

Tradition Sabotaged, Subverted and Slain: Post-Somme War Poetry and the Martial Canon

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While contemplating the vast difference which separates post-Somme war poetry from the more traditional martial canon, I came upon the following text, which I think does much to illuminate the fascination that war poetry exercises in the general culture. In *The History of Warfare*, John Keegan, lamed by a childhood disease which left him unfit for military service, comments that ". . . most of the friends I had made at Oxford had, unlike me, done their military service. They made me conscious of having missed something." He writes, "It was clear to me that the years they had spent in uniform had cast over them the spell of an entirely different world . . . The spell was in part one of experience—of strange places, of unfamiliar places, of excitement and even of danger."¹ And again, when he speaks of his years teaching military history at Sandhurst, his comments on the medals earned by the officers with whom he taught reflect this same view of war:

The history of the Second World War was written on these little strips of silk that they wore so lightly and its high moments were recorded with crosses and medals which the bearers scarcely seemed conscious of having been awarded.²

Finally, he notes that "My regimental friends were brothers in arms . . . Regimental loyalty was the touchstone of their lives."³

Traditional martial poetry from Homer onwards resonates with such comments, enshrining as it does the enduring fellowship, the glory of war, the quest for honor and the homage paid to the fallen. The maimed men, the monstrous waste and wrecked lives and the grief

of widows and orphans are given but short shrift: they are generally unmentioned and never a reason to reconsider the privileging of war. Evidently, warfare is necessary to the male experience. Although Keegan does not say this directly, I cannot help but picture him sitting in the Mess Hall at Sandhurst and indulging in a bit of vicarious living. Nowhere does he mention, for example, being relieved that he was unfit for military service. There he sat, without so much as a miserable scrap of silk with which to validate himself. Not for him the experience of courage under fire. "Half a league, half a league, half a league onward/All in the valley of death rode the six hundred"⁴ will never be more than poetry to him. He regrets he has not had the experience of charging under fire; he almost certainly has yearned to do so.

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether the dichotomies between the contexts and language of traditional war verse as opposed to post-Somme World War I verse work to establish a new kind of poetry, and if so, to establish what is of value about World War I poetry, which in the context of this paper will refer to the Post-Somme World War I poetry. As Paul Fussell notes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, a sense of dichotomy permeates the language of World War I poetry which he reads in terms of numerous "gross dichotomies" or binary oppositions.⁵ The experience of trench warfare and years of remorseless slaughter put paid to more than a young generation of men; it killed the credibility of warfare as a truly noble calling fraught with patriotism and fellowship and replaced it with images composed more of truth and considerably less of beauty. The contexts in which the poetry is written both shape and reflect the dichotomies as well as the poetry.

If modernist writers are often defined as those who jumped into the abyss while the Romantics and Victorians screeched to a halt at the brink, what follows? The distance to the bottom of the abyss, as an unbridgeable gap, in terms of time and space and experience, defines

the sense of dichotomy. These distances account for many of the dichotomies and much of the anger and betrayal which comes through World War I poetry so clearly: Traditionalists vs. Modernists, initiates vs. neophytes, troops vs. staff, soldiers vs. civilians: distance is all.

Traditional war poetry can call on an unbroken tradition harking back to Homer with its rich mine of poetic devices and well-wrought conventions delineating the traditional view of warfare. Thus, "traditional" war poetry has had a very long time indeed in which to seep and ooze and permeate every crack and every cranny of the national consciousness towards war. Post-Somme World War I war poetry, on the other hand, is compressed into two short years. It is not formed by tradition directly; it is formed by the abyss into which the World War I poets were pushed, dragging tradition with them, during mid-1916. What emerges may seem battered and broken to some; it is certainly no longer "your great-grandfather's war poetry."

As Stephen Kern notes in *The Culture of Time and Space*, time has speeded up, both in modern life and in warfare. Certainly the collapse in time affects the Post-Somme war poets in terms of the immediacy of experience. Days and not months affect the outbreak of war . . . days of telegraphed ultimatums instead of months of diplomatic parrying define the state of war.

In the summer of 1914 the men in power lost their bearings in the hectic rush paced by flurries of telegrams, telephone conversations, memos and press releases . . . During the climactic period between July 23 and August 4 there were five ultimatums with short time limits, all implying or explicitly threatening war if the demands are not met.⁶

The fevered rush to war, followed by the months of trench warfare, again contributes to both the immediacy of war and the disillusionment with war as the immediacy of action degenerates into

months of stalemate and stagnation. Unlike the traditional poets, however, these men find that time does not serve to soften the impact of war but to intensify the immediate experience.

Consequent to the velocity of time, comes the contraction, not only of time, but of space. And this space is not necessarily the concrete view of France or Belgium. These were not lands all that distant; even at the height of the war, it was possible to experience the trenches in the morning and be back in "merrie olde England" by that same evening. But the "trogdolyte world,"⁷ the world of mud-slimed trenches and jellied corpses and rats and poppies nourished by those same corpses, is not the known space: it is the Other. The idea that a modern soldier could be in London in the morning and back in the trenches of France by evening redefines space, because it is not France the familiar, but No Man's Land. France and Belgium, the lands located within relatively easy reach across the Channel, arguably familiar to many Britons, were no longer the known space, but had transmogrified into areas so devastated by war as to actually be No-Man's-Land in actual as well as metaphorical usage. This concept of familiar space as the unknown distances and dichotomizes the traditional and the post-Somme poets. In some ways, many of the traditional poets are also both chronologically and spatially challenged: they, too, are writing about a non-existent time and place. Times past and lands distant, however, allow for the free play of the imagination, allow for pure invention. The traditional poets are free to invent: not only can they preserve the ideal, they can, through the use of coded language, shape that ideal to be precisely what they wish. The euphemized and sanitized "medieval-world" poems of Tennyson and Morris are perfect examples. As Fussell points out, Morris's pseudo-medieval romances, with their "raised, essentially feudal language" in which "a table of equivalents" is established were wildly popular. As the post-Somme poets point out, while refusing the coded meanings in which "Dead

bodies constitute *ashes or dust*, the blood of young men is *'the red/Sweet wine of youth'* and to die is to *perish*,"these words cloak the true meaning of corpses, blood and death.⁸

The distance and the dichotomies thus established grow greater when one considers that most of the traditional martial poets had neither seen the places nor lived in the times about which they were writing. Even when the wars were contemporary with the poets, as were the Crimean War or the many far-flung imperial campaigns, for example, the poet rarely even saw the battlefield. Thus, most importantly, authorial distance comes into play. This establishes the greatest distance of all and the most disparate dichotomy. As a general rule, the poets who wrote of war did not synthesize it from direct experience, but from the general view of war which existed in the popular imagination. As far as I am aware (and there are probably exceptions: good essays are always being blown to bits by exceptions) most traditional war poetry was written by men whose chief qualification to write it was that they had not been on the business end of a rifle. They are distanced from the actual experience: forever will they write and it be false. They write about ideal war based on poetic ideals and accepted popular conventions of what warfare ought to be. As with Byron, writing about ancient Hellas in modern Greece, the ideal and the actual march to different drummers. If they had fought, these armchair scribblers, the whole effect of war on national consciousness might well have been different.

Thus, the major dichotomy established is that the majority of traditional poetry is written by the non-combatants, by the non-initiates, by the Others. Over and over in World War I poetry the theme of the Initiates versus the complacent non-Initiates surfaces. To paraphrase Owen, in a poem directed at the people who only talk about sacrifice, ardent glory and *dulce et decorum* . . . these people would not be so quick to lie if they had any first-hand experience at the Front.⁹

In the contexts familiar to the World War I soldier poets, the distances of space and time and experience do not apply: thus the dichotomies between the "ancient" and the "modern" come more vividly into play. While the soldier poets probably did go into the trenches with invented second-hand experience, that idealized version of war did not long survive the lice, the rats, the decayed bodies or the days of standing-to. Soldiers in the trenches did not long look back on idealized tales of war: they were two feet deep in the muddy feces-infested water of reality. Their poetry was forged from the white hot metal of war, caught between the hammer and the anvil, caught between the shells of violent death and the inertia of the trenches.

Numerous canonical writers, among them Homer, Mallory, Shakespeare, Scott, Byron, Kipling, Tennyson and Brooke, as well as the anonymous writers of such works as *Beowulf* and traditional ballads did much to shape the idea of war as a glorious and romantic endeavour, warfare as a masculine fellowship and the patriotism intrinsic to *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* as the only acceptable standard of conduct, defined by and forged in battle and blood. It is, perhaps, not too much to claim that the "canon," created by men and shaped, for the most part, to reflect men's values, is to a great degree shaped by war. This somewhat restricted view of the canon with its epics, elegies, ballads and lyrics, etc., reflects war as an activity to be celebrated by high diction, lofty themes of noble sacrifice and adherence to the classic virtues, and to this end sanctions various poetic devices associated with epic and elegiac works such as the heroic simile, the epithet, blank verse, iambic pentameter, and extremely formal "raised" diction and structure.

In *English Poetry of the First World War*, John H. Johnston argues that epic is the only suitable genre and poetic distance the only convention acceptable to convey the horror of war; he argues that the epic form and the distance invoked by the more traditional poets are effective in evoking the experience of war. For these reasons he does not value World War I poetry.

Modern war poetry, on the other hand, is deprived of the aesthetic advantages of temporal remoteness; it is inextricably involved in the whole physical and psychological complex of warfare and takes its particular spirit from a dedicated and often despaired representation of that complex.¹⁰

According to Johnston's rather tendentious argument, which echoes Yeats' view that passive suffering is not a subject for poetry, World War I poetry lacks the necessary temporal distance and its emotional reaction to suffering is valueless. Johnston contends that the poetry is ineffective because it is immediate and *aesthetically* unpolished. Precisely because it resonates with the suffering and degradation of war, I contend that World War I poetry is effective, not because it avoids these elements, but because it confronts them, because it sees past the empty themes and formal usage and because it lays bare the untruths represented by these epic devices and safely distanced narrators.

But there can be no looking back to the safe Past to form the new poetry of war. This poetry is composed of the rats, the lice, the "clay," the terror and the disillusionment of war. Isaac Rosenberg, for example, addresses these concerns in a poem entitled "Louse Hunting": hardly a fitting subject for traditional ears, but one undoubtedly familiar to the men in the trenches. His "Break of Day in the Trenches" addresses "cosmopolitan rats" who will feed indiscriminately on the corpses of either side. World War I flowers are poppies, "whose roots are in men's veins,"¹¹ as distinct from McCrae's poppies, that "blow between the crosses, row on row/ That mark our place."¹² Nor are they Wordsworth's daffodils which nourish the soul, but poppies nourished by Tommies. The break is complete. Flowers which inspire the soul are traditional metaphors; corpses blatantly nourishing flowers are something other.

Not only were many of the World War I poets classically educated and widely read and thus familiar with the classical view of war espoused by the traditional poets, but literature, especially poetry, glorifying warfare and soldiering was the popular reading of the times. Fussell notes, for example, that most English schoolboys read literary works which were steeped in a war tradition.¹³ The popular culture, the classics and the romance of war poetry goes back at least to 900 B.C. and recurs throughout the canon with numbing regularity. Such poets as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Edmund Blunden, who were to change the voice of war permanently before the end of the war, cut their poetic teeth on this tradition.

In choosing the conventional martial poems with which to examine the common threads defining war, I restricted my choices to either recognized classics or poetry typically found in anthologies because the common presence of poems is equivalent to the common cultural view of war. In *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, for example, there is quite a bit of martial type poetry, most of which appears in other anthologies. While World War I poems are represented in these texts, they still reflect the civilian population's romanticized views of war. It is interesting to note that the poems realistically describing war are few and scattered. And not very graphic.

According to Hilda Spears in *Remembering, We Forget*, the year 1916 marked the beginning of disillusionment with the Battle of the Somme, the start of conscription and the realization that the War was not going to be over in the foreseeable future, let alone by Christmas past. The beginning of awareness, fueled by the mounting casualties, that corpse-sodden ground was going back and forth in a stalemate and that war was very far from the glorious and highly illusionary cavalry charges began to penetrate modern consciousness. Spears points out that the romantic attitude which shaped the English view of war was one of the first casualties of World War I. Men

may have enlisted for honour and glory, but the trenches soon took care of any vestiges of romantic attitude.

For most men who took part in the war and lived through it the pattern of war experience was the same: first the excitement and enthusiasm of a new adventure; next, the disagreeable surprise when face to face with reality; finally, the terrible cold disillusionment, the full realization of the implications of war and the revulsions from former hopes and beliefs.¹⁴

The idea of war as a glorious endeavour, an acceptable standard of conduct which reflected the sports played on the fields of Eton as exemplified by Sir Henry Newbolt's fatuous "Vita Lampada," became not only passé but exposed as the sugar coating on the underlying rottenness. Instead of the old-fashioned heroic ideal with its references to the Fallen, duty, honour, glory, and patriotism, etc., these poets saw war as it was: brutal and futile. The ancient and proper sentiment of *dulce et decorum est* was subverted and inverted entirely.

For the first time in the history of civilization a concerted effort was made by a majority of participants to tell the truth about war and try to ensure that the truth was remembered. The old lie *dulce et decorum est pro patria* had reasserted itself time out of number. The writers of the First World War hoped to suppress it forever.¹⁵

No longer would it be sweet and fitting to die for your country: that sentiment ended labelled as a lie propagated by those who write of it, like Horace or Kipling, but who do not do it, as did the millions of soldiers transmogrified to putrefying corpses. Nor was this new war poetry a flash in the pan; patriotic poetry essentially dies in the trenches of the First World War along with many of

the men deluded into believing the high diction and lofty sentiments which overlaid the grim reality.

It is no surprise that as World War I, with its machine guns and miles of barbed wire defining no man's land and an eternal war of attrition in the trenches and staggering casualties and sense of betrayal by the politicians, dragged on Christmas after bloody Christmas that the new contexts of war were responsible for a "new language" formulated by poets to deal with the new warfare. But it is, of course, not so much a new language as a new way of expressing poetically the truth of war—a new *parole*, the language of common everyday speech, as opposed to a new *langue*, an accepted system of signs, which evoked the traditional symbols of war.

No more the heroic epithet, as when a flight of arrows like unto wild geese rains death and destruction on the masséd armies below, the grammar inverted and the diction lofty: alas! Fallen are they and sleep with the poetry celebrating war. Gone are the lofty terms and euphemized, sanitized imagery and positive martial imagery. Missing are the *pæan* calls to honor and glory and sacrifice; missing as well the willingness to die for dear old England to keep that green isle unsullied. Instead, although the World War I poets frequently co-opt traditional forms of heroic poetry, such as the lyric and the sonnet, and also employ conventions typically associated with epic poetry, the actual words, the building blocks of poetry, depict war in all its graphic horror.

If martial poetry employs the high diction, martial themes and sweeping action which defined warfare as a worthy goal and the men who participated in it as heroic, then *The Iliad*, perhaps the earliest and certainly one of the most significant, poem celebrating the battle-forged fellowship, is a touchstone which reflects the rest of the canon. Death is not important here: the fellowship cast amid danger and blood which defines not only war but manhood is privileged. Such lines as

So fight by the ships, all together. And that comrade
who meets his death and destiny, speared or stabbed,
Let him die! He dies fighting for the fatherland—
no dishonor there!¹⁶

This particular passage, culled almost at random, exemplifies and molds the attitude toward war that prevailed before the iconoclasm of "The Great War." Note especially that there is mention of death as something to be avoided, merely an acceptance of destiny and a call to fellowship, couched in high language.

In post-Somme poetry, however, if the associations with epic appear, they are frequently present to mock or subvert the traditional heroic view of war. A striking example of this subversion occurs in Edmund Blunden's *Trench Raid Near Hooge*.

At an hour before the rosy fingered
Morning should come
To wonder again what meant these sties
These wailing shots, these glaring eyes,
These moping mum,

Through the black reached strange long rosy
fingers
All at one aim
Protending and bending: down they swept,
Successions of similars after leapt
And bore red flame.¹⁷

Blunden employs the classic allusion of "rosy-fingered" to reference the time an hour before dawn as well as to apostrophize Morning, both devices which echo *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Then the line "Through the black reached strange long rosy fingers . . . And bore red flame" completely subverts the comfortable expectation of rosy-fingered Dawn; in this new world rosy-fingered refers to deadly shells and the dawn entirely lacks the traditional connotations of rebirth.

Beowulf, that epic near and dear to Anglo-Saxon hearts, also glorifies war. In this case, war is glorified as a duty common to men, and the heroic language and imagery cloaks the bloody truth. Beowulf, who is in reality only a warrior, is invested with virtues which make him god-like because he can wage war and kill well.

The King, good as in the old days, must experience the end of his transitory days,
of his days in the life of the world . . .

The lord of the rings scorned to seek out the wide flyer with a great army; he did not fear that conflict for himself nor did he consider the warfare, strength and valour of the dragon to be anything because he had previously ventured distress; He had survived the hostilities of many clashes of battle since he, the victorious warrior, had cleansed the hall of Heorot and crushed the kin of the hostile one, of Grendel, in battle.¹⁸

In "Third Ypres," Edmund Blunden effectively deconstructs this heroic ideal when his speaker describes the fate which awaits a man who does indeed define warfare as camaraderie and look for glorious combat.

And you, poor signaller, you I passed by this emplacement,
You who I warned, poor daredevil, waving your flags,
Among this screeching I pass you again and shudder

At the lean green flies upon the red flesh madding.

Well, I liked him, that young runner,

But there's no time for that . . .¹⁹

The difference in the portrayal of war is significant. In one poem, the aged king goes forth to battle unafraid. He scorns to take an army after a dragon as he has been previously successful in single-handed combat. This is magnificent, but it is not war, at least as the World War I poets have come to understand it. Blunden's language employs the inverted syntax of "you I passed . . . you I warned . . ." and then changes abruptly after the decidedly unmartial "screeching" to the everyday construction of "I pass you again and shudder." Shudder, of course, is another decidedly unmartial term, but perhaps there is no effective coded language which alludes to a man reduced to a pile of red flesh buzzing with flies. Blunden also employs the apposition so commonly employed in heroic poetry, but again switches abruptly to the simple diction of an average man. "Well, I liked him . . ." is not the stylized phrase of heroic epic; it is the everyday phrase of a man who just wants to survive. Perhaps the essential difference is that when Beowulf is a corpse, there will be no flies, lean or green, on him. Reality would not dare impinge its unwelcome self on the world of the epic. Nor will the signaller's comrades eulogize and lament him and erect a barrow: in modern war "there's no time for that . . ."

Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*, ominous title notwithstanding, links war with chivalry and great deeds in defense of the weak and helpless. Arthur has his band of knights, the renowned Knights of the Round Table, who form an unbreakable fellowship dedicated to war. The knightly code typified by Arthur glorifies war as a societal necessity and a great good. This myth of war as readily justified in defense of the weak had far reaching implications in World War I. Such tales of knightly errantry kindled a spirit of derring do and emulation in the schoolboyish breasts of the all too

numerous Englishmen who read them. One of the reasons, after all, for World War I was to free such small countries as Belgium, conquered by the rapacious Hun and to avenge poor helpless Belgian babies boiled down for Hunnish soap, not to mention the raped and bayoneted nuns.

Both Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, separated by nearly four hundred years, use the national myth of King Arthur and glorious details of battles and chivalry to imbue war with a sense of virtue, to define it as an activity of great value and manliness. Mallory, as one would expect, considering the cultural base of the Middle Ages, glorifies the courtly aspects of war. In Mallory's unreal reality, the fact that men die gruesomely is not as important as the quest for honour and the definition and equation of war as morally right. Tennyson, however, should be another matter and yet the same attitude towards war prevails:

So when the king had set his banners broad
At once from either side, with trumpet blast,
And shouts and clarions shrilling unto blood
The long lanced battle let their horses run.
And now the kings and barons prevailed
And now the king, as here and there that war
Went swaying But the Powers who walk the world
made lightnings and great thunders over him
And dazed all eyes, 'til Arthur by main might,
And mightier of his hands with every blow,
Threw the kings . .

* * * * *

So like a painted battle the war stood

Silenced, the living quiet as the dead

And in the heart of Arthur joy was lord.²⁰

In the midst of total devastation, in the midst of the quick and the dead, what is Arthur's reaction? Joy. This is also an attitude which will not survive the millions of dead on World War I battlefields, at least not in the hearts of the survivors who fought on those battle fields.

Siegfried Sassoon's "Counter-Attack" also describes the aftermath of a battle; the context and language, however, could not be more remote from Tennyson's heroic diction and distanced attitude.

The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
Bulged, clotted head slept in the plastering slime.²¹

Tennyson wrote *Idylls of the King* about an unreal world and also lacked direct experience of war; thus the heroic ideal is unvanquished and we can forget that Arthur is trampling corpses and merely see him as *Dux bellorum*, flushed with triumph. Sassoon's poem completely lacks the distance of Tennyson's piece. Rotten, sodden, clotted, bulged, wallowed and sprawled are not words newly invented for war; they are, however, new words for new war poetry: realistic and immediate. Even the guttural assonance and consonance of the words evoke the sucking mud and sprawled grovelling corpses of World War I instead of the "painted battle" and the living quiet as the dead. The battle here is not painted, not a distanced *mimesis* or a recounting; the resemblance between Sassoon's corpses who "slept in the plastering slime" and Tennyson's silenced corpses is

a world away. Direct time and space and experience form the nexus of Sassoon's poetry; Tennyson's appears as remote as a page from a medieval romance. In Tennyson's Arthur, joy may be lord; Sassoon's speaker brings war down to the slime and mud and bloated corpses of which it is comprised. Essentially, Sassoon's war poetry deconstructs the previously established traditional canon and the suitable language for dealing with war. The blank verse is not the weapon here, however; once again the form of traditional poetry is intact, but the language, down to the very vowels, has been conscripted to serve the immediate experience.

Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" quoted earlier, elevates an extremely stupid and wasteful manoeuvre into high heroics. Such immortal lines as "When can their glory fade? Honor the charge they made! Honor the Light Brigade, Noble six hundred!"²² illustrate the value of war in society. Tennyson's poem makes clear a blunder was made, but "Theirs not to make reply /Theirs not to reason why/Theirs but to do or die."²³ Such a monstrous attitude will undergo tremendous change as World War I drags on and on and the slaughter at Balaclava becomes minuscule in comparison. Such idiocies as quoted above will froth and disappear in the white-hot cauldron of modern warfare.

In World War I poetry, the truth of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" will be laid bare. Sassoon's "The General," for example, points up the incompetence which was apparently so unimportant for Tennyson. In this poem the basic incompetency of much of the Staff was highlighted, if only by their victims.

"Good Morning, Good Morning," the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line,
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his Staff for incompetent swine.

"He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack

As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

* * * * *

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.²⁴

Neither Harry nor the speaker thinks in terms of heroic charges as they "slog up to Arras," nor will they participate in anything remotely resembling the stuff of which legends are made. Although Tennyson could have applied the rather unheroic word "card" to either Raglan or Cardigan, he refrains, thus becoming complicitous in the process by which idiocy in war is transmuted into unfading glory. Sassoon's speaker, however, "curses the Staff for incompetent swine," thus laying bare the price of incompetence in war, a price usually paid by someone other than those in charge.

Shakespeare's Henry V emphasizes fellowship, that exclusive sense of camaraderie, and few, if any, Englishmen would not have thrilled to his St Crispin's Day speech. Indeed, few, if any, modern readers are immune from the stirring language.

But if it be a sin to covet honour

I am the most offending soul alive.

He which hath no stomach to this fight

Let him depart .

* * * * *

We would not die in that man's company

That fears his fellowship to die with us.

* * * * *

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;

For he today that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile.
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here;
And hold their manhoods cheap whilst any speaks
That fought with us upon St. Crispin's day.²⁵

As in *Beowulf*, fellowship is of the utmost importance in these poems. The relationship between the king and the thanes, the war-band, is not only the foundation for successful war-making but the base for the entire society. The relationship between Henry V and his men is almost exactly the same as that reflected in *Beowulf*. This war is something private, something exclusive, something to which the stay-at-homes cannot relate. "We would not die in that man's company . . . we few . . . we band of brothers . . ." establishes a sacred and ennobling camaraderie. And as such it is thrilling. But it was written by a dramatist, who though probably the greatest master the English language has ever known, had no direct experience with war. Easy then to write the stirring speech that holds death of so little account.

As Fussell notes, the "raised" diction of martial poetry, wherein friends are *comrades* and friendship is *fellowship*, "was not the least of the ultimate casualties of the war."²⁶ Wilfred Owen's "The Send Off" is the antithesis of Henry V's speech.

Down the close darkening lanes they sang their way
To the siding shed.
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.

Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath and spray
As men's are, dead.

So secretly, like wrongs hushed up, they went.

They were not ours:

We never heard to which front they were sent:

Nor there if they yet mock what women meant

Who gave them flowers.

Shall they return to beating of great bells

In wild train loads?

A few, a few, too few for drums and yells

May creep back silent, to village wells,

Up half-known roads.²⁷

In "The Send-Off," the function of soldiers is perfectly clear: "a casual tramp" may miss them, but no one else will. Far from anyone thinking himself accursed for missing the battle, the soldiers themselves are the accursed, like "wrongs hushed up." "Too few" will "creep back," but not in "wild train-loads." Once again, it is the *parole* of World War I language which distinguishes it from the traditional *langue*. The specific words are what distinguish the meaning and subvert the idea of war as glorious camaraderie. The form is traditional, employing a set pattern of rhyme and meter as the conventional materials of poetry. But Owen's content is worlds away from Shakespeare's somewhat bombastic claims. Ironically, the fate of Shakespeare's returning soldiers is no different

from Owen's: it is merely that Owen knows first-hand that the wild parades will be missing. Why bother, either for the men who survived Crispin's Day, or the Somme, to have a parade?

Rudyard Kipling was well known as an imperialist poet and a hawk. His works reflect the consciousness of the burdens of Empire—a dirty job, lads, but someone's got to do it—a sentimental view of the typical British soldier and a belief in Britain and her destiny religious in its intensity. For "All We Are And All We Have" expresses the celebratory idea embedded in traditional war poetry.

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
What stands if Freedom fall?
Who dies if England live? ²⁸

Post-Somme World War I poets will lose sight of the honour involved in falling for their native land in the realization, embedded in the mud of the trenches, that so abstract an ideal has no real connection to reality. It is not until Kipling's son is one of *the fallen*, who *perishes*, that his attitude changes. In an epigram both scathing and pithy, he comments, "If any mourn us in the workshop, say/ We died because the shift kept holiday."²⁹ Thus, even for Kipling, the intrusion of the personal answers the question posed by "Who dies if England live?" Reality obtrudes its head with an ugly and predictable answer.

Post-Somme World War I poetry uses the "lads" employed by Kipling to separate the men in the trenches from the poets and civilians riding it out at home. Far from the images of soldiers gallantly defending the home front and wishing to protect the civilians from the horrors of war, by 1916 there was an enormous amount of resentment expressed against those waiting safely back home by the soldiers caught in the horrors of modern war.

In Byron's "Eve of Waterloo" there is a synthesis between the civilians, especially the women, and the men who will fight at Waterloo:

There was a sound of revelry by night
And Belgium's Capital had gathered then
Her Beauty and her Chivalry, and bright
And bright the lamps shone o'er faire women and brave men;
A thousand hearts beat happily; and when
Music arose with its voluptuous swell,
Soft eyes looked love to eyes that spake again,
And all went merry as a marriage bell;
But hush! hark! a deep sound strikes like a rising knell.³⁰

* * * * *

The sentiments of war as a quest for glory and honour are expressed in the "raised" and archaic language of chivalric romance. "The fair women, the brave men, spake, the knell, bright shone the lamps" are all codes which describe the romantic view of war. In particular, however, the last line of the poem, "Rider and horse, —friend and foe,—in one red burial blent!" exemplifies the heroic ideal.³¹ If such a commingling of men and horses from both sides can be "blent," in death, what purpose does the previous grappling of mortal enemies further?

Compare some of the World War I poetry on the relations between the fighting men and those who are not in the trenches and an entirely new picture arises. "The gentlemen in England" do not hold themselves accursed; the soldiers in the trenches hold those who are not there, i.e., in the trenches rather than in a nice English club, accursed. Sassoon, in the bitter poem, "Blighters" writes,

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.³²

In the vitriolic poem "Fight to a Finish," far from cherishing the romantic notion that he is fighting to preserve England, he would like to see the English stay-at-homes get a taste of cold steel:

Snapping their bayonets on to charge the mob
Grim Fusiliers broke ranks with glint of steel
At last the boys had found a cushy job.

* * * * *

I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal;
And with my trusty bombers turned and went
To clear those Junkers out of Parliament.³³

Perhaps more than any other theme of World War I poetry, this view of war, in which the home-coming troops turn on the people they are supposedly fighting to protect, and in which men are reduced to swine and Parliament is infested with the martial-minded German aristocracy, indicates how far war had changed, or depending on your viewpoint, declined, from the heroic ideal. This is not Hector fighting to protect the Trojan women in their trailing robes, or Aeneas defending the household gods of Troy. This is the total and complete subversion of war as a glorious, romantic, or patriotic effort. "The mob, the cushy job" are traditional in their rhyme only. Neither mob nor job reflects a particularly raised diction: this is the language of the common Tommy employed by the poets who are bitter at the deceit intrinsic to the martial canon.

In "The Soldier," written early in World War I, Rupert Brooke expresses the traditional view that

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;
* * * * *
And think, this heart, all evil shed away
A pulse in the eternal mind no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given ... ³⁴
* * * * *

Brooke wrote this sonnet in the early war, when patriotism was still a value and dying for England appropriate behaviour. The idea of *dulce*, etc., which characterizes the traditional martial poetry, is reflected both in the form and the language of the poem. The context of the war at that

point still matches the sonnet: there is no feeling of subtextual subversion in this piece. It is perhaps sweetly mawkish to the modern ear, but jarring in neither language nor form. The first stanza evokes nothing more in me than distanced admiration for the balanced diction counterpointed by a realization of futility and waste. This poem, written in 1914, shrieks out that a bystander to the horrors of post-1916 World War I poetry wrote it. No one who saw the mass death in the trenches or the useless waste of millions of lives could write such heroic poetry. His sentiment is sincere but ignorant of reality. Nor is beauty lacking in the diction and the stately meter. Like Byron's "rising knell," it simply no longer rings true. This poem harks back to the heroic tradition which the poets who actually participated in the post-1916 war so effectively refute. By offering glorious images of deathless gallantry and sacrifice, the codes employed by such poets as Brooke lessen the death, pain and loss that are endemic to war and replace them with high sounding lines that ignore the reality in favour of some *pæan* call to honour and glory. Such images as the soldier's call to fellowship, Beowulf's speech, the banners, trumpets and lightnings all lead to one thing: the quick and the dead, a scorched land where the living are as quiet as the dead. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, in fact. The elevated language invoking the valour and strength of arms and the sense of exclusion men who are not warriors will feel all ignore the reality of death. It is no wonder that men born to and nourished on such poems of warfare should, in an ironic binary opposition, both react so positively and suffer such a crushing disillusionment.

Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est" reflects not only the bitter knowledge of the chasm between the civilians and the soldiers, but also the implicit lie of the traditional, though in Owens's work the bitterness is less savage and personal than in some other poets, notably Sassoon. He knows that if the distanced population were ever to witness the graphic agony of a gas attack,

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile incurable sores on innocent tongues
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.³⁵

The very title of this poem, like "Apologia Pro Meo Poetate," calls on the very classical traditional it subverts. Even today, when Latin scholars are thin on the ground, and classics are no longer routinely taught, *dulce et decorum est* is a recognizable Latin tag. It is the use of the ironic title, which leads the reader to expect the conventional martial poem, and the turn in the final lines in which the stately old tag is branded a lie, which makes this a post-Somme poem. It is, in reality, nothing less than an indictment of the whole martial canon, which consumes "children ardent for some desperate glory" and delivers them to a tortured choking death by gas. The very language, froth-corrupted, writhing, gargling, vile and obscene as cancer, plays off against the old lie. The image of bitter cud evokes the men in "Anthem for Doomed Youth," going to their death like so many cattle to the abattoir.

"The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna" is another frequently anthologized poem which exemplifies the nobility of death. It is ironic that though the poem is well known, the author is not. Charles Wolfe, "a one hit wonder," made his poetic reputation on these lines.

Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note
As his corse at the rampart we hurried.
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
O'er the grave where our hero we buried.

* * * * *

No useless coffin enclosed his breast,
Not in sheet or in shroud we wound him;
But he lay like a warrior taking his rest
with his martial cloak around him.

Few and short were the prayers we said,
And we spoke not a word of sorrow,
But we steadfastly gazed on the face that was dead,
And we bitterly thought of the morrow.³⁶

Obviously this is a proper end for a soldier. All of the necessary martial ritual is present, perhaps shorn of the time for graveyard obsequies, but all a soldier needs: a battlefield burial in his "martial cloak. . . narrow bed. . . [and] . . . lonely pillow" and his men mourning him. There is a sense of fitness in this poem: one gets the impression Sir John would not have had it any other way. The speaker is one of his men, a soldier, but the poet is not. Charles Wolfe was a minister who wrote this poem from an account in the newspaper. And thus it is easy to disguise what is really

going on: a corpse shovelled into the ground, wrapped in a piece of cloth for lack of time to cobble together a coffin. But the high-minded prose and accepted system of beliefs do disguise it nicely, do they not? It would be difficult to establish a greater sense of dichotomy, a greater distance than that established by lines separated from the actual experience not only by experience but by print. This is *mimesis* distanced to the fifth power. From the actual battlefield burial, to the account to an officer, to the report to the War Office, to the newspaper account to the poet.

Read against this high and noble, albeit fifth-hand description of a battle field burial, Sassoon's *The Rear Guard* describes an actual incident he experienced and transmuted into poetry.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall, saw someone lie
Humped at his feet, half hidden by a rug.
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug,
"I'm looking for headquarters." No reply
"God blast your neck!" (for days he'd had no sleep.)
"Get up and guide me through this stinking place."
Savage, he kicked a soft unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard, ten days before
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

* * * * *

At last with sweat of horror in his hair,
He climbed through darkness to the twilit air
Unloading hell behind him step by step.³⁷

The fifth-hand experience read against the immediate real experience perhaps exemplifies best the difference World War I made to poetry. This last poem was written by someone who had the experience and transmuted it into poetry. Perhaps the exchange is not as fair in terms of beauty of language; undoubtedly traditional poetry is more beautiful and written to a higher *aesthetic* standard. But if truth is a concern of poetry, perhaps "The Rear Guard," nastily explicit and not particularly concerned with Johnston's *aesthetics* though it is, is a "better" poem.

Sassoon, though in a position to sit out the war, does not: If he cannot get his men out of the Pit, he will rejoin them. Still, he makes no attempt to romanticize the Pit: he goes, not to redeem his men from hell, but to join them there, like Lucifer, who "misery hath joined in equal ruin."³⁸

I am banished from the patient men who fight.

They smote my heart to pity, built my pride.

* * * * *

They went arrayed in honour. But they died

Not one by one: and mutinous I cried

To those who sent them out into the night

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven

To free them from the pit where they must dwell

In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven

By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel

Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;

And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.³⁹

Nor is it an accident that *Paradise Lost* springs immediately to mind. "War," as Sherman so succinctly put it, "is hell." And beautiful and conventional language and the traditional sonnet form notwithstanding, Sassoon knows it. Knows it well enough to join his men, unheroically and unheroically groping through hell.

When Johnston decries the poetry of Sassoon and others for its pictures of degradation and debasement and claims, further, that it is shallow and valueless because it lacks of temporal distance, I do not understand him. Perhaps binary opposition comes into play. We are at opposite ends of the spectrum, he and I. In the realization that "it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country" is a lie, I do not see debasement and degradation, but plain and simple truth. The very distance that allows war to flourish, does no more than perpetuate the lie for desperate children. Far from being traitors to Poetry, the post-Somme poets were betrayed by an untrue fusion of Beauty and Poetry and Truth, which the post-Somme poets expose as an invitation to a slaughterhouse tricked out with uniforms, parades, and ghastly pomp.

Notes

¹ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) xiii.

² Keegan xiv.

³ Keegan xv.

⁴ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Jerome Buckley, Riverside edition. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1958) 274.

⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (London: Oxford U P, 1975) 74.

⁶ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Space and Time: 1880 – 191*. (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1983) 260.

⁷ Fussell 37.

⁸ Fussell 21-22.

⁹ Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori," *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* ed. John Stallworthy. (New York: W.W. Norton) 1985 117.

- ¹⁰ John H. Johnston, *English Poetry of the First World War: A Study in the Lyric and Narrative Form* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1964) 12.
- ¹¹ Isaac Rosenberg, "Break of Day in the Trenches," *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Ian Parsons, (New York: Oxford U P, 1979).
- ¹² John McCrae, "In Flanders Field," *War Verse* ed. Frank Foxcroft. (New York: Crowell) 1-2.
- ¹³ Fussell 135.
- ¹⁴ Spears, Hilda, *Remembering, We Forget: A Background Study to the First World War*, (London: Davies-Poynter, Ltd., 1979) 58.
- ¹⁵ Spears 6.
- ¹⁶ Homer, *The Iliad*. tr. Robert Fagles New York: (Viking, 1990) Bk 16: 575-80.
- ¹⁷ Edmund Blunden, "Trench Raid Near Hooge," qtd. in Johnston, 347.
- ¹⁸ Linda J. Holland-Toll, Personal Translation, *Beowulf*. ed. Fr. Klaeber Lexington: D.C. (Heath, 1922) 2339-53.
- ¹⁹ Blunden, "Third Ypres," qtd. in Johnston, 347.
- ²⁰ Tennyson, "The Coming of Arthur," *Idylls of the King* 353.
- ²¹ Siegfried Sassoon, "Counter-Attack," *Collected Poems*. (New York: Viking, 1949) 68.
- ²² Tennyson, "Charge of the Light Brigade," 274.
- ²³ Tennyson 274.
- ²⁴ Sassoon, "The General," 75.
- ²⁵ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV :iii: 28-29, 35-6, 38-9, 60-67.
- ²⁶ Fussell 21.
- ²⁷ Owen "The Send-Off," 149.
- ²⁸ Rudyard Kipling, "For All We Are and All We Have." *The Complete Verse*. (London: Kyle Cathie, 1990).
- ²⁹ Kipling, qtd. in Spear 41.
- ³⁰ George Gordon, Lord Byron, "The Eve of Waterloo," *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Helen Gardner, (New York: Oxford UP 1972) 565.
- ³¹ Byron 565.
- ³² Sassoon. "Blighters" 21.
- ³³ Sassoon. "Fight to a Finish," 77.
- ³⁴ Brooke "The Soldier," *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke*, 1915; (New York: Dodd Mead, 1980) 83.
- ³⁵ Owen, *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, 117.
- ³⁶ Charles Wolfe. "The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna." *New Oxford Book of English Verse*, , ed. Helen Gardner, (New York: Oxford UP 1972) 579.
- ³⁷ Sassoon, *The Rear Guard* 69.
- ³⁸ John Milton. *Paradise Lost. The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. I. ed. M.H. Abrahms. 5th ed. (New York: Norton, 1986) 1447.
- ³⁹ Sassoon. "The Banishment," 86.

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