THE MUSE AND MARS

AN EXAMINATION OF ENGLISH POETRY WRITTEN

DURING THE TWO WORLD WARS

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AMITAVA BANERJEE.
(821.909)

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FOR MY MOTHER

AND THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER
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Amitava Banerjee.
THE PRE-WAR POETIC SCENE

The poets of the First World War were confronted by the new phenomenon of mechanical warfare on a gigantic scale, and created a new kind of "war-poetry" which has no close previous parallel in English literary history. Both the nature of this War, and the circumstances under which the poets came to write about it, were unique. It is well-known that it was the first war in which man's increased skill in the fields of science and technology was harnessed for causing destruction on almost an unlimited scale. It was also the first war in which the whole nation was involved. The civilians went to the War along with the professional soldiers, and since unlike the professional soldiers, the civilians were not steeled by an unquestioning spirit of "discipline and obedience", they became more sensitive to the futility and waste of war. What is more, they were moved to express their own feelings in verse and prose. This fact can go to explain the enormous amount of literature that was produced during the war-years. Speaking of this War, Edmund Blunden pointed out: "The greatest war, breaking all records' produced the greatest number of poets (at least, in the English language) that any war has done."

1. See Edmund Blunden's 'Introduction' to an Anthology of War Poems, compiled by Frederick Brereton (1930).
Elsewhere, when Blunden compiled, with three others, *A Booklist on the War 1914-1918*, he had remarked not only on the prolific output of war literature, but also on the fact that much that "was printed has sunk into obscurity." It is true that a lot of this writing was trivial, but the significant point is that there were some poets who, not content to treat the war theme in conventional terms of glorification and justification, sought to establish a new relationship between the Muse and Mars. We are here concerned with their poetry.

In order to limit this study to manageable proportions, and also to investigate the nature of this new kind of "war-poetry", we shall confine ourselves to a discussion only of the soldier-poets who wrote about, and during, the War. This would exclude the more established poets of the time like Hardy, Pound and Yeats on the one hand, and poets like Herbert Read and David Jones on the other, each of whom wrote their best poems about the War from a certain distance.

One of the most difficult problems that arise in a study of the poetry of the First World War is connected with its literary lineage. It is necessary to find out the various cross-currents of the English poetic trends, out of which, or against which, this

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2. See Edmund Blunden's 'Introduction' to *A Booklist on the War 1914-1918*, compiled by Edmund Blunden and others (1929).
modern war poetry came into being. The poetic scene during the Edwardian era was pretty chaotic. Several movements arose in the field of English poetry at the turn of the century, but it is safe to suggest that almost all of them reacted against the poetry of the fin-de-siècle years. Beardsley had died in 1898, and both Wilde and Dowson in 1900. Lionel Johnson followed them in 1902, when Yeats too started a new phase in his poetic career at the Abbey Theatre. Arthur Symons published his Poems in 1901, but turned to literary history and criticism. Only John Davidson, of this group, kept on writing well into the new Edwardian decade. His five Testaments appeared from 1901 to 1908. He was always an isolated figure, and in any case, he drowned himself in 1909. Thus Decadence passed into history at the close of the Nineteenth Century, and a different kind of poetry marked the new age.

The distinguishing trait of the poets of the 'nineties was that they cut themselves off from the life of the common man in order to devote their lives to purely aesthetic ideals. The artists of late Victorian England found that the materialistic life around them was inimical and hostile to all artistic activities. Poets like Coventry Patmore, Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell rejected the world
around them and went to Roman Catholicism because it was still vital and significant for them. The Pre-
Raphaelites, on the other hand, having abandoned contemporary values, went to Greek and medieval times for sustenance and comfort. The Decadents, though they were one with the poets of these two groups in their rejection of the contemporary world, were different from either group in that they did not seek, nor did they find, countervalues in any of the older traditions, religious or secular. What they sought was a freedom of their personal emotions and sensations. Their disgust with the world, and their alienation from it, induced in them a feeling of melancholy. But because they refused to take into account, in their poetry as well as in their lives, the objective facts of life, their feelings of sadness lacked strength and vitality, leaving a sense of weariness and boredom, a pallid indifference. No doubt, in occasional poems like Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* or Dowson's *To One In Bedlam*, poets create poignant poetry out of the sordidness and misery of Victorian life, but in the majority of their poems they appear as self-conscious bohemians who revel in sadness and melancholy, and express their feelings in dolorous cadences. Yeats pointed out that these poets, whom he described as 'The Tragic Generation', were, in their "insistence
upon emotion which has no relation to any public interest, gathered together, overwrought, unstable men."³ In matters of technique, though Decadents like Dowson made interesting experiments, and Lionel Johnson wrote verses of classical simplicity and dignity, they were, in general rather conventional in the manner of the Pre-Raphaelites. Their bookish and hackneyed images, and romantic and languorous expressions looked backwards and not forwards.

The poets of the fin de siècle era have often been linked with the French Symbolists, but it must be admitted that they were poor imitators of their French masters. Edmund Wilson ⁴ noted that there were two branches of the French Symbolist Movement, "the serious-aesthetic" typified by Verlaine, and "the conversational-ironic" typified by Jules Laforgue, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Corbière. The poets of the latter category did not make their influence felt until about 1910 or so when poets like Eliot and Yeats adopted the Symbolist technique, which they combined with the influences of the Metaphysicals. (Grierson's edition of Donne came out in 1912.) The poets of the 'nineties, on the other hand, borrowed the dandyism of French Symbolists and pre-Symbolists like Verlaine and Gautier, and wrote

⁴ Axel's Castle (1962)
debilitated poetry, marked by hysteria and hedonism. No doubt, some of their poems have the charm of intricately patterned rhythms, and an almost classical dignity of impersonality. They were, on the whole, however, far removed from normal human existence, and were confined to an enervating atmosphere of moonshine, pale lilies and barmaids.

It was against this kind of poetry that most poets of pre-war England reacted. In the preface to his Collected Poems (1903), Synge lamented the current state of English poetry, and remarked: "It may almost be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal". Ezra Pound predicted that modern poetry "will move against poppycock, it will be harder and saner, it will be ... 'nearer the bone'. It will be as much nearer the granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, its interpretative power ..." Indeed, there was a general demand for return to 'realism' in poetry. But 'realism' was interpreted differently by different poets, so that in many a case we find that though the pre-war poet was dealing with a more common theme, he was, in some essential respects, almost as unreal as were the poets of the 'nineties.

The blustering Imperialists like Kipling, Newbolt

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Austin and Noyes avoided the private dreamworlds of their predecessors, and plunged into a poetry of noisy and often vulgar broad popular appeal. They were unashamedly patriotic, and they advocated the values of loyalty and obedience in order to carry out "the white man's burden". In doing so, they pandered to a vein of unself-critical popular sentiment and seldom succeeded in creating significant poetry. They never went beyond the surface facts, and tended to evade the perplexities and mysteries of human existence as such. Kipling was a considerable poet, as Eliot was one of the first critics to note. His best poems deal with elemental themes of fear and endurance. A poem like Recessional is full of mature self-questionings. Above all, he revived the supple, colloquial verse of the English light verse and ballad tradition. But most of his pre-war poems are jingling and jingoistic: The Galley Slaves and Loot are marked by a morbid enthusiasm for violence. In reading such poems, one gets the impression that "for Kipling England and the Empire were symbols which enjoyed complete poetic validity unqualified by pious self-questioning and doubts about the social justice of our legislation in various parts of it." Kipling seldom explored

the deeper realities. "Like the typical 'man of action'," as Pinto rightly points out, "he loved facts and hated and feared reality. All his work is coloured by his denial of the existence of the fundamental problems of the modern world. There was no Irish or South African problem, only rebels and traitors ..." 7

Such abstract concepts of duty and patriotism were further exemplified in the works of Henry Newbolt, who exulted over the political success of his poems. He described how his verses had influenced one election, and concluded an account of that event with a quotation from G.M. Trevelyan:

Such in those days was the close connection of poetry and politics, when poetry could serve the purpose of pamphleteering. 8

In this context, it should not be difficult to understand that for Newbolt soldiering was a game like football or cricket, and he advised that it should be treated in the like spirit. The following lines from his once popular Vitai Lampada show how far removed Newbolt was from the terrible realities of warfare:

The sand of the desert is sodden red, -
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; -
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel's dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.

7. V. de S. Pinto, Crisis in English Poetry (1961), p.32.
The river of death has brimmed its banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

The incredible superficiality of such an attitude, and
the grim irony of it, especially when contrasted with
later war poetry, hardly needs any comment. 'Blood'
and 'Death' lose their fierce reality, and are equated
with bruises and pains suffered on the playing field.
Similarly, Alfred Austin, though not as much respected
among the Conservatives as Kipling or Newbolt were,
was extolled in his day by his admirers for being
"before all things a normal and healthy man, in close
contact with realities." In a poem like Why England
is Conservative, Austin glorifies the picture of a
conservative England, and lashes out at all those
tendencies which threaten it. The poet distorts the
new progressive trends into images of chaos and disorder,
and returns to an idealized and sentimentalized picture
of a bucolic England:

Therefore chime sweet and safely, village bells,
And, rustic channels, woo to reverent prayer,
And wise and simple to the porch repair
Round which Death, slumbering, dreamlike heaves
and swells.
Let hound and horn in wintry woods and dells
Make jocund music though the boughs be bare,
And whistling yokels guide his teaming share
Hard by the homes where gentle lordship dwells.

9. "The Poetry of Mr. Alfred Austin", Quarterly Review
(January 1908), 174.
And though the throats of envy rage and rail
Be fair proud England, proud fair England still!

What these Imperialists were trying to do was to preserve conservatism in literature when it was fading out in politics. In 1906 the Conservatives were defeated by the combined Labour and Liberal parties, but since the Imperialists were Conservatives they continued to produce the kind of reactionary poetry which was admired and cherised by those who refused to face the realities. A certain amount of anti-Imperialist and anti-Boer War verse was produced by men like Belloc and Chesterton, but it was, like the verse on the Imperialist side, again skilful versification rather than poetry.

It is significant that much poetry in the first decade of the twentieth century was produced to suit the needs and tastes of the general public. In 1913, Arnold Bennett warned about "the futility of writing what will not immediately be read ... the sagacious artist will respect basic national prejudices." One ought to, therefore, investigate the 'taste' of the reading public on whose approval the literary reputations so much depended at the beginning of the century. Pinto divided the society of this time into various categories, and started by suggesting that there were the rich

people who "seemed to live in a hollow, empty world" 'befogged with the stupidity which hangs over this society and prevents them from using their money rationally'. They lived behind what Henry James called 'an impenetrable ring-fence within which reigned a kind of expensive vagueness made up of smiles and silences and beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements, all strained to breaking'. On the other extreme were the poor slum-dwellers, and the class of manual labourers whose literary tastes were confined to the traditional ballads. Between these two categories lay the vast middle-class population. Among these middle-class people there were, of course, some intelligent, liberal men who realized that many Victorian ideals were becoming irrelevant in the present context, and were aware of the immediate problems of poverty and unemployment. The consciousness - indeed, the conscientiousness - of such people was mainly reflected in the fields of the novel and of drama, but was also found in the works of a few poets. We shall discuss them later, but right now let us examine the attitudes of the other major portion of the middle-class who lived in the growing suburbs of London, earning a good living, sending their children to Oxbridge, and taking their holidays on the Continent -

They had literary traditions, but especially in the field of poetry, these were overlaid with a thick veneer of conservatism that was at once academic and puritanical. Poetry was regarded as something inseparable from the worship of the classics, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold. Poetry had to be pleasant, dignified, moral, not difficult or introspective, and based on the pretence that the rhythms of the suburban life was still those of the old England of the feudal contryside.

This was the class to which the Imperialists, whom we have discussed above, appealed, because those poets were committed to political and social ideals which were crumbling—a fact which neither these poets nor their readers wished to recognize or acknowledge.

The other type of poets who found favour with this audience could be represented by Wilfred Scawen Blunt, William Watson, Stephen Philips, Laurence Binyon and Robert Bridges. One pervading trait of these poets (who were not, of course, a conscious literary group) was their lack of revolutionary spirit and a worship of the classics. Poets like Watson and Philips did not think "that there (was) anything seriously wrong with the tradition of the English verse that (had) its roots in Ovid, Vergil, Sophocles, and Homer, and whose poetic charter was drawn up by Aristotle." And, therefore, they wrote imitative poetry in the manner

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12. Ibid., p. 117.
of Wordsworth and Keats, Tennyson and Arnold, marked by ornateness and sentimentalism. Blunt, though he wrote a few poems of political protest (e.g. *The Wind and the Whirlwind*), was essentially an aristocratic country gentleman (though a radical in Imperial politics) who had an enormous zest for life, and a healthy enjoyment of it. This was reflected in his nature poems which were inspired by a joy in the open-air countryside of Sussex:

To-day, all day I rode upon the Down,
With hounds and horsemen, a brave company.
On this side in its glory lay the sea,
On that Sussex Weald, a sea of brown.

I knew the Spring was come. I knew it even Better than all by this that through my chase In bush and stone and hill and sea and heaven I seemed to see and follow still your face.
Your face my quarry was. For it, I rode,
My horse a thing of wings, myself God.

This is a piece of descriptive nature-poetry, showing the poet riding upon the Sussex Downs, like a "God" on the "wings" of his horse, he himself being the embodiment of chivalrous love. But it has nothing of the grandeur, the dignity or the humanity of the best nature-poetry of the earlier Romantics. In other words, in the absence of the majesty of a "philosophic mind" like that of Wordsworth, such poetry strikes one as hollow and pseudo-Romantic.

The worst traits of the Romantics haunted the
verse of Sir William Watson, too, whose patriotic sonnets and nature poems were written in a conventional manner. His cold submission to authority was expressed in lyrics like *When Birds Were Songless*, and *Thy Voice From Inmost Dreamland Calls*; he glorified the British Empire in *Ode On the Coronation of Edward VII*:

> Who stretch one hand on Huron's bearded pines,  
> And on Kashmir's snowy shoulders lay,  
> And round the streaming of whose raiment shines  
> The iris of the Australasian spray.

and denounced Germany in a poem which appeared in the *English Review*, December 1915:

> Out of the gutters and shores of Hell -  
> Disgorged from the vast infernal sewer -  
> Vomitted forth from a world where dwell Childhood, maidenhood, wifehood pure - 
> She arose and towered on earth and sea Clothed in her green putridity.

The very tone, rhythm and diction of such lines show that the poet has a tremendous enthusiasm for the out-moded poetic conventions and rhetoric which are used to convey equally out-of-date ideals and attitudes. It is against such a background that one is in a better position to understand the bitterness of the War Poets towards their predecessors who preached these slogans with a complete disregard for the complexities of the human situation.

Poets like Binyon and Bridges were, as G.S. Fraser points out, "disgusted by the brassiness of contemporary
popular poetry, (and) sought refreshment in history or myth, or in technical experiment."^{14} Binyon shows a delicate handling of classical themes and metres in his poems on Tristram, whereas Bridges does it in his version of one book of the Aeneid. Bridges's most important poem Testament of Beauty (which was written in the 1920s) deals with beauty as an ethical and intellectual principle. And though it is doubtful whether he was able to fuse idealistic philosophy with modern scientific thought with complete poetic conviction, the poem remains a significant metrical experiment. Indeed, Bridges's chief importance in the history of English poetry lies in his prosodic skill. In the words of Lawrence Durrell, Bridges is a poet "whose skill and craftsmanship placed him in the front rank of English letters of this period."^{15}

Thus, these poets, whether they wrote Imperialist verses or soft, melodious "philosophical" poems, were out of tune with their age. Their poetry gave little evidence of their awareness that they lived in "a period in which, as a result of developments in the religious, political, economic, military and other fields men have lost faith in certain traditional ways of seeing the world."^{16} They were under the illusion that

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they were writing about life, though their poems had as little relevance to the deeper problems of contemporary living as the poetry of the fin-de-siècle era.

Unfortunately, they had the support, not only of the public but also of the critics. "The marked characteristic" of the period, as Arnold Bennett noted "is its gigantic temperamental dullness, unresponsive to external suggestion, a lack of humour — in short, a heavy and half honest stupidity: ultimate product of gross stupidity ... Then I note a grim passion for the status quo."17 The critics, too, voiced the opinions and attitudes of such a public. Thus, this is how the new books by Watson, Noyes and Newbolt were reviewed by The Times Literary Supplement (18 November 1909):

The three poets whose names are here joined, different as they are from each other, are alike in this, that they all belong to the centre of poetic tradition. Neither (sic) of them insists on a new formula for the definition of poetry. The compass of the old instrument is, in their view, still wide enough to contain modern music. They aim at a quality of beauty in expression which demands no violent adjustment of sympathy or taste on the part of the reader.

Artists like Pound, Eliot and Joyce were working on different lines because they thought that the "old instrument" was not "wide enough to contain modern music."

In fact Ezra Pound felt that the popular poet had

indulged in a "debasement of the literary coin", and that "the general tendency of British criticism at the time was towards utter petrifaction or vitrefaction".

But though such rebels had started writing from about this time (1909) - Yeats had changed his style, Eliot, presumably, was contemplating his Prufrock, and the Imagist Movement was well on its way - it was only in the nineteen-twenties that the new kinds of poetry made their impact widely felt. For the time being, the "non-revolutionaries" reigned supreme -

Until the War the new movements did not succeed in catching the attention of the public. The old favourites remained. In 1913 the Journal of Education held a plebiscite to discover the most popular poets in England, still living. Kipling received twice as many votes as his nearest rivals, William Watson. Robert Bridges (not the same kind of poet, but one whose diction was recognizably 'beautiful') was third. Alfred Noyes was fourth.

The only serious challenge to the popular pre-war poetry came from the Georgian anthologies edited by Edward Marsh. Georgian Poetry has been under critical fire for a long time, until quite recently when some critics have taken upon themselves the task of rehabilitating it. (cf. Alan Pryce-Jones, ed. Georgian Poets (1959); James Reeves ed. Georgian Poetry (1962);

O.K. Stead, *The New Poetic* (1964); Robert Ross, *The Georgian Revolt* (1967). Any discussion of Georgian Poetry must be preceded by the recognition that here we are dealing only with those poems which had appeared in the five Georgian anthologies between 1912 and 1922. It is easy to confuse the issue by believing that since poets like D.H. Lawrence, Robert Graves and Isaac Rosenberg had appeared in these volumes, or that poets like Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen were writing during this period, the Georgian Poetry anthologies represent some kind of a modern poetic revolt in their own time, perhaps still in some ways significant for our times.

It must be remembered that though different kinds of poets made their appearances in these anthologies (and indeed some of the well-known poets were included just in order to increase the market-value of these books), the Georgian poetic trend grew into a conscious 'movement', with its own rules and ideals. Harold Monro, himself a regular contributor to the Georgian anthologies, and their publisher, remarked in 1920:

... in its infancy the 'Georgian Movement' was uncharacterized by evidence of design, that is, it did not, like other schools, preach or practise a special dogma of poetic

art. It was fortuitous and informal. But poets subsequently included in the anthologies devoted much energy to narrowing and hardening what started as a spontaneous co-operative effort. They sought to establish (according to a recent review) 'a form of literary tyranny, demanding of its own disciples a complete conformity to certain standards, and seeking to exclude altogether who refuse to do homage to those laws'.

And Robert H. Ross's researches go to show that, though Marsh did invite, and in some cases accepted, suggestions from his friends, he was guided, right from the very start, by his own tastes and standards in matters of selection of poems for the anthologies:

With rare exceptions - such as when he allowed Sturge Moore to win the argument over Trevelyan's 'Dirge' - Marsh made himself entirely responsible for the specific poems selected from the works of chosen poets. Even Brooke appears to have had no direct hand in helping Marsh select his poems for Georgian Poetry I (1911-12).

Ross had remarked that "Marsh's poetic standards were also those of the amateur", and had gone on to quote the observations of James Reeves to the effect that Marsh "believed that they were the standards of a large educated public, and in this he was right. His outlook was characteristically English. Theorizing about art was foreign: announcing aesthetic and critical doctrines was foreign. His approach to artistic problems was pragmatic and amateur".

22. Quoted by C.K. Stead, op. cit., p. 94.
24. Ibid., p. 108.
Marsh had made abundantly clear in his memoirs his criteria for the selection of poems:

I liked poetry to be all three (or if not all three, at least two; or if the worst came to the worst, at least one) of the following things: intelligible, musical and racy ... I liked poetry that I wanted to know by heart, and could learn by heart if I had time. 25

It is tempting to digress for a moment and recall that it was precisely such poetic propensities and practices that the poets of the First War had found revolting, or irrelevant, at best. Charles Sorley, who died in 1915, pointed out: "The voice of our poets and men of letters is finely trained and sweet to hear; it teems with sharp saws and rich sentiment: it is a marvel of delicate technique: it pleases, it flatters, it charms, it soothes: it is a living lie." 26

Apparently Edward Marsh had his own views on the matter. In the Prefatory Note to the first volume of Georgian Poetry 1911-12, he exclaimed: "This volume is issued in the belief that the English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty ... we are at the beginning of another 'Georgian Period' which may take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past". These are obviously vague and extravagant claims, backed up neither by an explanation of wherein the "strength and beauty" of

25. Edward Marsh A Number of People (1939) p.322.
this poetry lay nor indeed a condemnation of what in the prevailing poetic trends was being rejected. However, it is quite possible to know, from an examination of the poems, as well as the critical remarks made by some Georgian poets themselves, what was being attempted. Thus Harold Monro found that "the numbing effect of the Victorian period (seemed) finally to have relaxed its pressure on the brain of the rising generation", and he looked forward to a new age which would be different from the Tennysonian world on the one hand, and that of the Decadents on the other. "27" And John Gould Fletcher declared that in 1912,

There was but one lesson the modern artist must learn and ponder, the lesson proclaimed by the Irish dramatist Synge, who had said that poetry, to be human again, must first learn to be brutal. In revolt against the elaboration of end-of-the-century aestheticism, against the romantic movement faltering in sentimental prettiness, against the genteel tradition in decay, artists everywhere were turning to the primitively ugly, knowing that in primitiveness alone lay strength. 28

The modern advocates of Georgian Poetry also feel that the distinguishing trait of this verse is its realism. While Ross believes that the Georgian poet "deliberately set out to be a realist, to reproduce faithfully and fearlessly what he saw", Stead maintains that "in the

work of the Georgians 'poetry' and 'life' begin to merge again: art is not for them something fragile, magical and remote from ordinary living, as it was for the aesthetes; nor is life equated with politics, public affairs, and large conservative generalizations as it was for the Imperialists. Life for them was what they experienced.30

The realistic tendencies of Georgian Poetry manifested themselves in the form, diction and subject-matter. The dramatic form was revived in plays like Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife* and Abercrombie's *The End of the World*. Abercrombie argued that verse-drama came "closer to life" and that instead of discussing social problems and their cures in an abstract manner, it heightened the consciousness of "spiritual reality ... emotional reality".31 Even when the Georgians did not set out to write dramas, their poems, like Hardy's *Satires of Circumstances* (1911), arise within the framework of dramatic situations (e.g. Brooke's *Dining-Room Tea*, De la Mare's *The Listener*, Wilfrid Gibson's *Devil's Edge* and *The Hare*).

A natural corollary of this dramatic bent of mind was the establishment of natural speech as poetic

diction. In their reaction against late-Victorian lushness and artificiality of diction, the Georgians insisted on taking their cue from Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. They used in their poems the accents of the speech of the common people, as indeed Kipling and Masefield had already started doing. The result is that Georgian Poetry is marked by a simplicity of diction, unadorned by the richness and the archaisms of Decadent poetry. Thus, while Brooke would write lines like:

Just now the lilac is in bloom,
All before my little room;
And in my flower bed, I think
Smile the carnation and the pink;

(W. H. Davies expressed his yearning for simple, rural pleasures in the simplest diction:

Yes, I will spend the livelong day
With nature in this month of May;
And sit beneath the trees and share
My bread with birds whose homes are there;
While cow lies down to eat, and sheep
Stand to their neck in grass so deep.

It was, however, in their handling of realistic themes that the Georgians were supposed to have shown themselves as distinct from the dreamy sentimentalists of the fin-de-siècle generation on the one hand, and the rhetorical outbursts of the Imperialists on the other. In occasional pieces like Gibson's Geranium,
the poet presented the wretchedness of the human
condition against an appropriate background of sordid
surroundings:

Stuck in a bottle on the window sill,
In the cold gas-light burning gaily red
Against the luminous blue of London night,
These flowers are mine; while somewhere out of sight
In some black-throated alley's stench and heat,
Oblivious of the racket of the street,
A poor old weary woman lies in bed.

And yet to-morrow will these blooms be dead
With their lively beauty; and to-morrow
May end the light lusts and heavy sorrow
Of that old body with the nodding head.
The last oath muttered, the last pint drained deep,
She'll sink, as Cleopatra sank, to sleep.

In this poem, which is perhaps the best single
piece in all the five Georgian anthologies, the poet
comes to grips with the actuality of the human
condition, even though he fails to achieve tragic
heights because of the unrelieved gloom of the poem.
In a similar vein John Masefield presents the reality
of the London scene that is both tawdry and terrible:

So, if the penman sums up my London days,
Let him say but that there were holier ways,
Dull Bloomsbury streets of dull brick mansions old
With stinking doors where women stood to scold
And drunken waits at Christmas with their horn
Droning the news, in snow, that Christ was born;
And windy gas lamps and the wet roads shining
And that old carol of the midnight whining,
And that old room above the noisy slum
Where there was wine and fire and talk with some
Under strange pictures of the wakened soul
To whom this earth was but a burnt-out coal.

(Biography)
Though such poems as these do not explore the realities of the "Age of Anxiety" with the fierce intensity of Pound, Yeats and Eliot, they do succeed in creating poetry out of the mature consciousness of artists who realize that they are living in a world which has been transformed by what I.A. Richards describes as "the neutralization of nature".\(^{32}\)

Unfortunately, poems like these are few and far between in the Georgian anthologies. More often than not the Georgians showed their love of realism either in coarse brutal descriptions or in simple nature lyrics in which they expressed their genuine fondness for those aspects of nature which had still remained unaffected by the onslaught of industrialization. John Masefield in his *Everlasting Mercy* (1911), with descriptions of drinking, poaching and whoring of the protagonist Saul Kane, and Rupert Brooke in his *Poems* (1911), with descriptions of Menelaus "who weeps, gummy-eyed and impotent", and whose "dry shanks twist at Paris's mumbled name", and of seasickness and love-sickness simultaneously in *Channel Passage*, seemed to have charted the way for Georgian "realism". Instances of the 'brutal realism' of the Georgians are to be found

especially in the plays where the dramatist seized
the earliest opportunity of giving coarse details,
often without any artistic relevance. In his Tale of
St. Thomas, Abercrombie describes at length the
sadistic pleasures of the king who subjected an
offending merchant to revolting tortures:

So, to better his tongue, a rope was vent
Beneath his outer, up he was hauled, and fire
Let singe the soles of his feet, until his legs
Wriggled like flying eels: then the king's dogs
Were set to hunt the hirpling man. The king
Laughed greatly and cried, 'But give the dogs words
they know

And they'll be tame'.

Similarly, Bottomley revelled in coarse details like
these:

When I was young
My mother would catch us frogs, and set them down,
Lapt in a screw of paper, in the ruts.
And carts going by would quash 'em.
(The End of the World)

Ralph Hodgson described how the "loathly birds" awaited
the death of a dying bull in his poem The Bull, and
Wilfrid Gibson in Hoops came out with some revolting
descriptions of camels. D.H. Lawrence rightly
condemned such "nasty efforts at cruelty", as did
the reviewers for New Statesman (V, 1915, p.218), and
The Times Literary Supplement (9th December 1915, p.447).

33. See D.H. Lawrence's letter to Edward Marsh,
May 24, 1914, in The Collected Letters of D.H.
The reviewer for the _T.L.S._ perhaps put the case against this mistaken concept of artistic realism most cogently and convincingly:

Now, undoubtedly there are unpleasant people and horrible things in the real world, but there is too much method in Mr Bottomley's madness. (The reviewer was commenting on _King Lear's Wife._) He is out to write a new kind of poetry, a poetry which is not romantic. He is not going to get a cheap effect, like Tennyson in 'The Idylls of the King', by drawing blameless prigs. But he gets a cheap effect by the opposite method ... He drew ugliness, as the Victorians drew beauty, for the sake of ugliness, as if it were interesting in itself quite apart from what it is made of. This is mere reaction from the notion that beauty is interesting in itself: and his _King Lear_ is no more interesting, no more alive and growing, than Tennyson's _King Arthur._ He is rigid and unreal in his own conventional baseness as _King Arthur_ in his conventional loftiness.

A similar charge of a lack of serious concern with reality was brought against Georgian nature poetry — and nature was far and away their favourite subject. John Middleton Murry was one of the first to point out the "false simplicity" of the nature-poetry of the Georgians who deliberately left out the thought content. In other words, these poets sought, in their nature-poems, agreeableness rather than truth. Hence this kind of poetry is pretty conventional, and hardly

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34. John M. Murry, _Aspects of Literature_ (1934), pp 154-155.
elegible for any special claim or attention. Yet, Robert H. Ross, who speaks of 'the Georgian pastoral tradition' which runs through all the five volumes, believes that the first two volumes of Georgian Poetry, contains the best poetry of the group, including their best nature-poetry. He singles out W.H. Davies as the poet who, before his 'imagination declined, along with that of his fellow-Georgians in the post-war years, wrote spontaneous and "inimitable" nature poetry:

The pre-war Davies had the rare gift of spontaneity, a quality which made his mode essentially inimitable. 'Nature poets, with their meticulous catalogues', as Richard Church observed, 'can be bores. Davies, with his handful of references which he repeats over again, is never a bore. On the contrary, he puts a sort of enchantment upon us ... The emotion is a kind of nostalgia, a harkening back to the morning of life, of time, the last realm of innocence, where everything is wonder, and nothing is knowledge.'

This is an excellent critique of Davies as a nature-poet, but hardly supports Ross's basic claim that Davies was a 'realist'. Surely, the poetry which was characterized by a sense of 'wonder', where "nothing is knowledge", could not but be just pleasant and agreeable at its very best. And that, indeed, can be the right description for Georgian poetry as a

whole. The Georgian wish for simplicity in a world of complex problems and attitudes took them to the countryside where they found nature, not "red in tooth and claw" but in its simple and humble manifestations. Each of these poets sought for himself an enclosed plot, and sang about its bucolic beauties softly and confidently. They deliberately retired to the meadows in order to forget "The lies, the truths and pain ... " (Brooke). Davies - whom Robert Graves described as "a half-educated Welsh natural" - establishes a kind of relationship between himself and nature, and decides to abandon humanity and its problems very much in the manner of the minor nature-poets, like Lady Winchelsea, in the first half of the eighteenth-century. In May expresses Davies's longing for natural pleasures free from human worries -

When I hemmed in by wrecks of men,
Thought of some lonely cottage then,
Full of sweet books; and miles of sea,
With passing ships in front of me;
And having, on the other hand,
A flowery, green, bird-singing land.

and in The Kingfisher, the poet identified himself with the bird in a mutual desire to flee from the pride and ambition of mankind:

Nay, lovely Bird, thou art not vain;
Thou hast no proud, ambitious mind;
I also love a quiet place
That's green, away from all mankind;
A lonely pool, and let a tree
Sigh with her bosom over me.

Similarly, John Drinkwater, who has "known the large unrest of men bewildered in their travelling", seeks peace and quiet in the sleepy hollows of Sussex countryside:

For peace, than knowledge more desirable,
Into your Sussex quietness I came,
When summer's green and gold azure fell
Over the world in flame.
And peace upon your pasture-lands I found,
Where grazing flocks drift on continually,
As little clouds that travel with no sound
Across a windless sky.

(Of Greatham)

Nature, for these poets, is a place of refuge from the worries and anxieties of contemporary life. Great nature-poets like Wordsworth heard "the still sad music of humanity" amidst the various manifestations of nature. In fact, their pastoralism was not the creation of an ideal world with no contacts with the actual world of day-to-day living, but rather gave significance to the problems and facts of contemporary life. It was in this sense that their nature-poetry was 'philosophical'. The Georgians, on the other hand, had a much simpler attitude to nature. The natural world, with its beauty and quietness, is viewed in sharp contrast to the world, of miseries and ugliness,
of the poet. And all he does is to yearn for the beautitudes of the former world, and sing of them in soft, lyrical cadences. Much of the nature poetry of the Georgians, therefore, consists of mere descriptions. Francis Ledwidge starts his description of a rainy day in April:

When the clouds shake their hyssops, and the rain
Like holy water falls upon the plain,
'Tis sweet to gaze upon the springing grain
And see your harvest born.

and ends too by gazing at the colourful scene:

See how she weaves her mantle fold on fold,
Hemming the woods and carpeting the wold,
His warp is of the green, her woof the gold,
The spinning world her wheel.

(A Rainy Day in April)

There is hardly one significant emotion controlling the poem. There is the poet's sense of quiet joy on a rainy day in springtime when the natural scene is fresh and colourful. No doubt such a poem can be agreeable for its simple pleasures, but in the absence of any deeper significance or richness, it soon palls on us.

Such nature-poetry was further watered down in the post-war volumes of Georgian Poetry. In the third volume (1916-17), for instance, we find John Freeman describing the coming of the moon out of clouds, as
she hovers over the "tired Earth", shedding her soft
glow all around:

It was the lovely moon - she lifted
Slowly her white brow among
Bronze cloud-waves that ebbed and drifted
Faintly, faintlier afar.
Calm she looked, yet pale with wonder,
Sweet in unwonted thoughtfulness,
Watching the earth that dwindled under
Faintly, faintlier afar.
It was the lovely moon and lovelike
Hovered over the wandering, tired
Earth, her bosom grey and dovelike,
Hovering beautiful as a dove ....

('It Was the Lovely Moon')

Here is a simple set of relationship. The moon is
beautiful, and the poet, presumably, is sad in his
human predicament, and all that he can do is to
compliment the moon for being thoughtful of the earth
on which she sheds her glory. Such a romantic
glorification of the sights and sounds of nature,
accompanied by self-pity, became the central
preoccupation of the Georgians. On occasions such
tendencies reached a point when their nature-poetry
became fatuous and absurd. There are perhaps no better
words to describe Harold Monro's longing for the
"paradise" of country pleasures:

The train! The twelve o'clock for paradise.
Hurry, or it will try to creep away.
Out in the country everyone is wise:
We can be only wise on Saturday.
There you are waiting, little friendly house:
Those are your chimney-stacks with you between,
Surrounded by old trees and strolling cows,
Staring through all your windows at the green.
Your homely floor is creaking for our tread;
The smiling tea-pot with contented spout
Thinks of the boiling water, and the bread
Longs for the butter. All their hands are out
To greet us, and the gentle blankets seem
Purring and crooning: 'Lie in us, and dream'.

(Week-End)

J.C. Squire put up a formidable list of bird names:

Yes, daw and owl, curlew and crested horn,
Kingfisher, mallard, water-rail and tern,
Chaffinch and greenfinch, warbler, stonechat, ruff,
Pied wagtail, robin, fly-catcher and chough,
Mistle-thrush, magpie, sparrow-hawk, and jay,
Built, these far ages gone, in this year's way.

(The Birds)

And John Freeman matched this with flower names:

I will take celandine, nettle and parsley, white
In its own green light,
Or milkwort and sorrel, thyme, harebell and meadowsweet
Lifting at your feet,
And ivy-blossom beloved of soft bees: I will take
The loveliest -

('I Will Ask')

The nature poetry of the Georgians came under
attack as early as 1914 when Richard Aldington pointed
out that poetry did not consist of "botanical
germination, florescence and decay". And in 1917,
T.S. Eliot remarked that since the Georgian nature poet
concentrated exclusively on the object itself, he

37 Eroist, I, No. 9. (May 1914), 161.
produced poetry that was vague and thin. Eliot went on to say that "only in something harder can great passion be expressed ... the vague is a more dangerous path for poetry than the acrid". It was Aldous Huxley who perhaps best defined the limitations of the Georgian nature-poetry when he explained that in order to be a successful nature-poet, one had to be a good poet in the first instance i.e. he should be a man of deep sensibility, with an ability to communicate his feelings and thoughts to his readers: "To be a nature poet a man must have felt profoundly and intimately those particular emotions which nature can inspire, and must be able to express them in such a way that his readers feel them." The central criticism of the Georgians must be that they were incapable of feeling or thinking deeply. They carefully avoided dealing with the reality that disturbs and elevates. For them, "the world of real matter" was "the English farms and fields, moors and hedge-rows". This kind of poetry has always been popular with the general public, but it was not enough to constitute a poetic "revolt" that would usher in the poetry of modern

consciousness. Rebecca West made this point quite early, when the first volume of *Georgian Poetry* was published:

Poetry should be burned to the bone by austere fires and washed white with rains of affliction: the poet should love nakedness and the thought of the skeleton under flesh. But because public will not pay for poetry it has become the occupation of the learned persons, given to soft living among veiled things and unaccustomed to being sacked for talking too much. That is why from the beautiful stark bride of Blake it has become the idle hussy hung with ornaments kept by Lord Tennyson, handed on to Philip Stephens and now supported at Devonshire Street by the Georgian school.

When the War unmasked the fierce reality of the contemporary situation - Bernard Berenson has demonstrated how, in the pre-war years, "some of the imaginative writers of the time were conscious of the spreading cracks in the social facade and the hints of impending disaster" - the Georgians staggered on their feet, and in the light of the new reality, the so-called "reality" of the Georgians was ignominiously exposed. C.K. Stead over-simplifies the issue when he suggests that the War Poetry can be related to the Georgian poetic tradition, that "poets like Sassoon, Owen and Sorley inherit the honesty, gentleness and

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open-mindedness of the liberal intellectual movement out of which had come the Georgian anthologies".  As we shall try to show later on, the poetry of the First World War cannot be put in any well-defined literary tradition. Poets like Sassoon, Sorley and Owen were confronted with an entirely new subject-matter, and, in the words of D.J. Enright, "simply the War, a great non-literary event, forced him, as a poet and an honest man, to find another way of speaking". Seekers for a precedent of this kind of War Poetry may perhaps find it in Hardy's The Dynasts, as has been claimed by A. Chakravarty in his The Dynasts and the Post-War Age in Poetry (1938). The Georgians can be credited with having supplied the War Poets with their techniques of simple diction and conventional metres, and that too, cannot be called a strictly Georgian 'innovation'. One of the understandable weaknesses of the poetry of the First War was the use of worn out, sometimes faulty, techniques. Better poets like Sorley, Rosenberg and Owen tried, within the severe limitations under which they wrote their poems, to modify the Georgian techniques that they had adopted.

43 Op.cit., p.89
Thus, Sorley and Rosenberg clearly used some of the methods of the Imagists, and Owen, as Rosemary Freeman has brilliantly demonstrated, "used the vocabulary and the rhythm accepted in the poetry of his time" for prosodic purposes.

Moreover, it is important to note that no significant War Poetry appeared in the Georgian anthologies of the War, or the post-War years. When in the Third Volume (1916-17) War Poets like Robert Nichols, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon and Isaac Rosenberg did appear — though it must be remembered that their non-War poems outnumbered their War Poems — the older Georgians expressed their protests. Abercrombie wrote to Marsh: "My occupation is gone, as completely as if it never were. God knows anything will turn up. Meanwhile, I try to write poetry, which seems ridiculous fiddle-faddle these terrific times." Wilfrid Gibson confessed ignorance of the new War Poets who had appeared in Georgian Poetry, and thought such "old fogies" as himself should make way for newer blood, and Bottomley suggested to Gibson that the old compatriots might find it necessary to form "a new society of George the Firsts". But, evidently,

45. Rosemary Freeman, 'Parody As a Literary Form: Herbert and Owen'. Essays in Criticism; XII, No. 4 (1963), 307-322.
46. Quoted by Ross, op. cit. p. 133.
47. Ibid.; p. 176.
48. Ibid.
this new kind of poetry failed to make a permanent impact on the Georgian movement, so that the last two volumes of *Georgian Poetry*, (1918-19 and 1920-22), followed the quiet, pietist, pastoral trends of the earlier volumes.

All these details show the weakness of the claim that the Georgians brought back 'realism' into English poetry. Ross admits that the decline of Georgian Poetry can be attributed directly to the war. The movement began to founder, he remarked, when, during the war years, it began to substitute "agreeableness" for "truth". 49

He, of course, does not go on to investigate the real reasons for this phenomenon, beyond implying a general "failure of the imagination". David Daiches explains this by pointing out that the Georgians could be 'realistic' only so long as it was superficial and agreeable. But, that, when the war presented before them the terrible realities, the Georgians failed to bring them within their poetry, and therefore, in their basic desire for 'agreeableness', they sacrificed 'truth'. 50

The true significance of the Georgian movement in the history of English poetry can be seen, not by regarding Edward Marsh as "a daring innovator", 51 but

49. Ibid., p. 187
only as a man who was "right in assuming that there was
a large public awaiting a particular kind of new poetry,
served up in a particular way." 52  Ezra Pound and T.S.
Eliot can be called "daring innovators" who dominated
the English literary scene in the post-War years, and
they had no desire to pander to the low taste of the
general public.  Pound insisted that "the public can
go to the devil", 53 and Eliot entirely abandoned "the
pretence of entertaining and instructing an imaginary
'common reader' and (concentrated) instead on using
every means in his power to express 'the boredom, the
horror and the glory' of the contemporary world". 54
The War Poet too, was more concerned with conveying the
'truth' rather than merely entertaining the public. The
Georgians, on the other hand, did not dismiss the public,
but rather tried to "educate" its taste, without
outraging it, which meant that, in the days of a
resurgent Liberal England, the public should reject
the academic reveries of the Decadents and rhetorical
outbursts of the Conservative Imperialists, and enjoy
poetry that dealt with more everyday and less

52. See Introduction to Georgian Poetry, Selected and
introduced by James Reeves, (Penguin: 1962), XIII
(1951) p.48.
54. Pinto, op. cit., p.59
controversial themes. And this kind of poetry was very welcome when it first came. Even D.H. Lawrence felt a sense of exhilaration, and he spoke of "sense of joy ... the exultation in the vast freedom, the illimitable wealth that we have suddenly got". Unfortunately, this all-pervasive sense of euphoria did not last long. But the Georgians tried to remain sane and pleasant, and this they did by remaining, as James Reeves has pointed out, very English: "The celebration of England, whether at peace or war became the principal aim of Georgian Poetry. The English countryside, English crafts, and English sports offered suitable subject-matter".

When we look back at this poetry, it seems rather anachronistic, with little evidence of the fact that these poems were written only a couple of years before the First World War started, and indeed, during War years. The Georgians deliberately averted their eyes from the complex realities of contemporary life. There is no need for an artist to deal directly with the world around him, but as Pinto has remarked, "poetry which directly grows out of a fully developed sensibility reflects in its imagery and rhythms the

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55 'The Georgian Renaissance', Rhythm, II (March 1913), Literary Supplement, XVII-XX.
56 Op. cit., XV
quality of contemporary life, as those of Marlowe's plays reflect the violence and splendour of the age of Elizabeth and Drake and those of Pope's satires the irony and sceptical grace of the age of Bolingbroke and Voltaire". 57 And in the failure of the Georgians to respond to the ethos of their times, one can get clues to their characteristic weaknesses and limitations. The Georgians, therefore, despite their claims that they were bringing about a poetic renaissance, were not to give lead to the poetry of the "Age of Anxiety", which was to dominate the literary scene for the next few decades. At best, one can suggest, as G.S. Fraser has done, "that the years before 1914 many young poets had an unconscious premonition of the disaster that was going to overwhelm them, and wanted to record their feelings about the English countryside while they could still look at it with innocent, untroubled eyes." 58

There were, however, as has been remarked earlier in this chapter, some poets in England who were working on lines which were to be developed, strengthened and recognized only in the post-war decades. Such poets as Pound, Yeats and Eliot were extremely

enthusiastic about their work, but their impact did not make itself felt until the nineteen-twenties.

The Imagist movement too, with its emphasis on a new poetic technique concerned with dry, hard, precise images, was, strictly speaking, a post-war phenomenon. Though the Imagist group was formed in 1912, and its first anthology _Des Imagistes_ was published in 1914, the movement won a wider recognition among the writers only after the War. So that, in the decade preceding the War, the Imperialists, and later on, the Georgians held their sway. In other literary forms like drama and novel, writers like Shaw and Galsworthy, Conrad and Forster were wrestling with the new problems and complexities of modern life. There were some poets too who refused to be enticed by either Imperialist sentiment or bucolic joys, and wrote about contemporary living. They seemed to have seriously taken the advice from Synge, who had prophetically remarked:

... the poetry of exaltation will always be the highest: but when men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life, and cannot write poetry of ordinary things, their exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation ... In these days poetry is usually a flower of evil or good: but it is the timber of poetry that wears most surely, and there is no timber that has not strong roots among clay and worms ... It may almost be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal.

_(Preface to the Collected Poems of Synge (1908)_)
A few poets in the England of this time were not so much "brutal" as sensitive to a general loss of faith that had sustained their predecessors in moments of crisis. They also became aware of the cracks that had appeared in the walls of Victorian self-confidence, the slums and miseries which had come to afflict the urban population of industrialized England. In this category fall, among others, poets like Davies, Gibson and Masefield who had already appeared in the Georgian anthologies. But Marsh had included only those poems of these poets that suited his limited tastes and principles. So, these are those poets "whose contributions (to the Georgian anthologies) do not at all represent the scope of their work as a whole".\(^5^9\)

W.H. Davies was essentially a singer, a singer of innocent love, and untrammelled beauties of nature. His lyrical genius was stimulated not so much by the ugliness of life as by its beauties, not by sadness but by joy. In a poem called Sadness and Joy he frankly admitted the fact:

\begin{verbatim}
I pray you Sadness, leave me soon,
In sweet invention thou art poor!
Thy sister Joy can make ten songs
While thou art making four.
\end{verbatim}

Yet he wrote poems of suffering, partly because he knew too much of it in his own life, and partly because he

\(^5^9\). David Daiches \textit{op.cit.}, p.46.
wanted to be considered a serious poet, who was concerned with "the deeper problems of life". Already, in 1917, he published in a small magazine called Form (No. 2 April, 1917, p. 18) a poem called Confession which shows how his earlier poems did not reflect his deepest thoughts:

One hour in every hundred hours,
I sing of childhood, birds and flowers:
Who reads my character in a song,
Will not see much in me that's wrong.
But in my ninety hours and nine
I'd not tell what thoughts are mine:
They are not so pure as find their words
In songs of childhood, flowers and birds.

Here is a clear repudiation of his "songs of childhood, flowers and birds" which he wrote, perhaps for financial reasons, for the Georgian anthologies. What we find, therefore, in his "sad" poems is a personal sympathy for the victims of industrialized England. In Saturday Night in Slums, he describes the horror of children, and women whose "grey hair is stained by gore". He is particularly sensitive to the plight of the unfortunate children whom he describes as

Poor little mites that breathe foul air
Where garbage chokes the sink and drain.

It must be admitted, though, that in dealing with such poor children, Davies tends to become rather

sentimental. In *The Little Ones*, the children, on realizing that they could not expect Christmas gifts from their parents, remark -

"We did some wrong", said little Will -
"We must have sinned," sobbed Emily.

In numerous other poems Davies's subjects are tramps, the poor who are homeless, and the miserable labourers, in short, the Edwardian underworld, of which the poet himself was a part, and which, in general, was neglected by the popular poets of the time. *The Sleepers* is a typical example of this kind of poetry. Davies describes how the labourers and factory workers huddle together on the pavements in "the cold damp air": they sleep there until the early hours of the morning when they are mechanically carried away by vans to their work -

These people work too hard, thought I
And long before their time they die.

Davies was, of course, a minor lyrical poet who wrote about odds and ends of things. Though his poems do not have the power, the immediacy, or the vision of great poetry, they are historically important for the vivid and authentic sketches of his contemporary world.

Some such appraisal must hold good for the poems of Wilfrid Gibson who described the lives of farmers
in his native Northumberland, and poems like Fires and Thoroughfares are the results of careful observation and painful realism. There is nothing revolutionary in their metres or imagery, but the descriptions in such poems are graphic, and what is more, they show that the poet is responding to the problems of his time. In The Shaft, he deals with miners who died while working under dangerous conditions, and in The Meadows the poet presents the poignant feelings of a poor labourer waking to love.

John Masefield, one would imagine, took the advice directly from Synge’s remark, and therefore his poems deal with the brutality, the coarseness and ugliness in the lives of the people around him. It is significant that the Poet Laureate should have started his career by consecrating his songs, not to the ruler but to “the men with broken heads and blood running in their eyes”. His sonnets brood upon the agonies and pains of the poor people, so indeed do the larger narrative poems of the pre-war years. The greater portion of The Everlasting Mercy (1911) deals with the squalid details of the life of the hero, Saul Kane, who is a bruiser, drunkard and fornicator. The Widow in the Bye Street (1912) depicts the sufferings of a widow
whose son is hanged for murder. But Masefield's pictures of suffering, like those of Gibson and Davies, are marked by pathos and sentimentality rather than the panic and indignation of much modern poetry. Both Davies and Gibson present pathetic pictures of hopeless suffering, unilluminated by any larger significance. And Masefield deals with evil and squalor with tenderness and pity rather than with a spirit of positive revolt. He seems to have the charming ability to transmute ugliness into beauty: ugliness in his poems does not strike one as ugly because the poet seems to spread an aura of romance over it. He gives coarse details, in order, finally, to force a moral of gentlemanly decorum. As such, his 'realistic' passages lack the "bite" of realism. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that even his moralistic passages remain mere rhetorical assertions rather than achieved poetry. The Everlasting Mercy, for example, falls into two parts. The first, dealing with the drinking, whoring and poaching of Saul Kane has been rendered with a breezy narrative skill, but the second portion, describing the hero's spiritual conversion remains poetically unconvincing. It is too brief, in the first place, and the sudden
illumination in the soul of the blackguard is inexplicable, except in terms of the creator's own wishes.

The poetry of suffering of Davies, Gibson and Masefield, therefore, possesses little intrinsic merit but it is of considerable historical significance because it is born out of the harsh realities of modern life. These poets avoid the parochialism and euphorism of much of contemporary verse, and though they hardly make any metrical innovation, they use simple, actual speech for describing the actualities of contemporary living.

W.E. went a step further in his exploration of the realities around him, and in experimenting with new techniques of versification. Unfortunately, he is known more for the triviality of his ballads, rondeaux, and the hollowness of his much anthologized Imperialist Invictus than his more serious poems. In a poem called To E.M., he sums up life in the following manner:

In our little hour we strut and fret,
And mouth our wretched part as for a bet:
We cannot please the tragicaster Time.
To gain the crystal-sphere, the silver clime,
Where sympathy sits dimpling on us yet,
Let us be drunk.

Everywhere this pervading sense of the wretchedness
of life is expressed with merciless honesty. The past might have been good but all that man is left with now is a faint recollection of the beautiful moments gone by, and an overwhelming sense of the darkness of night:

Where are the hours that came to me
So beautiful and bright?
A wild wind shakes the wilder sea
O, dark and land's the night.

(Echoes X)

And if the beneficent gods once ruled the world, they are now dead, and they have now been replaced by the demons of science and fact:

It must be true. The world, a world of prose Full crammed with facts, in science swathed and sheeted,
Nods in a stertorous after dinner doze!
Plangent and sad, in every wind that blows Who will hear the sorry words repeated:
'The Gods are Dead!'

(Bric-a-Brac)

It is significant that Henley's first poems under the title Hospital Outlines appeared in the Cornhill Magazine (XXXII, 1875), and they were based on his personal experiences while he was a patient of Lister at Edinburgh Infirmary. They deal with sickness and hospitals which are some kind of symbols of the modern preoccupation with morbidity and science. Moreover, these experiences are conveyed through images and
techniques which clearly anticipate the trends in the succeeding English poetry. Henley's images are anti-romantic, and are taken straight from the world around him. In fact some romantic images are deflated when they appear in the modern context:

A desolate shore
The sinister seduction of the Moon
The menace of the irreclaimable sea.

Flaunting tawdry and grin
From cloud to cloud along her beat
Leering her battered and inveterate leer,
She signals where he prowls in the dark,
Her horrible old man,
Mumbling old oaths and warming
His villainous old bones with villainous talks –

(Vigil)

In the above poem, which clearly anticipates Eliot's Rhapsody On a Windy Night, the traditionally beautiful moon, with all its romantic associations, is seen as a dirty prostitute, trying to allure her "customer", a horrible, mumbling, villainous old man.

Elsewhere, Henley describes how the "Wind-Fiend" throttles the "London Town":

Out of the most poisonous East
Over a continent of blight,
Like a maleficent Influence released
From the most squalid cellular of hell,
The Wind-Fiend abominable –
The Hangman Wind that tortures temper and light –
Comes slouching sullen and obscure
Hard on the skirts of the embittered night;
And in a cloud unclean
Of excremental humours, roused to strife
By the operation of some ruinous change,
Wherever his evil mandate run and range,
Into a dire intensity of life,
A craftsman at his bench, he settles down
To the grim job of throttling London Town.

(London Voluntaries, IV)

Such descriptions of ugliness through hideous images
like "squalid cellarge of hell", a "cloud unclean/Of
excremental humours", and expressions like "Comes
slouching" and "throttling" are prophetic of the practices
of Eliot, Yeats and other poets of the nineteen-twenties.
Moreover this poem, like Hardy's *A Wife in London*, is
about city life, from which Eliot and others sought to
get a new stock of images in the manner of Baudelaire.

Equally important is Henley's experimentations with
new forms of verse techniques. His unrhymed verses
descend from Heine by whose work he was greatly
influenced. What marks Henley out as a distinctly
twentieth-century poet is his use of irregular and
disjointed rhythms which are expressive of the
fragmentation, and divided consciousness of modern life:

Shoulders and loins
Ache ...
Ache, and the mattress
Run into boulders and hammocks
Gloves like a kiln, while the bedclothes -
Tumbling, importunate, daft -
As contrasted with the sweet, melodious flow of much poetry of the time, Henley's lines are sharp, short, jolting, and "free" with the help of which he is able to present, more forcefully, the restlessness, despair and disintegration of his consciousness. Though no one would deny that there is a more rigorous handling of language and metre in the later twentieth-century poetry, one must give credit to Henley for groping for a new technique, for the expression of a new - modern - sensibility.

There were two other poets whose poems, even of the pre-War years, suggest that all is not well with the world around them. David Daiches points out that "like Hardy, Housman is unhappy, pessimistic, and the reason, though neither knew it, is that each saw the Victorian base crumbling, or having crumbled".

The central impression that one gathers from Housman's poems is that man plays his role in the "drama" of life against the backdrop of death. The lads of A Shropshire Lad (1895) drink beer, play football, commit murders, are either slain in wars or are hanged in Ludlow Prison. There is nothing to look forward to in this life, because what awaits one

is endless night:

Oh never fear, man, nought to dread, 
Look not left nor right 
In all the endless roads you tread 
There's nothing but the night. 

(A.B.L. LX)

In many of his poems Housman explicitly speaks of the meaninglessness of various human activities which finally end in nothingness:

Lie down, lie down, yeoman: 
What use to rise and rise? 

(A.S.L. VII)

And elsewhere he laments that he goes on doing the daily routine of human life without realizing why he does so:

Oft have I washed and dressed 
And what's to show for all my pains? 
Let me abed and rest 
Ten thousand times I have done my best 
And all's to do again. 

(A.S.L. XI)

It is significant, however, that Housman tries to believe that in this meaningless, and often hostile, world - "Whatever brute and blackguard made this world" (Last Poems IX) - the pleasure of the moment can be the only possible motive for action:

Say lad, have you things to do? 
Quicken then, while your days at prime. 
Quick, and if it's to work for two 
Here I am man: now's your time. 

(A.S.L. XXIV)
The desire to catch the fleeting glimpses of significance or beauty is expressed, quite often, in terms of nature:

Ah! spring was sent for lass and lad,
'Tis now the blood runs gold
And man and maid had best be glad
Before the world is old.

(A.S.L. V)

But even in such evanescent moments of pleasure, the poet is ominously aware of life's inherent lack of significance and the inevitable fact of death. He comes out, finally, with a stoic acceptance of life's sufferings and miseries, and the fundamental impression that he leaves behind is one of hopeless passivity:

Therefore since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and the moon endure
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
I'd face it as a wise man would
And train for ill and not for good.

(A.S.L. LXII)

Because of his classical bent of mind, Housman is too prim and fastidious to embody his vision of humanity into a powerful poetic symbol, so that a body of poems like A Shropshire Lad does not quite succeed in carrying the weight of the poet's fearful mysteries. On the credit side, his classical quality stiffened him against the sentimentality of the Decadents. The music of his limpid and laconic verses is elegiac, though not challenging. In his later poems (written
after the War) there is an occasional glimpse of tragic dignity and an attempt to see life from a wider perspective, but the poems of the pre-War years bear witness to the changes that were in the air at that time.

Thomas Hardy carries the burden of the mystery of human life further, and as such his "pessimism" gains in depth and complexity. He too, like Housman, lives in a world where the recent scientific and industrial developments have destroyed the traditional values, making this universe a hopeless place for man. It is moved by an Unconscious Will where the human consciousness is repeatedly thwarted and crushed. The Will is not so much malignant as taciturn and indifferent. As a twelve-year old boy, Hardy made the following entry in his note-book: "The world does not despise us: it only neglects us". Though under the influence of nineteenth-century thinkers like Darwin, Huxley and Schopenhauer, Hardy came to reject God's role in the creation of this world, and believed that the universe was motivated by an Unconscious Will, he could not entirely discard the world-view that he had inherited from his forefathers. Much of the tension in his poetry arises out of this conflict. In many of his poems he takes up the traditional idea of a

Christian universe, motivated and ruled by a benevolent God and set it beside the universe of the modern scientists. In the well-known poem *The Oxen* he speaks of the traditional belief that on Christmas Eve the oxen kneel at prayer, but as the poem develops, the falsity of this view is made apparent:

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So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve
"Come; see the oxen kneel,
In the lonely Barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know."
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.
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It is a poem of complex attitudes. On the one hand, there is the recognition that "In these years" it is impossible to maintain such simple faith, but then there is also the poignant wish that "it might be so". The 'childhood' of the poem can be taken to mean the childhood of the entire human race whom experience has brought bitter truths. The conflict between what life actually is, and what human desire wants it to be has been expressed in the most moving terms. And it is the triumph of poetry that in this simple little poem life is seen from inside the human psyche rather than only in terms of intellectual perspective of the nineteenth-century science.

In his personal poems - which, incidentally, form the bulk of his poetic output - there is a pervading
sense of pathos arising out of situations where personal hopes and aspirations have come to nothing. In *Neutral Tones* he creates the external atmosphere which is in consonance with his own sad mood:

We stood by a pond that winter day
And sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
They had fallen from an ash and were grey.

Then he goes on to describe the wane of his love. The winter scene, suggestive of the end of the year, and the end of his love is described in terms of images which reinforce each other in a way that the reader realizes that the poet is moving from the personal to the universal. Middleton Murry wrote an appreciation of Hardy as a poet as early as 1919, and claimed that he was a major poet who projected a unified vision which was both passionate and universal:

Each work of his is a fragment of a whole - not a detached and arbitrarily severed fragment, but a unity which implies, calls for and in a profound sense creates a vaster and complete comprehensive whole. His reaction to an episode has behind end within it a reaction to the universe. An overwhelming endorsement descends upon his words: he traces them with a pencil, and straightaway they are graven in stone.

Murry takes up Hardy's *The Broken Appointment* as showing the poet's remarkable ability to transform a

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personal incident into a microcosm of wider human experience:

You love not me,
And love alone can lend you loyalty
- I know and knew it. But into the store
Of human deeds divine in all but name,
Was it not worth a little hour or more
To add yet this: Once you, a woman, came
To soothe a time-torn man: even though it be
You love not me?

Here, not only his own hopes as a lover but those of humanity also, are crushed, and destiny is seen as playing its role relentlessly and inexorably. In his great verse-drama *The Dynasts* (1903-1908) the subjection of the human consciousness to the Immanent Will is seen through the events of Napoleonic Wars.

This is not the place to go into greater detail about Hardy's poetry which was undoubtedly the most important poetic achievement of the early twentieth century before Pound, the later Yeats and Eliot. Sufficient it would be to recognize that during the twilight years of Victorian romanticism Hardy was grappling with problems which most of his contemporaries chose to ignore. I.A. Richards has placed Hardy among the modern writers because he "has courageously accepted the modern background", which Richards has described as "the neutralization of nature". Richards speaks of the crumbling of traditional values which have resulted in great changes in the human situation,

and he believes that Hardy's poems reflect these changes, and that the poet refuses to be comforted by any facile belief in imperialism or pantheism. Hardy succeeds in expressing the new consciousness which resulted from the various religious and social upheavals of his time: he deals with the crisis in his poetry is symbolized in the relationship between the sexes, the relationship between war and imperialism, and in the various social and religious problems that confront modern man.

Pre-War England then, presented a complex phenomenon, so far as English Poetry was concerned. On the one hand, there were the Imperialists whose optimism and self-confidence produced poetry which was marked by blustering, chauvinistic sentiments. On the other hand, there were the Georgians whose poetry of piety, quietness and delicate observation hardly gave one the impression that they were writing at a time when there was a tremendous social and intellectual upheaval, when Europe was heading towards the War. In neither case, did the poet subject himself to the painful realities around them. If the poet "is the point at which the growth of mind shows itself", 65 then neither the Georgians nor the Imperialists

measured up to this standard. Of course the modernity of a poet does not lie in his "mentioning modern things, the apparatus of modern civilization". In the words of F.R. Leavis, "all that we can fairly ask of a poet is that he shall show himself to have been fully alive in our time. The evidence will be in the very texture of his poetry." 66

The third group of poets whom we have discussed above appear to represent the modern consciousness because they seem to be "alive in our times". No doubt, these poets did not make any great impact on the contemporary poetic tendencies which were under the firm control of the Imperialists, and later on, of the Georgians. But poets like Henley, Housman and Hardy proved to be prophetic of the course that English poetry was to take in the next four decades. This fact is generally overlooked so that one gets the false impression that English poetry of the pre-War years presented simply a confident, quiet and peaceful world, which was suddenly shattered by the atrocities of the War. When David Lloyd George said in a speech on 17th July 1914 - only three weeks before the outbreak of the War - that in "the matter of external affairs the sky has never been more perfectly blue", one

can see how far from truth this supposition was, which was expressed in the Georgian poet's characteristic image of a blue sky. Just as the War itself was not so unexpected, one can see a definite, though a minority trend in English poetry - not to speak of the other fields of art - of the pre-War years towards dealing with suffering, violence and a general sense of disintegration in modern life. This was the trend which, having been "established" by the War Poets, became the central preoccupation of poets like Pound, Yeats and Eliot, who immersed themselves in "the destructive element". By doing so, they not only gave a conclusive image of our condition but also of that we might attain to.

67. See George Dangerfield's The Strange Death of Liberal England, (New York; 1935)
The better-known poets of the First World War, with the possible exception of Rupert Brooke, did not have any kind of established literary reputation before they went to war, and wrote about it. And it is reasonable to suppose that, but for the war, they might never have been the poets they turned out to be. They did not have any definite literary criteria or principles which they could apply to their war-experiences in order to create poetry. The disadvantage of such a lack of fixed poetic attitudes was that they could not "distance" their experiences and see them in a wider human perspective. But the great advantage was that, free as they were from contemporary and traditional prejudices, they wrote about what they saw and felt. In doing so they not only wrote a new kind of 'realistic' war poetry, but also profoundly influenced the course of modern English poetry. In the words of John Holloway, "the length and intensity of 1914-18 experience brought it about that English poetry of the mere traditional and indigenous kind itself underwent a remarkable change, and one which ran parallel to those now more conspicuous changes initiated by Pound and Eliot."

From the start, the War Poets devoted themselves to the objective reality around them. Hence, their poems have the freshness and authenticity of personal reactions. This is true even of the 'patriotic' poems at the beginning of the war. Unfortunately, in an age in which the horror and crime of war have been transformed into a glib axiom, the 'patriotic' poems of Brooke and Grenfell have fallen into an unmerited obloquy. Patric Dickinson pinpointed this weakness of the common critical attitude towards the War Sonnets of Brooke when he remarked:

Brooke was anything but a fool. Somehow his critics infer that he should have known as much in 1914 about the 'old bitch' as Pound knew safely afterwards. Confusion about time seems to me to bedevil much criticism of this period. 2

A worse critical error of judgement is involved when poets like Brooke and Grenfell are dismissed as merely conventional and traditional. In one of the first full-length studies of the subject, Johnston makes the following sweeping, and inaccurate, generalisation:

Apparently oblivious of causes, issues and practical effects, they (the early poets of the war) exploited the "poetic" aspect of the situation and indulged themselves in romantic fantasies of honor, sacrifice, self-redemption, and immortality. These were safe, traditional themes which could provide numerous elegant variations; but they had nothing whatever to

2. 'Poets of the First World War', The Listener, (February 8, 1962).
do with the objective historical reality, even when patriotism was the source of inspiration.

If the logic behind branding Brooke's and Grenfell's poems as conventional is simply that their kind of 'patriotism' is to be found practically in all periods of literary history, then, surely, there cannot be anything 'revolutionary' in the poems of Sassoon, Rosenberg and Owen, whose literary predecessors in matters of nastiness and brutality of war can be traced as far back as Euripides (The Suppliants and Trojan Women) and Shakespeare (Troilus and Cressida). The truth of the matter is that the poetry of the First War (whether 'patriotic' or 'anti-war') was pretty unconventional because the poets' personal reactions as soldiers in war has had a few or no literary precedents. The change that came about in the poetry of war was due not to the imaginary fact that while the earlier poets were conventional, the later ones were revolutionaries, but to the real fact that the English poet who was determined to write about the objective fact of war changed as the subject revealed its more sinister aspects with the passage of years.

When poets like Brooke and Grenfell experienced a sudden burst of joy and enthusiasm at the outbreak of war, they were not indulging "in romantic fantasies

of honor, sacrifice, self-redemption and immortality". They were, in fact, sharing the sense of exhilaration and freedom which was in the air of the immediate time. Pinto recreates the spirit and tries to find an explanation for it:

Part of the enthusiasm was certainly due to the sense of relief from the intolerable tension of the years preceding the war and from the drabness and monotony of commercialized "civilization", part probably to a sense of the breaking down of the barriers of British insularity and a reassertion of unity with the rest of Europe and the outer world. Part of it also was the outcome of the moral sense derived from the English puritan tradition, which had been starved, corrupted but not killed in a world of competitive commerce, and which now seemed to have found an outlet in heroic action.  

And for a first-hand account of the mood of the period, we may go to J.B. Priestley, who recalled:

There came, out of the unclouded blue of that summer, a challenge that was almost like conscription of the spirit, little to do really with King and Country and flag-waving and hip-hip-hurrah, a challenge to what we felt was our untested manhood. Other men, who had not lived as easily as we had, had drilled and marched and borne arms - couldn't we? Yes, we too could leave homes and soft-beds and the girls to soldier for a spell, if there was some excuse for it, something at least to be defended. And here it was.

It is not insignificant that even a poet like Thomas Hardy shifted from his customary stance of tragic contemplation in order to sing of the righteousness

of the war effort. In a sonnet, *Song of the Soldiers*, which he wrote on 5th September 1914, Hardy exclaimed:

In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just
And that braggarts must
Surely bite the dust
March we to the field ungrieving
In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just.

Even so solitary and melancholy a poet as Edward Thomas wrote to Bottomley in 1914, "I have given up groaning since the war began, I believe, I have been mainly the better for it."⁶

Is it surprising then that Rupert Brooke should have felt a similar sense of release and freedom? Unfortunately, he has been blamed, as he has been praised, for wrong things. His personality has been so much mythologised that it has always been difficult to extricate his poetry from the myth. In his own time he was shamelessly idolized and pampered, and Frances Cornford's well-known epigram bears testimony to this fact, though it conceals some unintentional ironies too:

A young-Apollo golden-haired,
Stands dreaming on the verge of strife,
Magnificently unprepared
For the long littleness of life.

His romantic death, and Winston Churchill's prose elegy on Brooke in *The Times*, seemed to perpetuate the myth about this astonishingly handsome young man.

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Even as late as 1967, Michael Hastings came out with a book titled *The Handsomest Young Man in England*, which is replete with photographs and illustrations. Apart from Edward Marsh, who did his best to boost Brooke's literary reputation, the poet has generally been the target for adverse criticism. I.A. Richards complained that Brooke's poetry lacked solidity, and F.R. Leavis dismissed, with his typical iconoclasm, Brooke's talents as "prolonged adolescence", and went on to remark that his "verse exhibits a genuine sensuousness rather like Keats's (though more energetic) and something like Keats's vulgarity with a Public School accent." Yet, an examination of his writings, letters and biographies will show that, though Brooke could often be accused of being a clever adolescent, he was also a man of considerable intellectual and emotional resources. He was elected Fellow of King's College, Cambridge on the basis of his dissertation, *John Webster And the Elizabethan Drama*. He was well-read in English literature, and was a great admirer of John Donne, whose poems he recited in Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop. He personally knew almost all the major poets of his time, including Hardy, Masefield and Yeats, the last of whom thought that "Brooke was likely to be

a considerable person if he got rid of his 'languid sensuality' and got in its place a 'robust sensuality'. 8

Brooke received a prize of £30 for the best poem of the year in *Poetry Review*, and when in 1911 a collection of his poems appeared, it ran to thirty-seven impressions. His poems like *The Fish*, *Dining-Room Tea* and *Dust* show not only a skilful handling of metres but also a successful use of detached irony and wit. These poems show the poet's mental agility which was something new to his readers, hence his poetry was objected to as "affected, complex, 'literary'". 9 But what really shocked the prim tastes of his reading public was his coarse and brutal realism. Brooke, however, delighted in administering such shocks because he felt that it was necessary to do so at that time. When he was attacked for speaking of love and sea-sickness in the same breath in *A Channel Passage*, he remarked:

> I'm (of course) unrepentant about the 'unpleasant' poems. I don't claim great credit for the Channel Passage; but the point of it was (or should have been!) 'serious'. There are common and sordid things - situations and details - that may suddenly bring all tragedy, or the brutality of the actual emotions, to you.  

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10. Ibid., p.lxvii.
One of his 'serious' concerns was about the fact of death. The blithe poet of *The Great Lover*, with his enjoyment of five senses, was also aware of the deeper implications of life and death. An early poem, dated 1908, contained the following recognition:

Mid youth and song, feasting and carnival
Through laughter, through the roses as of old
Comes Death, on shadowy and relentless feet,
Death, unappeasable by prayer or gold;
Death is the end, the end.

(Second Best)

In a love-sonnet, dated April 1909, he speaks more specifically about the inescapable reality of death:

Oh! Death will find me, long before I tire
Of watching you; and swing me suddenly
Into the shade and loneliness and mire
Of the last land!

(Sonnet)

Critics can justifiably point out that this kind of 'lyrical' contemplation of death is nothing new (Swinburne: *The Garden of Proserpine*), but it must be remembered that Brooke often introduced into his poems an element of wit and speculation. So that a poem like *Sonnet Suggested by Some of the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* strikes one as an interesting experiment at a time when poetry was generally concerned with Imperialistic 'ideas' or bucolic pleasures:
Not with vain tears, when we're beyond the sun,
We'll beat on the substantial doors, nor tread
Those dusty high-roads of the aimless dead
Plaintive for Earth; but rather turn and run
Down some close-covered by-way of the air,
Some low sweet-alley between wind and wind,
Stoop under faint gleams, thread the shadows, find
Some whispering ghost-forgotten nook, and there

Spend in pure converse our eternal day;
Think each in each, immediately wise;
Learn all we lacked before; hear, know and say
What this tumultuous body now denies;
And feel, who have laid our groping hands away;
And see, no longer blinded by our eyes,

A perfectly articulated poem like this, with its skill
in versification and felicitous phrasing (e.g. "substantial doors", "ghost-forgotten nook", "tumultuous body") is not just a piece of 'cleverness'. The poem combines a lively intelligence with sensitive speculation. What is missing is perhaps a deeper human experience. It is true that, even in his best poems Brooke seems to substitute abstract intellectual speculation and reveries for actual human experience. In his love-poems, he holds the woman at an arm's length, and fancies about her beauty or its gradual decay. In jealousy, he imagines the worst for the girl, who, presumably, chose a 'fool' in preference to the poet, and this is how Brooke imagines their future:

And after that,
When all that's fine in man is at an end,
And you, that loved young wife and clean, must tend
A foul sick fumbling dribbling body and old,
Where his rare lips hang flabby and can't hold
Slobber, and you're enduring that worst thing,
Senility's queasy furtive love-making,
And searching these dear eyes for human meaning,
Propping the bald and helpless head, and cleaning
A scrap that life's flung by, and love's forgotten.
Then you'll be tired; and passion dead and rotten;
And he'll be dirty, dirty!

It was this kind of vulgarity and callous cynicism
which offended the elderly critics of the time, like
Gissing and Dobson.\footnote{See Edward Marsh, \textit{A Number of People} (1939) p.277.}
Brooke's biographers have revealed
that he was psychologically unstable with a streak of
paranoia, which was aggravated by his thwarted love-
affairs. He was desperately in love with an Irish
actress Cathleen because "she was the responsive and
understanding Cathleen who believed in his genius and
made allowance for his moods, and was able to treat
him not as he deserved but as he desired".\footnote{Arthur Stringer, \textit{op. cit.}, p.242.}
This gives an important clue to his personality, which found a
yawning gulf between his expectation and the reality,
and hence tended to treat reality at the level of
intellectual speculation.

We are, however, concerned here with his War
Sonnets, which can be truly appreciated against the
background of his poetic practices in pre-war years.
When war broke out, he departed from his typical mode
of introspective speculation and applied himself to
the war. Though he glorified war, he had nothing in common with the Imperialist poets of his time, like Kipling, Newbolt or Noyes. And a perusal of the scholarly account of War and English Poetry will show how distinct Brooke's patriotism was in contrast to that of the poets of the past who wrote about wars from a distance. It is seldom realized that Brooke's, and Grenfell's, reaction to the war was as personal as that of Sassoon and Owen later on. Though Brooke never went to the trenches, he had a first-hand experience of war during the Antwerp Expedition. Arthur Stringer shows how Brooke realized, as a result of his military involvement, that "his Muse was no longer a laughing one". But Brooke also realized that the war provided a much-needed challenge. In a letter to Mrs Cornford he said:

    It's queer to see the people who do break under the strain of danger and responsibility. It's always the rotten ones. Highly sensitive people don't, queerly enough. I was relieved to find that I was incredibly brave. I don't know how I should behave if shrapnel were bursting over me and knocking the men around to pieces. But for risks and nerves and fatigues I was alright.

One common hope, almost conviction, at the outbreak

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of war, was that it would release man from the dreariness and triviality of day-to-day existence. C.M. Bowra detected the same mood in contemporary German poetry, the mood that arose out of a belief "that only through some vast sacrifice and redemption could society be purged of its complacency and grossness". Peace contains Brooke's expression of a similar hope:

Now God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,  
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,  
With hand made sure, clear eye, sharpened power,  
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,  
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary  
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,  
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,  
And the emptiness of love!

This goes with a sense of loss of the happy sights and sounds of the English countryside in the sonnet The Soldier, but it becomes bearable when such a loss is necessary for saving England. Admittedly, Brooke becomes sentimental and chauvinistic, and is guilty of the worst Georgian traits. He was the motivating impulse behind the Georgian movement, and Ezra Pound thought that "he was the best of all that Georgian group".

Perhaps the most mature of his poems to appear in the Georgian anthology was Grantchester, which, with

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its irregular tone of alternate satire and admiration
of the Cambridge landscape, revealed the dilemma of
the Georgian poet. But in the present sonnet (The Soldier)
there is no ambiguity, only a facile and sentimental
adoration of the magic of England. It is, as if in the
first flush of enthusiasm, he was incapable of seeing
contradictions in the realities of things. The same
can be said of his treatment of death in the War Sonnets.
From the early years of his poetic career, his thoughts
seemed to have flocked round death. In War Sonnet
III The Dead, there is bravado and an extravagant
glorification of death. However, a sombre note is
struck in the next sonnet, IV The Dead which is
reminiscent of the Psychical Research sonnet, the only
difference being that the following lines have the
dignity of classical impersonality and cold thought:

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
Washed marvellously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
And sunset and the colours of the earth.
These have seen movement, and heard music, known
Slumber and waking: loved; gone proudly friended:
Felt the quick stir of wonder: sat alone;
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All is
ended.

There is no patriotism in these lines, only a
recognition of the inevitable processes of life's march
towards death. He himself died in the Aegean on his
way to Gallipoli on 23rd April 1915. One of his last poems, a Fragment, dated April 1915, is interesting for showing the poet's awareness of the 'pity of war'. Speaking of his comrades on board a war-ship, he ruminates:

I would have thought of them
- Headless, within a week of battle - in pity,
Pride in their strength and in the weight and firmness
And link'd beauty of bodies, and pity that
This gay machine of splendour 'ld soon be broken,
Thought little of, pashed, scattered ....

This is how Brooke had started to feel when, on an expectedly prolonged military mission, he was confronted with the real prospect of his own death, as that of his fellow-soldiers. In other words, faced with the reality of death, he was no longer able to resolve its terrible burden on the level of intellectual speculation. It is on an occasion like this that one is justified in supposing that with increased human experience, Brooke would, perhaps, have turned his latent intellectual and emotional resources into more mature uses for creating poetry. As it is, he is known for his five sonnets, though "only two of the poems seemed satisfactorily good to him". 18 Paradoxically enough, these are the very poems which are now condemned for their unabashed

patriotism, for their callous unawareness of the deeper implications of modern warfare.

Brooke's example demonstrates the danger to which the English poet was exposed, when he found himself writing about war as a soldier. Just as Brooke could not, in the early years of war, see beyond the subject-matter that was immediately before him, the later War Poet too, unfortunately, fell into a similar trap when amidst terrible conditions of trench warfare, "no great event became luminous in his mind". The war inspired a few hitherto unknown poets into their finest utterances, but it muffled Brooke's real poetic voice. No one can claim that he was a great poet, but he was a man of definite, though limited poetic talents, which are revealed, not in Sonnets 1914 but in poems like Grantchester, Dining-Room Tea, Tiare-Tahiti and a few sonnets. In such poems, Brooke's preoccupation is, in the words of his friend T. Sturge Moore, with "the contrast between the momentousness of life to us, and our strangely casual relation to its vast movement, which is not at all suited to nourish our hopes of divining the whole truth".

Though there were many other poems which glorified the war (e.g. Laurence Binyon's high-hearted For The Fallen, Robert Nichol's Farewell) it was Julian

Grenfell's *Into Battle* which became most famous, next to Brooke's *Sonnets*, for its idealizing spirit. Grenfell was the eldest son of Lord Desborough, and was educated at Eton and Balliol. He was a man of high spirits, and loved games and sports like buck-stalking, pig-sticking and polo. In 1910, he joined the Royal Dragoons, then stationed in India, and in 1911 he moved with his regiment to South Africa. He was a professional soldier, and dearly espoused the Imperialist cause. At the outbreak of war, he wrote from South Africa on 6th August 1914:

> And don't you think it has been a wonderful and almost incredible rally to the Empire; with Redmond and the Hindus and Will Crooks and the Boers and the South Fiji Islands all aching to come and throw stones at the Germans. It reinforces one's failing belief in the Old Flag and the Mother Country and the Heavy Brigade and the Thin Red Line, and all the Imperial Idea, which gets rather shadowy in peace time, don't you think? But this has proved a real enough thing.

After the recall of the Red Dragoons to England, Grenfell found himself in France in early October 1914. For his war-time efforts, he was twice mentioned in the despatches and was awarded the D.S.O. He was wounded by a shell-splinter near Ypres and died in a hospital in Boulogne on May 26, 1915, a month after Brooke's death. Grenfell was not known as a poet.

before the publication of Into Battle. Edmund Blunden recalls that he "cannot remember that anyone noticed other poems of his (i.e. Grenfell's) – there were some, songs of action clanging with the vitality of a neo-Elizabethan 'compleat gentlemen'."&nbsp;22 Grenfell had sent home the manuscript of Into Battle only about a week before he died, and it was published in The Times on 27th May 1915.

The poem obviously grew out of his war-experiences as a professional soldier. Writing from Flanders, he had expressed his excitement at, and an animal enjoyment of, warfare:

*Here we are, in the burning centre of it all, and I would not be anywhere else for a million pounds and the Queen of Sheba ... I have never, never felt so well, or so happy, or enjoyed anything so much. It just suits my stolid health, and stolid nerves and barbaric disposition. The fighting-excitement vitalizes everything, every sight and word and action.*

The key words are "barbaric disposition" and those in the last sentence, which explain the mood of Into Battle – the mood which can be best characterized as one of animal energy, untamed by intellectual or imaginative scruples and fears. The war gave him the opportunity to show his dashing love of battle and courage, which

his gentlemanly upbringing, education and training had instilled in him. In a sense, *Into Battle* is the most subjective of war poems. The poet saw what he was instinctively trained to see, rather than throwing himself open to objective impressions.

When one has in mind a poem like Owen's *Spring Offensive* where the natural phenomenon puts into bitter relief the unnaturalness of fighting, one is struck by the terrible naivety and self-contemplation of *Into Battle*. Nature is seen here as organically related to the soldiers, and death in battlefield is viewed as a sacrificial death like renewal in nature:

> The naked earth is warm with spring,
> And with green grass and bursting trees
> Leans to the sun's gaze glorying,
> And quivers in the sunny breeze;
> And life is colours and warmth and light,
> And a striving evermore for these;
> And he is dead who will not fight;
> And who dies fighting has increase.

In the next few stanzas the soldier derives power and direction from the various manifestations of nature. A typical example of this is the stanza in which the soldier is exhorted to be "swift" and "keen" like the kestrel and owls:

> The kestrel hovering by day,
> And the little owls that call by night,
> Bid him to be swift and keen as they,
> As keen of ear, as swift of sight.
And appropriately enough, the soldierly virtues of patience and courage are instilled into him, not by leaders and generals, but by horses:

In dreary, doubtful, waiting hours,
Before the brazen fancy starts,
The horses show him nobler powers;
O patient eyes, courageous hearts!

It is not accidental that animal imagery is predominant in this poem which extols brutish energy. It ends with an unthinking ("Not caring much to know") cheerfulness and a 'blood-thirstily healthy' attitude towards predictable death:

Through joy and blindness he shall know,
Not caring much to know, that still
Nor lead nor steel shall reach him, so
That it be not the Destined Will.

The thundering line of battle stands,
And in the air death moans and sings;
But day shall clasp him with strong hands,
And Night shall fold him in soft wings.

T. Sturge Moore wrote an excessively laudatory appreciation of Into Battle, and filled in the "moral details" in which the poem is markedly deficient. In trying to define Grenfell's sense of joy, Sturge Moore remarked:

Harmony between impulse and circumstance creates this joy; but not only is it more complex than that of the young male stag who attacks the leader of the herd, there is in it an element of quite a different order, a sense that wrong within can be defeated by braving evil.

Sturge Moore, of course, does not analyse the text of the poem to document his thesis, only because an analysis of the poem would show that just the opposite is the case, that Grenfell's attitude is indeed no more "complex than that of the young male stag". However, in the same essay Moore expresses his dissatisfaction with the last two lines of the poem, which he finds "hollow and empty". Bergonzi seems to follow it up by remarking that the "concluding stanza is undoubtedly vulnerable, with its personified abstractions portentously intruding".²⁵ On the contrary, the stanza in question is a fitting, and within its context, impressive, conclusion with its explicit personification of abstractions. All through the poem the various qualities of nature are implicitly personified, and at the end, in the face of death, the merger of the personality of the soldier and the 'personalities' of Day and Night is done rather cleverly.

The study of Into Battle is significant in the history of modern wars because it shows that though it was possible, in the early years of the war to subdue the objective facts to chivalric ideals of a warrior, it became more and more difficult to do so as the war revealed its terrible realities. Though Sir Walter

Raleigh obviously had meant to pay a compliment when, on reading *Into Battle*, he said, "It can't be done again," subsequent developments in poetry and modern sensibility show that the words were **ironically** true.

Such poetry of chivalrous obligation, where poets like Brooke and Grenfell concerned themselves with sentiments more important than death, and with the beauty and ideals of England which they were going out to defend, soon became outmoded as the horrors of trench warfare became the most immediate reality. When the soldier-poets personally experienced the brutalities of war, they came to the grim realization that their earlier hopes and ideals which had provided them with sufficiently valid motive for participating in the war, were lies, or at best irrelevant. What is more, they felt that the people who were safely at home were callously ignorant of the realities of war, and carried it on for their own selfish ends without taking into account the suffering that it entailed for the fighting soldiers. And this resulted in a sharp division among the British people, a division, which Pinto\(^{26}\) has described, as "the Nation at Home" and "the Nation Overseas". Curiously enough,

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\(^{26}\) Finto, *op. cit.*, pp 142-143.
English poetry which had glorified England and all the qualities of English life at home, now turned fiercely against those very idols. Pinto goes on to point out that for an English soldier in the trenches, it was not the Germans so much as the British civilians and administrators who became his chief enemies:

The Nation at Home still believed in the patriotic myth of a beautiful, heroic war against diabolic enemies. The Nation Overseas was in touch with realities of life and death, and was completely disillusioned with regard to the heroic nature of the struggle. Indeed, as the war went on, they became more and more solidly united in sentiment not against the Germans, but against (as it appeared to them) the callous, stupid Nation at Home, the government and, above all, the "brass hats" of the staff.

This change of mood is central to an understanding of the chief merits as well as the severe limitations of the poetry of the First World War. It became the poets' main concern to portray the terrible realities of modern warfare, and to thrust it onto the face of the callous civilians. The unfortunate outcome of this poetic attitude was that, while on the positive side the poet created poetry of indignation, and at its best, of deep compassion, on the negative side this poetry degenerated into propaganda, hysterical protest and passive suffering.

'Realism' became the watch-word for the English soldier-poets for whom all illusions were shattered by
the brutal and unrewarding battles of Verdun and the
Somme in 1916. As the unflinching realist, Douglas
Jerrold remarked:

It is here we get back to the truth —
unromantic, unchivalrous, unadventurous,
unadorned by the marvellous, the epic or
the obscene, simply WAR.

In our discussion of the poetry written in England during
pre-war years, we had found that the limited kind of
realism that the Georgian poetry contained, comprised
of noting the actual sights and sounds of nature and in
recording the dull, drab details of urban life. This
'realistic' approach, when directed towards the war,
produced verses which were bare and undecorated, with
little feeling and less thought. One of the older
Georgians, Gibson wrote self-contained poems like the
following which is exclusively concerned with bare facts:

I watched it oozing quietly
Out of the gaping gash.
The lads thrust onto victory
With lunge and curse and crash ...

The lads thrust on to victory
With lunge and crash and shout
I lay and watched, as quietly
His life was running out.

(Victory)

The better War Poetry is, of course, more complex than
this simple-minded actualism of Gibson.

27. Douglas Jerrold, The Lie About the War (1930)
Charles Hamilton Sorley represents one of the early examples of a complex attitude towards war. It is interesting that though he was a contemporary of Brooke and Grenfell (Brooke, Grenfell and Sorley died in April, May and October 1915, respectively), Sorley's verses do not seem to echo the patriotic enthusiasm of the early years of war. This fact is perhaps explainable in terms of his special literary background. Sorley was born in 1895 in Aberdeen, the son of a professor of philosophy at Aberdeen University, who later on went to teach at Cambridge. Sorley went to Marlborough College, and in 1913 he won a scholarship to University College, Oxford. However, before going to Oxford next autumn he spent three months in Mecklenberg Schwerin, Germany, and for a brief period attended lectures at the University of Jena. At the outbreak of war, he arrived in England on August 6, 1914, and the next morning applied for a commission. He became a second lieutenant in the Suffolk Regiment. From September 1914 to May 1915 he underwent military training in England, and was sent to France in late May. He served his regiment in trenches around Ploegsteert during the summer and was promoted to the rank of captain. On October 13, 1915 he was shot and killed
Sorley was in the Western Front only for four and a half months, but both his letters and earlier verses show a highly intelligent awareness of the deeper implications of war and death. The development of his precocious mind is best reflected in his Letters which was published by the Cambridge University Press in 1919 and enthusiastically acclaimed by John Middleton Murry in January 1920. However, there is always the danger of confusing Sorley, the writer of the letters, with Sorley the poet. On reading his prose - as well as poetry - one gets the impression that, during his very brief life, Sorley's mind matured and was enriched by new experiences which he could not always amalgamate into poetry. He was, therefore, potentially a good poet. Nonetheless, his Letters help us to understand in what direction his mind was developing.

Sorley's literary consciousness grew at a time when "art for art's sake" theory was coming into disrepute. He was a seeker of truth, and in the words of Murry, "passionate and penetrating as was his devotion to literature, he never looked upon it as a thing existing in and for itself. It was to him and his kind, the satisfaction of an impulse other and more complex.

than the aesthetic. Art was a means and not an end to him, he belonged to his own generation, to which l'art pour l'art had ceased to have any meaning."

Sorley denounced Tennyson:

A paltry poet in general, Tennyson is most pre-eminently paltry and superficial when he sings about nature and earth. He was not long in hedging her in with the shapely corsets of alliterative verbiage.

In a paper on Housman read to the school Literary Society in May 1913, Sorley praised the elder poets' search for truth, and contrasted this attitude with that of the contemporary poets in general, and went on to remark "it pleases, it flatters, it charms, it soothes: it is a living lie".

With almost a boyish enthusiasm Sorley adopted, and discarded in quick succession, literary idols like Maiefield, Meredith and Goethe. But it appears that Hardy remained, for him, the greatest poet:

I cannot help thinking that Hardy is the greatest artist of the English character since Shakespeare: and much of The Dynasts (except in historical fidelity) might be Shakespeare. But I value his lyrics as presenting himself (the self he does not obtrude into the comprehensiveness of his novels and The Dynasts) as truly, and with faults as well as strength visible in it, as any character in his novels. His lyrics have not the spontaneity of

29. Ibid., p.174.
Shakespeare's or Shelly's; they are rough-hewn and jagged: but I like them, and they stick.

Hardy, undoubtedly, was Sorley's model when he came to write his own poems, especially war poems. He was, however, not an uncritical admirer of Hardy. In fact, in a letter dated November 30, 1914, Sorley took the older poet to task for deviating from truth when the author of *The Dynasts* wrote a poem praising the war-efforts of the soldiers:

Curiously enough, I think that 'Men Who March Away' is the most arid poem in the book, besides being untrue of the sentiments of the rankman going to war: 'Victory crowns the just' is the worst line he ever wrote—filched from a leading article in *The Morning Post*, and unworthy of him who had always previously disdained to insult Justice by offering it a material crown like Victory.

However, in general, Sorley was sufficiently influenced by Hardy to believe that human life was overshadowed by a cosmic tragedy. This being so he thought it stupid that people should quarrel among themselves for nationalistic or patriotic reasons. When he went to Germany, he fell in love with the country as well as its people. He could not, therefore, hate them, and when war broke out, he was able to see the conflict with detachment. He came to realize that there "is no such thing as a just war. What we are doing is casting out Satan by Satan," and went on to

remark about the need to take into account the deeper implications of human existence:

Indeed, I think that after the war all brave men will renounce their country and confess that they are strangers and pilgrims on the earth, ... But all these convictions are useless for me to state since I have not had the courage of them. What a worm one is under the cart-wheels - big, clumsy, careless, lumbering cart-wheels - of public opinion. I might have been giving my mind to fight against Sloth and Stupidity; instead, I am giving my body (by a refinement of cowardice) to fight against the most enterprising nation in the world. 34

Out of this largeness of spirit grew his well-known sonnet, To Germany, which is clearly Hardyesque in sentiment, and diction, without the melody or flow of Georgian verse:

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,  
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.  
But gropers both through fields of thought confined  
We stumble and we do not understand.  
You only saw your future bigly planned  
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,  
And in each other's dearest ways we stand,  
And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.

This was written in August 1914. A month later, he wrote one more similar poem in which the vast humanity is included, and is viewed as helpless and aimless:

A hundred thousand mites we go  
Wheeling and tacking o'er the eternal plain,  
Some black with death - and some are white with woe  
Who sent us forth? Who takes us home again?  

34. Ibid., pp 240-41.
And there is murmuring of the multitude
And blindness and great blindness, until some
Step forth and challenge blind Vicissitude
Who tramples on them: so that fewer came.

(A Hundred Thousand Mites We Go)
The rhetorical tone of the above lines is not able to conceal the absence of personal involvement in a cosmic tragedy, which was to distinguish a poem like Owen's The Show later on. The poem seems to reverberate with echoes of Hardy's The Dynasts or the sonnet Ban; instead of Hardy's "Grass Casualty" we have his "Vicissitude". Nevertheless, these poems of Sorley are important as showing that just before going into the trenches, he was viewing the war with a detached as well as a catholic spirit, and "this spirit", in the words of Robert Nichols, "appears steadfastly set upon subduing subjectivism and upon viewing what lay around him as a whole and with himself and his poetry as only part of the whole." 35

Sorley was a lover of nature, and it finds its proper place in the poet's all inclusive vision of human life. Right from the very beginning, he loved the countryside around Marlborough and he enjoyed his walks and runs in the Downs. In one of his earlier poems he expressed his sense of joy and exhilaration:

We swing ungirded hips,
And lightened are our eyes,
The rain is in our lips,
We do not run for prize,
We know not whom we trust
Nor witherward we fare,
But we run because we must
Through the great wide air.

(The Song of the Ungirt Runner)

But this joy in nature goes with a consciousness of
"the tearing tempests", storms and winds of the last
two stanzas. In another poem, Stones, a walk in fields
covered with white flints arouses in him deeper human
emotions as he contemplates on the pre-historic lives
that lay buried there:

This field is almost white with dust
That cumber all its thirsty crust
And underneath, I know are bones
And all around is death and dust.

This interest in nature is carried into his war
poems too. His most interesting war poem, with nature
as its background, is All the Hills and Vales Along,
which was probably written in August 1914. The
opening lines of the poem -

All the hills and vales along
Earth is bursting into song

might immediately classify it in the category of
Grenfell's Into Battle where the emotions aroused by
nature are identified with those of the brave soldiers.
In fact Robert Graves was misled by the tone of these
opening lines into regarding the entire poem as
"self-dedicatory" after the manner of Brooke's and Grenfell's poems. But in the very next lines a different note is struck -

And the singers are the chaps
Who are going to die perhaps.

The joy in nature is ironically contrasted with the soldiers' march to death. The casual indifference of nature to the human aspirations (of "the chaps") is traced through history, and the imminent tragedy of the soldiers is viewed as just another aspect of cosmic process:

Earth never doubts nor fears
Earth that knows of death, not tears
Earth that bore with joyful ease
Hemlock for Socrates,
Earth that blossomed and was glad,
'Neath the cross that Christ had,
Shall rejoice and blossom too
When the bullet reaches you.

Here is no easy escape into a pantheistic retreat or a naive lapse into pathetic fallacy, but a Housmanesque recognition of the indifference of nature and a sardonic collision between the bounty of nature and the doom of human life.

However, one has an uneasy suspicion that such attitudes of Sorley's were literary (borrowed from his idols Housman and Hardy) and unsubstantiated by deep human experiences. Such a supposition achieves

36. The Listener, (October 23, 1941), 566.
validity when one contrasts his earlier poems with those written during his experiences in the trenches.
When the prospect of his own participation in the war became imminent, he wrote a poem called Lost, in December 1914, in which he movingly expresses his departure from the "past imaginings", and looks forward to the future years with uncertain apprehension:

Across my past imaginings
Has dropped a blindness silent and slow.
My eye is bent on other things
Than those it once did see and know.

I may not think on those dear lands
(0 far away and long ago!)
Where the old battered signpost stands
And silently the four roads go.

East, west, south and north,
And the cold winter winds do blow.
And what the evening will bring forth
Is not for me nor you to know.

Shortly after arriving in France in June 1915, he wrote in reply to the suggestion that he might publish his poems: "... this is no time for oliveyards and vineyards, more especially of the small-holdings type.
For three years or the duration of the war, let be." 37
He had only spent about four and a half months in the combat before he died. During this short period, he had little time to extricate himself from personal experiences in order to evaluate them objectively.
In fact, only eight days before he was shot, he wrote:

... Perhaps afterwards, I and my like will again become indiscriminate rebels. For the present we find high relief in making ourselves soldiers.

He wrote only six poems in the summer of 1915. Three of them deal with the "past imaginings" - e.g. I Have Not Brought My Odyssey speaks of "great war and strong hearts wrung". But the three other sonnets deal with the theme of death which presumably was weighing on his mind. In the first of the Two Sonnets, written in June 1915, he speaks of his confrontation with death, to whose reality he had hitherto been a stranger:

You, so familiar, once were strange: we tried To live as of your presence unaware. But now in every road on every side We see your straight and steadfast signpost there.

And in the next sonnet he tries to define the nature of death as an end to all human experiences:

Such, and such is Death: no triumph: no defeat: Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean, A merciful putting away of what has been.

This sonnet, however, ends with the following lines:

But a big blot has hid each yesterday So poor, so manifestly incomplete. And your bright Promise, withered long and sped, Is touched, stirs, rises, opens and grows sweet And blossoms end is you, when you are dead.

John Press sees the above lines "as the prelude to a richer life", but probably they are, in fact, ironical. This impression becomes deeper when one puts

38. Ibid., 310.
Alongside this sonnet, Rupert Brooke's Sonnet IV Death (discussed elsewhere) in which Brooke expresses similar sentiments about death. Johnston rightly contrasts the mellifluence of Brooke's verse with the harsh imagery in Sorley's sonnet, e.g. the signpost, the empty or broken pails, the clean slate. Brooke sees death as a transformation into immortality:

He leaves a white
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

But Sorley's "bright Promise" and "blossoms" are deliberate romanticisms, expressed through choice of words, which collide with the harsh imagery and bleak sentiments of the earlier lines, producing thereby a sense of irony.

The last sonnet in this group, When You See Millions of Mouthless Dead is a further attempt at viewing death in its stark reality, stripped off the tinsel and romance with which it had been clothed in the early years of war:

When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you'll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For deaf, how should they know
Is it not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. The blind eyes see not your tears flow
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.

This clearly sounds like a rejoinder to Brooke's War Sonnets. It is well-known that Sorley had condemned Brooke for taking "the sentimental attitude" towards the war. In his own sonnet, Sorley discovers the irrelevance of praise, tears or honour in the face of death. In discussing the attitudes of these two poets towards death, the time factor must be taken into consideration. Whereas Brooke wrote his Sonnets in August 1914, Sorley wrote his criticism of Brooke, as well as his sonnets under discussion, in the summer of 1915, by which time the complexion of the war had changed for the worse. The intensity of this terrible reality burns out Sorley's 'literary' attitudes to death, and therefore prevents him from seeing it with a Hardy-esque detachment and cosmic vision, as he had tried to do in his pre-war poems. In a letter, dated 28th November 1914, Sorley had quoted Achilles's line, "Died Patroclus too who was a better man than thou", adding that "no saner or splendider comment on death has been made". Apparently, in the death of a man like Patroclus, Sorley still saw, in 1914, some assertion of human dignity, but when he himself went to the trenches, he learnt to believe otherwise. In the last lines of the sonnet, When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead, death is seen as a great leveller, under whose crushing

wheels both the great and the small are reduced to the same level:

Say only this, 'They are dead'. Then add thereto 'Yet many a better one has died before'. Then scanning all the o'er-crowded mass, should perceive one face that you had loved heretofore, It is a spook. None wears the face you knew. Great death has made all his evermore.

Admittedly, these War poems of Sorley, with their relatively straightforward conception of death, are a little disappointing, especially in view of the high promises held out by his earlier poems' comprehensive outlook and complex attitudes. But he died very young, and had little time to adjust to the new realities and experiences. Nonetheless, these four poems help us to see how very difficult it was for a poet of the First World War to see things objectively. Though Sorley had started with a proper literary and personal background, which might have enabled him to see the war as only one aspect of the human condition, that "we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth", his personal participation in its unimagined brutalities made it impossible for him to rise above a mere subjective approach.
This central dilemma of the poets of the First World War was best exemplified in the works of Siegfried Sassoon, who entered the war as a more mature man than most of his compatriots, and who lived through it. In his autobiography, Sassoon admitted that "One couldn't be 'above the battle' while engaged in it", and Edmund Blunden too expressed fears of a similar danger: "In a sense, as that Great War unmasked its ugliness, the problem of the legion of soldier-poets was primarily one of reporting." A poet like Robert Graves, who had actively participated in the war - he was seriously wounded during the Somme Offensive - wrote a series of war poems which appeared in Over the Brazier (1916) and Fairies and Fusiliers (1917). The lack of subtlety with which he dealt with the theme of war has been ably demonstrated by G.S. Fraser, who has compared Graves's A Dead Boche with Keith Douglas's Vergeismeinicht. This examination brilliantly shows the poetic potentialities in the war theme which Graves, and many other poets of his time, were unwilling, or more appropriately, unable to exploit at that period in time. Graves, of course, wisely suppressed his war poems, but, clearly, Sassoon discovered that his

42. Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey, (New York; 1946) p.73.
43. Edmund Blunden, op.cit., p.27.
44. Visere And Rhetorics, p.141.
limited poetic talents found their outlet only in his war poems. However inadequate they may be, his war poems are historically important for reflecting the mood of the British people as the war went on revealing its meaningless brutalities. For expressing the nation's mood of anger and disillusionment, Sassoon's war-time volumes *The Old Huntsman* (1917) and *Counter-Attack* (1918), won Sassoon the poetic fame that he had not known before and was not to achieve with his post-war poetry.

Sassoon grew up in a country gentleman's home, with hunting and poetry as his chief pleasures. His verses were privately printed, and they were mainly descriptive and meditative. He delighted in the peaceful aspects of nature which he viewed with the solitary-mindedness of a young poet. The very titles of his poems, *Before Day, Morning Land, Dryads, An Old French Poet, Daybreak in a Garden*, are an index to the kind of poems that he wrote. The unremarkable quality of his poems - both in their theme and diction - is illustrated in lines like -

I heard the farm cocks crowing, loud and faint,
When hooded night was going and one clear planet winked:
I heard shrill notes begin down the spired wood distinct,
When cloudy shoals were chunked and gilt with fires of day.

*(Daybreak in a Garden)*
The impression that such lines create is that the "poems that he (Sassoon) wrote in the early years of the war are in the Georgian manner: he was admitted to the circle of Sir Edward Marsh, and on the single occasion on which he met Rupert Brooke, he regarded him with awe as 'a being singled out for some transcendent performance, some enshrined achievement'. "45 Sassoon's single literary achievement before the war was The Daffodil Murderer (1913), which is an ingenious parody of Masefield's then famous Everlasting Mercy. This poem, which he chose to exclude from his Collected Poems (1947), does little to alter the picture of Sassoon the poet (of pre-war years) as a country gentleman, who had no serious quarrel with the world, his own position, or the society in which he lived.

This is borne out by the fact that in his early war poems Sassoon whole-heartedly echoed Brooke's sentiment that war was a heroic deliverance:

The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.
War is our scourge: yet war has made us wise,
And fighting for our freedom, we are free.

(Absolution)

In To My Brother, the death of a fellow soldier is regarded as an example of selfless courage, and

45. Pinto, op.cit., p.143.
meaningful, because it would lead to a just victory:

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,
And I am in the field where men must fight.
But in the gloom I see your laurelled head
And through your victory I shall win the fight.

Robert Graves has left an account, in Goodbye To All That,
of Sassoon's early enthusiasm and bravery in battlefields. For his reckless bravery Sassoon was known as "Mad-Jack", and for his heroism in bringing back the wounded after a raid opposite Nametz he was awarded the Military Cross. However, Graves also noted that once Sassoon went into the trenches, he would change his views about war, and that, that in turn would alter the course of his poetry:

At this time I was getting my first book of poems Over the Brazier ready for the Press. I had one or two drafts in my pocket-book and showed them to Siegfried. He frowned and said that war shouldn't be written about in such a realistic way. In return he showed me some of his poems. One of them began:

Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,
Not in the woeful crimson of men slain.

Siegfried had not yet been to the trenches. I told him, in my old-soldier manner, that he would soon change his style. 46

Sassoon was then not prepared for the horrors of war which might radically alter his picture of the world. He defined peace "in terms of hunting and nature and music and pastoral scene". 47 If we keep in mind these facts about his rather naive concept of the world we

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46. Robert Graves, Goodbye to All That (New York; 1957) pp. 174-175.
47. Ibid., p.232.
shall be able to judge properly his achievements and limitations as a poet.

His autobiography shows that his career both at school and university was intellectually undistinguished. Cultivation of the intellect was never his strong point. He chose, rather, to devote himself to the harmless pleasures of nature and hunting. As Maguire has pointed out:

In his (Sassoon's) case, hunting was not, as Oscar Wilde defined it "the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable". Hunting was for him a poetic apprenticeship akin to Wordsworth's early communing with nature. It combined adventure, beauty, comradeship. He was not coming to conclusions about people or events, but saturating his senses with the feel of things. He was not exactly becoming mature, either mentally or emotionally; his reactions to the war proves this.

As opposed to a mature communion with nature which finds expression in the poetry of his contemporaries like Edmund Blunden and Edward Thomas, Sassoon's simple attitude to nature received a rude shock when it was confronted with the terrible reality of war. The war shattered Sassoon's belief in a rural world of piety and peace, and that fact angered him no end. His war poems of the time are a record of this uncontrolled rage. He found an easy target in the Civilian as the instrument responsible for the destruction of his world, and he could never forgive

it then or in after years. In his old age (he was converted to Catholicism in 1957) he turned to religion, with uncertain poetic success, for the resolution of his doubts and disappointments. But whenever he remembered the war, he flew into a rage. For instance, he severely castigated in later years a London newspaper as an irresponsible moulder of public opinion, in a poem called Lines Written in Anticipation of a London Paper Attaining a Guaranteed Circulation of Ten Million Daily:

I damn your circulation as a whole,
And leave you to your twice-ten-million readers
With deep condolence from my lenient soul.

It is known now that after the wholesale massacre on the Somme and at Arras, the British soldiers were stripped of their patriotic feelings and they saw the horrors of war with feelings of revulsion and dismay. They questioned the very motives of the war and strongly suspected that it was being prolonged by the Civilians for their own greed and ambition. Since, for the soldiers in battlefields the raison d'etre of the war had disappeared they became more acutely conscious of the physical and mental agonies of life in trenches. And since they held the Civilians responsible for their terrible predicament, they directed their anger at them. Graves in his Goodbye to All That gives a vivid picture of the gradual
isolation of the Nation Overseas from the Nation at
Home. He also quotes Sassoon's famous A Soldier's
Declaration (July 1917) as a document which embodied
the general feelings of soldiers at that time:

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting
on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this
war, upon which I entered as a war of defence
and liberation, has now become a war of
aggression and conquest. ...

I have seen and endured the sufferings
of the troops, and I can no longer be a
party to prolong these sufferings for ends
which I believe to be evil and unjust. ...

On behalf of those who are suffering now
I make this protest against the deception
which is being practised on them; also I
believe that I may help to destroy the callous
complacency with which the majority of those
at home regard the continuance of agonies
which they do not share, and which they have
not sufficient imagination to realize. 49

These utterances were regarded by the authorities as
the outbursts of a shell-shocked mind, so Sassoon
was promptly despatched to Craiglockhart Infirmary as
a patient of the neurologist and anthropologist
W.H.R. Rivers.

Sassoon had already started his battle against
war and its authorities on a literary front. His
personal involvement in the war made him aware of its
nightmarish realities, which he decided to thrust at
the face of the smug civilians at home. This he did
by writing realistic poems about war. This was not

easy for him with his Georgian background, and Bergonzi has aptly commented on Sassoon's earlier difficulties in writing realistic verse:

In some ways Sassoon was not particularly well equipped for the role of ruthless realist; his basic, strongly Georgian sensibility and background were very inclined to see man and his surroundings in some kind of harmony, no matter how precarious. In such a poem as 'At Carnoy', for instance, he traces this harmony on the very edge of its imminent dissolution:

Down in the hollow there's the whole Brigade
Camped in four groups: through twilight falling slow
I hear a sound of mouth-organs, ill-played,
And murmur of voices, gruff, confused and low.
Of a blurred orange sunset flare and fade;
And I'm content. To-morrow we must go
To take some cursed Wood ... O world God made!


Here the subjoined date - two days after the opening of the Somme offensive - is an intrinsic part of the poem's meaning. It was circumstances rather than temperament that made Sassoon a realist.

It would be, therefore, far-fetched to trace the ancestry of Sassoon's realism to the practices of poets like Kipling and Masefield (in respect of their colloquial diction) in pre-war years. His own Daffodil Murderer showed his liking for facts, but it hardly prepares us for the savage realism of his war poems. One might almost say that in his war poems Sassoon starkly presented what he saw in the battlefield, and what he saw had no precedent either in history.

50. Bernard Bergonzi, op.cit., p.95.
Nonetheless, it is interesting to see how he started to write his realistic sketches on the Georgian mode, eventually to give it up. It was not until 1916 that he began writing realistic poems about life in trenches, and his earlier poems like *Golgotha*, and *A Working Party* show the poet's attempts at dealing with war's realities in terms of Georgian sensibility and technique. Take, for instance, the opening lines of *Golgotha*, which present a generalized picture of the scene at the front, with wistful sadness:

Through dark curves a spume of falling flares
That flood the field with shadow, blanching light.
The huddled sentry stares
On gloom at war with white,
And white receding slow, submerged in gloom.

Or, take the telling but straightforward description of a soldier's wretched plight, and his mechanical movements:

Three hours ago he blundered up the trench,
Sliding and poised, groping with his boots;
Sometimes he tripped and lurched against the walls
With hands that pawed the sodden bags of chalk
He couldn't see the man who walked in front;
Only he heard the drum and rattle of feet
Stepping along barred trench boards, often
Splashing wretchedly where the sludge was ankle-deep.

This is done very much in the descriptive manner of Gibson. But already, in this first volume, *The Old Huntsman* (1917), Sassoon began to emphasize the contrast between dangers in trenches and the
comparative safety of the Civilian life at home.

In *The Redeemer*, he identifies the soldier with the suffering Christ, and goes on to describe the wretchedness of his condition as contrasted with the sleep of the "peaceful folks":

> Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mire was deep;  
> It was past twelve on a mid-winter night,  
> When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep;  
> There, with much work to do before the light,  
> We luggered our clay-sucked boots as best we might  
> Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang,  
> And droning shells burst with a hollow bang;  
> We were soaked, chilled and wretched, every one;

They embodies a more vigorous condemnation of the false optimism, hypocrisy and ignorance which is symbolized in the Bishop of the poem.

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

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

Under the urgency of the 'message' the formalities of poetic techniques are ignored. In this twelve-lined poem, the poet felt no need to regulate his raw emotions of anger and satire by a deft use of language or diction. The result is that the poem is one of brash satire rather than one in which questions of morality and religion come under serious re-thinking. In place of the easy flow of Georgian verse, there is
the use of colloquial vocabulary of the "boys", and the method proved greatly effective at that time. Sassoon had later on remarked that he was perhaps the first English poet to have used the word 'syphilitic' in verse. The use of such words was part of his general strategy of shocking his audience.

They proved to be prophetic of Sassoon's poetic practices for the remaining years of war, because as the war dragged on he became more and more obsessed with the subject-matter. He became a propagandist, and chose the verse-medium as his means of propaganda, and this fact underlined the limitations of his poetic achievement. In the autumn of 1917, when he was convalescing at Craiglockhart Infirmary, he got hold of the English translation of Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* in which the French novelist had presented, in the manner of Zola, graphic pictures of violence and destruction in trenches. Sassoon was greatly influenced by the novel, and he lent it to Owen (who had also arrived at the Infirmary), "which set him alight as no other war book has done". Many of Sassoon's poems which appeared in *Counter-Attack* were written at this time, and the effect of the novel on the poems can be judged by the fact that a paragraph from *Le Feu* appears as an epigraph to *Counter-Attack*. 
In the opening poem, *Prelude: The Troops*, there is the war-torn landscape -

Sad-smoking, flat-horizons, reeking woods,  
And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom.

The next poem *Counter-Attack* gives a graphic description of the corpses huddled together, evoking a sense of utter futility. Sassoon presents the horror of a situation in *The Rear-Guard*; the protagonist crosses a tunnel under Hindenburg Line, and stumbles over a corpse whom he had mistaken for a sleeping soldier. The poet captures the frightening scene with epigrammatic terseness:

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.

His sympathy for the agony of the fighting soldier led Sassoon to lash out at those who were responsible for it. * Fight to Finish* is a poem of savage bitterness, in which the returning soldiers believe that real "finish" of their "fight" would come when they are able to exterminate "Yellow-Pressmen" and the "Junkers" in parliament:

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

And the smug civilians come under attack in *Suicide in The Trenches*:
You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

The lack of complexity and deeper sensibility of the above lines become too apparent when one compares them with the relevant lines from Owen's *In sensibility*. But Sassoon was intent on presenting the great discord that grew between the fighting soldiers and the civilians. Even women at home came under attack in poems like *Glory of Women* and *The Frailty*. That discord, in turn, led to a greater concord among the fellow soldiers. However, any positive aspect of such a fellow-feeling is cancelled out by the terrible isolation and even death of these men. If the wirers, in the poem of that title, evoke admiration for getting on with their job, there is no escape from death for them:

Young Hughes was badly hit: I carried him away,
Moaning at every lurch; no doubt he'll die to-day.
But we can say the front-line wire's been safely mended.

It is true, though, that Sassoon gave poignant expression to the suffering of his fellow soldiers, who were not articulate enough. He, and later on, Owen wrote poems in which their individual suffering was almost always related to the collective agony of all the soldiers. When Sassoon went away on sick leave, the thought of the fellow soldiers in the trenches
haunted him:

In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain
I think of the Battalion in the mud.
'When are you going out to them again?
Are they not still your brothers through your blood?'

(Sick Leave)

This is quite impressive, but this was as far as Sassoon could go. Owen, as we shall see later on, went a step further, and saw all the soldiers - friends and foe - as worthy of his compassion and concern.

Sassoon, however, was concerned with what was more immediate and what came within the focus of his own experiences. His unwillingness, or his inability, to go deeper beneath the facts of life and experience, became flagrantly clear in his poems about death. Unlike the greater War Poets - especially of the Second World War, like Douglas and Keyes - for whom the war brought about a confrontation with the mysteries of death, Sassoon just strips death off its conventional glories. In other words, he caricatures the romantic attitudes which glorified death in battle. He does exactly that in How to Die with a clever use of romantic expressions like "brightness breaks into flame" and "Radiance reflected", which conceal irony and anger:

The dying soldier shifts his head
To watch the glory that returns;
He lifts his fingers toward the skies
Where holy brightness breaks in flame;
Radiance reflected in his eyes,
And on his lips a whispered name.
Death kindled, not deep contemplation, but passionate hysteria in Sassoon. He is very much like the soldier, in Lamentations, who became hysterical with grief on discovering the death of his brother:

... it was not good trying
To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.
And, all because his brother had gone west,
Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief
Moaned, shouted, sobbed and choked, while he was kneeling
Half naked on the floor. In my belief
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

It appears that all the accumulated details of grief and moaning have been brought to bear their weight in order to yield the irony contained in the last lines about the loss of patriotic feeling. The poem, therefore, is not about death or grief so much as about the dubious merits of patriotism.

This points to the characteristic weakness of Sassoon's war poetry as a whole. As early as 1918, Middleton Murry came out with a very perceptive evaluation of Sassoon as a poet when Murry reviewed (anonymously) Counter-Attack and Other Poems. The opening paragraph of the review shows that the critic is not prepared to be swayed by mere sentiment in judging poetic achievement:

It is the fact, not the poetry of Mr. Sassoon, that is important. When a man is in torment and cries aloud, his cry is incoherent. It has neither weight nor meaning of its own.

51. The Nation (July 13, 1918), 398-399.
It is inhuman, and its very inhumanity strikes to the nerve of our hearts. We long to silence whether by succour and sympathy, or hiding ourselves from it. That it should somehow stop or be stopped, and by ceasing trouble our hearts no more, is our chief desire; for it is ugly and painful, and it rasps at the cords of nature.

Mr. Sassoon's verses - they are not poetry - are such a cry. They touch not our imagination, but our senses. It is understandable that Sassoon's poems were popular, when they first came out, for the very reasons which contribute to their poetic inadequacies. They recorded the inhumanity and brutality of war, and the rage and indignation of a sensitive man. But they lacked art because the poet was incapable of, what Murry calls, "intellectual remoteness" —

The experiences of battle, awful, inhuman and intolerable as they are, are only experiences for the mind which is capable of bringing their horror and their inhumanity home to the imagination of others. Without the perspective that comes from intellectual remoteness there can be no order and no art. Intellectual remoteness is not cold or callous; it is the condition in which a mind works as a mind, and a man is fully active as a man. Because this is wanting in Mr. Sassoon we are prey to uneasiness when confronted with his work.

Sassoon's obsession with the immediate fact of war, and his inability to see it in terms of wider context of history, or indeed life, produced the single emotion of hatred and indignation. D.J. Enright remarked that
"Sassoon's most interesting poetry is composed of what have been called the 'negative emotions' - horror, anger, and disgust - and outside that field he inclines to become sentimental in a conventional way. (Robert Graves hits the nail on the head in saying, 'Modernism in Mr. Sassoon is an intelligent, satiric reaction to contemporary political and social bluffs; it is not a literary policy.')\(^{52}\) In other words, Sassoon chose the role of a prophet and a propagandist, and used satire as his chief weapon. His diction and verse technique are unremarkable because they were subdued to his propagandist intentions. He used polemical verses and colloquial diction, and achieved the desired result by its bald banality, and roughness:

'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.

(The General)

It would be wrong to expect subtlety and rigorousness from Sassoon's diction or metre because of his fairly straightforward subject matter. His pre-war poems show the use of conventional, smooth rhythms and romantic diction, but when he came to

\(^{52}\) The Modern Age, ed. Boris Ford (Pelican; 1961) p.162.
write realistic and satirical sketches, he retained the traditional forms like blank-verse, rhymed stanzas and the sonnet, but used simple colloquial, and often slang, words. He loaded each line with heavy details, making his language overwrought and turgid:

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.

(Counter-Attack)

Sometimes, he achieved his effect by using pithy, epigrammatic style, hiding irony and hardness:

Does it matter? - losing your sight?...
There's such a splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be kind,
As you sit on the terrace remembering
And turning your face to the light.

(Does It Matter?)

Sassoon's poems of this time - their form, content and technique - were dictated by the immediate fact of war. He focussed his attention on the inhumanities of war, the callousness and greed of the Civilians and the sufferings of the soldiers. Though he never went deeper into the essential nature of the conflict and the crisis, his fierce indignation resulted in some remarkable poetic utterances. This was a far cry from his pre-war mood of quiet, pietist poems of country pleasures and wistful solitude. After the war, Sassoon tried to revert to his former role. In 1928,
he published *The Hearts' Journey*, the invocation of which shows his attempt to go back to the former times:

Soul, be my song; return arrayed in white;
Lead home the loves that I have wronged and slain;
Bring back the summer dawns that banished night
With distant warbling bird-notes after rain...
Time's way-worn traveller I. And you, O song,
O soul, my Paradise laid waste so long.

It is almost incredible that these lines with their romantic sentiments and melodious flow are from the poet of those fierce war poems. However, it became difficult for him to return to the Georgian mode, only because he himself was forced, not by his temperament, but by the circumstances of the war, to discover the limitations of the Georgian sensibility:

Looking back, one must wonder at how, by sheer truth and force of feeling, he broke out of the constricting mould of dead poeticism which, at nearly thirty years old, had almost stifled him. If he was no prophet, his famous war poetry makes him a portent. In his raw and heated satires the emasculated versifying of an outworn society is betrayed from within — his contributions to the 1918-1919 volume of *Georgian Poetry* give the lie to its heart. They are symptomatic of a new vitality which was to undermine the irresponsible rule of Marshianism. 53

The fact that Sassoon was not the poet to carry this "new vitality" through the post-war literary scene became apparent when he sought a return to

"Paradise laid waste so long". But the poems in The Heart's Journey clearly show that the poet was suffering from a sense of insecurity in his artificially created euphoria, and he attributed it to the fact of war. In 1933, he went back, as it were, and wrote a group of satirical poems under the title The Road to Ruin. Though in a few of these poems there is an apprehension of the more dangerous bacterial wars to come, An Unveiling is a characteristic Sassoon-like war poem:

The President's oration ended thus:
'Not vainly London's War-gassed victims perished.
We are a part of them, and they of us:
As such they will perpetually be cherished.
Not many of them did much; but all did what
They could, who stood like warriors at their post.
(Even when too young to walk). This hallowed spot
Commemorates a proud, though poisoned host.
We honour here' (he paused)'our Million Dead;
Who, as a living poet has nobly said,
'Are now forever London.' Our bequest
Is to rebuild, for what-they-died for's sake,
A bomb-proof roofed Metropolis, and to make
Gass-drill compulsory. Dulce et decorum est.

In 1933, this poem must have sounded a little anachronistic, and rather pathetic in the sense that it was the utterance of a victim of a former war, which had crippled his sensibility permanently. He gave the impression of a man whose imagination was fixed in the years 1914–1918, as if nothing had
happened in the succeeding years. This fact prevented him from interpreting the war crisis which he had tried to elucidate.

Joseph Cohen wrote an article in 1957,\(^\text{54}\) in which he saw Sassoon in the three roles of a country gentleman, an angry prophet and a self-effacing hermit.

C.S. Maguire, in another article, 'Harmony Unheard; The Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon' (Renaissance, Spring 1959), examined Sassoon's poetry from a Catholic point of view, and sought to demonstrate that Sassoon did achieve "harmony" after a period of "disharmony", which Middleton Murry was one of the first to discover in his war-poems. In a more recent full-length study of Sassoon's poetry and prose, Michael Thorpe basically takes his clues from the above-mentioned articles, and believes that Sassoon's real poetic achievement lies in his religious verses of later years:

No unprejudiced reader of Sequences can doubt that he is in the presence of a religious sensibility of great integrity. Though in manner Sassoon has, on the whole, less affinity with his contemporaries than with his spiritual fathers of the seventeenth century, The Tasking deserves to be distinguished as the most poetic of his sequences and the one most likely to satisfy modern taste: economical in language, pointed in idea, lucidly and sparingly imaged, it

fitly celebrates that stage of spiritual awareness where feeling is crystallized and finds its own clear form. Nevertheless, the impression remains that Sassoon achieved his most memorable poetic utterance in his war poems. It is with his war-poems that we are concerned here, and they mark, despite the severe limitations that we examined earlier, an important stage in the development of war-poetry in the twentieth-century.

Wilfred Owen went still a step further. In fact, it seems that he took this kind of war poetry as far as it would go, and created his highly impressive ‘poetry of pity’. He started from the basic position of his acknowledged model Sassoon, but without resting content with negative emotions of anger and hatred of satirical verses, evoked positive feelings of pity and compassion. Pity for the soldiers suffering and dying in the trenches became his fundamental subject, and he was able to create moving poetry out of this theme. This poetry has had its tremendous appeal for its universality and humanity. But now, when

we can see the horrors of that war in their historical perspective from a distance of fifty years, when we realise that the belief that the war could have been avoided was a myth, or at best, mere wishful thinking, when we see from the practices of the poets of the Second World War that it can be best dealt with as an inclusive component of modern poetic consciousness, we begin to notice weaknesses in Owen's poetry of pity. W.B. Yeats's charge that war poetry comprised of "passive suffering" seems quite relevant. Owen, like the other poets of the First World War, was no overwhelmed by the catastrophe of war that he could not view it objectively as another symbol of tragedy that pervades human existence. He saw it as a monstrous event which relentlessly crushed the innocent soldiers, and the only way he could accept this terrible fact was by feeling, and expressing, deep pity.

It is perhaps astonishing that the author of The Show, Futility, Greater Love and Strange Meeting should have started his poetic career by writing undistinguished - and one might almost say, unpromising - juvenilia. Owen started writing poems in the tradition of the Romantics, with Keats and Shelley as his idols. While a sonnet, entitled Written in a Wood, September 1910, is full of
Keatsian echoes, especially in its phraseology (e.g. "leafy grots", "bird-pavilions hung with arras green"), the poem On Seeing a Lock of Keats's Hair frankly expresses the younger poet's ardent and worshipful feelings for Keats, and these sentiments are expressed in a manner which is reminiscent of both Keats and Shelley:

It is a lock of Adonais's hair
I dare not look too long: nor try to tell
What glories I see glistening, glistening there,
The unanointed eye cannot perceive their spell.
Turn ye to Adonais; his great spirit seek.
O hear him, he will speak.

Though Owen's early poems are intensely sensuous and rich in diction, it would be wrong to assume, as J. Louiseau does, that "Owen had been born for joy. His early poems were filled with an intense enjoyment of life. A lover of beauty, like Keats, his master, he lived in an enchanted world of sights and sounds. From his senses, he derived an ever-fresh source of delight."56 On the contrary, despite his youthful enthusiasm for beautiful aspects in nature, Owen was, as C. Day Lewis has discovered, "a youth oppressed by the vague dissatisfaction and disillusionment, the morbid negativism of adolescence."57 C. Day Lewis goes on to illustrate, by quoting from Owen MSS, the fact that

the young poet was becoming depressed by his experiences as a pupil and lay assistant to the Vicar at Dunsden, Oxfordshire. He saw the rural slums of that Oxfordshire parish, and the poverty and squalor in the lives of the people there aroused his deep compassion. He developed a sceptical attitude towards the Christian faith, which was unable to alleviate their misery. Together with such experiences, his own recurrent ailments made him "a bit of a hypochondriac".

These brief biographical details help to explain the elegiac strain that runs through his early poems. Far from being a buoyant youth, Owen seems to have been a sad young man who believed that poetry must express melancholy. In a sonnet, written as early as January 1913, he believes that the poets of the past have, by writing poetry of suffering, eased the flow "Of my dumb tears with language sweet as sobs", and he hopes that his readers shall find a similar cathartic value in his poems:

One night if thou shouldst lie in this Sick Room
Dreading the dark thou darest not illume;
Listen: my voice may haply lend thee ease.

(On My Songs)
The weaknesses are obvious: archaic words like 'thou' and 'thee' and tired diction like 'illume' and 'haply' mark a poet who is immature and who relies too heavily on the practices of past poets. More significantly, the poem shows that the poet has failed to externalize or objectify his emotions with the result that he gives the impression of luxuriating in sadness. He contemplates the various aspects of human tragedy but ends up by recognizing just the fact of tragedy without going into its deeper implications and significance. In The End he starts by speaking of the inevitable fact of death in this life, and poses the question "Shall life renew these bodies?" to which both Age and Earth reply in the negative. Happiness deals with the theme of the gradual passing away of joy from life, and the realization that "the former happiness is unretuming". In Sonnet Autumnal, he again speaks of the inevitable "autumn" that must descend on human life, and the fundamental emotion that the poet expresses is one of vague and general apprehension:

And in the dead calm of voice may hear
The menace of a drear and mighty storm.

In most of these poems, the poet's emotions tend to be rather subjective, and they lose their sharpness and
edge because Owen fails to embody them in concrete symbolical terms. Poets like Yeats and Eliot, for example, detach the emotions, as it were, by embodying them in evocative images or symbols, or by dramatizing them. In the absence of any such techniques on the part of Owen, his poems seldom rise above the expression of vague and raw feelings of an introspective mind.

It is not surprising that, consistently with his own romantic bent of mind, Owen should have thought that his individual poetic destiny was akin to that of a prophet. In a couple of poems, Owen sees himself in the role of a prophet, very much like Shelley. In *O World of Many Worlds*, we find Owen isolating himself from the common man, whose course is "unalterably fixed", and be himself wanting —

To be a meteor, fast, eccentric, lone,
Lawless: in passage through all spheres,
Warning the earth of wider ways unknown
And rousing men with heavenly fears.

In a more telling — and perhaps more Shelleyan — sonnet he is fascinated by the enormous energy and beauty of storm. Just as Shelley wishes to identify himself with the West-Wind, Owen wants to borrow the terrible energy of storm with which he proposes to redeem the world:
The land shall freshen that was under gloom;
What matter if all men cry aloud and start,
And women hide bleak faces in their shawl,
At those hilarious thunders of my fall?

(Storm)

Here the poet is carried away by the power and strength of storm and fails to indicate, within the poem, how that destructive power can be utilized for constructive purposes. In Shelley's poem the fierce West-Wind is seen as a source of regeneration because it heralds spring, and as a vehicle of the poet's "dead thoughts". On the other hand "The land shall freshen that was under gloom" remains a mere rhetorical assertion, backed by neither a positive image, nor a consistent poetic thought-pattern. Storm is a later poem (October 1916), and it shows that in the absence of concrete poetic material (which turned out to be, in his case, the bestiality of war) Owen did not have the romantic poet's capacity to invest an abstract theme with the strength and power of an imaginative mind.

However, the charm of romantic imagery and diction had such a powerful hold on Owen that even when, in the war years, he came to repudiate the yearnings and pursuits of his early poems, he did so in poems which can only be described as bad romantic poetry:

I slew all falser love: I slew all true,
That I might nothing love but your truth, Boy -
That is how he starts his poem To Eros, and goes on to point out how he has come to disillusionment:

But when I fell upon your sandalled feet,
You laughed; you loosed away my lips; you rose.
I heard the singing of your wing's retreat;
Far flown, I watched you flush the Olympian snows,
Beyond my hoping. Starkly I returned
To stare upon the ash of all I burned.

Here the use of over-literary cliche imagery (e.g. "sandalled feet", "wing's retreat" and "the Olympian snows") would seem to deny what the poem ostensibly seeks to affirm. Music is a similar poem in which the need to deal with 'humanity' with depth and seriousness is felt in contrast to the early romantic escapades:

I have been gay with trivial fifes that laugh;
And songs more sweet than possible things are sweet;
And gongs and oboes. Yet I guessed not half
Life's symphony till I made hearts beat,
And touched Love's body into trembling cries,
And blown my love's lips into laughs and sighs.

C. Day Lewis has very apt comments to make on this poem, written in October 1916-1917: "The poem is an interesting example of Owen's occasional regression, even at this later date, into his earlier lush way of writing. The last two lines are obviously influenced by Keats." 58

The war provided Owen with a subject-matter which turned the romantic elegiac strain of his early poems into the deep feelings of sorrow and compassion of

58. Ibid., p.104.
his later poetry. Keats, it seems, did not have any external stimulus that could explain his rapid development towards the last years of his life, but Owen's development - his *annus mirabilis* was the period between August 1917 and September 1918, when he produced his finest work - can at least partially be linked with his experiences in the trenches, which proved so significant for his poetic personality. For one thing, these experiences enabled him to see and realize human suffering about which he had been merely contemplating without much imaginative power in his earlier poems. In other words, war provided him with the subject-matter on which his poetic sensibilities could work. But during the early stages of war, Owen himself little realized that it was to prove such a blessing to him, in this sense. In fact, in a sonnet, *To My Friend*, written on March 23, 1917, he pathetically abandons all his aspirations for poetic fame. He does not hope that the gravers would "score" his inscription with "florid screed", apparently in the Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey. So

*Let my inscription be this soldier's disc ... Wear it sweet friend. Inscribe no date nor deed, But may thy heart-beat kiss it night and day, Until the name grows blurred and fade away.*
When war broke out, Owen was in France, and even though he was not personally involved in it, he saw it as an instrument of terrible destruction — destruction of "the civilization of two thousand years." In a letter of August 28, 1914 he remarked: "I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds which were to have excelled the civilization of two thousand years, are being annihilated — and bodies, the products of aeons of Natural Selection, melted down to pay for political statues." His first poetic reaction to war was expressed in a sonnet entitled 1914 which, as C. Day Lewis points out, "is of interest both for its resemblances and its unlikeness to the state of mind expressed in Rupert Brooke's." The sentimental glorification of war as expressed in Brooke's 1914 Sonnets is often attributed to the fact that the young poet as yet did not have a first-hand experience of war, and that it had not assumed its terrible shape at this stage. More importantly, Brooke was merely reflecting the general enthusiasm of the English people in the early years of war. Owen, on the other hand, was in France at that time, and was not exposed to such external influences. He had, as we have seen, a tragic apprehension of life — however adolescent — and it is for this reason that even though he viewed war

59. Ibid., p.19.
60. Ibid., p.129.
from a distance he was moved by its tragedy and not
by its glory:

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in.
The soul tornado, centred at Berlin,
Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin
Famine of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin
The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

In the sestet, he traces the course of human
civilization through Spring, Summer and Autumn, and
views the present in terms of Winter. War obviously
symbolized for him the tragedy and the end of the
twentieth-century civilization. No doubt, this
sonnet sounds rather generalized and rhetorical
because it does not have the bite and immediacy of
personally felt emotions but it remains an impressive
piece, indicative of the poet's breadth of vision and
his recognition of the wider implications of war.

Owen joined the Artists' Rifles in the summer
of 1915, and spent the next sixteen months in
infantry and officers' training. Early in January
1917 he was assigned to the Second Battalion of the
Manchester Regiment, then on the Somme front. Just
before leaving for the front, he expressed
enthusiasm and excitement, in a letter to his mother:
"There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France,
and I am in perfect spirits. A tinge of excitement is about me, but excitement is always necessary to my happiness." 61 But once he was in the front he was repelled by what he saw. On February 4, 1917, he described:

the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language ... everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious. 62

Already one can guess the direction his poetry was to take. He spent the severe winter of 1917 in trenches and personally experienced horrors of warfare. In May he was sent to hospital for treatment of neurasthenia. He was, later on, transferred to England. After a brief stay at Welsh Hospital, Netley, Hampshire, he arrived in late June at Craiglockhart War Hospital.

It was during this period of medical treatment that Owen formulated his views about war which inspired his war poetry. To start with he felt a sense of brotherhood and fellowship with his fellow soldiers, and a feeling of indignation against the smug civilians who protracted the war. His religious ideas and ideals underwent a profound change, and he discovered that the central

61. Ibid., p.155.
62. Ibid., p.22.
message of Christianity lay in deep humanity free from national and patriotic prejudices:

Already I have comprehended a light which
never will filter into the dogma of any
national church; namely, that one of Christ's
essential commands was: Passivity at any price!
Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort
to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed;
but do not kill: It may be a chimerical and
an ignominious principle, but there it is. It
can only be ignored; and I think pulpit
professionals are ignoring it very skilfully
and successfully indeed ... And am I not a
conscientious objector with a very seared
conscience? ... Christ is literally in 'no
man's land' ... Thus you see how pure
Christianity will not fit in with pure
patriotism.

At Craiglockhart War Hospital Owen met Sassoon who was already well-known for his anti-war poems. The influence of this meeting on Owen's poetry has often been exaggerated. Sassoon has set the records right by pointing out:

It has been loosely assumed and stated that Wilfred modelled his war poetry on mine. My only claimable influence was that I stimulated him towards writing with compassionate and challenging realism. His printed letters are evidence that the impulse was already strong in him before he had met me ...

Indeed, Owen's letters to his relatives at home - during the period of the Somme offensive - show how he was describing with relentless graphic details, the

63. Ibid., p.167.
64. Siegfried Sassoon: Siegfried's Journey (New York; 1948) p.89.
horrors of the trench-scenes. However, there is no denying the fact that Sassoon's own poetic practices, and Barbusse's *Le Feu* (which Sassoon had lent to the younger poet) influenced some of Owen's poems, which are chiefly realistic and satirical. In *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, he builds up a series of horrible images, taken directly from the battlefields -

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,
Obscure as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, - only to prove the "old lie" of the Horatian motto. The contrast between the imagery and the motto has been presented powerfully enough, but as a piece of poetry it is rhetorical, because the poet relies on reportage rather than imaginative evocation. It, doubtlessly, records his great indignation, but judged as poetry it is mainly a rhetorical versification of what he tried to convey by sending pictures and sketches of soldiers' wounds and mutilation in his letters home. His other poems like *S.I.W.* and *Mental Cases* are starkly realistic in a similar vein, whereas *The Chances* and *The Dead-Beat* are Sassoon-like in their sardonic irony. Perhaps the most interesting poem of this category is *Exposure*. It is dated, according to Edmund Blunden, "February 1917"
in which case it must be one of Owen's first poems after he went to the front. The poem is interesting because it is a blend of various influences some of which Owen came to discard, while others matured to produce his major poetry. To start with, as Loiseau has noted, there is a similarity between the opening lines of this poem and those of Keats's Nightingale Ode. Keats's poem opens with the words -

My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense ...

and a trance-like atmosphere is created. In the like manner, Exposure starts:

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.

The context, of course, has changed. Instead of Keats listening to the bird singing with "full-throated ease" on his lawn at Hampstead, Owen and his fellow soldiers are seen lying in trenches in winter cold. As the poem proceeds, he tries to get reconciled to the suffering on the ground that it is some kind of penitential sacrifice. He hopes that man would be redeemed by learning to love God anew. These pious

yearnings are conveyed through lines which make a clever use of Keatsian adjectives, and his own innovation, half-rhymes:

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,

We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires bum;
Nor ever suns smile true on child, or field or fruit.
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,

For love of God seems dying.

There is, though, a clear note of scepticism.
Lines like "We turn back to our dying", and "For love of God seems dying" indicate the futility of suffering, but Owen makes a brave attempt at finding meaning in the war effort. He tries to accept the evils of war in terms of Christian sacrifice. However, his doubts about the validity of this position increased as he advanced through the war and he rejected it altogether later on. But Exposure is very interesting as a transitional poem in which Keatsian influence is markedly present in imagery and diction, and the treatment of war is done in terms of evocative contrasts. In the later poems like Futility and The Show, the Keatsian richness almost disappears, and there is
single-minded focusing on the suffering of war without any consciousness of relief, spiritual or otherwise.

Before going to Owen's later poems, in which he was overwhelmed by the horror of war, it might be of interest to examine a few other poems which present a balanced picture of life. Owen relies on creating poetic tension out of a concept of what life is, and what it was, and could have been but for the atrocities of war. It is likely that when Owen was confronted with unnatural sufferings in trenches, he discovered how much better, by contrast, the civilian life was, which had induced adolescent brooding in his early years. He must have developed a love for life, and Sir Osbert Sitwell had found evidence of this in Owen's personal appearance:

His face was rather broad, and I think its most unusual characteristics were the width of eyes and forehead, and the tawny, rather sanguine skin, which proclaimed—as against the message of his eyes—deep in their colour and dark in their meaning—a love of life and poet's enjoyment of air and light. 66

It is this healthy enjoyment of life that is at the basis of a poem like Disabled, in which a mutilated soldier sits in his wheel-chair, and suddenly discovers that the ordinary pleasures of civilian life, have assumed the charm of distant dreams:

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About this time Town used to swing so gay
When glow lamps budded in the light blue trees,
And the girls danced lovelier as the air grew dim,
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.

But now,

Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands;
All of them touch him like some queer disease.

The juxtaposition of life at two levels is perhaps done
with most remarkable results in Spring Offensive. The soldiers, going to battlefields realize that they have
"come to the end of the world", and just before the
offensive they fondly think of the beautiful and
familiar aspects of nature, and Owen renders this with
rich Keatsian sensuousness:

Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass
swirled
By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge,
For though the summer oozed into their veins
like an injected drug for their bodies' pains, ...

But as soon as they enter the battlefield, the whole
landscape changes:

And instantly the whole sky burned
With fury against them; earth set sudden cups
In thousands for their blood; and the green slope
Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.

Here nature evidently symbolizes an ordered world from
which the soldiers are thrown into an unnatural
predicament. The idea is vividly conveyed through a
dexterous manipulation of imagery. The "warm fields"
and "the buttercups blessed with gold" are symbolical
of the happy aspects of life, and as the soldiers
depart from this life even the little brambles cling to the soldiers "like sorrowing hands". The imagery of the battlefield changes: the sky burns "with fury", and the golden buttercups turn into cups thirsting for blood, and the green slope is "Chasmed". It is significant that the poem ends with a few survivors who crawl "slowly back" and are yet able to regain "cool peaceful air in wonder". Equally significant is the final line with its rhetorical question mark - "Why speak not they of comrades that went under?" Welland provides the answer: "The survivors, having besmirched 'blood over all their souls', can no longer see their world as it was: the buttercups have become receptacles for blood, not givers of benisons." While this answer is only implicit in Spring Offensive, it looms large in the subsequent poems of Owen. In the last year of the war, and of his own life, he was almost completely obsessed by the horror of war, so that he saw no positive alternative for the soldier who was doomed to meaningless suffering. What is more, he seems to create the impression that all the joys and consolations that the soldier might have known in his pre-war years, were illusory.

It so happened that his war experiences altered his personal and poetic attitudes altogether. In a letter which he wrote on his first return from the Front,

he makes the significant point that but for the war, he would have written less revolutionary poems:

The other day I read a biography of Tennyson, which says he was unhappy, even in the midst of his fame, wealth, and domestic serenity. Divine discontent! I can quite believe he never knew happiness for one moment such as I have — for one or two moments. But as for misery, was he ever frozen alive, with dead men for comforters? Did he hear the moaning at the Bar, not at twilight and the evening bell only, but at dawn, noon and night, eating and sleeping, walking and working, always the close moaning of the Bar; the thunder, the hissing, and the whining of the Bar? — Tennyson, it seems, was a great child. So should I have been, but for Beaumont Hamel. 68

His own capacity for happiness, which Owen thought Tennyson "never knew", is celebrated with magic in a poem called From My Diary which was written in July 1914. This poem is remarkable for its intense sensuous joy in the world around, and the poet's skilful use of alliteration, onomatopoeia and half-rhymes. Besides, the emotions expressed in the poem attain a kind of solidity because of Owen's command over telling and precise images.

Flashes
Of swimmers carving thro' the sparkling cold
Fleshes
Gleaming with wetness to the morning gold.
A mead
Bordered about with warbling water brooks.
A maid
Laughing the love-laugh with me; proud of looks.

But, as we have already seen, Owen's first

experiences in battlefields produced powerful poems of realistic details like *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, *Exposure*, *Disabled*, *Mental Cases*, and *Spring Offensive*. At this stage he was still able, however uncertainly, to conceive of a stable, natural world which had been blighted by the inhumanities of war, (*Spring Offensive*) and to believe that war sufferings might be justified in terms of penitential sacrifice (*Exposure*). But in the last year of the war this sense of the existence of a harmonious and ordered world disappeared almost completely from his poetry. He came to believe that nothing but the horror and the pity of war could be the subject of poetry at that time. In a letter dated August 15, 1917, he spoke of Sassoon's trench poems and remarked that "Shakespeare reads vapid after these. Not of course because Sassoon is a greater artist, but because of the subjects, I mean." No wonder therefore that the central charge against the poets of the First World War was, in the words of Babette Deutsch, that "They spoke as soldiers and citizens first, as poets afterwards."69 Indeed, Owen himself defined the new role of the poet in the context of war:

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. 
My subject is War, and the pity of War. 
The Poetry is in the pity. 
Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next.

All a poet can do to-day is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

Welland has interpreted this Preface to demonstrate that "Owen thought of these poems primarily as propaganda", and goes on to remark:

Here the implication is that the poems are addressed to Owen's generation but not as consolation; they are not, that is, the 'bardic' type of war poems which exalt, encourage, and thus console, the reader, but a challenge, calculated, by their relentless exposure of the pity of war, to disturb the equanimity and indifference into which the reader has been lulled by a surfeit of pseudo-hortatory verse. To a later generation they may be consolatory, presumably as the picture of a barbaric past now over.

Owen's poem Anologia Pro Poemate Meo, written in November 1917, poetically sets out the literary standards that a poet was forced to discover amidst the bestialities of war. He felt that as a poet it was his duty to convey the truth that he himself had learnt, the truth of war. He speaks of the emotions which have been the subject of other poets, but the sources of his (Owen's) emotions are different:

I, too, saw God through mud, -
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.
War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child.

And witnessed exultation -
Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl,
Shine and lift up with passion of oblation,
Seraphic for an hour; though they were foul.

70. D.S.R. Welland, op.cit., pp. 53-54.
Owen is doing (though with greater artistry and power) what Sassoon had tried to do earlier, namely to expose the false assumptions of the civilians at home, or, at any rate, to show how their values are non-existent or irrelevant in the context of war. The poem's underlying irony, which is reinforced by a skilful use of romantic and imaginative imagery for descriptions of battle-scenes, attempts to emphasize the romantic nature of civilian conceptions and values. When God is seen "through mud", or glory of war discovered in war's slaughter and bloodshed, the implication is that either God nor the glory of war does actually exist, and the same is true of laughter, exultation, fellowship and beauty. What is true, and what does exist is the tragedy of war, and the poet wants the reader to enter this reality of experience. In other words it is only the suffering soldier (rather, soldier-poet) who can lead the civilian into an area of experience which embraces the all important truth that he "needs to know".

This attitude, with its experiential basis (bias?) betrays a very narrow concept of poetry. But Owen was so obsessed with war that all other experiences became unreal and irrelevant to him. We have already seen that he found the "subject" of Sassoon's war poems so arresting that after them "Shakespeare reads vapid".
This bent of mind produced, naturally, one would expect, intense but limited kind of poetry. John Lehmann reminds us that "it is important for us not to forget that 'achievement in poetry' no longer had any meaning for him beside the sacred duty he felt to become the voice through which the agonies and wrongs of the men who were dying around him should be made known to the world. We should mistake Wilfred Owen as a human being if we did . . . ." While no one would deny that Owen very effectively "made known to the world" the sufferings of the soldiers, and that he was a noble human being with feelings of deep compassion, it is the limitations of his "achievement in poetry" that must be recognized now.

It is perhaps ironical that a sword-clanging Imperialist like Sir Henry Newbolt should have been among the first to pinpoint the characteristic weakness in Owen's attitude to war and poetry. In a letter written in 1924 but not published until 1942, Newbolt remarked:

(Sassoon) has sent me Wilfred Owen's Poems, with an Introduction by himself. The best of them I knew already - they are terribly good, but of course limited, almost all on one note. I like better Sassoon's two-sided collection - there are more than two sides to this business of war, and a man is hardly normal any longer if he comes down to one. . . . Owen and the rest of the broken men trail at the Old Men who sent

the young to die: they have suffered cruelly, but in the nerves and not the heart — they hav'nt the experience or the imagination to know the extreme human agony — 'who giveth me to die for thee, Absalom, my son, my son'. Paternity apart, what Englishmen of fifty wouldn't far rather stop the shot himself than see the boys do it for him.

(My underscorings)

Stephen Spender\textsuperscript{73} complained in 1935 that Owen's poetry dwelt on the one single emotion of pity. Next year, Yeats excluded Owen and other War Poets from the Oxford Book of Modern Verse on the ground that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry": more specifically he dismissed Owen, in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley (December 21, 1936), as "a revered sandwich-board Man of the revolution ... He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick ... There is every excuse for him but none for those who like him."\textsuperscript{74} It is perhaps true that in making these remarks about Owen, Yeats was partly roused by his dislike of the upcoming poets of the 'thirties, one of whom, C. Day Lewis, had recently (\textit{A Hope For Poetry}, 1934) held up Owen as one of their poetic ancestors. But it is also being generally realized that, as dispassionate critical remarks they are quite valid. After all, as a critical axiom, Yeats

\textsuperscript{72} Margaret Newbolt, ed. \textit{The Later Life And Letters of Sir Henry Newbolt} (1942) pp. 374-75.

\textsuperscript{73} Stephen Spender, \textit{The Destructive Element} (1935) pp 217-221.

\textsuperscript{74} Letters on Poetry to Dorothy Wellesby (New York; 1940) p.124.
was not propounding anything new. Matthew Arnold had dropped his Empedocles On Etna from the canon of his poetry because of its passive suffering. He explained his point in the Preface to his Poems (1853), and the remarks can be applied, with some justification, to the poems of Owen too:

What then are situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance; in which everything is to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life they are painful, not tragic: the representation of them in poetry is painful too.

Though many of Owen's poems can be characterized as morbid, monotonous and too painful without tragic relief or exaltation, it would be sheer insensitivity that would account for any deafness towards the intense humanity and deep compassion of some of his best poems. The poem Insensibility rises above mere satire into a plea for greater sensitiveness to, and a sympathetic understanding of, the sufferings of soldiers. As contrasted with Sassoon's condemnation of 'authority', Owen here universalizes the picture by addressing all insensitive beings. The tragedy which the poem evokes is cosmic, which consumes both
combatants and non-combatants:

He sings along the march
Which we march taciturn, because of dusk,
The long, forlorn, relentless trend.
From larger day to huger nights.

In the famous last stanza, Owen goes on to lament not only the insensitivity to the plight of "the cannon fodder" but also a general callousness towards the sad experiences of human life, that moves inexorably towards "the last sea and the hapless stars":

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,
That they should be as stones;
Wretched are they, and mean
With paucity that never was simplicity.
By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever mourns in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;

Owen treats the elemental theme of human tragedy most powerfully in *Futility*:

Move him into the sun -
Gently its touch woke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.
Think how it wakes the seeds, -
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, so sides,
Full-nerved - still warm - too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

In these lines of grand simplicity, the very rhythm evokes a sense of solemn dignity. The course of human
evolution has been charted to force the unanswerable questions of the last lines. Here we encounter no protestations or railings, but are confronted with the mysterious ways of nature. The B.M. manuscripts of the poem show how Owen removed all topical references, especially to the war - i.e. for "Are limbs bled with a little sword" we have the more general "Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides." Though in the context of the poet's biography, it is natural to think of the man in the poem as a war casualty, it is quite possible to see the poem as independent of war associations. The poet considers the sun as the source of human warmth and vitality and as the power that enables the "clay" to grow "tall". But if the natural process encourages human evolution, it also completes the cycle by bringing in the end. The title of the poem as well as its last lines emphasize the futility of all this. This attitude is certainly at variance with Yeats's concept of "tragic joy" (Lapis Lazuli) but it enables Owen to produce a moving poem about human condition.

Such pity which arises out of man's elemental confrontation with nature is still impressive, despite Owen's sense of helplessness before the mysterious
phenomenon, but when the mainspring of his poetry is the kind of pity which is felt for the sufferings of soldiers, caused by ignorant and greedy human and political institutions, the poetic performance is less impressive. Owen's central weakness lies in the fact that he was overwhelmed by the catastrophe of war, and was unable to interpret its meaning in larger human terms. He re-created its atrocities and brutalities, and endowed the victims of war with deep pity. However noble, and poignant, this performance was, it lacked the strength and the interpretative power of great poetry. Take, for instance, The Show, in which imaginative abilities are deployed to re-create a war-blasted landscape:

My soul looked down from a vague height with Death,  
As unremembering how I rose or why,  
And saw a sad land, weak with sweets of dearth,  
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,  
And pitted with great poeks and scabs of plagues.

Men have turned into loathsome caterpillars and Owen introduces a further set of hideous imagery to represent their agony and writhing:

I saw their bitten backs curve, loop and straighten,  
I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.

Departing from his practice of evoking contrasting pictures of civilian and military landscapes, Owen here strains his tortuous imagination that seems to feed
on masochistic intensity. Harold Owen's description of the poet's personality clearly shows that there was a streak of masochism in him right from the beginning.

Then there was Wilfred Owen's slightly abnormal fondness for his mother resulting in enmity towards his father. Harold Owen remarks:

so strongly was it fixed in Wilfred's mind that my father was alien to him and thwarting to all that he was seeking for, that he, in turn, could only meet any advances from him with infuriating nonchalance and a scornful often ill-disguised assumption that no suggestion originating from him could be of real value.

It is not surprising then that Absalom's sacrifice of his son (The Parable of the Old Man and the Young) should have been turned into some kind of a deliberate murder, with not a touch of Christian salvation or conviction:

But the old man would not so, but slew his son, And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Elsewhere, in many other poems, (e.g. S.I.W., A Terre, Smile, Smile, Smile) fathers are almost invariably identified with the wicked. They deliberately bring about destruction for their young men, who die helplessly and passively. The poem, Miners, puts the soldiers in the same category as miners. Both die so that

The centuries will burn rich loads
With which we groaned,
Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids
While songs are crooned
But they will not dream of us poor lads
Lost in the ground.

Stephen Spender has perceptive remarks to make on this poem:

Beautiful as these lines are, one sees that the poet is conjuring up an emotion of pity in order to achieve them: he is not writing because he believes that the lives of the men who dig coal and who die in wars could in any way be altered, or, on the other hand, are in any way justified. His one emotion is a passive grief for the men and boys. The difficulty is that poetry inspired by pity is dependent on that repeated stimulus for its inspiration.

This criticism is true of Owen's other - and even better - poems. Anthem For Doomed Youth has been praised more than once for its deft handling of imagery and rhythms. It is an extremely compact poem which opens with a contrast between the military and civilian attitudes. The funeral rituals of conventional societies would only constitute a mockery towards the dead soldiers. On a religious level, it points to the irrelevance of the Christian attitude. The Christian rituals cannot accommodate the grief of the situation, which can be best expressed in terms of human pity.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmer of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds
And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.

Not the acolyte's candles, but the light in the eyes of the boys, would speed on the dead; their pall will be the "pallor girls' brows", and "Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds". The calm, restrained sorrow of the last lines is very poignant, and they give a lie to all suggestions of Christian salvation and comfort. But the human elements which replace the Christian rites are equally feeble. This rather negative attitude is at the core of another brilliantly executed poem *Greater Love*, in which the dying soldiers come to a realization, not only of the inadequacies of sexual love but also, of the terrible demands made by the Christian concept of "greater love". Many critics have commented on the various levels on which the poem works. The basic contrast is, of course, between sexual love and the 'greater love' of the men in the trenches. Each object of physical love (e.g. lips, looks, limbs) is brought into sharp contrast with its counterpoint in battlefields:

Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the dead.
Kindness of wooed and wooer
Seems shame to their love pure.
O Love, your eyes lose lure
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

The images of the next couple of stanzas go on to firmly confirm the initial impression that he is
ashamed of sexual love as compared to the love and comradeship among men —

Kindness of wooed and wooer
Seems shame to their love pure.

One begins to have slight misgivings at this point when one remembers that in a letter written before the war, Owen had said to his mother that "All women, without exception, annoy me" (Owen's own underlining). Owen seeks to deny the value of sexual love by introducing lines of great lyrical beauty only to be brought to an abrupt halt by the last long and flat line carrying the image of piteous coughing mouths:

Your voice sings not so soft,
Though even as wind murmuring through raftered loft,
Your voice is not dear,
Gentle, and evening clear,
As theirs whom none now hear,
Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed.

After having presented the sufferings of the soldiers in sharp contrast to the supposed pleasures of sexual love, Owen sublimates the emotions in the last stanza by equating the sufferings of soldiers with the Passion of Christ. It may be recalled that early in 1917, he had learnt that "one of Christ's essential commands was, Passivity at any price!", and as the months rolled by he came to strike a resemblance

77. See C. Day Lewis's edition of Owen's Poems, op.cit., p.75.
between the passive suffering of soldiers with that of Christ. In a letter dated July 4th, 1918, Owen wrote to Osbert Sitwell:

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

It is this "Christ-soldier" who appears in the final stanza of the poem under discussion:

And though your hands be pale
Paler all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail:
Weep you may weep, for you may touch them not.

But whereas Christ's suffering and death redeemed mankind, those of the soldiers are pretty meaningless. The poem consists of a series of rejections of values that men ordinarily cherish, so that the attempt to see the suffering of soldiers in terms of Christ's sacrifice seems an ironic reproach, an impression which is reinforced by the sardonic last line.

The idea of the futility of the soldiers' "sacrifice" is the theme of Strange Meeting. Here again, the Christ figure appears:

Then as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared With piteous recognition in fixed eyes, Lifting distressful hands as if to bless
but it is in "Hell" that the encounter takes place:

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

And the entire poem is a lament over the fact that the war has interrupted and changed the course of the world, leading it to senseless disaster. Critics like Elliot B. Gose and Welland see in the poem the confrontation between the soldier and an alter ego. The basic feeling remains to be a regret over the "undone years", and a plea for the recognition of the "truth untold":

I mean the truth untold
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

And that, as Owen had said in the Preface, was the motivating impulse behind his war poems. Unfortunately, his profound capacity to feel pity increased his need for objects of such pity. This was one reason why he wanted to go back to the front, after his recovery:

... It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's. It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.

And Sassoon had told him that "it would be a good thing for my poetry if I went back". It is not surprising then that Owen gives the impression of nursing an

81. C. Day Lewis op.cit. p.173.
82. Ibid., p.175.
anguished imagination that battened on poignancy.

Any dispassionate critical evaluation of Owen's poetry would reveal that Owen's problem bears resemblance to that of Shakespeare in Hamlet: in either case the artists' overwhelming emotion exceeded the object which inspired it. Eliot had found the phenomenon difficult to explain in the absence of relevant biographical details of Shakespeare. Owen's critic, armed with such documentation, seeks to explain it in terms of Owen's homosexual tendencies. Taking the clue from Robert Graves's remark, made in 1929, that Owen was "an idealistic homosexual", Joseph Cohen has written a longish article in which he convincingly demonstrates "that a form of homosexuality dominated Wilfred's sexual nature and that its presence can be confirmed. I submit that it is the final key to understanding Owen's achievement, and that the position he took toward the war was almost entirely motivated by homosexual elements." By quoting extensively from Owen's letters and poems, Cohen shows how Owen's love for his mother resulted in a hatred for his father, and a rejection of women. Moreover:

Owen's extension of patriarchal blood-lust did not end, however, with the Home Front. There is a special antipathy in his poetry reserved for God, the ultimate Father-figure, as opposed to Owen's

thoroughgoing love of Jesus. ... Owen's animosity is so strong he can serve it only by creating a powerful clash of interest between Jesus and God, a clash hardly supported by Christian theology. It is understandable only in the light of Owen's attitude toward his own father and his transference of affection to Jesus, i.e. one who is young and suffering and passively subjected, as Owen felt he was, to an overwhelming authority.

The "injustice-collector" in Owen - a typical homosexual trait - can be seen in most of Owen's war poems, which dwell on defeatism, depression, privation and pity.

Robert Graves was, however, content with a pathological rather than psychological explanation for Owen's unhappy disposition:

Owen had been invalided home from the Manchester Regiment in France as of no further use to them. The mental rhythm of the typical war-neurosis was one of jagged ups and downs: the up curves gave a despairing nervous energy which, when converted to poetic use, resulted in poems terrifyingly beyond the poet's normal capacity: the troughs meant listless inept melancholy.

All such details do not detract, as Cohen is the first to point out, from Owen's contribution to English literature, which "is obviously safe". But they certainly go to explain the limitations of his poetry and his concept of poetic functions. G.S. Fraser has rightly pointed out that, though Owen's position is

84. The Listener (23rd October 1941), 566.
vulnerable by absolute critical standards, the poet's performance was extremely impressive in the context of the conditions under which he wrote his poems:

It may be the chief secondary duty of a poet to-day to warn but his primary duty to-day as at all times, (is) to be a poet. And the poetry of life is not only in the pity, but in the irony, the humour, the heroism, in what Mr. Eliot has called 'the boredom, the horror, and the glory', in the whole complex. Owen is demanding, certainly for the noblest reasons, an oversimplification of the poet's task. Yet that preface, and that stanza, have both about them the stern and simple authority of the English puritan tradition; and they will be listened to, generation after generation, by earnest young men who have turned away in exasperation from more balanced and sophisticated but (for the moment, and to them) less inspiring masters.

Alone among the poets of the First World War, Isaac Rosenberg realized that his "primary duty to-day, as at all times, (was) to be a poet". His aestheticism was expressed in his essay Art in which he observed that "A great genius is, at once, the product, and the creator of his age. It is in him that a marked stage of evolution is expressed," but Rosenberg went on to point out that the artist does more than merely reflect the life of his age:

... art is an intensification and simplification of life, which is fragmentary and has no order and no coherent relationship to us, until it has passed through the crucible of Art. Science explains nature physically by atoms, philosophy explains life morally, but art interprets and intensifies life, representing a portion through the laws of unity that govern the whole.  

More specifically, on the effect of war on his poetry, Rosenberg expressed his determination that he would not allow it (war) to master his poetry; it would be used in so far as it helped him to broaden a vision of life:

I am determined that this war, with all its power for devastation, shall not master my poetry; that is, if I am lucky enough to come through all right. I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and it will refine itself into poetry later on.

This cool, objective, and one might say, artistic attitude towards war might have come from Keith Douglas, who came to realize that "To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others." If such an unsentimental recognition of the reality of modern warfare, which prevented hysteria on the part of Douglas, came to him from Saseoon and Owen who had shown the 'truth' of war, the poor Jewish background of Rosenberg can partly explain why the horrors of war did not come to him as a totally unexpected shock.

87 Ibid., p. 373.
Joseph Leftwich wrote an article in 1936 in which he left an authentic account of Rosenberg's upbringing and background. Leftwich describes how he, and two other boys (Winsten and Rodker, both of whom became poets later on) all still in their teens, Jewish, living in the East End of London and having literary and artistic aspirations, had formed a 'group', and met one another at Toynbee Hall, Whitechapel Library, and Whitechapel Art Gallery, where they discussed subjects of mutual interest. Rosenberg joined this 'group' and was glad to have got some friends with whom he could discuss his poems and paintings. He was a boy of indifferent health, and his "home life was", in the words of Leftwich:

like that of most of us. We lived in dingy houses, in drab streets. His family was poor. His "studio" was in the back kitchen, a small, stuffy, crowded room at the end of a long, narrow passage, which was the family living room. The dresser, crammed with crockery, occupied most of the space; the table at a corner of which Rosenberg sat sketching, was rickety and littered with cups and plates.

He was educated in the elementary school of Stepney until he was fourteen when he became an apprentice engraver for Carl Heutschel, the art publishers in Fleet Street. He attended evening classes at the Art School of Birkbeck College, and later on joined,

through the generosity of three Jewish ladies, the Slade School. He published at his own expense three private pamphlets of poems which hardly brought him any money or recognition. However, he got to know some well-known literary figures of the day, but they were, as Leftwich noted, condescending in their attitude towards Rosenberg:

Harold Monro, of the Poetry Bookshop, Edward Marsh, Editor of "Georgian Poetry", and discerning art collector, Lawrence Binyon, whom he used to visit at the British Museum where he was Keeper of Prints and Drawings, Gordon Bottomley, about whose poetry he raved to me, were all very kind and showed interest in his work, but in some of them, it was touched a little, I fear, with condescension. Here was this poor ungainly-looking Whitechapel Jew, living in adverse circumstances, with imperfect education and want of opportunity, yet writing good poetry ...

However, none of these people gave Rosenberg any concrete help that might have helped him to gain a foothold in the contemporary poetic scene. For instance, Edward Marsh printed only one small extract from Moses in *Georgian Poetry 1916-17*, whereas more space and frequent appearances would have brought the young poet money and recognition. In fact so gloomy were his prospects that at one stage Rosenberg had contemplated emigrating to America, on "a cattle boat", for better prospects. He gave up the idea and went, instead, to South Africa to visit his married sister and a brother
there. Though he had thought that the South African climate would help improve his health, he did not like living there, primarily because he felt cut off from life. Therefore he returned to England in May 1915, and in spite of his indifferent health, he joined the Suffolk Bantam Regiment, and afterwards the 11th King's Own Royal Rifles, as Private 22311.

It seems pathetic now that he joined the Army for "sheer economic need": Leftwich wrote, "He was not physically fit for soldiering. But life became so hopeless, there seemed no chance of earning his bread, and sheer economic need drove him to join the Army." Life in the Army was particularly painful for him, because he was a private (as opposed to the officer ranks of his fellow-poets) who had to undergo rigorous training and menial labour, and also because of his weak health. In a letter to Lascelles Abercrombie, he wrote: "Believe me the army is the most detestable invention on this earth and nobody but a private in the army knows what it is to be a slave."\(^{89}\) Moreover, he spent about twenty months in and around the trenches, as opposed to about five months spent by Owen. Such experiences, one would imagine, must have turned him

\(^{89}\) Works (1937), op. cit., p.347.
into a fiercely anti-war poet. They did, but Rosenberg's sense of humour helped him retain his sanity. He wrote to Edward Marsh:

... know that I despise war and hate war, and hope that Kaiser William will have his bottom smacked - a naughty aggressive schoolboy who will have all the plum pudding.

This sense of humour, coupled with his special concepts of art and poetry helped in preventing his sufferings from mastering "his poeting".

Rosenberg's highly aesthetic concept of poetry made him realize the importance of language, form, order and unity in his poems, and for subject-matter, he sought to express (what Rosenberg described with reference to the work of another poet) "that strange longing for an indefinite ideal: the haunting desire for that which is beyond the reach of hands." 91

Inevitably, he wrote symbolical poems and plays. Moses deals with the theme of the proper use of will and imagination, which, when fused together, produce Power. And that Power is utilized for the destruction of the old and the creation of the new. A lover of Donne that he was (he carried Donne's poems with him to war) Rosenberg's poems tend to be dialectical. In God Made

90. Ibid., p.297.
91. Ibid., p.326.
God is jealous of human joy, but when human joy is seen to lie in love, there is the possibility of cheating him. God is love, and human beings, by loving Him, become part of Him:

We'll cheat Him with our joy.
For say! What can God do
To us, to Love, whom we have grown into?
Love, the poured rays of God's Eternity!
We are grown God -

Unfortunately, Jewish critics of Rosenberg's poetry have restricted its significance by interpreting it only in the Jewish context. Jon Silkin is a typical example. Writing in the Jewish Quarterly, he remarked:

In the poem God Made Blind it might be argued that the presentation of the cruel God is a presentation of inverted roles: it is not God who is cruel or harsh with the Jews, but the English who are harsh with the Jews. 92

While it is quite possible to link the rage and rebellion in his poetry with Rosenberg's oppressed Jewish background, he was too good a poet to rest content with licking his wounds. In the first place, he was sufficiently influenced by the Romantic view that man was the reservoir of infinite possibilities. The poem Expression, from his privately printed volume Youth (1915), is an enthusiastic and unrestrained embodiment of such a faith:

Life's heart, a blossoming fire
Blown bright by thought,
While gleams and fades the infinite desire
Phantasm'd nought.

Can this be caught and caged?
Wings can be clipt,
Of eagles, the sun's gaudy measure gauged,
But no sense dipt.

In the mystery of sense,
The troubled throng
Of words break out like smoother'd fire through dense
And smouldering wrong.

The declamatory tone is perhaps inevitable in this sort of poem, where the poet expresses a passionate belief that imagination will overcome 'the smouldering wrong'. But we must note here his concern with things universal and primordial. This fact can explain the kind of poem Rosenberg wrote, in Cape Town, in 1914, On Receiving the News of the War.

Red fangs have torn His Face.
God's blood is shed.
He mourns from his lone place
His children dead.

O ancient crimson curse!
Corrode, consume!
Give back this universe
Its pristine bloom.

This poem at once brings to one's mind Owen's The Seed, which was written in France in August 1914. The similarity between the two poems is both poets' generalized treatment of the war theme, but the obvious difference lies in Rosenberg's superior linguistic
control, economy of words and precise imagery. But more importantly, whereas Owen tends to see war from a historic perspective, Rosenberg takes a more primeval view. With a brilliant use of sensory images, he is able to see the elemental nature of the catastrophe, as well as the possibility of the universe regaining "Its pristine bloom", through it. His determination to adopt an abstract and colder attitude towards war was indicated in a letter written in June 1916:

... The poems by the soldier are vigorous but, I feel, a bit commonplace. I did not like Rupert Brooke's begloried sonnets for the same reason. What I mean is, second-hand phrases - 'lambent fires', etc., - take from its reality and strength. It (war) should be approached in a colder way, more abstract, with less of the million feelings everybody feels; or all these should be concentrated in one distinguished emotion. 93

The absence in the poetry of Rosenberg of the note of protest against the civilians, and the desire to 'inform' them is what sharply distinguishes him from other poets, like Sassoon and Owen. This again can be traced to his special background, which did not provide him with the stable life from which the monstrosities of warfare could have been seen as an abnormal departure. It was only in the ancient Jewish history that he discovered hope and peace -

93. Works. (1937) op.cit., p.348.
While underneath their brows
Life's waifs their spirits grope
For the pool's of Hebron again -
For Lebanon's summer slope.

('Through These Pale Gold Days')

He realized that human troubles and sufferings were
all pervasive, though their causes were different among
different people:

Poor people are born in troubles and spend
all their times getting out of them. But,
born free, all try to get into them.

It is for this reason that he held, as we have seen,
God, and not some Civilian authority, responsible for
the bitter injustices in this world. The sense of
strength in his poetry comes from the fact that the
protest against God is balanced by a faith in the
individual's power to create. This spirit is at the
core of his finest war poems in which there is an
unflinching recognition of suffering and destruction as
well as an obdurate refusal to be overwhelmed by them.
In a letter before his embarkation for France, he said:
"One might succumb, be destroyed - but one might also
(and the chances are greater for it) be renewed, made
larger, healthier." 95

It is interesting that like many of his fellow
War Poets, Rosenberg struck a patriotic note in a poem
like Soldier: Twentieth Century:

94. Ibid., p.266.
95. See Dennis Silk 'Isaac Rosenberg', Judaism, XIV, 464.
I love you, great new Titan
Am I not you?
Napoleon and Caesar
Out of you grew.

And The Dead Heroes resounds with Brooke-like enthusiasm and extravagance:

Thrills of their baptismal tread
The bright proud air;
The embattled plumes out-spread
Burns upwards there.

... ... ... ... ... ... ...

England - Time gave them thee;
They gave back this
To win Eternity
And claim God's kiss.

The conventionality of the theme, however, has been partly redeemed by an original use of images. Besides, there is already a realization, in another poem, that -

'We cannot give you water
Were all England in your breath.'
'Water - water - 0 water'
He moaned and swooned to death.

(The Dying Soldier)

His other poems dealing with the beginnings of the war, On Receiving News of the War, and August 1914 are perhaps more typical because the poet already lifts the war theme on to an impersonal and universal level, and experiments with new techniques of versification.

Rosenberg was acquainted with Ezra Pound, and the influence of Hulme on his (Rosenberg's) poetry has been convincingly demonstrated by Joseph Cohen. The

precise imagery and the linguistic compression of

August 1914 clearly classify it in the Imagist mode:

What in our lives is burnt
In the fire of this?
The heart's dear granary?
The much we shall miss?

Three lives hath one life —
Iron, honey, gold.
The gold, the honey gone —
Left is the hard and cold.

Iron are our lives
Molten right through our youth.
A burnt space through ripe fields
A fair mouth's broken tooth.

Though in the context of war, the last stanza can be interpreted as a picture of war's destructions, the poem operates on two levels. On the one hand there is the war's cruelties, on the other, a sense of lost joys and hopes in life. Rosenberg's capacity for detachment from the subject-matter for aesthetic portrayal is illustrated in Louse Hunting in which the poet exercises his painting skill in order to depict soldiers who are disturbed in their sleep by lice. He had treated the subject light-heartedly in The Immortals —

I called him Satan, Balzebub.
But now I call him dirty louse.

But in Louse Hunting the occasion is exploited for a heightened visualization of details, and ironic contrasts between the soldier's "supreme flesh" and the lice's "supreme littleness".
See the silhouettes agape,
See the gibbering shadows
Mixed with the battled arms on the wall.
See gargantuan hooked fingers
Pluck in supreme flesh
To smutch supreme littleness.

Keith Douglas was to adopt a similar technique, later on, for depicting dead soldiers (*Landscape With Figures*):

> On sand and scrub the dead men wriggle
> in their dowdy clothes. They are mimes
> who express silence and futile aims
> enacting this prone and motionless struggle
> at a queer angle to the scenery,
> crashing on the boards of the stage like walls.

Rosenberg’s memorable poems are those in which his aestheticism is directed towards creating the vision which came to him through a war-blasted landscape. The nature of death was one of the fundamental subjects which war brought into the forefront for the War Poets. Rosenberg, who had experienced miseries in his own life, was faced with the ‘ultimate misery’ — death — when he went to trenches. The idea of death that haunted him is beautifully expressed in *Returning, We Hear the Larks*. This lyric is a brilliant example of the poet’s ability to organise different strands of feelings and ideas into a poetic whole. The opening lines evoke the sombre atmosphere, with a consciousness of sinister threats —

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

The longer lines contain the aggravating anguish, only to be brought to a temporary respite in the brief line, "On a little sleep". The sudden revelation of beauty and joy at that brief moment of respite is expressed in lines of lyrical intensity —

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

The unexpected nature of the experience throws the poet on the borders of inarticulation: "Joy — joy — strange joy", and the subsequent images (e.g. 'heights of night' 'unseen larks') tend to endow the whole experience with a mystical glow. But his refusal, rather than inability, to respond to this pure joy, springs from his apprehension of the lurking threat —

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song —

Therefore the lark's song, instead of becoming a symbol of pure joy and beauty, embodies concealed treacheries —

But song only dropped,
Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides,
Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,
Or her kisses where a serpent hides.
Far from taking the easier course of intensifying the moment of pure joy and beauty in order to present them in sharp contrast to death's agonies, Rosenberg embodies a totality of vision which explores the extent and limit of a beautiful experience in the context of war. It is with a similar attitude that he faces death in the short narrative, *In War*. The personal sorrow (his brother's death) does not prevent him from viewing death as a generalized phenomenon brought about by war. A sense of timelessness is created in the first few stanzas in which death is seen as a part of the process of life:

The voice that once could mirror
Remote depths
Of moving being,
Stirred by responsive voices near,
Suddenly stilled for ever.

The living who bury the dead do so with a quiet dignity with the consciousness that it is just a matter of 'chance' that they are living while the others are dead -

And we whom chance kept whole -
But haggard,
Spent - were charged.
To make a place for them who knew
No pain in any place.

Here a general participation in the tragedy of life and death precludes any kind of Owenesque pity. This being so, when the succeeding stanza reveals that one of the dead who were being buried was the poet's own
brother, the temptation to fall into a Sassoon-like hysteria:

for he howled and beat his chest,
And all because his brother had gone west ...

(Lamentations)

is effectively checked:

He read my brother's name;
I sank -
I clutched the priest.
They did not tell me it was he
Was killed three days ago.

So that he can return, in the last stanza, to his earlier depersonalized, philosophic mood, now only a little heightened and elevated:

What are the great sceptred dooms
To us, caught
In the wild wave?
We break ourselves on them,
My brother, our hearts and years.

In Break of Day in the Trenches Rosenberg envisions a panoramic view of life which includes the human, the animal and the natural worlds. There is a pervading sense of stillness and gloom in the opening lines:

The dark crumbles away -
It is the same old druid Time as ever.

The poet notices "A queer sardonic rat" and indulges in metaphysical conceit to emphasize the artificial barriers which have divided the fighting soldiers:

Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German -
The rat also underlines the contrast between its low vitality and human death. But in effect (by implication) the rat's life is as precarious as that of the poet, and of the poppy of the last lines:

Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe
Just a little white with the dust.

Poppies are identified with men, they are dropping as men are dropping dead in battlefields, and the single poppy which is "safe" on the back of the poet's ear, is in fact as safe or precarious as the poet himself in the trenches. As Harding points out, "There is here a cool distribution of attention over the rat, the poppy and the men which give them all their due, is considerate of all their values, and conveys in their precise definition something of the impersonal immensity of war. For Rosenberg the war was not an incident of his life, to be seen from without, but, instead, one kind of life, as unquestionable as any."  

Break of Day in the Trenches, with its theme of the transience of life is a very sad poem, but it prepares us for Rosenberg's better war poems in which the war experiences make him aware of the possibilities of life through death and suffering. Bowra has

observed that for Rosenberg "the war was indeed a cosmic event, which he believed to be needed to purge the injustices of society and to bring back sanity to men."  

Rosenberg dealt partly with the theme of revolt against corruption and iniquity, but in poems like Dead Man's Dump and Daughters of War Rosenberg asserts man's dignity in his quiet, but formidable courage in the face of war's destruction, and in his return to the "primeval elements". This is because he knew that tragedy is not peculiar to the twentieth-century - he asked Miss Seaton, "If the twentieth century is awful, tell me what period do you believe most enviable?" and believed that art must concern itself with positive attitudes:

I like to read something joyous - buoyant, a clarion call to life, an inspirer to endeavour, something that tells one life is worth living and not death only is worth having.

He was also convinced that the distinguishing trait of great literature in the past was its sense of strength and dignity:

When Milton writes on his blindness, how dignified he is? how healthy? What begins in a mere physical moan, concludes in a

100. Ibid., pp 387-28.
Daughters of War was a War Poet's contribution to this body of English literature. It is a highly symbolical poem. Rosenberg considered it his best poetic effort, in which he had "striven to get that sense of inexorableness the human (or unhuman) side of this war has ... The end is an attempt to imagine the severance of all human relationships, and the fading away of human life."¹⁰² In Girl to Soldier On Leave, the mortal beloved of the soldier is already losing her battle with death, which later on was to take her lover into the arms of the Amazons of Daughters of War. The Amazons need for their fulfilment "the sons of valour", similarly the men need the Amazons' "huge embraces" for their own spiritual release:

So the soul can leap out
Into their huge embraces.

The visionary nature of this conception is indicated quite early in the poem -

I saw in prophetic gleams
These mighty daughters in their dances
Beckon each soul aghast from its crimson corpse
To mix in their glittering.

(Incidentally, here is evidence that Rosenberg was free from Yeats's complaint that War Poet's passive attitude

¹⁰¹. Ibid., p.332.
¹⁰². Ibid., p.317.
prevented the triumph in a dance over the corpses of war. But the passage of the human soul lies only through "savage death":

they have no softer lure —
No softer lure than the savage ways of death.

However, the men are not quite willing to be allured in this manner, because they seem quite content with the physical benefits of this world —

We were satisfied of our lords the moon and the sun
To take our wage of sleep and bread and warmth —

But then, they realize that they

must leap to the love-heat of these maidens
From the flame of terrene days.

The last stanza of the poem is an excellent example of Rosenberg's growing maturity as a poet, because it evocatively projects the vision towards which all the earlier stanzas had been moving. He does this with a brilliant manipulation of imagery. The Amazon, who speaks, uses appropriately romantic images to indicate the insufficiency of human life on this earth:

Frail hands gleam up through the human quagmire and lips of ash
Seem to wail, as in sad faded paintings
Far sunken and strange.

This is followed by short, crisp lines of dry, hard images to convey "that sense of inexorableness the human (or unhuman) side of war has", and indicate
possibilities for humanity through suffering and death:

'My sisters have their males
Clean of the dust of old days
That cling about those white hands
And yearns in those voices sad.
But those shall not see them,
Or think of them in days or years;
They are my sister's lovers in other days
and years.'

Critics like Bergonzi have expressed dissatisfaction with the poem because "it suffers from being wholly in a symbolical mode, instead of displaying the strength which comes from counterpointing the symbolic against the realistic."\(^{103}\) Of course, there is no general rule that "strength" is dependent on "counterpointing the symbolic against the realistic", as is evident from Yeats's remarkable Second Coming or Sailing to Byzantium. Perhaps the practices of Sassoon and Owen have so accustomed us to the "realism" of war that we are not quite prepared for the treatment of the subject in purely symbolical terms. Yet, Rosenberg regarded, as we have noted earlier, Daughters of War as his finest poem, and he wanted his more ambitious play The Unicorn "to symbolize the war and all the devastating forces let loose by an ambitious and unscrupulous will". It is true that this (fragmentary) play fails as drama despite its impressive isolated passages, but Rosenberg's artistic attitude towards war anticipated

\(^{103}\) Bernard Bergonzi, op.cit., p.120.
the manner in which the subject was to be tackled in the succeeding years. One thinks of David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*, and the poems of Keith Douglas and Sidney Keyes – the latter’s *In Wilderness* is a significant example of symbolic treatment of war.

*Dead Man’s Dump* is not a neatly unified poem because the poet’s attention to realistic details around him results in digression and fitful speculations. There is no denying, though, that it is an impressive war poem. It comes home to readers much more immediately because the symbolism of the poem is rooted in the reality of the war, and many images are drawn directly from trench life. The fact that Rosenberg was aware of war’s horrible brutalities is evident in a stanza like this one:

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,
Their shut mouths made no moan.
They lie there huddled friend and foe man,
Man born of man, and born of woman,
And shells go crying over them
From night till night and now.

This is done in the manner of Sassoon’s poem *Counter-Attack*, but while Sassoon was merely concerned with presenting such vivid sketches of war’s atrocities, this is only the starting point in Rosenberg’s poem. Again, as if to underline the inadequacy of an Owenesque attitude to poetry and war (Rosenberg and
Owen, of course didn't know each other or their works),

a war casualty is thus presented:

A man's brains splattered on
A stretcher-bearer's face;
His shock shoulders slipped their load,
But when they bent to look again
The drowning soul was sunk too deep
For human tenderness.

Rosenberg was concerned with a significant "idea"
controlling the poem. He had sent Dead Man's Dump to
Marsh for his criticism, and had remarked: "... I can
now, I am sure, plead the absolute necessity of fixing
an idea before it is lost, because of the situation
it's conceived in." So dominant was this intention
in his mind that the poem seems to have some kind of
an inverted order. The 'conclusion' is powerfully
presented in the first five stanzas, whereas the last
eight are devoted to 'exposition'. The death and
destruction described in the second stanza of the poem
is seen as the fulfilment of some kind of a natural
intention:

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

This is only a variation on the theme of Daughters of War.
Here, instead of the Amazons, it is nature which longs

for man's passage through death for the inevitable fusion of the two. Once this fusion has taken place, the possibilities of immortality are there:

What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit? Earth! have they gone into you! Somewhere they must have gone, And flung on your hard back Is their soul's sack Emptied of God-ancestrelled essences.

It is in this context that we can better appreciate Harding's observation that, "Rosenberg seems to have been specially impressed by the destruction of men at the moment of a simplified greatness which they could never have reached before, their destruction by the very forces that had made human strength and endurance more vividly impressive than ever." And in the next stanza the possibilities of life through death are presented as gently, as the inevitable (note the repeated use of 'doomed') death is presented impersonally:

No one saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass, Or stood aside for the half used life to pass Out of these doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth, When the swift iron burning bee Drained the wild honey of their youth.

One wishes that the poem had ended at this point, because the rest of it tends to be narrative and descriptive with meditative speculations thrown in.

There is a sense of looseness in the narrative as the poet moves to consider the fate of the living, which provokes a hysterical outburst - "Maniac Earth! howling and flying, your bowl ..." - and the consideration of the deed, which, however, results in a passionate exploration of death as something absolute:

Burnt black by strange decay
Their sinister faces lie,
The lid over each eye,
The grass and coloured clay
More motion have than they,
Joined to the great sunk silences.

The dying men in the last section of the poem, dies helplessly and passively:

So we crashed round the bend,
We heard his weak scream,
We heard his very last sound,
And our wheels grazed his dead face.

These lines would suggest the impossibility of responding to any kind of spiritual fulfilment, the motives of which seem to have been obscured by the exigencies of battle. This is contrary to the poetic affirmation firmly made in the first five stanzas of the poem. Rosenberg had apparently anticipated the risk involved when he had spoken of the need "of fixing an idea before it is lost." In an earlier letter to Marsh he had made the valid criticism of the poem: "I don't think what I've written is very good but I think the substance is, and when I work on it I'll
make it fine." It is not known whether Rosenberg got the opportunity of revising the poem; most likely he did not. But what is clear is the suspicion that, unlike Alun Lewis later on, Rosenberg needed to get away from the subject in order to distil its essence and present it as a unified work of art, in symbolic terms.

That Rosenberg did not have the full imaginative and technical resources - nor indeed time and leisure - for such an undertaking is evident from the comparative failure of The Unicorn, (which is unfinished anyway) and the obscurity, ambiguity and even incoherence of many of his poems. We have considered here only his best poems. Taken as a whole, his work gives the impression of a quality which Bergonzi has rightly described as "groping as much as exploration". But Rosenberg's distinction lies not only in the fine achievements of his best poems, but also in his being the first, among the poets who wrote and died during the First World War, to explore the possibility of dealing with the theme of war in aesthetic, rather than propagandistic terms. Speaking of Owen and Rosenberg, Welland observed: "Both are equally devoted, but to different things: Rosenberg, who was also a painter,

106. Works (1937) op. cit., p. 316.
to an aesthetic ideal, Owen to a social one."  

T.S. Eliot had indicated the falsity of arbitrary distinctions between poets' 'aesthetic' and 'social' ideals: while discussing Yeats's greatness as a poet, Eliot pointed out:

Born into a world in which the doctrine of "Art for Art's sake" was generally accepted, and living into one in which art has been asked to be instrumental to social purposes he (Yeats) held firmly to the right view which is between these, though not in any way a compromise between them, and showed that an artist, by serving his art with entire integrity, is at the same time rendering the greatest service to his own nation and to the whole world.

The intrinsic merit of Rosenberg's poetry as well as its importance in the future development of English poetry are implied in the above observations of Eliot, when considered in the present context.

Rosenberg's achievement, in fact, underlines the limitations of the kind of poetry most of his fellow War Poets wrote. Unfortunately most of the critical examinations of war poetry have been concerned with analyses of individual poems, without any attempt at a cumulative assessment of the entire

war poetry as such. A full-length study of the subject, like the one by Bergonzi, smacks of a survey which is held together by the obvious point that the example of the war writers showed "that the traditional mythology of heroism and the hero, the Hotspurian mode of self-assertion, had ceased to be viable". 110 When Bergonzi does take up the central criticism of war poetry, made by Yeats, he rejects it as "grotesque", and instead of subjecting it to a critical analysis, goes to make an unwarranted personal attack on Yeats: "The venomous tone of Yeats's remarks is inexcusable, denoting a degree of senile rancour and, perhaps, of jealousy." 111 Yet, Yeats was, after all, applying an age-old critical principle. A body of poetry which concerned itself exclusively with an overwhelming catastrophe, without seeing in it seeds of change or possibilities of human assertion, could not but be a dead-end in literature. Even Robert Nichols admitted, when he came to edit an _Anthology of War-Poetry_ 1914-1918, that that poetry was essentially a re-creation of the catastrophic events, without being able to reach "tragic" heights:

In these poems pity and terror may be - and indeed often are - separately or even

110. Bernard Bergonzi, _op.cit._, p. 141
111. _Ibid._, p. 125
simultaneously present but the quality of feeling called "tragic" is not often present. Why? Because in the absence of fatality which is revealed in the relation of the part to the whole the tragic cannot exist.

Tragedy is the spectacle of man's spiritual triumph within his physical defeat. But most of these War Poets were too close to the subject-matter to be able to contemplate anything but defeat. Their poetry, therefore, is catastrophic rather than tragic, and it is further restricted by the fact that it is selective and personal. Situated as they were, most of these poets saw the soldiers as suffering in isolation from the Civilians. And since their main aim appears to have been the desire to bring home to the Civilians the magnitude of their suffering, and the pity of it, there was clearly no room for the comprehensiveness of a tragic vision. The examples of Sorley and Rosenberg demonstrate the possibilities of creating tragic poetry only if the poets concerned came to the theme of war with an imaginative mind, enriched by literary and human experiences. Rosenberg succeeded to a certain extent, whereas Sorley's literary background proved vulnerable when suddenly confronted with the fierceness of actual tragic situation. Sorley's sad 'capitulation' is significant because it underscores the particular

dilemma of the poet of the First World War. The unheard of atrocities of the war prevented the poet's viewing the soldiers' suffering in wider human, cosmic terms. No wonder then that Robert Graves decided to suppress most of his war poems, and that Edmund Blunden had some such attitude towards his own war poems:

In May and June 1916, in my note-books, the grimness of war began to compete as a subject with the pastorals of peace. By the end of the year, when madness seemed totally to rule the hour, I was almost a poet of the shell-holes, of ruin and of mortification. But the stanzas then written were left in the pocket-book: what good were they, who cared, who would agree?

Herbert Read's books of war poems, Naked Warrior and Eclogues (both published in 1919) were concerned with the brutal realism of war, but it was only after the war was over that he, in 1933, published The End of a War in which the "higher reality" was explored. In a postscript to the poem Read made an important point which contains an implicit attack on much poetry of the First World War:

It is not my business as a poet to condemn war (or, to be more exact, modern warfare). I only wish to present the universal aspects of a particular event. Judgement may follow, but should never precede or become embroiled with the act of poetry...

All such facts and criticism are brought in only to indicate the limitations which were imposed on the

poets who were writing during the war. But they must not be allowed to obscure the fine achievements of their poetry. Sorley's poignant contemplation of death, Sassoon's righteous anger against hypocrisy and greed, and Owen's fellow-feeling, sensitivity, deep compassion and pity produced memorable poems. Historically speaking, their performance has proved to be extremely significant. They brought in a decisive break with the poetry of the pre-war years, and paved the way for the modern poetry of "the Age of Anxiety". Poets like Pound and Eliot had already been working on revolutionary lines but they did not make their impact felt until the end of the war. As we saw, in the previous Chapter, the dominant trends in the poetry of the pre-war years was towards treating simple and less controversial subjects. In Sorley's words, this was the poetry of "the small-holdings". But after the War Poets had unmasked the reality of twentieth-century civilization, the road was clear for poems like Hugh Selwyn Mauberley and The Waste-Land: C. Day Lewis found the chief merit of The Waste-Land (which had a profound influence in the post-war decades of English poetry) to lie in its being a "social document",
It makes us aware of the nervous exhaustion, the mental disintegration, the exaggerated self-consciousness, the boredom, the pathetic gropings after the fragments of a shattered faith - all these symptoms of the psychic disease which ravaged Europe as mercilessly as the Spanish influenza.

The War Poet, in his determination to shock an apathetic public into a recognition of the truth, was more in line with Pound and Eliot, rather than with Edward Marsh who was content with "educating" and pleasing the public taste. No doubt, the War Poet had no firm literary background, so that we find poets like Sassoon and Owen desperately trying to accommodate their new sensibility within the fragile (Georgian) technical mould. Though Sorley and Rosenberg tried to make experiments with new verse techniques, in general the War Poets depended, in the main, on the poetic practices of the Georgian poets. And in a sense, the War Poet carried the Georgian rebellion against the aesthetism of the nineties to the other extreme, and became pioneers of the kind of poetry which became so popular in the thirties. C. Day Lewis acknowledged this fact in his discussion of Owen, and observed:

Owen commends himself to post-war poets largely because they feel themselves to be in the same predicament: they feel the same lack of a stable background against which the dance of words may stand out plainly, the same distrust

and horror of the unnatural forms into which life for the majority of people is being forced... his unsentimental pity, his savage and sacred indignation are the best of our inheritance, and it is for his heirs to see that they are not wasted.

But it is to "War Poetry" as such that the poets of the First World War made their greatest contribution. They stripped war of all its tinsel and romance, and showed for all times to come, what it actually was. Hundreds of years of war poetry was put into the glass-cases of a museum, as it were, and no serious modern poet could write of wars in conventional, romantic terms. Besides, poets like Sassoon and Owen had expressed their sense of indignation and pity so fully and finally that the succeeding war poet was forced to discover, at the risk of mere repetition, new—and as it turned out, more poetic—ways of dealing with war. Ironically enough, the later poets found that earlier poets like Sassoon and Owen were mistaken in believing that their poetry would help prevent future wars. Yeats proved to be more prophetic when, in his On Being Asked For a War Poem, he declared: "We have no gift to set a statesman right." When war came in 1939, the modern poet had no illusions about it, thanks to the poets of the First World War.

115. Ibid., pp 16-17.
A poet like Alun Lewis, who had grown up with compassionate feelings for the sad lot of the Welsh miners, realized the insufficiency of such emotions for dealing with the theme of war in his time. His war poetry, therefore, hovered around a sense of nostalgia, impressionistic sketches of the Indian scene, vague spiritual intimations, and towards the end, thoughts of his own imminent death. But other poets like Keith Douglas, Drummond Allison and Sidney Keyes took the fact of war for granted, and saw it only as just one more aspect of the tragedy of life, and devoted themselves to the exploration of the nature of that tragedy.
POETRY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The chief difference in the attitudes of the major poets of the two World Wars springs from the fact that when war came in 1914 nobody knew, because it was so unexpected, and so totally unprecedented in its implications, what it really involved. This can go to explain why the poetry of the First World War is essentially a 'reportage' of the moods and attitudes of people and poets, as they moved from an initial sense of exhilaration and release into feelings of senseless suffering and outrage. In their unenviable predicament most of these poets had to rest content with just 'inform' and 'warn' their readers. The better poets of the Second World War, on the other hand, grew up, in the words of Alex Comfort, "from early adolescence, in the almost complete certainty that we should be killed in action".1 Hence, they had no illusions to shed, nothing new to learn (for purposes of poetry) about the nature of modern warfare. But the war brought before them, in their fierce reality, truths of life and death, and they directed their poetic energies towards such themes.

During the earlier war, really serious discussion about the literary potentialities of war as a theme in poetry was rare, and it was only fitfully carried out in journals like Blast, Evieist and the English Review. In contrast to this, such critical awareness was displayed not only by the older journals like John O'London's Weekly, The Cornhill Magazine and The Times Literary Supplement, but also by the avant-garde periodicals of the time, like Cyril Connolly's Horizon and John Lehmann's Penguin New Writing. The Listener published W.D. Thomas's 'War and the Poet', on 1 May 1941, and subsequently commissioned Stephen Spender's 'War Poetry in this War' (16 October 1941) and Robert Graves's 'War Poetry in this War' (23 October 1941). Later on, on 3 July 1944, A.L. Rowse discussed 'Poets of To-day', and on two subsequent weeks (January 18 and 25, 1945) Henry Reed evaluated the merits of poetry written during the two World Wars. The New Statesman and the Spectator were mainly confined to sensitive reviews of the works of the war poets. Across the Atlantic, war as a subject for literature was discussed and analysed in journals like Partisan Review, Poetry, The New Republic, and The Saturday Review of Literature. It is also important to remember that, despite Keidrych Rhys's
protestation in 1941 that the War Poet was not getting an adequate hearing from the reading public, the situation improved in the subsequent years, when not only did the various journals publish poems written by "the man in uniform", but as many as a dozen anthologies of War Poetry appeared in England alone between the years 1940 and 1946:

1. *Some Poems in War-time*, ed. J. Symons (1940)
2. *Poems From the Forces*, ed. K. Rhys (1941)
7. *Poems From the Desert*, by members of the Eighth Army (1944)
10. *Poems From Italy*, with an Introduction by Siegfried Sassoon (1945)

The above list, of course, does not include the known (and significant) anthologies of war-time

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2. See Kiedrych Rhys's 'Introduction' to his edition, *Poems From the Forces*, (1941)
poems like *The War Poets* (ed. Oscar Williams, New York; 1945) and *Personal Landscape* (1945), nor the unknown (and insignificant) collections of poems like *Any Soldier to His Son* (Calcutta; 1941) and *Grim And Grey, Some Rhymes of the Second World War* (Lahore; 1941), the like of which one keeps on "unearthing" in second-hand bookshops. Then, there were poets like Alun Lewis, Sidney Keyes, Drummond Allison, G.S. Fraser and Roy Fuller, to name only a few of the many who got their individual collections of war-poems published during the war-years. In addition to all this, there was almost a flood of prose writings about the war, though most of them were bad. As Tom Harrison remarked in his rather funny review of *War Books*:

> For two years, urged on by the editor of *Horizon*, I have read literally every book which has anything to do with the war, reportage, fiction or fantasy. Every month I have tried to sum up my curious learning into a report for *Horizon*. Month after month I have let the editor down. For I have become totally, immeasurably bogged, engrossed in bad reading. Ninety-five per cent of it is stuff I would never have read, or even imagined could be written, before. 300 pages at 8s.6d. a time.

At the beginning of the war, Cyril Connolly felt that it was stifling the voice of the English Muse. In his editorial 'Comment' of the *Horizon*,

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May 1940, he admitted to receiving from two to three hundred contributions every month but found them unusable for lack of literary merit. He pointed out that since "the intelligentsia are confused and muddled", there was no possibility of creative arts flowering forth from the men in uniforms:

The war is the enemy of creative activity, and writers and painters are wise to ignore it and to concentrate their talent on other subjects. Since they are politically impotent, they can use this time to develop at deeper emotional levels, or to improve their weapons by technical experiment...

But Connolly had gone on to remark that "The artist and the intellectual are lucky to be alive. They must celebrate by creating more culture as fast as they can" and concluded with a praise of Eliot's East which had recently appeared in the March 21st New English Weekly (1940). The implication was that art could be cultivated, at that time, only by those artists who were not personally and actively involved in warfare. George Orwell too expressed similar sentiments when he warned: "But don't look for any book of consequence to be published in England in the near future, for the people who are still young enough to learn are most of them too busy or too depressed to write." Beneath such dark

prognostications one can see a higher set of literary standards which the artists and critics had adopted. Thus, W. D. Thomas argued, in his article 'War and the Poet' in The Listener (1 May 1941), that the war does not "provide the poet with his best harvest-time". About the poetry of the First World War, he declared: "Most of the verse written by the soldier in the last war is just a record of his sensations. It is photographic - the photograph of a devastated area as it were, the materials out of which poetry may grow; but it is not poetry."

Stephen Spender's explanation for the lack of creative activity in England was that "Creative writers in wartime England had no status at all. They are neither reserved, nor given any kind of work as writers in the way that some journalists and painters who were appointed 'official war artists' or asked to do camouflage are."6 In fact, Spender was joined by other writers, including Orwell, Alun Lewis and Arthur Koestler, in his demand "Why Not War Writers? A Manifesto" in which special facilities were demanded for the 'war artists'. They believed that the journalists, for whom the Government had made special provisions, were not as effective propagandists as these writers could be. They

pointed out that the artists' propaganda was deeper, more humanly appealing and more imaginative than newspaper men had space or time for.\(^7\) In the light of the dubious results of the installation of the Writers' War Board in America, one may have reason to be happy over the fact that no one gave any special attention to the pleas of Spender and his fellow-artists. Babette Deutsch wrote an article in 1942 called 'The Poet and the War' in which she severely (and rightly) criticized a shocking war poem, *The Murder of Lidice* by Edna St. Vincent, in which Hitler is shown as sitting

with his long and cruel thumbs
Eating pastries, molding the crumbs
Into bullets ...

Miss Deutsch castigated the Writer's War Board for accepting and promoting such a piece, and accused it in these terms:

The Board was created at the instance of the Treasury Department in need of bond salesmen. Its president is a composer of popular detective stories who, for all his skill, does not seem to have discovered the body. That corpse is the sort of poetry that lies unburied in Miss Vincent's "The Murder of Lidice." \(^8\)

It was, however, John Lehmann, who (so it seems, now in retrospect) was most qualified to predict how

the war was going to affect English literature. Early in the Autumn 1941 issue of his *Penguin New Writing*, he disagreed with the contemporary critics who felt that the guns were silencing the creative imagination. As regards the more established writers, John Lehmann pointed out that in spite of the difficult conditions, they continued to write, and that some of them, in fact, had profited from their new experiences:

These writers too have changed, and in writing on themes connected with the war, have shown that so far from having exhausted their capacity to respond to new experience, they have it in them still to produce perhaps their most remarkable and fruitful work.

And speaking of the younger writers, he admitted that though most of them were producing very little of real literary significance, there were some signs of hope:

Nevertheless, I do receive a surprising number of MSS from young soldiers and sailors and airmen as well as civilians: the desire to interpret, to create is undoubtedly there. This makes me feel that the writers of the future, training in the hardest of schools, are slowly forming themselves behind these imitative and uncertain attempts. One or two have already some memorable poems and sketches to their credit, and these are gradually appearing in print.

In terms of quantity the output of verse at the beginning of the Second War was considerable, if not

10. Ibid., 10.
abundant. So that when the cry arose, 'Where are our war poets?' Horizon, in January 1941, came out with the answer 'under your nose', a retort which Kiedrich Rhys adopted, without acknowledgement, and made famous as his own invention. If critics and editors were wary it is understandable because - and this fact is seldom realized - much poetry was conventional stuff. In his review "War Books", which we have already referred to, Tom Harrison lamented:

You see, much wartime writing has got itself into a mess. Two years of it resolutely ignore the vast pattern of change of which we are now part, playing up the traditional and orthodox themes and aspects, emphasizing personal heroisms and frequently falsifying them. 11

The public, as it is its invariable wont, thirsted for patriotic poetry, and some such desire was at the core of the fatuous demand 'Where are our war poets?' When Henry Reed, in a series of two articles for The Listener, entitled "Poetry in War Time", picked out men like Vernon Watkins, Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes as the significant poets that had emerged since the war, one correspondent asked:

Now I would like to ask, in a purely scientific-objective spirit, whether there is a single four-line sequence (leave alone an entire short poem) to the credit of any of the poets mentioned by Mr Reed which has in the same way

11. Tom Harrison, op.cit., 421.
struck the popular imagination and become property, as did, say, several poems of Rupert Brooke on publication? 12

To which Henry Reed made the blunt rejoinder that Rupert Brooke "was a poet for the thoughtless; and there is no fundamental difference between his war poetry and the present-day song beginning 'There'll always be an England'." Unfortunately some critics and poets pandered to the public taste for patriotic verses. A.L. Rowse singled out Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes as two promising poets who died in the war, and concluded his article on the following note:

These two soldier-poets must do duty for their brothers in arms, the many men in forces, soldiers, sailors and airmen, whom the war has moved to write what they feel in verse. Just as earlier generations of Englishmen have always done, the men of the last war, or the wars of Elizabeth's time, John Donne on the Expedition to Cadiz, Philip Sidney or Walter Raleigh. What strikes one in reading the poems written by the fighting men - they have grown numerous in five years of war - is the continuity and intensity of their feeling about England ... 14

Here Rowse clearly turns the poets' simple sense of nostalgia and a human need for stability into a rhetorical 'feeling about England'. Perhaps Rowse was merely contributing his bit, as a critic, to the war effort, as was demanded by the editor of The Saturday Review of Literature: "... it is neither idle nor base to die for one's country in a struggle

13. The Listener, (15 February 1945), 146
like the present one, and we need the poets to give
us a few rousing songs to march by."15 Some poets,
it is true, genuinely felt that the war gave them a
sense of release from a dull and monotonous life.

Jocelyn Brooke recalled later in his life:

It is fashionable nowadays ... to mock
at my namesake, Rupert Brooke's (no
relation by the way) 'Swimmers into
cleanness leaping' and so forth: but
the fact is that, for people like myself,
this reaction could be as valid in 1939 ...
as it was in 1914.16

No wonder, significant war poetry did not come from
people like Jocelyn Brooke who looked backwards.

Henry Treece too found that he had little to say as
a poet, because his concept of the poet's role in
war-time was identical to that professed by the poets
of the First World War. Treece said: "I feel that
it is the poet's duty as a man to fight, physically;
but I maintain that it is his duty as a poet to heal
the results of that fighting now, and to prevent
such horrors for the future."17 Timothy Corsellis
had genuine poetic talent, but was content with
writing poems on the Sassoon tradition:

Laugh, laugh, you soldier sons,
Joke on your way to the war
For your mother won't laugh at the sound of guns
And the tales of the filth and the gore.

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15. (April 25, 1942), 12.
17. See Oscar Williams ed. The War Poets (New York;
   1945) p.21.
Smile and joke, younger sailor Jack,  
For it's the same old story.  
There'll be no jokes when you come back  
And bloody little glory.

And **Dawn After the Raid** is filled with echoes of  
Owen's **Futility**:

This mangled corpse once breathed slum air  
Lived in the grey dust where it died,  
Is it for this that bending we strived  
And fought in others' blood and others' sorrow,  
To reach these wretched religious remains?

Gorsell was, apparently, moving to fresher approaches  
towards the subject of war, as is shown in poems like  
"I" Always "I" and The Rush to N.A.W., but he died,  
early in action, in 1941.

Obviously, not many poems could be written now  
in the old manner. A new and fresh attitude towards war  
had, therefore, become inevitable for any serious poet  
writing during the Second War. Only an amateurish  
versifier could have been content with treating the  
subject in purely conventional terms, refusing thereby  
to face the physical realities and literary advances  
of his time. In purely physical terms, the nature of  
war in 1939 was different from the one in 1914. As  
a veteran of the First War, Robert Graves explained  
the difference thus:

It will be realized in the first place  
that the passing of the Conscription Act,  
a few months before World War II, made  
volunteer pride irrelevant and war-poetry
was unnecessary as a stimulus to recruiting. Next, the British Army has not yet been engaged on a grand scale with the enemy; and despite official reassurances, may never be. The soldier has, on the whole, lived a far safer life than the munition worker whom in World War I he despised as a 'shirker'; he cannot even feel that his rendezvous with death is more certain than that of his Aunt Fanny, the firewatcher. As for the beauty of the English countryside, he has seen far too much of it through a tent-flap during his dreary exile from home.

And Graves went on to add, in 1949: "Deliberate heroism was so far outmoded as to seem vulgar or quaint. Besides they (War Poets) saw no need to compete with the trained war-correspondent, who lived rough, brought his report back from the place of the greatest danger and told the whole truth - even if part of the truth was censored afterwards." There was another very important consideration, and that was the realisation that the war, even though it was evil, had to be fought in order to prevent men, art and letters from being wiped out by Nazi occupation. In the words of Cyril Connolly, "... the intellectuals recoil from the war as if it were a best-seller. They are enough ahead of the time to despise it, and yet they must realise that they nevertheless represent the culture that is being defended." Thus, it was irrelevant

18. The Listener, 23 October 1941, 566.
to produce poetry of mere protest or pity or 'information'.

More importantly, the literary developments in the inter-war years can explain to a very large extent the poet's different attitude towards the war in 1939-45. After the end of the First World War, T.S. Eliot proved to be the most influential poet in England. He depicted the sterility and boredom of modern life in The Waste-land, and Ezra Pound described the Western world as "an old bitch gone in the teeth/ ... a botched civilization". It was, however, W.B. Yeats who presented a powerful picture of the state of contemporary civilization in elemental and prophetic terms:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

(The Second Coming)

Though these poets came out with their own individual interpretations and solutions of the problems of modern man, all of them were one in viewing life from a spiritual standpoint. The hallmark of the poets of the thirties, on the other hand, was their social and political attitudes. The waste-land that poets like Auden, Spender and Day Lewis saw was not only a mental concept but was also a physical reality in
forms of industrial squalor, unemployment and poverty. They felt that they had to take sides in politics because it was in terms of politics that they saw the deadness around. The problems of the people were seen in the political rivalries of nations and parties, financial slumps, unemployment and the social degradation in which they had sunk. We have already noted elsewhere how C. Day Lewis held up Wilfred Owen, with his poetry of protest, as his literary ancestor. Stephen Spender pointed out in 1935 that the contemporary poet was compelled to see the human predicament in social and political terms:

In times of rest, of slow evolution and peace, society is an image of the individual quietly living his life and obeying the laws. In violent times the moral acts of the individual seem quite unrelated to the immense social changes going on all around him. He looks at civilization and does not see his own quiet image reflected there at all, but the face of something fierce and threatening, that may destroy him. It may seem foreign and yet resemble his own face. He knows that if he is not to be destroyed, he must somehow connect his life again with this political life and influence it.

The political colouration of reality as it appeared to Auden, for instance, is evident when one finds him describing what Yeats had foreseen in *The Second Coming*:

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

(In Memory of W.B. Yeats)

The striking difference between the attitudes of the two poets lies in the fact that whereas Yeats is able to relate the tragedy to something primordial, the loss of innocence in the "blood-dimmed tide", Auden holds the "living nations", "Each sequestered in its hate" responsible for the catastrophe in the Western world. It is well known that Auden and his group felt that most of the problems of the time could be solved by a revolution on Marxist lines. C. Day Lewis in his *Revolution in Writing* (1935) emphasized the need for the Muse to toe the line of Marx. But this Marxism was as Lawrence Durrell has observed, just a substitute for religious belief, which had vanished from the modern world: "it offered him something to believe in an empty world".22 It is also well-known that the Muse finally refused such a compromise with Marx, and drove the poets into the inner realities.

of human consciousness. It was for this reason that Auden became a religious poet and Spender a poet of the inner life, whereas C. Day Lewis started to write poems of quiet and subdued irony.

Already in the latter half of the 1930s there began a conscious reaction against social poetry. C. Day Lewis spoke, in 1936, of a "reaction from the recent preoccupation of poets with social justice, their possibly over-mechanized vocabulary, and often slapdash technique: a return to the ideals of poetic integrity and artistic individualism: a setting out in the direction of 'pure' poetry." This was, of course, the neo-romanticism, which was exemplified in the works of George Barker, David Gascoyne and Dylan Thomas, all of whom were influenced, directly or indirectly, by the Surrealist movement, which had begun in France in the nineteen twenties. It first got great publicity in England when the first International Surrealist Exhibition was held in London in June 1936. That very year Gascoyne wrote a short book, called Short Survey of Surrealism. Herbert Read edited an anthology of Surrealist poems and paintings, under the title Surrealism.

Also in that year appeared Roger Houghton's Surrealist review, *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* which ran for eighteen months, during which time ten numbers appeared. Houghton printed, in his review, translations from Surrealist masters like Breton, Eluard, Père et Picasso, and also works of Dylan Thomas, George Barker and Roy Fuller. It must be admitted, though, that these English poets were Surrealists in a rather superficial sense. Perhaps, as pointed out by Francis Scarfe, himself a Surrealist at one time, "the best neo-Surrealist work in English has been in prose: the fine prose-poems of George Barker, Davies's 'Petron', and some parts of that excellent first novel, Ruthven Todd's 'Over the Mountain'."\(^2\) The original impulse of the French Surrealists, which sought the 'inner reality' by abandoning all forms of rationalism with a belief in automatic-writing unchecked by selectivity, did not entirely succeed in striking roots in the English temperament. The English accepted the Romantic principles of Surrealism, but came out with its own version of it in the form of the Apocalyptic movement at the end of the nineteen thirties. Three young men, G.S. Fraser, F.J. Hendry and Henry Treece

were the moving spirit behind the group known as 'The Apocalypse'. They wanted to liberate poetry from purely objective reporting, and tended to view the human personality in its entirety, with emphasis on both emotion and intellect, realities of dream life as well as of wakeful consciousness. Moving away from the followers of Auden and Grigson, the new poets exalted imagination and myth. In short, their poetry signalled a return to private experiences and vision, to the simple and the natural, the more fundamental 'human' subjects. Their immediate ancestors were Dylan Thomas, Herbert Read and George Barker (who were primitivistic and mystical on lines of Blake and Lawrence) rather than any foreign idols. G.S. Fraser wrote an introduction to a collection of Apocalyptic verse, *The White Horseman*, in which he explained the ideals of the movement. To start with, he pointed out how the new movement sprang from, and developed beyond, the original impulse of Surrealism. The positive aspect of Surrealism that the Apocalyptic verse sought to adopt was the concern with man's submerged being, but it denied what was negative in Surrealism - "Surrealism's own denial of man's right to exercise conscious control, either of his political or social destinies, or of the material offered to
him as an artist, by his subconscious mind."\(^{25}\)

Fraser went on to explain that the more established social poets of the time sacrificed the eternal for the topical and hence were in danger of losing sight of the essential nature of poetry, which the Apocalyptics were trying to recapture:

Nobody denies the immediate social impact of much of the poetry of Auden, Spender or Mac Niece.\(^{26}\) But it was, to a certain extent, an impact of the surface and of the moment. The war, as a matter of fact, has made that sort of immediate political approach, that clear-cut partisanship, a practical impossibility. But to have social value, poetry does not have to show immediate political relevance. In "stripping the individual darkness from their own wills", the Apocalyptics are likely to discover certain fundamental disharmonies of human life, certain root causes of baseness and littleness, which will not vanish away, as if by magic, in the just city. In short, if the poetry of the Auden generation had a certain immediate political and social value, the poetry of the Apocalyptics is likely to have certain permanent clinical value for the human race.

As a theory of poetry it is so sound that it can accommodate the best poetry of all times, and is one which the major poets of our time Yeats and Eliot would have acknowledged with alacrity. But the Apocalyptic movement was a failure despite a few individual poems of promise and achievement.

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especially by Henry Treece, Vernon Watkins and Nicholas Moore. The answer is simple: though these young poets generally had a sound critical sense, they lacked the genius of the major poet. Nonetheless, their experiment was not only interesting but significant in the history of English poetry, in that they exposed the weaknesses of the poetry of social and political commentary, and expressed the desire and the need for the poets to come to terms with the more enduring realities. In some ways, they can be credited with having anticipated, along with the other 'romantics' of the decade, the later poetry of Auden and Spender, as well as the better poetry of the Second World War. It is not enough, for Ian Hamilton\textsuperscript{27} to contemptuously dismiss the experiment carried out by the Apocalyptics as some kind of an eccentricity off the main-stream of English poetry of the time. Babette Deutsch's judgement is more balanced when she recognizes that "the significance of the Apocalypse movement was rather symptomatic than intrinsic."\textsuperscript{28}

'Symptomatic' is, indeed, the operative word here, because the Apocalyptic movement was a concrete manifestation of the growing romantic temperament of


the time that can explain to a great extent the new attitude that the English poet developed towards war. Alex Comfort was shrewd and imaginative enough to observe this phenomenon as early as 1943:

The figure in English writing around whom the greatest part of our romantic movement revolves is undoubtedly Herbert Read, into whose influence Spender, in his own slow progress into Romanticism, is being drawn. Read has described the spirit of contemporary English verse as pacifist, in the sense that it has abandoned the idea of war as a struggle, and has come to see it as a calamity which one must regard as one regards the storms. That will imply a withdrawal from any expectation that verse written now, like the verse of the thirties, can reasonably expect to exert an immediate social influence.

As we shall see in our discussion of individual poets like Douglas, Lewis and Keyes, each of them was consciously a 'romantic' poet, and hence were able to absorb war as a part of the inclusive human consciousness.

A brief consideration of the poetry of the Spanish Civil War is relevant here because it shows that the theory of political poetry of the thirties started to betray its weaknesses when confronted with the catastrophe of war. The English poets of the Spanish Civil War were so committed, both politically and ideologically, to the cause of the Spanish

Republic that some of them fought and died for Spain. These heirs of Sassoon and Owen were aware of the brutalities of warfare, yet eagerly participated in it because they were convinced that they were fighting a 'just war', that by fighting there they were in effect fighting against Fascism, the warmongers, the armament manufacturers and the militarists. In introducing Poems For Spain, Stephen Spender thus explained the moving impulse behind those poems:

Poets and poetry have played a considerable part in the Spanish Civil War, because to many people the struggle of the Republicans has seemed a struggle for the conditions without which the writing and reading of poetry are almost impossible in modern society.

Spender went on to identify the political aims of liberty with those of the poet, and remarked that "this awakening of a sense of the richness of a tomorrow with poetry, is as remarkable as the struggle for liberty itself." In effect, therefore, Spender was only echoing the nineteenth-century romantic-patriotic note which allied poetry with political freedom, in the manner of Wordsworth. This was clearly going backwards rather than marching forwards, and therefore it is not surprising that much of the

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'heroic' poetry of the Spanish Civil War, even though it sprang from the noblest of motives, seems rhetorical and brash. The English Muse suffered rather than gained from this sentimental attitude. As early as 1941, George Orwell noted that "The Spanish Civil War, with its orgies of lying and its frightening revival of the war propaganda of 1914-18, drove away the more talented of them. (i.e. poets)." Jack Lindsay was one of the many poets who wrote rhetorical - and often hysterical - verses glorifying the fight of the 'workers' against Fascism. While he could write absurd lines like "workers, going to battle, /Went as to a fiesta", he could end the poem (On Guard) on a declamatory note:

Workers of the world, unite for us
that bear the burden of all.
You shall not hear us complain
That the wolves of death are raving in our streets,
if you but understand, if your bodies flow
into this steel of resistance, this welded mass,
making you one with us, and making us unconquerable.

Though his lines are more controlled, H.B. Mallalieu's poems also seem to be dominated by dogma rather than poetic experience. For instance, in the following lines from Spain 1938, the tears and "the suffering mind" are ignored for a greater political cause:

Tears are no use, the suffering mind is mad.
Let sanity have strength and men unite
Who in their individual lives are glad
That what remains of peace may yet prove strong.
We have the will, then let us show the might
Who have forborne and pitied far too long.

Among the poet volunteers who actually fought—and died—in the Spanish Civil War were John Cornford, Julian Bell, Christopher Caudwell and Charles Donnelly. They had established themselves as recognized authors before the war. Of these, Julian Bell was killed only six weeks after his arrival in Spain and Caudwell lost his life within two months of his joining the Republican army. Only Cornford and Donnelly wrote poetry out of their experiences in Spain, and Cornford was more promising of the two. He was a deeply committed communist, and in a poem like Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Huesca, he freely used the names of party figures and events:

All round the barren hills of Aragon
Announce our testing has begun.
Here what the Seventh Congress said,
If true, if false, is live or dead,
Speaks in the Oviedo mauser's tone.

Three years ago Dimitrov fought alone
And we stood taller when he won.
But now the Leipzig dragon's teeth
Sprout strong and handsome against death,
And here an army fights where there was one.

Though this poem deals with a pretty conventional communistic theme, namely that History can be changed by revolutionizing the economic structure of the society
and that the future would be what men make it, there are stanzas in it which suggest that the poet was asserting himself against the propagandist in Cornford. Take, for instance the following stanza in which - amidst the bravado and fiery revolutionary spirit of the rest of the poem - there is a recognition of the weakness of the flesh, and the inner war:

There let my private battle with my nerves,
The fear of pain whose pain survives,
The love that tears me by the roots,
The loneliness that claws my guts,
Fuse in the welded front our fight preserves.

The tension of the poem vibrates as the will clashes with the weakness of the flesh. It is on such an occasion as this that we can fully appreciate what a fellow poet Tom Wintringham said after Cornford's death. Wintringham discovered greater sensitiveness in Cornford's poems and remarked:

We knew him as a keen brain, crushing in argument; we knew how contemptuously his intelligence would have rejected the theories and rhodomontade (sic) of POUM speeches and newspapers. What we did not know ... was that his manner was armour worn over a poet's sensitiveness, over a horror-hatred of 'this death is background to our lives'.

This point is further exemplified in a poem like *As Our Might Lessens*, in which the poet realizes that "No abstraction of the brain / Will counteract the

animal pain", and that "But this fear haunts us all / Flesh still is weak". But he is determined that by sheer will power he would be able to give "nerve and bone and muscle to the word". So that he can end the poem on a note of political optimism and hope:

But moving in the masses' blood
Vienna, Amsterdam, Madrid
The Ten-years-sleeping-image of the storm

Shows us what we stand to gain
If through this senseless-seeming pain,
If through this hell we keep our nerve and pride.
Where the nightmare faces grinned
We, or our sons, shall wake to find
A naked girl, the future at our side.

The supposition that his personal human emotions were getting the better of his political idealisms is reinforced by a reading of a beautiful love-lyric, *Heart of the heartless world* which he addressed to his friend Margot Heinemann. The central value for him is his love for her, and as a soldier faced with death, his greatest fear is about losing her. He also becomes aware of 'fear' and believes that she alone can give him strength in his predicament:

The wind rises in the evening
Reminds that autumn is near.
I am afraid to lose you
I am afraid of my fear.

On that last mile to Huesca,
The last fence for our pride
Think so kindly, dear, that I Sense you at my side.
Fear on the part of a fiery political crusader is in itself quite unexpected. What is more, there is an apprehension of death, which instead of being regarded as something glorious in an ideal cause — as in the words of Miguel Hernandez:

Singing I wait for death,
for there are nightingales that sing
above the rifles' voice
and in the battles' midst.

(The Winds of the People)

— is acknowledged only as a stroke of "bad luck" that can be justified only by love:

And if bad luck should lay my strength
Into the shallow grave,
Remember all the good you can;
Don't forget my love.

Unfortunately volunteer poets like Cornford and Donnelly died too young and too early in the war to record all the poetic responses to the fluctuating fortunes of the Spanish Republican cause. It is the non-participants like Auden, Spender, Day Lewis and MacNiece who have left a more comprehensive, and to a certain extent, objective, account of the war. Poets like Herbert Read and George Barker expressed, in their few poems of the Spanish Civil War, their 'humanistic' attitude towards the war, and dwelt on the suffering and the inhumanity of the conflict rather than the rightness or the wrongness of the 'cause'. Louis MacNiece too was to draw, eventually, inspiration
from the permanent human values in the midst of war. But at the beginning of the war, he was naively hopeful about the outcome:

Not knowing that our blunt
Ideals would find their whetstone, that our spirit
Would find its frontier on the Spanish front
Its body in a rag-tag army.

(Autumn Journal)

O. Day Lewis was openly heroic in poems like The Volunteer and The Nabara. However, such hopes and enthusiasm soon gave way to disillusionment and cynicism as the Fascists and the military men gained increasing control over Spain. The English poets came to realize that the war was not at all what they had expected it to be, so that in a poem like The Two Armies we find Spender back to square one:

When the machines are stilled a common suffering
Whitens the air with breath and makes both one
As though these enemies slept in each others' arms.

W.H. Auden's Spain is perhaps the most comprehensive, prophetic and brilliant poem of the Spanish Civil War. He starts with a firm allegiance to the Republican cause, but goes on to chart out the past, the present and the future of history with impersonal austerity. In his refusal to be blinded to the essential truths of history by political considerations and personal loyalties, Auden is almost like the
Yeats of Easter 1916. After the controlled celebration of man's triumphs over ignorance and superstition of the earlier stanzas, Auden concludes the poem on a sombre note, with premonitions of disaster:

The stars are dead: the animals will not look:
We are left alone with our day, and the time is short and History to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.

This was written in 1937, and by the beginning of 1939, Franco was firmly established in power and history was already saying 'Alas' and all the champions of the Republican cause lay defeated. As Julian Symons noted, in his review of the period, the end of Spain symbolized the loss of hope and pride: "... the great tide of left-wing feeling had receded beyond the bounds of vision, and the land it had covered was as smooth, almost, as though the tide had never been."³³ For the English poet there was a clear lesson, that instead of concerning himself with ephemeral subjects like social themes and political ideals, he must devote himself to something deeper, more human and more enduring. So that at the beginning of the Second World War, we find Auden sitting in a New York bar, seeing himself and his fellow-men as frightened children:

Lost in a haunted wood
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good,
and seeking to understand the phenomenon in primordial terms:

Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

(September 1939)

It is not surprising that against such a poetical and political background, the English poets who wrote about, and some of whom died in, the Second World War should have produced poetry which was introspective and ironic rather than social and hysterical. Herbert Read set the tone for these poets in his *To A Conscript of 1940*, in which he encounters a soldier of the previous war who has come to the grim realization that "Our victory was our defeat". Thus he can help the poet to view his war, and his role in it, with a greater sense of reality:

Their is the hollow victory. They are deceived
But you, my brother, my ghost if you can go
Knowing that there is no reward, no certain use
In all your sacrifice, then honour is reprieved.

To fight without hope is to fight with grace
The self reconstructed, the false heart repaired.

Similarly C. Day Lewis, in reply to the clamour for "War Poetry" (by which was meant sentimental patriotic poetry after the manner of Rupert Brooke)
wrote a dignified epigram, spelling out the poet's role in the Second World War:

Where Are the War Poets?

They who in panic or mere greed
Enslaved religion, market, laws,
Borrow our language now and bid
Us to speak up in freedom's cause.

It is the logic of our times,
No subject for immortal verse,
That we who lived by honest dreams
Defend the bad against the worse.

(First appeared in Penguin New Writing, Vol 3, Feb. 1941, p. 714)

The literary criticism too, on the subject, tended to emphasize the irrelevance of the previous 'War attitudes'. Both Stephen Spender and Robert Graves believed that the new War Poetry would run on different lines. Spender remarked: "I do not think it will produce either a Rupert Brooke or a Wilfrid (sic) Owen, because moods of naif enthusiasm and of spiritual defeatism are equally unsuited to our times." There was a general agreement that the term "War Poetry" was a misnomer because, to the extent that it dealt with human suffering, it was simply 'poetry'. Geoffrey Grigson put the point succinctly:

34. The Listener, (16 October 1941), 539.
Men have been tortured, women have been murdered, explosives have exploded; and I am in debt to a letter of Rilke's in which he said that the whole possibility of human suffering has already been, and is always being, experienced. It is the quantity, not the quality or depth of suffering, which has been increased by this war. That helps one, not to be indifferent, which is impossible but not to be taken in by surprise and by the lewd rhetoric of a war, and to keep at best that degree of sanity one had before Chamberlain's voice announced over the air that England was fighting with Germany.

Should one's poems before have been about roses, and now about blood? Or shouldn't the blood and roses, the mortality and life have been mixed, as they always have been, at the times when a writer was most deeply possessed by life?  35

But the term "War Poetry" can become meaningful when it is applied to a body of poetry whose 'poetical content' has been intensified and extended by the war experiences. In other words war, ironically enough, enabled poets to realize human experiences with greater depth and immediacy. An American poet of the Second War, Irwin Shaw, envisaged such a possibility:

The art of writing, like the art of surgery, profits from the war. The surgeon does not delight in the new variety of disasters to the human body he is called upon to treat upon the battlefield, nor is he pleased with the millions of fresh patients for his experiments. Yet he cannot help but come out of the experience wider and deeper in knowledge

than he was before he went in. So with
the writer. He will shudder and weep,
but will learn as he never learned before ... 36

But poetry must contemplate man's triumph not his
defeat. One burning flame of assurance and
affirmation through the carnage and annihilation of the
war, lay in religious faith. A soldier, Goronwy Rees
wrote to Horizon (Vol.I, No.7) in July 1940: "I do
not know if there are artists alive who can achieve
this triumph, but if there are, I am certain that they
will see in the war, as artists once saw in the
crucifixion of Christ, not one more squalid incident
in the interminable suicide of humanity, but tragic
and terrible birth." Edith Sitwell's Still Falls the
Rain measures up to Rees ideals. Despite the evil
and guilt which is shared by the whole of mankind, the
hope is symbolized by love and the Cross:

"Still do I love, still shed my innocent light,
my Blood, for thee."

From across the Atlantic, Marianne Moore wrote a
remarkable poem called In Distrust of Merits which
embodies the idea of the continuity, throughout life,
of war. She sees the entire life as a continuing process
of war so that the outer war is merely a reflection

36. Irwin Shaw, 'If You Write About the War', The
Saturday Review of Literature, (February 17, 1945),
p.6.
of the inner war in the soul of men. The recurring triplet "fighting, fighting, fighting" is the major theme of the poem. In other words, by fighting against and eventually conquering that which causes war, we can recapture the essential "Beauty" of life:

Hate-hardened heart, O heart of iron,
iron is iron till it is rust.
There never was a war that was not inward: I must
fight till I have conquered in myself what causes war, but I would not believe
I inwardly did nothing.
O Iscariotlike crime!
Beauty is everlasting
and dust is for a time.

Some such spirit infuses the poetry of the three major poets of the Second World War, Keith Douglas, Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes. Keyes connected the war with the "inner war" of an individual in Foreign Gate and Alun Lewis came to the realization that

... though the state has enemies we know
The greater enmity within ourselves.

(The Jungle)

Keith Douglas, who was haunted and tormented by what he called his 'bête noire' - the title of an unfinished poem, was in the process of exploring the nature of that terrible burden, when he was suddenly killed in Normandy at the age of twenty-four.

But the bulk of the poetry of the Second World War
consists of impressionistic poems motivated by feelings of boredom and weariness, nostalgia and despair. Finding that neither a heroic attitude nor a mood of protest was viable now, most poets looked at their role in the war with a matter-of-fact resignation. G.S. Fraser looked at death with tired apprehension and fatalism:

Many a fool as dull as I
Now must rouse himself to die,
Now must seek a colder bed
Than the loneliest he had,
Now must learn to die alone
In the nakedness of bone.

(Poem)

Paul Dehn, on the other hand, saw little difference between the plight of the soldier in active service and the soldier dead. In fact, if there was any choice, the dead had at least quietness.

Each on our way, my ghost, my grayling,
You to the water, the land for me;
I am the fat-knuckled noisy diver
But you are the quietest fish in the sea.

(Lament For A Soldier)

Occasionally, in a remarkable single poem like F.T. Prince's Soldiers Bathing there is a brilliant attempt at seeing the present war's carnage in historical perspective, and wringing meaning in Christian terms:
For that age, that bitterness, those blows
That hatred of the slain, what could they be
But indirectly or directly a commentary
On crucifixion? And the picture burns
With indignation and pity and despair by turns,
Because it is the obverse of the scene
Where Christ hangs murdered, stripped, upon the Cross

I mean,
That is the explanation of its rage.

It ought to be pointed out, though, that this poem succeeds, as Edith Sitwell's *Still Falls the Rain* does, because it embodies a deeply felt religious faith that shines through historical depths. But if that faith were put to test as the poet sank deeper into the bestialities and meaninglessness of the modern war, it is doubtful whether he would have been able to sustain this stance of religious sacrifice. One's doubts in this matter are reinforced when one thinks of the examples of Owen in the First War, and of Lewis and Keyes in the Second World War, each of whom discovered that the religious explanation was difficult to accept, and hence devoted themselves to an exploration of (in Lewis's phrase) "the single poetic theme of Life and Death." It is in the light of such performances that one tends to put even a brilliant poem like *Soldiers Bathing* in the category of impressionistic poems, as opposed to that of poems of intensive exploration. Undoubtedly, most of this kind of poetry would have been rejected as versified
journalism, were it not for the fact that many of
these poems achieve poetic individuality and resonance
by being reflective and carrying something of the poet's
personality. Alex Comfort had noted in 1943 that
"if there is a factor in this war, which is more than
in past years, it is the tragedy of the ordinary
man."37 Take, for instance, Alan Rook's Dunkirk Pier
in which ordinary man's fear of imminent death finds
poignant expression:

Deeply across the waves of our darkness fear
like the silent octopus feeling, groping, clear
as a star's reflection, nervous and cold as a bird,
tells us that pain, tells us that death is near.

Next to considerations of death, poets often
wrote about weariness, strangeness of foreign lands,
and nostalgia because these were the dominant feelings
of many soldiers whose tragedy lay in the separation
from normal life, wives and sweethearts, and in the
monotonous routine of a soldier's life in the shadow
of death. In a poem like A Wartime Dawn by David
Gascoyne, though Gascoyne was not in fact a serving
soldier, there is a sense of weariness and nostalgia,
as the poet contemplates another dawn:

An incommunicable desolation weighs
Like depths of stagnant water on this break of day -
Long meditation without thought. - Until a breeze
From some pure Nowhere straying, stirs
A pang of poignant odour from the earth, an unheard
sigh

37. Alex Comfort, op. cit., p. 194.
Pregnant with sap's sweet tang and raw soil's
fine
Aroma, smell of stone, and acrid breath
Of gravel puddles.

Such weariness was often induced by the foreign
scenes amidst which the English poets found themselves.
One of the features of the Second War was that it
moved over vast geographical areas, and inevitably,
there was a large number of poems, which sketched
foreign landscapes. There were various anthologies,
like Poems From Italy, Poems For France, Poems From
the Desert, and Poems From India. More often than not
the poet was content with merely describing a strange
scene, in the manner of Bernard Gutteridge, who
captured a market-scene in Shillong against Himalayan
landscape:

The market strewn with gutted fish; and fruit
Spewed open for the kites; the cries
And foul and sultry smells. A revered priest
Stooping in ashes: the greatest, the least.
Testing North towards Tibet the cold
Austere horizon of coarse green pines
Holds trapped the waterfall. The wide sky throws
White clouds towards the annihilating skies.

(Shillong)

But a better poet of this kind like Roy Fuller
was able to connect a foreign landscape with the
inner theatre of his mind. In the Poem Petty Officers'
Mess he saw his own boredom reflected in that of the
tame monkeys around the mess buildings, and in
In Africa, the wild African landscape only intensifies his sense of exile:

For those who are in love and are exiled
Can never discover
How to be happy: looking upon the wild
They see for ever
The cultivated acre of pain.

and a deeper realization of the nature of his love for his wife:

I try to say that love is more solid than
Our bodies, but I only want you here.
I know they created love and that the rest
Is ghosts: war murders love.

(Letter to My Wife)

Kiedrych Rhys also wrote a poem entitled Letter to My Wife which, though less sophisticated and less complex than Fuller's poem, expresses directly, simple emotions of love and nostalgia:

O my darling and my own,
Remember the willows by the river in summer,
Remember always our love in wintry weather,
Remember the cottage, the bridge, the flowers, the fields,
O never forget the power love yields and wields.

Simplicity and directness were the marked characteristics of a large number of poems which expressed the soldiers' thoughts of home and familiar scenes. Reverend Cyril F. Garbett delivered the Presidential Address of the English Association in November 1945, entitled Reading in War-Time in which he remarked:

I have been told on good authority that officers and men on active service have a special delight in books on England and its country walks and scenes, The farther
they were from home the more eager they were to read about it .... On my own brief visit to our forces in Italy and Greece I was struck by the way in which the men who had been long absent wanted to know the simplest facts about England - the weather (Is it raining? I was often asked, and they seemed happier at my affirmative reply!) - the crops, the flowers - and above everything the county or town in which they lived.

An ordinary soldier like D.L. Dee was moved to write wistful lines like these -

Yes, this the eye sees,
But the mind, untrammelled, floats away
To wander beneath the trees
Where apple blossoms drench an English way
With perfumed purity ...

(But This is Sicily)

and E.G. Porter allowed himself the indulgence of nostalgic reveries:

The murmurous droning bee
Was ever joy to me,
And in my uncle's garden, there,
Stood the white hives before the pear;
And in their proper season they would make
Him stay at home, all other things forsake.

Such poetry with all its simplicity in expression and honesty of sentiment is as undistinguished as much of Georgian poetry was. But there is a good number of poems of the Second War which, though they deal with the Georgian themes concerned with homely sentiments and rural beauty, are shot through with a complexity of feeling, irony, wit and ambiguity. Take for instance Michael Barsley's Rural Sunday
in which the aspects of a familiar scene are seen in a new light in the midst of war, creating thereby a complex sense of irony and nostalgia:

The men say 'Cheers' to a round of beers
And Waafs have a gin and lime,
And the same again till the clock strikes ten
Saying 'Time, time, time.'

Night must fall but there's nothing at all
To disturb their accustomed slumber.
They peacefully snore in the midst of war
An intact and eclectic number.

and Emanuel Litvinoff sees the beautiful summer scene hideously transformed in war-time:

Here is a forest in full summer:
Trees strong and tall like sentinels
Guard the fierce marriage of their roots.

(Garrison Town)

Love was another theme which these poets handled with greater maturity. During the First World War, the poets were so concerned with the external fact of war that their intimate feelings of sexual love remained dormant, but in the Second War, as the poets looked inwards, love proved to be a sustaining value. Alun Lewis's poems supremely exemplify this phenomenon. But we also noted how Roy Fuller was enabled, through his war-experiences, to come to a mature understanding of the kind of love that he bore for his wife. Francis Scarfe's Barcarolle is less impressive but quite a moving expression of his love
rather in the manner of Hardy's *Neutral Tones*. Scarfe starts speaking of the happy times of the early years of love:

My love, my love, fair was the river,
At noon in the high reaches,
Where the rills dropped through the clover,
Over pebbles bright as peaches.

and then goes on to explain, in the succeeding stanzas, how the war has changed all this, so that the concluding stanza embodies a tragic concept of love:

My love, my love, foul was the river
When night fell between the piers,
Where blood and gall ran with the water
And the sky dropped inhuman tears.

For G.S. Fraser love symbolized the permanent and unshakeable value towards which everyone aspired, and a few lucky ones returned:

It's not for you the towers of Troy shall burn
But you are like that patient Ithaca
To which, from all the headaches of the sea,
After ten years of labouring at their oars,
Some few, the luckier voyagers, return.

*(Poem For M.S.)*

Fraser, however, was more concerned with the illumination of his private pains (e.g. *Lament*, *Shutting my Eyes*) which became more agonizing as the war threatened to wipe out all that one stood for. Indeed, that was true of the majority of the poets who wrote impressionistic poems about war. Their chief merit lay in their ability to present homely and familiar
emotions and experiences in a new light, so that their deeper implications and tragic ambiguities come to the surface. There was nothing revolutionary in their technique of versification, but a judicious use of irony and restraint, free from the rhetoric of the propagandist and the enervating romanticism of the sentimentalist, proved adequate to their needs.

Two poets, Drummond Allison and Hamish Henderson deserve special attention in this chapter, though the choice must seem arbitrary to those who might put cases in favour of poets like Alan Ross, Charles Causley, Roy Campbell, and above all Roy Fuller, who has come to the limelight after his recent election to the Chair of Poetry at Oxford. But so far as his war poems are concerned, Fuller's achievement, and its limitations, were perhaps best summed up by Geoffrey Walton in Scrutiny: "His work comprises impressions of service life with comments and asides, and more deliberate attempts to understand and define his reactions to events ...."38 Drummond Allison, on the other hand, with his deft use of language and treatment of war with an ironic self-detachment is a more interesting poet. Unfortunately, he has not received the critical attention that he deserves. He has often been recognized as one of the better poets of the
Second War, but has been left at that. The most recent example of this attitude can be seen in Roy Fuller's extended review of the Poetry of the Forties, in which Allison is named along with Douglas and Lewis as the "sensible poets" who died in the Second World War. When Allison's posthumous volume of poems The Yellow Night was published by the Fortune Press in 1944, it was ignored by almost all the important journals of the time: the Times Literary Supplement was content with merely mentioning it among the "Books Received".

Drummond Allison was born in 1921 at Caterham, Surrey. He was educated at Bishop's Stortford and Queen's College, Oxford. He went to Sandhurst in 1942 and the School of Military Engineering in 1943. As a member of the East Surrey Regiment he served in North Africa and Italy. He was killed in action in the attack on Gargilano, Italy, on December 2, 1943. While at Oxford, he was a contemporary of Sidney Keyes, who knew him well and admired his poetic talents. In fact, they had their rooms, one above the other, at 52 High Street, and Allison's poems had appeared both in Eight Oxford Poets, and Oxford Poetry 1942-43.

Belonging as he did, to the generation of Douglas and Keynes, Allison had, right from the beginning, a premonition of death. In one of his early poems, *The Seaside Hotel*, he is haunted by death, and instead of finding pleasure and ease in a holiday resort, discovers that death is lurking all around:

Death leans a loafer at the timid bends
In darkened corridors;

and he goes on to describe, in sharp, imagistic touches, death's assault on man who is already foredoomed ("anxious throats as white / As urine-yellow snow"):

His mascher's glance marks anxious throats as white
As urine-yellow snow,
Blackcurrent pastilled breath smites His, the slight
Odours of unchanged woe
Invite his sense,
His slack limbs tense and urgent grow.

And just as in Coleridge's *Christabel*, the old mastiff makes an "angry moan" when evil (Geraldine) enters the palace, in Allison's *The Gardener Rises Restive*, both the gardener and his mastiff have forebodings of death's attacks:

The gardener rises restive,
The mastiff shakes its chain
Resentful that exiled shadows
Make widows here again.

Such premonitions of death pervade all Allison's poems, and although the dates and circumstances
of these poems relate them to the war, there are very few direct references to war events. Occasionally, in a poem like *Written From Plymouth*, he is able to present a war-torn scene with a sense of language and rhythm:

*Written from Plymouth where portentous mist Passes its hands across the tattered theatres' Faces, hit houses hate to hate must;*

*Recumbent Sunderlands all afternoon As well-fed manatees wait on the water And a destroyer sprints from swoon to swoon.*

Allison was fundamentally concerned with the essentials of life, and the exploration of what he called the "cold truths" of human existence. He apparently had left-wing sympathies (*For Karl Marx, John Burns*). A poem like *After Layonesse* celebrates "what the sword began, the club completes", and goes on to describe in terms of antithetical imagery, himself - "I louseclothed scabskinned swartsouled The Serf" - and the vain glories of medieval heroes:

*Their rivalry and greed were their fairknighthood: Chivalry meant the cost of coats of arms, Courtesy rape of goatgirls on dark farms Christ the occasional cant of gabbled psalms And England the expression of their anger.*

But the past had its own serious and sensitive man in Arthur, who was as much a "realist" as the poet is in his own time:
Arthur shares
Cold truth with me, and realist will enter
The black barge where the wraith queens wail
together.

The poet is more like the student in the poem *A Great Unhealthy Friendship* in which out of his "friendship" with God the student learns to take life "like harmless poison". As a result of this, he is able to penetrate through the apparent and the superficial to the essential reality:

Royal and arrogant this Maying,
Loose the speech and fancy bridle,
But the crown already rusts.
Shrikes which through the foliage sidle
Give good grounds for all mistrusts
- May's merry month for dying.

(The Queen's Maying)

And in a beautiful poem like *The Brass Horse*, he asks the reader not to presume that the horse "asks himself no questions, has no doubt / What he a brazen engine is about", because we do not know

For what Arabian mares and ribboned manes
He writhes his motionless metallic reins?

This ironic self-detachment, when applied introspectively to his own self, produced memorable poetry that had the authenticity of personal experience and the courage of will. A poem like *From Wales, Where Whistling Miners* looks at life around him in Wales, Surrey and Oxford, and comes to his inner self which is invoked to look deeper into
the reality:

Oh! aid me now against my ease and memory;
With look and voice and intellect distract
Me from the larches and the brown front door,
Bookshops and deckchairs, every funny fact.
Oh! save me from short vision, make me see.
Shapes are related, varied shades obey a law.

Even a great poet like Yeats was able to write only
towards the end of his long life a poem like The
Circus Animals' Desertion, in which he distilled the
essence of what a life-time's experiences had taught
him. Allison, on the other hand, like many of his
fellow-poets, found his life-span drastically
shortened, but the astonishing fact is that he
achieved maturity so that he could quickly remove
the various layers under which the "cold truth" lay
hidden:

I walked their causeway with these unwitting
giants
Who set us up redoubtable road signs
- Karl Marx and Cromwell, Paine and Wilkes and
  Lovatt,
Camille Desmoulins, Martin Marprelate, Somerset;
  *
Now in my bareboard suite in truth's hotel
I'm stripping off the ill-fitting patched
pretences
- The laundry calls tomorrow.

(* Message to John Alves)

What is perhaps more significant is that the
poet is able to relate his own predicament to a
wider frame of reference. In other words, he puts
himself and his generation into historical perspective and achieves universality. 0 Fields Already Lost speaks of the fields which bear the dead, from the "jousters" of the medieval legends to the victims of the "last-war trench". And in We Shall Have Company, he links himself with the prime ancestors who were equally doomed:

I too go down with some self-conscious laugh
Like one too late
Discovering the examiners were serious;
We shall have company who haunt that highway's ghost
Which now the painstaking Atlantic gloatingly grinds.
We shall ride out on quaggers, on mastodon and mammoth,
Fat old triceratops in passing, stroke the dnasaur.

One ought to point out the poet's brilliant technical expertise. The image of the first three lines is taken straight from his Oxford experiences, and it is juxtaposed with the primeval imagery of the succeeding lines, suggesting at once the particularity as well as the sameness of all human experiences.

Two of the last of Allison's poems, Leave Poem and The Cold Thoughts, show his practical confrontation with the implications of the "cold truth" and the cold thoughts of his earlier poems. And this confrontation is brought about, apparently,
by his imminent participation in active warfare.

At first glance, *Leave Poem* easily fits into the category of those love-poems of the Second World War which are concerned with the pangs of separation, and a faith in love. But what distinguishes Allison's poem from the rest of them is the fierceness of death's reality which burns out the love as he had so far known it to be. In the poem he sees his sweetheart going around her usual way, "So you may cross the Corn and run uncaring / To tea at Merton", but he himself, having been called up, perhaps, is forced to confront the inevitable fact of death. And the impending death seems to indicate the only kind of 'love' that is possible between the two:

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For I've set up my soviet to elect
   My own new rulers now, and only Death
   Can quash this constitution and subject us both.

   His is the only bed we'll ever share
      And ours the love of different soil on soil.
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The poem concludes with preparations for his departure towards Dover, to the battlefield, and eventually to join "my faithful flock of swans in long Larne harbour". This poem, undoubtedly, is a very depressing poem (as opposed to Lewis's "love survives the venom of the snake", for example) but this was perhaps because Allison's own love-affair was
disappointing, and partly because in his mind death casts a dark shadow over all his worldly enterprises. But, it would be wrong to conclude from this that he was some sort of a defeatist poet.

On the contrary, he might be truly described as a poet of strength, and his strength lay in his dauntless and courageous exploration of the inescapable fact of death. In other words, the very consciousness of the inevitability of this greatest tragedy of life, and his anguished and brave preparation for it, gave significance to his entire human existence, which would, otherwise, have been drab and humdrum. One of his early poems beginning, 'Come let us pity not the Dead but Death' is in the long line of poems starting with Donne's famous "Death, be not proud ...", but Allison's poem is characteristically distinctive in its expression of life's superiority over death in terms of hope, fear and the sheer excitement of action:

He has no life, no exercise but cutting; While we can hope a houri, fear a phantom Look forward to No Thoughts. For Him no dying Nor any jolt to colour his drab action ...  

(Come Let Us Pity Death)

It is this spirit which informs his last poem, The Cold Thoughts, and through the conglomeration of diverse imagery he is able to project a vision
towards which he had been heading though the
fluctuations of living, and which suddenly presents
itself through the terrible fact of war:

Oh! cold as any snowprint, colder than
Compulsory bathing or some smiling Head
Master, untouched these thoughts have lately lain
Along the scalloped edges of the brain.
Colder than greens long-left upon a red
Enamel plate. But now the Baker Man
Warms up the engine of his different van
- Now round and numbered is the noisy bread
Of war he must distribute -

This poem can be described as a good example of
the best kind of "War Poetry" in which the poet is
able to envisage something universal and everlasting
through the particular experiences of the war. War-
images are sprinkled all over the poem, and they
impert a certain immediacy and authenticity to it, yet
the poet is able to project a transcendental vision.
The concluding lines of the poem show the poet's
remarkable ability to fuse the images of war (which I
have underscored in the following quotation) with his
deepest human experiences:

The truthful tapes are running
Across the minefields of my fear, and I
can trace and follow them to-night. Though by
Fast flare and Verey light I see the tombs
Of what my cold thoughts killed, or what my darling
Had put to death by tolerance, I say:
"Synchronize watches, we are going dancing, are
advancing,
Spite of the blinded windows and the Gaundice
of the Thames."
Yeats, who had complained that the poetry of the First World War was inadequate because it expressed only passive suffering without showing man's triumph in a dance over the corpses of war would undoubtedly have approved of Allison's attitude of courage and strength.

However, there is no denying that his poems suffer from the carelessness and cleverness of youth. They are heavily influenced by the early Auden, and what Richard Hoggart said about Auden's early poems can be applied to those of Allison: "In Auden's verse one finds obscurity which arises from an unusual handling of language - from ellipsis (the omission of minor parts), oddness of construction, experiments with new forms and so on." Some of Allison's poems are undoubtedly obscure for the above reasons, and a poem like A Message to John Alves reads like two poems put together without much connection between each other. But once these shortcomings are recognized, one should not be blind to his interesting experiments with language, and to his remarkably precocious vision. He wrote a short "Dedication" to the volume of his poems, which embodies not only the tragedy that English Letters suffered from so early a death of so promising a poet, but also his bold recognition of

the tragic irony of human life:

Had there been peace there never had been riven
Asunder my humility and pride,
My greed and my patience. Had I not accepted
The gift of sin I never had been shriven.

Hamish Henderson also was faced with the prospect of death in war, and tried to discover the possibilities of enduring and accepting it. He was born in 1919 in Perthshire. As an officer of the 51st Highland Division he fought in the North African, Sicilian and European campaigns. Since the war he has been with the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. His book, Elegies For the Dead in Cyrenaica was published by John Lehmann in 1948. As he says in the 'Foreword', the Elegies "were written between March 1943 and December 1947 in North Africa, in Italy and in Scotland. Four of them existed in fragmentary form in the Autumn of 1942."

Henderson's treatment of war can be described as "epical" not only in the sense that he views the present war in terms of wars in ancient Greece, Egypt and Scotland, but also because he brilliantly combines the different attitudes of the poets of the two World Wars. In other words, his poems embody feelings of exultation, indignation and pity that we have come to associate with poets like Brooke,
Sassoon and Owen, and also those of nostalgia and inexorable tragedy that distinguish the poetry of Lewis, Douglas and Keynes. That is not to say that Henderson merely echoes the voices of other poets. What he actually succeeds in doing is to carry in an epic sweep the war as a whole. One's immediate suspicion would be - and justifiably so in the case of Henderson - that such a poet's interpretation of man's role in war is over-confident and too cut-and-dried, without diffidence and doubt which must assail the deepest human reactions. Nevertheless, Cyrenaica deserves an important place in the history of modern War Poetry because what it loses in terms of depth, it gains in breadth of vision.

In his foreword, Henderson had gone on to point out that "it was the remark of a captured German officer which first suggested to me the theme of these poems. He had said: 'Africa changes everything. In reality we are allies, and the desert is our common enemy.'" Thus one gets in his poem the double view of war, what he himself describes as the 'doppelgänger' effect, enhanced by the desert distances and the constant changing hands of equipment of all kinds. The poet is aware of the common victimization of soldiers on both sides, who
"have gone down like curs into anonymous silence" (First Elegy). But he also feels the need to re-state the courage of these soldiers, "who have not flinched before their ineluctable exploit".

Elegies For the Dead in Cyrenaica is an extremely "literary" piece, sprinkled with not-too-familiar allusions, which have necessitated the author's appending "Notes" at the end of the book. It, of course, immediately reminds one of the technique of The Waste-Land, but its real predecessor, in this kind of poetry, is David Jones's In Parenthesis. The poem consists of ten Elegies, divided by an Interlude, and it concludes with a "Heroic Song For the Runners of Cyrene". The various sections of the poem are held together by a conscious and careful design, and the sense of unity is marred only occasionally by discursiveness, and flatness of rhythm. Cyrene, in the poem, is the symbol of civilized humanity, and soldiers of both the warring factions are seen as sacrificing themselves "to safeguard our human house. In the first Elegies, we encounter the "sleepers", the dead soldiers, who are troubled by half-forgotten memories of wars, including wars of ancient times, their injustices and indignities. They are filled with nostalgia, for the now remote civilian life, in the manner
of Alun Lewis. Henderson's longer lines of heroic verse, of course, mark the poet out from Lewis, who generally used shorter lyrical lines:

The dreamers remember
a departure like a migration. They recall a landscape
associated with warmth and veils and pantomime
but never focussed exactly. The flopping curtain
reveals scene-shifters running with freshly painted
incongruous sets. Here childhood's prairie garden
looms like a pampas, where grown-ups stalk (gross
outlaws)
on legs of treetrunk: recedes: and the strepitant
jungle
dwindles to scruff of shrubs on a docile common,
all but real for a moment, then gone.

But the poet indicates, quite early in the book, his central theme, namely that the desert symbolizes the common enemy of all the soldiers. The "sleepers" feel the "cold of the malevolent bomb-thumped desert,/ impartial / hostile to both". The Third Elegy opens with a description of the soldiers' farewell march out of the city of Alexandria, which, in the Greek Alexandrian poet C.P. Cavafy's poem The God Leaves Anthony, is a symbol of life itself. Henderson shows a striking descriptive talent as he portrays "the holy filth of living", from which the soldiers are departing to die:

Leave them. And out past the stinking tanneries,
the maritime Greek cafes, the wogs and the nets
drying among seaweed. Through the periphery of
the city
itching under flagrant sunshine.

He asks the soldiers not to regret that they are
going to suffer and die. He intersperses his lines with quotations from Cavafy's poem, to stress the fact that the "brave man" at all times has proudly accepted the sacrificial role:

Like a man for long prepared, like a brave man, like to the man who was worthy of such a city be glad that the case admits no other solution, acknowledge with pride the clear imperative of action, and bid farewell to her, to Alexandria, whom you are losing.

The Fourth Elegy, however, is more like Sidney Keyes' poems. Henderson exhorts, "The son of man / grow and go down in pain", and expresses the need to pass through the "gap in the minefield". (cf. Keyes' The Foreign Gate). Still more striking is the similarity between Keyes' The Wilderness ("The rock says 'Endure'") and the concluding section of the Fourth Elegy:

Endure, endure. There is as yet no solution and no short cut, no escape and no remedy but our human iron.

In other words, Henderson believes that since pain and suffering are unavoidable, man must learn to accept and endure them, and that "the clear imperative of action" can give significance to his life.

Having thus interpreted the various ways in which the deaths of soldiers in action can be meaningfully related to the human situation as a
whole, Henderson proceeds to describe the initiation into the war. The subtle planning of the poem is such that one would be equally justified in saying that at the end of the first cycle, the poet goes 'backwards' in the Interlude which is sub-titled "Opening of an Offensive". The barrage at the opening of war is rendered with intense physical vividness, and the jolting and disjointed rhythms of the lines powerfully convey the confounding din:

slake
the crashing breakers — hurled rubble of the guns.
Dithering darkness, we'll wake you! Hell's bells blind you. Be broken, bleed
death'shead blackness!
The thongs of the livid
firelights lick you
jagg'd splinters rend you underground
we'll bomb you, doom you, tomb you into grave's mound.

This noise chimes with the thrill and excitement of the music of the Highland soldiers who look like the Scottish counterparts of Brooke's soldiers, or Grenfell's:

      Yes, hill and shielding
sea-loch and island, hear it, the yell
of your war-pipes, scaling sound's mountains
guns thunder drowning in their soaring swell!

What is more, the Highland soldiers have the confidence and the determination of their race that can be traced back to their great ancestors, such as Bruce and Lindsay:
We'll mak siccar!
Against the bashing cudgel
against the contemptuous triumphs of the big
battalions
mak siccar

Moving from the Fifth to the Sixth Elegy is like
shifting from the poetry of Brooke and Grenfell to
that of Sassoon and Owen. The initial exultation and
excitement has already receded, "become history", and
the soldiers realize that they, like all the soldiers
of the past are destined to lie "dead like refuse".
The Staff Officers review the situation and are
generally satisfied with the strategy that they have
so far adopted, despite an occasional doubt:

Occasionally there are doubts, dispute became
acrimonious,
the case is not proven, judgement must be deferred.
On one point however there is unanimity: their
sacrifice
though hard and heroic was on the whole "necessary".

One can detect, in the above lines, the resurrection
of Sassoon's tone, albeit a little subdued. When
Henderson goes on to reflect the piteous plight of
the soldiers who are either dead or are going to die,
one is immediately reminded of Wilfred Owen's poems
like Disabled and Insensibility both of which demand
from the reader a complex reaction of pity, indignation
and regret at the soldier's tragic alienation from
civilian life, and the civilians:
Neither by dope of reportage, nor by anodyne of statistics
is their lot made easier: laughing couples at the
tea-dance
ignore their memory, the memoirs almost slight them
and the queue forming up to see Rangers play Celtic
forms up without thought to those dead. - O, to
right them

What requiem can I sing in the ears of the living?

Just as Owen had assumed the role of the poet-priest
who mourned the English dead, Henderson speaks for
the Highland soldiers, and admonishes the crowd at a
Scottish football match, for their callousness towards
their brother-victims of war.

In the Seventh Elegy the poet goes on to present
the other side of the picture. The 'Seven Good Germans'
of the poem come from various walks of life. The
'Lieutenant' and the 'Corporal' have been trained to
lead their men, and they are determined to carry out
their assignments. But the ordinary soldiers like the
farm-hand, the lance-jack and the mechanic were
fighting only with the hope that at the end of the war
they would be able to get back to their civilian life,
to their sweethearts, wives and children. Death,
however, makes no distinctions among people and their
different aspirations, so that, at the end of the poem,
all the soldiers meet the fate of any soldier in
battlefield:
The Eighth Elegy goes back to the Arabian conquest of Egypt in the seventh century. It is the most discursive section of the whole book, and the poet tries to emphasize the irony implicit in all motives behind wars. Every war is regarded as a "war to preserve civilization", though in fact, it is "Insolence of this civilization / to counterfeit with such assurance the eternal!". Refusing, therefore to see wars in a crusading spirit, the poet takes them as parts in "the rhythmical tragedy" of life.

And, appropriately, death is viewed as something pathetic in the next Elegy. Like Keith Douglas (Verlangen), Henderson comes back to the scene of a previous battle, at Capuzzo, and notices an English soldier looking at the grave of a German soldier. Henderson's reaction is less subtle and less ambiguous than that of Douglas. Henderson's attitude is pretty straightforward, but there is a striking honesty about his overwhelming sense of the common victimization of the soldiers. The English soldier thinks of the eighteen-year old "Good Jerry"
who had obviously volunteered, and died, and his last words are imbued with irony and pity:

Don't be late on parade, when the Lord calls 'Close Order'.
Keep waiting for the angels. Keep listening for Reveille.

The Tenth Elegy completes the cycle as it were, when, in the opening lines, we again meet the 'sleepers' of the first Elegies:

But dust blowing round them has stopped up their ears
0 for ever
not sleeping but dead.

The poet goes on to describe the indifference (towards the dead soldiers) of "the airborne travellers" as they fly over the scenes of battle. He reminds them, with something of a communistic bitterness, that they should not ignore the sacrifices made by the soldiers. He exhorts the survivors to expiate their survival by "love, patience and power", and by bringing their own selves - "the living" - within the orbit of "death's proletariat":

And inhabit that desert of canyon and dream - till we carry to the living blood, fire and red flambeaux of death's proletariat.

Thus, Henderson brings the poem off to a confrontation with death. And as in all tragic plays, the resolution is achieved through a lyric speech; Elegies For the Dead in Cyrenaica concludes with
Heroic Song for the Runners of Cyrene. The symbol of the runners is taken from the two Philaeini brothers from Carthage. They ran from their city to meet the runners from Cyrene, to fix, at the intersecting point of the two runners, the disputed boundaries between Carthage and Cyrene. The Philaeini brothers ran faster, and thus had acquired for their city greater land, and when charged by the Cyrenean party with cheating, had agreed to be buried alive to prove their honesty. Henderson's runners (soldiers) also are, like these brothers, innocent and brave victims who, by dying, have fulfilled themselves. The epigraph to the poem contains the central idea: "Only those ideas are acceptable that hold through suffering and death", and in the Song itself, there is a sense of dignified exhilaration, as the soldiers run to carry out their tragic assignment, in order to save "the human house", Cyrene:

Fiercely they run
to the chosen assignment;
ineluctable role,
and they ready to accept it!
Going with elan of pride
to the furious onset
they'll reclaim the dead land
for their city of Cyrene.

All this is very impressive, showing Henderson as a poet of rough humanity and robust courage. But,
somehow, the experience in the poem seems remote, and the soldiers appear to be chosen ones to play their gloriously tragic roles. The better war poetry of our times is much more universal because the reader can enter the experience as an ordinary human being. This can partly explain why Henderson chose the techniques of Eliot and Pound rather than those of the neo-romanticists of the late 'thirties and 'forties. Nevertheless, Henderson is one with the major poets of the Second World War in recognizing the reality of suffering and death, and in realizing that war was just one way in which such tragic experience presented itself.
KEITH DOUGLAS

Though Stephen Spender refused to include Keith Douglas among "the most talented" poets who perished in the Second World War, and the Times Literary Supplement reviewer of Douglas's first edition of Collected Poems found very little to commend in the actual poetic performance of Douglas, his editors and critics (who more often than not happen to be poets themselves) have found in him a major poet. One of the earliest critical comments on Douglas came from Olivia Manning. Speaking of the English poets who were writing in the Middle East during the war years, she pointed out:

Among the younger men whom the army has brought out here, Keith Douglas stands alone. He has been in contact with the enemy much of the time and he is the only poet who has written poems comparable with the works of the better poets of the last war and likely to be read as war poems when the war is over. Hamish Henderson, John Waller and G.S.Fraser spent some time in Cairo. Henderson, too, has seen heavy fighting and has written one or two good poems, but his work is less individual and accomplished than that of Douglas.

2. 19th October 1951, p.662.
When Douglas died on 9th June 1944 Bernard Spencer wrote a brief obituary note for him in *Personal Landscape*, in which he praised Douglas's various poetic qualities. M.J. Tambimuttu, who had always encouraged Douglas by publishing his poems in *Poetry* (London) wrote a lengthy obituary, "In Memory of Keith Douglas", in which he remarked:

for I can say without any hesitation that Douglas' view of life and his actions were the most sound and realistic that any man of our generation can come to. He accepted the greatest gifts of this life and lived with passionate sincerity. His conclusions about life in action are the most mature any poet has arrived at in this war and are borne out by the Wisdom of the Old World... By his death at the youthful age of 24, England has been robbed of one of the most accomplished among all her contemporary poets, and his mother of an only and much loved son.

It was, however, G.S. Fraser, who was perhaps the first to give a detailed critique of Douglas as a poet in his Chatterton Lecture to the British Academy in 1956. In 1962, Ted Hughes wrote an article in *The Listener*, in which he pointed out that he (Douglas) had produced what is to my mind a more inexhaustible body of poetry than any of his generation has produced since, in England or America.

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5. See Keith Douglas: *A Poet of the Second World War* in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1956. 89-103

Hughes followed it up by writing another article, this time in *The Critical Quarterly*, in which he dwelt mainly on Douglas's astonishing mastery over "a utility general-purpose style, as for instance Shakespeare's was...". In the like manner, Edmund Blunden, Lawrence Durrell, Ronald Bottrall and Charles Tomlinson have commented on the remarkable poetic promise and performance of Douglas (See Bibliography).

Keith Castellain Douglas was born on 24th January, 1920 at Tunbridge Wells, Kent. When he was eight his father left the family, and Keith was brought up single-handedly by his mother. At the age of six he went to the boarding school Edgeborough at Guildford, and when eleven, he proceeded to Christ's Hospital on the Nomination Examination. Even as a schoolboy, Douglas showed interest in poetry and painting. He regularly contributed poems and woodcuts to the school magazine *The Outlook*. At the age of sixteen he had his poem *Dejection* published in Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse*, which was certainly an encouraging recognition of his original poetic talent. Douglas went to Merton College, Oxford in October 1938.

where his tutor was Edmund Blunden, according to whose testimony Douglas was a conscientious student:

Keith was one of the most outspoken of people as many accounts agree, but to his Tutor (capital T in those days), he was infallibly gentle and attentive. He took plenty of trouble over his weekly essay, even when his passion for horsemanship (and his friendship with Hamo Sassoon, another pupil of mine), preoccupied him. Handwriting - ever clear and flowing; but then so was the expression. Brevity - but nothing impecunious about it. Substance - as matter-of-fact as he could make it! He did not care about novelty when he was finding his way.

While at Oxford, Douglas got training as an artist at the Slade School of Art, which had been evacuated there at the beginning of the war. He was rather good at drawing and sketching as is evident from his various works that are lodged along with his manuscripts in the British Museum. His painter's eye helped him in his poetry too when he wanted, for instance, to depict a war-blasted landscape or Russian soldiers frozen to death in battlefield. Sometimes, he sought to capture ideas about a proposed poem in a drawing. Under one of his drawings (which can be seen in the British Museum) with the caption "Corpses playing hide and seek", there is a note by Douglas, "sketch and ideas

for a poem"

Besides his artistic activities, he took keen interest in the literary life at Oxford. He published his poems in *Cherwell*, of which he became an editor later on. He was also one of the editors (the other was Alec Hardie) of *Augury* (1940), an Oxford Miscellany of prose and verse. Douglas contributed to it a few poems and a statement "On the Nature of Poetry". There is nothing original about his ideas on poetry, but what is striking is that the statement reflects an individualistic and independent poetic personality, that valued simplicity, sincerity, stylistic discipline, and above all actual achievement in poetry:

In its nature poetry is sincere and simple. Writing which is poetry must say what the writer himself has to say, not what he has observed others to say with effect, nor what he thinks will impress his hearers because it impressed him hearing it. Nor must he waste any more words over it than a mathematician: every word must work for its keep, in prose, blank verse or rhyme. And poetry is to be judged not by what the poet has tried to say; only by what he has said.

One can detect in these aphorisms a veiled attack on much of the poetry of the 'thirties and 'forties, which dwelt on social themes and was marked by verbal excesses and fuzziness. When Keyes and
Meyer edited *Eight Oxford Poets* (1941) which claimed "little sympathy with the Audenian school of poetry", Douglas also contributed some of his poems to it. In 1943, he, along with J.C. Hall and Norman Nicholson brought out a three-man anthology, called *Selected Poems*, in which nineteen of Douglas's poems appeared, some of which, according to the 'Acknowledgements' notice had previously appeared in *The Cherwell, Programme Aurore*, *The Oxford Magazine, Fords and Bridges, Eight Oxford Poets, Solero, The Best Poems of 1939 and Poetry*, (London).

The other side of Douglas's personality, which craved for physical stimulation and outdoor sports made him join the O.T.C. at Oxford, and that in turn rendered him liable for active service when war was declared. However, he was not called up immediately, so he spent the year 1939-40 at Oxford. Once called up, he went to various places in England for military training. He had his first posting in the Middle East in June 1941. He was transferred to the Notts. Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, but was seconded to a staff job at the base. Since he did not like the life of inaction where he did nothing but waste "government petrol and money" 10. he ran

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away to his old regiment and fought, along with them, in a Crusader tank from El Alamein to Wadi Zem Zem. He had kept a note-book account of the North African Campaign which was later published as *Alamein to Zem Zem* (1946), one of the most impressive prose accounts of the Second World War, comparable to the First War prose masterpieces like *Goodbye to All That* and *Undertones of War*. Douglas returned to England from the Middle East before Christmas 1943 for preparations for 'D' Day. On his third day in Normandy, on 9th June, 1944, he was killed at the age of twenty-four.

During the four months between his return from the Middle East and his departure for France, Douglas had plans of collecting his poems, and publishing them under the title *Bête Noire*, but he did not live to execute his plan. Some of his poems of the war years - poems which he wrote in "airgraphs, on captured Italian note-paper of the Governo Generale della Libia on which he would insert humorous captions in Italian, in letters" had appeared in Tambinuttu's *Poetry* (London), and Spencer and Durrell's Cairo periodical *Personal Landscape*. And though sixteen of his best poems had appeared at the

end of *Alamein to Zem Zem* (1946) — and the poems were enthusiastically praised in at least two reviews. It was not until 1951 that Editions Poetry London published Douglas's *Collected Poems* under the editorship of John Waller and G.S. Fraser. It did not find wide favour with critics (though Ronald Boffard wrote an enthusiastic review in *The New Statesman*), and public and soon went out of print. Douglas remained neglected until 1964 when Ted Hughes brought out an edition of Douglas's *Selected Poems*, which was published by Faber and Faber. In 1966 the definitive edition of Keith Douglas's *Collected Poems* came out under the editorship of John Waller, G.S. Fraser and J.C. Hall, so indeed did a new edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, also under the joint supervision of the editors mentioned above. Both the books were published by Faber and Faber. More recently (1969) Penguin Books have brought out a paper-back edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem* in their Penguin Modern Classics series.

Now that all the extant poems of Douglas are available, it is possible to come to a fresh

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evaluation of him as a poet. His latest editors have divided his poems into different sections in their chronological order, and it is significant that, though his later poems show a greater maturity in his vision as well as technique, his early poems clearly anticipate the poet of the later years. If this point is realized, one would not be "bewildered by inconsistent rhythms, unconvincing imagery, and a general diffuseness in which the experience to be communicated is irrevocably lost", as one reviewer complained, and one would certainly not have wished, with the reviewer, that the early poems had been excluded from Douglas's Collected Poems: "This is the unfortunate result of the posthumous publication of poems which the poet was unable to collect into book form during his life-time; many poems which the poet himself would have entirely omitted or completely altered, his editors feel bound to include." 13 Douglas's earlier poems foreshadow the subtle irony and detachment, coupled with a passionate attempt to explore the mysteries of Love, Time and Death, themes which were to achieve extraordinarily mature expression in his later poems. 13 It is true that during the year 1943-44,

13. Times Literary Supplement, 19th October 1951, p. 662
he created poems out of his war experiences, but in the majority of these poems his fundamental preoccupation remains the same as in earlier poems. In other words, his war experiences did not alter his poetic materials; rather they gave a sharper edge to his thoughts and emotions. It is the inability to appreciate this subtle treatment of war theme, and harking back to the practices of the poets of the First War, that can explain Brian Gardner's misleading distinction between Douglas's "more ambitious, philosophic and difficult 'base-area' poems" and "the easier but powerful poems of the front line." G.S. Fraser was better inspired when he remarked that though the poem Bête Noire is a failure, it is in its light, "against its darkness, (that) all Douglas's other poems must be read."15

In that poem as well as the 'notes' appended to it, Douglas speaks of the indefinable "black beast" which has haunted him all his life, whom he has neither been able to shake off, nor has it been possible for him to come to terms with it. The


15. op cit; p.99.
'beast' is obviously open to Freudian and Jungian interpretations as the Death-wish or the Shadow. But in the poems, its influence can be best seen, like the burden on the back of Bunyan's Christian, in the poet's obsession with the theme of decay and death, and the misery and mystery of human existence. The man that emerges out of Douglas's poem has a profound consciousness of the tragedy of the human predicament, and though he could write an occasional poem of happiness like Villanelle of Spring Bells, it is "the murderous skeleton in the body of a girl, the dead men being eaten by dogs on the moonlit desert, the dead man behind the mirror, these items of circumstantial evidence are steadily out-arguing all his high spirits and hopefulness."16

It is tempting to link Douglas's melancholy with that of his generation, which in Alex Comfort's well-known words "grew up in the almost complete certainty that we should be killed in action". But then, one may also suggest that the circumstances of his early life (his father, it may be recalled, left him and his mother when he was eight) can explain the strain of sadness in Douglas's

personality. The truth seems to lie, not in outward facts as much as, in the poet's own special temperament. Just as in the case of Housman - who incidentally, is one of the poets that the reader of Douglas's early poems thinks of - the sense of melancholy was essentially temperamental, Douglas too gives a similar impression. As an intelligent and sensitive boy he seemed to have been struck by the way hopes inevitably turned to disillusion, success into emptiness, happiness into sadness. As a fifteen year old boy, he wondered how famous men, after their death, were like plates lie deep licked clean their skulls rest beautifully, staring.

(Famous Men)

Any sense of joy or happiness is checked by the consciousness that it is evanescent, and that it is going to be blighted by darker experiences to come. Take for instance, the poem Kristin. The poet first speaks of happiness and love, which come with the sun.

Presently then our simple friend sun will climb and watch out of his summer tower To see us play the country interlude: Love like the lovely plants he wants renewed...

But at the back of his mind hovers the realization that such an 'interlude' is so lamentably brief:
Yes, futile to prolong the natural instant:
Black days lean over, hours curtailed with fear.
But look, bedewed violets lip the rain,
A little forlorn magic has homed again.
Take this, these limpid days will not be constant;
They will forsake you, will not reappear.

Already the young poet is able to view the
human and the natural phenomena in organic terms,
when one corroborates and reinforces the other.
A similar attempt is made in Dejection, which
Gregson had accepted for inclusion in New Verse.
Death is the subject here, and young Douglas tries to
accept its inevitability in terms of some kind of
hope. There is recognition that

**Death is the season and we the living**
Are hailed by the solitary to join the regiment
To leave the sea and the horses and march away
Endlessly.

But it is followed by a faint ray of hope with which the
poem concludes:

Only tomorrow like a seagull hovers and calls
Shrieks through the mist and scatters the pool
of stars.
The windows will be open and hearts behind them.
The hopes expressed in the last line are effectively
undercut by the image of the seagull shrieking and
scattering "the pool of stars", emphasizing thereby
the poet's obsession with tragedy.

The themes of death and decay are linked
with his concept of Time, which is always dragging
life towards its tragic end. *On Leaving School*
deals with the idea that Time allows little respite to a person and that the happy schooldays would soon be over. One's life is thus constantly exposed to the ravages of Time:

One of us will be the kettle past care of tinkers, Rejected, and the tip-top apple, the winking Sun's friend. It will be that way and Time on our ground Will sweep like a maid, and where we were be clean.

If one chooses to ignore the fact that these poems were written by a sixteen-year old schoolboy one can be hard on Douglas and accuse him of taking Auden's language and rhythm of colloquial speech pretty whole. Not only Auden, but Dylan Thomas, Eliot, and even the poets of the 'nineties seem to aid Douglas in his use of expressions and images like "afternoon's blue drowsiness", "cool tones", "glints of pearly laughter", "soothing his pale hair / with automatic ecstasy", and the "winking"/ Sun's friend".

But even in these early poems one can occasionally notice a certain bluntness and frank honesty, both in thought and technique. Four years before the war started, he, as a young boy of fifteen, had foreknowledge of what it involved.
Through a machine gun's sights
I saw a man curse, weep, cough, sprawl in
their entrails.

Douglas's determination to see facts and realities
as they were, and not to make concession to poetry,
lies at the bottom of a poem like "Encounter With
a God." The poetess in the poem contemplates the
"beautiful" god Daikoku, but-

But Daikoku came
Who had been drinking all night
With the greenish gods of chance and fame.
He was rotund standing in the moonlight,
With a round, white paunch.

Who said
I am not beautiful
I do not wish to be wonderfully made.
I am not intoxicated, dutiful daughter,
and I will not be in a poem.

The poem is quite limited but succeeds in showing the
poet's quest for fact as well as original use of
language. His economy in the use of words, which
are chosen for their simplicity, reflects a growing
spirit of independence. Thus, despite the literariness
of many of Douglas's earlier poems, what distinguishes
them from the juvenilia of other poets, (say, that
of Owen) is the attempt to find his own voice and
his own style. It is this fact that creates a
sense of reticent gloom, rather than the
morbidity of adolescent sadness, in his "Schooldays"
poems.
What was missing in these poems was the authenticity of actual human experience. His going to Oxford in 1938 did not immediately provide him with such experience but he found the atmosphere there congenial to his poetic development. In the first place, young poets like Michael Meyer, John Heath-Stubbs, John Waller and J.C. Hall were his contemporaries at Oxford, and all of them were, in their own ways, enthusiastic experimenters of poetry. When the editors of *Augury*, Douglas and Hardie, pointed out that the poets in that miscellany "survey the world as placidly as one should who looks out from such an ancient standpoint as this university. The emotions expressed are as a rule about more ordinary and permanent things than the situation this year (1940)," we get a clue to Douglas's own poetic practices. Similarly, Sidney Keyes's assertion (as one of the editors of *Eight Oxford Poets* (1941) that "we have, on the whole, little sympathy with the Audenian school of poetry", indicates if nothing else, at least the desire of these young English poets to write differently. Unlike the poets of the 'thirties, Douglas was not concerned with social or political themes. Nor was he in full
sympathy with the excessive verbal luxuriance of the neo-romantics of the late 'thirties and the early 'forties. But he was a romantic in so far as he evinced an independent spirit that reacted subjectively to more permanent and elemental themes. And in his case, these were the themes of Death and Time. But another theme entered now, the theme of love, and as it turned out, frustrated love. Douglas made friends at Oxford, many of them women. He celebrates the beauty of four of his lady friends in a fragment called To Kristin, Yenchen, Olga, Milena. And in Stranger he writes of his love passionately, and in a manner which is reminiscent of Donne:

You are the whole continent of love
For me, the windy sailor of this ocean,
Who'd lose his ragged vessel to the waves
And call on you, the strange land to save.
Here I set up my altar and devotion
And let no storm blot out the space I have.

But the tendency which made him penetrate into the essential realities of things, the tendency which brought him the realization that the happiness of boyhood would soon be replaced by the harsher experiences of adult life, compelled Douglas to go deeper into the darker realities of love. Leukothoea is a poem in which the poet's romantic belief that the supernatural beauty of the
girl was incorruptible, is rudely shattered by a bad dream:

I trusted the ground
I knew the worm and the beetle would go by
and never dare batten on your beauty.
Last night I dreamed and found my trust
betrayed
only the light bones and the great bones
disarrayed.

The poem, apparently, has deeper implications too, connected with frustration of man's higher aspirations and visions. This poetic method of embodying wider implications in a chosen theme is again employed in the poem Absence, which focuses on the poignant realization that his beloved is dead. These feelings are expressed in organic terms:

So the minutes assembled at first in silence
'till here or there the speech of ghosts or leaves
is audible. And it appears each grieves,
the garden with its composite voice sighing:
she is not here and you come instead
show by your attitude she is dead.

Though Douglas tends to sentimentalize the poem under the spell of fairyland imagery of "speech of ghosts or leaves", his evocation of quiet grief in nature that is in consonance with his own mood, has something of the poignancy of Hardy's Neutral Tones.
It was as if to prove how valid the forebodings of his boyhood days were that in the very first poem of the 'Oxford' section, Douglas ruefully contemplates the fact that his joys are over now.

Once in Monte Nero in the spring
Some pleasant girl fashioned for love and work
Taught me a smile that I had forgotten,
It is so hard to speak her language now.

(Forgotten the Red Leaves)

In a similar fashion, he looks back at his childhood as some kind of sanctuary, out of which he had to emerge and face the harsher facts of life:

Once my mother was a wall
behind my rampart and my keep
in a safe and hungry house.
I lay as snug as winter mouse
till the walls break and I weep
for simple reasons first of all.

(Sanctuary)

The important point to note about Douglas's 'Oxford' poems is that he is extending his range, and is manipulating his material with greater dexterity. In other words, though his themes remain pretty much the same - Death, swift passage of Time, tragic nature of Love - he attacks them from different angles: there are variations on these themes. In a poem called A Mime, he presents the workings of Time and Death in a manner which is grimly light-hearted:
Time and Death, villains in the wings stretch out the fingers parallel at me. Death says: 'If I don't get you, Then Time she will presently upset you — You'll find how soon his famous spells will coil you in successive strings'.

One can connect this with the 'black beast' on his back, but as yet the monster's threat is neither very terrible nor quite immediate. A similar absence of a sense of immediacy and the authenticity of human experience, take the depth out of his ruminations about the mystery of creation. He sees men passing from woe to woe, while the sun and the stars go about with "fine uninterest", and God is just left gaping at the sorrowful scene:

   And surely God, with never less ignorance of pity or remorse, is gaping at the eternal course of sorrow, all His planning. Yes, He's petrified and cannot see His marvellous inefficiency.

   (The Creator)

Douglas was, however, moving from this Housman-esque pessimism and cursing of God to a realization that pain and pleasure, good and evil, beauty and ugliness are coexistent. When in Soissons he explains that the stones yield both gargoyles and cathedrals, Douglas goes a step further than that of his 'Schooldays' poems. While in the boyhood poems he sees Time dragging hopes
to disillusion, happiness to pain, he now expects the cycle to move from pain to pleasure. In a poem like *An Exercise Against Impatience,* there is a determined effort to find positive significance in living. The opening stanza evokes the scene of difficult times with images of silent bells, the leaning buildings, "where youth and age inhabit./ exchange an austere opinion of foreboding". But --

But all these whom wisdom and no curse keeps in a kind of existence beyond their ordinary time here;
they must know how thought still works,
a hidden creator like the silkworm. It is this to which I cling, and think will save us all.

He looks around himself and finds the trees, the ocean, clouds and winds regaining their original power and beauty after the initial onslaught of nature. In this he finds hope for man. In other words, he moves from nature on to human life, for which he holds out a similar hope:

Meanwhile these signs are not of the world's end
it is another famous age they portend.
The work will be for us now, only to wait;
then in the chaotic state tomorrow, we can set these spirits free.
The poem concludes with a stanza which shows a mind that is intelligently aware of the realities, as well as is robust with hope:

And without prophets, what is there in the crucible, the inscrutable cavern, and what all the signs have given. You can be certain will appear.

Here, one should also notice Douglas's use of simple language, shorn of all floridity and decorative imagery, that is both powerful and effective. *The Deceased* is a similar exercise at linguistic compactness and honesty. Speaking of a 'reprobate' poet, Douglas says:

and with his failings you regret the verses the fellow made, probably between curses, probably in the extremes of moral decay; but he wrote them in a sincere way:

Consistently with his idea that poetry must deal with "permanent things", Douglas did not write any "war poems" during his stay at Oxford. He did however, write a few poems which foreshadow the kind of war poems that he was to write after his own war experiences. In the poem *Stars*, he sees the stars in military terms, who are "marching in extended war orders", on "a vast field", and what the poet admires in them is their sense of discipline and order:
nothing but discipline
Has mobilized and still maintains them. Thus
Time and his ancestor have seen them. Thus
Always to fight disorder is their business,
And victory continues in their hand.

And he pays the same kind of ambiguous tribute to
John Anderson, (an Oxford scholar turned soldier)
that he was to pay to the obsolescent breed of heroes
in Aristocrats later on:

But I think, the last moment of his gaze
behold the father of god and men,
Zeus, leaning from heaven as he dies.

Whom in his swoon he hears again
summon Apollo in the Homeric tongue:
Descend Phoebus and cleanse the stain,
of dark blood from the body of John Anderson.

(John Anderson)

And his poem about Russian soldiers frozen to death:

How silly that soldier is pointing his gun
at the wood
he doesn't know it isn't any good.....

(Russians)

prepares us for a detached, and sometimes a
clinically dispassionate, attitude towards war's
casualties, especially on the enemy side, of his
later poems.

Already in such poems one can find evidence of
change that he spoke of in his letter to J.C.Hall:
"In my early poems I wrote lyrically, as an innocent,
because I was an innocent. I have (not surprisingly)
fallen from that particular grace since then. I
had begun to change during my second year at Oxford". But on the whole, his poems of Oxford days are the product of an accomplished young man, who was not hindered by the realities of actual human experience and who could "survey the world as placidly as one should who looks out from such an ancient standpoint as this university". The last poem in the "Oxford" section is full of buoyant hope, which is expressed in an appropriately singing rhythm, and through images of spring, dance and wine:

Songs will appear like flowers, they'll sing and sing
and everywhere as it used to be, permanent spring
for which their town was known, will fly and dance
on the soft air, the food and wine flow
from all the fertile outskirts, plenty, plenty
for the poor and the rich, plenty for the admirers,
the visitors and those travelling through.

(An Oration).

It is true that Douglas's later experiences belied such hopes so that he wrote almost exclusively about the tragic aspects of life, but these early poems are significant in that they show the poet's attempt at bringing both joy and pain within the area of his poetic experience. Once he left the university, and entered life, as it were, the separation from the loved ones and familiar

preoccupations and the prospect of his own death became a burning reality. And the 'black beast' on his back suddenly assumed its hideous and true shape. It seems to me that Douglas had an instinctive feeling, that the life had to be lived and he was determined that the 'black' beast' would not interfere with this living on the material plane. And he tried to come to terms with the 'black beast' in his poetry.

Perhaps we can understand Douglas's poetry better if we realize that the poet and the public man were separate in his personality. While he emerges as a profoundly pensive person from his poems, in his outward impact he was, from all accounts, an adventurous, energetic, almost a gay personality. Thus, while Edmund Blunden spoke of Douglas's "generosity and zest for life", Lawrence Durrell remarked that "Douglas took things as they were, exacting every ounce of experience from them.... Everything was enjoyable, even fear, horror and physical discomfort." And Douglas's mother had this to say about her son:

The truth was (that) he had unbounded energy and perseverance in anything he considered really worthwhile. He was keen on rugger and swimming, on riding, on dancing and acting. He was interested in people and the reasons for their behaviour; in past ages - and the future.

18. 'Introduction' to Douglas's Collected Poems (1966) p. 18
19. 'Introduction' to Alamein to Zem Zem (1966) p. 11.
But beneath this exuberant, vibrant exterior lay the tragic poet. In *Alamein to Zem Zem* (1966), he himself speaks of those two selves in him:

> I lay down to sleep in my clothes, covered with my British warm and blankets, for the nights were already beginning to be cold. Perhaps betrayed by the spectacle of the stars as clear as jewels on black velvet into a mood of more solemnity, I suddenly found myself assuming that I was going to die tomorrow. For perhaps a quarter of an hour I considered what possibilities of suffering, more than of death, I had laid myself open. This with the dramatic and emotional part of me: but my senses of proportion and humour, like two court jesters, chased away the tragic poet, and I drifted away on a tide of odd thoughts, watching the various signs of battle in the lower sky. (p.25)

In other words, Douglas faced the day-to-day world with his senses of "proportion and humour" and the essential human condition - which was the subject of his poetry - with "the part of his personality which was tormented by the 'black beast'.

Further I suggest that it was this division in himself that enabled him to contemplate, during his time in active service, on Time, Death, etc, with metaphysical dispassionateness. It is not insignificant that he uses the phrase "emotional and dramatic" because it is the quality of negative capability that imparts to his poems a remarkable objectivity and solid intellectual depth, though, it must be admitted, it also takes away from them the kind of warmth and humanity that we associate
with, say, the war poems, of Owen or Lewis.

The few poems, that Douglas wrote during the period of his military training in England, show an increasing mastery of style and depth of experience. The very first poem of this time is a love poem which has a greater maturity and solidity. In it, the intensity of passion is burnt by the recognition of the weakness of the flesh, and the power of death. The poem is called *The Prisoner*, and Douglas builds up, with a firm control over language and imagery a picture of beauty and love, which is at once tender and sensuous, without being sentimental:

but mothwise my hands return
to your fair cheek, as luminous
as a lamp in a paper house,
and touch, to teach love and learn.

but soon the weight of death falls, to which the poet yields, not helplessly but with a passionate desire to break the spirit from the flesh:

There was the urge
to break the bright flesh and emerge of the ambitious cruel bone.

Douglas was to recreate, two years later in 1942, this defiant and frightening vision, when he envisioned a bird, which flew "electric, brilliant hue", and which had

consumed and drained
the colours of the sea
and the yellow of the tidal ground,

(The Sea Bird)

finally to creep back into the dead bird.
Perhaps the most impressive poem in this section (Army: England) is *Simplify Me When I'm Dead*, in which Douglas traces in the simplest, yet most effective, language and rhythm, the way Death strips man of all his pretensions and glory. His schoolboy poem on this theme was *Famous Men*, but in the present poem he foresees his own death, and 'places' his own successes and achievements in a wider context of life and death. The tragic course of life is charted, beginning with birth:

When hairless I came howling in
as the moon entered the cold sky.

and ending with death. Time's 'telescope' only can reveal his real and lasting qualities:

Time's wrong-way telescope will show
a minute man ten years hence
and by distance simplified.

Through that lens see if I seem
substance or nothing.....

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

Ted Hughes rightly singles this poem out for its stylistic perfection:

Here he (Douglas) has invented a style that seems able to deal poetically with whatever it comes up against. It is not an exalted verbal activity to be attained for short periods, through abstinence, or a submerged dream treasure to be fished up when the everyday brain is half drugged. It is the language for the whole mind, at its most wakeful, and in all situations.

Time, inevitably, was another theme on which he wrote some very good poems during this period of military training. The years, that he had spent at Oxford seemed to him the time when everything was stable and permanent like a Grecian urn. In his memoir, C. Day Lewis looked back at his university days differently:

Whenever in later life I have visited Oxford, I have felt it as, for the undergraduates, a transit camp - a place full of amenity and permanence, to be sure, but for them even more a place where the present is particularly subjected to the drag of the future, like a junction where you wait between trains, with your mind less on your book or your fellow passenger than on the next stage of the journey. 22.

But during the war-years Oxford must have seemed particularly safe and stable to its undergraduates. It may be recalled that Oxford was singularly untouched by war, it was never bombed, and young poets like Douglas, Keyes and Allison seemed to have made the most of their time there, without worrying about war, or the possibility of their own participation in it. Their hectic and intense literary and cultural activities are a proof of it. No wonder then that Douglas should see Oxford as "venerated and spared by ominous hours":

This then is the city of young men, of
beginning, ideas, trials, pardonable follies.
the lightness, seriousness and sorrowness of youth
And the city of the old, looking for truth,
browsing for years, the mind's seven bellies
filled, become legendary figures, seeming
stones of the city, her venerable towers;
dignified, clothed by erudition and time.

(Oxford)

These were magical years when Time did not
seem to move. But the reality is that Time destroys
everything it makes. *Time Eating* is one of the most
perfect and finished poems that Douglas ever wrote.
Here he deals with a theme which has been the subject
of philosophers and poets since time immemorial,
but Douglas puts his individual stamp on it. "At
the end of it", Ted Hughes remarks, "you may feel
there is more to be said about Time, but you
cannot doubt that a genuine man has had hold of
Time in its most dangerous mood, with an extra-
ordinary grip, for twenty-two lines". What is
perhaps most impressive is the ingenuity with which
Douglas executes the poem. With a "metaphysical"
wit, as Fraser notes, Douglas indicates his
huge conception of Time:

That volatile huge intestine holds
material and abstract in its folds.
thoughts and ambition melt and even the world
will alter, in that catholic belly curled.

23. The Listener, 21st June 1962. 1069
24. op. cit. p. 102.
Though Time destroys and remakes the various objects of nature, it, paradoxically enough, can bring back neither the poet's youth nor love. In this paradox lies the agony of the individual human self, and perhaps, his triumph because both youth and love, in a sense, transcend Time. Time's recreative capability is confined to "the lizards tail" and "the bright snakeskin". It "cannot, cannot" remake the poet's youth or love.

But Time, who ate my love, you cannot make such another: you who can remake the lizards tail and the bright snakeskin cannot, cannot. That you gobbled in too quick and though you brought me from a boy you can make no more of me, only destroy.

After completing his military training and receiving his commission Douglas was selected for special duties with the Indian Army. The Indian plan was cancelled for some reason, and he went out to the Middle East. Until he returned home from there late in 1943 he fought in the desert war for more than two years, except for a short period in hospital in Palestine for treatment of injuries received from a mine explosion. When Douglas went to war, he faced its circumstances with his senses of "proportion and humour", and not with
"the dramatic and emotional part" in him.
Speaking of Douglas's role in the war, Lawrence
Durrell remarked: "In all this dust and confusion
Douglas found a way of life which was much to
his liking, and to which he brought a tough
yeoman skill; moreover in some curious way he
remained curiously individual inside. I mean that
the poet was also present in this world, he was
not relegated to the attic. He partook of the
soldier and became an appropriate part of him."

The poet in Douglas was "not relegated to the attic"
in so far as he continued to write poems. But
this must not be taken to mean that he immediately
started writing 'war poems'. Specially during
his earlier years in war, it did not seem to him
to be a particularly suitable subject for poetry.
According to his own admission, in a letter to
J.C.Hall, dated 10th August, 1943, until then he
had "never tried to write a war". He played
his role in the war as a good soldier, and in this
he was different from his fellow poets, who were
reluctant soldiers. In the words of Alan Ross,
himself a poet of the Second War:

25. 'Introduction' to Alamein to Zan Zan (1966). p.13
Lewis and Keyes, although caught up inevitably in the machinery of war, struggled emotionally to get away from it; their identity could never be absorbed into the working out of the process in terms of men, battles, guns because they accepted it only against their will. Douglas did more than that, not because he was less sensitive but because he had a natural passionate need for excitement that made him want always to be a protagonist in, and part of, events, rather than an observer. 27.

Douglas has himself described in Alamein how excitedly he took part in the war. He saw it as an "important test which I was interested in passing". 28

Some of the poems that he wrote at this time dealt with his reactions to a foreign scene (e.g. Syria I and Syria II). Egypt depicts the poverty, disease and suffering of a native woman. But the poet is not content with merely cataloguing the various squalid details. He gathers together the various details in order to project an unified impression, of a poor woman, that is shot through with an awareness of a redeeming quality in her, her beauty:

And in fifteen years of living found nothing different from death but the difference of moving and the nuisance of breath.

28. Alamein to Zem Zem (1986) p.15
A disguise of ordure can't hide her beauty, succumbing in a cloud of disease, disease, apathy. My God, the king of this country must be proud.

When he spoke of war, it was with ironic self-detachment. Christodoulos, in the poem of the same title, is "a successful alchemist", and

Out of Christodoulos' attic full of smoke and smell, emerge soldiers like ants; with ant's erratic gestures seek the pavement's verge.

The poem is more an exercise at verbal and technical ingenuity, than a serious attempt to explore the nature of war or man's role in it. It appears that during these early years of his active service, Douglas used the poetic mind for clever speculations, or "drilling the mind" as he put it. The hand, for example, reveals geometrical symbols:

The hand is perfect in itself - the five fingers, though changing attitude, depend on a golden point, the imaginary true focal point to which infinities of motion and shape are yoked. There is no beginning to the hand, no end, and the bone retains its proportion in the grave.

(The Hand)

His more successful poems are, however, those in which the themes of his earlier poetry are taken up again, and are put through the crucible of personal experience. Separated, as he was from a sweetheart, he addresses a poem to her beginning.
I listen to the desert wind
that will not blow her from my mind.

The poem was originally entitled 'Milena', and it is not a nostalgic poem about separated lovers in the manner of so many war poems of this period. Out in the desert, he is agonized not so much by the fact of separation as by his consciousness that she cannot give him her love as she used to do in the former time. Such feelings get an edge from the desolate scene around him. The images of the desert heighten his emotions, and his loss of love assume 'elemental' proportions:

Skims like a bird my sleepless eye
the sands who at this hour deny
the violent heat they have by day
as she denies her former way.

All the elements agree
with her, to have no sympathy
for my tasteless misery
as wonderful and hard as she.

And the last stanza brings home to him the tragic nature of love. Douglas had expressed this kind of realization in many of his earlier poems, but here, the stark simplicity of the language, and the whole context out of which this realization is achieved, create a sense of authenticity and depth:
0 turn in the dark bed again
and give to him what once was mine
and I'll turn as you turn
and kiss my swarthy mistress pain.

(I listen to the Desert Wind)

Similarly, in poems like *The Knife* and *Song* loss
of love is seen as inevitable in the process of
man's journey through life to death. The latter's
poem's poignant refrain "for the poisonous sea
and cruel star/ the one by day and one at night
have charmed me", relentlessly repeat the reality,
which must eventually swallow up to borrow Alun
Lewis's expression, "this living and this loving":

Yes, for I am doomed my dear
and I have jilted myself and you;
soon when the sea's embalmed me
I'll fade into the deceitful blue,
for the poisonous sea and a cruel star
for one by day and one at night have
charmed me.

In all such poems one can find traces of Douglas's
*Noire* obsessions. *Devils* deals specifically
with this obsession. His mind's apparent silence
is deceptive, because he is tormented by the cries
of the "idiot crew" of his mind. This turbulence
is present in the outward world also, and this is
rendered in terms of images of flying clouds and
black winds:

Outside the usual crowd of devils
are flying in the clouds, are running
on the earth, imperceptibly spinning
through the black air alive with evils
and turning, diving in the wind's channels.

There is a case for suggesting that such a
picture of violence and disorder can be related to
the war-time conditions in which Douglas wrote the
poem. But it would be as wrong to limit its
significance and deny its artistic breadth of
vision as it would be to suggest that when Yeats
spoke of "mere anarchy loosed upon the world" in
his _Second Coming_ he was merely referring to the
atrocities of the First War. Here indeed, lies
Douglas's triumph as a War Poet. When he said
that he had "not tried to write about war" he
obviously meant the kind of war poetry which poets
like Sassoon and Owen had made famous. He did not
write propagandistic war poetry, but war entered
his poetic experience as a symbol of life's pain and
frustration. In the poem _The Offensive_ Douglas thus
lifts the war theme on to a universal level and views
it in cosmic terms:

> When you are dead and the harm done
> the orators and clerks go on
> the rulers of interims and wars
> effete and stable as stars.

The sun goes round and the stars go round
the nature of eternity is circular
and man must spend his life to find
all our successes and failures are similar.
But there is a definite reason why Douglas is regarded as a War Poet, whereas Yeats is not, and it has something to do with the former's career in the army. Yeat's detractors on this subject are right on one factual point, namely that he was never personally involved in the First War, and as an Irishman, fighting for independence, had perhaps little sympathy with the English cause. In the case of Douglas, on the other hand, war formed the background against which his personality developed. And it was in a war-torn world that he realized his deepest human experiences, of which his best poems are a moving record.

In that letter to J.C. Hall, in which Douglas had said that he had never tried to write about war, he had gone on to say that from then on he would. He had also indicated his views about war:

To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others. To trust anyone or to admit any hope of a better world is criminally foolish, as foolish as to stop working for it. It sounds silly to say work without hope, but it can be done; its only a form of insurance: it does not mean work hopelessly. 29

29. See Douglas's Collected Poems (1966) p.110
This is a much more responsible acceptance of the essential realities of the human condition than Owen's attitude, summed up in, "All a poet can do today is warn". Among the Douglas manuscripts in the British Museum, there are a few pages on which the poet had jotted down some points under the title "Poets in this War". They have not yet been published, perhaps because it is not a finished piece. However, some of his thoughts are important in so far as he tries to explain why there is no war poetry comparable to the one produced during the earlier war. He attempts to find reasons for the modern poet's silence on the specific subject of war.

They do not write because there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, about this war, except its mobile character. These are two reasons: hell cannot be let loose twice; it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. The hardships, pain and boredom: the behaviour of the living and the appearance of the dead were so accurately described by the poets of the Great War that everyday on the battlefields of the western desert - and no doubt on the Russian battlefields as well - their poems are illustrated. Almost all that a modern poet on active service would be inspired to write, would be tautological.

(B.M. Mss. No. 'Add MS53773')

This is a statement about what war poetry in his time was not, or rather could not be, than
his ideas about what it should be. Perhaps, Douglas never had, and understandably so, any theory about the relationship between war and poetry. It was merely by writing poetry as he always wanted to, even through his war experiences, he established a new relationship between the Muse and Mars.

Douglas entered war with the conviction that though wars could excite "financiers and parliamentarians", it could not "excite a poet or a painter". But as a man he was a realist enough to see himself condemned to figure in, and observe, it. His naturally passionate mind looked for thrill and excitement wherever he could find it, and his Alamein to Zem Zem shows that once he was in the battlefield, he reacted more easily to fear and exhilaration than the deeper issues of war:

The turret was full of fumes and smoke, I coughed and sweated: fear had given place to exhilaration. Twilight increased to near-darkness, and the air all round us gleamed with the different coloured traces of shells and bullets, brilliant graceful curves travelling from us to the enemy and from him towards us. The din was tremendously exciting. I could see a trail of machine gun bullets from one of our heavy tanks passing a few yards to the

as the shell tilted towards us, it disappeared. Red and orange leapt up beside and in front of us. 31.

Amid this kind of colour and excitement the only human relationship that Douglas recognised was one of comradeship with his fellow-soldiers, whereas the Italians were to him, "little beasts" (p. 54) and a German soldier "Poor little toad" (p. 70). He recreates the mood of heroism in what would now appear as an anachronistic poem, Aristocrats. But Douglas was instinctively drawn towards aristocratic morality and heroism:

The plains were their cricket pitch
and in the mountain their tremendous drop fences
brought down some of the runners. Here then
under the stones and earth they dispose themselves,
I think with their famous unconcern.
It is not gunfire I hear but a hunting horn.

But he realizes that these are the "obsolescent breed of heroes". And in a poem The Trumpet which follows Aristocrats almost immediately, the trumpet, which cried "for the death of Hector from Troy steeple" is seen as a "liar". The trumpet is a liar because"the flight of bullets " have exposed the hollowness of its notes -

31. Ibid. p. 42
But, as the apprehensive ear rejoiced
breathing the notes in; the sky glistened
with a flight of bullets.

During his stay in the Middle East, Douglas
was fascinated by aspects of the foreign scene,
and he recorded some of them in sharp, impressionistic
poems. L'Autobus presents girls of a convent school
whose "mothers' mothers" had "for centuries mingled
with the swarthy coastwise seamen", and "were
famous for beauty and nefarious arts". But
for the time being, these young girls are innocent,
"their tearing eyes, ignorant of love or pain/ to
come". Thus, Douglas presents not only a scene
vividly, but also illuminates an aspect of human
life that the scene represents. In the present
poem, for example, the innocence of the young girls
is celebrated in the light of the adult experiences
that must come to them as they came to their mothers.

Behaviour of Fish In An Egyptian Tea Garden is a
satirical portrayal of the idle pleasures of men,
from various walks of life, in war-time Egypt. The
single metaphor of the poem is fish, and the central
fish is a girl around whom all the other fish move
for her attention. One of them is:

A cotton magnate, an important fish,
with great eyepatches and a golden mouth
through the frail furniture swims out
and idling, suspended, stays to watch.
It is a brilliantly executed poem, and the poet's negative emotions of satire never bursts into a hysteria against the corrupt civilians who went on with their life of greed, profit and frivolity when the soldiers were dying in battlefields. Douglas's satire is urbane, gay and charming, yet sufficiently devastating in its implications.

Douglas, like many other Englishmen in the Middle East of these times, was particularly struck by the country's rich people on the one hand, and the poor on the other. In one stanza he presents the wide cross-section of the Egyptian population:

The moon shines on the modern flats
where sentient lovers or rich couples
lie loving or sleeping after eating.
In the town the café's and cabarets seating
gossiers, soldiers, drunkards, supple
women of the town, shut out the moon with slats.

(Egyptian Sentry)

The soldier keeps a watch for this world, feeling nothing, seeing nothing:

But of this no scent or sound reaches him there.
He leans and looks at the sea:
sweat lines the statue of a face.

But in a poem like Cairo Jar, Douglas depicts the squalor of the civilian and military life, to show the universal pervasion of corruption and ugliness. There is Marcelle, with her dull, dead lover's
photographs and letters, shrieking in Arabic with the cabman about the fare, and there are legless beggars in "the streets dedicated to sleep/ stenches and sour smells". Then comes a description of battlefield:

But by day's travelling you reach a new world the vegetation is of iron, dead tanks, guns barrels split like celery, the metal brambles have no flowers or berries and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine the dead themselves, their boots, and possessions clinging to the ground, a man with no head has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.

The idea behind such an accumulation of diverse descriptions of civilian life and military front is to emphasize their similarity - "it is all one, all as you have heard". Fraser explains it in greater detail: ".... moral death and disorder match physical death and disorder; Marcelle's photographs and letters exactly match the dead soldier's packet of chocolate and souvenir of Tripoli, are as futile, and pathetic and meaningless, and ultimately enraging."

Thus, the poet was gradually drawn into dealing with themes of death and tragedy in war. But it must be noted, however, that in the beginning, his highly philosophic mind found it difficult to transmute his deep personal feelings or personally observed

32. G.S. Fraser. op. cit; p. 104.
experiences of war into his distinctive kind of poetry. It is for this reason that some of his war poems about suffering and death do not have the authenticity and frankness of some of his earlier poems, or the metaphysical richness of, for example, these lines from his diary:

Silence is a strange thing to us who live: we desire it, we fear it, we worship it, we hate it. There is a divinity about cats, as long as they are silent, the silence of swans gives them an air of legend. The most impressive thing about the dead is their triumphal silence, proof against anything in the world. 33

On the other hand, his rational compunctions, and ironic self-detachment prevented him from writing 'human' and compassionate poetry, which was Owen's special achievement.

Gallantry gives an ironic portrait of a pompous colonel, who is faintly reminiscent of Sassoon's general, and Douglas's own Piccadilly Jim with whom he was in constant touch over the wireless during the desert war:

The Colonel, beautifully dressed and with his habitual indolence, returned my salute from inside the fifteen-hundredweight, where he was sitting with Graham, the adjutant, a handsome, red-haired, amiable young Etonian. I said to Piccadilly Jim (the Colonel), 'Good evening, sir, I've escaped from Division for the moment, so I wondered if I'd be any use to you up here'. 'Well, Peter', stroking his moustache and looking like a contented ginger cat, 'we're
most glad to see you - er - as always. All the officers in "A" Squadron, except Andrew, are casualties, so I'm sure he'll welcome you with open arms .......

In the poem, the colonel's jokes spoken in "a casual voice" which fell into the "ears of a doomed race" starts it (the poem) on a grim and antithetical note. And although the brutalities of war are brilliantly expressed in contrasting images - e.g. the boy whose "perfectly mannered flesh fell" when he was struck by a shell on opening the door which he did "as he had learnt to do at school", or the description as to how a soldier's "silken intentions" during the ensuing spring was "severed with a single splinter" - Douglas soon cramps our response by understatement and irony:

It was a brave thing the colonel said, but the whole sky turned too hot and the three heroes never heard what it was, gone deaf with steel and lead.

But the bullets cried with laughter, the shells were overcome with mirth, plunging their heels in steel and earth - (the air commented in a whisper)

The poem is remarkable, not so much for any "distinguished emotion" as for its direct language and brilliant technique. Apart from the effective

34. Ibid; p. 20
use of antithetic imagery already referred to, the personification created, in the last stanza, of the bullets, and shells, which (who?) collide merrily against men, who in turn, have been transformed into "steel and earth", is quite clever. It is a well-organized poem, in which the contrasting elements, ordinary human hopes and destructive war, have been poetically fused, with the war overcoming human aspirations.

Vormischenicht is a perfect example of war poetry of its kind, in which the poet is able to distance a war incident, in which he was personally involved, in order to present paradoxes of human life. In the first stanza, the poet and his comrades return to the scene of a previous battle, which is now sunlit, as contrasted to its having been a "nightmare ground" during the combat:

Three weeks gone and combatants gone returning over the nightmare ground We found the place again, and found the soldier sprawling in the sun.

The bouncing rhythm of the lines, with repetitions and concealed rhymes - e.g. "Three weeks gone and the combatants gone", and "we found the place again found" - suggests the tanks moving bumpily. On seeing the corpse of the German soldier, the poet almost exults because he had hit the poet's tank, during the battle, with a shell which came "like the
entry of a demon". In the third stanza he notices "the dishonoured picture" of the dead soldier's sweetheart in his pocket, but moves on to express satisfaction over the death of the enemy:

We see him almost with content abased, and seeming to have paid and mocked at by his own equipment that's hard and good when he's decayed.

In the next stanza, the poet goes on to describe, by carefully selecting his adjectives, how the girl would "weep" (instead of a more familiar "cry") to see her dead lover on whose skin "swart flies" move and on whose "paper eyes" dust has settled. Fraser has shown how by thus distancing the scene, Douglas has been able to save it from becoming disgusting.

He contrasts Douglas's method with that of Graves, who in his rather sentimental poem, Familiar Letter to Siegfried Sassoon, crudely presents "a dead Bochë", by merely [piling up adjectives:

Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired
Dribbling black blood....

Though Douglas had, what in army parlance might be described as, a "healthy hatred" for the enemy, he is, as a poet, able to see the German as a

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35. G.S. Fraser. Vision and Rhetoric (1959) pp 140-142
person rather than as a mere object. The poet sees, in the predicament of the dead soldier, the paradox of human life, and it is contained in the antithesis, between the soldier and the lover, of the last stanza:

For here the lover and the killer are mingled who had one body and one heart. And death who had the soldier mingled has done the lover mortal hurt.

In another context, this antithesis might seem trite, even meaningless, but here, suddenly the awareness of the lover in the soldier makes the poet respond to the human implications of the situation. This is not to say, however, that Douglas "is reacting with Owen's kind of compassion to the dead enemy who might, but for the grace of God, be Douglas himself, the dead German soldier with a picture of his girl in his pocket". 36

Unfortunately, the tendency among many readers of this poem has been to be sentimental about the potential pity in the subject-matter, even though Douglas does not exploit it in the poem. It is reasonable to suppose that faced with a similar subject, Owen might have written the kind of poem Currey has in mind. But Douglas's highly

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36. R.N. Currey Poets of 1939-1945 War. (1967, p.28
individualistic attitudes, both as a soldier and a poet, produced a poem of urbane sympathy rather than overwhelming compassion and fellow feeling.

Endeville is one poem which is Owenesque in theme, if not technique. It opens with a vivid description of the city whose houses and church have been destroyed by war:

The men and women who moved like candles in and out of the houses and the streets are all gone. The white houses are bare black cages. No one is left to greet the ghosts tugging at doorhandles, opening doors that are not there.

But with the coming of the daylight the next day, the men and women return to their city, and try to salvage whatever has been left ("a bed or a piano") of their belongings. At such a moment, the desecrated images of the Virgin and St. Thérèse seem to come alive again:

Who could not love them at this minute?
I seem again to meet
The blue eyes of the images in the church.

Even here, Douglas’s distinctive touch of strength can be seen in the suggestion that humanity can withstand war’s atrocities. After the initial destruction, life is renewed, as it were, and promises to continue.
Lawrence Durrell believed that "the gradual maturing of this exceptional poetic gift (of Douglas) might have given him by now (after his war experiences) an extra dimension, perhaps more 'metaphysical and less brilliantly impressionistic'. One would tend to agree with Durrell on this point on the basis of some of Douglas's last poems, which are certainly more "metaphysical" than "impressionistic". How to Kill is not only a clever poem in which he sees, in a crystal ball, a boy's growth into manhood when he becomes a soldier and dies, but also one in which there is an intelligent exploration of death:

The weightless mosquito touches her tiny shadow on the stone, and with how like, how infinite a lightness, a man and shadow meet. They fuse. A shadow is a man when the mosquito death approaches.

Similarly, in Dead Man, the poet turns from romantic love, "the white dresses and jasmine scent" on to the dead men lying on the moonlit desert. He contemplates on death, and the dubious value of the "human virtue" which is "tasteless" even for a wild dog, who would rather have man's face or a leg/ for food." Thus he sees that death reduces human life to nothingness.

37. Introduction to Alamein to Zem Zem (1960), p.13
All that is good to them, the dog consumes.
You would not know now the mind's flame is gone
more than the dog knows....

However, though the moonlight seems, in the context
of the dead men, cynical, it is different in the
case of lovers:

But tonight no lovers see the lines
of the moon's face as the lines of cynicism.

But it is the Platonic lovers that the poet is
speaking of. In the last stanza, he explains
that the wise man is he, who like a Platonic
lover revolves above the earth without being
drawn either by reason or time, or one who has
a pragmatic attitude to life like the wild dog:

And the wise man is the lover
who in his planetary love resolves /revolves/ without the traction of reason or time's control
and the wild dog finding meat in a hole
is a philosopher. The prudent mind resolves
on the lover's or the dog's attitude for ever.

In one of his last poems, Landscape With Figures,
Douglas presents a war-blasted landscape and human
casualties with Imagistic sharpness, or, one might
say, with Rosenberg's artistic precision:

On scrub and sand the dead men wriggle
in their dowdy clothes....
The decor is terrible tracery
of iron. The eye and mouth of each figure
bear the cosmetic blood and hectic
colours death has the list of.

And then he elevates the poem on to a metaphysical
level, and sees his own self in terms of heaven and
hell:
Yes,
I am all these men and I am the craven
the remorseful the distressed
penitent: not passing from life to life
but all these angels and devils are driven
into my mind like beasts. I am possessed,
the house whose wall contains the dark strife
the arguments of hell with heaven.

Here he views himself as the prototype of
Men whose mind is the battleground of good and evil.
This tendency to wring an abstract meaning out of,
rather than be content with a straight reaction to,
an immediate objective fact was typical of him.
Unlike most War Poets, especially of the First War,
who needed objective experiences in order to write
poetry, Douglas's highly philosophic mind did not
need any take off ground for creating his kind
of poetry. Though he enjoyed his war experiences,
especially in the initial months, the constant
mobility prevented him from writing the sort of
poetry he best liked to write. That is why in
his last poem *On a Return From Egypt*, he comes
back "disheartened" from "the sick land". He
is sad, particularly because:

the lillies of ambition
still spring in their climate, still unpicked.

Speaking of this poem, Douglas' mother remarked, in a
letter to Maurice Wollman:
His last completed poem reflects, I think, his doubts and urges, - his longing to carry out the things he once planned and looked forward to - all the writings, illustrations back-cloths... 38.

It is not surprising then that on his return to England, Douglas finds himself in Piccadilly Hotel in 1944, oppressed by the "black beast",

This is my particular monster, I know him; he walks about inside me: I'm his house and his landlord. He's my evacuee taking a respite from hell in me.

(Être Noire)

Among the Douglas papers in the British Museum, there is a very impressive drawing of this beast in strong black, white and red colours. It depicts a horseman with an anguished expression on his face, and a huge, oppressive black monster on his back. Douglas evidently felt that to carry this kind of a burden was the price that he had to pay for his poetic destiny. In one of his earlier poems, The Poets, he had said how the poet was different from the lot of people in general. A poet had the distinctive gift of exploring the truth, at a terrible personal cost:

If at times my eyes are lenses through which the brain explores constellations of feeling, my ears yielding like swing doors admit princes to the corridors into the mind, do not envy me. I have a beast on my back.

(Bête Noire)

Douglas seems to have had an uncanny suspicion that the essential truth that can give significance to human life lay beyond man's capacity for ordinary perception, and the conventional values of society. He felt that death was a gateway to that 'secret'. He would have whole-heartedly agreed with Yeats's belief that "we begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy". Hence the preoccupation with themes of death and tragedy. In the last complete poem that he wrote in Egypt, he speaks of that 'secret', and the means of achieving it:

Each time the night discards
_of the eyes and leaves the mind awake_ I look each side of the door of sleep for the little coin it will take to buy the secret I shall not keep.

I see men as trees suffering or confound the detail and the horizon.
Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing of what the others never set eyes on.

(Desert Flowers)

It is in this sense that Douglas can be described as a metaphysical poet, who rumminded and speculated over eternal themes - the "permanent things" as the expression was used in *Augury* - of Death and Time. His best poems show a mature mind, a refined technician and a master in the use of simple yet extremely sophisticated language.

The vision that he projects is about the tragedy of the human situation, combined with an intelligent acceptance of that fact. His poetry is a record of his efforts to understand the nature of that tragedy, because "if one knows this it becomes possible to accept life more easily on its own terms, soberly and without cynicism, no longer idealizing the prospects, yet sufficiently convinced that the effort to go on with, and on behalf of humanity, is worthwhile".  

His explorations of the tragic theme took on an extra edge during those calamitous years of war. But paradoxically enough, the war cut short the process of such explorations, which were by no means complete when Douglas died. Just a few months before he died, he was still hopeful,

The next month, then, is a window, and with a crash I'll split the glass.

*(On a Return from Egypt)*

as indeed he was in one of his first poems, *Rejection* (1936):

*The window will be open and hearts behind them.*

In a sense, like the protagonist, in the last section of *The Waste Land*, Douglas remains where he had started but intense explorations have been made, and rich and powerful poetry has been created.
Alun Lewis

As long as the poetry of the Second World War was casually and tentatively dealt with — "this poetry is the most difficult to judge at the present while we are so close to it", wrote Stephen Spender in 1949, — Alun Lewis was regarded as the greatest poet who perished in the war. Lewis's poetry was immediately appealing because it expressed in sensuous and lyrical terms the soldier's feelings of separation and isolation, and a nostalgia for the familiar native scenes and countryside. But a growing interest in recent years in the poetry of the two Wars, and the resultant careful examination of it, have revealed the genius of some other lesser known poets who wrote during those fateful years. At the same time, a closer scrutiny of Lewis's own poems, especially when set against the achievements of Sidney Keyes and Keith Douglas, has led critics to believe that Lewis had been over-rated as a poet. Thus Gordon Symes (himself a minor poet of the Second War, prefaced his article on Alun Lewis by remarking: "In many ways, and not only because of his youth, Keyes was a far more startling phenomenon. I

doubt if anyone would deny that his intellectual and imaginative resources were deeper than Lewis's. But Keyes was emphatically a poet's poet...." And we have already seen how Ted Hughes regarded Douglas as not only the greatest poet of the war but also the most promising poet of his generation. Lewis's poetic performance, on the other hand, can be best described as rather uneven. He could write occasional poems of great power and intensity, but had not as yet developed a consistent theme or themes. A critic like R.N. Currey 3 can make a plausible case for viewing Lewis as a poet of pity on the lines of Wilfred Owen, tracing the poetry of pity through Lewis's feelings for the Welsh miners, the Indian peasants and the "landless soldiers" of war. But such an attitude is bound to be inadequate because it fails to take into account Lewis's poetry as a whole. Though Lewis was a man of deep sympathy and compassion, his bewildering war experiences brought him face to face with terrible realities of life and death. He realized that pity was not enough to deal with


those realities. In other words, he discovered that it was difficult to adopt an Owenesque attitude, because the tragedy which threatened to consume both the giver and the receiver of pity seemed to be cosmic. While Lewis was in the process of understanding this overwhelming tragedy, he died suddenly.

He knew that as a poet he had not developed a consistent vision which could be projected through his poems. As late as 6th December 1943, he had remarked that he had "a persistent feeling that I'm still waiting for my big moment, my big word. It's still in the seed and won't flower 'till it has a mind to. I can't hurry that up". Unfortunately, he died within a few months of writing those words and his poetic statement remained incomplete. His attitude to war varied from feelings of apprehension to viewing it as man's confrontation with death, but he seldom gave the impression of a poet who had come to grips with problems. Rather, his poems seem to be a record of the life of a man who was hurled from one experience to another. The poems are, therefore, "occasional" rather than constellations composing one sky. Some of them are able to catch and preserve, the intensity of the moment, while

other's fail to be anything more than fleeting reactions of a sensitive man. The interest of his poems, therefore, is limited to the fact that they reflect the attitudes of the poet as he moved from his native Wales for military training at various places in Britain; then his postings in India, and finally his accidental death in active service in Burma.

Alun Lewis was born on 1st July, 1915 at Aberdare in Glamorgan. He had a happy childhood, but was always aware of the poverty and suffering of the Welsh people around him. His grandfather, a farm labourer had moved from Carmarthenshire to Glamorgan when pits were opened there, and worked as a miner for fifty years until his death. Lewis's father was a schoolmaster, and later on the Director of Education, at Aberdare; one of his uncles became Professor of Celtic Studies at Aberystwyth, and the other a Congregational Minister. This kind of family background enabled Alun Lewis to view the life of miners in South Wales with understanding and sympathy on the one hand, and with a certain detachment on the other.

He first went to Glynhafod School, Aberdare, and then to Cowbridge Grammar School on a scholarship.
At the age of seventeen he sat for a scholarship at Jesus College, Oxford, which traditionally has some scholarships reserved for Welsh students. Though he had apparently won the scholarship, Jesus College hesitated on account of his extreme youth, and recommended that he might try again the following year. In the meantime, Aberystwyth had offered him a scholarship, which he accepted. So that in the Autumn of 1932, he entered the University College of Wales for an honours degree in History. While at college, he was a good student and according to his tutors his 'first' was never in doubt. He also took an active interest in sports and extracurricular activities. He was a member of the University Hockey Eleven in 1932-33 when it won the University Championship. He was interested in the various political and academic societies of the college. He contributed his writings to the college magazine, *The Dragon*, of whose editorial board he became the secretary in 1934-35. There was nothing extraordinary about the few poems that he wrote at this time. They were facile, decorative and conventional. Some of his short stories, however, were quite promising.
He obtained the expected first class degree in 1933, and started to worry about his career. Though the choice seemed to lie between "the ideal of a writer's life, to be attained by way of journalism, or a career of research and teaching", he chose research, and went to the University of Manchester on a Pickles Research Studentship. He did not like life in a big industrial city, nor indeed the research work that he had undertaken. In a short story of this time, *Attitude*, he spoke of:

work, the diurnal, unmanageable, - bending over medieval charters and accounts, transcribing copying, collating. And all the time making it remote and scientific, this long dead Thirteenth Century... And then suddenly to see it as the clod of dry dung that it was, and try to kick it off the sole of our shoe and kick and kick in a vain nightmare. 6

At one point he was seriously considering giving up the work but stuck it out on the advice of his supervisor. In 1937, he took an M.A. in Medieval History. Since there was no prospect of a university job, he returned to Aberystwyth for a year's course in teachers' training. It was with some difficulty that he was finally able to get a position at a school in Pengam, Glamorgan. At this time, threats


of war were looming on the horizon, and though he had started by being a pacifist, he soon realized that he must go to war when it came:

I shall probably join up, I imagine. I've been unable to settle the moral issue satisfactorily: when I say I imagine I mean I have a deep sort of fatalist feeling that I'll go. Partly because I want to experience life in as many phases as I'm capable of - i.e. I'm more a writer than a moralist, I suppose. But I don't know - I'm not going to kill. Be killed, perhaps, instead.

His attitude is similar to that of Owen who had remarked in June 1917; "Be bullied, be outraged, be killed: do not kill". Anyway, Lewis joined the army as a postal-clerk with the Royal Engineers and for the next two years he moved from camp to camp in England.

During this period of military training, Lewis had plenty of time to reflect on life as he had known it, and also on the army life in general. And this was the time when he wrote the majority of the poems that appeared in the volume Raiders Dawn (1942); and the short stories which were collected under the title The Last Inspection (1942). His first works were published in Dublin Magazine, and subsequently in the Welsh Review, Time and Tide, The Times Literary Supplement, Life and Letters Today, Horizon, English Story, Poetry (London) and Penguin New

7. Ibid. p.18.
Writing. He very much wanted to reach a wide public. With this aim in mind, he collaborated with John Petts and Brenda Chamberlain to bring out the "Case Broad sheets". Brenda Chamberlain has written an account of the broadsheets, (her manuscripts are lodged in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth) in which she has remarked:

(Alun Lewis) suggested with immense enthusiasm that the three of us should collaborate in a literary venture of bringing out a cheap series of broadsheets. He seemed to be obsessed with the idea of reaching the people. (NLM 18969 E).

It was to be essentially a Welsh venture with the hope that poems would be illustrated with woodcuts and engravings. Two of Lewis's own poems, Raider's Dawn and Songs of Innocence appeared in the first number in 1941. Unfortunately, the venture was a failure, and the series died out after the fifth issue.

In 1942, Lewis was transferred to India Command. He arrived in India later that year, and stayed on in the sub-continent until March 1944, when, while patrolling Mayu Range in the Arakan, he slipped on a stone, and the loaded revolver he was carrying went off, hurting him fatally. From the time of his embarkation until his death, he wrote letters
regularly to his wife Gweno Ellis, a teacher of
German at a school in Mountain Ash, near Aberdare
whom he had married in 1941. These letters
appeared under the title Letters from India in
1946. And these letters, together with six
uncollected short stories appeared in In The
Green Tree in 1948. Apart from these, he had
written poems during his stay in India. He had
sent them to Robert Graves for his comments.
Lewis got them back, accepted some of Graves's
criticisms, rejected others, and sent his revised
poems for publication in England, in January 1944.
This collection of poems appeared posthumously
under the title Ha! Ha! Among The Trumpets in 1945.

Lewis has received a fair amount of critical
attention since his death. Obituary notices for
him appeared in the New Statesman, The Times,
Wales and Anglo-Welsh Review. Wales contained a
short note of critical appreciation of Lewis as a
poet by George Ewart Evans, and three elegies, one
each by John Ormond Thomas, Branda Chamberlain
and Vernon Watkins. In the preface that he
wrote for In The Green Tree, A.L. Rowse eulogised
both the man and the poet. Among the straight
critical pieces on Alun Lewis, one may mention
Gordon Symes's 'Muse in India - An Aspect of Alun Lewis', Ralph Houston's 'The Broken Arch', John Lehmann 'A Human Standpoint', and John Stuart Williams's 'The Short Stories of Alun Lewis' and 'The Poetry of Alun Lewis'. Horst Jarka wrote a doctoral dissertation on Alun Lewis: His Short Stories and Poems at the University of Vienna in 1934. In 1966, Ian Hamilton brought out an edition of Alun Lewis's Selected Poetry and Prose, which included eight uncollected poems and a lengthy 'Biographical Introduction'. 'The Biographical Introduction' gives some valuable details about Lewis's life and surroundings, documented with excerpts from unpublished materials. It also contains some highly perceptive critical remarks about Lewis's works, though Ian Hamilton's attempt to see Lewis as moving towards self-realization through a negation of the personal self seems a little too neat and contrived.

It is important to note, as John Stuart Williams reminds us, that even though most of Lewis's short stories and poems are directly or indirectly connected with his war experiences, he

8. op. cit.
9. The Adelphi; No. 4 (1951), 403-413
had launched himself on a poetic career even before 1939. In consultation with Mrs. Gweno Lewis, Williams has been able to date the pre-war poems:

It is necessary to remember that more than a third of the poems in Raider's Dawn were written before 1939; that is, all the poems in the section entitled 'Poems in Love' except 'Valediction' and 'War-Wedding', all in the section entitled 'Songs' except 'Autumn 1939', and all the poems in the last two sections of the book except 'Destruction', twenty-one in all. It is clear then, that Lewis did not become a writer because of the stimulus of war.

This argument seems convincing despite Lewis's own remarks in the 'Author's Note' to Raider's Dawn, that "practically all these poems have been written since September 1939": In the poems, which Williams thinks were written before 1939, the poet deals with subjects that are quite independent of war. But in the absence of "the stimulus of war" or indeed any deep experience or thought, Lewis's pre-war poems are in the romantic vein and are pretty conventional. Mid-Winter creates an atmosphere of a cold winter evening with a lavish use of adjectives:

I took the path to the sea along the ruts Whose crystals cracked and crunched beneath my boots; The frost-bound mountains, tuned like tightened strings, Quivered beneath the hawk's exalted dream. The disused quarry, red with peat and iron, Suspended frozen stalactites of moss.

And then there is longing and wistfulness for the arrival of Cytherea. When she does arrive, the feelings are expressed in appropriately romantic imagery of "the passionate wave" answering the "moontug". The poem ends with a sensuous description of the poet and Cytherea embracing each other in "the warmth of flesh" in order to ward off the inexplicable chasms of "time and pain". Amidst all this sense of exile, loss and longing, there is a sensuality which is not altogether accidental.

In these early poems Lewis gives the feeling that some hidden sexual forces needed to be released. In the poem The Desperate, he specifically speaks of such a need:

O man and woman
In that hour of need,
Flying wide the sluice
release the seed;

This unfortunately led him to use erotic imagery without much poetic relevance. Thus, stars and night are described as:
Stars seemed gilded nipples
Of the Night's vast throbbing breasts,
Softly disclosing themselves at the fall of dark.

(Songs For The Night)

Reviewers complained that in Lewis's poems the theme of love "often dissolves into depressing sensuality and what is known as 'sex'" 13 and Lewis himself spoke later on of "the disturbingly sensual vein there that interfered with the poetry of the poems". 14 His early love poems are rather weak primarily because Lewis has not, as yet, learnt to control his lyrical impulse, or to curb his fondness for florid imagery and diction. It is for this reason that his Songs strike one as rather sentimental, where the grief seems some kind of a luxury, and death merely a delicate dance.

His objective poems of this period are more interesting. Poems from the Chinese are a pleasant exercise in the manner of Pound, while The Swan's Way and Horace At Twenty are poems of skilful versification. The Odyssey bears evidence of Lewis's striking historical imagination. The poem has great assuredness and poise, and the poet

has been able to create myth and experience which has direct relevance to contemporary living. The ambivalent feelings of guilt, courage, frustration, and a general sense of nostalgia for a peaceful homely existence on the part of Odysseus's followers, have been captured in the following lines of dignified blank-verse:

But still we sailed, like ugly gods enduring
The day-spring glittering with beauty
And one of us kept notching up the moons
Along the rotting gunwale; still we kept
A fitful knowledge of ourselves; we wove
Into the pattern of our nervous thoughts
A vague confusing longing for the fields
Homesteads and wives and children grown
to manhood.

The pastoral life, the common satisfaction
Forfeited when we answered wrong with wrong.

The Madman is an equally impressive poem in which the central irony of life is presented through the protagonist who is at once mad and wise, whose "laughter has the sound of weeping" and whose vision of "angelic faces" breaks through the "darkness of life".

Two other poems of this period, The Mountain Over Aberdare and The Rhondda, grew out of Lewis's personal interest in, and the knowledge of, life of the Welsh miners. This is how he presents the poverty and suffering of people in a small Welsh village:
Out stubborn bankrupt village sprawled
In jaded dusk beneath its nameless hills;
The drab streets strung across the cwm,
Derelict workings, tips of slag
The gospellers and gamblers use
And children scrutinising for the coal
That winter dole cannot purvey.

(The Mountain Over Aberdare)

John Stuart Williams has analysed the poem, and has demonstrated Lewis's "weakness for adjectives, a lack of concentration, of compression in some of the imagery... There are over thirty adjectives in a poem of thirty-seven lines, and although many of them are apt, even powerful, and help to create striking phrases, the frequency of their occurrence lessens the tension that the opening lines promise with their steadiness of focus, their everyday vocabulary, and their speech rhythms". This criticism of the technique of the poem is justified but Williams misjudges the basic intention of the poem when he supposes that it is "a poem of protest". On the contrary, it is essentially a poem of pity in which the miserable lives of the miners have been viewed with the sympathy and detachment of a spectator. It is the failure to see the poem in this light that prevents Williams from responding to the

following lines of lyrical quietness:

And mourners in their Sunday best
Holding a tiny funeral, singing hymns
That drift insidious as the rain
Which rises from the steaming fields
And swathes about the skyline crags
Till the upland gorse is drenched
And all the creaking mountain gates
Drip brittle tears of crystal peace.

Williams believes that these lines achieve "its effect at the expense of bite and drive one might have expected in what is, after all, a poem of protest". But in fact, the sense evoked in the above lines (despite the sentimentality of "brittle tears" and "crystal peace") is in perfect harmony with the general feeling of suffering in the poem. While at the beginning of the poem the bitterness and roughness in the lives of the poor people have been conveyed through the images of "stubborn bankrupt village", "Derelict workings", tips of slag", and "children scrutinising for coal", the lyrical lines that have been quoted above balance the picture without destroying the central effect of a general sadness that the poet is trying to create. The people go on living their painful lives, and the poet acts as a sympathetic observer. The poet starts with viewing the village from a "high quarried ledge" and ends with the words:
I watch the clouded years
Rune the rough foreheads of these moody hills,
This wet evening, in a lost age.

The Rhondda, on the other hand, contains a
direct attack on profiteers who are held responsible
for the plight of the "unwashed colliers", whose
"kids float tins down dirty rapids", and whose

flat flabby breasted wives
Have grown accustomed to her ways
They scrub, make tea, peel the potatoes
Without counting the days.

All this is the doing of "Circe" who
is a drab

She for her profit takes their hands and eyes.
It is true that this attempt to symbolize the greed
and cruelty of capitalists in the mythological
figure of Circe is rather awkward and self-conscious.
Here, Lewis's literariness takes away the frankness
and honesty of, say D.H. Davies's or John Masefield's
poems on similar lines about the poor and deprived.
Nevertheless, this poem, as well as The Mountain
Over Aberdare are important in so far as they indicate
the poet's genuine concern for the poor and the
oppressed, a concern which was later on extended to
"the landless soldiers" of war and the Indian
peasants.
Twenty-six of the forty-seven poems in *Raider's Dawn* grew out of Lewis's experiences in the army. They are quite varied in attitudes, changing with changes in Lewis's own personal experiences. It is important to remember that Lewis's poems are directly related to his personal experiences. While in the Author's Note to *Raider's Dawn*, he called the poems "a personal statement", elsewhere he had remarked: "I consider my poems as expressions of personal experiences". He felt that he always needed to be near an experience in order to write about it creatively. He explained this in a letter to his wife, written from India:

......I always realize this when I'm trying to write a poem or a story - if I get too far away from the thing, the thought becomes flabby and invalid, and it weighs on me with a dead weight, and all the creative vitality dies in me. 17.

It would be appropriate, therefore, to refer to his letters and other relevant sources, to find out what his first reactions to army life were which supplied him with the raw material for "Poems in Khaki" in *Raider's Dawn*. That would give us a clue to the workings of Lewis's poetic mind.

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15. See 'Foreword' to *Hai Hai Among the Trumpets* (1945)
17. *In The Green Tree*, op.cit. pp. 52-53
which created the poems - poems, some of which are just impressionistic while others are objective poems with their own universal validity.

Lewis hated the boredom and separation involved in a training camp. "I wish I was in London, or Mountain Ash, or the cockpit of a Spitfire. Not just eating Government food and wasting my own time". And in the author's Note to The Last Inspection he remarked that in the stories "the main motif is the rootless life of soldiers, having no enemy, and always, somehow under a shadow". Indeed, the isolation of the soldier from all that he had been familiar with, and the impending catastrophe and death are the themes of some of the poems in Raider's Dawn. The Soldier deals, not only with a sense of banishment but also a conscienciousness of cleavage within himself. The opening stanzas set the scene with their contrasting expressions, e.g. turbulence and Time (which alleviates the intensity of pain), Volcanic fires and the glacier, sunlight and nightmare. Despite the romantic phraseology like the "flashing wings" and "Hall of Mirror",

Lewis is able, in the first section of the poem, to create a sense of catastrophe and helplessness in which the soldier finds himself. In the next section the poet evokes a beautiful picture of joys of love amidst natural beauty, from which the soldier finds himself alienated:

yet still
I who am agonized by thought
And war and love
Grow calm again
With watching
The flash and play of finches
Who are as beautiful
And as indifferent to me
As England is this Spring morning.

Here the power of life-denying forces is felt as strongly as a heightened consciousness of life. A similar undercurrent runs through The Sentry, with the significant difference that now the soldier looks at the beautiful life before he went to the war as a thing of the distant past and is obsessed with an overwhelming apprehension of his impending death. Lewis conveys this sense of the eventual end of life through brilliantly manipulated images of sleep, silence and night:

I have left
The lovely bodies of the boy and girl
Deep in each other's placid arms;
And I have left
The beautiful lanes of sleep
That barefoot lovers follow to this last
Cold share of thought I guard.
I have begun to die,
and the guns' implacable silence
Is my black interim, my youth and age,
In the flower of fury, the folded poppy,
Night.

Lewis believed that his present weariness and
an overwhelming sadness were the symptoms of the
present conditions around him and his fellow
soldiers, and that such shadow, would pass,
enabling him and others to be hopeful and creative
again. In an unpublished letter to his friend
Llewellyn Wyn Griffith, which is deposited
with the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth,
he had remarked:

The last six months - during which I have
been commissioned - have so undermined my
self that I value with the half-apathetic
half-desperate mind of a sick person the
profession of faith that came my way. I
find it hardest to identify 2/Lt. A. Lewis
with Alun Lewis: and I believe its not
confined to me, but is a general symptom of
the Now through which Britain is passing.
My great hope is that this sadness and
weariness is an adolescent rather than an
aged disease, and contains its own remedy.
But now hard it is, like a black stone.

One way to face this predicament was to adopt
the stance of impersonality. This is what Lewis
did in All Day It Has Rained, the beautifully
modulated longer lines of which evoke a sense of
boredom, inertia and indifference. His short
story Lance-Jack looks like a prose statement of the various moods and feelings out of which the poem *All Day It Has Rained*—grew. For instance, in the story, the author states:

A soldier is always impersonal. That's the only way to preserve any privacy in conditions where one is never alone. Eight in a tent, lying on groundsheets feet to the tentpole, kit piled high and in small space by one's side. Writing letters, looking at snaps, cutting toenails, sewing buttons, contemplating something distant, brooding over something immediate. It is all impersonal, the other seven don't notice, don't interfere.19

In the poem too, there is this sense of impersonality as well as indifference. He identifies himself with his comrades, and does the dull chores in an army camp:

And we stretched out, unbuttoning our braces, Smoking a Woodbine, darning dirty socks, Reading the Sunday papers—

and regards with casual indifference the 'duties' and the motives of the warlords:

And we talked of girls, and dropping bombs on Rome, And thought of the quiet dead and the loud celebrities.

Exhorting us to slaughter and the herded refugees;

Like his fellow soldiers, he looks at his civilian

19. Alun Lewis; *The Last Inspection*, (1947) pp. 75-76
past, and future, through a haze of mist and submits himself entirely to "the brooding over something immediate":

Yet thought softly, morosely of them and as indifferently,
As of ourselves on those whom we
For years have loved, and will again
Tomorrow maybe love; but now it is the rain
Possesses us entirely, the twilight and the rain.

But he is different too from his comrades-in-arms.
As a well educated civilian - and a poet - he has his moments of vision. Just as the protagonist in *Lance-Jack* indulged in some kind of reverie -

The forest is blue and lazy with warmth and distance, like lavender, and the sandy path runs forward to the cluster of tents on the open heath. I see only the distance, the forest, and I half forget my khaki and imagine myself an itinerant preacher ... Or a lover in a Hardy Novel, fifty years ago, on this same path, Tess lonely and hurt, Jude instinctively seeking loneliness. 20

so Lewis in this poem envisions a world of idyllic beauty in which children play and "where Edward Thomas/brooded long". But this picture is undercut by the images of the children "Shaking down burning chestnuts", and of Edward Thomas's "song" being stopped by a bullet. In other words, his experiences as a soldier colour his vision of what was once beautiful and good.

To Edward Thomas is an extension of such ideas, and sees death as a natural commitment which man has to accept, as the poet Edward Thomas did. While reviewing Edward Thomas's *The Trumpet And Other Poems* for *Horizon*, Alun Lewis said:

As a War Poet, say that he (Thomas) did not suffer as Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg and was not embittered beyond bearing, but felt it as a profound and seric experience, a voice in himself — Death, the ultimate response that he, despite himself, desired. The war came to him as to his dead ploughman, naturally. He accepted his own death and, it seems to me, the death of every fated soldier.

In the poem *To Edward Thomas*, Lewis visits the Edward Thomas memorial stone in Hampshire. Amidst the pastoral surroundings which had inspired the older poet, Lewis also feels "lonely and exalted by the friendship of the wind". In the beautiful third stanza he describes the soft and gentle beauty of the place which makes him see Life itself as gentle and calm:

And sunlight with discerning fingers
Softly explore the distant wooded acres,
Touching the farmsteads one by one with lightness
Until it reached the Down, whose soft green pastures
Went slanting sea- and skywards to the limits
Where sight surrenders and the mind alone
Can find the sheep's tracks and the grazing.
And for that moment Life appeared
As gentle as the view I gazed upon.

In the next stanza he goes on to reflect on the failures and frustrations that Edward Thomas had encountered:

And in the lonely house there was no ease for you, or Helen, or those small perplexed Children of yours who only wished to please.

In this predicament, Lewis believes, Edward Thomas must have derived inspiration from the natural scene described in stanza III - it is the sky of that stanza that is recalled in the following lines:

Divining this, I knew the voice that called you Was soft and neutral as the sky Breathing on the grey horizon, stronger Than night's immediate grasp, the limbs of mercy Oblivious as the blood; and growing clearer More urgent as all else dissolved away.

Edward Thomas is here seen as being in the "dream" which perhaps means a state of poetic bliss. This state is akin to death because it dissolves all worldly considerations. From this 'dream' to the 'ultimate dream', i.e. death, is a natural progression. So that when Lewis speaks in the last line, of Thomas's death in active service at Arras, the suggestion is that through his death, the elder poet achieved some kind of a spiritual fulfilment, "the ultimate response that he, despite himself, desired."

Lewis comes out with a more earthy interpretation of man's role in war in *After Dunkirk*. In this
poem, human life is viewed at a critical point in history, when old forms suddenly seem irrelevant:

I have no desire to express
The old relationships, of love fulfilled
Or stultified, capacity for pain,
Nor to say gracefully all that the poets have said
Of one or the other of the old compulsions.

The ideals of politicians and democrats are rejected. He realizes that now even personal relationships have to be sacrificed—"A growing self-detachment making men/ Less homesick, fearful proud"—in order to liberate the imagination, which would then be able to have a wider perspective:

The dark imagination that would pierce
Infinite night and reach the waiting arms
And soothe the guessed-at tears.

Once that stage is reached, one can envisage new life emerging out of ruins:

And as the burning town falls down the wake
And white waves spread their fans and day grows bright.
Then sea and sky and wheeling gulls commingle
In the smiles of dying children and the joy
Of luckier babies playing in the cot.

Here the affirmation seems to stand despite—in fact, is fed by—the realities which deny it. A similar attempt to force triumph out of defeat is made in Odi Et Amo, which traces the gradual stages of the soldiers torture and pain. But in "this blood-soaked forest of disease/ Where wolfish men lie scorched", he feels exhilarated by love in the manner of the Ancient Mariner:
My soul cries out with love
Of all that walk and swim and fly
From the mountains, from the sky
Out of the depth of the sea
Love cries and cries in me.
And blossoms break above my head
With all the unbearable beauty of the dead.

The strength and the determination of the poetic mind which refused to yield are summarised in the images of summer blossoms breaking over head, and the phrase "the unbearable beauty of the dead". Lewis universalises the picture in Threnody For a Starry Night in which the pattern of tragedy is traced through the past ages:

Socrates on the frozen lake
Sat awhile and heard, disconsolate,
The blind unnerving harmonies of fate.
And always in Shakespearean tragedy
The foils are poisoned that the good may die.

It is with the knowledge that "the foils are poisoned that the good may die" that Lewis accepts the death of the soldier:

And in the dark the sensitive blind hands
Fashion the burning pitch of night
In lovely images of dawn.

The soldiers frozen sightless eyes
End the mad feud. The worm is love.

But surely these were just a few of the many ways he was looking at war. From a comparatively safe position, during the period of his military training, Lewis was able to contemplate the possibility that through war's destruction,
some positive alternative might be discovered. But he thought of the other side of the picture also. In a poem like *Lines On a Tudor Mansion* he naively contrasted the permanence of a Tudor Mansion, "So, grey assured house, surviving change" - with the soldier's own sense of impermanence and decay:

*We know*  
*Violence, terrible and degrading*  
*Beauty disfigured,*  
*And the coward cruel brute*  
*Shaping us in his image.*

A couple of poems like *The Defeated* and *Autumn 1939* show the poet going back in history and finding no difference between the cruelty and nothingness of wars, past and present. The *Defeated* has, for its epigram, a quotation from a 7th-9th century Welsh poem in which valor and honour are held up as virtues but Lewis can see that when a soldier is confronted with death, such supposed virtues evaporate into thin air:

*Forgetting honour, valour, fame*  
*In this darkness whence we came.*

Similarly in *Autumn 1939* - which bears traces of his animus against the "long dead Thirteenth Century" which was the subject of his research at Manchester University - Lewis sees the Knights of the medieval times fighting for nebulous ideals.
Up to November 1940 Lewis had been assigned to the camp loco sheds and then he was transferred to the staff of army Education Officer. In this capacity he found plenty of time — and facilities — to do his writings. He wanted to be permanently transferred to the Education Corps but his application was rejected. So he applied for infantry commission, and was accepted, and was sent for officer training in Morecambe in Lancashire.

He was none too happy in the company of officers and was repelled by their arrogance, stupidity and class-consciousness. He satirized their behaviour in his short stories, notably in *Almost a Gentleman*, and also wrote a poem called *Finale* which ironically portrays one of them. The officer posed his way through life. He —

Was fascinating to the young ladies,
Male, seductive, sardonic for the occasion;
Whose sloping shoulders were blazoned for duration
With the flashy epaulettes of tradition.

But war permanently fixed him in a posture that was terrible:

Today he struck a final gesture,
Arms akimbo against the sky,
Crucified on a cross of fire.

The poem, however, ends on a philosophic note in which death is regarded as a deliverer from the confusion of living:
He had no choice in this, yet seems content
That Life's confused dishonesty
Should find this last simplicity.

More importantly, Lewis was bitterly
disappointed over the fact that he could do nothing
constructive as an officer. He had said to his
friend J. Maclaren-Ross, 'I thought that as an
officer I'd be able to do something for the men.
But one's more helpless than ever,' and Maclaren-
Ross himself had noted that "Lewis had a deep
tenderness towards life itself. In June 1942,
Lewis was sent to Lulworth in Dorset for wireless
training and it was at this time that he visited
T.E.Lawrence's cottage at Cloud's Hill. Here
Lewis found some important thoughts in one of
T.E.Lawrence's letters: "As for fame after death,
it's a thing to spit at; the only minds worth
winning are the warm ones about us. If we miss
these we are failures. It is in this
context that we can understand what was going on in
his mind when he said to his friend Richard Hills:

He (Robert Graves) warned me against becoming
too democratic - poets are not democratic in
their poetry but only in their lives. Do you
accept? I don't. I wrote back and said that
my whole power, such as it is, springs from one
source - humility - which alone engenders and

22. J.Maclaren-Ross 'Second Lieutenant Lewis' in
The Penguin New Writing, No. 27 (1946) pp 78-79.
23. See The Last Inspection, op.cit. p.214
resolves my perpetual struggle against the arrogant and the submissive, the victors and the vanquished. I think I am working from the only true source these days: if I succeed (I use the word in no vulgar sense) I will have helped to make the world gentler, more understanding, more beautiful therefore. I don't mind sweating my soul out for such an end. 24.

These utterances acquire richer significance when one realizes that they came from the poet who felt so tenderly towards the miserable miners in his native Wales. When he found himself trapped by the treacherous forces of war, he clung more and more to "the warm ones about us". The first impulse, however, was to seek the love of women. In poems like Post-Script: For Gweno and On a Be-reaved Girl, love survives the calamities of war. In the former poem, his wife will abide with him like "A singing rib within my dreaming side", even when he is engaged in his battle with "uncought, untamed" death. And in the other poem the girl will have a deeper understanding of her relationship with her lover after his death: she will realize that "the fled-away is eternal within her". But perhaps more important are those poems in which a sustaining value amidst the catastrophe of war is sought, not in personal terms but in terms of the vast humanity in general. Poems like Odi Et Amo 24. See Hamilton, op. cit; pp. 34-35
point in that direction, but more such poems were to come in his next volume *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*. The direction in which his mind was moving is best exemplified in the short story *They Came*. In that story, the soldier, Taffy who returns from home leave after finding that his wife was killed, his house destroyed, in air- raids, submits himself to the world:

"My life belongs to the world", he said "I will do what I can". He moved along the spur and looked down at the snow-grey ever-green woods and the glinting roofs scattered over the rich land. And down in the valleys the church bells began pealing, and he laughed like a lover, seeing his beloved. 25

On the abandonment of his personal life, the soldier finds a new beauty and richness in nature - "the glinting roofs scattered over the rich land" - and love for humanity in the true religious spirit.

When one looks back at Raider's *Dawn* as a whole, one tends to get a little bewildered by the diversity of attitudes and feelings expressed there. The poems appear to be anthology pieces rather than the work of a single poetic mind, which normally is able to sift the various experiences into a recognizable mould. This is perhaps due to Lewis's

method of writing about personal experiences, without the ability to distance them and transmute them into a harmonious poetic whole. His contemporaries Keyes and Douglas had this ability so that their poetry gives a sense of wholeness rather than the unevenness which mark Lewis's poetry.

In other words, Lewis had a lyrical impulse which he was not always able to subdue for the creation of significant poetry. That is why he could speak of death in his Songs in terms of lilting rhythms and sensuous phrases. In fact, except for the occasionally remarkable poems like All Day It Has Rained, To Edward Thomas, Peace and After Dunkirk most of the poems in Raider's Dawn are just charming lyrical exercises. Indeed when this volume appeared, Lewis was hailed as "The Rupert Brooke of the War" which was denied by reviewers like H. Peschmann. This prompted The Scotsman reviewer to claim that Lewis is "one of the most notable singers of this war. He may not be Rupert Brooke, but he is at least Francis Ledwidge". Herbert Palmer made a more balanced criticism of the book when he remarked:

26. The New English Weekly, (30th July 1942), 132
27. (August 6th, 1942), 7.
Half the book is as terse, shapely, imaginative and lucidly concentrated as these examples, but the other half is nothing of the kind. 28

Probably Lewis lacked the imaginative resources of a major poet. He was always waiting for experiences, and hence his poetic performance depended on the intensity with which they hit him. He was very ambitious as a poet, and was aware of the achievements of great poets in the past. In Prologue: The Grinder, he made extravagant claims for his poetry:

I've used strength in striving for the vision, And with the vision - like old Jacob's stress; And I've worked to outline with precision, Existence in its nakedness.

This is more a statement of what he wanted to do rather than his actual achievement. Gwynn Jones notes how Lewis reacted to "the high-flying praise of Raider's Dawn": "I take all they say with a grain of salt. As a writer I've just gone back to school again." 29

Until the time he left for India, Lewis lacked, both in his life and poetry, a sense of direction. His friend J. Maclaren-Ross recalls how Lewis felt the night before he was to leave for India:

29. See In The Green Tree, op.cit. p.139
On the night before Lewis's mob was due to leave, we sat on a rusty abandoned roller in a field of long grass. Lewis did not talk much, he was depressed. Once he said: 'I'm not sure that I want to go really' and later: 'But there'll be something to get to grips with out there.'

Just before leaving, Lewis urged his wife to join him in abandoning themselves to the war, very much in the spirit of Taffy in the short story _They Came_:

> I say we must lose ourselves in the war and go each into the unknown and neither of us must cling to a past memory or a future hope but we must give to the world and suffer the world and become its accidents, and so grow rich.  

Yet, when he arrived in India, the writer in him asserted itself:

> I don't know whether to dive in or stay on the bank and concern myself with tanks only. At least I considered both courses, but the insatiable humanist and the restless writer in me will probably impel me to abandon neutrality and seek in India as in England the true story and the proper ending.

This is an ambiguous statement, and though Lewis seems to indicate therein a hope that a more active life would probably lead him to write better poetry, it is possible to interpret his words to mean that he was seeking more experiences in order to write better poetry. Even in his general behaviour he

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30. op. cit. p.31.
32. In The Green Tree. op.cit. 27
seems to have given the latter impression. That's how Lewis's instructor felt, though Lewis vigorously denied it:

When I was leaving Karachi, one of the instructors said to me: "You're the most selfish man I've ever met, Lewis. You think the war exists for you to write books about it". I didn't deny it, though it's all wrong. I hadn't the strength to explain what is instinct and categorical in me, the need to experience. The writing is only proof of the sincerity of the experience, that's all. 33

The quest for experiences is perhaps an admirable trait in man, but that alone or 'the sincerity of the experience' cannot itself assure the creation of significant poetry. What happens in such a case - and that happened to Lewis - is that one is able to create isolated pieces of interesting poetry, depending on how intensely the poet can respond to a particular experience. Lewis's poems in Hai! Hai Among the Trumpets too are extremely varied and uneven, depending on the impact that a particular experience made on him, and what technical expertise happened to be available to him at the moment. One tenuous thread that runs through his life, letters, short stories and poems written in India is one of movement towards extinction, a movement which is chequered by diverse moods and meditations. His

33. Ibid. p. 47.
letters written from India show how he himself regarded his poems as mere reflections of his various moods - he described the poems in his second volume as a "queer batch, written in queer moods over a long period", and as late as January 1944, he was still hoping that he would soon find a "constructive purpose" to guide his pen:

Oh, if only I had the composure and self-detachment to write of all these things. But everything is fluid in me, an undigested mass of experience, without shape or plot or purpose. And it is as well to let it be so, for its a time of reflection of this Now we scramble through ....I'd like to wait until I can get a stronger and more constructive purpose to guide my pen. 35

Unfortunately, he died in the following March, leaving behind a body of poetry which is "a true reflection of this Now" as it is viewed by a sensitive man. This attitude, by its very definition, produces impressionistic poems, some of which like Karanji Village, The Peasants, The Jungle are remarkable, showing the poet's increasing mastery over technique and a mature sensibility working on a given experience. It is significant to note in this connection that his stay in India provided him with experiences whose richness and intensity sometimes extended beyond his poetic

34. Ibid. p. 46
35. Ibid. p. 57
powers so that he embodied them in excellent short stories like Orange Grove and Ward 'O' 3 (b).

The striking difference between Raider's Dawn and Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets is that the poems in the latter volume bear evidence of the fact that the poet's feelings now are much more immediate, and hence more concretely realized. Most of the poems in the first section of Ha! Ha! Among The Trumpets recapitulate the feelings and attitudes of the poems in Raider's Dawn, but it is done with greater firmness and economy.

A Welsh Night grows out of a sense of apprehension and a general feeling of sadness. The effect of the war on the Welsh miners, who, for instance had appeared in Mountain Over Abergarre has aggravated the misery in their lives. Lewis evokes the appropriate background of "the coal-tipped misty slopes/of old Garth mountains" against which the Welsh families lead their lives, made more wretched now because the women are forced to work in the munition factories, and their men folk have been enlisted into the army:

Munition girls with yellow hands
Clicking bone needles over Khaki scarves,
Schoolboys' painful numerals in a book,
A mother's chilblained fingers soft
Upon the bald head of a suckling child
But no man in the house to clean the grate
Or bolt the outside door or share the night.
Lewis's firm grasp over the actual is demonstrated in his graphic description of the young girls working in war factories, and the mother rearing her child single-handedly. This is much more moving than the effect created by *The Mountain Over Aberdare*, where Lewis's indiscriminate use of adjectives and self-conscious allusions (e.g. the equation of the gambler's money with Christ and the thirty pieces of silver) diffuse the focus. Similarly *Infantry* is very much like his earlier poems *The Soldier* and *The Sentry*, with the significant difference that whereas in the earlier poems there is a consciousness of the positive aspects of life, however remote, in *Infantry*, there is a sense of resignation which is symbolized in lines like:

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All mortal anguish shrunk into an ache
Too nagging to be worth the catch of breath.
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Moreover, there is a complete impersonality on the part of the soldiers, who play their roles mechanically:

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Enduring to the end the early cold
The emptiness of noon, the void of night
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There is one more theme that Lewis took up, the theme of love and separation, and it is again tempting to compare and contrast the earlier and the later poems on the subject. Besides *Goodbye* poems like *Post Script to Gweno* and *Lines on a Bereaved Girl* sound callow and sentimental.
The apprehensions of the girl — or the wife — in *Goodbye* are juxtaposed with the soldier's sense of resignation. But these feelings lead them to an understanding of deeper implications of their relationship, and their own place in the universe. The soldier spends the last night with his wife and for him it is nothing beyond just plain love-making. But the frightened expression in his wife's eyes suddenly makes him aware of darker experiences to come:

> Your kisses close my eyes and yet you stare
> As though God struck a child with nameless fears;
> Perhaps the water glitters and discloses
> Time's chalice and its limpid useless tears.

> Everything we renounce except ourselves;
> Selfishness is the last of all to go;
> Our sighs are exhalations of the earth,
> Our footprints leave a track across the snow.

The poet does not stop at this point. If the lovers come to a deeper realisation of the tragic nature of life, they, at the same time, grow conscious of a greater meaning in their relationship, a meaning which stretches beyond physical attraction:

> Yet when all's done you'll keep the emerald
> I placed upon your finger in the street;
> And I will keep the patches that you sewed
> On my old battledress tonight, my sweet.

Though the idea of the soldier keeping the patches that his wife has sewn on his battledress might strike one as a little sentimental, it is not so in the present context. In fact, the poet succeeds
in suggesting the continuation of love whether it is symbolized by emeralds or patches. Besides one must notice the great economy and precision with which Lewis conveys the feelings and thoughts of these two lovers on their, perhaps, last night together.

When Lewis actually left England, and sailed for India, he tried to alleviate the painful feelings of separation by choosing to believe in a vague but a good outcome of his future commitments. *On Embarkation* grows out of this mood, and it is an interesting poem primarily because it contains, within itself, a little vague subjective hope which is stifled by a consciousness of more pressing and immediate realities. The poem starts on a reflective note and the poet finds it easy to indulge in a benign speculation about the eventual result of his voyage into "the long Unseen" and "the strange Unknown";

Each of us is invisible to himself, Our eyes grow neutral in the long Unseen We take or do not take a hand of cards, We shake down nightly in the strange Unknown. Yet each one has a hankering in his blood, A dark relation that disturbs his joke And will not be abandoned with a shrug: Each has a shrunken inkling of the Good.
But at the end of this section of the poem there is an unconscious realization on the part of the poet about the limitations of this vague subjective hope—

But others, lacking the power of reflection
Broke ship, impelled by different emotions.

Indeed, he himself seems to be at his best—and most natural—when instead of indulging in general reflections, he like his comrades, goes home on his last leave, and the entire native landscape comes up in its minute idyllic details, details that he knows he would "need" when he goes out into strange and unknown lands:

Just here you leave this Cardiganshire lane,
Here by these milk churns and this telegraph pole,
Latch up the gate and cut across the fields.
Some things you see in detail, those you need;
The raindrops spurting from the trodden stubble
Squirting your face across the reaping meadow,
The strange machine-shaped scarab beetle
His scalloped legs clung bandy to a stalk,
The Jew's-harp bee with saddlebags of gold,
The wheat as thin as hair on flinty slopes,
The harsh hewn faces of the farming folk....

Lewis's apparent enthusiasm for, and familiarity with, such homely scenes help him create evocative poetry, firmly rooted in first hand observation and precise descriptive ability. But as the poem progresses, the essential reality of the soldier's predicament pierces through as the women foresee the doom of their men which they cannot hide behind their smiles and laughter:
Or maybe when he laughs and bends to make Her laugh with him she sees that he must die, Because his eyes declare it plain as day.

The poem therefore ends on a very subdued note. Now neither the "shrunken inkling of the Good" nor a nostalgic longing for home seems quite relevant. He knows that he is going into the dark - and this Lewis conveys through the telling image of the ship slipping into the sea in the dark of night - and all that he can do is not to hope but to pray. And that prayer is a poignant cry for a better world for his progeny:

The steel bows break, the churning screw burns white. Each pallid face wears an unconscious smile, And I - I pray my unborn tiny child Has five good senses and an earth as kind As the sweet breast of her who gives him milk And waves me down this first clandestine mile.

However, this was too pessimistic and resigned an attitude for a poet, and Lewis's letters and Journals show that his constant effort was towards finding some alternate value in the impasse in which he found himself. The men who were in sympathy with the Welsh miners now felt tenderness for the poor soldiers around him who lived in squalid circumstances:

The bunk piled to the roof round the hatches and on hatches, men like maggots playing "Housey-Housey" and the croupier shouting the numbers in a voice like a bull. Hammocks, beer bottles, oranges, bare legs protruding from shirts, sweat and smell and foetid warmth.36

36. In The Green Tree; p.19
These men appeared in *A Troopship In The Tropics*:

Deep in the foetid holds the hired bunks
Hold restless men who sweat and toss and sob;
The gamblers on the hatches, in the comer
The accordionist and barber do their job.

The smell of oranges and excrement
Moves among those who write uneasy letters
Or slouch about and curse the stray dejection,
That chafes them with its hard nostalgic fetters.

Lewis greatly enjoyed being an entertainment officer
for these men, arranging concerts and competitions for
them. This was his way of doing "something for
the men".

And when he encountered the injustices meted out
to the natives of the colonies his sympathies were
further extended to them. As he came into contact
with different cultures and different problems, both
his vision and imagination expanded. His ship
*Athlone Castle* had two ports of call; at Belia in
Brazil and at Durban. He had a first hand acquaintance
with the racial problems in South Africa and was
outraged on realizing that "to equip and humiliate
people seems to be our general policy". But
far from being content with being a missionary in
his attitudes towards the victims, Lewis groped
for some ideals beyond "the European's measured hate":

37. See Hamilton; *op.cit.* p.42
But now the white-faced tourist must translate
His old unsated longing to adventure
Beyond the European's measured hate
Into the dangerous oceans of past and future.

Where trembling intimations will reveal
The illusion of this blue mulatto sleep
And in that chaos like a migrant eel
Will breed a new direction through the deep.

This was, in some ways, a turning point in
Lewis's career, He had already moved from the
uncertain hope "of the Good" of On Embarkation
to the"trembling intimations" of the present poem.
This was because he was coming to realize that
there was only a spiritual solution to his personal
problem, as it had been for Rilke. Hamilton
substantiates this point by quoting from Lewis's
unpublished Journals:

The poem (to Rilke) was started on the boat
just before it arrived in Bombay, when Lewis
was ill in bed from food poisoning, and it was
completed at his first camp in India. He had
had a dream in which he had returned home to
Wales to find that he had died, and that Gwen,
when he embraced her, had become a different
woman, blonde, lavishly dressed and bejewelled;
'and the jewels flashed and I put out my hand to
touch her shoulder, but couldn't'. At this
point the dream ends, and Lewis writes of it:

'I realized the significance of that dream before
I got out of bed, It came seeping uncomfortably
into my understanding, that I had gone back
there in the only way possible, the spiritual way,
having passed first through the spiritual
experience of death.'
It was immediately after this dream, and in the conviction that it had told him the truth, that he began to contemplate a poem to Rilke:

"He approached me when we were lying off India and I asked him about silence, and what price one paid for going my way - through the panzer divisions of the century - and whether he would have found his silence there. Robert Graves said in a letter that Milton would have profited from serving in the army. But I don't know whether this is so. Some men have it - it seems to destroy others". 38

The poem, however, was not completed until a couple of weeks after his arrival in India, during which time he had at least one of the several encounters that he had with granite Buddha set amidst desolate plains. It was then that he experienced tranquility and 'silence' despite the suffering and desolation of the Indian scene:

"...and Buddha carved by a village craftsman lying there in a simplicity so complete and timeless and artless that all the tranquility and persistence of the East was caught in the stones and hills and plain; and Tony and Jack hallowed across the rocky fields and I turned towards them. I felt wonderfully happy, wonderfully happy. So much so that I had to tell Tony "I feel so happy". 39

When Lewis sat down to write the poem, he found himself as belonging to the brotherhood of artists like Rilke who had an intuitive perception

Of what can develop and what must be always endured.
And what the live may answer to the dead.

38. op. cit. 44
39. Ibid. p.47.
But he realizes that whereas an artist like Rilke never lacked "an occasion", to whom "silence" came as a birthday present, he himself always has to seek an occasion. Also, that in his pursuit "Labour, fatigue supervene". And although he is able to catch flashes of spiritual intimation -

I knew that unknown lands
Were near and real, like an act of birth.

he soon"fell ill and restless". He envied Rilke at such moments, for having been free from such distractions. Lewis is acutely conscious of the fact that his own predicament is different from that of Rilke, and wonders"whether he would have found his silence there", i.e., in Lewis's conditions. He himself is overwhelmed by the fact that he is so far away from his native land, and is in an alien country which is teeming with distress and darkness:

I sit within the tent, within the darkness Of India, and the wind disturbs my lamp.

But he makes one supreme effort to believe that it does not really matter that there is so much suffering and poverty. Simplicity and silence can be found in-will, perhaps, justify, the human miseries.

And I know that in this it does not matter where one may be or what fate lies ahead.
And Vishnu, carved by some rude pious hand,
Lies by a heap of stones, demanding nothing
But the simplicity that she and I
Discovered in a way you'd understand
Once and for ever, Rilke, but in oh a distant land.

Though the poem ends with the rediscovery of spiritual values, something which aligns him with Rilke, the journey for Lewis has not been so smooth. In fact the last words - "but in oh a distant land" - anticipate the difficulties that lay in his way. These words are ambiguous, or at any rate, are open to more than one interpretation. They may refer to Rilke who is now dead, and is removed to a distant land, or to the fact that both he and his wife had discovered the simplicity (which is now demanded by the image of Vishnu) in the now distant Wales. However, the most likely suggestion is that the simplicity that both he and his wife had discovered is the very thing demanded now, but finds it difficult to rediscover in the distant land of India.

It was ironical that Lewis found that the silence and simplicity which he had discovered earlier seemed threatened by spectacles of suffering in the land which had preached these very spiritual ideals through the ages. Karanje Village demonstrates this fact in vibrant poetic
terms. The poet who wanted "to go East and East and East faire le tour; there is a consummation somewhere," goes on a spiritual quest in this poem. He is frustrated and distressed by spectacles of poverty and suffering before coming face to face with higher truths as they are enshrined in the village temple. Even though he seems to accept them, he, in the end, finds himself in a state of indecision and doubt. The opening lines of the poem:

The sweeper said Karanje had a temple
A roof of gold in the gaon.

- remind one of Christian in Pilgrim's Progress whom Evangelist asks, at the beginning of the journey, "Do you see yonder shining light"? Just as Bunyan's pilgrim's immediate confrontation was with the Slough of Despond, and people like Obstinate Lewis could hardly see "a roof of gold". Instead -

But I saw only the long-nosed swine and the vulture
Groping for refuse for carrion,
and the burial cairns on the hill with its spout of dust
Where the mules stamp and graze,
The naked children begging, the elders in poverty,
The sun's dry beat and glance.

40. See 'Foreword' to Hai Hai Among The Trumpets; (1945)
The picture of poverty, misery and squalor is intensified in the next two stanzas by the poet's heaping one squalid image upon another, images like, "The old hags mumbling by the well", and "The monkey loping obscenely round our smell". After this the silence and simplicity of Vishnu are conveyed with remarkable effect by a dexterous manipulation of images in tune with the feelings of stern simplicity and austerity:

And alone by a heap of stones in the lonely salt plain
A little Vishnu of stone,
Silently and eternally simply Being,
Bidding me come alone,
The poet is warned of the flesh which enmeshes "the singing bird of the soul". But he is distracted by the people around who "are hard and hungry and have no love", and as such is uncertain whether he or his sweetheart can fully accept Vishnu's message:

And Love must wait, as the unknown yellow poppy
Whose lovely fragile petals are unfurled
Among the lizards in this wasted land.
And when my sweetheart calls me shall I tell her
That I am seeking less and less of world?
And will she understand?

One has a feeling that Lewis was too practical-minded to achieve any kind of spiritual self-realization. That is why we find him quickly moving from nebulous spiritual gropings to something more concrete and physical. The pathetic plight of the
Indian peasants re-awakened the humanitarian spirit in Lewis. He shelved aside personal considerations of his ownself in order to attend to their condition. And characteristically enough, in the face of pressing physical problems Lewis found little spiritual or religious salvation for the Indians who were victims of exploitation by the ruling class, nature’s cruelties and their own passive inert tolerance. In *Maharatta Ghats* the answer to the question whether the hard-working woman would eventually find some kind of compensation is,

But no! She cannot move. Each arid patch Owns the lean folk who plough and scythe and thatch Its grudging yield and scratch its stubborn stones. The small gods seek the marrow from their bones.

Similarly, the poem *Holi* celebrates the Hindu festival of Spring when the lands are fertile and the greenery of springtime is all around. Amidst the dancing and drumbeating of the peasants the poet detects their suffering which their God cannot alleviate:

Blood drips from the drumskins, The youths and girls obey The wild God's uttermost intent, And sob, and turn away,

And turn to the Indian forest And there they are as one – One with the dust and darkness When the God's last will is done.
Or again, in *Village Funeral: Maharashtra*, the poet's descriptions of the powers of the various Hindu gods assume ironical overtones when set beside the abject fact that the poor peasant leads each succeeding life in the same misery:

Nandi; bull of holiness,
Ganapathi; elephantine force,
Siva; destroyer and sparer,
Consider this poor corpse.

Not being and then being,
- Cowdung fire, bed of earth, -
How shall the peasant fare between
One birth and another birth?

Such a life of the Indian peasant aroused in Lewis a dazed compassion rather than promise of any spiritual nourishment for his own self. Critics like Williams tend to exaggerate the influence of the Indian scene on Lewis when they believe that "the simple humanity of the Indian peasant" became a kind of an ideal for the poet:

This suggests a rejection of the basic tenet of 'getting and spending'; of seeking after status and power, which govern our complicated world. It is in a sense reminiscent of Wordsworth's search for profundity and his equation of the two. Lewis's Indian peasant is half-brother to Wordsworth's Cumberland shepherd. 41.

On the contrary, Lewis, the poet, looks at the Indian peasant with the detachment and wonderment

41. *Anglo-Welsh Review*: Vol XIV. No. 33, 65
of a foreigner. Surely he felt sympathy for him which made him "wish I had come here as a doctor, teacher, social worker: anything but a soldier". But for his poetic purpose he began to view the Indian peasant with growing detachment. He began to see in his life the undisturbed continuity of human life, and his indifference to the problems and aspirations which beset the more sophisticated people. Lewis wrote an excellent poem on this theme, called The Peasants, and the following quotation from one of his letters should be read as a footnote to it:

I've got very interested in the war in the East, not only as a purely military problem, but also because these countries and peoples are a constant source of wonderment to me: so strange and individual and unlike our closed swift little Western world are they. Every time I look at an Indian peasant, I feel tranquil, especially when we are on some fantastically strenuous exercise, for the peasant is so utterly different and settled and calm and eternal that I know that my little passing excitement and worries don't exist in his world and are therefore not universal and will disappear. I don't think I feel the same tranquility in the starving villages of Bengal where there are such dreadful sights of human destitution... 43.

So far as his poems are concerned, he sees the peasant in destitution and want. The peasants of

42. In The Green Tree. p.48
43. Ibid.
the poem bearing the title *The Peasants* is
dwarf, barefooted and half-awake; as he ploughs
the field he steps "lightly and lazily among the
thorntrees". The women work hard and carry
burden, but at the same time they are sources of
abundant human life:

> The women breaking stones upon the highway,
> Walking erect with burdens on their heads,
> One body growing in another body,
> Creation touching verminous straw beds.

The third stanza shifts the focus on to the
soldiers who "struggle by" as contrasted to the
"stepping lightly" of the peasant. The dying
soldiers are a proof that History or Civilization
is in danger but the peasant who seems to symbolize
the eternal flow of life is just indifferent to
all these temporary excitements. Lewis's
objectivity lends the poem a certain power and
individuality all its own. There is no room
for sentimentality. The two pictures are
presented without the poet's own comments. The
soldiers represent the sophisticated Western world,
to save which they are fighting and dying. On
the other hand, the peasants are seen for what they
are, poor and half-awake, eking out a bare
*subsistence* by working hard, thereby representing
the basic instincts in men. Hardy had written a
similar poem, in which the fundamental theme is
that the basic pattern of human life cannot be destroyed by war:

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will fade into night
Ere their story die.

(In The Time of The Breaking of The Nations)

Lewis felt that the lives of Indian peasants were unbearably painful, yet the fact that they lived on the way they did was enormously interesting. He was both fascinated and repelled by the colour and squalor in the lives of the Indian people, and he conveyed his feelings through descriptions, which, with his mature gift of phrasing and skilful use of rhyme, assonance and alliteration, are indicative of Lewis's improved craftsmanship. Thus for instance Indian Day begins with a tableau whose brightness and colour tend to obscure the harsher realities of the scene even when they are mentioned:

The supple sweepер girl goes by
Brushing the dung of camels from the street
The daylight's silver bangles
Glitter on her naked feet.

And here is the Indian landscape:

Yellow remtills stiffens the noon,
Jackals skulk among the screeën,
In skinny fields the oxen shiver
The gods have prophesied disease.
Hedges of spike and rubber, hedges of cactus, 
Lawns of bougainvillea, jasmine, zinnia, 
Terraces of privilege and loathing, 
The masterly shadows of a nightmare.

Such poems are charming but since they are generally only sensitive descriptions, they demand, under the weight of 'reportage', no complex responses. In a sense, therefore, Lewis's poems about India are results of a detached and leisurely contemplation of an intriguing foreign scene. Gordon Symes is right in believing that "India remains a background, sensitively apprehended, but a background". 44

Lewis had plenty of leisure to look at the Indian scene. It must be remembered that during the greater part of his stay in India, he led a very humdrum life, with little excitement and less adventure. And he was not imaginatively haunted, as Douglas was with his "Bête Noire", or as Keyes was with his passion to discover "the Ultima Thule of Romanticism". Only two months before he was killed, Lewis noted:

But the most satisfying thing that I do these days is dig a trench or hack a bamboo down or find that my compass calculation through the jungle brought me exactly to the spot I

44. - op.cit. p.194.
planned.... It is a strange easy interlude in my life, this January in the wilds. But I went life to become serious and purposive again. I want to be getting on, the way I must go to get back to you. 45.

Lewis's attitude all along had been to view war impersonally and to wait for his 'great moment' after it was all over. Far from considering war as an integral part of the whole human experience, he looked at it as a menacing shadow which must soon pass. 'It was for this reason that most of his Indian poems are impressionistic and the few isolated personal pieces like The Way Back and Home Thoughts From Abroad are mainly nostalgic reveries.

But Lewis was, in the last months of his life, driven more and more to deal with his own predicament as a soldier who was going to die. The Journey shows him as an entranced spectator of the Indian scene with its "caravanseraiis" of gypies, "the donkeys grey as mice and mincing camels", but then there is the apprehension of death and all that it implies:

There was also the memory of Death
And the recurrent irritation of ourselves,
But the wind so wound its ways about us,
Beyond this living and this loving,
This calculation and provision, this fearing,
That neither of us heard the quiet voice calling us

45. In The Green Tree, op. cit. pp. 54-55
Remorse like rain softening and rotting the ground,
We felt no sorrow in the singing bird,
Forgot the sadness we had left behind.

These lines echo the sentiments that we had already encountered in his earlier poems like *All Day It Has Rained* and *The Sentry*, but the apprehension of death in the present poem is much more immediate and the poetry is more solemn and memorable. The first impulse now, at the thought of death, was to turn nostalgically towards homeland and desperately hope that love would survive after all. Lewis underwent hospital treatment for a broken jaw, which he got at a football game, and it was then that he prefigured death. In his two *In Hospital: Poona* poems, he tried to assert some alternative value in the face of death. In the first poem he conjures up an idyllic picture of Wales:

And like to swan or moon the whole of Wales Glided within the parish of my care: I saw the green tide leap on Cardigan, Your red yacht riding like a legend there,
And then -

And then ten thousand miles of daylight grew Between us, and I heard the wild daws creak In India's starving throat, whereas I knew That Time upon the heart can break But love survives the venom of the snake.

In *In Hospital: Poona* Lewis envisages death under the influence of anaesthesia, and sees "A void
where Pain demands no cheap release" where "mind lies coiled within green icebound streams". The outcome of this dream gets lost in the dense and diverse metaphors of the lines, though optimism seems to rest on a vague "hope that has no food" and "The heart's calm voice that stills the baying hounds". A more explicit - though perhaps a more abstract - outcome of death is envisioned in *Burma Casualty*. A wounded soldier comes to the hospital, utterly disgusted with the meaninglessness and horror of the operations he had been engaged in. The doctors tell him that his leg has to be amputated-

"Take it" he said, "I hate the bloody thing"

But he's terrified - terrified of death because it means leaving the known good of life for the unknown darkness of death:

The whitewashed walls, the windows bright with sky
Gathered a brilliant light above his head. Here was the light, the promise hard and pure, His wife's sweet body and her wilful eyes. Her timeless love stooped down to raise him up.

But under the influence of anaesthesia he experiences "darkness" and when he returns to consciousness he realises that that kind of darkness is preferable to life - life, whose meaningless sufferings come
out in greater relief in the new context:

The dark is a beautiful singing sexless angel
Her hands so soft you scarcely feel her touch
Gentle, eternally gentle, round your heart.
She flutters and unsexes every man.

And life is only a crude, pimpled churl
Frowsy and starving, daring to suffer alone

Lewis had ascribed a death-wish to Edward
Thomas - that's why the reference to "the hinted
land" in To Edward Thomas. Moreover, when Lewis
reviewed Thomas's The Trumpet And Other Poems, he
had remarked: "Death - the ultimate response that
he, (Edward Thomas) despite himself, desired."
Edward Thomas certainly spoke in his poem of a
world beyond, which lay outside his conscious
grasp, as is clear from the following last lines
from his poem Old Man:

I sniff the spray
And think of nothing: I see and hear nothing;
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet, never can remember;
No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush
Of Lad's love, or Old Man, no child beside,
Neither father nor mother, nor any plate;
Only an avenue, dark nameless, without end.

Nature symbolized for Edward Thomas the mystery and
the immortal truths about human spirit which he
tried to realize imaginatively through communion
with nature. But he is never overwhelmed. As
H. Coombe not s while discussing Thomas's *The Gypsy*, the "feeling of a dark immensity is very powerful, but it is not at all conquering: against the blackness and the words of the tune (suggesting an ever farther recession) there are the spark, the strength of stamping, the new moon."

It is for this reason that Thomas's desire for death is free from defeatism and weariness. He would willingly forsake the "dearest" objects in order to penetrate the "unknown":

There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown.

because by losing himself into the "unknown" he envisages a mysterious fulfilment:

The tall forest towers;
Its cloudy foliage lowers
Ahead, shelf above shelf:
In silence I hear and obey
That I may lose my way
and myself.

*(Lights Out)*

The subtly varying pressure of the rhythm, together with a natural delicacy and simplicity in the handling of the language, create an effect of mystery and strength that is highly complex.

Lewis's wish for death, on the other hand, is less subtle: it becomes a longing for escape. Lewis

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had written to his wife that "death does not fascinate me half as powerfully as life", but had gone on to point out in the same letter, "Death is the great mystery, who can ignore him?" 47 And as it turned out, towards the end of his life he more and more sought death in his desire to go through all the experiences that life could offer. In August 1943 Lewis was sent to Karachi to attend an intelligence course on the completion of which he was offered an instructor's job which would have kept him away from active warfare. He turned down the offer, partly out of his loyalty towards fellow Welsh soldiers, but mainly because he wanted the experience:

"It's time I took a harder job in a way. Yet I'm frightened of leaving them. They seem to have some secret knowledge that I want and will never find out until I go into action with them, and war really happens to them. I dread missing such a thing: it seems desertion to something more than either me or them. I hadn't the strength to explain what is instinctive and categorical in me, the need to experience. 48,

It was with this attitude that he hurled himself into war, and died within six months of writing the letter. Like many other war poets of his generation Lewis perhaps had an instinctive apprehension that the end

47. In The Green Tree, op. cit. p.39
48. Ibid. p.59
was near, and that the tragic fact must be faced. His last significant poem *The Jungle* grew out of this mood, and it seems to be his final poetic statement about life and war, or rather, "Life and Death" as he had phrased it in his well-known letter to his wife which Robert Graves quoted in his Foreword to *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpers*. The poem opens with the presentation of the jungle, apparently as a powerful symbol, and in the first section it is viewed as both corrupt and beautiful. In the second section, the poet surveys life in the Western World, and enumerates its economic, social and cultural ills:

The weekly bribe we paid the man in black,
The dry shift sinking from the sun,
The blinding arc of rivets blown through steel,
The patient queues, headlines and slogans flung
Across a frightened continent, the town
Sullen and out of work, the little home
Semi-detached, suburban, transient
As fever or the anger of the old
The best ones on some specious pretext gone.

In contrast to this, life and values asserted in the jungle seem preferable – the "instinctive rightness" of the Kingfisher is clearly a better choice than "the banal rectitude of the states", the "dew-bright diamond on a viper's back" than "the vituperations of the just";
But we who dream beside this jungle pool
Prefer the instinctive rightness of the poised
Pied Kingfisher deep darting for a fish
To all the banal rectitude of states,
The dew-bright diamond on a viper’s back
To the slow poison of a meaning lost
And the vituperations of the just.

It is as if at the end of his journey, Lewis comes face to face with the essential realities of life. With the enlargement of his imagination and experience, he sees the irrelevance of the values that he had imbibed as a youth. And now all the themes and attitudes that he had been trying to adopt in his earlier poems have become secondary in importance. For instance, there is no mention in the poem of his democratic ideals or pity for the victims of oppression and suffering. Lewis becomes more and more concerned with the vast and the elemental. In the third section he drops the symbol of the jungle, or at any rate relegates it to the background, and investigates the origins of man’s trouble, and discovers the truth within man himself:

   And though the state has enemies we know
   The greater enmity within ourselves.

This, however, goes with the recognition of man’s achievement, and his realization of elemental love. Lewis renders this splendidly with almost a perfect control over his materials:
Some things we cleaned like knives in earth,  
Kept from the dew and rust of Time  
Instinctive truths and elemental love,  
Knowing the force that brings the teal and quail  
From Turkestan across the Himalayan snows  
To Kashmir and the South alone can guide  
That winging wildness home again.

This, in a sense, might be taken as a statement — in vibrating poetic terms — of Lewis's own effort to retain the integrity of his self in a world of crumbling walls, but unfortunately it also contains admission of defeat. In fact, taking the section as a whole, one feels that man is viewed as a complex phenomenon in whom the potentiality for both good and evil is present. Regrettably, he has been more evil than good — and the poet seeks forgiveness for "this strange inconstancy of soul" — and as such he is pictured as completely alienated at the end of this section of the poem. This is conveyed through the powerful image of a face being distorted and strangled by leaves in the pool:

The face distorted in a jungle pool  
That drowns its image in a mort of leaves.

So that the final image with which the last section of the poem begins is that of a man who finds himself lost in this world, he is "anonymous, unknown". He is all alone, and all his hopes
and dreams of achievement have fallen to pieces:

Only aloneness, swinging slowly
Down the cold orbit of an older world
Than any they predicted in the schools,
Stirs the cold forest with a starry wind,
And sudden as the flashing of a sword
The dream exalts the bowed and golden head
And time is swept with a great turbulence,
The old temptation to remould the world.

Here one is reminded of W.H. Auden's poem

*September 1939* in which the poet finds himself in a situation which is similar to that of Lewis in *The Jungle*:

......we are
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

Arden too, like Lewis, traces the cause of man's unhappiness within himself, and relates it to his selfishness and his misconception of the true meaning of love:

For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Graves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

But whereas Arden's poem ends on a positive note, "We must love one another or die" and faith in an "affirming flame", Lewis's poem sees death as the final release from all human struggles and failures. Though there is a faint suggestion that death might lead to a liberation of the soul, the final
impression that the entire tone of the poem leads to is one of utter resignation:

Or does the will's long struggle end
With the last kindness of a foe or friend?

Anyone who kills him would be doing an act of kindness to him because death will put an end to "will's long struggle".

The impression that Lewis did not envisage any possibilities through or beyond death is reinforced by the symbolical implications of his brilliant short story Orange-Grove, which was one of the last he wrote. In that story, the officer, Beale, carries in his truck the corpse of the driver who had been assassinated. But the truck breaks down in the flooded paddy-fields, and Beale is assisted by some gypsies. They agree to carry the dead body for him, like a soul into Hades. Beale does not know where they are going, and the last words of the story are:

He wished though that he knew where they were going. They only smiled and nodded when he asked. Maybe they were not going anywhere much, except perhaps to some pasture, to some well. 49

This is, if one insists on discovering one, Lewis's final vision. But then, this vision is not

49. Ibid. p.125
something which is explored, and eventually achieved through a series of poems, hence it lacks solidity and conviction. To pick up a handful of his poems and to show that Lewis was moving towards self-realization through a negation of the personal self, is to ignore the vast body of his poetry, which bear evidence of his uncertainties about the way the facts of war could be reconciled with the poet's vision. As we have seen, his poems deal with a variety of ideas and thoughts as they occurred to him. He was right, therefore, in describing his Hai Hai Among The Trumpets as "Poems in Transit". Most of his poems have, in the background, an apprehension of death, but death, in his poetry does not have the terrible intensity that it has in the case of some of his fellow poets. Thus for instance, in contrast to Keith Douglas's concept that the fierceness of death reveals the reality of human experience. Or Sidney Keyes's search for death as a test of courage, Alun Lewis's longing is akin to romantic wish for an easeful death. His concept of death as putting an end to this humdrum life is not so much a compelling vision as a sad
commentary on his own life.

Lewis was perhaps the best critic of his own works. A few months before he got killed, he was hoping that once he was able to leave the life of a migrant soldier, and settle down in the stream of normal living, he would also crystallize those experiences in order to produce "serious and continuous work". (my underscoring).

But I hope I can breathe in crowds and in business when I return, for all these fields of human life — the greatest part of people's lives in fact — is scarcely known to me. I mean in sufficient force and familiarity. I don't know whether I'll write much here: one book, may be, in the end. But my most serious and continuous work must be for home. 50

Here is an explicit statement from Lewis himself that he was not prepared to identify himself with the processes of war. He was physically involved in it, but he tried to free himself emotionally. Yet, the tragic fact was that he, like so many young men of his generation, was doomed to the reality of war, and was consumed by it. It is this ambivalent position of his that can explain, to a great extent, the unevenness and the impressionistic nature of his war poems.

50. Ibid. p.51.
There is another factor involved here, and that is about his constant search for new experiences for the creation of poetry. But, as Yeats has shown from his example, poetry is made, "not out of the experiences which we go out to seek, but of those events which come upon us like waves".  

Stephen Spender made a similar point while discussing the role of an artist in times of war:

Yet the search for new experience is futile, whether in art or in life. Everyone, even a child, is aware of pain, cruelty and violence, and the worst pain is only an extension of something easily imagined already. There are innumerable variations on experience, yet the fundamental experiences are very simple, being contained within the human mind and human body and the relations of human beings with each other.

Lewis evidently lacked the imaginative resources of a major poet, and relied too heavily on personal experience. He never went into action, and his poetry is a record of the frustrations and abstract broodings of a waiting soldier. This is not to deny the magnificent achievement of his isolated poems where he is able to give to his personal emotions the impersonality of great poetry. Despite

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52. Stephen Spender. Life And The Poet (1942) pp 123/124
his left-wing sympathies, he was not interested in the type of 'social poetry' that was popular in his time. He was more in line with the 'neo-romantics' of the 'forties, with his colourful and exotic imagery and diction, together with his more fundamental "poetic theme of Life and Death." 53. And there is reason to believe that, had he lived longer, he would have developed his poetic talents in that direction.

53. See 'Foreword' to Hai Hai, Among The Trumpets (1945)
SIDNEY KEYES

The boy, who at the age of five, rejected The Children's Encyclopedia as inaccurate, and who grew up in isolation from other children, under the guidance of a stern grandfather, was perhaps destined to be a precocious but esoteric poet. Sidney Keyes lived in a world of myths, fables and heroes and the creative artist in him seldom came into contact with human beings. Early in his brief poetic career, he set himself to discovering the "Ultima Thule of Romanticism"¹, from where Yeats and Rilke had brought back only partial reports. Both by temperament and vocation he tended to be a lover of the visionary and the macabre. Among the numerous influences on him; Keyes's first biographer and editor, Michael Meyer mentions the following:

Keyes's literary and artistic preferences are curiously significant. For direction and inspiration, he turned to such visionaries as El Greco, Blake, Holderlin, Schiller, Rilke, Yeats and Sibelius. At the same time, he found his emotional problems most completely resolved in the nineteenth-century school of haunted countrymen: Wordsworth, Clare, Van Gogh, Hardy and, later, Housman and Edward Thomas.... He loved the masters of the macabre: Donne, Webster, Goya, Beddoes, Dickens, Picasso, Klee, Rouault, Graham Greene; and such as came his way of the early German and Russian films. ².

¹. See Michael Meyer's 'Memoir' in The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes; (1945) p. XVII
². Ibid.; p. XIII
It is not all surprising, then, that working under such formidable influences, Keyes started by becoming extremely 'literary', and produced poetry that was 'intellectual', remote, and often obscure. His subjects were pain, guilt and death which he tackled in abstract and non-human terms, and while still on this level of abstraction, he tried to force those problems with heroic defiance and obstinate hope. But because of a basic lack of human contact, neither the sense of pain nor that of heroic defiance or hope, is brought home to the reader with any amount of poetic intensity. In fact, after an initial impression of dazzling brilliance, one detects, what Keyes himself had described as "a vaguely bogus atmosphere" in his poetry, whose technical shortcomings seem to lie in verbal excesses, uncontrolled imagery and borrowed modes of expression.

It is likely that had the experiences of war-time Oxford as well as those of actual war not intervened, Keyes would have developed into a mystical or metaphysical poet. With greater maturity he might have tightened his verses and his vision might have become more austere, but he would, perhaps, have become less appealing than he is now.

3. Sidney Keyes; *Minos of Crete*, (1948)p. 170
His years at Oxford broadened his human experience, and on a personal level made him realize what it was to be in love. He fell in love with a German girl, Milein Cocxen, but the affair was both unhappy and unsatisfying. It was under a burden of tortuous love relationships that he left Oxford to join the army, and encountered deeper human problems on a practical scale. Feelings of pain, separation, suffering and death presented themselves to him in their stark reality, and as a poet he sought to deal with them in their own terms. It is for this reason that his later poems are real and effective in a way his earlier poems were not. Death and violence are faced in their starkness and immediacy in his later poems, and after this is done, the subsequent belief that the test of our victory is measured by the courage of our submission is conveyed with deep poetic conviction.

Sidney Arthur Kilworth Keyes was born at Bactford, Kent, on 27th May, 1922. His mother Edith Blackburn, the daughter of Rev. Arthur Blackburn, rector of St. Paul's in Bradford, died of peritonitis six weeks after the birth of the poet. His father Reginald Keyes became a Captain in The Queen's Own (Royal West Kent) Regiment and served in India and Mesopotamia during the First World War. Since his father took only a sporadic
interest in Sidney, he was brought up by his grandfather, who was a self-made man, having risen from being a mill-hand to a mill-owner. The old man was domineering and often violent and tempestuous, and left a lasting impression on the little, frail and sickly Sidney, who lived a life of isolation under the care of his nanny Anne Ives. He was sent to a kindergarten but was mainly taught at home. He had little interest in games and sport, and with his imaginative and intellectual propensities devoured books of history and legend. He showed a keen interest in the natural world around. He wandered in fields and woods and had an uncanny capacity for becoming friends with animals, birds and reptiles. Michael Meyer recalled how Keyes "possessed an almost supernatural power over animals. Creeping things, snakes and lizards obeyed him like dogs. Later at Tonbridge, when a snake was lost in the museum, he sat in the middle of the floor and made curious noises and the snake came up and curled at his feet". This extra-ordinary childhood, when Sidney Keyes grew up in an imaginative world of the legendary heroes and animals.

where the only significant human contact was with a stern grandfather and a nanny, had an enormous influence on him as a boy and a future poet.

In 1933, he went to Dartford Grammar School and in 1935, he took the Common Entrance Examination to Tonbridge, his father's school. Within three years he reached the History Sixth and came in contact with the form master Tom Staveley, a poet who had received encouragement from Yeats. Staveley, in turn, directed the literary efforts of Sidney Keyes and offered him help and guidance. By the time he reached his final year at Tonbridge, Keyes had written about one hundred poems, most of which were schoolboy efforts. However, *Elevy*, which he had written on his grandfather's death was an exception, so were poems like *Nefertiti*, *Greenwich Observatory* and *The Buzzard*, all of which were included in his *Collected Poems*. He also wrote an allegorical story *The Albatross* as a form task at Tonbridge, and in the spring of 1940, he wrote two plays, *Hoses* a short two-part play, a kind of modern morality, and *Minos of Crete* in three acts and an Epilogue. The latter was obviously a more ambitious play in which he had intended to trace the herds
progress through suffering. In the notes to the play he explained that "the play is concerned with devious ways by which he (Minos) eventually finds himself again, passing from neurotic brooding to real breakdown, and thence to spiritual exaltation". As drama, the play is unsatisfactory because the characters speak their emotions rather than dramatizing them, and because Keyes lacked a sense of dramatic flow. But the play is important in that it contains the poet's ideas about destiny, pain, death and "spiritual exaltation" that were to recur in his poetry. Minos bears some resemblance to such later works as Gilles de Retz and Schiller Dying.

During his last term at Tonbridge, Keyes learnt that he had won a history scholarship at Queen's College, Oxford. He spent the summer holidays with his father and step-mother, who were then living at St. Leonards-on-Sea in Sussex. At this time, the German Air Force had started a series of air-raids on the English coasts, and Sidney saw the first casualty of war, when the family gardener was machine-gunned in the orchard.

5. Minos of Crete, op. cit. p. 56
Besides, his father, who had been ill, died on the 4th September. But in spite of all these unfortunate happenings, Sidney's step-mother decided that he should enter Oxford as he had planned. So in October 1940, he went to Queen's College. At first he did not feel at ease there because of his natural shyness, aggravated, perhaps, by his rather isolated childhood:

He was always polite but did not mix easily with others, or take much part in college activities and organisations. Quiet and unassuming, he chose friends chiefly for common intellectual interests and because they had to give him something intellectually; and in spite of courtesy and charm, this tended sometimes to make him an exhausting companion.6.

Oxford, however, did help Keyes in bringing out those aspects of his personality which were susceptible to its influences. For instance, he soon made friends with fellow poets like Drummond Allison and John Heath-Stubbs, the latter helping him by offering criticisms and comments on the poems that he wrote. Another friend, Michael Meyer, who was to become his biographer and editor, introduced him to the university magazine, Cherwell, of which Meyer was then one of the editors. If one goes through the various issues of the magazine, from the time Keyes entered Oxford (October 1940) until he left it (April 1942), one would realize how active

he was in the literary and cultural activities of the university. He wrote not only poems and short stories for it, but also participated in critical controversies. In addition to all this, he reviewed books, plays and concerts. On 21st May, 1941, he became, with his school friend Basil Taylor, one of the editors of Cherwell.

Mention has been made, elsewhere, of the fact that Keyes had edited, in collaboration with Meyer, *Eighth Oxford Poets*, and wrote a foreward for it. Keyes again took the role of spokesman for younger writers when he was asked to write on artist's role in society for a collection of articles which Percy Colson brought out under the title *The Future of Faith* in 1942. In his article, "The Artist in Society", Keyes did not say anything startlingly new, but laid special emphasis on the fact that an artist had a vision and that by communicating that vision he enlarged the experiences of his audience.

In addition to his literary activities Keyes continued to write his weekly essays and secured a first in the first half of history schools. On a personal level, he had fallen in love with a German girl, Milein Cossman, who was a student at the Slade
School of Art. Milein did not return his affection because she "felt that he was making her into a symbol and seeing in her all kinds of things he wished to be there".\footnote{Ibid.; p. 53.} When Keyes's play 
\textit{Hosea} was produced at the Taylorian Institute, she took the leading feminine role but dropped out because she accidentally broke her hand during a rehearsal, possibly "out of some deep wish to become disentangled from their tortuous relationship, as she remarked later."\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}; p. 55.} However, she left a deep impression on his mind and some of his deeply poignant love poems grew out of this relationship. Throughout his stay at Oxford he wrote a number of poems, and by the end of 1941 he had written enough to form a volume. They were collected under the title \textit{The Iron Laurel} which was published by Routledge in 1942.

On 13th June, 1941, Keyes enlisted into the Royal Fusiliers, but was relegated to the Army Reserve. He was called up for active duty in the middle of the term on 8th April 1942, and went to Northern Ireland for infantry training. During his training period he was posted to Omagh, Dunbar and Dovercourt, yet found time to write poems, sufficient to form another volume, which appeared posthumously in 1944, under the title \textit{The Cruc
Soltice. After the end of his training, he wanted to be transferred to the Intelligence Corps but instead was appointed to a Regular Army Emergency Commission in the Queens Own (Royal West Kent) Regiment. His Regiment was sent for desert war in North Africa. He saw active service for only two weeks, was taken prisoner during the last days of the Tunisian campaign, and died from "unknown causes" on 29th April, 1943 while in enemy hands. (For details of circumstances leading to Keyes's death, see the last two chapters in John Guenther's book, Sidney Keyes).

In Spring 1944, Keyes was posthumously awarded the Howthornden Prize for 1942 for his two volumes of poems. Michael Meyer brought out The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes, with a Memoir, in 1945, and in 1948, he collected Keyes's plays and stories, excerpts from his note-books and letters, together with a few hitherto unpublished poems, under the title Kings of Crete. Among critical writings on Keyes, one may mention, Michael Meyer's "Sidney Keyes" in The Windmill (1944), Derek Stanford's chapter on the poet in Studies in Contemporary Poetry (1947), and Harold Nicholson's

The most astonishing thing about the hundred or so poems that Keyes wrote while still at school is that they were written by a boy so young. As might be expected, most of them are, conventional pieces, written in a second-hand language, heavily influenced by Keats, Shelley and the later Victorians. But in some other more successful poems of this period, one can find traces of the mind, the attitude and even the technique which marked the mature poems of his later years. Perhaps because of his isolated and unhappy childhood, dominated by a tempestuous grandfather, he tended to build up an inner world. But this inner world was not one of idle fantasy but rather of evil destiny. Thus, a tragic concept of life, with only an intellectual grasp of it became the keynote of his personality. Pain, suffering and death were the central themes of his poetry, but they remained curiously remote and baroque. It is because he never seems to have felt
such emotions on a personal or human level that some of the most painful—or what one would imagine, should be the most painful—poems leave the reader surprisingly unscathed. On the other hand, his treatment of death in a poem like Elegy mark the poet out as distinct from those whose juvenilia are characterized by adolescent brooding and tearful melancholy. Elegy is a tightly constructed poem in which he shows a fastidious use of words, a skilful use of rhyme and repetition, and also his capacity for vivid sketches:

April again, and it is a year again
Since you walked out and slammed the door
Leaving us tangled in your words. Your brain
Lives in the bank-book, and your eyes look up
Laughing from the carpet on the floor:
And we still drink from your silver cup.

The concept of Time is enlarged here to contain not only its sense of destruction but also the process of continuity—"And we still drink from your silver cup". There is also a determination that rolling years would not be allowed to wipe out personal values:

We shall never forget nor escape you, nor make terms
With your enemies, the swift departing years.

Here, a personally felt grief gives a certain solidity to the poem, but whenever, Keyes writes impersonally, he tends to be abstract. Thus in Prospero, Death is viewed as a "fellow-sorcerer"
of Prospero, who himself is "a disembodied mind".

Similarly, in the poem *Shall The Dead Return?* there is a romantic hope that the dead would return in springtime:

In spring they all come back:
I saw old Housman waiting by the weir
For sweethearts he never knew and never will know,
They all come back.

But Keyes was also an extremely "intellectual" poet, and this fact found expression in his rather abstruse descriptions. For instance, he clearly delights in cleverness while seeking to describe the Greenwich Observatory:

This onion-dome holds all intricacies
Of intellect and star-struck wisdom: so
Like Coleridge's head with multitudinous
Passages, full of strange instruments
Unbalanced by a touch, this organism
From wires and dials spins introverted life.

( *Greenwich Observatory*)

Or, again in *The Buzzard*, he constructs a geometrical pattern in words, before contrasting the extended human comprehension with the narrow apprehension of the buzzard:

In motion centripetal to this sphere
Or dust under the burning glass of sky;
This noontide motion spins a kind of peace.
Thoughts nuzzle to the crystalline
Walls of the curving brain and gape their message
Dumbly and flounce away.
What one must note here is the fact that Keyes is burdened by a conscious intellectuality, which he finds hard to subdue for purposes of poetic concentration and intensity. This remained his problem for a long time, because later on, as a result of his wider readings in English and foreign literatures, (he was well-versed in German and French) his literariness seemed to interfere with his more direct poetic intuition. Perhaps, the impression remains, to the end, that his intellectual maturity far outclassed his emotional growth.

The last poem that he wrote before he went to Oxford, is called Cervières, which is his first poem that deals with a war background. It's subjects are air raids and threatened invasions, and the setting a cherry orchard. It is reasonable to suppose that it had something to do with the incident in his family orchard at St. Leonards, where the gardener was shot down by a low-flying plane. In this poem, Keyes addresses two French children, Aimee and Victor - probably his friends during his holidays in France in July 1939 - and tells them that birds have taken away all the cherries and warns them —
Soon an invader will be taking more than cherries
They'll be stealing our dreams or breaking up
Our history for firewood.

He goes on to build up a picture of destruction and
ruin, with images like "avenues of cherry trees are
broken/ And trampled boughs crawl in the dust", only to come out with a Shelleyan reassurance of regeneration:

Yet somewhere - O beyond what bitter ranges? -
A seed drops from the sky and like a bomb
Explodes into our orchard's progeny,
And so our care may colonize a desert.
They cannot break our trees or waste our dreams,
For their dispoiling is a kind of sowing.

But cracks soon appeared in his world of dreams when he wrote about women who came to grief during war. The first poem that he wrote on entering Oxford is called *Remember Your Lovers*, which Keyes wrote in an examination hall, after finishing his paper. The poem is carelessly written, as is evident from expressions like, "When you foresaw with vision prescient", but it is important in so far as it shows his awareness of war as an instrument that destroys human love, and at the same time brings the soldier face to face with "death's unconquerable wisdom". Though war was by no means the central theme of his poetry during his stay at Oxford, it hovered in the background all the time.
In other words there was always this consciousness that the tragedy symbolized by war was inescapable.

Thus, on 5th March, 1941, he wrote *Advice For a Journey* in which he expresses the need to be prepared for war:

*The dreams mutter for war and soon we must begin To seek the country where they say that joy Springs flowerlike among the rocks, to win The fabulous golden mountains of peace.*

But this goes with an unsentimental realization that what war actually holds forth is neither joy nor peace, but suffering and despair:

*So, take no rations, remember not your homes Only the blind and stubborn hope to track This wilderness. The thoughtful leave their bones In windy foodless meadows of despair.*

But, characteristically enough, the poem ends with a note of defiance, so that the passion for life comes out as strongly as feelings of disillusionment:

*Go forth, my friends, the raven is no sibyl; Break the cloud's anger with your unchanged faces. You'll find, maybe, the dream under the hill - But never Canaan, nor any golden mountain.*

Instead of seeing war as accidental, Keyes views it as a part of the vast tragic pattern of life. In *Europa's Prisoners*, both the escapees and the prisoners are doomed to the same fate:

*The ones who took to garrets and consumption In foreign cities, found a deeper dungeon Than any Dachau. Free but still confined, The human lack of pity split their mind.*
The cause of suffering is traced inside men, in his lack of human pity, and the poet's advice is to encounter the reality of pain, which must be overcome before any strength can be achieved:

Whatever days whatever seasons pass,
The prisoners must stare in pain's white face:
Until at last the courage they have learned
Shall burst the walls and overturn the world.

He looks across the Atlantic, and has the premonition that the Americans too would be engulfed in the tragedy of war. The poem Neutrality, was written only five months before the Americans entered the war, and Keyes speaks for them:

We are no cowards, we are pictures
Of ordinary people, as you once were.
Blame not, nor pity us; we are the people
Who laugh in dreams before the ramping boar
Appears, before the loved one's death.

But these poems about lurking danger of war reflect the spirit of the undergraduates at Oxford during those times- the Oxford which still allowed them to go their own ways until they were called up for service. Sidney Keyes certainly went his own way, and in fact confirmed and strengthened his earlier poetic attitudes. Michael Meyer notes that "hitherto (i.e. until he went up to Oxford) Keyes had perhaps inevitably found deepest satisfaction in the Romantic poets (1780-1830) with their
preoccupation with death and the macabre". \(^9\)

Keyes himself had said that as a poet, he had set
before himself a Romantic ideal. In a letter to
Richard Church, he pointed out:

As to the question of symbolism: the best
cue that I can give you is to say that I
believe the greatest and the most influential
poets in the last 100 years or so to be Yeats
and Rilke. These two brought back reports from
a kind of Ultima Thule of Romanticism, which
suggests that there is even more - much more -
to be discovered there: and the starting point of
my quest is therefore to synthesise this
information. \(^10\)

Keyes's romanticism was not an isolated phenomenon,
but was part of a general reaction against the
socio-ethical poetry of the 'thirties, which we
discussed elsewhere. In Keyes' second poem, written
in Oxford, we find the poet "misery's son",
wandering bewildered and frustrated in a sour land.
The setting of the poem in Stanton Harcourt in
Oxfordshire, where Pope completed the fifth book
of his *Iliad*. Keyes fuses Pope's disillusionments
with the atmosphere of the sour land which is
evoked with romantic sensitivity:

The houses are white stone in this country,
Windowless and blind as leprosy;
No peace for the wanderer waiting only death;
Plovers crouch in the rain between the furrows
Or wheel club-winged and tumble across the wind;

\(^9\) See *The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes*, op.cit.

\(^10\) *Ibid.*, pp XVII-XVIII
A land so dead ghosts lodge not.  
Along its borders to torment the mind.

Keyes's ability to conjure up a picture of  
natural phenomena - this time its beautiful aspect -  
is again manifest in *Poem For May The First*, in  
which, despite his preoccupation with threats of  
war, natural beauty is conveyed through fresh  
images and conceits like "the magnolia candles/  
Burn white to greet the courteous evening light"  
and "the soft-faced season's features".

Though Keyes wrote a few 'romantic' love  
poems like *Two Variations* in which he seemed to be  
wearily in love with love itself, his meeting  
Milein Cossman in May 1941, resulted in poems of  
passionate love.  *Poem For Milein Cossman*, which  
he wrote almost immediately after meeting her,  
testifies to his revival of spirits, and personally  
felt joy and happiness, which are conveyed with  
simplicity through images taken from direct observation  
of nature:

Summer. The fine rain speckles  
My windowsill, and beyond heavy trees  
A blackbird sings, green voice of May.  
And I the summer's prisoner,  
Remembering earlier promise, the safety  
of flowering trees with the unlucky hawthorn  
Still beautiful not deadly, thank you  
For all your kindness, for restoring  
These gardens and my singing voice in May.
Similarly, in two other poems, For M.G. Written in the Train and Poem for Milein About The Mechanical Bird, the need for passionate love goes with a sense of joy. Unfortunately, his love for her soon proved hopeless and frustrating. In the poem Letter to M.G., he spoke of his own disappointments in terms of frustrations caused by war-time conditions. He looked back in history, and saw artists like Goethe, Stendhal and Goya preserving their personal integrity amidst chaotic environments. In the rather curious last stanza - curious because he blames war-time conditions for his own frustrations in love - he pleads that both of them as artists, should take courage from the examples of artists in the past:

Tonight I'm thinking of these and you, my dearest; Sheltered but not secure in my country pleasures. We must create our peace, our war is private. For while you face the canvas and my hand Walks on the paper, we can take No rest nor comfort, but must learn their courage.

These poems are significant, if not as anything else, for the fact that they bear evidence of the poet's participation in human activities. However, Keyes's interest in the irrationally significant, which was first expressed in his boyhood stories and poems, was deepened as an undergraduate at Oxford.
While reviewing Christian Hole's *Haunted England* for Cherwell, he remarked:

...The chief issue now seems to be not whether one believes in ghosts, but what justification can be found for their existence. This book can give no solutions, and leads one deeper into perplexity. But those who can read it for entertainment will enjoy a fine feast of horrors... This book is for the marvellers and the thoughtful, but not for the sophisticated.

Keyes obviously regarded himself among the marvellers and the thoughtful rather than the sophisticated. He went with John Heath-Stubbs to a spiritualist seance in one of the colleges and was greatly impressed by the experience. He also visited a Jacobean cottage in the grounds of Queen's college. The cottage was supposed to be haunted, and passing by it one night, he felt a sudden and unaccountable chill. Out of this experience grew his poem *Little Drauda*, which is reminiscent of Edith Sitwell's *The Little Ghost Who Died For Love*. Keyes's poem shows not only his ability to conjure up a ghost but also to identify himself with it. The ghost is disturbed, rejected and lonely. It was perhaps indicative of the way Keyes's mind was working, that he thought that the condition of the ghost was essential for the discovery of "the secret of living".
In the last stanza, he transcends the material world in his search for the "Ultima Thule":

On this stormy night, remain you lonely Seeker beside me, though my heart is dumb: We may together solve the unexpected Secret of living, now that the clock is dumb.

His identification of his own quest with that of the ghost defines the nature of the search. Keyes was always looking for a spiritual meaning, and this often led him to reject the rational and the materialistic world, and adopt an attitude of reverence for the irrational and the supernatural.

Keyes's love for the physically non-existent fired his historical imagination, and he vividly recreated heroes of history and literature, myth and legend. He was at once fascinated by the sea-god Glauclus in the poem of that title and the dead and gone supernatural beings of Scandinavian mythology in Troll Kings. In the poem Paul Klee, which he wrote after visiting the Klee exhibition in London, he tried to enter into the German expressionist painter's mind through his works. But, obviously, literary figures held a special appeal for Keyes. In a brilliant sonnet William Wordsworth, he seems to have caught the true spirit of the elder poet in a few striking phrases. What
prevented Keyes from being a good dramatist enabled him to present vivid portraits of men and women. His conception of character was static and Theophrastian. Though he had difficulty in revealing various facets of a character through a series of dramatic actions, he captured a few selected, and significant, aspects in memorable lines. Wordsworth’s strong poetic personality, which retained a sense of strength in spite of the "still sad music of humanity" has been evoked in the following lives of austere dignity:

He was a stormy day, a granite peak
Spearin the sky; and look, about its base
Words flower like crocuses in the hanging woods,
Blank though the forehead and the bony face.

His tribute to Virginia Woolf in \textit{Elegy for Virginia Woolf} is extended into a lament for all the victims of war and air-raids. Though she killed herself by drowning, Keyes sees her as a victim of war, who is now free from its cruelties:

Lie low, sleep well, safe from the rabid winds
Of war and argument, our hierarchies and power.

He sees her as a tender and sensitive personality, and in lines which are marked by a very careful choice of words, he hopes that her tenderness and privacy might be better preserved in the quietness of her grave, in contrast to "our towns and broken skies:"

\begin{quote}
\textbf{He was a stormy day, a granite peak}\\
\textit{Spearin the sky; and look, about its base}\\
\textit{Words flower like crocuses in the hanging woods,}\\
\textit{Blank though the forehead and the bony face.}\\
\end{quote}
Over the head, these small distinguished bones
Hurry, young river, guard their privacy;
Too common, by her grave the willow leans
And trails its foliage fittingly.

Among Keyes portraits of various literary
and artistic figures of the past, the most impressive
as a poem is perhaps A Garland For John Clare, in
which Keyes, while recounting the hopes,
aspirations and frustrations of John Clare, is in
fact expressing his own feelings. The poem is
very much on the lines of Wordsworth's sonnet to
Milton or Keats's to Spenser, or, more recently
Alun Lewis's To Edward Thomas, in which the younger
poet pays tribute to an older poet. Keyes too
recognizes that Clare was a poet of greater courage
and stronger vision:

But you had courage, facing the open fields
Of immortality, you drove your coulter
Strongly and sang.....

But he finds affinity with him in a general love
of rural pleasures:

But I'd give you other
More private presents, as these evenings
When under lime-trees of an earlier summer
We'd sing at nine o'clock, small wineglasses
Set out and glittering: and perhaps my friend
Would play on a pipe, competing with the

These lines, together with the painstaking descriptions
of minute aspects of nature, in the earlier part of the
second stanza of the poem, might lead one to agree
with Keyes that had he been born in "the last century in Oxfordshire or Wiltshire instead of London between two wars...(he) might have been a good pastoral poet". But being born over a hundred years after Clare, he does not have the elder poet's strength and confidence that could disregard public's failure to recognize his genius. So, he asks him to tell him "the secret of your singing". So far as he himself is concerned, Keyes was weighed down by the unearned guilt of his generation:

This personal responsibility
For a whole world's disease that is our nightmare,
and was tormented by "The hedgehog-skin of nerves, the blind desire/For power and safety."

But Keyes felt that in a wider sense, he was one with "mad John Clare" and a host of other poets who "were never trusted nor obeyed in anything"

by people in the society in which they lived. Like other war poets (e.g. Keith Douglas (The Poet) and Alun Lewis (Madman)), Keyes saw the poet as an isolated being, who was even becoming anti-social in his attempt to preserve individual values. In his note book, he disagreed with the current poetic trend to associate poetry with politics and society and said:

12. See The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes; op. cit. XIII
...We can dissociate ourselves from political development completely, and consider every individual, or even every situation, as a separate problem... Hence, the frankly anti-social attitude of so many artists today...

In The Plowman, he likened the modern poet to the disinherited and dispossessed ploughman of the nineteenth century industrial England. He universalized the picture in the poem The Bards, where the ancient Celtic blind minstrels sing in "their raftered halls and hung with hard holly", in "great places/ Decked with the pale and sickled mistletoe". Though the precision and diction of Keyes's lines align them with Robert Graves's poem of the same title, the central image of the bard as a suffering but visionary and proud sage comes perhaps, from Thomas Gray:

Sing, blinded face: quick hands in darkness groping
Pluck the sad harp; sad heart for ever hoping
Valhalla may be songless, enter
The moment of your glory, out of clamour
Moulding your vision to such harmony
That drunken heroes cannot choose but honour
Your stubborn blinded pride, your inward winter.

The bards have traditionally mustered "the shards of pain to harmony", and so has Keyes. Pain; and the need for its acceptance has been central to his poetry. In Minos of Crete, he had sought to present a character who did not break

down under suffering, but rather progressed through it. He deals explicitly with such a subject in the poems **Gilles de Retz**. Gilles de Retz was a famous captain, who fought with Joan of Arc in the battle of Orleans in 1429, and again at the siege of Paris, and was made Marshal of France at the age of twenty five. Thereafter for eight years before he was publicly condemned and hanged, he murdered about 140 children in an effort to make a pact with the devil. Keyes was at once fascinated by the perversions of this man, and in his eyes, Gilles de Retz's enormous crimes invested him with a strange kind of splendour. In the poem, Keyes tries to understand the structure of such a mind, and feels both awe and compassion. (He could not see the minutes of the trial which were translated from Latin and French, and were published in Paris in 1969 - they show that both the judge and the crowd came to pity the perverted hero.)

Fraser who has analysed this poem at some length remarks:

> For him (Keyes) these crimes of Gilles have a perverted religious motive, they are a sort... 

of blasphemous attempt to bridge the terrible gap between man and God. Estranged as he feels, from the love of God, Gilles wishes to experience at least the presence of God as wrath, pure divine anger.

Piercing your safety like a lancet, or perhaps A flat knife working for years behind the eyes, Distorting vision....

Estranged, he seeks to imitate, or it would be truer to say, parody God. Pain is as near as he can get to an absolute, it is his parody of absolute love. 15

Keyes himself had made a similar point while reviewing Charles Williams's Witchcraft, (which, incidentally, was one of the sources of his information about Gilles de Retz):

Mr. Williams treats witchcraft as a mystical perversion, an inverted Christianity: for does it not thrive upon just these qualities which Christianity tends to suppress — personal pride, malice, exhibitionism? Furthermore, it fulfills the instinctive demand of the human soul for logic, order, a happy ending. 16

In the poem Keyes deals with his subject with a frigid detachment, an attitude which alone could prevent the poem from becoming obscene and sensational. In fact, it was his detached stance that enabled him to look at his subject with any amount of sympathetic understanding. He could get into the skin of Gilles and project his unusual concepts of love and pain:

15. G.S. Fraser 'The Poetry of Sidney Keyes' The Poetry Review (July/August 1950) 204—205.
16. Cherwell. 29th May 1941. 73—74.
How I believed in pain, how near
I got to living pain, regaining my lost image
Of hard perfection, sexless and immortal.
Nearer than you to living love, to knowing
The community of love without giving or taking
Or ceasing of the need of change. At least
I knew this in my commonwealth of pain.
You knowing neither, burn me and fear my agony
And never learn a better kind of love.

The poem, however, ends with the hero repenting for
his "misdirected worship", and feeling that he does
not even deserve to see the cross or get divine
forgiveness. But the poet has remarkably
succeeded in laying bare the workings of an
extraordinarily perverted mind, in a kind of
Browninesque monologue. It is true, as Fraser
notes, that the poem is less moving on a human
level because in his metaphysical idealism, Keyes
thought that "there is a kind of real pain, more
important than actual pain". But perhaps, this
was the only way Keyes could explain the senseless
atrocities on the part of Gilles, who was at the
same time a distinguished soldier. The poet was
merely interested in exploring such a mind. He
obviously didn't endorse Gilles's action. In his
review of Charles Williams book, he had condemned
the use of witchcraft by Gilles "from sheer pride
or immodest curiosity", but had gone on to admire
Williams's book: "for it is a study of a spiritual disease which has been chronic among the human race, and which today shows many signs of reappearance". Evidently, Keyes viewed his own study of Gilles in some such light, and perhaps this could have been one of the ways of looking at Hitler.

However, the real importance of Gilles de Retz in the poetic development of Keyes lies in the fact that the poet was trying to understand the nature of pain. If the concept of pain here is metaphysical, there is evidence that he was constantly trying to subdue his "over-curious mind" to the simple poetic act. The poem All Souls: A Dialogue, is a sequence of six short poems in which the poet engages in a dialogue with himself and three friends. Keyes had planned a sequence of sonnets in imitation of Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus. The present set of poems is a part of it. He abandoned the plan because he found the sonnet form cramping, "as if I had shut myself up in a number of little boxes". Despite some fuzzy descriptions and disconnected sequences, the central

17. Keyes's Collected Poems, op. cit. p.119
theme of the poem is pretty clear. The poet wanders in the contemporary waste-land, and faced with transience, pain and death, tries to accept them in the love of other persons, in this case, John-Heath-Stubbs and Drummond Allison. In the first section, where he addresses Heath-Stubbs, he asks his friend not be to "beguiled" by the singing of autumn birds or dew in fields. He warns him that

Nature has plan against your peace of mind -
You must be cunning with her, When the wind Cries like a child, sit behind bolted doors. 

In another section, the poet expresses his failures and frustrations and seeks salvation in love. But it is in the last section, where the poet addresses Drummond Allison, that he speaks of the temporary nature of all earthly memorials, and like Alun Lewis, finds more permanent value in winning the warm hearts around us. Keyes conveys this in lines of simplicity and dignity, evoking a spirit of defiance as well as serene acceptance.

So let's not advertise the immemorial Autumn of flesh; let's cheat the easy powers Of history's malice, build in human rooms Our fame, in falling hearts our vast escorial.

Keyes’s more personal poems are, of course his love poems. When he returned to Oxford for the second year after the summer vacation, he was tormented
by Milein's refusal to return his affection. The sorrow and agony of unrequited love resulted in the poem *Lover's Complaint*, written in October 1941. The poet expresses his total inability to establish any kind of happy relationship with the girl, and his sense of being a stranger before her:

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For my private streets and summers
Are any alien's comer's;
And the tall miraculous city
That I walked in will never house me.
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In the poem *The Migrant*, the fugitive ringneck ouzel symbolizes for him his own unsteady love. Keyes wrote the poem when he was wintering in Yorkshire in 1941. Heath-Stubbs had written to him from Hampshire about this bird, which Keyes found in Yorkshire:

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A Hamshire naturalist seeking, noting
The flocks, the fluting birds...
So by the millrace and the stony ridge
I look for something different, for a sign
That love has flown into another country,
Migrating from the frost - not as I fear
Frozen and starved.
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Such treatment of nature can give one an idea as to what kind of a pastoral poet Keyes would have developed into, had he been born "in the last century in Oxfordshire or Wiltshire". Unlike the Georgian poets, Keyes could not have been contented with noting peaceful aspects of the countryside, but rather would have tried to "express
the eternal meaning which resides in the physical world"

Keyes wrote another poem, *The Mad Lady And The Proud Talker*, on the theme of lost love. The poem is heavily laden with romantic imagery and phraseology (e.g. "snow-queen's sister", "Mistress of rocks", "green stars") in order to indicate the romantic nature of love. The rejected lover reminds the girl that she was once in love with her, but she replies that she has changed, and has taken a transcendental lover:

Let me be

For I am queen of peaks, my lover
A green star is, hanging on my high head.

Together with this personal disappointment, Keyes was confronted with threats of war which were becoming more immediate. That sense of immediacy is conveyed with greater force in poems like *Time Will Not Grant* and *The Cruel Solstice*. Like Douglas, he has an uneasy certainty that because of war-conditions, he would not be able to fulfill his poetic mission in this life:

Time will not grant the unlined page
Completion or the hand respite.

He realizes that poets of past ages, like Donne and Rilke, had the strength and courage to write.

*See Minus of Eratz, out. cit. p.147*
great poetry against all odds, but in his own case, he feels that time is overwhelmingly against him:

Fear was Donne's peace; to him
Charted between the minstrel cherubim,
Terror was decent. Rilke tenderly
Accepted autumn like a rooted tree.
But I am frightened after every good day
That all my life must change and fall away.

(The time will not grant)

The quality that Keyes admired so much in Rilke — the quality of acceptance — was becoming rather elusive for him. All he foresaw was chaos and destruction:

I see a black time coming, history
Tending in footnotes our forgotten land.

(The island city)

This mood of despair found expression in most poignant and moving terms in the poem The Cruel Solstice, which gave, prophetically enough, the title to his second volume of poems, which appeared posthumously. The opening stanza of the poem creates the feeling of despair, with images of a cold, dark night in a strange city:

Tonight the stranger city and the old
Moon that stands over it proclaim
A cruel solstice, coming ice and cold,
Thoughts and the darkening of the heart's flame.

The soul's importunities to "stand up" seem a mockery in the face of his utter helplessness.
Even love cannot offer a sustaining value;
it can give him only tender memories:

So I must walk or falter by the wall
Wondering at my impotence
Of thought and action; at the fall
Of love and cities and the heart's false
diligence.
Tonight I cannot speak, remembering
For all my daily talk, I dare not enter
The empty month; can only stand and think
Of you, my dearest, and the approaching winter.

His personal feelings obviously did not
warrant any hope in the chaotic world, but Keyes
was too strong a poetic spirit to be completely
swept off by "the approaching winter". An
alternate value had to be found, a meaning had to
be discovered in this apparently meaningless chaos.
Here his literariness came to his aid. He
realized that the past poets, especially Rilke,
were able to solve their problems courageously,
and he was determined to do likewise. Just
before leaving Oxford for military training, he
wrote a long poem, The Foreign Gate in March 1942.
Although his volume The Iron Laurel was in the
press, he asked the publisher to hold it
up until he could submit this poem for inclusion.

Keyes imminent enlistment made him aware of
the possibility of his own death, and The Foreign
Gate deals with that possibility. Speaking of this poem, Michael Meyer notes, "here, for the first time in his poetry, Death appears as a real presence. The only victory lies in courageous submission". But G.S. Fraser sees with deeper perception, though with less accurate biographical information about the poet, that "though it (The Foreign Gate) was written by a soldier on active service might have been written as easily by a student among books". The poem was indeed written, literally as well as metaphorically, "by a student among books". It was, as if Keyes was making one last desperate effort to mould this gross world of physical experience with the refinements of an academic mind. The poem bears traces of various literary influence, the predominant one being that of Rilke, whose lines form the epigram to the poem.

It is concerned with death in battlefield of heroes of past and present generations, and attempts a philosophical elegy of them. The poet tries to explore the nature of the sacrifice and tow ring some significance out of them. The poem

20. op.cit. p203
has some passages which are incantatory and hortatory and they do not tie up very well with the unity of the poem. However, it is clear that Keyes is viewing death as the "foreign gate" through which the soldiers must pass, and that they often pass into eternity.

In the first section of the poem he invokes the dead soldiers of past, and addresses them as "my brother". They came back to speak of their consciousness of loss:

Give back the days
Of love's high summer even; with the calling
Birds in the woodland, glimmer on the stream
Of eddy and of ear-splash; roads as grey
As evening; give back the sunburnt face,
The easy manners, and the trodden grass
Under the hedge.

and their sufferings in wars:

"My mouth speaks terror and truth, instead of hard command".
"Remember the torn lace, the fine coats slashed
With steel instead of velvet. Kunesdorf
Fought in the shallow sand was my relief".
"I rode to Naseby"... "And the barren land
Of Tannenberg drank me. Remember now
The grey and jointed corpses in the snow,
The struggle in the drift, the numb hands freezing
Into the bitter iron..."

"At Dunkirk I
Rolled in the shallows, and the living trod
Across me for a bridge..."

But in their loss, suffering, pain and death, Keyes sees triumph and glory. The theme of pain—and the need for its acceptance—which runs throughout
his poems, now finds a more pointed expression:

A soldier's death is hard;  
There is no prescribed or easy word  
For dissolution in the army books.  
The uniform of pain with pain put on is  
straiter  
Than any lover's garments; yet the death  
Of these is different, and their glory greater.

But already, because of his wider human experiences,  
Keyes goes beyond this prescription of pain, and  
connects the outer war with the "inner war" of  
the individual:

Speak out the word and drape the drum and spare  
The captive brain, the feet that walk to war  
The ironbound brain, the hand unskilled in war  
The shrinking brain, sick of an inner war.

War, in this sense, enables the soldiers,  
who have "ironbound brain" and "hand unskilled in  
war" to come to terms with their own ignorance,  
fear and "inner war". Thus Keyes is holding not  
only the politicians, but also the public in  
general, responsible for the colossal hecatomb of  
war. And it is only by doing penance, in the shape  
of death, that the soldier can achieve redemption:

Death tried many  
Ways to invade the citadel of mind,  
Always in vain; until the mortal hour  
When they at last let down the bridge  
and flung  
The gates apart, but left no easy plunder  
A greater victory lay in their surrender.
Death, in this manner becomes a part of the total scheme of things, and unless man passes through this experience, his soul remains confined, and "he must walk alone":

The great have come and the troubled spirits have spoken;
But help or hope is none till the circle be broken
Of wishing death and living time's compulsion,
Of wishing love and living love's destruction.
Till then, the soul is caged in brain and bone
And the observant man must walk alone.

The poem concludes with images of chaos and confusion, representing the doubts and hesitations which must assail human mind. But the poet is strengthened by the "stone faces" (perhaps the examples of great men in the past):

It is well to remember the stone faces
Among these ruins.

It was with such a frame of mind that Keyes joined the army in April 1942. Though the poems that he wrote after this date show that Keyes was beginning to link his abstract thinkings with actual living, his approach as a poet remained essentially literary'. He was too impersonal a poet to abandon himself completely to new experiences. Rather, his highly literary mind sought to discover something familiar in those experiences. Unlike Wilfred Owen, who discovered the pity of war out
of his personal war experiences, Keyes had
foresuffered it all. So that when he actually
went to war, his highly academic mind tried to
impose its pattern on his experiences. Only a
couple of weeks after his going to Omagh for
military training, he wrote to John Heath-Stubbs
about the paradox that he discovered in army
life. He described "the vision of the army" as
it struck him as

cold obscenity, an occasional sense of peace,
greater than any I have known before, and
flashes of startling beauty. 21

And Michael Meyer had noted that later on "in
Africa, Keyes found a serenity which had never
been his in England: a peace paradoxically
arising from actual violence". So that, one
can say, with some justification, that both in his
life and poetry, Keyes tried to conquer pain, and
arrive at a serene acceptance of it.

But, apparently, Keyes did not achieve this
condition overnight. He struggled hard, and at
times seemed to capitulate before the meaningless
suffering of war, but eventually came out with a
sense of strength. His poems written in 1942

21. Minos of Crete, op.cit. p 171
22. See Meyer's article on Keyes in The Windmill, op.cit. p.58
are a record of this history, and it has been rendered in moving poetic terms. The important point about them is that they affect us as human and real as his earlier poems do not. The 'literary' element is there, no doubt, but it is no longer an isolated entity wandering in thin air, but has its roots in human experience. In other words, his literariness, now in contact with actuality, has achieved a solidity, all its own.

Keyes's Army poems are subjective, and their personal tone is refreshing, in contrast to the abstract broodings of some of his earlier poems. In March 1942, only a month before he was called up for service, Keyes wrote nine poems, which deal with his varying moods, reflecting the state of uncertainty that lay ahead. In a moment of confidence and joy, he wrote extravagantly of his love in a poem called Hopes for a Lover, which dazzles with colourful imagery, and gay and jaunty rhythm:

I'd have you proud as red brocade
And such a sight as Venus made
Extravagantly stepping from a shell.

But this was a temporary mood which gave way to lover's feelings of frustration and regret in
Lament for Harpersfield: The Flowering Orchard.

In War Poet, he expressed the contradiction that he encountered in life: "I am the man who looked for peace and found/My own eyes barbed". The poem Anarchy, which has been described as his spiritual autobiography, depicted the turbulence of his mind, only balanced by his fearlessness and courage:

Black dancers crossed his brain. The bearded sun Whirled past him, locked with prancing Capricorn. A dog began to howl, until he cried It was too much. And then his wonder died.

Evening found him lost but unafraid Surveying the wry landscape in his mind.

Keyes had a great fear that war would coarsen his mind. His first poem after he joined military service is full of dark forebodings and black imagery:

Rain strikes the window. Miles of wire Are hung with small mad eyes. Night sets its mask Upon the fissured hill. The soldier waits For sleep's deception, praying thus: O land Of battle and the rough marauders lying Under this country; as your faces blackened Turn to bedrock, let me not be rotted:

In reply to this poignant prayer, "The wind cries through the valley" and the soldier knows that he is doomed. But he also chooses to believe that "it's love could save him from his mind". This poem reminds one of Alun Lewis's All Day It Has Rained, but Keyes's treatment of the subject is entirely
individual. He does not indulge in, as Lewis does, a gentle jibe at "the loud celebrities/ Exhorting us to slaughter", and a general nostalgia for the familiar native landscape. Keyes's poem, on the other hand, is one of apprehension and prayer. More importantly, it recognizes the hesitations and doubts that a sensitive mind can arouse in a soldier.

We know the same
Perplexities and terrors - whether to turn back:
On the dark road, whether to love
Too much and lose our power, or die of pride:
The fear of steel, or that the dead should mock us.

(Ulster Soldier)

Yet, paradoxically enough, it was his mind which enabled him to remain sane amidst war's carnage, and to preserve his values:

"I am not a man but a voice. My only justification is my power of speaking clearly. Therefore, it doesn't matter in the least what happens to my body...."
All of which is true enough, but dangerous if one is not watchful; it might easily mean submission and not what I intend - the conquest of the physical world by acceptance.23

By this time Keyes had started to discover that love was becoming a source of pain to him: it was no longer the agony of separation so much as the hopelessness of unrequited love. Milein did not give him the slightest encouragement. On the contrary, she did not meet him when he came to

23. Milos of Crete, p. 174
Oxford and London, on a brief leave in July. He was all along hoping that he would meet her, but when he received her letter telling him that that would be impossible, he was numbed. He wrote to Michael Meyer:

The passionate need I felt...for three months has suddenly stopped, as if a string had snapped, or a muscle that gave me pain had parted. 24

Nevertheless, he tried to contact her again and wrote a couple of letters, but without success. Along with one of his letters, he sent her a copy of his book *The Iron Laurel*, with an inscription, "To the mad lady from a proud talker", July 1942, which was the title of one of his poems, in which the lady tells the lover that she has changed, and that the former relationship is no longer possible.

Keyes enclosed the poem *Not Chosen* with another letter to her. The poem is a resigned acceptance of his fate, which goes with the realization that love would bring unhappiness to both:

I am the watcher in the narrow lane...
My tongue is schooled in every word of fear.

24 John Guenther, *op.cit.* p112
O take me back, but as you take remember
My love will bring you nothing but trouble,
My dear

In the last poem that he wrote about her, North Sea, he looks back at their relationship with regret. It is a compact poem in which the lines and images are controlled and precise. The central emotion of personal pain has been delicately balanced in a larger universal context. He looks at the North Sea, and various figures appear in his mind. He is particularly sensitive to "Heine's ghost", and is reminded of the German poet's failures and frustrations. As if to suggest that this is the common lot of all poets, Keyes passes on to his own sorrow:

And eastward looking, eastward wondering
I meet the eyes of Heine's ghost, who saw
His failure in the grey forsaken waves
At Rulenstein one autumn. And between
Rises the shape in more than memory
Of Düsseldorf, the ringing, river enfolding
City that brought such sorrow on both of us.

Düsseldorf was a city of sorrow for both of them because it was from there that she was exiled due to Nazi tyrannies, and he was to fall hopelessly in love with this girl from that city. After the termination of this episode with Milein, Keyes turned to her room-mate Renée-Jane Scott, in whom he found an agreeable companion. He kept in touch
with her till the end, writing to her, and when
together, going with her for walks etc. Though
he could never forget Milein completely, his
companionship with Renée gave him much pleasure
and a sense of stability. He wrote at least
two poems for her, **Seascape** and **The Promised Land**.
The latter poem contains a touching lyrical tribute
to her friendship and love:

> How dare I sing for you
> I the least worthy
> Of lovers you've had:
> You the most lovely
> of possible landscapes?

Renée's love obviously had a calming effect
on him, after the agony and hopelessness of his
passionate love for Milein. But during the last
months of his life, he was more and more haunted
by the pain and suffering in the external world.
As he remarked, "the only difference is that now
I am haunted by the chaos of the outer world, more
than by my own personal world". The chaos of
the outer world was, of course, the war-ridden
time, when love had departed:

> There is no speech to tell the shape of love
> Nor any but the wounded eye to see it;
> Whether in memory, or listening to the talk
> Of rain among the gutters; or at dawn
> The sentry's feet striking the chilly yard.

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25. *Minos of Crete*, *op.cit.* p176
There is no synonym for love's great word -
No way of comforting the limbs
That have lain lovelocked at an earlier season.

(The Uncreated Images)

He takes images from nature in The Vines Are Planted
to indicate man's own responsibility for the kind
of world in which he has found himself:

The hand is writing, but the page is bare
We are unthrifty vintners. We have raised
Great rootless gardens from our impotence
To challenge this unlovely season's envy:
So now they bloom across the bitter wind
Like the immortal spurge, the tempest's enemy.

But Keyes was far from picking on his generation
as a special case, As a history student, he knew
that peoples and countries in the past had brought upon
themselves suffering and destruction. Rome Remember
displays his brilliant historical imagination as he
reminds the holy city of its tragic fate in the
past:

Remember the Greeks who measured out your doom
Remember the soft funereal Etruscans.
Remember the Nordic snarl and the African sorrow.

Speaking about this poem to Renee, he had said:
"I have begun to write a poem which is still another
lament - for Rome and Carthage, for poetry and
learning....".26 The lament is accompanied by
a warning of the coming dangers, which is given
in ringing admonitory tones:

The bronze wolf howls when the moon turns red.
The trolls are massing for their last assault.
Your dreams are full of claws and scaly faces
And the Gothic arrow is pointed at your heart.

Rome remember your birth in Trojan chaos.
O Think how savage will be your last lamenters
How alien the lovers of your ghost.

Fraser\(^\text{27}\) has remarked on the technical maturity that
Keyes had achieved in his later poems, and has quoted
lines from *Rome Remember* to demonstrate how skilful
and supple Keyes's blank-verse had become. Indeed,
this is one of the few perfect poems that he wrote,
and its verse has not only lyrical surge and sonorous
majesty, but also an epical sweep, which is in perfect
keeping with the theme of lament and warning.

It is reasonable to suppose that the "outer chaos"
around him had fired Keyes's historical imagination
that resulted in the war-like theme of *Rome Remember*.
But it is interesting to see how that historical
imagination invested a modern figure with the stature
of a hero in history. The poem *Timoschenko* is about the
Russian general who was not far removed in time -
his recent victory over the Germans had achieved
wide publicity in newspapers in September 1942
when the poem was composed - yet, in the poem he seems
as far removed as Wordsworth or Klee were in Keyes's
ever earlier poems about them. But as before, Keyes has

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27. G.S. Fraser, *op. cit.* 202
no difficulty in getting into the mind of the Russian, who looked at the "army of twisted limbs and hollow faces", and was grieved to think of the devastations, especially those caused at home, by war:

And there before the night, he was aware
Of the flayed fields at home, and black with ruin
The helpful earth under the tracks of tanks.

This filled him with anger at the same time. These contradictory feelings of grief over sufferings, and anger at the enemies who caused them, was perhaps typical of the victims of Nazi aggression. Keyes embodied this paradox in memorable lines of great visual power:

He turned, and his great shadow on the wall
Swayed like a tree. His eyes grew cold as lead,
Then in a rage of love and grief and pity,
He made the pencilled map alive with war.

Most of the war poems dealing with superior army officers have tended to be satirical, condemning their stupidity, arrogance and callousness. Keyes poem on the other hand is unique, because with his characteristic detachment he could see the Russian general as a tragic figure, who was faced with a tragic choice.

Keyes had extended this concept to humanity in general and believed that every man was faced with a tragic choice. He felt that literature at all times and in all ages had been concerned with man's
tragic choice. Hence the preoccupation with the theme of death. He made the following entry in his diary in March 1943:

How significant it is that Hood's ghost in *The Haunted House* is a daylight one! The Romantics raised a spectre they could not lay; it was broadly speaking, death as a part of life, conceived in terms of sensual imagery. To the Middle Ages and the Elizabethans, death was merely the Leveller; to the C.17, a metaphysical problem; to C18, the end of life. The Romantics tried to think of it as a state of existence. By the 1840's, this had become an obsession, and had degenerated into curiosity.

By the later C.19, and up to our time, it has resulted in a clearly apparent Death Wish as the only solution to the problem - since the solution must come in sensual terms. It was left to Necrophilous Germany, to Rilke in fact, to provide the best solution short of actually dying. That's why there had to be a "Poet of Death" in C.20; and why Rilke is the most important European poet since Goethe and Wordsworth. 28

Like Rilke, Keyes himself was a "Poet of Death" and believed that man carried death as a woman carried her child. We have already seen how Keyes had been concerned with pain, suffering and death. In some of the last poems, that he wrote before he was killed, these themes acquire a greater pointedness and authenticity.

*Four Postures of Death* is comprised of poems written separately, and they were not conceived as a sequence until later on. The last poem in the series *Death and the Plowman* is perhaps the most impressive. Here Keyes faces death in its nakedness, as it were,

and its horror fascinates him instead of repelling him, because by now he has come to recognize death not only as an immediate but also a necessary reality. In a letter to John Heath-Stubbs, Keyes had remarked:

But my most exciting single experience was Helpmann's Hamlet ballet, which I saw twice in the same week at Edinburgh. It is an extraordinarily sinister work, with a sadistic quality which makes it really painful to watch. I was able to accept the whole thing entirely without question...its total effect is one of great horror and pain - all the more so, because one can well imagine that the moment of death will take such a form -- 29

The "moment of death" is foreseen in Death and the Plowman, and the vision is conveyed through dry, hard images, which are more in the tradition of Webster and his contemporaries rather than in that of the Romantics. The Rider tells the Plowman not to ask for alms because he is going to "the dry valley of bones" in his search "for a drop of truth". The Plowman wants to accompany The Rider, but the latter warns him of the perils of such a quest. But the Plowman insists, hoping that he too might wither into the truth. (cf. Yeats' The Coming of Wisdom with Time):

29. Ibid, p179
It's only the wind holds my poor bone together,
So take me with you to that famous land.
There I might wither, as I'm told some do,
Out of my rags and boast at last
The integrated skeleton of truth.

So, both of them set out in their common search:

We're driving to famous land some call
Posterity, some famine, some the valley
Of bones, valley of bones, valley of dry bones where there is no heat nor hope nor dwelling:

But cold security, the one and only
Right of a workless man without a home.

It may be recalled that Keyes had once told Milein that he was ever ready to sacrifice his body, but had added, "it might so easily mean submission and not what I intend - the conquest of the physical world by acceptance". In a poem, called William Byrd, he tries to resolve the dilemma in terms of Christian sacrifice. The poet speaks through the mouth of the sixteenth century English composer of Church music, and expresses a quiet but firm hope that after all the sufferings of this world, salvation would await him:

\begin{quote}
Lord, I am no coward,
But an old man remembering candle flames
Reflected in the scroll-work, frozen trees
Praying for Advent, the willow cut at Easter
The quires are dumb. My spirit sings in silence.
You will appoint the day of my rising.
\end{quote}

The gentle tone of these lines create a sense of religious certainty, the light of "the candle flames"
shine, even though "the quires are dumb". Keyes also went to the Arthurian legend in order to underline the theme of redemption through sacrifice and death. The symbolism of The Grail was largely taken from Charles Williams's Taliessien Through Lornes, in which Blancheffleur, the sister of Percival died giving blood to a sick girl. Keyes presents Blancheffleur as a symbol of love, which triumphed through sacrifice: "She alone/ Knew from her birth the Mystic Avlon".

But Keyes turned the other way round in The Expected Guest, where he despaired of salvation, which was symbolized in the Syrian Veronica's handkerchief that bore the imprint of Christ's features. The 'guest' of the poem is Christ, who is dead, and the living people are also dying:

We are dying tonight, you in the aged darkness
And I in the white room my pride has rented
And either way, we have to die alone.

Similarly, in An Early Death, the grief of the mother whose sons have died in war is likened to that of Mary over Christ's crucifixion. But in either case, the grief is bitter, and is unredeemed by any spiritual consolation. In fact, the confident hope, which turned into sheer disappointment is conveyed rather skilfully through the central
image of the tree:

But for the mother what can I find of comfort? She who wrought glory out of bone and planted The delicate tree of nerves whose foliage Responded freely to the loving wind? Her grief is walking through a harried country Whose trees, all fanged with savage thorns, are bearing Her boy's pale body worried on the thorns.

An Early Death might be described as Keyes's version of Owen's theme in Futility. Keyes wrote a few poems dealing with classical mythology, but it is not difficult to see them as symbolical of his own predicament in a war-torn world. Thus, for example, in a perfectly simple poem like Lament For Adonis, the lament seems to assume topical significance when the poet appears to be identifying himself with Adonis, who had symbolized beauty and art. In a like manner, in Orestes and the Furies, the story of Orestes's madness, after he had murdered his mother Clytemnestra, and his relentless pursuit by the Furies, reflects the poet's acceptance of his sense of guilt, and the need to face up to the dangers:

Observing shapes of judgement in the sky He seeks the dark, yet dare not turn his back Upon these shattered mirrors where he sees The snake-haired furies running on his track.

The passionate tones of bitterness and defiance
of The Moonlight Night on the Fort is a more direct poem and it reveals Keyes's ability to use nature for varied poetic purposes. The poem is about soldiers and sailors lost at sea. The sea is not a symbol in the poem. Rather, it, along with night and the moon constitute a sombre backdrop against which the dead men are seen. Keyes's portrayal of the dead on a moonlit port has been done after the manner of Webster:

Some were unlucky, Blown a mile to shoreward
Their crossed hands lie among the bitter
marsh-grass

Link arms and sing. The moon sails out
Spreading distraction on the faces, drawing
The useful hands to birdclaws....

But here again, such a macabre scene does not drive the poet into an uncontrolled hysteria. Rather the unsentimental recognition of human reality enables him to salvage what can be recovered from such a situation. This resolution comes out in a compelling image like "the tide's kiss on this dog-toothed shore":

... bearing our weakness bravely
Through all the frigid seasons we have weighed
The chances against us, and refuse no kisses
Even the tide's kiss on this dog-toothed shore.

This kind of fierce acceptance of necessity finds a vibrant poetic expression in Keyes last poem, The Wilderness. It is a poem of various
literary influences, and the poet had originally dedicated it to "I.M. Geoffrey Chaucer, George Darley, T.S. Eliot, the other explorers. "The poem bears the obvious influence of Darley, from whose book Nenentha, Keyes got the idea of Phoenix as a symbol of pride, which is the starting point of The Wilderness. Keyes had praised the flat, direct style of Eliot's The Little Gidding, which along with the Waste-Land, echoes throughout Keyes poem.

Despite these literary influences, The Wilderness is a highly individualistic work, and is an example of the fact that Keyes was learning to assimilate the external influences, and to transmute them into a work that is uniquely his own. The poem is a whole in itself. It starts with the instinctive knowledge that the "red rock wilderness/ Shall be my dwelling place", and after extensive explorations, ends with a description of the very nature of it:

Flesh is fire, frost and fire
Flesh is fire in this wilderness of life
Which is our dwelling.

More importantly, the poem forms an integral part of Keyes's entire poetic output. In the prefatory note to The Cruel Solstice (1944), he had said that "the poems have been arranged in a rough order of thought: and shall be read consecutively". The
Wilderness is the last poem in this collection, and it marks the climax of his poetic development. It shows the rapt understanding aimed at all along his poetry, a poetic vision, which came out of a mature acceptance of life's realities. In other words, while reading the poem at the end of his Collected Poems, one has the feeling that all his poems were heading towards this climax, though much in the earlier poems have been discarded in the process, and many new ideas have taken a firmer shape. In an earlier poem, Time Will Not Grant, Keyes had expressed his fear that things might change, rendering his life useless:

But I am frightened after every good day
That all my life must change and fall away.

But in The Wilderness, change is seen as an inevitable— even a desirable— fact of life, because man must carry his dreadful mission to its completion.

There is no parting,
From friends, but only from the ways of friendship;
Nor from our lovers, through the forms of love
Change often as the landscape of this journey
To the dark valley where the gold bird burns
I say, Love is a wilderness and these bones
Proclaim no failure, but the death of youth.

The key image of the poem is, of course, the wilderness, which recurs throughout his poems, directly or indirectly, right from the time he wrote one of
his first poems at Oxford. In that poem, Advice For a Journey, he made a plea to the men of his generation to view the future unclouded by sentimental hope:

So take no rations, remember not your homes Only the blind and stubborn hope to track This wilderness.

Similarly in Death And Flowman (Four Postures of Death), we found him marching to "the valley of bones, valley of dry bones,/Bones where there is no heat nor hope is my dwelling." And in this last major poem, we find the poet came face to face with the pitiless desert:

The rock says "Endure", The wind says "Pursue", The sun says "I will suck your bones And afterwards bury you".

It is important that Keyes was no longer a spectator as in The Foreign Guest but he identified himself with the protagonist in the poem. That was why, while he used the third person in the first draft, he changed it to the first in his final draft. Thus "The red rock wilderness, wilderness/ shall be your dwelling place" became "my dwelling place", "Your own bleeding feet" became "My own bleeding feet" and so on. His only mission in this desert is to find "the predatory Phoenix", the symbol of pride:
The home of the gold bird, the predatory Phoenix,  
O' louder than the tongue of any river  
Call the red flames among the shapes of rock  
And this is my calling.....

The notion that the phoenix of pride must be discovered and destroyed, before he could "sing the song that rises from the fire", is a philosophical extension of his idea in *The Forei*n Gate* that the mere acceptance of pain and death constitutes glory:

The uniform of pain with pain put on is straiter  
Than lover's garment; yet the death  
Of these is different, and their glory greater.

Now all the good and evil of this world must be left behind, and nothing should matter except his "calling:"

No weather, even this cruel sun, can change us;  
No dress, though you in shining satin walk  
Or you in velvet, while I run intatters  
Against the fiery wind. There is no loss,  
Only the need to forget. This is my calling.

He is prepared to leave behind his beloved too. But she is not content "to sit / Alone with her candle in a darkened room", and is determined to "follow after you and stand beside you there". So they join forces in the quest:

And we go forth, we go forth together  
With our lank shadows dogging us, scrambling  
Across the raw red stones.
Here, again, we find a development in Keyes' views from the time when he wrote *Remember your Lovers* in which the women stay back and grieve, when their lovers go away to war. Now Keyes has acquired a deeper and more universal vision of trial in which everyone has to participate:

All who would save their life must find the desert—
The lover, the poet, the girl who dreams of Christ,
And the swift runner, crowned with another laurel:
They all must face the sun, the red rock desert,
And see the burning of the metal bird.
Until you have crossed the desert and faced that fire
Love is an evil, a shaking of the hand,
A sick pain draining courage from the heart.

Keyes believed with Rilke that man carried death as a woman carried her child. When that moment of birth came to him; he accepted it with courage. His intellectual progression towards death culminated in *The Wilderness*, and knowing that he grew up, and died, during the war years, we can see how his external experiences matched his deepest thoughts. That is why he was able to absorb war as a part of human experience. This is an astonishing achievement for a young man who had not completed his twenty-first birthday when he died. If his technique is not exciting, it is certainly adequate. Many of his poems do suffer from verbal excesses and uncontrolled imagery. It is also true that he tends to give the
impression, in the words of Robert Graves, of "being a synthetist of group styles rather than a poet in his own right". But a careful and comprehensive reading of his own poems dispels that impression. One realizes that Keyes was searching both for his own vision and his own style, and in some of his last poems he succeeded to a great extent in achieving both. The Wilderness, for example, not only projects his own vision but also reflects the style of the poet who had learnt to give to his lines the austerity that turned his lyricism into impressive solemnity.

Keyes said: "The artist is a man who has visions and is able to communicate them, in a necessarily imperfect form, to a wide audience... he will have succeeded, as far as possible, if he can give to his audience some inkling of the continual fusion of finite and infinite, spiritual and physical, which is our world". Having been called upon to bring about such a fusion in times of war's meaningless sufferings and brutalities, Keyes himself vindicated his role as an artist. And what he said about the permanence.

31. Kings of Grate, on cit. pp 144/145
and universality of artistic achievement holds true of his own works too:

As long as he continues to believe in the importance of his art... there is no danger that the artist will be swamped by the war, or find himself impotent when peace comes at last. 32.

32. Ibid.
Horace, it is said, fled from the battle of Philippi, throwing away his shield, and war never entered his life — or poetry. On the other hand, the English poets, who grew to manhood during either of the two World Wars, not only fought in war but also wrote their best poetry about it. Wars in the twentieth century have been fundamentally different from those in the past in the sense that while warfare had traditionally been the affair of the warrior classes, it has permeated the whole lives of nations in our times. It is basically this fact that has necessitated a readjustment in the relationship between the Muse and Mars.

The fact of collective participation, as well as responsibility, brought before the common man the 'reality' of war, its horror, suffering and brutality. The major poets of the First War devoted themselves to the exposure of such 'Truths' of war and succeeded in creating stirring poetry. But art is more than a mere representation of life. Also, it is more than a representation of only topical realities. So that if modern war poetry were to have the universal validity of
of all good poetry, it had to achieve a double focus, concentrating not only on the destructive aspects of war but also discovering in them resemblances with man's deepest human experiences.

This was the direction in which the best poets of the Second War moved. Condemnation of War and its atrocities was merely a starting point for them, and they went on to relate their war experiences to the larger context of human life as a whole. The realization on their part that the 'warnings' of their predecessors to the greedy politicians was of no practical avail and that war had inevitably come, did not throw the poets into an apathy of spiritless resignation, just as the greatest poets have not given up the determination to live meaningfully in spite of their consciousness of the perpetual presence of death. Indeed, death, life and love have been the central themes of modern war poetry. These themes have been the subjects of searching analysis and exploration against the fierce backdrop of war. Hence this poetry is as significant and relevant at all times - war or peace - as any that concerns itself with the permanent human condition.

As we have seen, the developments of war poetry
in our times ran parallel to the changes that came about in contemporary poetry in general, thereby making it a product of the modern sensibility. Most of the poets — especially those of the Second War — were men of firm literary background, and they not only partook of the prevailing literary climate, but also, in a few cases, helped to shape it to a certain extent. And they brought it about that, during times of war, The English Muse refused to pay special homage to Mars, or indeed, to depend on his bounty, and inspired poets to write about "the boredom, the horror and the glory" of human life.
A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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