

BEN TOWNSEND

On the Front Lines of an Empire: The Rhetoric of Poetry of the First World War

Here we do lie, dead but not discontent

—Joseph Lee, 1917

Joseph Lee is a little-known poet of World War I. His epigram, though it contradicts a modern view of World War I and poetry that came out of it, actually defined the war experience for most British soldiers. In fact, the myth that those soldiers went into war with great hopes of reliving old myths and left it disillusioned, is simply not true. Evidence proves the counter, that right through the end of the war most believed in the old values of duty, honor, and courage.

In the Somme attack of 1916, one the most destructive battles in human history, Captain W.P. Neville gave out four soccer balls, one to each of his platoons, and offered a prize to the platoon that kicked the first over the German line. Neville was killed, as were nearly 60,000 in the eleven-division, 110,000-man attack on July 1, the first day of the Somme offensive.¹

Paul Fussell says of the attack, “the pattern in 1916 was that of one vast optimistic hope leading to one vast ironic catastrophe.” Known after as “The Great Fuck-Up,”²

¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

the battle of Somme has come to symbolize the dramatic and situational irony of The First World War: In their minds, the soldiers were playing an ancient game, one in which they had the upper hand; but in reality, war had changed and man, even with great courage, was no match for the technology he faced. In 1916 men still believed whole-heartedly in the old ideals of duty, valor, and courage. By the end of the war, men would realize that that dream was no longer compatible with the realities of modern warfare.

But then, before the Somme offensive, that new reality had yet to take shape. On July 1, at 7:30 in the morning, across a thirteen-mile front, 110,000 men, in broad daylight, charged toward firing machine guns kicking soccer balls. Fussell calls it an “absence of cleverness.” Why did British not attack at night? Why did they march straight into firing machine guns? Irrational though it may seem, in fact most believed that many courageous men could still beat out a few machine guns. Ivor Gurney wrote of that feeling of optimism.

Suddenly into the still air burst thudding
And thudding, and cold fear possessed me all,
...
But still a hope I kept that we there going over,
I in the line, I should not fail, but take recover
From others' courage, and not as coward be known.⁴

As with much pre-Somme Offensive poetry, situational irony runs deep: Despite their hopefulness, soldiers faced slim chances of survival.

One cannot help but see in the Somme, a repeat of the Battle of Balaclava, which took place in 1854. In that battle 637 men charged on horseback against the Russians. Of those, 247 were killed. That event would have been strong in the memory of the highly literate British troops, not necessarily because military history was important to them, but because it had been mythologized by Tennyson in his poem “The Charge of Light Brigade,”⁵ which most would have read and known. The parallels between Tennyson’s poem, which became myth, and the absurd plan enacted on July 1, 1916 are striking. Tennyson’s poem begins:

Half a league half a league,

3 Ibid., 13.

4 Ivor Gurney, “On Somme,” in *The Penguin Book of War Poetry*, edited by George Walter (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 125.

5 Accessed April 1, 2013, <http://www.nationalcenter.org/ChargeoftheLightBrigade.html>.

Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred:
'Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns' he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

In the second stanza, the cavalry charges gallantly into enemy gunfire, "Into the valley of Death," not knowing that "Some one had blunder'd," and mistakenly sent them into direct fire. Even so,

Theirs is not to make reply,
Theirs is not to reason why,
Theirs is but to do and die,

And they charge, regardless of whether the decision was right or wrong. "Boldly," the brigade rides "Into the jaws of Death" and they break through the enemy line and "Cossack and Russian . . . Reel'd from the sabre-stroke." The 247 who return, "Back from the mouth of Hell," are regarded as heroes, and those killed are honored. Tennyson's poem ends by eulogizing the dutiful men:

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wonder'd.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!

That there was not mutiny before or after Haig's call to send 110,000 men in broad daylight into direct machine gun fire suggests that Tennyson's myth was at work.⁶ The charge on Somme parallels exactly the story of the 600 who charged into Russian fire. In more situational irony, no one today interprets the Somme Offensive through Tennyson's poem.

⁶ As would have been Southey's biography of Nelson, especially Nelson's dying words—"Thank God I have done my duty"—which would have been known by every English schoolchild.

An earlier poem by Coleridge, written in 1798 when Britain was under attack from France, suggests a similar fortitude in the face of invasion.⁷ In “Fears of Solitude” he writes,

Secure from actual warfare, we have loved
To swell the war-whoop, passionate for war! . . .
The which we pay for as a thing to talk of,
Spectators and not combatants! . . .
We send our mandates for the certain death
Of thousands and ten thousands! Boys and girls,
And women, that would groan to see a child
Pull off an insect’s leg, all read of war,
The best amusement for our morning meal! . . .
As if the soldier died without a wound;
As if the fibres of this godlike frame
Were gored without a pang; . . .
As though he had no wife to pine for him,
No God to judge him! Therefore, evil days
Are coming on us, O my countrymen!
And what if all-avenging Providence,
Strong and retributive, should make us know
The meaning of our words . . .

The poem is first an indictment of the British people for their passive patriotism. He is critical of “spectators and not combatants.” He compares English people to children pulling the legs off of insects, who do not see the pain and gore, though they are amused reading of war. Coleridge’s compassion for the soldier is further shown in his description of the soldier as “godlike.” Coleridge warns of “evil days” to come and then sends a patriotic call to action:

Stand forth! Be men! Repel an impious foe,
Impious and false, a light yet cruel race,
Who laugh away all virtue . . .

Though he indicts the British spectators, he is not disillusioned about war and its just purpose. These self-righteous poems, and many more like them, are reflective

⁷ Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of The Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 7.

of English attitudes toward war before 1914. As Silkin notes, a nation needs to always find “patriotic pretext to fight an ideological war.”⁸ That “patriotic pretext,” imbedded in and inherited from the war poetry of pre-1914, informed the attitude, language, and action of soldiers entering the war. Theirs was a war that was, at the beginning, defined by high-sentence, sophisticated poetry.

Though it would not be written about extensively as such until after the war, the events had been put in place for a new myth, one that did not see the soldier as virtuous or dutiful. The myth of the soldier by World War II would reverse over ten thousand years of literary history. At the advent of the machine gun, Homer became a more distant, romantic memory than ever before. Though the ideals of war would still survive among humans, in literature, those ideals would be satirized, critiqued, destroyed. When H.G. Wells called World War I “The war that will end war,” he was partly right. In a literary sense, the myth and literary experience of war would not survive for much longer.

But at the beginning of World War I, those ideals were stronger than ever. The British had built an empire over the past few hundred years that reached across globe. Quite literally, the British Empire was one on which the sun never set, as Kipling said, “from palm to pine.” Because it had grown so strong, the British people had enjoyed many years of peace and prosperity, and with that came education. Paul Fussell notes that “the belief in the educative powers of classical and English literature was still extremely strong,” and that most education was seen “in humanistic terms.”⁹ Further, because of Victorian and Edwardian reforms, that humanistic education reached across social and economic classes. The age harnessed an immense respect for literature, and volumes such as *The World’s Classics* and *Everyman’s Library*, created a national literature available to the masses. Fussell notes that their were “few of any rank”¹⁰ who had not read and studied the English canon. In a time without radio or television, poetry and literature was at the center of discussion. To understand World War I, we must see it through the English literary canon at the beginning of the twentieth century. These were a literary people who saw the war through the old texts.

The body of poetry these literary people produced is surprisingly diverse in tone, ranging from satirical and critical, even treasonous,¹¹ to dutiful and patriotic, as

8 Ibid., 6.

9 George Walter, *The Great War*, 157.

10 Ibid.

11 Heather Lusty, “Shaping the National Voice: Poetry of WWI,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 30:1 (Autumn 2006): 199-200. As Lusty notes, one poet, Siegfried Sassoon, narrowly avoided military tribunal for his rhetoric of dissent. It was his poet friend, Robert Graves, who convinced the review board to instead send Sassoon to Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburg. Sassoon later returned to war, apparently more reckless and daring than ever.

seen above. A “field diligently plowed over the last decade by Modernist scholars,”¹² the poetry of the First World War provides a literary picture of the Empire at its height and before its fall, when a highly literate public saw a modern war through medieval eyes. It is for that reason that that body of poetry presents critical problems in understanding western attitudes toward war at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is body of poetry that has been unevenly studied and misunderstood.

One problem with reading this poetry is that in this post-fascist, post-World War literary world, the *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* philosophy seems to use Orwell’s description of the poetry of Kipling, “morally insensitive.”¹³ Today, the enlightened person is one with an anti-war perspective and an eye toward poetry that mirrors that moral-ethical position. It has become, therefore, virtuous, if not fashionable, to repudiate imperialism because the world has seen what it can bring about. Out of its context, the prefascist¹⁴ poetry of World War I seems the uncivilized rhetoric of the ignorant, illiterate class. But in actuality, the opposite is true. The readers and writers of that poetry were incredibly literate, and for that reason their reality was focused as well as fogged by the illusions and myths of the past.

The conservative message that men should give their lives for their country, that peace at home has a price, that love of country supersedes love of family or self, has become unpopular in the well-intentioned, liberal literary world. As a result, the poetry of the British Empire, important as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century, has been skewed so much by modern notions of morality that to defend it today seems insensitive. This paper aims not to defend that literature and the prefascism it extols, but to understand it in its own time and place.

As George Walter, editor of *The Penguin Book of World War Poetry* notes, the expanded readership of early twentieth century England created a boom in demand for poetry, in particular, war poetry, which provided access to the image of the war on the front.¹⁵ Being able to read and write, having studied the basic elements of poetry and war rhetoric, the soldiers on the front were able capture

12 Ibid., 203.

13 George Orwell, “Rudyard Kipling: Review of Kipling’s Verse,” *Horizon*, February 1942.

14 Ibid. Orwell’s term.

15 *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (new ed., New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), xxiv. Walter claims, for example, that “by 1926, the combined sales of *1914 and Other Poems* and the later *Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: With a Memoir* had reached 300,000 in Britain alone.” Other popular titles Walter lists include: *A Crown of Amaranth*; *Refining Fires*; *Songs of Youth and War*; *Soldier Poets: Song of the Fighting Men*, *The Seamen, Soldiers, and Flying Men Who Are Serving, or Have Served in The Great War*; as well as collections from magazines and newspapers.

poetry of World War I is far from arresting. Its importance then and today is not its art so much as it is its historical importance in shaping and mirroring the national voice at the end of the Empire.

Thanks to those Edwardian and Victorian reforms, a “basic level of literacy previously unseen in Britain”²⁰ harnessed this amorphous literary picture of war. That poetry, in an age when art was trending toward realism, paints a picture of soldiers who had not forgotten about glory, valor, and virtue. In the shadow of the Empire, there remained a faith in the old ideas of war, still visible today in Homer, Southey, Tennyson, Kipling. That is not to say that poetry does not depict war as awful. It does that, too. But to regard Eliot or Hemingway as representative of the entire body of literature of that period is inaccurate. While it may seem irrational, the idea that death is a “gallant sacrifice” is clearly reflective in much of the poetry of that newly literate world.

In 1914, a critical need for soldiers brought young, educated volunteers. At that time, recruits with a public education were accepted immediately as officers with the assumption “that a public-school education would endow a young man with the self-confidence and assurance necessary to lead, while also ensuring that he would have a highly developed sense of duty and self-abnegation.”²¹ Vandiver tells us that public schools had formed in the young men a sense of classical duty by fostering the reading of classics that romanticized war and chivalry. One thing taught in those schools was the value of sport, in which students learned to be committed and passionate, to play fair, and to accept pain without complaining. These games, in conjunction with scholarship, produced patriotic soldiers.

Another reason, Walter notes, for the increased demand for war poetry has to do with the changing face of war at home. As illustrated in Kipling’s early works, the wars of the eighties and nineties were “geographically remote and fought by small professional armies”²² World War I was different. By the time the Armistice was signed, nearly eight million²³ men and women had participated. Literally at their doorstep, war became the imminent threat of the nation, and death, the complex problem of the era. In the few decades prior to World War I, through the expansion period, the middle class lived comfortably while the lower class fought gallantly on the frontier.²⁴ Kipling’s poetry survives as one of the only literary pictures we have of those wars. In contrast, World War I was a total war fought by all of Britain.

20 Walter, *War Poetry*, xi.

21 Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trenches*, Achilles, 33.

22 *Ibid.*, x.

23 *Ibid.*

24 This is Orwell’s point in his review of Kipling.

The literature of that period seems irrational, ethically immoral, and uncivilized by today's measure. But by its own measure, it is a body of literature that represents an attitude toward empire that the modern world has yet to witness again.

As the demand for troops increased into the war, so did the demand for poetry. One reviewer, L.B. Gillet, wrote in 1919 for *The North American Review*,

The war has stirred the world into poetry More than five hundred volumes of original verse had been published since the beginning of the war, and the number must be double or treble that now. The output of war verse in Germany by civilians alone is reported to be upwards of a million pieces!²⁵

Did people really develop a greater appreciation for poetry? Probably not. Orwell, to explain the popularity of Kipling's "good bad" poetry, makes note of the importance of mnemonic character of good bad poetry in helping us to identify our own complex feelings toward war and country more easily. He calls a good bad poem a "graceful monument to the obvious,"²⁶ recording "some emotion which very nearly every human being can share."²⁷ That same argument can be made for the good bad poetry of World War I.

Take, for example the final two stanzas from A.E. Housman's "On the idle hill of summer":

East and west on fields forgotten
Bleach the bones of comrades slain,
Lovely lads and dead and rotten;
None that go return again.

For the calling bugles hollo,
High the screaming fife replies,
Gay the files of scarlet follow:
Woman bore me, I will rise.²⁸

In the first two stanzas (not shown above), the speaker sits "sleepy" and "idle" on a hill. He is unmoved, spiritless, and bored with nothing for which to live. As he sits, he begins to hear steady drumming, "like noise in dreams," and though he

25 L.B. Gillet, "Poets in the War," *The North American Review* 209:763 (June 1919), 822.

26 George Orwell, "Review of Kipling's Verse."

27 Ibid.

28 A.E. Housman, "On the idle hill of summer," in *War Poetry*, 1.

knows that the soldiers march “all to die,” that “lovely lads” are “dead and rotten,” he chooses irrationally to “rise” and join. The idle lad is relieved of his emptiness upon becoming a soldier. He is not a wasteland. Quite the opposite, he is seized by the opportunity to fulfill his destiny. Having been born in England, he’ll die there too.

The soldier’s life in this poem, and also in other poetry of the war, is a life lived to its fullest. The soldier, pushed to his physical limit, experiences the extremes of emotion while confronting death head on. In that way, poetry becomes the perfect instrument of patriotism, the antibody to a nation’s immune system, during war. By turning war into a transcendent experience and England into mythic symbol, poetry could become a safeguard against mutiny, glue to the nation’s crumbling ego. The final line of Housman’s poem, “Woman bore me, I will rise,” stands as a memorable monument to that feeling of patriotism.

It is important, though, to discriminate between Literature and pop-poetry. Eliot’s “Burial of the Dead,” for example, is clearly distinguished today as Literature. Housman’s poem, sentimental and clichéd, avoids a meditation on the psychology of war in the human. Though the contrasting emotions of duty to country and the desire to live surface, the mindless choosing of duty over self-preservation reduces this poem to an advertisement for the army. Housman’s poem, therefore, seems more propaganda than poetry. Still, Housman’s poem and poems like it are important. That they were published so extensively through the war shows that the nation still believed in the old values.

Poems like Housman’s are a testament to the enthusiasm felt by many toward war and fighting for one’s country. While spiting the awfulness of trench life and military bureaucracy, soldier poets still seemed to find it valorous to die for England. In “August, 1914,” for example, John Masefield writes,

But we knew the misery of the soaking trench,
The freezing in the rigging, the despair
In the revolting second of the wrench
When the blind soul is flung upon the air,

And died (uncouthly, most) in foreign lands
For some idea but dimly understood
Of an English city never built by hands
Which love of England prompted and made good.²⁹

29 John Masefield, “August, 1913,” in *War Poetry*, 9-11.

As with Housman's "Idle hill," war provides this speaker with the opportunity to be a part of something greater than himself. In many ways, while "the misery of the soaking trench" and the "freezing in the rigging" are miserable, the experience of war is transcendent in its rhetoric. One part of that transcendent experience is participating in England's mythic literary and historical past. Isaac Rosenberg's, "Soldier, Twentieth Century," for example recalls those myths:

I love you, great new Titan!
Am I not you?
Napoleon and Caesar
Out of you grew.³⁰

England in this poem takes on its mythic size. Like the Roman legions who marched against the ancient Gallic tribes, the English marched against the Kaiser.³¹ Launcelot Dowdell would employ the trope too in "French War Song":

Charge on! And keep the sacred name
Of France unsullied still,
Which never German tribe could tame,
Nor Caesar's iron will.³²

Of course here Caesar is a metonym for the invading force, not a leader. It is important to see him as a symbol rather than an historical figure, one who represents both a "wise leader" and a "brutal invader."³³ Rome, too, was a unfixed symbol, as here in H.D. Rawnsley's "A French Mother's Message," Rome is an ancestor to France:

Say not the race is decadent; the power
That made so great the mothers of old Rome
On Latin soil, immortality shall live
As long as mothers thus their sons can give.³⁴

30 Isaac Rosenberg, "Soldier, Twentieth Century," in *War Poems*, 24.

31 Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21.

32 *Ibid.*, 22.

33 *Ibid.*, 24.

34 *Ibid.*

Whether symbolic of aggression or greatness, Rome and Caesar as points of reference locate the soldier's experience in ancient literary history. Regardless of the allusion's agenda, it suggests a persistence of classical culture and ideals, not an abolishment of them.

Those ideals are alive in Kipling, who through England's later decades of Empire building served as war correspondent. He writes here in "For All We Have and Are," about "iron sacrifice" of "body, will, and soul." He encourages the giving up of life for this "goal."

No easy hope or lies
Shall bring us to our goal,
But iron sacrifice
Of body, will, and soul.
There is but one task for all—
One life for each to give.
Who stands if Freedom fall?
Who dies if England live?³⁵

And here, in Edward Thomas's, "This is no case of petty right or wrong," war is an act of love of country more than it is an act of hating an enemy.

I hate not Germans, nor grow hot
With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers
...
God save England, lest
We lose what never slaves and cattle blessed.
The ages made her that made us from dust:
She is all we know and live by, and we trust
She is good and must endure, loving her so:
As we love ourselves, we hate her foe.³⁶

These were the conservative philosophies that served the British nation through its most prosperous times. At beginning of the war, this was the conservative, patriotic lens through which soldier poets saw the war.

But recently, the impression of that time period has changed. "Put simply," says George Walker, "modern anthologies tend to only favour those poems which

35 Rudyard Kipling, "For All We Have and Are," in *War Poems*, 12-13.

36 Edward Thomas, "This is no case of petty Right or Wrong," in *War Poetry*, 15.

stress the suffering of those who endured it . . . Such a limited body of work fits all the more easily into the Owenesque narrative of war experience.”³⁷ A negative effect of the marginalization of such a huge body of work is, according to Walter, a “distorted but enduring image of what the poetry of the First World War is actually like.”³⁸ The problem with that kind of limited understanding is that it translates to disillusionment toward war, its purpose, and its effect. While the romantic, classical rhetoric of war, valor, and duty remains incompatible with the philosophy of modern, highly literate humans toward war, the realistic in that body of work speaks to a modern perspective.

Martin Armstrong’s “Before the Battle,” for example, provides a vivid, realistic, description of trench warfare; however, its view toward war is not necessarily critical. It begins,

Here on the blind verge of infinity
We live and move like moles.”³⁹

These are two unsettling images. The first, a trench on the boundary of a place without boundaries (presumably what exists after death, and also the frontier of the empire), has the effect of bringing the immediacy of death, felt on that frontier, to the reader. There, on that edge, where death is so near, men are reduced to blind, burrowing animals. From that wide angle perspective, the “land is dead” and the “sky is waterlogged” and the “whining sorrow of slow shells / Flies overhead.” The speaker then recalls the image of happy war scene. In a split screen, we see both images: the happy memory and the grim present. In the grim present, the speaker remembers young men running “naked by the river . . . Their boots and shirts and khaki lay in rows.” One man stands naked “like ivory in the sun” and many swim gleefully in the “clear watery mirror.” He recalls a bugler sounding and the men dry off, get clothed, and “gradually the bright and flashing crowd” is “dimmed into sober khaki.” Remembering the past, the speaker recalls: “loud / Laughter and shouts and songs died at a word. / The ranks fell in: No sound, no movement stirred.” The men march off and the scene fades. We are back in the grim present, stuck in the trench.

37 George Walter, *War Poetry*, xxxii.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Martin Armstrong, in *War Poetry*, 88-91.

The speaker remembers that those young men are dead and gone, that they can
... no longer now
Cast running shadows on the grass or make
White tents with laughter shake
But lie in narrow chambers underground,
Eyes void of sunlight, ears unthrilled by sound
Of laughter.

And what in his dream seemed a green and life-filled landscape becomes a

... grim, charred skeleton of land
Where ruined homes and shell-ploughed fields are lost
In one great sea of clay, clay seared by fire,
Battered by rainstorms, jagged and scarred and crossed
By gaping trench-lines hedged with rusted wire.

In his trench, the “evening fades” and night descends leaving a “Silence that is not peace but bated breath The quivering prelude to tremendous noise.” In the final stanza, the soldier asks for “one more day of sun and leaves.” In the night, he imagines dawn, when “destruction” will wreck the silence and men will form rank, “climb the trench, and cross the wire and start.”

The tone of Armstrong’s poem is not political. It makes no case to end war, neither does it condemn nor condone England. Even at the end of the poem, the soldiers march with “good heart” through the “shell-bursts.” Though one thing is clear: These are not the soldiers from Homer’s *The Iliad*, or Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade,” who fight constantly and gallantly. Nor is it Jack Tar or Kipling’s Tommy—dutiful and patriotic. The poem suggests, instead, a soldier who is quite aware of the realities of battle and the romance of memory. He is struck by the “empty gloom” of war. His rhetoric is absent of the high diction so present in Kipling and Thomas. Still, the poem is not anti-war. While it does somewhat follow the “Owenesque narrative” of the disillusioned soldier, it is absent of ridicule or invective.

The grim outlook of World War I that reflects back to us today comes from this kind of realism paired with Owen’s critical outlook on war and its purpose. We are more familiar, for example, with these lines from Owen’s “Exposure”:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife 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.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire.
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?⁴⁰

Notice that Owen's countryside is not served by the classical literary cannon of the time. Nature is hostile to man.⁴¹ Winds are "merciless" and "knife" the soldiers. The myth to Owen has been reduced to a "dull rumour." Nugate writes on Owen that "Owen's 'narrative', by comparison, is of people who suffer and die, not the people who applaud and sanctify."⁴² That implied invective is clear in Owen's diction. The winds are harsh; the silence is tense; the experience is worrying. The soldiers are defined by inaction, their "watching," listening, "twitching," and waiting, not by their action.

The rhetorical question, "What are we doing here?" makes the opposite point of Kipling's "Who dies if England lives?" Whereas Kipling's speaker willingly gives up a life to save England, Owen's sees no point in the suffering. Owen's is the perspective toward war that thrives today in the highly literate world. The tone of Owen's final rhetorical question is echoed in these lines, from a 'Soldier's Song'⁴³:

We're here
Because
We're here
Because
We're here
Because we're here.

40 Wilfred Owen, in *War Poetry*, 55-56.

41 Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of The Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 206. Silkin writes, "Owen uses nature in a way that is new, not only for him, but in relation to the generally accepted romantic view of nature, which is the view he inherited."

42 Paul Norgate, "Wilfred Owen and the Soldier Poets," *The Review of English Studies, New Series* 40:160 (November 1989), 521.

43 Walter provides, in *War Poetry*, a variety of verse, poetry, song from World War I. The poems are sorted by theme rather than type. These two poems can be read on facing pages, allowing the soldier song to echo Owen's longer, versed poem.

This depiction of war as futile and filled with horror mirrors the modern narrative of World War I, of the soldier and the absurdity of trench warfare. Owen satirizes England's mythic literary past by ridiculing rather than applauding the Empire's myth. In one of his more satirical pieces, "*Dulce et Decorum Est*,"⁴⁴ Owen alludes to and ridicules the Horatian and Roman view that "'Tis sweet and glorious to die for fatherland." That resonating phrase, so important to the Roman Empire and adopted by the British Empire, is undercut by the energy of the horror described in the poem's verse:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge.

The realism here is underpinned by a sense of agony and despair of trudging through the muddy trench. The soldiers are compared to beggars and hags, and even rats, cursing and coughing. When gas-shells drop into the trench the men fumble clumsily. One stumbles and flounders "like a man in fire or lime." The speaker is helpless, watching that man "guttering, choking, drowning," hearing "gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs." Owen's theme is explicit. He addresses the reader directly in a supposition:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writing in his face,
...
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

To paraphrase: If you could see war from the trench, you would not believe it glorious. This poetry has shock value. Owen's effect is to remove any sense of glory from death. He does this for example in "Anthem for a Doomed Youth" when he asks, "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?"⁴⁵ By comparing men dying on the front to the slaughtering of cattle, Owen aims to expose the myth of war as false.

44 Wilfred Owen, "Dulce est decorum est," in *War Poems*, 142.

45 Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for a Doomed Youth," in *War Poems*, 131.

The problem with Owen's poetry is that, in tone, it does not gel with voice of the typical soldier-poet of World War I. As Norgate explains:

There is a striking congruence of sentiment in the poems themselves and in their audience . . . which suggests that this sort of verse was not merely approved of but actively sought, desired. In a time of bitter uncertainties the voice of the Soldier Poets, speaking from the front itself, sanctioned the continuation of the war.⁴⁶

Norgate describes that voice as "a persistent—almost willful—idealization." He notes that though "mechanized mass-slaughter" was a real part of The First World War, poetry critical of that fighting is partly absent from the combined work of the soldier-poets.

As Silken notes, though, even Owen at first approached the war with self-righteous, classical attitudes. Owens, commissioned in June 1916, went first to fight in France in December, five months after the Battle of Somme. On that same field, he was injured and wrote:

This morning I was hit! We were bombing and a fragment from somewhere hit my thumb knuckle. I coaxed out 1 drop of blood. Alas! No more!! There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France . . . but excitement is always necessary to my happiness.⁴⁷

The passage is not typical of Owen and is a far reach from the poems analyzed above. Owen here seems excited, almost euphoric. He had yet to interpret the war as gruesome. A few weeks later, in January his enthusiasm leaves him and he writes, on 16 January,

I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell. I have not been at the front. I have been in front of it. I held an advanced post, that is, a 'dug-out' in the middle of No Man's Land. We had a march of 3 miles over shelled road then nearly 3 along a flooded trench. After

⁴⁶ Paul Norgate, "Wilfred Owen and the Soldier Poets," 519.

⁴⁷ Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle*, 200.

that we came to where the trenches had been blown flat out and had to go over the top. It was of course dark, too dark, and the ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, 3, 4, 5 feet deep, relieved only by craters full of water. Men have been known to drown in them . . . High explosives were dropping all around out, and machine guns spluttered every few minutes . . . Three quarters dead, I mean each of us $\frac{3}{4}$ dead, to go forth and find another dug-out for a still more advanced post . . . Those fifty hours were the agony of my happy life . . .⁴⁸

Owen's experience serves as a perfect analogy. He goes into the war with the idea that it is going to be as he experienced it in his imagination. In reality, the war is awful and Owen, with precision describes the feeling, smell, and imagery of the battlefield. On 17 January, he writes of No Man's Land:

It is like the eternal place of gnashing of teeth; the Slough of Despond could be contained in one of its crater-holes; the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah could not light a candle to it . . . It is pock-marked like the body of foulest disease and its odour is the breath of cancer . . . No Man's Land under snow is lie the face of the moon chaotic, rater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness . . .

The language is literary. It is full of allusion, metaphor, *enargeia*. It brings the imagery of battle and World War I to its reader. This is the writing that Owen would later make into poetry.

Critical to understanding the shift in tone not only in Owen but also in all war poetry is looking at when these works were published. In fact, the anthologies produced during the war period had specific aims. Norgate lists those aims as "raising funds for patriotic and charitable causes," "recruitment," and "memorials to the fallen." In context, these poems served agendas through the war. Whether used to build morale or to gather troops, that poetry found its moral-ethical appeal in the people at home, their lives, safety, and peace dependent on the Empire's ability to keep the war far away.

48 Ibid., 200-201.

It was not until well after the war that *Poems by Wilfred Owen* was even published.⁴⁹ Even that edition sold only a few thousand copies. The book's second edition, published in 1931, sold more, but by then the anti-war audience had grown. As Hynes notes,

The late 1920s and early 20s were the eras during which the great antiwar novels appeared, creating the Myth of the War that still defines 1914-1918 for most of us. Coming at the end of this myth-making period, this new edition of Owen's poems became the canonical poetic statement of the myth, and it found a new audience.⁵⁰

How accurate of a reflection of sentiment toward World War I, then, are Owen's poems? According to Hynes, not very. During World War I, people read what they wanted to hear, that their young men were dying gallantly, that the Empire would live on, that country still came first. The nation wanted to believe that old flames still burned brightly, not that men were dying like cattle or that Horace had lied.

Vandiver, in *Stand in the Trench, Achilles*, argues a similar point, that anthologies published during the war were mostly patriotic and unironic.⁵¹ She writes, "the great majority of the poems in both anthologies accept the righteousness of the war and the nobility of the soldiers' sacrifices."⁵² Vandiver notes the profound influence of poets like Owen, but she argues that the relatively small canon of war poets has warped our perceptions. In fact, war is complex, as are the emotions associated with it. If poetry is to be a document of social history, then it should be understood in its proper context. In the case of war poetry, that context is in the literature that precedes the war, which provides the author with poetry's rhetorical tools.

By 1931 the literary tradition had changed. Across the ocean, T.S. Eliot made way for a new reflection on war, one that did not so brightly shine on classical notions of duty and heroism. While Owen had certainly written during the war, his poems were still an afterthought of it. The national experience of World War I, therefore, should be seen in the context of Homer, Southey, Tennyson, Kipling.

In the beautiful summer of 1914, no one would have understood where Owen was coming from with his anti-war rhetoric. Arguably, even by the end of the war Owen would not have made much sense to those who had never been in battle. That contradiction, between the events that occurred and the interpretation of

49 Samuel Hynes, "Wilfred Owen and the Poetry of War," *The Sewanee Review* 93:4 (Fall 1985), 618.

50 *Ibid.*, 619.

51 Elizabeth Vandiver, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

52 *Ibid.*, 3.

them, is in large part a problem of rhetoric.⁵³ Paul Fussell’s “table of equivalents”⁵⁴ is helpful in seeing how the language of war, before The Great War, was imbued with the romantic fervor of Homer. He writes,

A friend is	<i>comrade</i>
Friendship is	<i>comradeship, or fellowship</i>
A horse is a	<i>steed, or charger</i>
The enemy is	<i>the foe, or the host</i>
Danger is	<i>peril</i>
To conquer is to	<i>vanquish</i>
To attack is to	<i>assail</i>
To be earnestly brave is to be	<i>gallant</i>
To die	<i>to fall</i>

And so on. This feudal high-diction defined early war poetry. For Hemingway to write *A Farewell to Arms*, eleven years after the war ended, he would need to invent a new diction, one that resembled more of a reporter’s style, because the old war rhetoric no longer made sense. We do not, for example, send 60,000 *comrades* to death, and *peril* is far too weak a word to describe the unutterable danger of going over the top. In common rhetoric, a whole new table of equivalents would need to be invented to deal with the unprecedented death that this war would bring. That table might look something like the one below, which mirrors the indifference that came to replace romance.⁵⁵

Mutiny is	collective indiscipline
To be wounded in the genitals is to be	hit low down
To be killed is to be	knocked out, or to go out of it, or to go under
Dead soldiers are	wastage

Into the war, a system of euphemism came to replace feudal rhetoric, according to Fussell. Those euphemisms reflect accurately a modern rhetoric of war, one that is devoid of emotion.

“Phlegm” has come to be the word to describe the emotional style of language on the front. As Fussell describes it,

⁵³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War*, 170.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 21-22.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 176. This chart is based on Fussell’s chapter “Oh What a Literary War.”

The trick here is to affect to be entirely unflappable; one speaks as if the war were entirely normal and matter-of-fact. Thus Clive Watts writes his sister, "It was most interesting being in the trenches this morning and seeing the effect of the shelling."⁵⁶

During the war, the change went from feudal rhetoric to the rhetoric of "Phlegm" overnight. In the poetry of Owen, and the prose of Hemingway, we see neither. The grim and deeply sardonic poetry of Owen and the reportage of Hemingway are reactions to this change. Both define the new literary trend as decidedly anti-war.

One obvious reason for a lack of Owenesque poetry in the early war canon is censorship. Even if soldiers had written realistic, critical poems about trench warfare, it would have been hard to get those poems published, or even through the field postal service. The full extent of that censorship can be seen in the letters of soldiers. Toward the end of the war, soldiers sent mostly form post cards home.⁵⁷ In them the soldier was given options as to what information he were allowed to send home. The soldier could cross out or erase unwanted sentences, leaving those sentences he wanted his family to see. A post card home might look like this one, reproduced here from Fussell's book:

NOTHING is to be written on this side except the date and signature of the sender. Sentences not required may be erased. If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed.

I am quite well.

I have been admitted into hospital

Sick _____
Wounded _____

and am going on well.
and hope to be discharged soon.

~~I am being sent down to base.~~

I have received your
letter dated _____
telegram " _____
parcel " _____

⁵⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 184.

Letters follows at first opportunity.

~~I have received no letter from you~~
~~_____ lately~~
~~_____ for a long time.~~

Signature only.

Date _____

With this kind of censorship and forced optimism, it would have been rare for a soldier to send home an anti-war poem. More likely, most were coming home with little to say of their indescribable experience.

A more compelling reason why it may have taken so long to assess and describe that war in literature is that the war was, for a long time, literally indescribable. This was an unprecedented war and the experience of a war like this had never been described before. No one had ever written about machine guns mowing down humans like a scythe crosses a field of wheat. No one had ever attempted to describe the kind of mechanized and systematic slaughter that occurred in an offensive. The old myths of gallant soldiers worked in their time, but not in this one. Here was a war where a man was a number, where the dead were considered “wastage.” One could not with any seriousness invoke Homer to describe the experience of World War I. That myth, simply, did not fit, and there was nothing familiar about trench warfare.

Though full of educated, well-read, literate people, the trenches were without a literary language. Stretching thousands of miles through Europe, the trenches, even today, are difficult to understand. Many historians have tried by way of imagery to describe the experience. A smell of rum, blood, and rotting flesh has been described as typical. Ambient, too, is constant noise from continuous bombardment, or from the wailing of injured and dying men. And the men are almost always compared to their trench-companions: rats. Like vermin, they live in their own muck and filth. Like vermin, they are exterminated by gas. Like vermin, they scurry into and out of holes and are plowed up by men of greater rank.

The kind of dehumanization felt by soldiers on the front is vividly depicted by Wilhelm Klemm in “Clearing Station,” a poem describing a makeshift emergency hospital on the front. Klemm’s rhetoric is medical. It does not employ the rhetoric of war literature. The poem is set ironically in a church, a place once symbolic of

the old values. There, men lie prostrate and bleeding on straw. “Candle-stumps,” typically symbolic of light and life, stare “solemnly” at the men. In situational irony, the church smells of “blood, pus, shit and sweat” and “bandages ooze.” These are medical terms. The church, typically a sanctuary, has become a human slaughterhouse. “Patiently,” the men are “waiting for their graves,” and in the distance groans the thunder of battle.

In Klemm’s poem, the violence of war turns people into animals, and churches into slaughterhouses. It is a reflection on the horrific experience of battle, though the poem is not typical of a poem published in England during that period. Notice the difference between Klemm’s poem and Charles Hamilton Sorley’s, “At the hills and vales along”⁵⁸

On, marching men, on
To the gates of death with song.
Sow your gladness for earth’s reaping
So you may be glad, though sleeping.
Strew your gladness on earth’s bed,
So be merry, so be dead.

Or Ivor Gurney’s “Sonnets 1917: Servitude”⁵⁹

If it were not for England, who would bear
This heavy servitude one moment more?
...
Only the love of comrades sweetens all,
Whose laughing spirit will not be outdone.

They almost seem like different wars. Klemm and Owen are bitter. They see men as being reduced to animals. They witness mass slaughter and try to write about it using unfamiliar rhetoric, while others maintain the optimism of Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade.” And both were probably right. Gurney, Sorley, Mackintosh all write in the literary tradition of the age. The difference in tone is not a clash in experience, but a clash in rhetoric.

Today we can put together more than a snapshot of trench warfare, but only because we have had the benefits of being able to synthesize the documents, literature, and photographs that have come out of that era. To assume that one

58 *War Poetry*, 33-34.

59 *War Poetry*, 35-36.

in the trench can accurately describe himself in the greater picture is positivistic. As we have come to know, that war and the life of a soldier in it were particularly awful. Ironically, most World War I poetry today feels insincere. The poems we have from Owen and Sassoon, though representative today of the experience of trench war, are not necessarily reflective of the national feelings toward war during the war years.

As bad as World War I was, some English poets would maintain some form of patriotism right up to the end, but most were embittered by the experience. The war ended and World War I in poetry would become memory. Often forgotten, misinterpreted, personalized, the memory would be preserved not as it was but as a distant memory. Sassoon writes of it,

Do you remember the dark months you held in the sector at Mametz—
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled up sandbags on parapets?
Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench—
And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?⁶⁰

And Kennedy,

If ye forget—If ye forget,
Then your children must remember,
And their brow be ever wet,
With the tears of their remembrance,
With the tears of bloody sweat
If ye forget.⁶¹

The poetry that defines the later-experience, a time of forgetting the past, of trying to find a new language by which to live, is Eliot's, who famously wrote,

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?⁶²

The metaphor is appropriate. England's myths had crumbled with the empire. What could possibly grow out of that? World War I brought on the end of myth of the

60 Siegfried Sassoon, "Aftermath," in *War Poems*, 266-267.

61 G. A. Studdert Kennedy, "If ye Forget," in *War Poems*, 269.

62 T.S. Eliot, "Burial of the Dead," in *The Wasteland and Other Poems*.

Empire, one that the modern world has yet to experience again. Eliot's rhetorical question, what can possibly grow out of this rubble? And Sassoon's implied question: How do we deal the memory of trench warfare? still haunt us today.

Unfortunately for the soldier poets, patriotic poems in the face of an absurd war are only ironic, and even the best poetry of that war falls far short of the real experience. There is a wonderful oil painting by Magritte, which shows a pipe, and below it the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," or, "This is not a pipe." He was right. It was not a pipe, but a painting of a pipe, one interpretation. Poetry is the same way. We must remember that poetry is made of words and words must always be considered carefully under the umbrella of rhetoric.

The literature of World War I comes to us from the decades that followed it. It is for that reason that World War I in literature will always be seen as medieval men fighting in a modern war, a cavalry charging into machine guns. It was not until the twenties that the public realized that those soldiers were doomed from the start, that the days of chivalry and romantic warfare were gone, and that charging light brigades would gain no honor for their sacrifice.



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