private in his brown uniform and'tin hat'. And the third phase of a malign, crazed witch in league with the forces of evil is yet to be envisaged.

If the combat soldier was brought into a new and pleasing relationship with the elements in his period of training, his life in the trenches made familiarity breed a kind of contempt. Novelty

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[38] W.N. Hodgson, U.T.I.T.D., pp. 29 - 30.

[39] Ibid., p. 24.

gave place to the normal state of affairs, and if sunrises were no less brilliant, they now opened on days of less promise, and the nights of sentry stand that impressed Montague's fellows now held the threat of death. Huts had given way to tents, which in turn had been replaced by groundsheets and blankets, until these too were taken away. Soldiers in the Front line were not permitted blankets or ear warmers; clothes were worn for the length of service in the line which varied from one night or three days under ideal conditions to two or more weeks in 'active' sectors. But the greatest of all the combat troop's fears was rain. The English line, extended as it was over most of the Flemish lowlands, managed to maintain a water level of between one and three feet. Dry clothes became the image of all that was desirable in life after even a first stint in the trenches.[40] The only way that the water could be eliminated was by temperatures below freezing, and these brought their own tribulations. Life's pleasures are few when one can count weather of ten degrees a boon because the rate of decay in battlefield corpses is at zero.

Rain, fog, cold, snow - Flanders seemed to have become a centre for all that was perverse in the meteorology of Europe. Like the spheres of human relationships, those of the weather were not any more malevolent than usual, but one day in a mud-hole with wet

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40 Axel Eggebrecht's tale of the "Death Of A Cat" and Ludwig Tugel's "Over The Top", both in Blunden's Great Short Stories Of The War, describe conditions in the trenches and the fighting man's morbid hatred of dampness and cold. One gains as good an insight from the descriptions of English trench life in David Jones's In Parenthesis, especially in the three sections between pages 27 and 153.

clothes can cast a gloom over months, and winter under these conditions is particularly terrible.

And, again, by the frequency of association, aspects of the world of the seasons became identified with the mechanical gad-flies of enemy guns, gas and rifle-fire. As the battle-field began to take on more of the features of Hell, men noticed that the elements and man-made agents of destruction seemed to be in league in their new creation.

> Through the light rain I think I see them going
> Through the light rain under the muffled skies;
> Across the fields a stealthy wet wind wanders,
> The mist bedews their tunics, dizzies their brains.
>
> Shoulder-high, khaki shoulder by shoulder,
> They bear my Boy upon his last journey.
> Night is closing. The wind ebbs, sighs, and falters. . . .
> * * * * * * *
>
> Now they arrive. The priest repeats the service.
> The drifting rain obscures.
> They are dispersed.
> The dying sun streams out: a moment's radiance;
> The still, wet, glistening grave; the trod sward steaming.
> * * * * * *
>
> Sudden great guns startle, echoing on the silence.
> Thunder. Thunder.
> HE HAS FALLEN IN BATTLE.
> (O Boy! Boy!)
> Lessening now. The rain
> Patters anew. Far guns rumble and shudder
> And the night descends upon the desolate plain. [41]

One cannot be sure that the thunder of the thirteenth line comes from the skies anymore than from the mouths of the guns, so closely allied are the two forces. This is the negative use of the

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[41] Robert Nichols, "Burial In Flanders", pp. 46 - 47.

pastoral elegy, for here no rebirth is promised, no good is drawn from the death; the only consolation is that this man followed the path of his fathers.

In an entirely different way, a section of Herbert Read's poem"Kneeshaw Goes To War"[42], the description of the necessary shooting of a man caught in the mud churned up by the guns, brings home the realization that man was obliged to struggle as hard against the elements as he was against the enemy.

"Winter Warfare"[43] is the picture of the Front line over the winter of 1916 - 1917, told as a fable of 'Colonel Cold' and 'Hauptman Kalte' on a tour of inspection. The misery of frost-bite is inflicted by a staff-officer, and if one adopts a soldier's view of the War, this isn't too inaccurate.

Blunden's response, partly because of his Georgian bias for natural description, is essentially a world seen through the eyes of a man who is at home in the countryside. His description of the whole battlefield in terms of a garden makes the connection between the soldier as victim and the world he is violating:

> "And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed"-
> But we are coming to the sacrifice.
> Must those have flowers who are not **yet** gone West?
> May those have flowers who live with death and lice?
> This must be the floweriest place
> That earth allows; the queenly face
> Of the proud mansion borrows grace for grace
> Spite of those brute guns lowing at the skies.

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[42] Herbert Read, "Kneeshaw Goes To War", part 4, pp. 34 - 35.

[43] Edgell Rickword, U.T.L.T.D., pp. 92 - 93.

Bold great daisies, golden lights,
Bubbling roses' pinks and whites -
Such a gay carpet! poppies by the million;
Such damask! such vermillion!
But if you ask me, mate, the choice of colour [44]
Is scarcely right; this red should have been much duller.

Descriptions of nature also serve as contrasts to man's new world, and sometimes as indications of the grotesqueness of it. In "Rural Economy"[45] Blunden completes the connection between the men and the death's harvest:

. . . The sower was the ploughman too,
And iron seeds broadcast he threw.

What husbandry could outdo this?
With flesh and blood he fed
The planted iron that nought amiss
Grew thick and swift and red,
And in a night though ne'er so cold
Those acres bristled a hundredfold.

Why, even the wood as well as field
This thoughtful farmer knew
Could be reduced to plough and tilled,
And if he planned, he'd do;
The field and wood, all bone-fed loam
Shot up a roaring harvest home.

Robert Service, in a piece so symbolic as to be untypical of his style, sees the same associations between a world that is able to renew itself and impotent ineffectual man. One should also note this poem as another example of the semi-mad combat sensations described by the British war poets. Service's choice of colours is correct; he was serving as a stretcher-bearer with the French Army at this time.

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[44] "Vlamertinghe: Passing The Chateau, July 1917" in The Poems Of Edmund Blunden, p. 152.

[45] Undertones Of War, pp. 282 - 283.

Poppies, you try to tell me, glowing there in the wheat;
Poppies! Ah no! You mock me: It's blood, I tell you, it's blood.
It's gleaming wet in the grasses; it's glist'ning warm in the wheat;
It dabbles the ferns and the clover; it brims in an angry flood;

* * * * * * *

Cornflowers, you say, just cornflowers, gemming the golden grain;
Ah no! You can't deceive me. Can't I believe my eyes?
Look! It's the dead, my comrades, stark on the dreadful plain,
All in their dark-blue blouses, staring up at the skies.

* * * * * * *

Lilies, (the light is waning), only lilies you say,
Nestling and softly shining there where the spear-grass waves.
No, my friend, I know better; brighter I see than day:
It's the poor little wooden crosses over their quiet graves. [46]

An obvious illustration of this theme of dead men and live natural objects is John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields".[47] The local variations in colour and sound, like the colours of flowers and the voices of the few birds, notably the larks, are fascinating, again, more because of their contrast with the world of the war than for any aesthetic values they might otherwise possess. The idea of any life at all, much less the delicate growths of flowers and birds, in this area of death is something for these men to marvel at.

Alec Waugh's "From Albert To Bapaume"[48], in the simplicity of its technique and the contrast it builds up between the details described and the concluding sense of waste and shame, makes a sadly accurate verdict on man's achievement.

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[46] Robert Service, "Tri-Colour", in The Collected Poems Of Robert Service, (Dodd, Mead & Co.: New York, 1961), pp. 367 - 368.

[47] John McCrae, U.T.L.T.D., p. 49.

[48] Ibid., p. 86.

Lonely and bare and desolate,
  Stretches of muddy filtered green,
A silence half articulate
  Of all that those dumb eyes have seen.

A battered trench, a tree with boughs
  Smutted and black with smoke and fire,
A solitary ruined house,
  A crumped mass of rusty wire.

And scarlet by each ragged fen
  Long scattered ranks of poppies lay,
As though the blood of the dead men
  Had not been wholly washed away.

Isaac Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump" is the most extreme example of this type of poetry. All semblance of goodness has been stripped from the vegetable world, and man stands opposed to,not only his fellow men, but the assembled forces of nature and the machine. He is alone with no place to flee to for protection or solace.

Maniac Earth! howling and flying, your bowel
Seared by the jagged fire, the iron love,
The impetuous storm of savage love.
Dark Earth! dark Heavens! swinging in chemic smoke,
What dead are born when you kiss each soundless soul
With lightning and thunder from your mined heart,
Which man's self dug, and his blind fingers loosed? [49]

Like the image of man, the image of man's world has become reversed. The thing that promised so fair has turned, literally, to dust and ashes, and the hopes of reconciliation are dead.

The last response of man must be an admission that he has

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[49] Isaac Rosenberg, The Collected Poems Of Isaac Rosenberg, (Schocken Books: NewYork, 1949), p. 82.

neither the power to act nor the power to suffer. The being that had dared all has been reduced to something lower than the vegetable world after his attempt to be a god. The writer whose work catches this final mood died in April of 1917. He was representative in every way of the soldier-poets of the War. His friends included the best writers of the day both military and civilian. It is appropriate that this section of my paper should end with one of the most effective pieces of poetry to emerge from the Great War.

> Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
> On this bleak hut, and solitude and me
> Remembering again that I shall die
> And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
> For washing me cleaner than I have been
> Since I was born into this solitude.
> Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
> But here I pray that none whom once I loved
> Is dying tonight or lying still awake
> Solitary, listening to the rain,
> Either in pain or thus in sympathy
> Helpless among the living and the dead,
> Like a cold water among broken reeds,
> Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff
> Like me who have no love which this wild rain
> Has not dissolved except the love of death,
> If love it be for what is perfect and
> Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint. [50]

I have attempted to outline the major theme that I feel to be the final poetic synthesis of the War. This is not the theme of all war poetry, but it is the eventual inevitable conclusion that a poet must make about any activity which has as its initial hypothesis the destruction, for whatever reason, of man and his works. I would

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50 Edward Thomas, "Rain", in Lawrence Durrell's A Key To Modern British Poetry, pp. 135 - 136.

suggest that the First World War is the first complete demonstration of the full argument against the taking of human life in any form. Three factors are relevant here. The War demonstrated that man has the power to destroy whole civilizations. The old argument that "It will have to stop somewhere." could no longer be valid for the machines man had constructed could kill by themselves and man's role was obviously on the decline. Secondly, the War lasted for more than four years, and it did not have to stop when it did. War could become a way of life, continuing indefinitely, or at least until death became the end of all human endeavour rather than life and the preservation of it. Finally, these men were the first poets to see war at first hand. No screens of national purpose or bravery recalled after the event intervened to gloss over the horror of killing and being killed. No illusions stood between them and the knowledge that War was evil, from the philosophies that supported it to the men who throve on it; that it was essentially anti-social and inhuman.

Their message came from the period when the issue seemed darkest with no hint that it would ever be relieved or redeemed. The end of that darkness was the end of man, and that, in essence, is their message. We, like the poets who survived the War, at our remove in time can look back and say "It couldn't have been all that bad, because here we are today, and life goes on." From their place in the midst of the event, these men wrote better, frequently, than they knew. We can decide to ignore their warning because they may have been too close to see all things clearly. We do so at our peril.

IV

WILFRED OWEN

Rupert Brooke's enthusiastic "Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour/ And caught our youth and wakened us from sleeping",[1] may well serve as a point of reference in a study of Wilfred Owen's verse. It is insufficient to say that Owen is the poet of pity for it is important to understand the depths of that pity and the amount of suffering it had to draw on. It seems almost trite to point out that the 'trench poets' were not representative of the soldiery of the British army. Their links with the fighting men were formed by bitter experience as junior officers, bound to lead and execute orders that brought discomfort, pain and death to men who trusted them and looked to their authority sometimes for life itself. As his letters reveal,[2] Owen was a man who took his duties seriously and found in his role of leader a chance to serve his fellows. As well as being an officer, he felt that he had another contribution to make to England. He knew before he became involved in the War what his ambition in life was to be.

> To be able to write as I know how to, study is necessary: a period of study, then of intercourse with kindred spirits, then of isolation. My heart is ready, but my brain unprepared, and my hand untrained. I quite envisage the possibility of non-success.[3]

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[1] Rupert Brooke, The Collected Poems Of Rupert Brooke, (McClelland & Stewart Ltd.: Toronto, 1961), p. 101.

[2] Wilfred Owen, The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, (Chatto & Windus: London, 1964), pp. 158 - 161.

[3] Ibid., p. 154.

In its inimitable, ironic fashion, the War was to fulfil all of Owen's aims. His contact with Siegfried Sassoon [4] led to meetings with other poets - the Sitwells, Robert Nichols and Robert Graves. Sassoon's criticisms and suggestions, whatever their literary merit, encouraged and stimulated his early attempts to present the War to people back home. His trench service acted both as a period of isolation and a training for what he wanted to do poetically. Cut off by the war from contacts with his new friends, he developed,in his later work, themes and techniques to express the horrors he witnessed to his countrymen in England. He was never to know the success that his work would enjoy. On the fourth of November, 1918, he was shot and killed while helping his men across the Sambre canal in the last great 'push' of the War. He had been on active service for two years, had been in hospital for six months of that time and had almost fourteen months of trench life. He was awarded the Military Cross one month before he was killed. [5]

Because the wartime verses are the only real poetic contribution that Owen made, and because they are poetry of a remarkably high quality, his work is probably the best known of all of the First War's poets. His life, his leadership and his work combine to make the experiences he writes about both believable and compelling. He is the image of the 'war poet' - a man who went and suffered all

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[4] Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey, (Faber & Faber Ltd; London, 1945), pp. 58 - 68.

[5] Wilfred Owen, pp. ix - x.

of the things that his verse describes and more[6], and, who, in the end, paid the supreme sacrifice to preserve the things in which he believed. His writing to the end of the War, the time of his death, caught almost all of the major attitudes that the conflict brought forth - a sense of duty and of group loyalty on a very high plane, an awareness of the enemy as a human being who suffered and died with the agony and distress of human kind, and a profound longing for peace. This, more than anything else, was Owen's message.

> Already I have comprehended a light which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ's essential commands was, Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill . . . [7]

In a sense, the War made Owen. It brought his work from 'juvenilia' to poetry of the highest order in two years. If one can compare verse written with a desire to be a poet and verse written in the hopes of reforming mankind, then Owen became a poet through the War. The mellifluous rhymes of "From My Diary, July 1914" become the reversed effects of consonantal dissonance in "Exposure":[8]

> Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds
> that knive us . . .
> Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent . . .
> Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the
> salient . . .
> Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious,
> nervous,
> But nothing happens. . . .

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6 Siegfried's Journey, pp. 60 - 61.

7 The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, p. 22.

8 Ibid, p. 117 and p. 48.

Both pieces are aesthetically pleasing, but Blunden finds in the latter"the most intimate of Wilfred Owen's interpretations of the Western Front, that is the masked and remorseless chorus".[9]

The early poetry shows the promise of what the later work achieves, and it is impossible to say, of course, what Owen would have done had he lived, or had he avoided the War. We can attempt an evaluation of what he did achieve.

Owen's war poetry is a crusade against War and his proposed 'preface' to the volume of verse he hoped to produce after the conflict bears more than a cursory reading. Because of his illness, the man could probably have avoided returning to active service, but as C. Day Lewis points out:

> Wilfred Owen went back to the front line because he felt that there he would be in a stronger position to voice his protest against the war, and to speak for his comrades.[10]

In the Preface he states the theme of this thesis: "This book is not about heroes. . . . My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity".[11]

His use of the term 'Poetry' or 'Poet' would be supported by the people whom he met through Sassoon - the consciously poetical Georgians and 'New' poets of civilian England. While he does not

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[9] Edmund Blunden, (ed.) Great Short Stories Of The War, (Eyre & Spottiswoode: London, 1933), p. v.

[10] The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, ed. C. Day Lewis, p. 23.

[11] Ibid., p. 31.

reject their view that the poet's role is involved in the study of beauty, he would insist that it be extended to a social function as well. Writing to Sassoon, he said:

> It is a strange truth that your "Counter-Attack" frightened me much more than the real one: though the boy by my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour.
>
> Catalogue? Photograph? Can you photograph the crimson-hot iron as it cools from the smelting? That is what Jones's blood looked like, and felt like. My senses are charred.
>
> I shall feel again as soon as I dare, but now I must not. I don't take the cigarette out of my mouth when I write Deceased over their letters.
>
> But one day I will write Deceased over many books.
>
> I'm glad I've been recommended for M.C., and hope I get it, for the confidence it may give me back home. [12]

This is the Owen of the War. Self-consciousness has given place somewhat to dedication. "But one day I will write Deceased over many books " - this is the promise, and before his death, he was able to accomplish enough to give a shape to the message that he planned to preach after the War. His letters and diaries show more strongly the indignation that he felt than do his poems. In his verses, the personal notes are almost always eliminated or given as comments on the sufferings of other men. As well, Owen managed to control the outbursts of anti-social feeling that mar the work of Graves and Sassoon and Read. His attacks on civilians and non-combatants in safety on the Home Front are through the eyes of Front Line men

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[12] Wilfred Owen, p. 176. Owen's view of himself as a poet in communion with other poets is given in excerpts from his letters on pp. 172 - 174 of The Collected Poems.

in poems like "Dulce Et Decorum Est"[13] and "S.I.W." but his feelings about civilians seem to be as strong as those of his fellow sufferers in comments like the following:

> I wish the Boche would have the pluck to come right in and make a clean sweep of the pleasure boats, and the promenaders on the Spa, and all the stinking Leeds and Bradford war-profiteers now reading 'John Bull' on the Scarborough Sands.[14]

His wisdom in confining his poetry to war experiences and not extending it to comment on conditions as he imagined them at home has had two important results. Initially, Owen was able to write about what he knew and one has the impression that the poems are attempts to transcribe into words feelings both honest and deep from a man who tried as best he could to maintain a perspective in a world gone mad. Secondly, the readers of his poems have been civilians. Excepting possibly men in another war who were caught up in his situation - civilians turned soldiers in a time of stress - Owen wrote to be understood by people who had had no knowledge of war. He wrote to make others aware of the wrongs of war, not to chastise them for causing it and then not fighting. By his having a mission, I mean that he saw more clearly than his compatriots the effective routes to reach the human conscience. He does not alienate his audience, even in a poem like "Smile, Smile, Smile"[15] the way Sassoon does in"Glory Of

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[13] Wilfred Owen, p. 55 and p. 74.

[14] Ibid., pp. 174 - 175.

[15] Ibid., p. 77f.

Women"[16] where the female sex in general is criticised as an aid and abetter to the War effort. This scathing indictment, without a reference to its validity, is hardly calculated to win the sympathy of the reader, and the poem, one could conjecture, is more the random striking out of an enraged and frustrated officer at any available civilian target than the considered opinion of a man who has looked closely at the reactions of a mother, wife or lover as her man was called away to war.

It is this calculated, purposeful presentation that sets Owen's work apart from those poets,on the one hand,who try to 'capture' the essentials of their experience in the details of the War scene, as Blunden does in pieces like "Thiepvall Wood" and "The Ancre At Hamel: Afterwards"[17] where little or no moral judgement is drawn, and the writers like Read and Sassoon, who attempt an interpretation of the War and all its causes and effects from an extension of their small view of it. Owen's adherence to conclusions drawn from his experiences probably accounts, more than anything else, for his place as interpreter of the 'little man's' view of the hell that was World War One. A final word on Owen's purposes in writing might be J.H. Johnston's view that:

> He responded to the war in such a way that his whole outlook was profoundly affected; his sensibility, his perception, his attitudes, and his

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16 The Collected Poems Of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 79.

17 Edmund Blunden, The Poems Of Edmund Blunden, (Harper Bros.: New York, & London, [1933]), p. 11 & p. 174.

> poetic technique all underwent a remarkable change. In him the roles of observer, participant, and poet are actively mingled. His poetry is conditioned by an inescapable awareness of himself as a participant and a spokesman; he felt it to be the duty of the "true poet" to disclose the truth of war . . . Although he was at first influenced by Sassoon's disillusioned realism, he quickly advanced beyond the negativism of anger and accusation. His poetry became an extraordinarily sensitive medium of the compassionate attitude - the only attitude, he felt through which the tragedy of the war could be rightly revealed and interpreted. [18]

Before one can turn to Owen's poetry to find the themes that I claim exist in poetry of the Great War, an explanation of the man's battle experiences up to the time of their writing is necessary. Like the other officer-poets I discuss, Owen was an officer in the 'New Army', the great response to Lord Kitchener's call for half a million men to make Britain an important land power as well as Mistress of the Seas. He did not go into combat until December of 1916, the worst winter of the war. He was commissioned into an infantry regiment as a second lieutenant and went almost directly to the Front on arrival in France. In many ways his training resembles that of Blunden, Read or Graves, and the only important distinction that I find is that Owen lacked the sense of class that most of the other poets felt so acutely. His 'compassion', to use Johnston's term, was, once again, a more sincere feeling than that of Sassoon because he did not see the distinction between officer and soldier as a necessary and unchangeable rule of life the way that the other

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[18] J.H. Johnston, English Poetry Of The First World War, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1964), pp. 155 - 156.

officer-poets did. Richard Aldington's lines could never apply to Owen's case; not that he would not have the courage to behave like an officer - his conduct proves that - but,rather, that concepts of class and the duties of class were not part of his thinking. An important feature of Kitchener's Army was that it was made up of officers who were selected not by their parentage but by their ability to lead and maintain control of a situation. In 1916 this scene would have become an anachronism.

> . . . In a near shell-hole lies a wounded man,
> The stretcher-bearers bending over him;
> And at our feet
> Cower shrinkingly against the ground
> Dark shadowy forms of men.
>
> Only we two stand upright;
> All differences of life and character smoothed out
> And nothing left
> Save that one foolish tie of caste
> That will not let us shrink. [19]

Owen knew that a Cockney private could love as deeply, fight as bravely, and die as gallantly as a Duke's son, and, as he gave no laurels to the aristocracy, he did not take any away, as Sassoon has in "Memorial Tablet":

> Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight,
> (Under Lord Derby's Scheme). I died in hell -
> . . . . . .
> Two bleeding years I fought in France, for Squire:
> I suffered anguish that he's never guessed.
> Once I came home on leave: and then went west... [20]
> What greater glory can a man desire?

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[19] Richard Aldington, Collected Poems 1915 - 1923, (Allen & Unwin Ltd.: London, 1933), p. 83.

[20] The Collected Poems Of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 104.

C.E. Montague's dictum of judging a man by his acts and what he has been through is echoed by Owen's comment in "S.I.W."

II. The Action

One dawn, our wire patrol
Carried him in. This time, Death had not missed.
We could do nothing but wipe his bleeding cough.
. . . . . .

III. The Poem

It was the reasoned crisis of his soul
Against more days of inescapable thrall,
Against infrangibly wired and blind trench wall
Curtained with fire, roofed in with creeping fire,
Slow grazing fire, that would not burn him whole
But kept him for death's promises and scoff,
And life's half-promising, and both their riling. [21]

To Owen, the suicide of a man too long in the trenches is an understandable and tragic event that is the result of laws no more sacred than apply to the world of inanimate things. "Courage leaked, as sand/ From the best sand-bags after years of rain". He sees no one to revile in the action and does not try to lay the blame on family or country, although both are misguided in their expectations. This acceptance of conditions is a lesson which Owen learned much earlier than his contemporaries, and in this sense, he had already profited from the preceding years of the War.

By early 1917 two features of the conflict had become evident to observers in positions to see events clearly. The first was the attrition involved in reducing a modern army, which would begin to take effect only after several years of fighting. This meant that no amount of personal, or even group, action could accelerate

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[21] The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, p. 75.

or retard the progress of the war. As a corollary, a man involved in a war of this nature gained nothing for his faction by acts of heroism and greatly increased the chances of his 'going west'.

In effect, two years of war had already established a frame within which the War had to be discussed. A poem in praise of the integrity of the Press or the contributions made to the war effort by Big Business, written in seriousness by a soldier-poet would have drawn the indifference or scorn in 1916 that poetry with an anti-war theme would have received at the outbreak of hostilities. Brooke's mood was not contradicted by the later war-poets; it was replaced by the slaughter in France and the realization that that slaughter might continue indefinitely. To meet this new situation, new themes were required, new values 'that kept our courage straight', and new answers to questions about the meaning of war.

Before his enlistment, Owen had written two poems that catch the early moods of the War - the beliefs that it was a cataclysmic event on a global scale, and that England was entering the fray as a matter of national honour and safety.

The Sun is sweet on rose and wheat
  And on the eyes of children;
Quiet the street for old men's feet
  And gardens for the children.

The soil is safe, for widow and waif,
  And for the soul of England,
Because their bodies men vouchsafe
  To save the soul of England.

Fair days are yet left for the old,
  And children's days are ruddy

Because the good lads' limbs lie cold
And their brave cheeks are bloody. [22]

The overtones of A.E. Housman are striking, and at this time, Housman's poetry, both in style and subject matter, was appealing. The 'unblooded' cynicism, the theme of 'do or die',still had currency but the real dying was yet to be done. English lads achieved Housman's feats of dispassionate courage, but after two years of bravery, the rewards of a glorious death and the lingering knowledge among your fellows that you had done the right thing began to pale as the highest achievements of human life. Housman was also correct when he said; "Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose,/ But young men think it is, and we were young." [23]

In "1914", written in that year, Owen already shows signs of a harsher, more realistic, view of the way events were tending:

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in.
. . . . . .
Now begin
Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled. [24]

With the historic events of two years to draw upon, the insights into realities of warfare gained in training and the ability to sympathize with the human predicament at this early date, Owen was the poet to sing the themes of the latter stages of the War - the

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[22] The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, p. 154.

[23] A.E. Housman, The Collected Poems Of A.E. Housman, (J. Cape, 1939), p. 131.

[24] The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, p. 129.

songs of experience.

I have mentioned already the uses War poetry makes of contrast and paradox. Almost every aspect of military life, every facet of the French countryside, each difference in the personal and social relationships between men provided some grounds for comparison with life before the War. In this sense, events of the time were more a suspension of the normal routine, an interruption in the affairs of the world, than a part of any human or divine scheme. The War was an area set over against life and it formed a contrast to anything most of the soldiers, and, of course, the soldier-poets, had ever experienced. Eating habits, housing, body care, forms of address - all had new rules governing them, and the rules were made on utilitarian principles rather than on any aesthetic consideration. New ways of evaluating actions and events had to be worked out by these men and they, in turn, made men reconsider some old and accepted values which they had taken but never examined before. Owen shows this process of change in his "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" as he outlines the new principles he has adopted.

> I, too, saw God through mud, --
> The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.
> . . . . . .
> I have made fellowships --
> Untold of happy lovers in old song.
> . . . . . .
> I have perceived much beauty
> In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
> Heard music in the silentness of duty;
> Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate. [25]

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[25] Ibid., p. 39.

These new and contradictory ways of seeing things imposed an additional barrier between the poet and his civilian audience. They built up a feeling of fraternity among the men who understood them, but the gap between combatant and non-combatant widened as the War began to assume a culture of its own. Language developed out of terminology, morality out of the needs of the company, and success from the individual's ability to meet a new and deadly threat.

The poet's task of communication became more difficult. To bridge this gap in experience, many writers turned to an old and established convention that was in the process of modification and elaboration in academic circles in many nations. The use of the dream situation and the effects of the dream on thinking processes is a hallmark of War poetry. Freudian exegesis was in current use at home in England, and the possibilities of an experience seen through the mind of a dreamer greatly expanded a poet's ability to communicate with his audience and to draw conclusions both about himself and about what he had been through.

Initially, the technique can be used to convey a feeling of unreality in the mind of the narrator that covers difficulties in conveying precise emotional or sensational effects unknown to the reader. The dream can be an analogy to consciousness, and the metaphor, " . . . a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,/ Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,/And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues ",[26] is allowed to pass for what it is - a description of a

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[26] Ibid., p. 50.

battlefield, meaningful because of what it reminds the writer of - the condition of his own body if it falls in battle, and, of greater importance, the national consciences which become the worms that feed on carrion. The imagery of the poem is complex, but it never moves away from man's fear of having his body desecrated. In the dream, the reader can share the poet's feelings without having to share either the complex background and terminology of the battle-front or the searing emotional effects of combat. By entering into the realm of the unconscious through sleep, the uninitiate are permitted to bypass the many barriers that stand in the way of a reasoned or orderly progression from sensations to personal responses.

By its tacit admission that it is not trying to convey a complete description of events or a causal movement in time, the dream can move through its metaphoric connections directly to the point of impact in the reader's mind. "The Show" is a highly moral anti-war poem, but because the conclusions are arrived at mentally by the audience, the poet seems only to have described a nauseatingly vivid picture of how war appeared to him, not even in real life, but only in a confused after-image of sleep.

Because of the elements of escape in any dream process, the device was probably struck upon more as a means of working out memories and thoughts by the poets attempting to rid themselves of feelings from the Front than as an effective method of bringing the War home to people who had never experienced life at the Front.

But with the realization that writings from direct mental

stress carried with them a sincerity that more rational approaches often lacked, several poets, notably Sassoon and Graves, used this method to induce sympathy. "The Death Bed" is a particularly fine poem in this vein, both in its description of the coma as dream and in its appeal against war. "Repression of War Experience"[27] is closer to Graves's use of the dream as nightmare, where dead comrades come back to haunt the living, but not in an accusing way. Rather, the poet remembers the circumstances that caused the death by an after-vision of the corpse as in the poem, "Corporal Stare".[28] Dream situations are well suited to the poets' needs because they can elicit an audience response that is both sympathetic and knowing and they serve as an outlet - a very logical outlet - for emotions that would be difficult to analyse on rational levels of thought.

The dream technique suited Owen for another reason. By the contrasts it allowed him to make, he could intensify the feelings he wished to convey. In "Dulce Et Decorum Est",[29] his argument is "If in some smothering dreams you too could pace/ Behind the wagon that we flung him in . . .". The poet does not ask the accused to enter into the real situation that caused the soldier's death; he only asks that the man be subjected to the nightmares that haunt the poet as a human being and an officer. In effect, Owen has said that the mere

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27 The Collected Poems Of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 34, & p. 89.

28 Poems (1914 - 26), p. 50.

29 The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, p. 55.

after-effects of battle experience are enough to make the most bellicose person a pacifist. Had he used a formal argument to make his point, the effect would have been lost, or would have fallen on deaf ears.

The confusion of reality with the dream state, of consciousness with the elements of nightmare, is the method employed in "Mental Cases";

> Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
> Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
> Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
> Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?
> Stroke on stroke of pain, - but what slow panic,
> Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
> Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms
> Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
> Sleeping, and walk in hell; but who these hellish?
>
> - These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
> Memory fingers their hair of murders,
> Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
> Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
> Treading blood from lungs which once loved laughter.
> Always they must see these things and hear them,
> Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
> Carnage incomparable, and human squander
> Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.
>
> . . . . . .
> -Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
> Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
> Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
> Pawing us who dealt them war and madness. [30]

Poet and reader move by rational paths among the shell-shocked ward cases, unwilling to believe that human beings could be so reduced as to live forever in a world of constant pain and suffering - a world which exists only in their tortured minds. And the real

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[30] Owen, p. 69.

guilt does not lie with the patient who is more victim than perpetrator; it lies with the men who caused the situation - all those who made the mental cases go through hell too terrible to bear.

A final use of the dream is'the hope that did not come true'; Owen's piece, "Soldier's Dream" describes,in the first stanza, Christ's redescent to earth where he destroys all the accoutrements of war, and in the second, God's sending of Michæl to repair them as the poet awakes.[31] Sassoon moves just beyond the scene of war in his description of the State that floundered in "Miracles"[32] where the beauties of the dream are seen for what they are -passing shadows to keep man from a too bright reality. Richard Aldington, however, takes this theme and presents it as the only thing of value in a world which is worse than a nightmare, but less than a dream. His poem, "Reverie", ends with such a conclusion:

> Tomorrow, maybe, I shall be one of them,
> One in a vast field of dead men,
> Unburied, or buried hastily, callously.
> But forever and for ever
> In the fair land I have built up
> From the dreams of my love,
> We two are together, she bending by the pale flower
> And I beside her:
> We two together in a land of quiet
> Inviolable behind the walls of death. [33]

I have tried to demonstrate that dream poetry served several functions. Owen's use of it is unique in that it forms some of his

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[31] Ibid., p. 84.

[32] Sassoon, p.107.

[33] The Collected Poems 1915 - 1923, pp. 87 - 90.

most impassioned writing.

Owen does not use the dream as an escape from the realities of the War. "Strange Meeting"[34] begins with an explanation of the place wherein the poet finds himself: "It seemed that out of the battle I escaped/ Down some profound dull tunnel, . . . I knew that sullen hall,/ By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell." There is neither life nor hope here, and the author has escaped in the dream only for a short time to be made aware of the deeper tragedy of War - the unfulfilled lives, the things not done, the progress not made.

In these instances of the dream, Owen becomes more prophet than poet, and his social message is intensified from the colloquial poems like "The Letter"[35] and "The Chances",[35] where mere men talk of the War with only the knowledge of men. In the 'mystical' poems the freedom of the dream state allows for speculations and beliefs that would be unacceptable in 'conscious' poetry.

The dreamer,in all of this work, is a man being educated. He has no function beyond being made aware of the sufferings of his fellows and making them known to the world. He will have no means of alleviating their pain, or of leading them to a new and happier world. Unlike Christ, he cannot give solace. This is Owen's position at the time of writing his war poems.

He held the image of his soldiers as 'modern Christs' in his

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[34] Owen, p. 35.

[35] Ibid., p. 60 & p. 71.

letters, although it was not as clearly developed in his poetry.

> For 14 hours yesterday I was at work - teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine his thirst till after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha. [36]

This rather elaborate image of the private soldier as Christ is more than just an apt figure. I have already quoted the reference in "Soldier's Dream" to God's dispatching of Michæl to repair the instruments of war. "Inspection" [37] gives the view of the common soldier that " . . . when we're duly white-washed, being dead,/ The race will bear Field-Marshall God's inspection." This connection between the Father and the old established order in the nation, and the sacrificing nature of Christ and the generation in the trenches is completed in one of the last and most bitter of Owen's poems, "At A Calvary Near The Ancre":

> One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
> In this war He too lost a limb,
> But his disciples hide apart;
> And now the Soldiers bear with Him.
>
> Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
> And in their faces there is pride
> That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
> By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

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[36] Owen, p. 23. This quotation is from a letter written in the summer of 1918 and reflects what comes close to being a final attitude. Analogies or extended similes of this sort are quite common in letters attempting to explain experiences in the War.

[37] Ibid., p. 82.

> The scribes on all the people shove
> And brawl [sic.] allegiance to the state,
> But they who love the greater love
> Lay down their life [sic.]; they do not hate. [38]

The analogy needs little explanation. One can substitute Church of England cleric for priest, newspaper reporter for scribe, and British political powers for state to arrive at a theme close to Sassoon's view of the War and its causes. But the connection of the private with Christ is a constant in Owen's thought. The idea of sacrifice - something given to serve a higher cause - keeps Owen's concept of the human being on a plane above that reserved for him by most other poets of the War. Rosenberg's final figure is the corpse of "Dead Man's Dump" [39] while Blunden's simple unknowing private [40] and Read's "Happy Warrior" [41] are far removed from any concepts of the hero in English mythology.

This happy faculty for seeing God's face through mud keeps Owen's poetry close to his mood of sympathy. It is impossible to sustain a love for mankind if the image that one has is that of a madman, a fool or a cripple; these figures can draw pity but only because they have been deprived of some aspect of a complete man, and because they live in a world that is peopled by men who are complete and whole, their loss is compounded. Owen's total vision does not

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[38] Owen, p. 82.

[39] The Collected Poems Of Isaac Rosenberg, pp. 81 - 84.

[40] The Poems Of Edmund Blunden, "An Infantryman", pp. 160 - 161.

[41] Herbert Read, Poems 1914 - 1934, p. 39.

fall to make men less than the bravery, loyalty, resourcefullness, and honour that he saw in France. In this sense, he does not possess a fatal vision - there are returns from hell, and there are chances for expiation. The worst of mankind had strayed far from righteousness, but redemption is possible.

The final poem of the canon has the ominous title "The Next War", yet behind the sarcasm(and the irony), the refusal to concede, either to Death or to defeat,remains as a verdict of approval for the human race.

> Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death;
> Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland, -
> Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
> We've sniffed the thick green odour of his breath, -
> Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
> He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed
> Shrapnel. We chorused when he sang aloft;
> We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.
>
> Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
> We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
> No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.
> We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
> And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags
> He wars on Death - for lives; not men - for flags. [42]

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[42] Owen, p. 86.

V

ISAAC ROSENBERG

From descriptions of conditions on the British Front, it is difficult to understand how any poetry written on tour of duty managed to survive, or how it came to be written initially. Cramped, wet quarters, the interruptions of shells and the constant state of readiness demanded by the situation were hardly inducements to tranquil contemplation. Not all of war-poetry, in fact, only a very small percentage of it, came into being under these circumstances. Rest billets and the leisure of the army camps provided far better opportunities for putting one's thoughts down on paper than did the Front Line.[1] And several of the major figures, Sassoon and Owen especially, did most of their work in hospital, in France as well as back in England. But it was not impossible to find someone in a forward position giving the lie to the statement that England was a nation of shopkeepers by penning a poem while under fire. Just such a soldier was the man I wish now to consider, for Isaac Rosenberg is, in the strictest sense, a 'trench-poet'.

I have already pointed out that most of the war-poets were junior officers, fresh from civilian life, usually from the universities or prep schools with little or no previous military training. They were the ones who saw the War in its harshest terms, or, at least had the greatest adjustment to make in their attempts to reconcile their views on the wastage of human life with the governing principle of the War that 'they are expendable'. Their sensitivity and the responsibility they felt for their commands made them question the morality of calculated suffering and death that a career officer could accept, if not with alacrity, then with the knowledge that he was carrying out the orders of his superior officers which 'in their wisdom they had seen fit to give', no matter how much he might feel the irony of that

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[1] Edmund Blunden, "Foreword" of Up The Line To Death, p. vii.

statement or regret the necessity to carry out the order.

It is a major point of my thesis that these writers were genuinely concerned by the dichotomy of Christian nations attempting to annihilate each other for the justness of a national cause and the glory of God. And the reasons for their concern lie in the background of traditions, national, religious and social that they shared - a background which discouraged killing, felt death to be a loss and held that individual pain should be eliminated, not extended.

The poet I wish to deal with now is notable chiefly for arriving at the same conclusions about the War that his fellows did, but also, for arriving at them from a very different tradition and set of experiences in combat. Isaac Rosenberg had almost every disadvantage that a British soldier could bring to France with him. His parents were European and spoke German, he disliked almost all aspects of the army, he was unfit for military service because of a lung infection and he was Jewish. To aggravate these def iciencies, he was highly sensitive in a poetic sense and was a private in His Majesty's infantry. With an irony typical of the War, he saw more active service than any of the other war-poets. He remained at the Front for periods beyond which even the General Staff felt it unwise to demand duty. He was killed in the Somme retreat of 1918 after nearly two years of active service with only short respites from the Line.[2]

I stress the fact that the differences in race and temperament are large because almost every level of the army has a different picture of the war than the class immediatly above or below it. To this point, my paper has dealt with the officer class because it has dealt with poetry. Had I been writing on military history, the views given would have been those of Staff officers and generals, or economics, the war as seen by administrators and coordinators or cabinet ministers. I do not believe that I have been writing about the 'com-

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[2] Isaac Rosenberg, The Collected Poems Of Isaac Rosenberg, (Butler & Tanner: London, 1949), pp. vii - viii.

mon' man in any sense, except as his sufferings have been seen by the poets. Military histories, war poems, service records and the newspaper accounts dwell on his trials and tribulations more than he ever did himself. I have attempted to sketch in the more pleasant aspects of trench life to show that the War was not four years of unbroken Hell. If we add to these small diversions the general level of ignorance of a British infantry soldier (and I do not mean to be overly harsh on the British army; the same comment could be made about a collection of men from any nation chosen for their physical rather than their mental abilities), the sometimes patronizing attitudes of the officers are understandable. Herbert Read catches something of this mood in his poem "My Company".

> You became
> In many acts and quiet observances
> A body and a soul,entire.
>
> I cannot tell
> What time your life became mine:
> Perhaps when one summer night
> We halted on the roadside
> In the starlight only,
> And you sang your sad home-songs,
> Dirges which I standing outside you
> Coldly condemned.
>
> Perhaps, one night, descending cold
> When rum was very acceptable,
> And my doling gave birth to sensual gratitude.
>
> And then our fights: we've fought together
> Compact, unanimous;
> And I have felt the pride of leadership.
>
> In many acts and quiet observances
> You absorbed me:
> Until one day I stood eminent
> And saw you gathered around me,

Uplooking
And about you a radiance that seemed to beat
With variant glow and to give
Grace to our unity. . . . [3]

This is an expression of the reciprocal respect between an officer and the men he commands, but the very position of leadership cuts him off from being an 'equal' in the group. His place, and consequently, his view of the war is always apart from the private.[4] Rosenberg is the only poet who gives an account of the war through the eyes of a man in the ranks. I have pointed out that he is not representative of English Infantryman for several reasons, but he does catch pictures of the war that his fellow poets do not see.

Because of his racial and religious differences, he was denied one of the greatest consolations that life in the trenches could give, and his poem, "The Jew", is a bitter indictment against the men who talked about building a new world out of the ashes of the old one - of giving all men the chance to be free and equal. At a time when many soldiers were experiencing a loyalty to their group that they had not known before and seeing in the world around them brutalities which awoke humanitarian feelings they did not know they possessed, Rosenberg remained the victim of a deeper persecution than he had experienced in civilian life.

Moses, from whose loins I sprung,
Lit by a lamp in his blood

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[3] Herbert Read, Poems 1914 - 1934, (Faber & Faber: London, 1935), pp. 43 - 44.

[4] Edmund Blunden, ed. Great Short Stories Of The War, (Eyre & Spottiswoode: London, 1933), Introduction, p. xi.

Ten immutable rules, a moon
For mutable lampless men.

The blonde, the bronze, the ruddy,
With the same heaving blood,
Keep tide to the moon of Moses.
Why then do they sneer at me? [5]

This is an excellent example of a piece of poetry which draws an added effect by being written from a war-time situation. It is both a sad commentary on the human inability to rise above a petty prejudice and an insight into the poetic temperament of a man who had just cause to be bitter about the role which Fate cast for him.

Rosenberg's poetry seems to bear out my theory that the War set a pattern in writing which imposes itself over the individual impressions of the various poets, for in his work one finds all the major themes that I have outlined. Because of the racial and social differences which set him apart from the other men and the fact that he saw the War from the ranks, rather than as an officer, many of the things that impressed him are unique. A series of poems on the British campaigns in the Middle East serves as an example. His concern for the Jewish culture in Palestine is reflected in "The Burning Of The Temple", "The Destruction Of Jerusalem By The Babylonian Hordes", and "Through These Pale Cold Days"[6]. This is a part of the conflict that does not figure in English verse except as it influences men who are involved in that battle zone.

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[5] Isaac Rosenberg, The Collected Poems Of Isaac Rosenberg, (Schocken Books: New York, 1949), p. 71.

[6] Ibid., pp. 89 - 91.

Rosenberg uses different symbols,of course, when he attempts to describe powerfully moving experiences. The parallels are drawn from the Old Testament only as with "Chagrin",[7] a description of an attack through the simile of Absalom's'suspension'. This is a device resorted to frequently by the other poets and Owen's "The Parable Of The Old Man And The Young"[8] or Sassoon's "Ancient History"[9] use the same traditions for contrasts to the demonic present.

At an even smaller consideration, one finds in Rosenberg a style almost apocalyptic. His use of figures like 'star', 'spirit', 'space' and 'breath', along with an ability to deal in abstracts like 'love ', 'death', or 'Chaos', gives his poetry a prophetic quality not unlike some of the work of Blake. The reader must always 'work' with one of his poems to apply it to a particular situation, but here the total grasp of the poet often makes such labour well worthwhile. An example of this style is "Home-Thoughts From France":

> Wan, fragile faces of joy!
> Pitiful mouths that strive
> To light with smiles the place
> We dream we walk alive.
>
> To you I stretch my hands,
> Hands shut in pitiless trance
> In a land of ruin and woe,
> The desolate land of France.

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[7] Ibid. p. 65.

[8] The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, p.42.

[9] Collected Poems, p. 109. (The use of Biblical imagery and subject matter is almost a constant in war-poetry. Because it contrasts so effectively with the conditions of the War and the alleged goals of Christian nations, its use points up the essentially satiric mode of so much of this verse.)

Dear faces startled and shaken,
Out of wild dust and sounds
You yearn to me, lure and sadden
My heart with futile bonds. [10]

The reader cannot be sure whether the faces are those of actual Frenchmen, civilians caught up in the War, or whether they are the remembered faces from a dream of times past, or possibly the war-haggard faces of people back home who fear for the poet's safety. This ability to strike a mood without using a particularized setting is sometimes contrasted, sometimes combined with,pieces of description that match Owen's for their graphic detail and concern for visual effect. Such a piece is "Dead Man's Dump"[11] where the poet moves from the battlefield to a mental picture of the dead soldiers to an anthropomorphic connection with 'Dark Earth'.

It is impossible to draw a line between the artistic effects Rosenberg achieves through the use of cultural symbols that take on added meaning for us because they are not our own and the individual view he holds as a poet with personal techniques and methods of presentation. One never feels that he is being obtuse or ethnic as a pose to highlight his work.

The actual volume of Rosenberg's war verse is small in comparison with that of poets like Blunden and Sassoon, but he does manage to touch on the major themes of the image of man and his relationship

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[10] The Collected Poems Of Isaac Rosenberg, p. 74.

[11] Ibid., pp. 81 - 84.

to the world around him.

Greek myth provides the early figure of the soldier as hero. In the poem, "Soldier:Twentieth Century", the modern fighting man is placed above three cultural sources of the dominant-man, or leader.

> I love you, great new Titan!
> Am I not you?
> Napoleon and Caesar
> Out of you grew.
>
> Out of unthinkable torture,
> Eyes kissed by death,
> Won back to the world again,
> Lost and won in a breath,
>
> Cruel men are made immortal,
> Out of your pain born.
> They have stolen the sun's power
> With their feet on your shoulders worn. . . . [12]

"Girl To Soldier On Leave"[13] seems to be more a variant of the preceding poem than another approach to the same theme but here the connection between love and death is made, and the knowledge that man cannot have two loves - a love of War and a love for a maiden - and be true to both,is brought forth. This is de Rougement's conviction that both themes are present in the thinking of men in battle and the rejection of the woman is close to Owen's turning away from the alluring aspects of the female in "Greater Love".[14] Both poets have arrived at the same conclusions about war but have done so in very different ways of thought and expression.

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[12] Ibid., p. 87.

[13] Ibid., p. 88.

[14] The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 41. de Rougemont's discussion of the soldier as hero and lover appears in chapter V.

Rosenberg alters the view of the splendid Classic hero with his confrontation of army life. "The Troop Ship"[15] has affinities with one of the last pieces written by Rupert Brooke entitled "Fragment".[16] Both men catch, in their description of a ship full of soldiers, some of the pathos of men about to die and yet unaware of their approaching fate. The descriptions of men as sleepers, unaware of their high mission and intent only on gaining what repose they can, are a progress downwards to the visions of men unable to sleep or forced to sleep in death.[17] "In War" is the musing narration of how a man learned of the death of his brother. No moral can be drawn from the piece except that we are made to suffer and our brightest visions are mere diversions to keep us from looking too strongly at a relentless future.

The grim aspects of War occas ionally are lifted for a moment and the sufferers find release in a return to life through Nature. The ever-ready hand of Death stays just outside the poem "Returning, We Hear The Larks";[18]

> Sombre the night is.
> And though we have our lives, we know
> What sinister threat lurks there.
>
> Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know
> This poison-blasted track opens on our camp --
> On a little safe sleep.

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[15] The Collected Poems Of Isaac Rosenberg, p. 70.

[16] Rupert Brooke, The Collected Poems Of Rupert Brooke, (McClelland & Stewart, Ltd: Toronto, 1961), p. 157.

[17] Isaac Rosenberg, p. 76.

[18] Ibid., p. 80.

But hark! joy - joy - strange joy.
Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
Music showering on our upturned list'ning faces.

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song -
But song only dropped,
Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides,
Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,
Or her kisses where a serpent hides.

Compared to the rejuvenating influences of the animal-vegetable world, the world of man-made things is a depressing and destroying agent, intent on dehumanizing,and then annihilating the victims in its grip. The fear of the machine and the weapons that go beyond human control is the theme of this poem, and the note of defiance does not cancel out the knowledge that the machine will win eventually.

My eyes catch ruddy necks
Sturdily pressed back -
All a red brick moving glint.
Like flaming pendulums, hands
Swing across the khaki -
Mustard-coloured khaki -
To the automatic feet.

We husband the ancient glory
In these bared necks and hands.
Not broke is the forge of Mars;
But a subtler brain beats iron
To shoe the hooves of death
(Who paws dynamic air now).
Blind fingers loose an iron cloud
To rain immortal darkness
On strong eyes. [19]

The use of terms like 'automatic feet' and 'flaming pendulums' links the men of the first stanza with the 'blind fingers'of the

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[19] Ibid., "Marching", p. 66.

death-dealing machines in the second. Private soldiers, as well as officers, could see the double threat of the 'machine age' - the robot-like actions of men must go down to meet the 'subtler brain' of the emerging iron menace.

Rosenberg's most complete picture of the Inferno of the War is the poem I have already refered to, "Dead Man's Dump". I would offer this work as one most representative of the final poetic vision of the War. It incorporates the themes of unmourned death and the waste of human life with the view of unresponsive Nature into a piece that is at once an elegy and a satire. The poet laments for the dead and yet cannot lament;

> None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,
> Or stood aside for the half used life to pass
> Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,
> When the swift iron burning bee
> Drained the wild honey of their youth. [20]

Like many'war poems', it ends on a note of death that does not require a summation or an explanation. It could stop after a single episode or continue on to other men and other deaths. Like the War it is describing, its form depends only on the viewer. The techniques employed by the poet involve the use of contrast - the summoning of certain known responses by the use of phrases like:

> . . . their rusty freight
> Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,
> And the rusty stakes like sceptres old
> To stay the flood of brutish men
> Upon our brothers dear,

and the wealth of nauseating descriptive details of the field. They

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[20] Ibid., p. 81.

move from the microscopically 'real' and disgusting to the visionary and prophetic with passages like the following;

> Earth has waited for them
> All the time of their growth
> Fretting for their decay:
> Now she has them at last!
> In the strength of their strength
> Suspended - stopped and held.

And the contrasting pictures give a tone of unreality to the entire poem, so that with the conclusion, the reader must admit that there are levels here beyond his experience and comprehension.

As a reader of the "Trench Poems"[21] will see, I have given a fairly complete listing of Rosenberg's war verse. I have tried to point out, through biographical details, the separation of this man from the officer-poets whose work composes most of this paper. If the similarities in theme and technique seem clear, I will have accomplished my purpose. Rosenberg does not stand apart from Owen, Graves, or Sassoon. The War, in its effect upon the poetic temperament of these men, gave them a unified response to its horrors and few joys.

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[21] "Trench Poems" is the collection of war poems sent back to England by Rosenberg before his death. The designation is an editorial one and no evidence exists that either the order or the poems to be included had any shape in the poet's mind.

VI

SASSOON, BLUNDEN, GRAVES AND READ: A CONSIDERATION

I have chosen to discuss the poets of this chapter as a group because I feel that their work, while it uses the themes and subject matter of war-poetry, also displays certain characteristics that mark these men as members of a distinct social class. Their views of the War are much closer to the attitudes and beliefs of the generation that preceded them than of their own. They were 'aristocrats' in the best sense of the word, and by this I mean that they had a real feeling of responsibility about the conduct of the War and of their place in it, as well as a sincere desire to live up to the phrase 'officers and gentlemen' and the traditions that stood behind it. With the exceptions of the Sitwells and the Asquiths, none of the 'known' war-poets were titled men. The four under consideration came from families with backgrounds in the lower realms of the upper class, and the rank they assumed in the army corresponded to their civilian social status - they were junior officers in the thick of battle as they were relatively influential members involved with matters of politics, learning and the interests of culture in times of peace. All came from families with scholarly pursuits and a keen awareness of democracy, English history and the ideas of nationhood. The four men were well educated at the time of their enlistment and brought more than the usual degree of knowledge and ability to their new, if temporary, vocation.

I am not attempting to prove that these poets were the epitome of English manhood, but it is important to see them as men with exceptional potential and a well developed and highly demanding concept of the nation they were going to serve.

Their viewpoint was Arnoldian in that they saw Britain as a great concordat of three ways of life. It was the unwritten duty of their class, as the political and military leadership, to guide the nation through the pitfalls of international diplomacy, and when the ultimatums of foreign policy could no longer be disregarded, to render her a force to be reckoned with by her adversary. This class enjoyed the respect and wealth due to it, and, in turn it was obliged to be ever in readiness to meet whatever challenges might arise. In many ways the idealism of men in their position was greater than that of the average middle-class volunteer, as Leon Wolff's memoir[1] makes clear. The young men in a position like that of these writers saw themselves, and their class, as the first wall of defence for all that was good in England and the English way of life. Kipling's tribute, if it seems mawkish by present standards, seems to be valid in terms of the feelings of many people at that time.

> These were our children who died for our lands: they were dear in our sight.
>
> * * * * *
>
> At the hour the Barbarian chose to disclose his pretences,
> And raged against Man, they engaged, on the breasts that they bared for us,

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[1] Leon Wolff, In Flanders Fields, (Viking: London, 1958).

The first felon-stroke of the sword he had long-time
prepared for us -
Their bodies were all our defence while we wrought
our defences.

They bought us anew with their blood, forebearing
to blame us,
Those hours which we had not made good when the
Judgment o'ercame us.
They believed us and perished for it. Our statecraft,
our learning
Delivered them bound to the Pit and alive to the burn-
ing
Whither they mirthfully hastened as jostling for
honour -
Not since her birth has our Earth seen such worth
loosed upon her. [2]

* * * * *

This poem alludes to the first 'wave' of British volunteers for the campaigns of 1914 and 1915. By the time that the soldier-poets were ready to enter on active service the situation had not been rectified. The sacrifice was still being made, but the time for the repairing of the defences had been bought with no visible result in terms of national victory or well-being. These men were to question why. In none of their work does one find complaints about having to serve; the only real matter of concern is that other men with their positions to uphold were failing in their duties. This betrayal by members of their own class is the deeper sense of wrong that adds another level to the social criticism of these men. Often it is an exaggeration of facts, as frequently it is a generalization that could not be applied to even the majority of cases. But it is real

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[2] Rudyard Kipling, "The Children", in Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition, (Hodder & Stoughton:London,1960), p. 522.

and keenly felt sense of failure intensified by the vulnerability and isolation they knew in the trenches.

Added to this belief that their class had failed in its duty was the knowledge that they personally had not, and that the classes serving under them as privates and sergeants had been obliged to do more than their expected share in redeeming the errors and cowardice of their leaders.

Speaking of his own motives for writing and the technique he employed, Sassoon comments;

> At Flixécourt my mind and imagination had been my own. During the next three months my existence had been so completely identified with that of the battalion and those nearest to me in it that I had lived very little with my private self. My diary shows me making diligent efforts to be a selfless spectator, and I often felt like a student historian of those tragic, vivid, and profoundly moving scenes in the Somme country. On certain occas ions where initiative was needed I had indeed been able - somewhat recklessly - to rise above my plodding self, thereby earning the much valued respect of my companions. All this had changed my emotional outlook on the war, . . . The notes were soon afterwards developed into "The One-Legged Man" and "The Hero" /the notes refered to are those of his diary from this period and the poems appear on pages 25 and 29 respectively of the Collected Poems /, with a strong sense of satisfaction that I was providing a thoroughly caddish antidote to the glorification of the 'supreme sacrifice' and such-like prevalent phrases. These performances had the quality of satirical drawings. They were deliberately designed to disturb complacency. . . . In "Died Of Wounds" I had hit on a laconic anecdotal method of writing which astonished me by the way it inadvertently expressed my passionate feeling about the agonizing episode described. At the time, however, I did not realize the irony of my exulting in having done a fine piece of work, when I owed opportunity for it to the death of a pathetically youthful officer in the ward of the hospital at

> Amiens . . . Nor was I aware that, while it could be argued against the other two poems that they were merely a display of dextrous sarcasm, the graphic sincerity of "Died Of Wounds" was unanswerable . . . . [3]

I quote this passage at length because it brings together, as no other commentary I have found, so many of the factors in the writing of the war-poets in general, and these four men in particular. The respect for one's men and the pride of their respect in turn, the realization that there is an important difference between poetry that is effective by deliberate attempts to shock and poetry which draws its results in the recording of aspects of tragedy in life - these are hallmarks of the war-poet of the Great War. If we add to this the need to strike out at the civilian betrayers of a national ideal, the picture of any one of the four men I am considering is complete.

Siegfried Sassoon is most representative of the group and his social criticism extends beyond the scope of the War to include, in later years, politics, the upper classes and the English way of life generally.[4] His desire to annoy and his abilities in satire give his work a splenetic quality unmatched by any other of his contemporaries, and frequently the reader must ask if the point of the poem is really a fair one. Of all the work of these men, his is most able

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[3] Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey 1916 - 1920, (Faber & Faber: London, 1945), pp. 18 - 19.

[4] Poems like "Breach Of Decorum", p. 135, "The Case For The Miners", p. 137, and "At The Cenotaph", p. 201, are representative examples of this kind of work.

to impress initially and also to anger or annoy first.

An example of the ability to overgeneralize or to see events, both in France and back home, from only the Front-line point of view, is the poem entitled "Blighters"[5]:

> The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
> And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
> Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
> 'We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!'
>
> I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
> Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, sweet Home',
> And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
> To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

A first impression is that a combat soldier has made an accusation that civilians in Britain are enjoying the pleasures of life and the events of the War at the expense of the men caught at the Front. E.A. Macintosh makes exactly the same point in his poem, "Recruiting"[6] with the stanza:

> Leave the harlots still to sing
> Comic songs about the Hun,
> Leave the fat old men to say
> Now we've got them on the run.

And neither of these poems can be labelled 'invalid'. Many men shirked their duty, and the music halls did promote a kind of nationalist sentiment that did little to foster good relationships either during or after the conflict. But these poets failed to ever realize that the War involved citizens as well as soldiers, that it was a

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[5]Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, p. 21.

[6]E.A. Macintosh, "Recruiting" in Brian Gardner, Up The Line To Death, pp. 111 - 112.

war on all Fronts and that not all the suffering and grief occurred in Flanders. Kipling's poem, "A Recantation" gives the other side of the picture in an apology by the author to a prominent singer who had been informed just before her performance that her son had been killed in battle.

> . . . Never more rampant rose the Hall
> At thy audacious line
> Than when the news came in from Gaul
> Thy son had - followed mine.
>
> But thou didst hide it in thy breast
> And, capering, took the brunt
> Of blaze and blare, and launched the jest
> That swept next week the Front.
>
> Singer to children! Ours possessed
> Sleep before noon - but thee,
> Wakeful each midnight for the rest,
> No holocaust shall free! [7]

Neither poet has the monopoly on truth, but Sassoon's piece leaves little doubt about his feelings towards anyone not in uniform, while Kipling's gives a fairer appraisal of all parties involved.

A corollary to the theory that any man who was not fighting was some form of traitor or parasite, is the poem like "Memorial Tablet"[8] which contrasts the deeds of the labourer and clerk with the inactivity and cowardliness of the gentry:

> Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight
> (Under Lord Derby's scheme). I died in hell -
> * * * * *
>
> Two bleeding years I fought in France, for Squire:

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[7] Rudyard Kipling, "A Recantation: 1917", pp. 369 - 370.

[8] Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, p. 104.

I suffered anguish that he's never guessed.
Once I came home on leave: and then went west . . .
What greater glory could a man desire?

The social inequality that this poem points up might well be a part of the war experience of many men, but the dialogue of "Equality Of Sacrifice"[9] gives a more honest statement of affairs.

A. "I was a Have." B. "I was a 'have-not.'"
(Together) "What hast thou given which I gave not?"

This inability to see that the effects of the War extend beyond the immediate battlefield is a factor which frequently mars the verse of these writers, but their closeness to death and the hardships they underwent do exonerate them to some extent. Their naivety was not proportionately as great as that of the civilian population who seem to have had no real concept of life in the trenches until factual newspaper accounts and war verse were published.

Sassoon's style can, on occasion, rise above the direct and temporal to become more inclusive and apocalyptic, and it is these almost spiritual flashes which contrast so markedly with the 'revolver verse' and the social satire. Poems like "Night On The Convoy"[10] and "Aftermath"[11] deal with themes beyond the actual fighting and therefore appeal more to later generations intent on understanding the 'truth' about War. "Dreamers"[12] is a poem which catches the

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9 Rudyard Kipling, "Epitaphs Of The War" , pp. 386 - 392.

10 Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, pp. 101 - 102.

11 Ibid., pp. 118 - 119.

12 Ibid., p. 71.

death-in-life mood of the War in a way that only a poet could, and it sums up in its sonnet length much of the idea that David Jones sought to embody in In Parenthesis[13] - the otherworldliness of men close to death and their ability to move outside the present and back to a more happy past.

Sassoon's verse, like that of most of the surviving poets, cannot be said to end with the War. While it was impossible to carry over the viewpoints of the civilian world into the theatre of the War, it was not impossible to bring back attitudes developed in France and apply them to England as one found it after the fighting. "Road To Ruin",[14] Vigils[15] and Rhymed Ruminations[16] are continuations of social criticism started in the war years. In this sense, there is a consistency between the early poetry of Sassoon and his later work. He is a product of the War for two reasons. He portrayed the experiences he had in France in the light of humanitarian values which he has never renounced. As well, his early verse brought him fame and set a pattern for all his later techniques. In his dependence on satire for effect and in his retention of social themes first seen in the War, he differs from the three other members of this group.

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13 David Jones, In Parenthesis,(Faber & Faber;London, 1937).

14 Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, section 8, pp. 199-205.

15 Ibid., section 9, pp. 209 - 228.

16 Ibid., section 10, pp. 231 - 257.

Robert Graves shared many of the experiences of combat with Sassoon and they enjoyed each other's friendship during and after the War, but at this point similarity and mutual intent ends. For Graves, the War was an introduction to manhood; fresh from school, he stepped suddenly into a man's position and almost over-night he turned from a boy into an officer. The experiences of the War were not pleasant for him, despite some fond memories in Goodbye To All That.[17] In a way, the years in France seem to have influenced him more than any of the other poets and he has been at some pains to repress old memories and old poems. The rather cryptic comment as foreword to Collected Poems: 1959, does not tell the reader why the War was such a determining factor: "These poems follow a roughly chronological order. The first was written in the summer of 1914, and shows where I stood at the age of nineteen before getting caught up by the First World War, which permanently changed my outlook on life."[18]

Three years of service were rewarded by a disability pension earned by sustaining a case of mild shell-shock, and a chance to continue an interrupted education. The effects of the War became obvious more in retrospect than in the act, for, as an officer, Graves had had little of life to compare his experiences in France to. His two poems, both written years after the conflict, touch on what I feel to be the primary themes of war-poetry at this time.

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17 Robert Graves, Goodbye To All That (Penguin: London, 1960).

18 Robert Graves, Collected Poems: 1959, (Cassell: London, 1962), 3rd. ed. p.vii.

"Recalling War"[19] says as much about the attitudes of men engaged in it as volumes of autobiography:

> ... War was return of earth to ugly earth,
> War was foundering of sublimities,
> Extinction of each happy art and faith
> By which the world had still kept head in air,
> Protesting logic and protesting love,
> Until the unendurable moment struck -
> The inward scream, the duty to run mad. . . .

This is the same fatal vision that Owen and Aldington saw, and it is the same verdict that Rosenberg rendered on the War.

In another connection, "The Enlisted Man",[20] also written at a remove in time, is a good example of the feeling of a loss of personal freedom that plagued many men and officers who entered the Army from civilian life. I have noted the reasons for this attitude in an earlier section; suffice it to say that they were particularly important to men with temperaments like Graves and Read who valued independance of thought and action as essentials of existence.

> Yelled Colonel Corporal Punishment at Private Reasons:
> 'Rebels like you have no right to enlist -
> Or to exist!'
> Major Considerations leered approval,
> Clenching his fist,
> So no appeal, even to General Conscience,
> Kept Private Reason's name off the defaulter-list.

The poems written on active service are generally of two kinds; the first is a piece which shows the author's delight in telling a story, or recalling an incident, and the bizarre nature of many

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19 Robert Graves, Poems Selected By Himself, (Penguin: London, 1961), pp. 92 - 93.

20 Robert Graves, S.T.E.P.S., (Cassell: London, 1958), p. 251.

of these is an odd contrast to the grim, calculated aspects of death in wartime. The pieces I have in mind are poems like "Corporal Stare" and "An Occas ion"[21] where an already unpleasant situation is further complicated by elements of the supernatural, or the grotesque.

The second kind of poetry is that of the eulogy and the epitaph, and, like Robert Nichols's "The Burial In Flanders"[22], it is written for some particular friend or fellow officer.[23] These poems combine with pastoral reminiscences to give a view of War,not as harsh or demanding as Sassoon's,but nonetheless both cogent and sustained on the theme that war is hell.

Herbert Read is the War's best example of the psychological poet. Several of his descriptions match or exceed those of Owen in their graphic portrayal of men in battle. Poems like "Fear" and "The Happy Warrior"[24] offer no consideration to the view that wars can be glorious and men can be raised to greater glory by them. The sustained poems - "Naked Warriors"[25] and "The End Of A War"[26] are

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21 Poems (1914 - 1926), pp. 50 and 63 - 64.

22 Robert Nichols, Ardours And Endurances, pp. 46 - 47.

23 "The Dead Fox Hunter", p. 48 & "Goliath And David", p. 51.

24 Herbert Read, Poems 1914 - 1934, both pieces are on p. 39.

25 Ibid., pp. 31 -37.

26 Ibid., pp. 53 - 75. Both this and the foregoing piece are published separately by the same company.

descriptive pieces - the one of the entire war as it has been experienced by an individual and the other, an incident in the war as it was known by several people.

Francis Berry, in his sketch of Read's achievement, finds these poems to be inconclusive.

> It would, however, be too much to say that these brief annals attain anything in the nature of an understanding of war, as a motif in human history, or even of modern warfare. Finely objective and utterly cleansed of any self regard or indulgence as they are, war emerges from this collection of sketches and comment, as an unanswered problem. [27]

Owen's earlier point that a poet's duty is to warn might be invoked to suggest that possibly Read is not attempting an analysis of War. Rather, he,like the other soldier-poets, is attempting to record what war can do to man - what effects a battle situation has on the men who serve in it. Kneeshaw, crippled and aging makes,as his final hymn of praise, a song for the happiness, or, better, the contentment, he feels for the quiet world around him.

> . . . I stand on this hill and accept
> The flowers at my feet and the deep
> Beauty of the still tarn;
> Chance that gave me a crutch and a view
> Gave me these.
>
> The soul is not a dogmatic affair
> Like manliness, colour, and light;
> But these essentials there be:
> To speak truth and so rule oneself
> That other folk may rede. [28]

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[27] Francis Berry, Herbert Read, (Longmans: London, 1961), p.16.

[28] Herbert Read, Poems 1914 - 1934, p. 37.

Edmund Blunden, after Sassoon, the most prolific of the soldier-poets, was probably least effected by the events of 1916 - 1918. Of course it is impossible to enter into the personality of a man and trace causes and effects in the figure we see in the present day, but in his prose statement on the years of fighting he experienced there is little hint of the depths of horror and depression reached by men like Owen and Sassoon.

> . . . Let me look out again from the train on the way to England. We travel humbly and happily over battle-fields already become historic, bewildering solitudes over which the weeds are waving in the mild moon, houseless regions where still there are lengths of trenches twisting in and out, woods like confused ship-masts where amateur soldiers, so many of them, accepted death in lieu of war-time wages; at last we come to the old villages from which the battle of 1916 was begun, still rising in mutilation and in liberation. Then - not troubling overmuch about those droves of graceless tanks exercising and racing over the hill-top - we view Albert, pretty well revived, its tall chimneys smoking, its rosy roofs renewed and shining, and all about it the fields tilled, and the young crops greening. The mercy of nature advances. Is it true? . . . I might have known the war by this time, but I was still too young to know its depth of ironic cruelty. . . . No destined anguish lifted its snaky head to poison a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat. [29]

Blunden, like Graves, really came to know the War better in retrospect than in its actuality. ". . . but I was still too young to know its depth of ironic cruelty. . . ;" this should be the final statement by any man on whom the War exerted an influence. Those who felt they knew the whys and wherefores of things are seen now as

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29 Edmund Blunden, Undertones Of War, pp. 264 - 265.

reactionaries and 'old men' whose errors in judgment were responsible for many otherwise needless deaths. The war-poets made little pretence of understanding the intricacies of either the military situation or the longer aims of the conflict; they were concerned with the human beings involved and what war could,and was,doing to them. Blunden's high regard for the men he served with,and over,is apparent both in the poetry and in the prose. Poems like "The Watcher"[30] show a sympathy and regard that has nothing in it of condescension or superiority.[31] This attitude contrasts with Read's view in "My Company" or even Sassoon's "Twelve Months After"[32]. He understood the changes that the War had caused and he realized that it was a world apart from the life he had known previously.

> . . . We went, returned
> But came with that far country learned
> Strange stars, and dream-like sounds,
> changed speech and law are ours.[33]

But this poet's first love and greatest concern was the world of nature. To him, the world around reflected the world within. His love of the countryside made him see the tragedy of this war more clearly through contrasts between a rejuvenating vegetable and animal life and the pointless, purposeless death of men. He did not

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30 Ibid., p. 317.

31 Herbert Read, Poems 1914 - 1934, pp. 43 - 46.

32 U.T.L.T.D., p. 96.

33 Edmund Blunden, The Poems Of Edmund Blunden, "War's People", p. 192.

see Man as a threat to the realm of nature, but only as a threat to himself. Green leaves and flowers each new spring and summer seem to mock the decaying corpses that become only so much food for lower forms of life. I have already developed this parallel and contrast in an earlier part of the paper. Blunden is its best exponent.

A point seldom noted is this poet's sense of humour. It is not the laughter of a man like Sassoon, with a whip-lash effect on the reader, nor is it the tragically loaded humour of Owen in comments like;

> With him they buried the muzzle his teeth had kissed,
> And truthfully wrote the Mother, "Tim died smiling". [34]

The pieces I have in mind are poems like "Trench Nomenclature"[35] and "The Prophet"[36]. Here Blunden touches on the small ironies of the War in a manner at once pensive and funny. If one compares the latter poem with either a book like Ypres - A Panoramic History And Guide[37], written at the end of the conflict as a ghoul's handbook to modern history, or the bitter poem by Philip Johnstone, written in 1918, "High Wood"[38], the 'undertones' of Blunden's style become apparent. Without having to force a response from the reader, he manages

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[34] The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, "S.I.W.", pp. 74 - 75.

[35] The Poems Of Edmund Blunden, p. 173.

[36] Ibid., p. 158.

[37] Ypres - A Panoramic History And Guide, (Essex: New York, 1916).

[38] Philip Johnston, "High Wood" in U.T.L.T.D., p. 157.

to remain,at once,composed and droll.

Of all the soldier-poets, he is the one who has retained the best perspective. His poetry lacks the fierce condemnation of most of the other officers; only indirectly in comments like "With generals and lame privates both/ Such charms worked wonders . . ."[39] does one come to understand that he,too, felt the inequalities of War.

In these four writers, the Great War takes on a very British image. Their sense of what was right comes from a long and strict tradition of service and responsibility. Morality determines their poetic reaction to a greater extent than most of them would care to admit, and more than they were probably aware. Their concepts of fairness and equality are part of the structure of their way of life and when one comes to look closely at events of their time, the light that these attitudes give must be taken into account. To them the phrase 'World War' would apply only to the scope of the fighting, not to their reaction to it. For them, the War was often a personal thing - a coming to grips with a hostile, distorted world. In their refusal to compromise, either in their personal conduct or in the truths they attempted to impart in their writing, they attain a stature worthy of their ideals.

They were sometimes overly demanding on their fellows, especially the people not directly involved in the War, and they

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39 The Poems Of Edmund Blunden, "Concert Party:Busseboom", pp. 148 - 149.

could, at times, become too expansive over the deeds of their comrades-in-arms. But, when one considers the circumstances under which they wrote - the mental conditions even more than the physical - the accuracy, the objectivity, and the justice of their comments is remarkable.

The verdict all of them would treasure most is that given by A.P. Herbert.

> And I said, 'There is still the river, and still the stiff stark trees:
> To treasure here our story, but there are only these';
> But under the white wood crosses the dead men answered low,
> 'The new men know not Beaucourt, but we are here - we know.' [40]

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[40] A.P. Herbert, "Beaucourt Revisited", U. T. L. T. D., p. 122.

VII

CONCLUSION

An assessment of the work of the soldier-poets of the Great War poses most of the problems that I have outlined in my introduction. In a rhyming letter to Robert Nichols during the winter of 1917, Robert Graves states the fundamental difficulty:[1]

> . . . Robert, how can I rhyme
> Verses at your desire -
> Sleek fauns and cherry-time,
> Vague music and green trees,
> Hot sun and gentle breeze,
> England in June attire,
> And life born young again, . . .?
> Why should I keep him time?
> Why in this cold and rime,
> Where even to dream is pain?
> No, Robert, there's no reason;
> Cherries are out of season,
> Ice grips at branch and root,
> And singing birds are mute.[2]

Graves's description, besides being a picture of the coldest winter of the war, is one of this particular war itself. The Great War was more than an interruption in the lives of several million individuals; it was a suspension in time of several cultures. When one considers the changes that the War brought about in all fields of human endeavour - transportation, medicine, learning, trade - the list is almost endless. But there was almost nothing in the conflict

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[1] The poem refered to is "A Faun's Holiday" found on pp. 69 - 136 of Robert Nichols's Ardours and Endurances.

[2] Robert Graves, Poems 1914 - 1926, pp. 62 - 63.

itself which had either permanence or desirability, except the wish for death that marks the last stages of war-weariness. "Cherries are out of season" is a metaphorical way of saying that the situation is not conducive to poetic creation. And this is my reason for suggesting that almost all war-poetry of this period is social in its purpose. The atmosphere of the War simply did not allow for the writing of any verse other than that demanded as an outcry against War. Graves offers a reprimand of sorts to Nichols for using a theme from another way of life that has as its basis a belief in a world forever green and living. In this sense, war-poetry must be considered in terms other than those employed in evaluating poetry from 'normal life'.

A second difficulty is the system of values imposed by a war-time situation. Along with the unusually heightened emotions of love, anger, fear and hatred, one must consider the changed aesthetics and morality of the Front. Poetic truth, if it is difficult to define in a peace-time world, is an impossible abstraction in time of war. A poet is capable of portraying aspects of his world, but any hopes of objectivity or dispassioned statement must be held off until a period of consideration and greater perspective. This is the case with Blunden's afterthoughts on the years of his service. As any reader will see, the theme of Undertones Of War is markedly different from that of the war verse. The great difference is the element of uncertainty that is prominent in the work written during war-time. There are no absolutes or constants in the suspension between the

declaration of war in 1914 and the much hoped for, but unsuspected, peace four years later.

And this is Owen's point in his preface.

> My subject is War and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.
> Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why true poets must be truthful.
> (If I thought the letter of this book would last, I might have used proper names; but if the spirit of it survives - survives Prussia - my ambition and those names will have achieved themselves fresher fields than Flanders. . . .) [3]

I suppose that there are many reasons why the work I have been considering can not be regarded as a major period of English literature. None of the men are outstanding poets, or men of the first rank; rather the combined canon of their work in this area must be employed to gain a complete view of the times. In other words, my considerations are those of an anthologist rather than a biographer. Secondly, war-poetry is a tragic vision and it offers no release from the world it describes. The torments and tribulations that its heroes undergo have no corresponding rewards, and the hell in which they act and suffer is not altered or destroyed by their actions. Peace, when it comes, is too late for many and too futile for most. It is not attained by their actions and will be lost again despite their warnings and attempts to sustain it.

Such a theme cannot have an enduring appeal. It will be re-invoked in times of stress and trouble, but it will be ignored

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[3] The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen, p. 31.

in times of plenty and peace. And if the belief of the soldier-poets is correct - that war will return despite man's efforts to avoid it - then, possibly, we are right in ignoring a theme so fatal and unpleasant until we must face it ourselves in our own time.

Owen's use of the word 'truth' bears some consideration. If the war-poets wrote from a need to respond to a situation too awful or too frustrating to bear, then the essence of their work must be a portrayal of human life in all its nakedness - a stripping away of all pretence, all glamour. I hope that I have shown that this is an idealization. Frequently these men overstated elements of horror for dramatic effect, as often they utilized national and religious symbols to point up the falseness they felt existed in the civilian's view of the War. Even the most 'sincere' poetry does not escape from charges of being overly dramatic or using descriptive techniques for artistic, rather than humanitarian,motives. But, by and large, there is as little of the 'imaginative', in a pejorative sense, about this material as one can hope to find in a literary grouping of almost any kind. The reason for this, as I have already suggested, is the poet's initial disinclination to write at all. With the feeling of duty goes a corresponding desire for accuracy and precision in the completed work.

Finally, to end in a more optimistic mood, war-poetry did make several contributions to the larger scheme of English literature. It restored to some extent both an element of truth and a belief in poetry with a purpose that much poetic theory of the turn of the

century lacked. Whether this is an immutable rule of 'great literature' or not will be a matter for later ages; to the present, the turn by Great War poets from the subject matter and techniques of the Georgians is generally viewed as a form of progress.

Modifications and innovations in poetic technique have also been mentioned already. The use of dream situations, contrasting verse forms and styles from elegiac and lyric originals (The verse form of the poem by Graves, "To R.N." mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is Skeltonic and the turns to the 'New Poetic' in fragment pieces like Herbert Read's "Movement Of Troops", (also mentioned previously) are indications that the war poets were both influenced by, and in turn influenced, the literary climate of their day.) The fact that they are considered as a group of men brought together by the subject they wrote about is another reason for believing that war-poetry does not fit into the patterns of peace-time literature. During the war two poetic worlds existed side by side, the one in London aware of and interested in the one in France; the writers of the War striving to interpret the new situations and events of this chaos, and employing whatever techniques seemed most efficient in conveying their message.

Finally, and this is the paradox of war-poetry, despite the theme of suffering and death that marks the logical extension of its subject, the poetry of the Great War cannot be regarded as an area of complete darkness and futility. Through all the descriptions of disgust, despair and hopelessness runs the single positive chord

of faith in the ideals that Englishmen held at the outset of the fighting. Men can be betrayed, and they can lack courage and they can be killed, but this does not cancel out loyalty, courage and the will to live. The determination to abide by these precepts "that kept our courage straight" is possibly a non-poetical consideration. But it is a literary value when it determines the direction of the work these men produced. The final portrait of their lives and art might well be the one Rudyard Kipling drew during the same war of another Englishman who maintained that man's greatest struggle is always the war within:

> He mapped for those who follow
> The world in which we are -
> "This famous town of Mansoul"
> That takes the Holy War. [4]

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[4] Rudyard Kipling, "The Holy War: 1917", pp. 289 - 290.

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