POLITRY

AND

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

by

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in the University of Leicester, 1972
To
Walter
Gillian
and
Kathryn

without whom this thesis would have been completed much earlier
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A Note on Books Cited in the Footnotes

In each chapter, the first time I have referred to any book I have used the full title and the name of the author. In subsequent references within the same chapter I have, where it is possible to do so without confusion, used a shortened form. Full details of place and date of publication of all books referred to are given in the Bibliography.
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"The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

The spark which set off the First World War was the murder at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne. It did not appear likely that a world war would ensue. Professor A. J. P. Taylor asserts that on July 5 (upon which date he believes the decisions were made which led to war), "general war seemed hypothetical and remote."1 Certainly Austria-Hungary was not swiftly aroused; its ultimatum to Serbia was not presented until 23 July, almost a month after the Archduke's assassination. When Serbia rejected the ultimatum events moved swiftly and surely to bring most of Europe into a conflict which they scarcely understood. On 28 July Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia; on 1 August Germany followed suit and two days later made general war inevitable by declaring war against France. The British declaration followed on 4 August.

* * * * *

When war came, it came to a Britain totally unprepared except for its navy for warfare against a powerful enemy. It came too, to a Britain surprised to find itself in conflict with a foreign enemy, for matters much nearer home had been the grave concern of politicians and newspapers for months past: during the vital days before war was declared the question of Home Rule for Ireland was darkening England with the threat of Civil War. It was not until 27 July 1914 that The Times devoted its first leader to international rather than internal affairs. But there was still no conviction of the inevitability of war:

...should there arise in any quarter a desire to test our adhesion to the principles that inform our friendships and that guarantee the balance of power in Europe, we shall be found no less ready and determined to vindicate them with the whole strength of the Empire, as we have been found whenever they have been tried in the past. That, we conceive, interest, duty, and honour all demand from us. England will not hesitate to answer to their call.

The following day, 28 July, the very day on which Austria-Hungary declared war, there was even less conviction, and The Times' first leader began with the reassuring words,
"The European situation is perceptibly less threatening than it was yesterday, although it still remains very anxious and insecure." The truth was that the nation had been lulled into a sense of security with regard to international war. Writing of the pre-war Cabinet, Professor Taylor declared that "they did not believe that England could be endangered by events on the Continent". 2

By the beginning of August the British public had at last become aware of the possibility of war. On 3 August The Times reported Bank-holiday crowds eagerly buying up the latest editions of the morning papers and instantly becoming "engrossed in the news from abroad". Their reaction to this sudden revelation of impending war was natural. Events in far-away Serbia seemed to have little relation to England and English interests. The Daily News for the same day announced: "There is no war party in this country. On the contrary, the horrors of war have already seized on the popular imagination, and in the highways and public vehicles in London yesterday, the populace were heard to express their indignation at the swift and tragic movements on the Continent."

This pacific mood was merely transient. While Britain was outside the war it was remote from the hearts of the British people, for most of whom Serbia and Sarajevo were no more than names. The threats to neighbouring France and to 'little Belgium', however, were swiftly realized, and the proclamation of war on 4 August brought with it a change of attitude that was overwhelming. *The Times* for 5 August reported that the crowds which gathered to hear the Proclamation of War read "were filled with the war spirit", and the *Daily News*, which two days earlier had affirmed that "there is no war party in this country", now described how "The enthusiasm culminated outside Buckingham Palace when it became known that war had been declared". Newspapers and periodicals of the first month of the war did much to encourage the wave of fervent patriotism and war-eagerness which swept over the country, and it was not long before every available wall bore the famous poster of Kitchener with its pointing finger and arresting caption "Your King and Country Need You". On 12 August *The Times* was able to report that "there was again a large queue of young men waiting outside the Central Recruiting office at Great Scotland-yard yesterday to respond to Lord Kitchener's call for 100,000 men. The work of enlistment proceeded briskly all day, and new recruits were
sworn in at the rate of between 80 and 100 an hour."

There was scarcely a discordant voice anywhere in the country. Internal strife and party faction were forgotten. The fighting spirit of Ireland was diverted from civil to world war, and divisions of Irishmen were soon ready to join in the greater conflict. Amidst all this enthusiasm it is sobering to read a letter from Lord Weardale in The Times for 5 August. This letter shows him to have been one of the most clear-sighted statesmen Britain could boast of in those troubled days. This is what he wrote for publication the day after war was declared:

The indignation of Austria at the crime of Sarajevo is as natural as the racial and religious sympathy of Russia with the Servian people; but what rational man can contend that such a question and such temporary antagonisms can justify the horrors of a great European war—the worst, perhaps, the world has ever seen—with its countless dead and maimed, its ruined homes, its irremediable industrial losses? Both victors and vanquished can only emerge from such a conflict bankrupt in resources and in all the higher attributes of humanity.
His was the voice in the wilderness proclaiming the true and deadly character of the war. Before long he would be joined by others who spoke not from a lively apprehension of what war could mean, but from the terrible experience of twentieth century warfare.

Meanwhile the war was on and enlistment continued, and among those who enlisted during the next few years were the young men who were to become the voice and the conscience of their age—the poets of England: Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, to mention only some of the better known. When war broke out Siegfried Sassoon, who was the oldest of these young men I have mentioned, was twenty-eight; Edmund Blunden was seventeen. Even the most sensitive scarcely foresaw the horrors that were before them. Although Wilfred Owen wrote in 1914,

War broke; and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in.3

he yet wrote home in a letter to his mother when he first joined the fighting forces in France: "There is a fine heroic feeling

about being in France, and I am in perfect spirits. A tinge of excitement is about me... ⁴

It was mainly this "tinge of excitement" which prevailed during the first two years of the war. In his journal for August 1914 Aubrey Herbert wrote, "The men were very pleased to have been under fire, and compared notes as to how they felt," ⁵ but the Battle of Mons in which his men were engaged was followed by the Battle of Le Cateau and of the Marne and the first Battle of Ypres. Meanwhile Antwerp had fallen and the hopes of peace "before Christmas" began to recede. The tone of reports from the Front began to change: The Times reported from the Battle of Mons that "The British soldier was cheerful, steady and confident." ⁶ Six weeks later another report told how the wounded were "as happy and as eager to be well enough to go to the front again as if they were schoolboys going home for the holidays." ⁷ But a sourer note was creeping into the reports: first, the confession that war and the idea of war were two very different things:

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⁵ Mons, Anzac and Kut, p. 43.
⁶ 23 August 1914.
⁷ 8 October 1914.
"I had not the slightest conception what war could mean, even in the wildest flights of fancy"; secondly, descriptions of the real horrors of war: "You cannot imagine what a battlefield is like after a battle — a huddled mass of corpses, some of which have been lying there since the fighting round here in October last...." and thirdly, the beginnings of condemnation:

By the touchstone of the men it has broken this war is judged and the makers of this war. And more than ruined villages and desecrated churches these soldiers pronounce condemnation. They, who have given so much, are, in a sense, without joy and without enthusiasm; rather they shun recollection. There is no rest in the killing of men.... The war is revealed as a thing gross and dull-witted, a crime even against the ancient, chivalrous spirit of war.

During 1915 the frontiers of war were extended and its horrors intensified. Early in the year Zeppelin raids were made on England; in February the Germans began their U-boat

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8. Letter from an Officer, The Times, 4 December 1914.
9. Letter from an Officer, The Times, 5 April 1915.
blockade of Britain; and in April, on the Western Front, during the second battle of Ipres, the Germans launched their first gas attack. The allied offensives which followed were largely indecisive and by the end of the year the enthusiasm of 1914 was beginning to wane. In a letter to his mother two days after Christmas Alan Seeger wrote of "the immense secret longing for peace that is the universal undercurrent in Europe now."  

Despite the loss of American lives from German U-boat attacks, the United States had so far avoided any sort of commitment in the war. In January 1916, however, President Wilson made his first peace move; it was done secretly by sending his adviser, Colonel House, to Europe to negotiate. The attempt was entirely unsuccessful and was not renewed until the end of the year, by which time the Germans had stolen the initiative from the Americans and made their own peace offer. Yet in 1916, politically, Europe was not ready for peace. However, it was in that year that the heart seemed to go out of the men fighting the war.

To begin with, the Military Service Act of January 1916 sent to France men who were not volunteers, but conscripts,

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11. Letters and Diary, p. 172.
men who had not chosen but rather were being compelled to fight. Secondly, the troubles in Ireland which had dissolved themselves in the greater European troubles at the beginning of the war surged up again with the Easter Rising. The violence with which this was put down and the harshness of the punishments meted out to the rebels caused an unrest and dissatisfaction which the British government had hardly expected. Thirdly, the Battle of the Somme, which began on the 1st of July and dragged on until mid-November, stands as a classic example of the foolishness and futility of war. The command on both sides committed errors and sacrificed lives without understanding and without sympathy. Over a million British, French and German soldiers gave their lives to achieve nothing, or very little. As Professor A. J. P. Taylor states,

Idealism perished on the Somme. The enthusiastic volunteers were enthusiastic no longer. They had lost faith in their cause, in their leaders, in everything except loyalty to their fighting comrades. The war ceased to have a purpose. It went on for its own sake, as a contest in endurance.  

12. The First World War, p. 140.
The year petered out. Both the German and the American Peace moves were rejected. After the peace negotiations had failed war seemed more hopeless and less right. Men had ceased to believe any longer in the cause they were fighting for; this resulted in feelings of guilt that they were the instruments by which the war was being prolonged; they had, as Sir Herbert Read put it, "no moral sanction to support the spirit." 13

At last, in April 1917 the U.S.A. declared war on Germany. It seemed to make little difference: the war of attrition dragged on. New peace proposals were put forward by Germany in July and by the Pope in August but to the politicians on both sides the final acceptable solution had not been found. Whilst the proposals were being discussed the third battle of Ipres was being fought; 'Passchendaele' as it was known was the most terrible battle of the war:

...all the combatants engaged on either side regarded it as the culmination of horror.... The rain was pitiless, the ubiquitous mud speedily engulfed man and beast if a step

was taken astray from the narrow duckboards, upon which descended a perpetual storm of shells and gas. 14

In November, with the reports of the casualties and horrors of Ypres still coming in, Lord Lansdowne made an attempt to bring about a compromise peace. In a letter published in the Daily Telegraph on 29 November he insisted that,

We are not going to lose this war, but its prolongation will spell ruin for the civilized world....What will be the value of the blessings of peace to nations so exhausted that they can scarcely stretch out an arm with which to grasp them?

Lord Lansdowne's plea for peace and the Daily Telegraph's publication of it were supported by the Daily News and the Manchester Guardian but The Times opposed them. The war dragged on.

It was Philip Gibbs' reporting of the third battle of

Ypres that moved Lloyd George to write to C. P. Scott in December:

I warn you, I am in a very pacifist temper. I listened last night to Philip Gibbs on his return from the Front, to the most impressive and moving description from him of what the war in the West really means, that I have heard....If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow, but of course they don't know - and can't know....The thing is horrible and beyond human nature to bear, and I feel I can't go any longer with the bloody business; I would rather resign.\(^1\)

But, of course, he did not resign and the war dragged on.

The spring of 1918 saw repeated offensives by the Germans along the Western front and then gradually the tide began to turn. By early October the Germans were suing for peace and negotiations drifted on until the Armistice was finally signed on 11 November.

In four and a quarter years of war about 13,000,000 men

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had been killed and almost 20,000,000 wounded

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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
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead. 16

16. Charles Sorley, Marlborough and Other Poems, p. 73.
I am quite bon.
I hope this finds you
in the pink as it leaves me
well at the present

I am sending this home
A Merry Christmas
To wish you A Merry & Happy
A Happy New Year

Better follows at the first opportunity.
I think this war will end
this year.
next year.
some time.
ever.

Christian Name
only
Kisses.

(Any more must be sent by letter or post card
if there is no more room on this card.)

Give our love to Mary, Emily, Ethel, or the other names that still ring.
"War makes rattling good history; but Peace is poor reading"

More than fifty years are behind us when we look back on the men of 1914, years which have seen two world wars, and times of peace which have been nothing if not precarious. I and my contemporaries can remember no time, politically speaking, when we have felt secure, for our background has been constantly one of war and world turmoil. We cannot imagine the advent of war being greeted with rapture. But the background to the lives of the men who went to war in 1914 was one of peace and they had at first no language nor aura of thought by which they could describe their new experience.

It was perhaps inevitable, therefore, that the romantic attitude to war should be the first to sweep through the country, since in 1914 no other attitude had been clearly formulated. Literature too had fostered the romance, for in general even the most realistic accounts had shown war to be not without honour. The poets had spoken of battle and
death but the conventional approach had been to describe them in terms of glory and patriotism. Sir Henry Newbolt's Collected Poems, published in 1908, illustrate this point very well. In an era of peace he looked back to such battles as Trafalgar, which represented for him the greatness of England, and in which he saw nothing but courage and nobility:

Lover of England, stand awhile and gaze
With thankful heart, and lips refrained from praise;
They rest beyond the speech of human pride
Who served with Nelson and with Nelson died.

As an elder poet (he was 52 years old when war broke out) his message to youth extolled the martial virtues: the public school spirit was one which should endure through adult life:

To set the cause above renown
To love the game beyond the prize,
To honour, while you strike him down,
The foe that comes with fearless eyes...

The legend inscribed on the wall of Clifton Chapel was an ideal to live for:

1. "For a Trafalgar Cenotaph", p. 56.
"Cui procul hinc...  
Qui ante diem periiit:  
Sed miles, sed pro patria."²

Even more immediately, poetry had reflected the contentment and security of the pre-1914 era. The great age of Victorian poetry faded away with the turn of the century; Edwardian poetry scarcely got off the ground. By the beginning of the second decade of the century poets were attempting to rebel against the poetic tradition they had inherited and a number of new movements such as Futurism, Vorticism and Imagism arose and died away before the publication of the first volume of Georgian Poetry in 1912 heralded the "Georgian age":

"For what is it to be a poet?" asks Lord Dunsany,

It is to see at a glance the glory of the world, to see beauty in all its forms and manifestations, to feel ugliness like a pain, to resent the wrongs of others as bitterly as one's own, to know mankind as others know single men, to know Nature as

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² "Clifton Chapel," pp. 123ff.: He who died far from here, before the dawn, died as a soldier, for his country.
botanists know a flower, to be thought a fool, to hear at moments the clear voice of God.\textsuperscript{3}

These words to some extent sum up what the Georgian poets were trying to do during the years before the war, and it was their poetry which was the immediate heritage of the war poets.

The main preoccupations of the Georgian poets as exemplified in the first two volumes of \textit{Georgian Poetry} are threefold: first, an interest in nature, the countryside, animals, birds and romantic love; secondly, verse drama and dramatic verse have a position of some importance in both volumes; and finally, there is an attempt at realism. It was this last aspect of the poetry that showed the clearest break from tradition and caused the most controversy, yet from it in part stems the preparedness for the realistic poetry of the later war years. On the other hand, the first flush of romantic war poetry was directly Georgian, yet it lacked realism, the one ingredient which had made the volumes of Georgian poetry appear revolutionary.

\textsuperscript{3} Epigraph to \textit{Georgian Poetry, 1911-1912}. 
When war broke out, men's first impulses were towards its romance, for academically, in 1914 war was romantic. This romanticism was apparent in various attitudes to war, all of them completely unrelated to the essence of war itself, none of them embodying a philosophy able to stand up to the realities of actual battle, yet in themselves real enough to express a large part of what war meant to a peaceful generation. And what war meant to most men at that time was something personal and individual; when they enlisted they did not consider the wider implications of war; their action was essentially thoughtless and essentially selfish. "Getting out to the Front", wrote Siegfried Sassoon, "had been an ambition rather than an obligation.\(^4\) Had it been otherwise, romanticism would have died with the war's inception, for it is only in sheer egotism that the romance of war thrives. It is not surprising that men turned to poetry to express their sudden upsurge of emotions, for the act of writing poetry has in itself a romantic aura. Men turned as easily to writing poetry as to writing those "last letters" home, of

which Rupert Brooke spoke.\textsuperscript{5} For many it was a sentimental
exercise, lacking even an ephemeral truth, but among the
great welter of poetry written in the early days of the
war some at least reflected the true spirit of the times.

A simple, yet not necessarily naive, classification
can be made by suggesting that the writer of true romantic
war poetry was writing for and of himself, whereas the
writer of sentimental poetry was writing for and of others;
the romantic writer was generally a participant, wanting
something personal from war and something which only war
seemed able to give—glory, honour, freedom, escape; he
may have been mistaken, but he was at least sincere; he
did not reflect every facet of his life in war, but he
reflected certain facets which at a particular moment of
time appeared to him to be important. The sentimental
writer, on the other hand, was generally a non-combatant,
writing without personal involvement, seeing war impersonally
as glorious and honourable. The romantic participant often
used exaggerated vocabulary but he rarely sentimentalised.
He would not write a poem such as that by Robert Femede
published in \textit{The Times} for 19 August 1914:

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{The Letters of Rupert Brooke}, p. 623.
Lad, with the merry smile and the eyes
Quick as a hawk's and clear as the day,
You, who have counted the game the prize,
Here is the game of games to play,
Never a goal—the captains say—
Matches the one that's needed now:
Put the old blazer and cap away—
England's colours await your brow.

Notice the falsifying of standards, the equating of war with
a game and of the soldiers' uniform with the school colours,
the exploitation of men's finer feelings by the captain's appeal,
the evocation of the clean young Englishman in the first two
lines and the sentimental use of the word "lad". It is
propaganda, written not from the heart but from the head.

6. It is reminiscent of Sir Henry Newbolt's poem "Vitæi Lampada",
published seven years before:

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night—
Ten to make and the match to win—
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame.
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote—
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

The sand of the desert is sodden red,—
Red with the wreck of a square that broke;—
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke,
The river of death has brimmed his 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!"

Collected Poems, pp.131f.
But compare Femede's lines with (say) the second and best of Rupert Brooke's sonnet sequence:

War knows no power. Safe shall be my going,
Secretly armed against all death's endeavour;
Safe though all safety's lost; safe where men fall;
And if these poor limbs die, safest of all. 7

Here the poet is writing of himself; we may feel that his view of war is mistaken but he is not offering it as a game; in these concluding four lines he faces up to the possibility of death in war - his own and that of others - and embraces it, not through any lack of sincerity, but because death would capture for ever a particular moment of time. 8

The insidiousness of such sentimentality as that of Femede's poem was that it touched a chord in men's minds and won a false response from them:


8. *It is a true romantic sentiment*, cf. Keats' Ode, "On a Grecian Urn":

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!
When war broke out the public-school man applied for his commission in the firm conviction that war was a glorified form of big-game hunting—the highest form of sport. His whole training, the traditions of his kind, had prepared him for that hour. From his earliest schooldays he had been taught that it was the mark of a gentleman to welcome danger, and to regard the risk of death as the most piquant sauce to life.9

In a letter to his father written on 8 August 1916 Lt. H.P.M. Jones took up for himself Vernède's metaphor of the football game:

...in my heart and soul I have always longed for the rough-and-tumble of war as for a football match.10

He was in France, but as yet merely an observer, waiting to become a participant,

...it is my passionate desire to share the hardships and dangers of this war.11

9. Donald Hankey, A Student in Arms, p. 91.
11. op. cit., p. 158.
It is ironic to find that by this time Vernède, now fighting in France, was writing home to his wife:

...I suppose I have just found out what [war] can be like....I still think it's right that [it] should be damnable, but I wish everybody could have an idea of how beastly it can be.  

It is this kind of switch that makes it difficult to understand that the romantic attitude was indeed very real, and also to distinguish between what was frankly sentimental with false values and false emotions and what stemmed from more genuine and more personal feelings. Fair judgment is particularly difficult when one considers poetry written during the war by older poets such as Thomas Hardy. At the outbreak of war Hardy was seventy-four years old. His poetic gift had matured late in life and because of this he was poetically very aware. "Men Who March Away", written on 5 September 1914 seems to me to chime in well with the spirit of the time:

What of the faith and fire within us
Men who march away
Ere the barn-cocks say
Night is growing gray,
Leaving all that here can win us;
What of the faith and fire within us
Men who march away...

Press we to the field ungrieving,
In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just,

Hence the faith and fire within us
Men who march away...

During the years of war, however, he became increasingly unable to identify spiritually with the war generation. An old man, a non-combatant, he was aligned with the sacrificers rather than with the victims as can be seen from "A Call to National Service" written in March 1917:

Up and be doing, all who have a hand
To lift, a back to bend....

---Say, then, "I come!" and go, O women and men...
That scareless, scathless, England still may stand,

Would years but let me stir as once I stirred
At many a dawn to take the forward track,
And with a stride plunged on to enterprise,

I now would speed like yester wind that whirred
Through yielding pines; and serve with never a slack,
So loud for promptness all around outcries!\(^{14}\)

His failure to progress in thought from ideas of courage,
honour and patriotism indicates his lack of spiritual
involvement with the experiences of the later war years.
Not only did he lack personal knowledge of the realities of
war but he also lacked the vicarious understanding which has
been given to our generation through the poetry of such a
writer as Wilfred Owen. Our age, indeed, finds little
sympathy with those who see war as a 'death or glory'
business. The reasoned attitude to war today is that
which regards it as wasteful, brutal, and a sin against
humanity, but it is an attitude that crystallised only
after two world wars had ravaged the conscience of mankind
and after it became evident that modern weapons and hence,
modern warfare, are impersonal and unromantic.

For another older poet, Rudyard Kipling, who was
forty-nine years old in 1914, the idea of war was poetically

\(^{14}\) Collected Poems, p. 514.
familiar; soldiers and battles were the themes of many of his poems; the sentiment of romantic patriotism had been given a new slant in "The Roman Centurion's Song", which ranks among his very best poems:

Legate, I had the news last night—my cohort ordered home
By ship to Portus Itius and thence by road to Rome.
I've marched the companies aboard, the arms are stowed below:
Now let another take my sword. Command me not to go!

I've served in Britain forty years, from Vectis to the Wall
I have none other home than this, nor any life at all.
Last night I did not understand, but, now the hour draws near
That calls me to my native land, I feel that land is here....

For me this land, that sea, these airs, those folk and fields suffice.
What purple Southern pomp can match our changeful Northern skies,
Black with December snows unshed or pearled with August haze—
The clanging arch of steel-grey March, or June's long-lighted days....
Legate, I come to you in tears—My cohort ordered home!
I've served in Britain forty years. What should I do in Rome?
Here is my heart, my soul, my mind—the only life I know.
I cannot leave it all behind. Command me not to go!15

The love of Britain imposed upon the Roman centurion of 300 A.D. was for Kipling a continuing historical fact through which, in 1914, he saw his vision of war, yet it had become oddly twisted. "The Roman Centurion's Song" expressed a belief in the sanctity of an individual soul; "For All We Have and Are", the poem with which Kipling greeted the war in 1914, put forward the idea that the individual soul was subservient to the state:

For all we have and are,
For all our children's fate,
Stand up and take the war
The Hun is at our gate....

No easy hope or lies
Shall bring us to our goal,
But iron sacrifice
Of body, will and soul.

There is but one task for all—
One life for each to give.
What stands if Freedom fall?
Who dies if England live?  

Again, in 1914 the sentiment was not merely acceptable, but was common to many people. However, during the next two years it began to wear thin. In a rather brash article entitled "My First Week in Flanders", Lieutenant the Hon. W. Watson-Armstrong gave an account of the battle of St. Julien, finishing up by referring to Kipling's poem:

The other battalions in the brigade all suffered heavily, and our Brigadier himself was killed. On all this, we can only comment that it was the 'fortune of war', and what does it matter who dies, if only England lives?  

His query was answered four months later by E. S. P. Haynes in a memorial article for Alfred and Rupert Brooke and 'Ben' Kipling:

17. Published in The Cornhill, XLI,244, New Series (October 1916).
The sense of loss to England in the death
of all these young men must surely obliterate
all the old romantic nonsense about war for
several decades at least... 'Who dies if
England lives?' like most rhetorical
questions invites no answer. But one may
well ask what sort of England would survive
if wars on the present scale occurred in
each decade.  

Kipling himself, in fact, was not unqualifiedly romantic
about the war in its later years as I shall show later. But
the attitudes which informed 1914 must not be judged in the
light of understanding which more than fifty years have
thrown upon events. What was, indeed, the truth for the
men of 1914? The truth was that, at the outset, war
offered romance and adventure, and the emotions which
inspired the men of 1914 are reflected in the romantic
poetry of the war:

Now, God be thanked who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping.  

18. "Youth in the War", The Cornhill, XLII, 248, New Series (February 1917).
In _Blasting and Bombardiering_, Wyndham Lewis wrote:

Need I say that there is nothing so romantic as war? If you are "a romantic", you have not lived if you have not been present at a battle, of that I can assure you. 20

In what ways did the 'romance of war' manifest itself between 1914 and 1918? First and foremost was the unwonted excitement and exhilaration of living dangerously, of pushing the old life behind and starting afresh; secondly there was an idealistic patriotism which, viewed widely, embraced the whole of England, or viewed more narrowly showed itself in the love of a village or a county, or in the pride in a regiment; thirdly, there was a belief in the glory and honour of acquitting oneself well in battle and the culmination of this belief was the idea that death in battle was the most fitting and honourable end to life.

In "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", Ezra Pound listed the possibilities:

These fought in any case,
and some believing,

pro domo, in any case...

20. p. 120.
some quick to arm,
some for adventure,
some from fear of weakness,
some from fear of censure,
some for love of slaughter, in imagination,
learning later...
some in fear, learning love of slaughter;\textsuperscript{21}

The first reaction to war was a sense of release, of excitement and adventure, for during the previous decade there had been no outlet for such feelings. The early years of the century were years in which the prevailing tone was that of security, and with security came lethargy; so much had been achieved in the preceding era, that it seemed there was little left to be achieved; the nineteenth century had been one of amazing scientific progress, of tremendous social reforms, of great statesmen and politicians, of powerful writers and thinkers; now the impulse was to rest on these achievements: "Surely", wrote C. E. Montague,\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Personae,} p. 200.

It was not, however, a list conceived within the romantic attitude, for the poem continues:

Died some, pro patria,
non 'dulce' non 'et decor'...
walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old man's lies, then unbelieving
came home, home to a lie,
home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy;
usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places....
there never was any time in the life of
the world when it was so good, in the way
of obvious material comfort, to be alive
and fairly well-to-do as it was before
the war. 22

Yet there was something missing. "Material comfort" there
may have been, but spiritual alertness and stimulus were
lacking. To the boys who were growing into manhood during
the years before 1914 it seemed that adventure had passed
then by. They looked for a challenge and none presented
itself. Their spirits seemed to stagnate in the calm of
the opening twentieth century. Robert Nichols expressed
part of their frustration when he spoke of the security
which prevented his contemporaries from being able to
"experience the sensation...of carrying [their] soul in
[their] teeth." 23 Those who were unable to live in the
imagination were unable to live a life of full awareness,
and even the more imaginative looked nostalgically back to
their childhood for the life of adventure:


23. Introduction to Anthology of War Poetry, p. 27.
Great days we've known, when fancy's barque unfurled
Her faery wings, and bore us through the world
To spy upon the devious ways of men...
For magic ruled the whole earth over then.
Earth was a treasure house of wondrous things. 24

As men looked at the world around them they could see nothing in the time that appeared to offer an outlet to the spirit:

No more to watch by Night's eternal shore,
With England's chivalry at dawn to ride;
No more defeat, faith, victory — 0! no more
A cause on earth for which we might have died. 25

Yet the second decade of the century showed how very precarious were the beliefs in peace, safety and security, and already in 1909 G. F. C. Masterman was expressing his doubts as he claimed that "of all illusions of the opening twentieth century perhaps the most remarkable is that of security." 26 Certainly 1914 put an end to all thoughts of security, and there was an

upsurge of excitement which caused the advent of war to be hailed with enthusiasm. Not that people were not anxious during the vital days before 4 August to avert war if it were possible. Before the Declaration had been made few people would have chosen war; the daily newspapers expressed the unwillingness of English people to embark upon a European war. On 2/3 August 1914 'Ben' Keeling was writing to his mother-in-law, "Has ever a nation gone into war more cold-bloodedly and reluctantly than we are going...I am amazed at the lack of feeling and interest about the war everywhere—even now." Yet there was a feeling of inevitability about the whole process. Men and nations had become pawns in a huge game and had no more power to control their own destinies than the counters in a game of chess. France and Belgium had to fight and if war was coming to such near neighbours Britain had to fight too, to keep the war away from her own shores. Apart from all matters of policy, the people of France and Belgium were our friends and we could not stand by and see them go under: "The one topic is—'Are we coming in?' —It will be a black

shame if we do not stand by our friends," wrote Douglas Herbert Bell in his Diary for 3 August 1914. 28

So war came, and the people shouted in the streets and held up the traffic in order to hear the Proclamation of War read. Doubts were dispelled overnight. There was no thought of what war meant, but an overwhelming desire to put the presumptuous German Kaiser in his place, to right the wrongs done to the small countries of Europe, and to show a Britain still victorious and free; and amongst the young men who rushed to enlist there was a feeling inspired by neither patriotism nor duty, but by the knowledge that here at last was a challenge for the dying spirit, here was a cause to fight for, and if necessary to die for. Sir Philip Gibbs, then a young and exceedingly frank and outspoken war-correspondent, understood this attitude and wrote of it in Now It Can Be Told:

Some of them offered their bodies because of the promise of a great adventure—and life had been rather dull in office and factory and on the farm. Something stirred in their blood—an old call to youth. Some instinct of a primitive, savage kind, for open-air

28. A Soldier's Diary of the Great War, p. 3.
life, fighting, killing, the comradeship of hunters, violent emotions, the chance of death, surged up into the brains of quiet boys, clerks, mechanics, miners, factory hands. 29

It was true. Boys and young men who had been content to live peaceful and uneventful lives flocked to enlist.

Every daily paper contained letters written by men in the fighting forces rejoicing in their own good fortune and commiserating with their friends and relations who were missing the war. Typical of many letters is this extract from the letter of a serving midshipman to his parents, published in The Times for 11 November 1914:

It is awful for Reg being kept at Harrow while this is going on, but I have written to try and cheer him up by saying the war is certain to last two years, by which time he will be able to join in.

Douglas Herbert Bell and his friends in his Territorial Regiment saw the war as "a bit of a game" 30 and 'Ben' Keeling

29. p. 69.
30. 7 November 1914. A Soldier's Diary, p. 54.
In an article published in the *New Statesman* on 5 December 1914 wrote,

I may possibly live to think differently; but at the present moment, assuming this war had to come, I feel nothing but gratitude to the gods for sending it in my time.

Alan Seeger, the American poet, who joined the French Foreign Legion at the outbreak of war wrote in a letter to his mother on 17 October 1914, "I go into action with the lightest of light hearts...I am happy and full of excitement over the wonderful days that are ahead,"[^31] and again, nearly a week later,

I am feeling fine, in my element, for I have always thirsted for this kind of thing, to be present always where the pulsations are liveliest. Every minute here is worth weeks of ordinary experience.[^32]

About the same time Julian Grenfell wrote to his mother, "I adore war. It is like a big picnic without the objectlessness

[^31]: *Letters and Diary of Alan Seeger*, p. 7.
[^32]: *op. cit.*, p. 12.
of a picnic. I have never been so well or so happy," 33 and a week or so later, writing to both his parents he claimed that "it is all the best fun. I have never felt so well, or so happy, or enjoyed anything so much." 34 Robert Nichols summed up the attitude to the war of the majority of his contemporaries when he wrote,

I am surprised looking back, at the lack, as the threat of war intensified, of a feeling of horror—the chief feeling in 1914, you know, was one of extreme and somewhat elevating excitement. 35

and again,

In 1914 my generation didn't consider themselves victims—not at all! On the contrary we felt we were in some sort privileged. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!" 36

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36. op. cit., p. 25.
Bertrand Russell in a more recent book confirmed this view when he wrote of his experiences on the fourth of August 1914, "During this and the following days I discovered to my amazement that average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war." 37

It was this spirit which inspired the romantic poetry of the early war years. Of Brooke's famous "1914" sonnets Robert Nichols wrote, "...they seem to me now, as then, a just, dazzling and perfect expression of what we then felt". 38 Professor A. J. P. Taylor commented that, "Rupert Brooke spoke for an entire generation", 39 and Sir Herbert Read, quoting the first of the sonnets in "Extracts from a War Diary" for 12 April 1917, stated,

...But England of these last few years has been rather cold and weary, and one finds little left standing amid the wreckage of one's hopes. So one is glad to leap into the clean sea of danger and self-sacrifice....
If I do die, it's for the salvation of my own

37. Portraits from Memory, p. 29.
38. Anthology of War Poetry, p. 35.
39. The First World War, p. 56.
soul; cleansing it of all its little egotisms by one last supreme egotistic act.  

From the point of view of his contemporaries, then, Brooke was the voice of their own feelings. What he was expressing was a truth, albeit a transient truth. He was not alone. In August 1914 William Noel Hodgson began his poem, "England to Her Sons" with the words,

Sons of mine, I hear you thrilling
To the trumpet call of war.  

In a poem which is by no means blind to more permanent truths, Charles Sorley, nevertheless tried to catch some of the inconsequential gaiety and excitement of the marching troops:

All the hills and vales along
Earth is bursting into song
And the singers are the chaps
Who are going to die perhaps.

*   *   *

From the hills and valleys earth
Shouts back the sound of mirth,

40. The Contrary Experience, p. 90.

Tramp of feet and lilt of song
Ringing all the road along.
All the music of their going,
Ringing swinging glad song-throwing...\[42\]

Julian Grenfell, whose letters home have been quoted above (pp. 39f.) developed this theme in his poem "Into Battle", a great paean of rejoicing at the challenge of war:

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 colour and warmth and light,
And a striving evermore for these;
And he is dead who will not fight;
And who dies fighting has increase.

* * *

And when the burning moment breaks,
And all things else are out of mind,
And only joy of battle takes
Him by the throat, and makes him blind,
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.\[43\]

\[42\] Marlborough and Other Poems, p. 72.

\[43\] Soldier Poets, Songs of the Fighting Men, pp. 27ff.
This was written in Flanders in April 1915. A month later Grenfell was dead.

It is indeed incontrovertible that during the first two years of war, up to the beginning of the Battle of the Somme, men's attitudes were ambivalent. While the horror of the Battle situation was in no way diminished, many men found the actual experience exhilarating:

Psychology on the Somme was not simple and straightforward. Men were afraid, but fear was not their dominating emotion, except in the worst hours. Men hated this fighting, but found excitement in it, often exaltation, sometimes an intense stimulus of all their senses and passions before reaction and exhaustion. 44

This fact has often failed to be recognised and the result has frequently been a condemnation of the romantic poetry of 1914 to 1916. 45 Yet, as I have shown, this poetry was reflecting what men were thinking and saying in those early war years and had the war ended in 1916 Sassoon's savage satire and Owen's suffering realism would have been unknown.

44. Gibbs, Now It Can Be Told, p. 395.

By mid-1916 most of the writers quoted above were dead, the years of disillusion and moral bewilderment unknown to them. The ones who remained were writing very differently before the war ended.

The second theme of the romanticists was patriotism. Again, the existence of such a sentiment has been denied. There is a world of difference between Isaac Rosenberg's personal denial in a letter to Edward Marsh, "I never joined the army from patriotic reasons" and Robert Graves' categorical rejection of the theme:

Patriotism. There was no patriotism in the trenches. It was too remote a sentiment, and rejected as fit only for civilians.

Graves was wrong. For many men patriotism was an important contributory factor in their attitude to war:

I always feel that I am fighting for England, English fields, lanes, trees,
English atmosphere, and good days in England...

wrote Lieutenant C. C. Carver in a letter to his brother, as late as 27 February 1917, and Captain J. L. T. Jones wrote to his family of "fighting for the country which has sheltered and nurtured one all through life."

As an abstract ideal patriotism was comparatively unimportant and as such it was certainly discredited later in the war, but as a personal justification for taking part in the war it was at least a contributory factor for many men. One cannot fight long for an abstraction, but the idea of defending home and friends, the English 'way of life' was strong and was very frequently interpreted in terms of death; in other words, men were moved and inspired by the thought of dying for their country. So Francis Grenfell writing of his twin brother, Riversdale's death, commented, "Rivy died for old England, and no Englishman could do more."

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comment are the final lines of W. N. Hodgson's poem, "Reverie", in which he described the dead as

\[
\ldots\text{loving as none other}
\]
\[
\text{The land that is their mother,}
\]
\[
\text{Unfaltering renounced her}
\]
\[
\text{Because they loved her so.}^{51}
\]

Brooke's best-known sonnet, "The Soldier", is a more personal and perhaps more conceited view of the same sentiment. At this time there was no other view to take. Even Edmund Blunden, whom one would in no way associate with the romantic attitude, asserts that at the time Brooke was writing "the romantic note was justified" and enlarges thus,

At first, speaking broadly, the poetry thus called into existence was concerned with the beauty of English life, made distinct by the act of separation, renunciation. The fact of war was still strange and enigmatic...Hardly any one could be genuinely, at that early stage, in two minds about it. The appalling destruction which it would ultimately mean, direct and

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51. Verse and Prose, p. 25.
indirect, was not seen... So, the early war poetry is mainly insistent on chivalrous obligation, the things that matter more than death, and the affections and home pictures of the life that the soldier leaves behind him.  

It was in this spirit that Geoffrey Howard looked back towards England, seeing her as,

...very small and very green
And full of little lanes all dense with flowers
That wind along and lose themselves between
Mossed farms, and parks, and fields of quiet sheep.

As in the poetry of most combatants this was the form in which patriotism manifested itself—an anguished love for the things of home, the peace, the quiet, the happiness that life in England represented, as opposed to the disorder, noise and misery of life in wartime France.


The final and most persistent theme of romantic war poetry was that of the glory and honour accruing to those who die in battle. It is a time-honoured theme in English poetry, but also one which appears to have had substance in the minds of the soldiers fighting during the war. Death and the idea of death was in most soldiers' minds, though in the early war years few of them had fully faced up to its reality. Siegfried Sassoon, recalling his thoughts on receiving a letter offering him a commission wrote,

As I sat on the ground with my half-cleaned saddle and the War Office letter, I felt very much a man dedicated to death. And to one who had never heard the hiss of machine-gun bullets there was nothing imaginatively abhorrent in the notion.

Neither was it an isolated thought, for a little later he

54. A number of examples from Beowulf onwards rise to the mind, e.g. Beowulf, 11. 3172-3177; Henry the Fifth, IV.vii.7-27, etc.; William Collins, "How Sleep the Brave"; Tennyson, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and so on.

returned to the same theme with, "In an emotional mood I could glory in the idea of the supreme sacrifice". To begin with, death was an accepted possibility and was rarely repulsive. Diaries, journals and letters refer to the writer's death without qualms, without sentimentality and almost objectively as though Death is simply another milestone in his life: "Of course in a war of this magnitude and difficulty" wrote Donald Hankey to his sister, "the chances of coming back are not very great". Viewed in this abstract way death was not something to be feared, but rather, perhaps, to be gloried in. On 3 July 1915 Alan Seeger, whose attitude to the war continued to be ultra-romantic, wrote to his mother that

The fears for those who take part in [the war] and who do not return should be sweetened by the sense that their death was the death which beyond all others they would have chosen for themselves, that they went to it smiling and without regret, feeling that whatever value their continued presence in the world might be to humanity.

56. op. cit., p. 257.

it could not be greater than the example
and inspiration they were to it in so
departing. \textsuperscript{58}

It was a plea that she should not mourn for him, for death
appeared to him in no way abhorrent. Similarly, but
much later in the war, 2nd. Lt. G. R. Morgan wrote to his
father,

\begin{quote}
...I do not fear Death itself; the
Beyond has no terrors for me. I am
quite content to die for the cause for
which I have given up nearly three years
of my life... \textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

This was the romantic view of death current among those
"who had never heard the hiss of machine-gun bullets". \textsuperscript{60}
It was faithfully reflected in the romantic poems of the
period. The best-known of Brooke's famous sonnets,
"The Soldier" gained instant popularity because of the
large and magnificent acceptance of death which it
portrayed. Robert Nichols looked theatrically upon

\textsuperscript{58} Letters and Diary, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{59} Housman. War Letters, p. 197.
\textsuperscript{60} See above, p. 49.
himself going to war and embodied his thoughts in a somewhat over-sentimental poem saying goodbye to his old home and to life:

For the last time, maybe, upon the knoll
I stand. The eve is golden, languid, sad...
Day like a tragic actor plays his rôle
To the last whispered word, and falls gold-clad.
I, too, take leave of all I ever had. 61

Comparable, and in many ways similar to this poem of Nichols, is the last stanza of a poem by U. N. Hodgson:

I that on my familiar hill
    Saw with uncomprehending eyes
A hundred of Thy sunsets spill
    Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice,
Ere the sun swings his noonday sword
    Must say good-bye to all of this;—
By all delights that I shall miss,
    Help me to die, 0 Lord. 62

Alan Seeger, lacking the certainty of death which appears to have inspired Hodgson, nevertheless embraces its

possibility in his poetry, just as he had in his letters home:

I have a rendezvous with Death  
At some disputed barricade...  
It may be he shall take my hand  
And lead me into his dark land  
And close my eyes and quench my breath—  
It may be I shall pass him still.  

Most poems of this personal kind were written before their writer had seen action, as were most of the letters, diaries and other reminiscences which contain similar remarks. (To this generalisation Hodgson's poem is an exception.) Such a condition did not, however, essentially apply to poems written about the death of others. This was, indeed, the last illusion—that one's friends and comrades died gloriously; that, for them, death in battle was heroic and honourable. It perhaps seemed that to shatter this illusion was to dishonour the dead and that it was ignoble to fail to glorify the death in battle of one's friends—as though one thus failed in one's duty towards the dead. Revulsion came later.

W. N. Hodgson described the death of his friend soon after the outbreak of war as being, "Perfect in one great act of sacrifice". Almost a year later, Charles Sorley, who was certainly far from being a romantic, wrote in his epitaph to "S.C.W." that there could be "no fitter end" than death in battle and claimed for his dead friend, "A glory that can never die". Even in the months after the Somme the lingering illusion remained. Robert Nichols, invalided out of the army, his nerves shattered, ended one of his memorial poems to H. S. Gough, "Boy," with the lines,

What need of comfort has the heroic soul?
What soldier finds a soldier's grave is chill?

In 1917 Richard Aldington, who viewed with anguish and bitterness the slaughter of the war, romanticised and idealised the death of one of his officers in "Epitaph":

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64. Verse and Prose, p. 36.
65. Marlborough and Other Poems, p. 85.
66. Ardours, p. 50.
You are dead—
You, the kindly, courteous,
You whom we loved,
You who harmed no man
Yet were brave to death
And died that other men might live.... 67

The belief that some soldiers died in order that "other men might live" contained its own truth. How they died was another story.

I have tried to demonstrate that romantic poetry was a true reflection of what men were saying, thinking and writing in the early days of the war; that it represented a phase, but a genuine phase, through which the majority of men engaged in the war went; that it mirrored the times, if only briefly, and that it must thus be allowed to take its place in the course of English poetry, however reluctant we may be to place it as war poetry beside that of Sassoon and Owen. War is not, of course, something to be romantic about. This is obvious to us in 1972; it was not so obvious to the men of 1914. To them what was hero and now was truth and in August 1914 the hero and now

of war was excitement and exhilaration. It was not until 1917 that Owen demonstrated the need for poetic truth to be absolute and three years of bitter agony and bloodshed separated 1914 from the understanding vouchsafed to Owen and his peers.
Chapter II

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

A great deal of poetry was written during the war which appeared to have little direct relation to war itself. Most of this was written by non-combatant poets who isolated themselves from the conflict both physically and mentally, and often morally as well. What they wrote has no more connection with the First World War than the mere accident of having been written during the years 1914–1918. It is, however, of some interest to consider why two of the greatest poets of the early twentieth century were silent about the war. I refer to W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot, both of whom were writing poetry during the war years. (In 1919 Yeats published The Wild Swans At Coole, and Eliot published Prufrock and Other Observations in 1917 and Poems in 1920.)

For Yeats, not to write war poetry was a deliberate
choice. Born in 1865, he was the same age as Kipling, but his poetry and personal interests had followed very different lines. By 1914 he had published six volumes of poems. His themes were mainly romantic - love, beauty, sorrow, time and the changes brought about by time, Irish mythology, and in his last two volumes, The Green Helmet and Other Poems (1910) and Responsibilities (1914) there was a growing awareness of contemporary problems in art, literature, the theatre and in Irish affairs. It might perhaps have been expected that this growing awareness would be developed in poems concerned with the European war. However, Yeats, both as an Irishman and as a man too old to be personally involved in the war, judged himself unfit to comment upon the conflict:

I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth
Or an old man upon a winter's night.¹

¹ "On Being Asked for a War Poem". Collected Poems, p. 175.
At this time Yeats was absorbedly interested in his own art and it is clear that he could not write of the war out of his own experiences or emotions. Had he written war poetry it would have been for some purpose outside himself. Life for Yeats was never straightforward, but was made up of a series of choices in which man and artist often found themselves at variance. Yet his artistic integrity compelled him towards the choices in which he fulfilled himself as a poet:

'I will not be clapped in a hood,
Nor a cage, nor alight upon wrist,
Now I have learnt to be proud
Hovering over the wood
In the broken mist
Or tumbling cloud.'

Thus, the total rejection of "meddling" in politics by writing war poetry was his own choice. Most of the poems

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in _The Wild Swans at Coole_ and a number of those in _Michael Robartes and the Dancer_ (published 1921) were written during the war, but they can hardly be said to reflect any 'attitude' to the war on Yeats' part. "Sixteen Dead Men" makes a bare mention of the war; "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", although an elegy for a friend killed in the war, approaches any idea of war only through the indirect and romantic description of

...my dear friend's dear son,
Our Sidney and our perfect man...4

In fact, the only 'war' poem published in the _Collected Poems_, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death", is interesting in that, whilst it is ostensibly connected with the war, its motivation is purely an emotional one which directly rejects political or patriotic motivation. This poem also was written for Robert Gregory and admirably captures the spirit of knight-errantry with which he chose to sacrifice his life.

It can be considered as an 'escapist' poem in the true sense, for it depicts Gregory in what is essentially a war situation, yet with his mind so absorbed by a new sensation of delight that he can dwell only on the emotional experience:

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

The Variorum Edition of Yeats' poems contains another poem, not published in his lifetime, which appears to be an answer, or second thoughts, on the theme of the Irish

airman. In this poem the airman, like Yeats' friend, Robert Gregory, is dead after having brought down "some nineteen German planes"; yet at Kiltartan Cross "half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery" are running amok in the struggle between Gregory's own people and the nation for which he chose to fight. Yeats' bitter last words to the airman urge him to

...close your ears with dust and lie
Among the other cheated dead. 6

It is hardly a war poem, yet, such as it is, it is not surprising that Yeats himself did not publish it for he maintained his objection to war as a subject for poetry for the rest of his life; when he edited The Oxford Book of Modern Verse in 1935 he almost entirely omitted the war poets, including only four poems about

6. p. 791. The events which followed Easter 1916 certainly made Yeats' question whether England was keeping faith with Ireland, e.g., "Easter 1916". Collected Poems, p. 204,

...Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said...
Had this been his reason for ignoring the war it would at least have been comprehensible.
the war: W. W. Gibson's "Breakfast", Julian Grenfell's "Into Battle", Herbert Read's "The End of a War" and Siegfried Sassoon's "On Passing the New Kenin Gate". He claimed that

...passive suffering is not a theme for poetry....

If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell...?

It is to me an extraordinary and scarcely excusable attitude on the part of a man who lived unscathed through the years of war.

For Eliot the decision not to write war poetry appears to have been absolute, though less deliberate than Yeats' choice. Born in 1888 he was roughly contemporary with many of the men who were fighting and dying on the various war fronts. He was, of course, an American citizen, and America did not enter the war until 1917. Nevertheless, throughout the whole of the

war period Eliot was resident in England, and though it was not until 1927 that he became a British subject, the heritage of English literature already made him look on Britain as his own land. Yet *Prufrock and Other Observations* shows no overt preoccupation with war or wartime conditions. E. M. Forster, reading the volume in 1917, shortly after its publication, remembers seeing it as a protest, a dissent against the affront to human dignity which war offered:

> I should have been a pair of ragged claws,
> Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

Here was a protest, and a feeble one, and the more congenial for being feeble. For what, in that world of gigantic horror, was tolerable except the slighter gestures of dissent?...he who could turn aside to complain of ladies and drawing-rooms preserved a tiny drop of our self-respect, he carried on the human heritage.  

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8. *Abinger Harvest*, pp. 102f.
If Eliot's attitude to war was anything beyond a deliberate isolation from it, Forster appears to have suggested the only feasible alternative explanation. However, the more important poems which appeared in the Prufrock volume, including "The Love Song" itself, date in fact from the period 1910-1912, so whatever gesture Eliot was making it was not against the war. Yet who, reading The Waste Land can doubt that in some profound way the war bit deep into Eliot's consciousness? If he rejected the direct poetic enactment of it he was deeply impressed by the spiritual stagnation and sterility which accompanied four years of massive destruction of human values:

Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down...\(^9\)

There are few poems written by those involved in the struggle, which show a complete dissociation from it, for it was impossible for most men to divorce their minds from

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the deeper spiritual involvement: "Wrote a poem on the Colliery Disaster: but I get mixed up with the war at the end," remarked Wilfred Owen in a letter to his mother. Though his subject was ostensibly not war, his poem became, nevertheless a war poem.

The attempt to look outwards, away from the war, is often described as "escapism", yet it was rarely a genuine escape, but rather, a partial repression. It had to be learned in some measure if sanity was to be retained, but behind it was a lurking awareness of reality. "We are learning to be soldiers slowly," wrote Charles Sorley, "—that is to say, adopting the soldierly attitude of complete disconnection with our job during odd hours. No shop."[11]

10. Quoted in Blunden's notes to his edition of Owen's poems, p. 125. It is perhaps relevant to enquire here what has happened to this letter. It does not appear in the edition of Owen's Collected Letters. It is curious too that Blunden places it as a note to "Miners": the great Colliery Disaster (at Podmore Hall Colliery, Halmerend, N. Staffs.) occurred on 12 January 1918, yet Owen mentions "Miners" in a letter to his mother on 10 November 1917.

Despite the apparent 'soldierliness' of this attitude it was inspired less often by the desire to be unquestioning and loyal soldiers than by the great overwhelming need for the mind to escape from a situation which was well-nigh intolerable to men with imagination and sensitivity. The ravages of war had torn to pieces the natural landscape, had disrupted normal human relationships and had demanded from civilised men behaviour which only differed from that of brute beasts in that it excelled theirs in cunning, in cruelty and in compass. To escape from such thoughts men turned to things which could distract them—often momentarily, to sexual satisfaction in the sordid brothels which sprang up in every village or town in Belgium and northern France where soldiers were billeted, and which are alluded to so often in writings of the time; more lastingly, to eternal nature, to distant unchanged homes, to love and friendship. Of these distractions the first has no genuine place in literature; it was without emotion and without passion, a bestial excrescence of the times, a kind of revenge upon Fate who, nevertheless
all too often, even in this, had the last laugh:
"...venereal hospitals at the base were always crowded", wrote Robert Graves.12

The second form of distraction was of the mind and of the spirit and its clearest expression is to be found in the poetry written in war and at war, yet attempting to look outward from the conflict to peace, happiness and security. Yet such an escape was only partial; and it was not confined to poets or poetry, for they were merely giving more intensity to an attitude that was part of the life of many, indeed of most men in the trenches. While beauty and freedom were being destroyed men turned to the natural beauty and freedom of nature as something stable and lasting in the midst of insecurity, for the things of nature defied war: flowers sprang up where towns had been ruined; birds sang while guns roared; the same stars twinkled above friend and enemy alike, over the terrible battlefields of Belgium and France, over England, over Germany.

As D. H. Bell noted in his diary for 8 February 1915,

12. Goodbye To All That, p. 295.
"The stars are your only companions on sentry duty in the trenches; and they seem filled with majesty and peace, as does the sunrise too." Yet, while escaping from the scene around him, some part of his thoughts is still dominated by war: the distant, inaccessible stars are filled with "peace" which compels the realisation that there is no peace on earth.

The references to birds and flowers in every form of writing which came out of the trenches are innumerable. A month after he had written the words quoted above D. H. Bell wrote that it was

a beautiful warm spring afternoon, though misty; and the robins, thrushes, and tits are nesting, and singing as if they were English. Only there are no primroses to 'take the winds of March with beauty' nor any sign of bluebells.

In this context "as if they were English" detracts from the lyric quality of the scene. Negatively it throws us back to the fact that they are not English; that the scene itself is not in England, but in war-ravaged France; that it is remarkable because it contrasts with what the soldier daily experiences. Edmund Blunden

heard an evening robin in a hawthorn,
and in trampled gardens among the refuse of war there was the fairy, affectionate immortality of the yellow rose and blue-grey crocus.15

Again the escape is incomplete: not only are the gardens trampled, and the "refuse of war" lying around, but the "immortality" of the flowers serves to remind of the only too certain mortality of soldiers, contrasted in their khaki and field-grey with the yellow and blue-grey of the rose and the crocus.

It was impossible for the mind to escape for long or with any depth of concentration from the war, yet most soldiers encouraged their thoughts to range freely over anything that could pleasantly distract them, so that

15. Undertones of War, p. 119.
"writing in a trench not very far from the Germans"
Theodore Wilson described how he could see

...a great blazing belt of yellow flowers...smelling to heaven like incense, in the sun—and above it all are more larks. Then a bare field strewn with barbed wire—rusted to a sort of Titian red—out of which a hare came just now, and sat up with fear in his eyes and the sun shining red through his ears. Then the trench...16

"Complete disconnection", in Sorley's words, appears to have been rare, but occasional or partial disconnection was common. It is both interesting and curious to see how images of war entwined themselves with dissociated thoughts either subconsciously, or, as in the letter above, more deliberately. In this letter a change of focus from the flowers, the sun and the larks brings the field of war into vision, bare of flowers, littered with barbed wire and the wire itself rusted red; then the two scenes coalesce: an image from nature is superimposed upon the war-field, a hare, symbolic of hunted frightened

creatures appears; like the soldiers he has "fear in his eyes", and the sun illuminates his ears to the colour of blood.

Herbert Read saw nature around him as firmly presaging the ills of war:

Spring we do have here, but in an abortive sort of way. The felled trees bloom, but for the last time, and forget-me-nots spring up among the ruins. But everything is sad, and our few flowers are like wreaths among so much desolation.\[17\]

The passage is heavy with doom. Even the first clause of the first sentence has to be assertive, as though the possibility of spring coming is in doubt. The melancholy pattern of 'denial-words' running through the passage: "...abortive...felled trees...the last time...the ruins...everything is sad..." culminates in the vision of the spring flowers as wreaths, a reminder that the writer is indeed describing a land of death.

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Once in France partial disengagement of his mind
was probably the most a soldier could hope for. Certainly
there are few genuine poems which achieve more than partial
disengagement. There are many, however, which gather up
the small delights which even trench-warfare was unable
to destroy completely. Edward Wyndham Tennant discovered
a garden which had survived the bombardment of Laventie:

Green gardens in Laventie!
Soldiers only know the street
Where the mud is churned and splashed about
By battle-wending feet;
And yet beside one stricken house there is a glimpse
of grass,
Look for it when you pass.

Beyond the Church whose pitted spire
Seems balanced on a strand
Of swaying stone and tottering brick
Two roofless ruins stand,
And here behind the wreckage where the back wall
should have been
We found a garden green... 18

18. "Home Thoughts in Laventie". F. Brereton (ed.).
   An Anthology of War Poems. p. 151.
He saw the gardens and the mud, the shelled house and the grass, in close juxtaposition, and the survival of nature seemed to him a sign of hope, something to be searched out and cherished in the midst of destruction and ruin.

In a similar fashion, Isaac Rosenberg, returning to his dug-out after an attack, despairing that, though his life was safe the future held nothing but threat, heard a lark:

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

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song—
But song only dropped... 19

Suddenly the future holds hope again, albeit hope precariously balanced "Like a blind man's dreams on the sand". 19

19. "Returning, We Hear the Larks". Complete Works, p. 80.
The lark, in fact, recurs frequently in all the literature of the period and together with the poppy it has come to symbolise the hopes and eternal values that sprang from the Flanders mud. The two are associated again in the well-known poem by John McCrae, often recited in Armistice Day services:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below. 20

The crescendo of the lark's song is well portrayed in the first four lines of a sonnet by J. W. Streets:

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20. "In Flanders Fields". Brereton. An Anthology, p. 103.
Hushed is the shriek of hurtling shells: and hark!
Somewhere within that bit of deep blue sky,
Grand in his loneliness, his ecstasy,
His lyric wild and free, carols a lark.... 21

In a moment of silence between the shell-blasts the lark
aspires to all that the soldier longs for, culminating
in freedom and song.

I do not see these poems as 'escapist' poetry for the
poet is rarely trying to escape from the war; they rather
belong to a poetry of 'awareness' in which all the poet's
faculties are concentrated on extracting from a life in
which spiritual values are degraded, any sign of hope
or integrity which can add to human dignity and self-respect.
Pervasive thoughts of war are always present, but the poet
attempts to look outward and to embrace anything that can
remind him of a life cleaner and purer than his life in
the trenches. So, for W. N. Hodgson, going back 'to Rest'
after the Battle of Loos, the things of nature stood out
clear and beautiful:

A leaping wind from England,
    The skies without a stain,
Clean cut against the morning
    Slim poplars after rain,
The foolish noise of sparrows
    And starlings in a wood—
After the grime of battle
    We know that these are good. 22

Ford Madox Hueffer 23 saw war and peace inextricably bound

together in the scene around him, but it was the song of

the lark that allowed him to escape in daydreams to the

happiness of his own country:

The French guns roll continuously
    And our guns, heavy, slow;
Along the Ancre, sinuously,
    The transport wagons go,
And the dust is on the thistles
    And the larks sing up on high...
**But I see the Golden Valley**
**Down by Tintern on the Wye.** 24

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23. i.e. Ford Madox Ford; He changed his surname to Ford in 1919.

The insistence on the continuance of life distinct from the war was one way in which men were able to disengage their minds from over-oppressive thoughts of war. A kind of reversal of this process, which at first sight appears to be complete escapism or dissociation can also be seen in some of the poetry. The conscious mind escapes and roves over some other scene apparently distant and separate from war, but reality is all-invasive and the poem presents itself on several levels at once. The supreme example of this is Robert Graves' "A Boy in Church":

"Gabble-gabble...brethêr...gabble-gabble!"
My window frames forest and heather,
I hardly hear the tuneful babble,
    Not knowing nor much caring whether
The text is praise or exhortation,
Prayer or thanksgiving, or damnation.

Outside it blows wetter and wetter,
    The tossing trees never stay still.
I shift my elbows to catch better
    The full round sweep of heathered hill.
The tortured copse bends to and fro
In silence like a shadow-show.
The parson's voice runs like a river
   Over smooth rocks. I like this church:
The pews are staid, they never shiver,
   They never bend or sway or lurch.
"Prayer," says the kind voice, "is a chain
That draws down Grace from Heaven again."

I add the hymns up, over and over,
   Until there's not the least mistake.
Seven-seventy-one. (Look! there's a plover!
   It's gone!) Who's that Saint by the lake?
The red light from his mantle passes
Across the broad memorial brasses.

It's pleasant here for dreams and thinking,
   Lolling and letting reason nod,
With ugly serious people linking
   Sad prayers to a forgiving God....
But a dumb blast sets the trees swaying
With furious zeal like madmen praying.25

The poem contrasts the peaceful security within the church
with the wilderness of the storm outside, but through his
description of the natural storm the poet is analogizing
the storms of war. It is only through the discernment of
this analogy that the full force of the troubled and violent

25. Fairies and Fusiliers, p. 68f.
vocabulary can be felt: the wet and the turbulence of
the second stanza lead toward the vision of the "tortured
copse" which is, through sound association, a "tortured
corpse" of war from the real (i.e. not the "shadow-"") show.
Unlike the dug-outs and the trenches the church is stable
and secure; its staid wooden pews contrast with the
tossing trees in the storm. The poem culminates in the
terrifying futility of a big battle with its "dumb blast...
furious coal" and its realisation of men gone mad.

Siegfried Sassoon attempted something of the same
sort in "Haunted", though the whole of this poem is heavy
with threat, and the suppression of war thoughts has only
succeeded in producing a nightmare theme—a man alone, in
a wood, terrified, unable to escape, pursued by some inhuman
creature, threatened by louring storm and thunder; but at
the same time we know that the man is a soldier caught in
a gas attack in No Man's Land, struggling to get back to
his own lines and the "voices of tired men"; sunset has
"Died in a smear of red"; he stumbles through the barbed

wire barricades ("Barbed brambles gripped and clawed him round his legs") but is overcome by the gas and falls dying at the end of the poem:

Then the slow fingers groping on his neck,
And at his heart the strangling clasp of death.  

The two poems quoted above were deliberate attempts on the part of Graves and Sassoon to show how intrusive thoughts of war had become to those involved in it. There seem to be few poems worth preserving which were written by soldiers on active service and which show a complete dissociation from the war. In Books II and III of *Ardours and Endurances* Robert Nichols published a number of poems which had no relation to his war experiences, but some of them were written before the war and none of them is memorable.

His active service was, in fact, of short duration; he was sent home from France in 1916 suffering from shell-shock.

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27. It is interesting to notice the similarity in vocabulary between this poem and Sassoon's much-anthologised "The Death-Bed" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 34f). Particularly striking is the likeness between "something...squat and bestial" and "blots of green and purple in his eyes" of "Haunted" and "pain/Leapt like a prowling beast" and "Queer blots of colour, purple, scarlet, green/Flickered and faded in his drowning eyes" of "The Death-Bed".
A poem such as "Last Words", though written in April 1916 was written at home. Its sentimentality has lost the poignancy of the earlier poem "Farewell to Place of Comfort"; at Lawford, in April 1916 it seemed unlikely that a twenty-three year old soldier, home from the front physically unharmed, was soon to die. The Keatsian overtones are too lush:

O let it be
Just such an eve as this when I must die!
To see the green bough soaking, still against a sky Washed clean after the rain.
To watch the rapturous rainbow flame and fly Into the gloom where drops fall goldenly,
And in my heart to feel the end of pain...  

Yet in the previous year he had been close enough to the reality of death and it is strange to find him playing so fancifully with a theme that must surely have reminded him of his comrades left behind in France.

Sassoon too, published in The Old Huntsman a number of his early poems; it is difficult to date them precisely.

29. p.206.
but the style and the choice of subject suggest that the non-war poems pre-date Sassoon's period of active service and again, few of them (with the exception of "The Old Huntsman") are worth preserving except as they throw light upon Sassoon's poetic progress.

Francis Ledwidge, in two wartime volumes\(^{30}\) wrote mainly 'escapist' poetry, choosing as his subjects fairies, the Irish countryside, the gentler aspects of nature and sentimental love. His service during the first two years of the war was at home and then in Serbia, Greece and Egypt. Nothing in *Sonatas of Peace* published in 1917 suggests that his heart was moved by the realities of war. In Serbia he wrote of the night beetles, the moon, autumn, roses, subjects which in 1915 were ultra-romantic. How much the tone of his poems was at variance with the mood of the times can be judged from the final two lines of his last Serbian poem, "Spring and Autumn":

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I with desire am growing old} \\
\text{And full of winter pain.}^{31}
\end{align*}
\]

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\(^{30}\) A third volume, *Sonatas of the Fields*, although published in 1916 was completed by June 1914.

\(^{31}\) p. 63.
But "growing old" was not within the conceptual grasp of most of his fellow-soldiers. More akin to their comprehension and experience were the words of Binyon, asserting

They shall not grow old, as we that are
left grow old:
Ago shall not weary them, nor the
years condemn.\(^{32}\)

It is, I think, more surprising to find that in 1916 and early 1917 Ledwidge was able to maintain his attitude of complete dissociation, even on the Western Front. But his air of conscious 'separateness' makes his verse seem empty and lacking in vitality:

Once more the lark with song and speed
Cleaves through the dawn, his hurried bars
Fall, like the flute of Ganymede
Twirling and whistling from the stars.

The primrose and the daffodil
Surprise the valleys, and wild thyme
Is sweet on every little hill,
When lambs come down at folding time....

\(^{32}\) "For the Fallen". Brereton. *An Anthology*, p. 39.
And when the blue and grey entwine
The daisy shuts her golden eye,
And peace wraps all those hills of mine
Safe in my dearest memory.  

The concepts of "peace" and "safety" were indeed so
distant that reference to them exacerbates the triteness
of the poem. The lark no longer, as in Rosenberg's poem
quoted above (p. 74), symbolises the hopeful aspirations
of those trapped in the war, but is dealt with as in a
literary exercise; truth has been sacrificed to expression:
"song and speed" alliterate, it is true, but is "speed" an
apt or accurate description of the lark's rise skyward?
And can the song of the lark be divided into bars, or
is the word merely used to rhyme with "stars"?

It is Edward Thomas who at first appears as the
'escapist' poet par excellence. His poetry, none of which
was written until after his meeting with Robert Frost in
October 1913, expresses with great control and economy the
serenity and beauty he found in natural things. At the
same time there is an unquestionable awareness of the war,

33. Last Songs, pp. 58f.
occasionally in his choice of subject but more frequently
in his choice of vocabulary:

The blackthorns down along the brook
With wounds yellow as crocuses... (p.100)

a sentry of dark botanies (p.75)

Tall reeds
Like criss-cross bayonets (p.59)

And salted was my food, and my repose,
Salted and sobered, too, by the bird's voice
Speaking for all who lay under the stars,
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice. (p.26)

Thomas went to France in late January 1917, he was
killed in the Battle of Arras on 9 April 1917. It has been
conclusively demonstrated by William Cooke that all Thomas's
poetry in fact pre-dates his going to France so that what
we see here is the reverse of an escape from the war: the
poet is clinging to his own way of life but finding himself
increasingly committed to involvement:

34. All these quotations are taken from Thomas's Collected
    Poems.

Now all roads lead to France
And heavy is the tread
Of the living... 36

There is no poetry coloured by his trench experiences and it is useless to conjecture what such poetry would be like.

The one poet who consistently wrote poems which, whilst looking away from the war, nevertheless showed an intense awareness of wartime experience in France was Ivor Gurney. He is a much neglected poet who survived the war a broken man and died in the City of London Mental Hospital on Boxing Day, in 1937. He published two war volumes, Severn and Some, 1917 and War's Embers, 1919.

A striking feature of many of the poems in these volumes is their similarity to the kind of letters and diary entries quoted above (pp. 69-72). Even in "Carol", 37 one of the few non-war poems in Severn and Some, war thoughts are intrusive. Though the poem is to celebrate Christmas, winter is described as having "Killed with tiny swords" the leaves of the trees; "All green things..."

37. p. 21.
have...died”; the holly which has withstood winter is "brave”; along with the shouting, dancing and singing to celebrate Christmas we are called upon to "Honour courage."

More commonly, Gurney evokes memories of past scenes and pleasures in order to dispel present fears:

A creeper-covered house, an orchard near;
A farmyard with tall ricks upstanding clear
In golden sunlight of a late September.—
How little of a whole world to remember!
How slight a thing to keep a spirit free....

(When day died out behind the lovely bare
Network of twigs, orchard and elms apart;
When rooks lay still in round dark nests above,
And Peace like cool dew comforted the heart)....

Against a backcloth of a world at war the Harveys' farmhouse was small enough and yet its memory, distinct and separate from war, was able to free the war-bound spirit of the poet; and day could die and darkness come with memories of peace to comfort the heart. For Gurney the evocation of such

memories was a conscious effort to escape war fears:

If I were on the High Road,
   That runs to Malvern Town
I should not need to read, to smoke,
   My fear of death to drown;\(^{39}\)

Or again,

If only this fear would leave me I could
   dream of Crickley Hill
And a hundred thousand thoughts of home would
   visit my heart in sleep;\(^{40}\)

That complete escape was not attainable, is made only too
clear by the conditional openings of those two poems:
"If...." Yet Gurney continued to write poems which,
whilst constantly aware of the war, looked outwards to
the remembered peace of England and his Gloucestershire
home and friends.

Generally, only in so far as judgment is implicit in
the contrast between war and peace did his poems show any
'anti-war' element. An excellent illustration of this is

\(^{39}\) "Contrasts". War's Embers, p. 41.

\(^{40}\) "De Profundis". War's Embers, p. 91.
to be found in "Trees." The starting point of this poem is a parenthetical comment in quotation marks:

You cannot think how chastly these battle-fields look under a grey sky. Torn trees are the most terrible things I have ever seen. Absolute blight and curse is on the face of everything.

Yet the poet attempts to look outward, away from the scene of war:

The dead land oppressed me; I turned my thoughts away, And went where hill and meadow Are shadowless and gay.

Where Coopers stands by Cranham, Where the hill-gashes white Show golden in the sunshine, Our sunshine—God's delight.

Beauty my feet strayed at last Where green was most cool, Trees worthy of all worship I worshipped...then, 0 fool.

41. _Severn and Somme_, p. 61.
Let my thoughts slide unwitting
To other, dreadful trees,...
And found me standing, staring
Sick of heart—at these!

As usual the escape is all too brief. In a circular
movement his mind travels from the battlefield to the
hills and meadows of his home; he dwells upon the beauty
of sunshine and trees and is unwillingly dragged back
again to the battlefield from which he had tried to escape.

Similarly, the 'romance' of war is rarely seen in
Gurney's poetry. At times, in fact, he seems at pains
to refute it:

We are stale here, we are covered body and
soul and mind
With mire of the trenches, close clinging
and foul,
We have left our old inheritance, our Paradise
behind,
And clarity is lost to us and cleanness
of soul

O blow here, you dusk-airs and breaths of
half-light,
And comfort desairs of your darlings
that long
Night and day for sound of your bells,
or a sight
Of your tree-bordered lands, land
of blossom and song. 42

Is it mere coincidence that the vocabulary of this poem
bears a resemblance to that used by Brooke in his "1914" 
sonnets? Or was Gurney in his own way, "out of the 
depths", actively denying that experience of war can be 
romantic? Brooke, in 1914, ended the first of his 
sonnets with the line, "And the worst friend and enemy 
is but Death." 43 Gurney's answer to Brooke appears to 
be the line with which he ended "De Profundis": "Oh! 
Death would take so much from us, how should we not 
fear?"

In Severn and Somme there are five sonnets dedicated 
"To the Memory of Rupert Brooke." They are headed simply 
"Sonnets 1917" but their writer had lived through three 
years of war and taken part in the Battle of the Somme 
since those other five sonnets of 1914 had been written 
and since Brooke had died. The challenge to Brooke's

42. "De Profundis." War's Embers, p. 91f.
43. Poetical Works, p. 19.
romanticism is contained in these sonnets written to his memory:

Though heaven be packed with joy-bewildering Pleasures of soul and heart and mind, yet who Would willingly let slip, freely let go Earth's mortal loveliness...?¹⁴⁴

That is, the challenge is not one of war-realism such as Sassoon and Owen were to make, but one of belief in the survival of the human spirit in conditions which would not lead to the premature destruction of the human body. It is one of the ironies of war that Gurney whose poems repeatedly expressed this belief should become a war casualty not in body, but in mind; that in the midst of death and destruction he could be aware of salvation of the spirit through the contemplation of the enduring beauties of nature, but that when the war was over the memory of its horrors had so gripped his mind that he was unable to look outward from his own misery:

Horror follows horror within me; There is a chill fear Of the storm that does deafen and din me And rage horribly near.

What black things had the human
Race in store, what mind could view—
Good guard the hour that is coming:
Mankind safe, honour bring through. 45

or again, "There are strange Hells within the minds War
made..."46 As far as Ivor Gurney is concerned it is

certain that his escape was not merely partial in the
usual sense, but was an escape of his conscious mind only.
The rest of his story belongs to a later section of this
thesis.

The attitude to war which I have been discussing in
this chapter differed from the romantic attitude in that
it necessitated the experience of war. Yet it was
basically uncritical: if war had to be endured, the
spirit could be refreshed by dwelling on things of peace.
Death was neither welcome nor glorious, but honour and
courage were not devalued.

45. "Horror Follows Horror". Poems, p. 47.
Chapter III

Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And shares the nature of infinity.

To understand the change of emphasis which took place in the poetry of war during the years 1914 to '18, it is necessary to understand the changes which influenced men's minds and hearts. For most men who took part in the war and lived through it the pattern of war experience was the same: first, the excitement and enthusiasm of a new adventure; next, the disagreeable surprise when face to face with reality; finally, the terrible cold disillusionment, the full realisation of the implications of war and the revulsion from former hopes and beliefs.

When disillusionment came it brought with it no simple way to understanding, no clear-cut path which could be followed by the whole man. Instead it tore men apart, so that they felt they understood nothing. It was this mood of bewilderment and of horror that inspired the 'realist' poetry of the war. This, in its turn
reflected the true thoughts and feelings of men at war, but by now experience had matured and coloured emotion. From trenches and battlefields flowed accounts of what war was and what war meant. Diaries, letters, newspaper reports began to belie the old romantic ideas of war and—more vital, because more permanent—poetry, which had been chief vehicle for romanticism, took on a new hard reality.

The first thing that emerged clearly from all these accounts was the terrible suffering that was to be found everywhere in the war area. Physical distress and misery appeared to be easily communicated for they seemed straightforward and uncomplicated, able to be understood by those who had not seen them. Most writers did not at first realise that their communication was only partial and that the most they could hope for from men and women at home was an academic acceptance of the truth of their words. Robert Nichols put this very clearly and simply:

Were I to say to you "Fifty pounds of T.N.T. contained in an iron canister will, if detonated in a sufficiently confined space, blow to bits any men present in
the space" you would probably only
nod. Why? Because "blown to bits"
is a mere phrase; whereas collecting
those bits for burial when they have
been strewn about a cow-byre is an
appalling experience. ¹

Yet accounts of war continued to pour out of France,
perhaps because the soldiers hoped that someone would
understand them, perhaps because they felt that the truth
had to be told whether it was understood or not, perhaps
as a form of catharsis by which men purged their minds of
horrors and helped to keep themselves sane.

Already in September 1914 a correspondent of The Times
reported,

I have come from Orleans where the
hospitals are full of broken men, young
men and men in their prime, who have laid
youth and strength upon this blood-drenched
altar of freedom. I have seen sights too
terrible to speak of, sights which I cannot
describe—which in the selfishness of his
health a man tries to blot from his memory. ²

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1. Introduction to Anthology of War Poetry, p. 62.
2. 15 September 1914.
These were the words of a non-combatant, but of one writing the truth according to his knowledge, who had seen that the old conventional romantic terms were not sufficient to describe war as it was. He had not completely expunged those terms: he still wrote of youth and strength being "laid [upon the] altar of freedom", but it was a blood-drenched altar, suggestive of heathen sacrifice, not the Christian altar, offering renewal of life to those who knelt before it. He was in France, in the war area, and there the war took on the same complexion for all men, experience differing only in the degree of vulnerability of body, mind and spirit.

Writing to his mother a year later a young officer in hospital suffering from shell-shock summed up battle experience as it had seemed to him. He was describing the Battle of Loos; it could have been almost any battle on the western front at any time during the war:

Nothing could be an exaggeration of the horrors of that battlefield; it was, it is, a veritable shambles, a living death of unspeakable horror even to those who,
like myself, were destined to come through it unscathed, bodily at all events. Most of the survivors went through it as through a ghastly nightmare without the relief and joy of awakening.\(^3\)

The sacrificial altar has become a slaughter-house, the heroic dream of glory "a ghastly nightmare".

Reading the words of soldiers who went to France, one ceases to be surprised that they could not make themselves understood by people at home. Second-hand experience cannot shatter illusions. Every man had to experience war, real war, for himself, before he could believe that his visions of greatness and glory were false. Many men in the trenches for the first time saw ruined and broken comrades returning from the battle and could not themselves understand the significance of it all. On 18 November 1914 D. H. Bell

...saw some stragglers from the lines come limping in, incredibly dirty and played out. They had a fortnight's

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3. "Letters from the Front". The Times. 5 November 1915.
growth of beard, were plastered with mud from head to foot, greatcoats ragged and torn, some without arms, all barely able to drag one foot after another.

A little naively surprised, he commented,

Wonder who and what they are...? We gazed at them in wonder and pity; hope we never come to look like that.4

A year later he reported graphically the relief of his own Brigade from the Front Line; the words he used were strikingly similar, but now he knew "who and what" they were, and knew that all men came out of the trenches "like that":

It was a shocking sight to see the battalion march into billets when morning came. Pale and weary, plastered from head to foot with white chalk and mud, what was left of them stepped out desperately to the pipers playing. Only two officers who went over the top remain.5

5. op. cit. 1 October 1915, pp. 132f.
These two extracts give prominence to one of the miseries of trench warfare which perhaps served more to demoralise most men than fear of physical injury by bullet, grenade or shrapnel: mud and water in the trenches were as sure enemies of the soldiers as the men in the opposing lines and certainly took a heavy toll of life, both directly, by slow drowning and immersion, and indirectly, by preying upon nerves already keyed to breaking-point. Vividly and terribly in his *Undertones of War* Edmund Blunden recounted an incident which illustrates both these effects of mud; he was describing the relief of a front line trench called "St. Martin's Lane" close to Thiepval:

> It was blasted out by intense bombardment into a broad shapeless gorge, and pools of mortar-like mud filled most of it. A few duckboards lay half submerged along the parapet, and these were perforce used by our companies....The wooden track ended, and then the men fought their way on through the gluey morass, until not one nor two were reduced to tears and impotent wild cries to God. They were not yet at the worst of
their duty, for the Schwaben Redoubt ahead was an almost obliterated cocoon of trenches in which mud, and death, and life were much the same thing.... Men of the next battalion were found in mud up to the armpits, and their fate was not spoken of; those who found them could not get them out. The whole zone was a corpse, and the mud itself mortified.

In a book which has nothing to do with the war, his biography of Leigh Hunt, Blunden, still haunted by his war-time experiences, wrote of "the real mud era of 1914 to 1918".

A Territorial officer wrote home, "The trenches here are up to and above our knees in water and sludge, especially the communication trenches"; another officer wrote:

...we were ordered to the first line trenches to repair these, as the rain and the shells had crumbled parts of them away. At 3 a.m. we got up and splashed our dismal way up past the third line, then the second, till we got to the front line. It was

8. The Times, 7 October 1915.
knee-deep in mud and water and pouring with rain....It is dreadful work flopping and splashing along, sinking into the soft clay, and dragging one's foot out again... 9

The Master of Belhaven noted in his Diary, "I am wet to the waist, and slippery from head to foot—and still the rain comes steadily down" 10—and this was in the height of summer, the 29th of June, 1917; Wilfred Owen wrote in a letter home after a few days in France, "Since I set foot on Calais quays I have not had dry feet...we were let down, gently, into the real thing, Mud. It has penetrated into that Sanctuary, my sleeping bag, and that holy of holies, my pyjamas." 11 A fortnight later he had more to say on the same subject, as he described how he had gone to take over an advanced post in No Man's Land:

It was of course dark, too dark, and the ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, 3, 4, & 5 feet

deep, relieved only by craters full of water. Men have been known to drown in them. Many stuck in the mud & only got on by leaving their waders, equipment, and in some cases their clothes."\textsuperscript{12}

Private William Burgon of the 19th Royal Fusiliers wrote in his 1915 Christmas letter to his parents

\ldots we were isolated from the other platoons by mud almost impassable and quite uninhabitable. The way up to our "island" was so bad that we waded along through mud and water to the next island...\textsuperscript{13}

Arthur Graeme West writing in his diary for 7 December 1915, described the mud and water as

worse than anything we had ever met, many went in up to their necks, and all of us were soaked up to and over the knees.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
13. MS letter lent to me by his sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Burgon Barriss.
14. \textit{The Diary of a Dead Officer}, p. 7.
\end{flushright}
Edward Thomas, though he wrote no poetry from the trenches, wrote a number of letters, and less than three weeks before his death he wrote to Eleanor Farjeon:

You have often heard of the mud out here, haven't you? Well, I have been in it. It is what you have heard. You nearly pull your leg off, and often your boot off, at each step in the worst places—the stiff soft clay sucks round the boot at each step.  

C. R. M. F. Cruttwell saw "darkness, cold, and mud—particularly the last [as] invincible enemies"\(^{15}\) and Henri Barbusse came to think of Hell as being water:

A une époque, je croyais que le pire enfer de la guerre ce sont les flammes des obus, puis j'ai pensé longtemps que c'était l'étouffement des souterrains qui se rétrécissent éternellement sur nous. Mais non, l'enfer, c'est l'eau.\(^{17}\)

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15. Quoted by Eleanor Farjeon in Edward Thomas, The Last Four Years, p. 257.


17. "At one time I used to think that the worst hell of war was the flame of shells; then I thought for a long time that it was the suffocation of the dugouts which eternally close in upon us. But no! Hell is water." Le Feu, p. 355.
The feeling against mud and water appeared to be universal and also dates from most periods of the war except for 1914, but there were many other forms of physical suffering and misery which had to be endured. C. S. Lewis describing his experiences in the trenches during the winter of 1917/'18 combined the horror of mud with the terrible deprivation of sleep:

Through the winter, weariness and water were our chief enemies. I have gone to sleep marching and woken again and found myself marching still. One walked in the trenches in thigh gum boots with water above the knee; one remembers the icy stream welling up inside the boot when you punctured it on concealed barbed wire. 18

Edmund Blunden too, remembers the lack of sleep: "The great defect of war here as elsewhere was the shortage of sleep" 19 he commented, and Alexander Caseby noted in his Diary for 25 March 1918: "Men very tired and have poor

rations. Want of sleep 'tells' on men...." 20  C. E.

Montague enlarged on these statements:

...most of the privates were tired the whole of the time; sometimes to the point of torment, sometimes much less, but always more or less tired. 21

General physical discomfort was increased by the lice which infested the trenches:

All through this winter I have felt most crotchety, all kinds of small things interfering with my fitness. My hands would get chilblains or bad boots would make my feet sore....I have gone less warmly clad during the winter than through the summer, because of the increased liveliness on my clothes. I've been stung to what we call 'dumping' a great part of my clothing, as I thought it wisest to go cold than lousy. 22

20.  My Experiences as an Artilleryman with the Famous 24th Division.


Over and above the conditions of discomfort there were the actual physical results of battle. Shelling and gunfire rarely resulted in the 'nice clean wound' that soldiers prayed for, but rather in many wounded and broken men. Those who had seen battle began to confide its horrors to diaries and reports and the terms they used no longer allowed the possibility of 'glory' in war:

Etched in my brain is the picture of one of our officers lying dead, sprawling on his back, head down, mouth open, eyes staring in the middle of what was once a section of trench, now a jumble of upturned earth and ruptured sandbags...²²

The great retirement from the Somme in Spring 1918 was described thus by one participant:

...This scene was beyond words. Dead, dying and half demented soldiers and civilians lay everywhere, crippled transports and slaughtered animals blocked roads etc....²³

The 'romance of war' was completely devalued. It had never been more than an idea fostered by history books and literature. The experience of war, certainly war in the trenches on the western front, was frequently too horrible to contemplate; "God, in Thy mercy, let me never again hear any one speak of the Glory of War!" wrote Ralph Scott in his Diary for 14 July 1918. Three months later Wilfred Owen wrote to Siegfried Sassoon:

...the boy by my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour.

Catalogue? Photograph? Can you photograph the crimson-hot iron as it cools from the smelting? That is what Jones's blood looked like, and felt like. My senses are charred....

Gas left many of those it did not kill maimed and broken:

Another officer...became delirious and had to be held down....One man underwent the most remarkable muscular contortions,

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and when he recovered consciousness he was paralysed and was unable to move for some hours. One or two struggled violently; bit the men attending to them and appeared to be temporarily insane. 25

In an account of his battery's operations during April 1918 Major A. A. Longden's concern was mainly with the German gas attacks:

On the 8th at 2 a.m. desperate reports began to come in from the Nos. 1 and from the billets to the effect that serious cases of gas poisoning and blindness were fast accumulating....

A No. 1 rang up to say that all of his detachment was gassed owing to numerous gas shells which had burst practically on the guns. He could not fight his gun properly as he was almost blind. 26

War had ceased to be a great adventure and it was no longer thought the sportsmanlike thing to conceal its


26. From t/s report "Narrative of Operations carried out by 100 Siege Battery Between April 7th and April 14th 1918", dated "30th April 1918."
miseries. The accumulation of suffering and horror had to be told, more particularly so because officialdom had realised the necessity of glorifying the war if enough men were to be recruited to bring it to a satisfactory political end:

...[the War Office] apprehended that in order to stimulate the recruiting of the New Army now being called to the colours by vulgar appeals to sentiment and passion, it might be well to "write up" the glorious side of war as it could be seen at the base...without, of course, any allusion to dead or dying men, to the ghastly failures of distinguished generals, or to the filth and horror of the battlefields. 27

The first task of the realist war poet then, was to show what war meant in terms of physical suffering, not to gloss over the agonising details, and above all, not to write euphemistically in the old romantic terms which had belied war:

Where are the battle-cries,
The flashing eyes,
The flying banners and the spears of Thor?
Here there are only mud, and filth, and flies,
And foul obscenities men's hearts abhor.\(^{23}\)

The physical realities of the soldier's life were unlike anything he had ever imagined. In fact, there is little evidence that men when they joined up had given any thought at all to the actual physical conditions of trench warfare. It seems improbable that anyone would have conjured up a vision of the cold, the mud and the lice. The possibility of death occurred to many, if not to most, but death had not meant to them the terrible wounds, the slow choking by gas, the lingering and agonising pain. The poetic presentation of these facts was one of the tasks that poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon set themselves. The discomfort of trench life was depicted again and again:

Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mire was deep;
It was past twelve on a mid-winter night...
We lugged 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.  

Or from Owen:

Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime,  
Kept slush waist-high and rising hour by hour,  
And choked the steps too thick with clay to climb.

Herbert Read, with the same sort of scene in mind, attempted  
in "Kneeshaw Goes to War" to focus on the individual human  
predicament by describing a particularised incident:

A man who was marching by Kneeshaw's side  
Hesitated in the middle of the mud,  
And slowly sank, weighted down by equipment and arms.  
He cried for help;  
Rifles were stretched to him;  
He clutched and they tugged,  
But slowly he sank.  
His terror grew—  
Grew visibly when the viscous ooze  
Reached his neck.

And there he seemed to stick,
Sinking no more.
They could not dig him out—
The oozing mud would flow back again.  

Mud and slime and water are seen to be not merely
the beginning of discomfort but the cause of inconceivable
horrors. Yet all the other physical miseries had to be
added to the picture before any true idea of trench conditions
could be formed. Sassoon described the return of a Company
from the Front Line, emphasizing their utter exhaustion:

Up a disconsolate straggling village street
I saw the tired troops trudge: I heard their feet.
The cheery Q.M.S. was there to meet
And guide our Company in...
I watched them stumble
Into some crazy hovel, too beat to grumble...  

Richard Aldington showed the lack of sleep as being an
incidental misery, not a part of war itself, but a direct
result of war:

Four days the earth was rent and torn
By bursting steel,
The houses fell about us;
Three nights we dared not sleep,
Sweating, and listening for the imminent crash
Which meant our death.

The fourth night every man,
Nerve-tortured, racked to exhaustion,
Slept, muttering and twitching,
While shells crashed overhead. 33

For Isaac Rosenberg, the lice which infested the soldiers' clothes added agonizingly to his burden of horror:

I killed them, but they would not die.
Yeal! all the day and all the night
For them I could not rest nor sleep,
Nor guard from them nor hide in flight...

I killed and killed with slaughter mad;
I killed till all my strength was gone.
And still they rose to torture me,
For Devils only die for fun.

I used to think the Devil hid
In women's smiles and wine's carouse.
I called him Satan, Balzebub.
But now I call him dirty louse.  

The poets also tried to convey the truth of war by writing of the actual results of battle—terrible wounds, mutilation and physical agony. Herbert Read had become a soldier in a spirit of adventure but disillusionment soon came to him:

One week in the trenches was sufficient to strip war of its lingering traces of romance; there was nothing in the Ypres Salient where I first went into the line, but primitive filth, lice, boredom and death.  

He was at first very reluctant to write 'realist' war poetry, but by the beginning of 1918 he had overcome this reluctance; one of the poems he produced at this period was "Kneeshaw Goes to War" in which Kneeshaw ends up "Minus a leg, on crutches". Owen's account of similar experiences is more

34. "The Immortals". Complete Works, p. 78.
36. Collected Poems, p. 32.
He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
Voices of play and pleasure after day,
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him. 37

Though the poem is told in the third person the effect of the
last three and a half lines is to place the reader in the
position of the disabled soldier and to point the contrast
between his expectations and those of the strong and healthy
boys in the park. In another of Owen's poems, "The Chances",
a Cockney Tommy lists in a down-to-earth, unsentimental way
the results of battle:

One of us got the knock-out, blown to chops,
T'other was 'urt, like, losin' both 'is props.
An' one, to use the word of 'ypocrites,
'Ad the misfortoon to be took be Fritz.
Now me, I wasn't scratched, praise God Amighty
(Though next time please I'll thank 'in for a blighty).

But poor young Jim, "e's livin' an' "e's not;
'E reckoned "e'd five chances, an' "e 'ad;
"E's wounded, killed, and pris'ner, all the lot,
The bloody lot all rolled in one. Jim's mad.38

Sassoon makes a similar list and also places it in the mouth
of a soldier:

...George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
Poor Jin's shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert's gone syphilitic...39

It is clear that realism had completely superseded the
romantic attitude for those who had had the experience of
battle. From this point of view it is interesting here to
observe Rudyard Kipling's progress in thought from the trite
"What stands if Freedom fall? Who dies if England live?"
quoted above (p. 30). In 1915 the war touched him personally
when his son John was killed in action. His realisation of
the horror of war was, however, entirely literary:

The Garden called Gethsemane
In Picardy it was,
And there the people came to see
The English soldiers pass....

The Garden called Gethsemane,
It held a pretty lass,
But all the time she talked to me
I prayed my cup might pass.
The officer sat on the chair
The men lay on the grass,
And all the time we halted there
I prayed my cup might pass.

It didn't pass—it didn't pass—
It didn't pass from me.
I drank it when we met the gas
Beyond Gethsemane. 40

The association of Gethsemane with Christ's agony helped Kipling to achieve a reference to the agony of war without being explicit. At the same time, the identification of the suffering soldier with Christ was one which was widely used by the realist poets and which will be discussed later.

However, the impact of Kipling's poem is negligible if one compares it with Wilfred Owen's account of a gas attack:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. 41

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The realism of this poem is particularly horrible and frightening. It has an immediacy which conveys the panic which occurred when a gas attack began. Nothing in the poem is irrelevant or can allow misinterpretation—no garden, no suggestion of redemption by implication, no possibility of choice. In Kipling's poem, the title itself, "Gethsemane", and the use of words suggest the possibility of choice at least insofar as Christ had a choice, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." Even this is denied to Owen's gassed soldiers—the cup is not offered to them to drink; they are unwillingly smothered, immersed, drowned in the poison which Kipling's soldier politely quaffs down to his own destruction. Owen was a combatant re-interpreting war for the non-combatant, determined that lies should be known as lies and that the truth, however horrible, should be told to those who were unaware of it, and that the understanding of truth began with knowledge of physical suffering on a scale such as had never been known before.

42. St. Matthew, 26, 39.
I have already suggested (see pp. 49ff. above) that the idea to which romantic notions attached themselves most persistently and most perseveringly was that of the glory and honour belonging to death in battle. For the idea to be perpetuated death had to be seen as clean and immediate, not disgusting and lingering, yet the truth of the majority of deaths in war was quite other than the romantic view. Arthur Graeme West's description of a scene in a trench after a German bombardment is sufficient to dispel illusions about what death in battle is really like:

The trench was a mere undulation of newly-turned earth, under it somewhere lay two men or more. You dug furiously. No sign. Perhaps you were standing on a couple of men now, pressing the life out of them, on their faces or chests. A boot, a steel helmet — and you dig and scratch and uncover a grey, dirty face, pitifully drab and ugly, the eyes closed, the whole thing limp and mean-looking: this is the devil of it, that a man is not only killed, but made to look so vile and filthy
in death, so futile and meaningless that
you hate the sight of him.\textsuperscript{43}

No one could see glory in such deaths. Sassoon takes up
a similar theme in "Counter-Attack":

\begin{quote}
The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps,\textsuperscript{,}
And trunks, face downwards, in the sucking mud,
Wallowed like trodden sandbags loosely filled;
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime....\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

The description is offensive and is meant to be, for death
in such a fashion is an offence against human dignity. For
all too many of those dead soldiers not even a cross in
Flanders marked their burial place, and if death was an end
to their suffering Sassoon did not intend his reader to see
suffering as ended. It is re-enacted in the poem, just as
it is in Rosenberg's poem, "Dead Man's Dump":

\begin{quote}
The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,
Their shut mouths made no moan....
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43} 20 September 1916. The Diary of a Dead Officer, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{44} Collected Poems, p. 60.
Burnt black by strange decay
Their sinister faces lie,
The lid over each eye... 45

It is clearly important to the poet that his reader should have no excuse for seeing any nobility in such deaths; the active lurch of the wheels chimes with the crunch of the bones, but the dead themselves are inactive, unmoved; they are sprawled, their mouths are shut, their voices silent, their eyes unseeing. Yet one is inescapably in the presence of physical suffering; the ungainly corpses are treated without care or reverence, not only because in the presence of so many dead the soldiers have lost their respect for life, but also because it was impossible, given the circumstances of trench warfare, to do more than "[leave these] dead with the older dead,/Stretched at the cross roads." 46

Insensibility towards the dead is a theme presented in Arthur Grasmo West's "Night Patrol". The horror of the battlefield was intensified by the stench from the corpses lying everywhere, yet to the soldiers on night patrol each

45. Complete Works, pp. 81ff.
46. id.
dead man was a landmark to help them back to their own trenches:

Only the dead were always present — present
As a vile sickly smell of rottenness;
The rustling stubble and the early grass,
The slimy pools - the dead men stank through all,
Pungent and sharp; as bodies loomed before,
And as we passed, they stank: then dulled away
To that vague factor, all encompassing,
Infesting earth and air. They lay, all clothed,
Each in some new and pitious attitude
That we well marked to guide us back... 47

Despite the actualities of war the occasional romantic tried to retain the romance, the spirit of careless courage which the soldiers of 1914 carried into battle. In his poetic evocation of "Third Ypres" Edmund Blunden deflates this spirit, for death came first to such men and, even for them, death in war is shown as repulsively ugly:

And you,
Poor signaller, you I passed by this emplacement,
You whom I warned, poor daredevil, waving your flags,
Among this screeching I pass you again and shudder
At the lean green flies upon the red flesh madding. 48

47. The Diary of a Dead Officer, p. 62.
48. Undertones of War, p. 289.
Such then was the first, and the most straightforward, of the tasks of the realist poets; to depict the truth about the physical horrors of war. On this at least, every soldier who had seen trench warfare was agreed, and this kind of result of battle was visible before their eyes. Had physical discomfort and suffering been all that the poets wished to convey, however, the tale could soon have been told. Poet and reader alike would soon reach satiety. What emerges most clearly from the realist war poetry is the mental, moral and spiritual dilemma of the men who were fighting.
Chapter IV

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

When it was seen that the romance of war had been an illusion, when the glory of war was being reckoned in death and human suffering, when the would-be heroes were seen to be victims, then there was a great wave of compassion for all victims. In the minds of men fighting in France the world was divided into two—the safe and the suffering. The safe were all the people at home and all those in the army with 'cushy' jobs. The suffering were the men and officers in the trenches on both sides of the line.

Once in France a soldier was completely isolated from ordinary life. In the first place he was living wholly among men. The chores which were normally done for him by his womenfolk were done by other men: his food was prepared by men; his personal washing he did himself, or if he were an officer it was done by his batman. Once in
the Line he saw no women at all. Further back behind the lines the only women who remained in the war area were the prostitutes living in the brothels and the occasional innkeeper's wife making her fortune by cheating the army for their drinks. Secondly, he was, in most instances, wholly engaged in death and destruction. Whereas in England he would have been working steadily at a job, however monotonous, building up his home, living with his family and playing with his children, in France his body and mind were directed towards destroying everything that he and others had previously thought worthwhile. Finally, his whole mode of life was inevitably foreign to normal life. He lived, ate, slept, suffered and often died in the same place. His home for much of the time was a hole in the ground which he shared with others whose lives were centred there.

It is not surprising that wholly artificial attitudes to many aspects of life prevailed, for life itself was unreal. Its usual ordered daily round was completely disrupted and a new, though temporary, order was necessary to save it from chaos. Those who clung too tenaciously
to their old life found that the mental and spiritual upheaval was too great to be contained. Writing to the Master of Marlborough on the first anniversary of the outbreak of war Charles Sorley ended his letter with the words, "A year ago to-day—but that way madness lies." Thus, the acceptance of a new mode of life was essential to the survival of the whole man as were the physical safety precautions in the dugouts.

One would perhaps expect friction among men living under such conditions, but there is rarely any mention of friction in the writings of the period. There was, on the other hand, a strong sense of comradeship which frequently appeared to develop into love. This was scarcely surprising: the attention, the consideration, the loving care which a man would normally expect to lavish on his wife and family had in the trenches to be devoted to other men; the sick, the wounded, the dying, the fearful and the pitiful were all men, tended by other men, their comrades; their trust and reliance on each other had to

be absolute; their lives were in each other's hands.

Such are the conditions which breed the beginnings of love, and it is quite clear that some sort of idealistic homosexuality flourished in the trenches.

In contrast to his own life of misery, discomfort and toil the soldier began to see life at home in England as comfortable, careless, self-indulgent, and the representatives of life at home were those who could never be identified with the soldier-victims. The children growing up were themselves potential victims, neither responsible for, nor desirous of sending men to France. But the older generation and the women (justly or not) were unable to be identified with suffering and thus could no longer be participants in the life of the men in France. To measure the love of one man for one woman against the universal compassion for all those who were victims was scarcely worthwhile: romantic love between the sexes was weighed in the balance and found wanting. This is not, of course, to say that once in France the English soldier became in any way actively homosexual. Physical love between soldier and the object of his love at home in
England was denied to him; physical lust could be fulfilled in the brothels, but true spiritual love lived and flourished between man and man in the trenches and was as real and poignant as is the love of a man for a woman:

...at present the only form of beauty which thrills me at all is the beauty of strong limbs and the beauty of the human expression. I am even so limited as not to care for female beauty, but only for the male! A graceful boy with the wonderful smile of youth, or a strong man with a look of resolution and compassion fill me with pleasure. 2

Time was against romantic love between man and woman. In the present, which had to be lived and endured, it was necessary for men to love and care for each other. John Buchan, in his memoir of Francis and Riversdale Grenfell wrote of the "intimate ties" which bind together the members of a regiment, and described Francis' "aching affection for

his regiment" as "the devotion of 'a lover or a child'. 3
Ten years after the war had ended Edmund Blunden recalled simply this "aching affection" that many officers must have felt for their men:

Daniels, Davey, Ashford, Roberts, Worley, Clifford, Seall, Unstead, do you remember me yet? I should know you among ten thousand. Your voices are heard, and each man longed for, beyond the maze of mutability. 4

The warmth of affection, the longing, and the belief in the immutability of love are reminiscent of romantic love, but are offered to the memory of Blunden's men. A more immediate and personal expression of this love can be found in a letter which J. S. Engall wrote to his parents a few days before his death in action:

Tomorrow morning I shall take my men—men whom I have got to love, and who, I think, have got to love me—over the top... 5

3. Francis and Riversdale Grenfell, p. 223.
And Ralph Scott, using terms of endearment which are exchanged between lovers, wrote in his diary of "these dear, darling fellows of mine".

Over and over again one reads of love and affection between the fighting men and devotion beyond the bounds of ordinary comradeship: men giving their lives to save their officers or their comrades, officers sacrificing themselves for the sake of the men under them. Just as poetry has been the vehicle for romantic love throughout the ages, so the strong emotional bond between soldier and soldier found expression in poetry of one kind or another. The sentimental songs of romance were paralleled by the rather banal verse which was published in the Trench magazines, such as the lines from *The Somme Times* for 31 July 1916:

> But we've also learnt, and 'tis good to know,
> That the pal of a dug-out's a friend worth while,
> For friendship made 'neath the star-shell's glow
> Means "Help every lame dog over a stile."\(^7\)

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Sydney Oswald, in a somewhat better poem, wrote of the love between two soldiers, one of whom has been killed in battle. His choice of "eyes...lips...mouth...heart..." suggests some affinities with Wilfred Owen's poem "Greater Love" and it is quite possible that Owen read Oswald's poem for it was published in the Trench edition of Soldier Poets in September 1916:

Thy dear brown eyes which were as depths where truth
Lay bower'd with frolic joy, but yesterday
Shone with the fire of thy so guileless youth,
Now ruthless death has dim'd and closed for aye.

Those sweet red lips, that never knew the stain
Of angry words or harsh, or thoughts unclean,
Have sung their last gay song. Never again
Shall I the harvest of their laughter glean.

The goodly harvest of thy laughing mouth
Is garner'd in; and lo! the golden grain
Of all thy generous thoughts, which knew no drouth
Or meanness, and thy tender words remain
Stored in my heart; and though I may not see
Thy peerless form nor hear thy voice again,
The memory lives of what thou wast to me.
We knew great love....We have not lived in vain. 8

A more realistic and more forceful portrayal of such
love was made by the few real poets of the war. Robert
Graves gave firm expression to the bond which grew up between
men in his poem, "Two Fusiliers":

...there's no need of pledge or oath
To bind our lovely friendship fast,
By firmer stuff
Close bound enough.

By wire and wood and stake we're bound,
By Fricourt and by Festubert,
By whipping rain, by the sun's glare,
By all the misery and loud sound,
By a Spring day,
By Picard clay.

Show me the two so closely bound
As we, by the wet bond of blood,
By friendship, blossoming from mud,
By Death...9

As in the poetry of romantic love the imagery is taken
from the minutiae of the joint life of the two men: the
barriers set up in No Man's Land, the French villages, the
mud, the blood pouring from wounds. At the same time there
is a faint suggestion in the first line quoted of the
rejection of romantic love: lovers' tokens and oaths of
constancy are not necessary, since the bonds forged by war
are binding enough.

Like Graves, Sir Herbert Read used the love between
two men to show the sort of love and affection engendered
in the trenches. Typical of his method of presentation,
he particularised with an actual incident:

"O beautiful men, O men I loved
O whither are you gone, my company"....

A man of mine
    lies on the wire;
And he will rot
and first his lips
the worms will eat.
It is not thus I would have him kiss'd
but with the warm passionate lips
of his comrade here. 10

In these lines the savage picture narrows down to a
concentration on the lips, a focal point for the imaginations
of romantic love, and the poet is now ready to use the romantic
terms "kissed" and "warm passionate", not for conventional
love, but for delineating the love between an officer and
one of his men.

Most writers, however, display a much more general love
between comrades than is shown in the poems of Graves and
Read quoted above. Ivor Gurney enlarged his sympathies in
"Recompense" to embrace his friendship with all the men of
the 2/5 Gloucester Regiment:

10. "The Scene of War, VII, My Company". Collected Poems,
pp. 38f.
I'd not have missed one single scrap of pain
That brought me to such friends, and them to me;
And precious is the smallest agony,
The greatest, willingly to bear again—
Cruel frost, night vigils, death so often ta'en
By Golgothas untold from Somme to Sea....

Their eyes were stars within the blackest night
Of Evil's trial. Never mariner
Did trust so in the ever-fixed star
As I in those....

The biblical reference to Golgotha and the use of the word
"agony" so closely associated with the death of Christ,
enrich and intensify the ideas of friendship and love which
he expresses. Yet the Christian reference is followed by
a metaphor taken from the literature of romantic love and
used to describe the men he loved. For Siegfried Sassoon
love manifested itself in an aching longing for all those
who shared the misery of war, and separation from them
brought out an agony of love, regret and guilt:

    I am banished from the patient men who fight
    They smote my heart to pity, built my pride....

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven
To free them from the pit where they must dwell
In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven
By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel.
Love drives me back to grope with them through hell...12

So far the poems which I have quoted illustrate how love flourished in the trenches between man and man. It is clearly only a step further to the symbolic rejection of romantic love between man and woman. In the face of the stark realities of war romantic love appeared to be irrelevant, unable to measure up to the demands of life as it was being lived, not false, but not wholly true as it could not encompass the whole truth. Wilfred Owen in "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" took up an imagery similar to that used by Graves in "Two Fusiliers", quoted above [pp.135f], but he added a dimension of bitterness by a contrast with romantic presentation:

I have made fellowships—
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips,—
But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes
  are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

The lines are deliberately anti-romantic: love in the context of sexual desire—"the binding of fair lips", "the soft silk of eyes that look and long"—is insufficient, since it fails in the human situation which the soldiers in the trenches faced. The old songs may tell of bonds between happy lovers, but true love and fellowship is that which persists in misery too. It was this revelation which moved Robert Nichols in his poem, "Fulfilment", in which the fulfilment he finds is not heterosexual love and procreation, but the complete abandonment of all his thoughts and feelings and his whole being to love for his comrades and fellow-victims in war:

Was there love once? I have forgotten her.
Was there grief once? grief yet is mine.
Other loves I have, men rough, but men who stir
More grief, more joy, than love of thee and thine....

...loved, living, dying, heroic soldier.
All, all, my joy, my grief, my love, are thine!  

Love for a woman cannot be sustained in the great and overwhelming need to focus all the tender emotions of love and solicitude upon the men who are his comrades. Nichols is striving towards the expression of an attitude which finds its poetic culmination in Wilfred Owen's "Greater Love":

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

Heart, you were never hot,
   Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;
And though your hand be pale,
Paler are all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail:
   Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not. 

14. Ardours and Endurances, p. 44.
Owen laid great emphasis upon the perfection or completeness of experience; emotions that were not sufficient for all human experience lacked ultimate truth—hence, romantic love was deficient, but the love by which a man laid down his life for others was perfect and holy, and the poem identifies it with the love of Jesus, also a victim, Who lay down His life for others.

My friend, Professor Joe Cohen, in an article entitled "Owen Agonistes", first published in English Literature in Transition, VIII.5 (1965) and later republished in pamphlet form, develops and documents a phrase from the American re-issuc of Robert Graves' Goodbye To All That, describing Owen as "an idealistic homosexual with a religious background". Cohen discusses the usual pattern of homosexuality and comes to the conclusion that this pattern is clearly observable in Owen's life. To my mind there is no doubt that his documentation is fair and correct. However, with the documentation accomplished, and with the addition of the word "idealistic" to "homosexual" there seems to me to be no proof of Owen's proclivity, one way or the other. At
the same time, Owen's religious upbringing, his dedication
to his poetry (to some extent necessitated by his life and
background), his flirtation with religion in his Dunsden
period, and the advent of war during his early manhood,
partly precluded the probability of any sustained or
active heterosexual love affairs. All this, taken
together with the fact of the universality of the tendency
towards homosexual love among the soldiers in France,
suggests to me that Cohen has overstated his case and
failed to qualify his diagnosis by direct reference to
the circumstances surrounding it. In other words, I
am not arguing that Owen was not an "idealistic homosexual",
but that Professor Cohen's thesis is to some extent
invalidated by the fact that the peculiar circumstances
in which Owen and others found themselves during the years
1914-'18 resulted in a widespread tendency towards
homosexuality and that this was a phenomenon of trench
warfare, idealistic because the love engendered was pure,
sacrificial and untarnished by any thought or intention of
carnal fulfilment.

In his Textbook of Psycho-Sexual Disorders Clifford
Allen lists among twelve common types of homosexuality:
"Deprivation homosexuality" and explains that "this is common in...situations when men are deprived of women."^{16}

A few pages later he comments, "There is considerable homosexuality in the armed forces....No doubt the Service life with its frequent isolation from home and women, tends to produce isolation homosexuality....^{17} It is clear that if these statements apply under ordinary circumstances to the armed forces, they are even more relevant to the conditions of Trench warfare. At the same time it has been pointed out to me that many of the soldiers in the trenches were still very immature, being in their late "teens" and early twenties and that at this age many young people are both hetero- and homo-sexually inclined. The idealism that pertains to this age-group would also suggest another reason for the apparent lack of physical fulfilment of homosexual inclinations.^{18}

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17. p. 225.

18. Private discussion with Professor I. R. C. Batchelor, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Dundee.
As a final literary support to my contention I refer to the very strongly worded statement by Richard Aldington in his "Prologue" to Death of a Hero:

Friendships between soldiers during the war were a real and beautiful and unique relationship which has now entirely vanished, at least from Western Europe. Let me at once disabuse the eager-eyed Sodomites among my readers by stating emphatically once and for all that there was nothing sodomitical in these friendships. I have lived and slept for months, indeed years, with "the troops," and had several such companionships. But no vaguest proposal was ever made to me; I never saw any signs of sodomy, and never heard anything to make me suppose it existed. However, I was with the fighting troops. I can't answer for what went on behind the lines.

No, no. There was no sodomy about it. It was just a human relation, a comradeship, an undemonstrative exchange of sympathies between ordinary men racked to extremity under a great common strain in a great common danger....

"Who is my neighbour?"

The loving comradeship which existed between soldiers in the trenches was based on a sympathetic identification with each other's lot. All were victims, unable to help themselves, compelled to wait and suffer until they were released by death or mutilation. At first sight it would appear that the German soldiers in the opposite line were responsible for inflicting all the agonies upon them. It is interesting to see how quickly this view was discredited and fellow-feeling was extended to the German soldiers. They too were victims, under the same compulsions as the allied soldiers. As early in the war as 15 September 1914 a correspondent to The Times quoted in his report the remarks made to him by a French soldier:

[The Germans] are our enemies but they are also men. And see, there are women who wait for them, and children who prattle of their home-coming.
Such an attitude, so early in the war, was, in fact not very typical. To begin with most men hated, or thought they hated, the enemy soldiers. It was not until they came face to face with them and saw the predicament of all soldiers in the trenches as being the same, that the hatred abated. There is an interesting letter from Julian Grenfell to his parents in which one can see this very process of change of heart:

We took a German Officer and some men prisoners in a wood the other day. One felt hatred for them as one thought of our dead; and as the Officer came by me, I scowled at him, and the men were cursing him. The officer looked me in the face and saluted me as he passed; and I have never seen a man look so proud and resolute and smart and confident, in his hour of bitterness. It made me feel terribly ashamed of myself.  

Christmas Day 1914 appears to have marked a turning point in the soldiers' attitude towards the Germans. Two entries a fortnight apart in the unpublished War Diary of Harry Byett, a hospital orderly, illustrate this very well. A

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week before Christmas a German patient was brought into
the field hospital where Byott was working. Byott
commented in his diary for 19 December that

...many of his fellow patients say they
would like to finish him: I can tell you
the British hate the Germans quite as much
as the French do.

However, during the Christmas season a sympathetic friendship
grew up between the allied soldiers and the Germans in the
trenches opposite them and on 2 January 1915 Byott made
quite a different sort of comment in his diary:

...many of the new patients tell how on
Christmas Day many of the Germans came over
to the Trenches, shook hands with our
men, and exchanged cigarettes and cigars,
and many of them vowed they would not
fire another shot on ours after that...

The experience of that first war time Christmas seems to
have been common. D. H. Ball wrote a very similar comment
to that of Harry Byott in his own diary for Christmas Day:
Today a number of our fellows and the Germans have been chatting between the lines, swapping cigarettes, and so on.  

This was followed by his report for 26 December:

Yesterday there were hundreds and hundreds of both sides, officers and non, in between the lines. We carried over some German dead and helped to bury them. Their officer read some prayers and thanked (in English) 'his English friends' for bringing them over.  

Frank Richards told how:

On Christmas morning we stuck up a board with "A Merry Christmas" on it. The enemy had stuck up a similar one. Two of our men then threw their equipment off and jumped on the parapet with their hands above their heads. Two of the Germans done the same and commenced to walk up the river bank, our two men going to meet them. They met and shook hands and then we all got out of the trench.  

Philip Gibbs writing about Christmas 1914 in *The Soul of the War* commented that

The war had become the most tragic farce in the world. The frightful senselessness of it was apparent when the enemies of two nations fighting to the death stood in the grey mist together and liked each other. They did not want to kill each other, these Saxons of the same race and blood, so like each other in physical appearance, and with the same human qualities.23

As the war progressed the English soldiers were less and less inclined to hate their German counterparts, more and more inclined to see them as fellow-victims; as Donald Hankey wrote in *A Student in Arms*:

...the Cockney warrior does not hate the Hun. Often and often you will hear him tell his mate that "the Bosches is just like us, they wants to get 'ome as much as we do; but they can't 'elp theirselves."24

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23. p. 351.
24. p. 95.
In a letter to the Canon of Canterbury Ben Keeling wrote:

Few Englishmen out here hate their enemies—I feel as sorry for the Germans as for our own men in the bombardments, and am none the worse soldier for that. 25

A. G. West writing to a friend commented:

For the Hun I feel nothing but a spirit of amiable fraternity that the poor man has to sit just like us and do all the horrible and useless things that we do when he might be at home with his wife or his books, as he preferred. 26

And A. R. Williams expressed a similar sentiment:

[The war] is nothing but an intimately personal tragedy to every British (and German) soldier concerned in the fighting part of it. Also it is quite the exception.

to note any ill feeling towards the
individual German... In many cases it
is impossible not to feel pity. 27

The connecting link in all these statements is the sympathy
felt for those in the same predicament. The British
soldier and the German soldier are seen as essentially
the same. C. E. Montague expresses this belief quite
clearly in Disenchantment:

While these men fought on, year after
year, they had mostly been growing more
void of mere spite all the time, feeling
always more and more sure that the average
German was just a decent poor devil like
everyone else. 28

It is quite clear that as this belief grew it added to the
mental distress of the men in the trenches. If British
and German soldiers were alike victims, who then was the
enemy? against whom should their hate be directed? As
Philip Gibbs wrote:

They had obeyed orders, they had marched to the hymn of the Fatherland, they believed, as we did, in the righteousness of their cause. But like the dead bodies of the Frenchmen and the Englishmen who lay quite close, they had been done to death by the villainy of statecraft and statesmen, playing one race against another...

Ralph Scott, writing in his diary two months before the war was to end, extended this doubt. If, after all, the German soldiers were not the true enemy, what was the war about:

We have seen brave Germans die with faith as great as ours, and, knowing their intelligence to be not less, we must at least doubt the validity of our first conclusions.

It is in the poetry of the realists that such ideas are explored and developed. Through a simple incident—the taking prisoner of a German officer—Herbert Read illustrated

30. 3 September 1918. *A Soldier's Diary*, p. 103.
that the Germans were ordinary men with private lives, were in fact like their British counterparts:

Before we reached our wire
he told me he had a wife and three children
In the dug-out we gave him a whiskey...

In broken French we discussed
Beethoven, Nietzsche and the International.

He was a professor
Living at Spandau
And not too intelligible.31

Arthur Graeme West, in a bitter poem criticizing those who wrote romantically of war, claimed that soldiers were banded together "to maim and kill their fellow men." He then added, "For even Huns are men,"32 a stark and simple reminder, but one which places the Germans on a more sympathetic footing than the "young cheerful men/Whose pious poetry blossoms..."32 W. N. Ewer's poem "Five Souls"

32. "God, How I Hate You". The Diary of a Dead Officer, pp. 79f.
has close affinities with the words of Ralph Scott quoted above. In this poem five souls of men from different nations and backgrounds talk about their contribution to the war. The sting of the poem comes in the five-times repeated chorus which ends each stanza:

Third Soul
I worked in Lyons at my weaver's loom,  
When suddenly the Prussian despot hurled  
His felon blow at France and at the world;  
Then I went forth to Belgium and my doom.  
I gave my life for freedom — This I know  
For those who bade me fight had told me so.

Fourth Soul
I owned a vineyard by the wooded Main  
Until the Fatherland, begirt by foes  
Lusting her downfall, called me, and I rose  
Swift to the call — and died in far Lorraine.  
I gave my life for freedom — This I know  
For those who bade me fight had told me so.

Fifth Soul
I worked in a great shipyard by the Clyde;  
There came a sudden word of wars declared,
Of Belgium, peaceful, helpless, unprepared,  
Asking our aid: I joined the ranks, and died.  
*I gave my life for freedom - This I know*  
*For those who bade me fight had told me so.*

The thought that most appeared to move the poets was  
the futility of hate towards the German soldiers. Not only  
were the Germans men, like those opposing them, but, when all  
had been said and done, the suffering and death on both sides,  
indeed the whole war, would appear fruitless, a backward step  
for mankind. It was an idea that the world at large was  
not ready for (is perhaps still not ready for), but it was  
an idea that had taken clear hold of thousands of men directly  
participating in the futility. The visionary and religious  
quality of this idea is made apparent by the constant theme  
of reconciliation through death and in some after life.  
On earth, in war reconciliation was impossible: the  
Christmas truces with their Christian love and fellowship  
broke down when Christmas was over. Only the dead could  
be eternally reconciled. In "Enemies" Siegfried Sassoon  
shows one such reconciliation taking place:

He stood alone in some queer sunless place
Where Armageddon ends. Perhaps he longed
For days he might have lived; but his young face
Gazed forth untroubled: and suddenly there thronged
Round him the hulking Germans that I shot
When for his death my brooding rage was hot.

He stared at them, half-wondering; and then
They told him how I'd killed them for his sake —
Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men;
And still there seemed no answer he could make.
At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand
Because his face could make them understand. 34

It is once more in a poem of Owen's that this idea is
perfected. "Strange Meeting" 35 was described by Blunden in
his edition of Owen's poems as an "unfinished poem", but
though the manuscript had clearly not been finalized the
poem is, to all intents and purposes finished and perfect
of its kind. It brings out the agonizing hopelessness and
futility of war in which two men of differing nations, but
of similar outlook can fight and kill each other, destroy
the beauty and truth of life and, though men of foresight

35. Collected Poems, pp. 35f.
and vision, can set back the hopes of mankind. By placing the bulk of the poem in the mouth of his German counterpart Owen already assures a sympathy with him; it was the German who was reluctant to kill his fellow-man and who thus had himself to die. The poem lays great emphasis on the idea of truth and the truth is "The pity of war, the pity war distilled." It is a poem which does not offer much hope for, unlike Sassoon's vision, it does not attain to ultimate reconciliation after death; for this, both nations have to wait for peace:

Let us sleep now....
Perhaps the French saying is true:
"It is not a tragedy to grow old,
the tragedy is not to grow old."

I have shown how easily the apparent hate between combatants turned to love and a sympathetic identification. Those who held on to hate were the people at home who could have no possible self-identification with the lives of the soldiers in the trenches:

The hymns of hate, the rancour and vindictiveness are the expressions of non-combatants whose venom has time to accrue in the quiet of studies far from the noise of the cannon.\footnote{Alan Seeger. Report in New York Sun, 28 April 1915. Republished in Letters and Diary of Alan Seeger, p. 97.}

The fact that the soldiers on opposing sides in the trenches had more in common with each other than with the people of their own nation back at home made it fairly certain that resentment and bitterness would arise. The pleasures and
luxuries of life in England were a clear target for
attack; "...a law should forbid a football being kicked"
wrote one officer to The Times on 17 November 1914. This
was followed up in the same paper a week later, on 24
November 1914, by a letter from another officer who claimed:

I tell you this war is the most
appalling crime that was ever committed,
and if only English people, living in
their unharmed luxury at home, could catch
a glimpse of the utter misery that exists
where fighting is and has been, they would
be absolutely horrified.

Later in the war George Sherston (alias Siegfried Sassoon)
stationed back in England recuperating from an illness
visited the Olympic Hotel, Liverpool, for a meal and observed
that

some non-combatants were doing themselves
pretty well out of the War...they ordered
lobsters and selected colossal cigars....
They had concluded their spectacular feed
with an ice-cream concoction, and now they
were indulging in an afterthought —stout
and oysters. 37

That Sassoon's experience in Liverpool was by no means unique is well illustrated by an article on restaurants and food in London which appeared in The Times for 21 June 1916. The article contained considerable discussion of what foods were available in many of the luxury restaurants and a number of menus were quoted:

...At one restaurant [in Soho] where hundreds of people dine every night the following bill of fare was placed last night before the patrons:

Hors d'oeuvre, choice of two soups, choice of salmon croquettes or whitebait, choice of braised beef with asparagus tops, scallops of sweetbreads and peas, or bouchée à la Reine, Punch à la Romaine, chicken and salad, Neapolitan ices, cheese, and dessert.

What is fitting in [the case of soldiers on leave] is only irritating in the case of civilians, who are making money out of the war and spending it carelessly and in the pursuit of pleasure... with many of them their only excuse would appear to be that they have nothing else to do.
An equally straight report had appeared in *The Times* six months earlier; this was a report on "War Prosperity" in Sheffield:

"Rations" has come to be a magic word among the workers of Sheffield....

The weekly outpourings of money in wages has swollen to a remarkable total... Wives who have long wished for a sideboard, or a sewing-machine, or some other article which in ordinary times has been beyond their means, are at last able to realize their ambitions....

Young mechanics are buying motor-cycles, often with a sidecar attached... Women... are now ordering costumes costing £4 and even £5, guinea hats, and expensive shoes....

Jewellers are doing an extensive business in rings, gold bracelets, brooches, lockets, and other trinkets....

The Christmas holiday gave the men the first real break in their labour for many months. Most of the shops were shut down for three days, and an attempt to start again last Tuesday was not altogether
successful...Munition workers... found rest so attractive that many did not resume on Tuesday... 38

Kipling, after 1915 vicariously involved in the struggle through the death of his son, commented on such holidays in a brief but bitter epigram:

If any mourn us in the workshop, say
We died because the shift kept holiday. 39

When men came home on leave from the Trenches it was the shock of this sort of contrast that met them: soldiers living meagrely, ill-fed, ill-clothed, in constant danger, and at home men and women enjoying better standards of living than normal.

Philip Gibbs described men returning to France from seven days' leave fuming and sullen. Everybody was having a good time. Munition workers were earning wonderful wages and spending them on gramophones, pianos, furs and the "pictures". Everybody was gadding about in a state of joyous exaltation. 40

38. 3 January 1916.
The emotions felt towards the people at home were very mixed, but gradually some sort of hatred began to come to the fore, not hatred of individuals, but hatred of a nebulous mass who appeared to be saving their own lives at the expense of others:

I wish to God England would come into this war and get it over! I told you I thought November. It won't be November twelvemonth unless England drops attacking Kitchener, attacking the Daily Mail, attacking defenceless Germans in London, striking and all the rest of it, and devotes all its attention to attacking the German Army out here....Every man not engaged in supplying food and warmth and order...should be directly engaged in supplying strength toward the ending of the war. If he isn't doing so he is contributing by neglect to that killing and maiming of our men out here which he might be preventing. 41

The universal wish began to arise that people at home should be forced to understand the soldiers' predicament; the desire for them to be compelled to share the miseries and horrors of the men in the trenches grew; "...the best way to buck them

up would be a hundred thousand Germans landing in England" was the comment in one letter to *The Times*, and the writer went on to say that this would bring home to the smug armchair brigade as nothing else ever will something at least of the awful way in which Belgium and part of France has suffered.

Philip Gibbs told how soldiers desired that profiteers should die by poison-gas. They prayed God to get the Germans to send Zeppelins to England—to make the people know what war meant.

And to prove that his remarks were true there are letters such as this one from an officer in France published in *The Times* for 26 October 1915:

> I see from the papers that Zeppelins have dropped bombs on London again. I cannot even say that I am sorry. It is the only thing that reminds the people

42. 21 November 1914.

43. *Now It Can Be Told*, p. 143.
at home that the war is still continuing. If only they were sufficiently awake to realize one-hundredth part of what our men suffer out here, how differently they would behave!

The soldiers in France and the people at home were spiritually completely out of touch with each other. The degree of privation and of suffering differed so immeasurably that the points of contact became fewer and fewer. In England the lack of understanding of the suffering which the soldiers at the front endured was absolute because that suffering was beyond comprehension to those who had not seen it. Meanwhile the men in France condemned those at home for not understanding, for not suffering. Robert Nichols described how there seemed to be "two Englands":

...individuals, returned from leave, reported a queer, hectic England... strangely at variance with the mood of the trenches. Leave or a wound soon assured the fighting soldier of the existence of two Englands—the England
that was in the trenches and the England elsewhere—and of two wars—the war that was waged with flesh and blood and the war that was waged with words....Profiteers, arrogant Brasshats in "cushy" jobs, jacks-in-office and embusqués generally, plethoric elders full of vindictiveness and ignorant opinions, jaunty newspapers, womankind running loose, civilians labouring under the delusion that they were suffering severely because they had a meat card and no petrol...44

In the same category as the 'people-at-home,' that is, sacrificers as opposed to victims, were the staff, the 'Brasshats' to whom Nichols refers in the quotation above. The combat officers, sharing in the dangers and miseries of the men were accepted as being on the right side, but the officers organising manoeuvres from offices in England and the Staff comfortably billeted well behind the lines, well-shaved, wearing clean uniforms were seen in the same light as any other non-combatant. It does seem that these latter particularly were incredibly obtuse in their attitudes;

44. Preface to Anthology of War Poetry, pp. 58f.
not having experience of fighting at first hand they
were still concerned with the usual ludicrous attention
to unimportant details which bodevil armie. As Blunden
explained,

The war as we saw it fell into two
zones: - first, In the Trenches, but
less baited and badgered by gorgeous
numsculls: 45 second, Out of the Trenches,
and suffering from the official terror
that we might fall into indolent habits.
Thus we were between devil and deep sea. 46

The word 'gorgeous' is especially telling, implying a
material description of neat and tidy uniforms, possible
only out of the fighting zone, decorations given for no
one knew what, a foppish, feminine outlook to what should
have been a strong and masculine experience. At the same
time it implies a definite despising of those who are
being described; it is not a word that a man uses of
another man whom he respects.

45. sic!
46. De Bello Germanico, p. 81.
Frank Richards affirmed that

We all hated the sight of Staff
officers and the only damned thing the
majority seemed to be any good at was
to check men who were out of action
for not saluting them properly.47

The attitude of the non-combatant was a theme taken
up and developed by the realist poets, in particular by
Owen and Sassoon, but also by lesser-known poets. Alexander
Robertson wrote a poem inspired by a mis-remembered
quotation from Campbell which he used as his title, "We
shall drink to them that sleep."48 Like other soldiers
he was especially embittered by the thought that people
at home were battening on the soldier's lives by luxurious
living. Had they lived lives of deprivation the soldiers
could have seen war as touching them more nearly, but the
reverse often seemed to be the case, and to make the
deaths of those killed in France an excuse for self-indulgence
was anathema to soldiers like Robertson:

47. Old Soldiers Never Die, p. 170.
48. Campbell's line is: "Let us think of them that sleep."
    From "The Battle of the Baltic".
Yes, I can see you at it, in a room
Well-lit and warm, high-roofed and soft
to the tread,
Satiate and briefly mindful of the tomb
With its poor victim of Teutonic lead.

Some unknown notability will rise,
Ridiculously solemn, glass abrim,
And say, "To our dear brethren in the skies,"—
Dim are all eyes, all glasses still more dim....

The evocation of the trenches through an inverted description
is skilfully managed; "...a room/well-lit...warm, high-roofed...
soft to the tread..."—all in fact, that the trenches are
not, yet all accepted unquestioningly by those not to do
honour to the dead of whom they are but "briefly mindful."
The indulgence in luxury is also criticised by Owen in
"The Calls":

Gongs hum and buzz like saucepan-lids at dusk,
I see a food-hog whet his gold-filled tusk
To eat less bread, and more luxurious rusk.

49. Soldier Poets, p. 76.
and by Sassoon in "The Fathers":

Snug at the club two fathers sat,
Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat. 51

In these poems the criticism of people at home is implicit in the implied contrasts with life in the trenches, where even fresh bread was a luxury, where to be "snug" and "gross" was unknown. There is too, a certain amount of explicit criticism: the images used by Owen, "food-hog" and "gold-filled tusk" are unpleasant ones underlining a complete lack of identification, and Sassoon's "gross, goggle-eyed" fathers are unsympathetic figures, though perhaps pitiable rather than repulsive.

E. A. Mackintosh voiced the feelings of many soldiers when in his poem "Recruiting" he saw the older generation as hypocritical and completely lacking in true understanding:

'Lads, you're wanted, go and help',
On the railway carriage wall
Stuck the poster, and I thought
Of the hands that penned the call.

Fat civilians wishing they
'Could go and fight the Hun.'
Can't you see them thanking God
That they're over forty-one?...

Better twenty honest years
Than their dull three score and ten.
Lads you're wanted. Come and learn
To live and die with honest men....\(^52\)

It was Sassoon, however, who expressed the savage
hatred developed in the soldiers' wishes that the people
at home should suffer the same miseries, deprivations and
fears as were suffered in the trenches. Of this kind of
poem his "Blighters" is the most effective:

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
'Ve re sure the Kaiser loves our dear old tanks!'

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home sweet Home,'
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.\(^53\)

\(^{52}\) Brian Gardner (ed.). *Up the Line to Death*, pp. 111f.

\(^{53}\) Collected Poems, p. 21.
The music-hall scene, the wild and careless self-indulgence, the unfeeling stupidity of the song in the fourth line are shown as ludicrous anachronisms in a world at war by the first two lines of the second stanza. The culmination of the poem with its 'sick' play on the words, "jokes" and "riddled", is venomous and tragic at the same time, suggesting as it does the complete isolation of those at home from those fighting and dying in France. "...England one by one had fled to France. / Not many elsewhere now, save under France", commented Wilfred Owen. 54

The logical outcome of the wish that non-combatants should experience the war in the same way as the combatants did was the extension of that wish to ensure its fulfilment by direct action on the part of the victims. This idea also is expressed by Sassoon in a poem which envisages the triumphant return to England of soldiers who had fought and survived:—

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

I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal;
And with my trusty bombers turned and went
To clear those Junkers out of Parliament.\textsuperscript{55}

The other target for hatred and bitterness was the
staff and the high-ranking officers who planned campaigns
but did not participate in them. Generals were especially
picked out for abuse, for they were seen as having the
ultimate responsibility, yet planning trench warfare on
the drawing-board and not on the field. The General of
Sassoon's poem of that name is seen as such a one:

"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 spine.
"He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} "Right to a Finish". \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 75.
A. P. Herbert wrote of a contrary situation—a successful battle in which the General's plans work—yet the result for the soldiers themselves is not so very different from failure; many of them are dead and wounded, spiritually broken despite the success. The barrier between soldiers and General is shown to be insurmountable by the General's reaction to the success; he sees only the military victory and thinks of the personal honour it will bring to him:

So they are satisfied with our Brigade
And it remains to parcel out the bays!
And we shall have the usual Thanks Parade,
The beaming General, and the soppy praise.

You will come up in your capacious car
To find your heroes sulking in the rain,
To tell us how magnificent we are,
And how you hope we'll do the same again.

And we, who knew your old abusive tongue,
Who heard you hector us a week before,
We who have bled to boost you up a rung—
A K.C.B. perhaps, perhaps a Corps—
We who must mourn those spaces in the Hess,
And somehow fill those hollows in the heart,
We do not want your Sermon on Success,
Your greasy benisons on Being Smart....

The soldiers' attitude towards the non-combatant staff is summed up in a little-known poem by Julian Grenfell. It is an ironic prayer, a parody of the type of poem which romanticises prayer to God for safety in battle:

Fighting in mud, we turn to Thee,
In these dread times of battle, Lord,
To keep us safe, if so may be,
From shrapnel, snipers, shell and sword.

But not on us, for we are men
Of meaner clay, who fight in clay,
But on the Staff, the Upper Ten,
Depends the issue of the Day.

The Staff is working with its brains,
While we are sitting in the trench;
The staff the universe ordains
(Subject to Thee and General French)....

0 Lord, who mad'at all things to be,
And madest some things very good,
Please keep the extra A.D.C.
From horrid scenes, and sight of blood.... 59

I have discussed so far in this chapter how a universal compassion arose, embracing all soldiers in the trenches, of whatever nationality and how the soldier victims saw the non-combatants as sacrificers. The emotions of love and hate were directed towards objects which they would not move towards under normal living conditions. I believe that out of these abnormally-directed emotions grew the idea of the 'generation gap' which is so glibly talked of today as a modern phenomenon. This I should like to discuss in the next chapter, together with the reshaping of the Christian myth which took place during the war years.

Han is by his constitution a religious animal.

During times of especial stress the thoughts of many people naturally turn to religion, and so it was during the war period. Many men prayed to God for help and release from their misery; others saw God as the hand of Fate directing their lives, redeeming and condemning as He saw fit. This latter attitude led to a re-interpretation of the Christian myth in terms suited to twentieth century warfare. Before discussing this, however, I should like first to look briefly at the more conventional attitudes to God and religion in which God was seen in the New Testament perspective and in which the Church and Church services were accepted as part of spiritual life.

In the conditions which prevailed in France it was comforting to have some firm belief in an all-loving all-caring God. The assurance in a difficult situation that God would
protect and help enabled men to endure their miseries more readily. Major S. H. Baker, writing to his brother of his experience stranded in No Man's Land caring for his wounded servant, told how 'We both agreed out there that God would help us somehow...". The fact that they survived their ordeal, and lived to write an account of it confirmed them in their belief. On the other hand, we read in the same book a letter from J. S. Ennall to his parents, full of faith and trust in God:

I took my Communion yesterday with dozens of others who are going over tomorrow; and never have I attended a more impressive service. I placed my soul and body in God's keeping, and I am going into battle with His name on my lips, full of confidence and trusting implicitly in Him. I have a strong feeling that I shall come through safely: but nevertheless, should it be God's holy will to call me away, I am quite prepared to go...  

This letter was written on one of the last three days of June 1916; on 1 July he was killed. The dilemma of belief is

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immediately obvious; had he survived he would have believed that God had saved and protected him; as he died he was no longer receptive of belief or disbelief. It was left to others to wonder whether God had failed him, or whether God had chosen and received him. Add to this bewildering uncertainty the equally perplexing problems as to whether God was the God of the Germans too, and whether God could help men to break the precepts that upheld Him—in other words whether He could guide the bullet, put power into the bayonet thrust, when one of His commandments was

Thou shalt not kill,\(^3\)

and the spiritual dismay of Christian men in the trenches is readily understandable:

God and Christianity raised perplexities in the minds of simple lads desiring life and not death. They could not reconcile the Christian precepts of the chaplain with the bayoneting of Germans and the chambles of the battlefields.\(^4\)

Frank Richards told how an

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3. Deuteronomy 5, 17.

...Old Soldier had been reading in a paper that our bishops and ministers had been praying for a speedy victory and also that the German clergy had been praying for the same. "God's truth!" he exclaimed. "That poor old Chap above must be very nearly bald-headed through scratching His poll, trying to answer the prayers of both sides.\(^5\)

The poets heard the prayers: indeed some of them prayed themselves, but there is a marked absence of reverent prayers and references to God from the better poets. We find Evan Morgan ending a trench poem with a stanza which begins

Great God, with tending hand
Watch o'er our souls...\(^6\)

Or Captain J. E. Stewart offering thanks to God for deliverance:

Blessed be God above
For His sweet care,
Who heard the prayers of those who most I love
And my poor suppliance there,

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5. *Old Soldiers Never Die*, pp. 103f.
Who brought me forth in life and limb all whole,
Who blessed my powers with his Divine repair,
And gave me back my soul!

Robert Nichols, in his memorial poem for Richard Pinsent concludes with a slightly agnostic kind of prayer:

God, if Thou livest, and indeed didst send
Thine only Son to be to all a Friend,
Bid His dark, pitying eyes upon me bend,
And His hand heal, or I must needs despair.

Probably much more typical of Trench prayers were those spontaneous utterances in time of great misery and fear, the "impotent wild cries to God" which were rarely recorded. These are, in fact, occasionally found in the poetry of the period: "O God, send us peace!" wrote Ivor Gurney in "De Profundis" and Sassoon ended "Attack" with "O Jesus

8. *Ardours and Endurances*, p. 54.
The only sincere, wholly perfect and beautiful battle prayer I know dating from this period is W. H. Hodgson's "Before Action" with its final line refrain for each stanza, "Make me a soldier, Lord./Make me a man, O Lord./Help me to die, O Lord."12

There were, of course, other references to God. F. W. Harvey describing a dead soldier declared that "His soul sits safe with God."13 Owen, voicing belief and doubt at the same time, commented of men killed in an offensive "Some say God caught them even before they fell."14 There are antagonistic references too, such as Ivor Gurney's, "The ansated heart cries angrily out on God,"15 but most of these verge on, or belong to, the re-interpretation of the Christian myth which I should now like to discuss.

15. Sevrem and Somme, p. 66.
"Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering..."

The whole history of the Christian religion from its Old Testament origins to the heart of the New Testament story itself is bound up with the idea of sacrifice, the blood offering made to God. It begins in the fourth chapter of Genesis with God rejecting Cain's offering "of the fruit of the ground" but respecting and accepting Abel's blood offering "of the firstlings of his flock". The whole story of sacrifice is intricately interwoven with that of the scapegoat. Indeed, one of the four Hebrew words translated in the Authorised Version as "flock" can mean either "sheep" or "goats". The lamb used when the Passover was instituted was "without blemish, a male of the first year...from the sheep, or from the goats" and it was not only a sacrifice, but also a scapegoat, for by its blood the Israelites escaped God's punishment which

was executed upon "all the first born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast." The killing of the firstborn of the Egyptians is another strand in the complicated web of sacrifice. It is paralleled in the New Testament by Herod's massacre of the Innocents.

Although human sacrifice was never part of the religion of the Bible there are two major references to it, apart from the massacres just referred to, one in the Old Testament, the offering of Isaac by Abraham, and the second in the New Testament, parallelling the earlier one, the offering of Jesus by God the Father. The two incidents have many features in common with each other and with the Passover sacrifice: in each instance a father offers for sacrifice his first born son; in each instance the son is innocent and without blemish. However, here the similarities end for God intervenes in the Old Testament story and Isaac is saved, whereas in the New Testament story no one intervenes and Jesus is sacrificed.

18. St. Matthew 2.16.
I find it slightly strange that no one has seen in these biblical stories the seeds of the concept of the 'generation gap' for this is how they were seen by the soldiers of 1914-'18. In fact, the whole concept which we think of as a modern idea, dating from the mid-1950s, seems to me to have been formulated in a now Christian myth during that era. The 'parent-child' aspect of the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, and more importantly, between God and Jesus was exploited to draw a new parallel between these biblical victims and the victims of the war. Soldiers were seen both as the sacrificial lambs and as the scapegoats, dying to save others by their blood and dying to atone for the mistakes of an older generation which had allowed chaos to overwhelm the world. Thus, Jesus the Son was accepted and loved because He was a suffering victim, whereas God the Father was rejected and often hated because he was willing to sacrifice Jesus. This willingness was no longer seen as a personal and supreme sacrifice on the part of God the Father, but as an act of harsh and selfish egoism, not Himself to atone for the world's sins, but to send another to atone for them; the sacrifice was all on the part of Jesus the Son. Emotive words in this context were those connected with the
sacrificial act of the New Testament—"Golgotha", "Calvary", "cross", "agony" and so on. The soldier-victims were identified with Jesus; His lot was theirs: they suffered agony, bore their crosses, frequently endured a cruel and undeserved death; the older generation and the statesmen were identified with God and the Pharisees; they believed in the need for sacrifice and by their acts enforced it, yet it seemed not to touch them personally.

(I am aware of the element of unfairness in all this discussion: I am attempting to fix the general impression which emerges from the writings of the period and to prepare for the very vivid and vital re-interpretation of the Christian myth which occurs in the poetry.)

For 2000 years it had been taught that the death of Jesus was an end of sacrifice within the Church, that God demanded nothing further of His people but that they should accept Jesus' sacrifice which week by week was celebrated in the Churches as being "a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world." 19 Now the ministers of the Church seemed

not only unable to give a lead in upholding the principles upon which their religion was founded, but also to be denying the fullness and sufficiency of the sacrifice that had already been made:

...the Bishop of London...declared that what the Church has to do is to breathe the spirit of sacrifice from end to end of this country....

Wilfred Owen, who had quoted so approvingly in a letter to his mother the text "Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life—for a friend", found himself parodying another text also concerned with the laying down of life:

God so hated the world that He gave several millions of English-begotten sons, that whosoever believeth in them should not perish, but have a comfortable life.

The difference between the originals of these texts appears to me to lie in the implications of the wording: in the first the laying down of life is entirely voluntary; a man shows his love by laying down his life for another; the second text implies an obligatory laying down of life; God showed His love by sacrificing His Son, that is, a life other than His own.

So the symbolic sacrifice of the One is redefined: it is no longer symbolic; it is no longer a single sacrifice; Abraham insists on offering his own sacrifice; other fathers insist on offering theirs; they reject Christ's vicarious suffering for they all have sons to give: "...my father was proud that I had 'done the right thing'" wrote Robert Graves, describing his enlistment, and fathers would not offer their pride instead of their sons:

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

23. Goodbye To All That, p. 102.
Abraham was a target for Osbert Sitwell too. Although Isaac's life is, in fact, saved in the Biblical story, emphasis was laid upon the willingness of the father to sacrifice his son; this was seen as parallel with the willingness of the fathers of the young men of 1914–1918.

Sitwell's Abraham is rich, flabby, pempered—and a profiteer. He takes what he can for himself from the war, and he gives by sacrificing others:

...Consider me and all that I have done—
I've fought for Britain with my might and main;
I make explosives—and I gave a son.
My factory, converted for the fight
(I do not like to boast of what I've spent),
Now manufactures gas and dynamite,
Which only pays me seventy per cent.
And if I had ten other sons to send
I'd make them serve my country to the end...²⁵

Sassoon uses two other Old Testament stories to parallel his own times; first, the story of Abel and Cain, one fearful, loved by God but killed by his brother, the other hated and punished by God.²⁶ The second story is that of King David's treachery to Uriah the Hittite whose death in

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battle was deliberately planned by David. It can be seen that both these stories are concerned with the deaths of young men in circumstances not of their own choosing; both, of course, belong to the pre-Christian myth, but the protagonists of both have considerable importance as preludes to the New Testament story.

For Isaac Rosenberg with his Jewish background the sacrifice of soldiers in battle was naturally seen in pre-Christian terms. Alignment with a re-interpreted Christian myth was for him spiritually impossible yet the image which he used in "Dead Man's Dump" combined the sacrificial pyre of the Jewish Old Testament with Nebuchadnezzar's deliberate attempt to burn to death Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: 28

What of us who, flung on the shrieking pyre,
Walk, our usual thoughts untouched,
Our lucky limbs as on ichor fed,
Immortal seeming ever? 29

29. Complete Works, p. 82.
It was the idea of unwilling sacrifice which was seized upon by the soldiers in France— the thought developed that they were not sacrificing themselves, but were being sacrificed:

The Daily Mail has just come in & I see that we have taken Pozieres & that the Rt. Hon [David] Lloyd George still has his back to the wall & will fight to the last drop of our blood.

wrote Ford Madox Ford on 23 July 1916.\(^\text{30}\) The idea of the laying down of lives was accompanied in the minds of the soldier-victims by the idea of there being someone to perform the sacrifice who was not personally laying down his own life. In Ford's letter quoted above it was Lloyd George. Graves squarely presents an opposition between the older and the younger generation:

We no longer saw it as a war between trade-rivals; its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder.\(^\text{31}\)

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\(^\text{31}\). *Goodbye to All That*, p. 268.
A corollary to this was the belief that religion, as represented by the Church was doing nothing to end the war and that God the Father was, at the least, not exerting Himself to save the victims of war:

Any faith in religion I ever had is most frightfully shaken by things I've seen, and it's incredible that if God could make a 17-inch shell not explode— it seems incredible that he lets them explode... 32

So the kind of alignment that I have described began to form itself in the minds of the soldiers—the older generation, men and women at home, the government, the staff, and God the Father were on one side; the younger generation, the combatant soldiers and officers and Jesus Christ the Son were on the other side; it was, in fact, a Christ-centred religion, "pure Christianity," 33 as Owen described it, in which the emphasis was laid on the Christ-like qualities of those who were following this new religion. Even the more conventionally religious


saw the strength of this alignment, as the young
Canadian, Roger Livingstone, who wrote to his mother:

Do you realize that Christ was the first
one to fall in the present war?... The
very principles for which Christ gave
His life are identically those principles
for which Britain is today giving her
life-blood. It is an old struggle, and
Christ Himself was the first martyr to
the cause. 34

Richard Aldington stated the opposition between young
men on one side, and old men and women on the other, quite
clearly in the poem entitled "The Blood of the Young Men",
which is full of Biblical allusions:

...Blood of the young men, blood of their bodies,
Squeezed and crushed out to purple the garments
of Dives,
Poured out to colour the lips of Magdalen,
Magdalen who loves not, whose sins are loveless.
O this steady drain of the weary bodies,
This beating of hearts growing dimmer and dimmer,

This bitter indifference of the old men,
This exquisite indifference of women.

Old men, you will grow stronger and healthier
With broad red cheeks and clear hard eyes —
Are not your meat and drink the choicest?
Blood of the young, dear flesh of the young men? 35

The reinterpretation of the myth crystallised in the
poetry and correspondece of the realist poets. In a letter
to Wilfred Owen sometime in 1918 Osbert Sitwell enclosed a
brief epigram "Ill Winds" which re-enacted and up-dated the
agon and death of Jesus:

Up on the Cross, in ugly agony,
The Son of Man hung dying—and the roar
Of earthquakes rent the solemn sky
Already thundering its wrath, and tore
The dead from out their tombs....Then Jesus died—
But Monsieur Clemenceau is fully satisfied! 36

The scene is at one and the same time the New Testament
Calvary and France of 1918, the fearful natural horrors

35. The Complete Poems, p. 120.
enacted at the moment of Christ's death and the equally fearful unnatural horrors enacted at the deaths of the many 'Christ's' who were being sacrificed in France. Over it all the distant, God-like figure of Monsieur Clemenceau (then French Premier) broods, with his peculiar satisfaction at the final enactment of the tragedy.

Writing to thank Sitwell for this epigram Owen commented in his letter:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work—teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha. 37

The whole passage shows, as might be expected from Owen, a close acquaintance with the language of the Biblical story;

37. Collected Letters, p. 562. In transcribing this letter from Noble Essences the editors included a superfluous "to see" between "his feet" and "that". I have kept to the original text.
at the same time it has been skilfully adapted to parallel
the various aspects of a soldier's life preluding and leading
up to the final consummation in his death in battle. Sassoon
had already developed a similar image of the Christ-soldier
in "The Redeemer" published in The Old Huntsman and Other
Poems during the previous year:

I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;
A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,
And lit the face of what had been a form
Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;
I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare,
And leaning forward from His burdening task,
Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine
Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine.

No thorny crown, only a woollen cap
He wore—an English soldier, white and strong,
Who loved his time like any simple chap,
Good days of work and sport and homely song...
He faced me, reeling in his weariness,
Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.
I say that He was Christ, who wrought to bless
All groping things with freedom bright as air,
And with His mercy washed and made them fair. . . .

38. Collected Poems, pp. 16f.
The parallels are less emphasized in this poem than they are in Owen's words, perhaps because the religious background of the two poets differed considerably: Owen had been brought up in a strongly religious home and had contemplated the Church as a career whereas Sassoon's background was one of conventional religion only.

Yet it was a generation brought up to be conversant with the Authorized Version of the Bible and the biblical words are part of the common heritage, certainly of all educated men. I believe, too, that the emotional impact of the Bible was, speaking in general terms, greater then than it is today so that words taken from the story of the Crucifixion, were in themselves powerfully emotive. It was because of this that Herbert Read was able in two brief lines:

My men, my modern Christs
your bloody agony confronts the world.\(^{39}\)

to involve his reader in re-interpreting the Christian myth according to the beliefs suggested by Owen and others.

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Osbert Sitwell was particularly engrossed with the story of the Crucifixion and used it in two other wartime poems. The first of these, "Rhapsode", describes the horror of Calvary in words relevant at the same time to death in battle:

When Christ was slowly dying on that tree -
Hanging in agony upon that hideous Cross -
Tortured, betrayed, and spat upon,
Loud through the thunder and the earthquake's roar
Rang out
Those blessed humble words of doubt:
My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

But to cry out in this way was seen as unheroic, and the

...Pharisees and Sadducees,
And all were shocked -
Pained beyond measure.
And they said:
"At least he might have died like a hero
With an oath on his lips,
Or the refrain from a comic song -
Or a cheerful comment of some kind."40

The other of Sitwell's poems concerned with the Crucifixion

40. Argonaut and Juggernaut, p. 104.
shows the old men of Jesus' time pitying not Christ the victim, but Joseph, His father: "Poor Joseph! How he'll feel about his son!" Christ Himself, however, is criticized for His bitterness and discontent, and His generosity to His persecutors is misinterpreted:

For when they nailed him high up on the tree, And gave him vinegar and pierced his side, He asked God to forgive them — still dissatisfied!\(^{41}\)

There seems to me little doubt that an interest in the Christian myth was fostered and encouraged by what was to Englishmen the unexpectedly religious aspect of the French countryside with its "Calvaries" and huge Catholic Churches:

...in the churchyard not half a dozen yards from the wreckage of what was the church is a large crucifix which is unscathed and intact. It is over 15' high.\(^{42}\)

Robert Nichols in his poem "Battery moving up to a New Position from Rest Camp: Dawn" heard a church bell boom; he imagined

\(^{41}\) "The Eternal Club". \textit{op. cit.} p. 110.

\(^{42}\) MS letter from William Burgon to his mother and father, 3.12.1915.
the priest and people inside the church celebrating Mass
and offered them a renewed sacrifice to celebrate:

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

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

And slowly, slowly, lifted up
Dazzles the overflowing cup.

O worshipping, fond multitude,
Remember us too, and our blood.

Turn hearts to us as we go by,
Salute those about to die,
Plead for them, the deep bell toll:
Their sacrifice must soon be whole.

Entreat you for such hearts as break
With the premonitory ache
Of bodies, whose feet, hands, and side,
Must soon be torn, pierced, crucified. 43

43. Ardours and Endurances, pp. 33f.
The contrast which Nichols presents between the worshipping congregation performing the sacrificial rites at their church and the suffering soldiers going towards their own re-enactment of Calvary suggests the chasm between church religion and pure Christianity. Owen uses the same theme, perhaps rather more subtly in his "Anthem for Doomed Youth," which is a carefully worked out negation of the Mass for the Dead.

Two short poems from Owen are of especial interest in this connection. Both originated from aspects of the Roman Catholic religion in France, both have a similar theme, and both were written in four-line stanzas of iambic tetrameters. The first is inspired by the view of a shelled Calvary:

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him.

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

44. Collected Poems, p. 44.
The scribes on all the people above
  And brawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
  Lay down their life; they do not hate.45

The Christ-figure has again been compelled to re-enact His personal sacrifice, but those who profess to follow Him have abrogated their Christian responsibility in favour of what they see as a responsibility to the state, ignoring what to Owen was the essence of Christ-centred religion, Christ's words in St John 15.13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." The second of these two short poems, which I again quote in full, took its origin from the view of a shelled Church in Quivières:

So the church Christ was hit and buried
  Under its rubbish and its rubble.
In cellars, packed-up saints lie serried,
  Well out of hearing of our trouble.

One Virgin still immaculate
  Smiles on for war to flatter her.
She's halo'd with an old tin hat,
  But a piece of hell will batter her.46

45. "At a Calvary near the Ancre." Collected Poems, p. 82.
During both the First and Second world wars the practice in churches at risk from shelling and bombing was to pack up their art treasures, including free standing statues, and frequently, stained-glass windows, and either convey them to a place of safety or store them in the vaults. In Roman Catholic churches, however, the Crucifix which was central to the worship of the Church, and the figure of the Virgin, the necessary intercessor were left. Owen saw this as symbolising his new religion: Christ Himself was ready to face the horrors and destruction of war, but His followers kept out of it. It is interesting to see his ambivalent attitude towards the Virgin Mary, since to him personally the mother-figure was almost sacred, though his idea of "pure Christianity" in no way necessitated a reverence for the mother of Christ. Thus she was left unaligned, neither suffering with Christ, and the soldiers, nor hidden away with the saints, yet the final line seems to imply that she too would have to re-enact her suffering, and this time more directly.

I think that there can be little doubt that what people like Owen were rejecting was not Christianity as such but
church religion, Christianity as it was interpreted by the Bishops and priests. There is an interesting letter from Owen to his mother written from Craiglockhart in August 1917. It is especially interesting when one remembers Owen's oppressively close relationship with his mother and at the same time considers her narrowly devout and religious nature. It is indeed a criticism of much that she has appeared to stand for:

...I'm overjoyed that you think of making bandages for the wounded. Leave Black Sambo ignorant of Heaven. White men are in Hell. Aye, leave him ignorant of the civilization that sends us there, and the religious men that say it is good to be in that Hell....Send an English Testament to his Grace of Canterbury, and let it consist of that one sentence, at which he winks his eyes:

'Ye have heard that it hath been said: An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:

But I say that ye resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.'
And if his reply be "Host unsuitable for the present distressing moment, my dear lady! But I trust that in God's good time... etc." then there is only one possible conclusion, that there are no more Christians at the present moment than there were at the end of the first century.  

Sassoon also made a direct attack on the Church and its priests in a poem published in Counter-Attack and Other Poems in 1918. Like "Le Christianisme" the starting-point was again a church, but this time an unharmed church in the vicinity of Edinburgh, a church whose joyful bells appeared to ignore and make little of the suffering and death in France:

...What means this metal in windy belfries hung
When guns are all our need? Dissolve these bells
Whose tones are tuned for peace: with martial tongue
Let them cry doom and storm the sun with shells.

47. Collected Letters, p. 484.
Bells are like fierce-browed prelates who proclaim That 'if our Lord returned He'd fight for us.'
So let our bells and bishops do the same,
Shoulder to shoulder with the motor-bus. 48

As I have already pointed out earlier in this chapter, the identification of the soldier-victim with Christ seemed to necessitate the rejection of God and the older generation, the sacrificers, so it is not surprising that the poetry of the realists frequently made harsh or ironic references to these latter. Sassoon attacked the Bishops not only in the poem quoted above, but also in "They," where the Bishop's facile sermon is brought hard up against the terrible realities of battle; the cruelty and suffering implicit in maiming and death are dismissed with the words, "The ways of God are strange," 49 an ineffectual apologia for God's helplessness or indifference in war. More positively, Osbert Sitwell showed all the Bishops going "mad with joy" when a Parliamentary speaker maintained:

"Gentlemen, we will never end this war
Till all the younger men with martial mien
Have entered capitals; never make peace
Till they are cripples, on one leg, or dead!"  

Much more common, however, are adverse comments about God the Father. The general burden of these comments is that He is insensitive to the sufferings of the soldiers. As early as 1915, Robert Nichols saw God as unwilling to enable one dying soldier to succour another, so that the second one, in his agony "cursed God and died". Arthur Graeme West commented in his diary during May 1916:

If there is a God at all responsible for governing the earth, I hate and abominate Him—I do not think there is one. We only fall into the habit of calling down curses on a god whom we believe not to exist, because the constant references to his beneficence are so maddening that anger stings us to a retort that is really illogical.

50. "Armchair". Arronaut and Juggernaut, p. 117.
52. The Diary of a Dead Officer, pp. 35f.
In Robert Graves' twentieth century re-interpretation of the battle between David and Goliath, God dims His eyes, "His ears are shut," and He allows David to die. In "Break of Day" Sassoon used the term "God's blank heart." and Owen spoke of God seeming "not to care." However, the poem which most clearly shows the opposition between Christ and God is Owen's "Soldier's Dream;"

I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;
And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;
And buckled with a smile Hausers and Colts;
And rusted every bayonet with His tears.

And there were no more bombs, of ours or Theirs,
Not even an old flint-lock, nor even a pikel,
But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;
And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.

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54. *Collected Poems*, p. 82.
56. *Collected Poems*, p. 84. Michael, of course, is the militant archangel of the Bible. He is described by Milton as "Michael, of celestial armies prince." *Paradise Lost* VI.44.
Here we see Christ clearly aligned with the soldiers and working for the relief of their sufferings whilst God is on the other side, once again enforcing the blood sacrifice, the obligatory laying down of life not His own.
our right to forward with officers returning. Colonel H.D. Hamilton joined Headquarters of 1st R.C. again.

Scene of further French retirement on left. Auyon in move to Beaucourt. P. W. I in action at Care and they get them to bite: slight progress on left but we again return to 1000 yards to rear. We turned from Oissavy and Inchevry. Bugy all right. Get shelled.

28th March. Beech moves rapidly on left. Traps back to choose positions. Lieut. Prindoe brings back battery only three guns left. In action between huts. Bombarded by other planes. Major Adley finds a gun while Colonel Patles arrives from top of hill. German nearly all round us and we have only one road to escape. Barton along road toward Beaucourt with heavy train 59 barage 300 yards from road on left. This plane overhead. The scene was beyond words. Dead, dying and half covered bodies and civilians lay everywhere, crippled livestock and slaughtered animals blocked roads etc. This was one of our "clouds" and by a miracle we reached Maison Blanche without ammunition. No sign of major ties.
Chapter VI

0 the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, cheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold then cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep....

I have discussed in the three preceding chapters the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of trench warfare. In this chapter I intend to consider the various forms of mental distress which are evident in written accounts of the period and which were reflected in the poetry. Broadly speaking, these may be divided into two kinds; first, the mental stresses which though agonising can be registered as 'normal' and secondly, the forms of mental illness known variously as shell-shock, war neurosis or neurasthenia, and the psychoses, unrelated to, but probably precipitated by, war stress, which in some instances developed into permanent mental imbalance or madness.

The two emotions most significant in producing mental distress were fear and the morbid depression which nurtured
guilt. Fear was universal as was readily acknowledged by responsible medical opinion of the time:

Fear is an emotion common to all and evidence was given of very brave men who frankly acknowledged it.¹

Many years later Lord Moran, writing his book The Anatomy of Courage, looked back to the First World War for his examples, and early in the book he commented:

Is there then anyone who does not feel fear? Those who lived in the trenches for a long time may answer by recalling some happy soul who did not appear to be conscious of danger, and had never had to make an effort to carry on.... Perhaps he was killed or wounded and was remembered as a man without fear. But if the enemy was less merciful and he was left on his feet, the frailty of the rest of the men overtook him; time had stolen from him his peace of mind that came from a certain vacancy which had always passed for courage.²

² p. 10.
Certainly in their diaries and letters men did not hesitate to acknowledge the reality of fear. Arthur Graeme West described in his diary for 20 September 1916 how his battalion endured a heavy bombardment in the front-line trenches:

Men cowered and trembled....Five or six little funk-holes dug into the side of the trench served to take the body of a man in a very huddled and uncomfortable position, with no room to move, simply to cower into the little hole.... One simply looks at his hands clasped on his knees, dully and lifelessly, shivering a little as a shell draws near; another taps the side of his hole with his finger-nails, rhythmically; another hides himself in his great-coat and passes into a kind of torpor....3

Ford Madox Ford writing to C. F. G. Masterman in January 1917 commented:

Now...I find myself suddenly waking up in a hell of a funk till morning. And that is pretty well the condition of a number of men here....4

3. The Diary of a Dead Officer, pp. 67f.
Donald Hankey wrote of his nerves not being "as good as they were last year" and Theodore Wilson in a letter to his mother on 1 March 1916 described his own feelings under fire:

I was horribly afraid—sick with fear—
not of being hit, but of seeing other people torn, in the way that high explosive tears. It is simply hellish...  

Acknowledged fear was, however, the mind's own catharsis. The man who was afraid and knew that he was justified in being afraid and thus was ready to express his fear was less likely to suffer from nervous disorders than the man who repressed his fears:

I think there is an idea among young soldiers especially that there should not be such a thing as fear. I do not know, but I think I was in an awful funk the whole time, and I think most people were, and if the young soldier were given to understand that everybody is very much

5. *A Student in Arms*. 2nd series, p. 198.

afraid and that it is a natural condition to be in, but he should overcome it...and that it was up to him to control himself, it would have some small effect. Many men are afraid of being thought afraid, and it worries them. I think if it were pointed out that it is not cowardly to be afraid, but it is cowardly to let fear get control of your actions...it would help to a certain extent.7

In other words, fear itself was not a major problem unless it was continuous and sustained. It is, in fact, clear that men under continuous stress were more susceptible to disturbing emotions than men under intense strain for a brief period. In Chapter III I discussed the physical discomfort and misery of fatigue. There is no doubt that it also played a supremely important role in encouraging the development of neuroses. Lack of sleep and physical exhaustion made men more liable to fear and anxiety; the mental conflict involved in dealing with these fears and anxieties increased the feeling of fatigue. This vicious

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spiral all too often ended in neurosis.

The real problems were concerned not with men's natural fears, but with the effects which accompanied fear; a man's efforts to pretend that he was not afraid; repression of the causes of fear; the battering of the sensibilities of men whose whole mental outlook was coloured by their attempts not to give way to fear. There was for such men a conflict between fear and their sense of duty; at first such conflict would be consciously appreciated and wrestled with, but when it became intolerable, repression would ensue and neurotic or hysterical symptoms would become manifest.

The psychiatric literature appertaining to the period makes it fairly clear that in most cases of war neurosis the soldier concerned had something in his mental and nervous make-up which made him more liable than others to nervous disorders. However, Dr. Mililais Culpin stated quite categorically that:

The percentage of findings of predisposition to mental disturbances...signifies that the number of patients whose symptoms are due entirely to war experiences acting upon a mentally sound organism is likely to be
small. Nevertheless, the study of a few cases apparently of this type leads me to believe that, given enough of the strain of modern warfare, any man whatsoever will break down. 8

Dr. W. H. R. Rivers also emphasised the fact that there was

The man who breaks down after long and continued strain. These were the men who...after some shell explosion or something else had knocked them out badly, went on struggling to do their duty until they finally collapsed entirely. 9

A little further on in the same section of the report

Dr. Rivers accepted the suggestion that men in this condition were probably suffering from a "mental wound" or "trauma". 10

10. op. cit. p. 56.
I think that today there is very much more lay recognition of mental and nervous disorders, even if they are not properly understood, than there was fifty to sixty years ago. This, however, makes it more difficult for us to accept the line which was then drawn between fear and cowardice, and even more finely, between conscious and unconscious cowardice, between malingering and hysteria—that is between the man who was afraid and gave way to fear and the man who was afraid and suffered from an anxiety neurosis. It is interesting to find that in the War Office Enquiry military witnesses were, on the whole, more willing to differentiate whilst medical witnesses were, in general, less willing:

Dr. Napother said: "Frankly, I am not prepared to make a decision between cowardice and shell-shock. Cowardice I take to mean action under the influence of fear and the ordinary type of 'shell-shock' was, to my mind, persistent and chronic fear." 11

11. p. 159.
The summing-up of the evidence in this section makes interesting reading:

Dr. Hampton: "Many cases were on the border line between conscious and unconscious malingering."

Lieut-Colonel Scott Jackson: "Many cases of neurasthenia and 'shell-shock' were skrimshanking of the worst type."

Major Adie: "We did not see much malingering."

Dr. Wilson, in speaking of men who took advantage of an attack to get away, said: "I do not know how much malingering there is in these cases; it is almost impossible to tell."

Colonel Campbell considered 'shell-shock' a favourite method which malingerers employed to get away from the battle front...

Dr. Dunn said: "In acute shock a man abandons himself to his terror. I have
not seen an attempt to simulate it, 
and I cannot imagine such an attempt 
deceiving anyone."

Colonel Jervis considered the number 
of emotional breakdowns was slight as 
compared to the number "swinging the 
lead."

Any distinction would appear to be entirely arbitrary; 
once hysteria had developed a man was no longer capable 
of controlling his own actions; on the other hand apparent 
simulation of hysteria would suggest in itself some lack 
of conscious control which probably arose from excessive 
fear. To call actions performed by a man suffering 
from hysteria or from hysterical simulation, cowardice, 
and to punish them accordingly showed a complete lack of 
understanding of the psychiatric problems involved.

12. p. 144. Of those with military titles, Major Adie was 
a distinguished physician and neurologist serving as a 
Medical Officer in the R.A.I.I.C. The others all held 
high military positions, though Lieut-Colonel Scott 
Jackson appears to have had a medical degree. However, 
he was not serving as a Medical Officer, but in a 
military capacity.

of Psychiatry (Revised), p. 156.
I have dwelt upon the questions of fear, cowardice and neurosis, because it seems to me that the problems they raised were not easily soluble and because it also seems to me that this was another instance in which the private soldier and the junior officer were aligned together against the senior officers, staff and those at home. Rank cowardice and "skrimshanking" were fairly universally condemned but the more experience of trench warfare a man had the more likely he was to feel sympathy with others who had broken under the strain:

A man has sought refuge in our house, his nerves all gone. He sobbed and moaned a little as each [shell] came wrote D. H. Bell in his Diary for 20 April 1915. Here there is no sign of condemnation for a man who has given way to fear. Similarly, Ralph Scott in his Diary for 18 August 1918 asserted angrily,

If ever again I hear any one say anything against a man for incapacitating himself in any way to get out of this I

will kill that man. Not even Almighty God can understand the effort required to force oneself back into the trenches at night...  

Through his very bluntness and rough soldierly attitude, Frank Richards succeeded admirably in conveying the pity of war in his description of the following incident during the battle of the Somme:

One of our old stretcher-bearers went mad and started to undress himself. He was uttering horrible screams, and we had to fight with him and overpower him before he could be got to the Aid Post. He had been going queer for the last month or two.  

On the other hand, Lieutenant-Colonel R. G. A. Hamilton, The Master of Belhaven, was unable to extend any real sympathy or understanding to men suffering from nervous or mental disorders. On 30 July 1917 he reported in his diary, "Another man has gone mad. This makes two since

15. A Soldier's Diary, p. 93.
we have been in this position...."17 Four days later, on 3 August 1917 he made the following report:

Another man has gone off his head, but I have refused to allow him to leave the guns. It is simply a matter of everyone having to control their nerves. I am very sorry for the man, but if the idea once gets about that a man can get out of this hell by letting go of his nerves, Heaven help us.18

Within the hierarchical context of war organisation the varying attitudes are understandable. The junior officers and private soldiers were concerned with their small area of operations and with the men within that area, most of whom they knew personally and were in close contact with. They were not only aware of the fear and horror of battle and of the immense strain of being under constant bombardment, but they were also directly involved in each other's nervous troubles:

My nerves are under control, and I can do my job all right, but I am feeling

18. op. cit. p. 359.
the strain in a way I used not to do.
I often find myself speaking sharply when
there is no need for it. The men too
seem different; they no longer want 'Jerry'
to come over, as they used to declare.19

On the other hand senior officers such as Lieutenant-
Colonel Hamilton overlooked a much larger situation. A
man who went 'mad' was simply another gap in the firing
line; if others became infected by his madness the gaps
would become formidable. The private soldier or the
junior officer would see a friend or companion breaking;
the senior officer merely saw them, as Wilfred Owen described,
as

Ken, gaps for filling:
Losses, who might have fought
Longer; 20

As I have already stated, simple fear, recognised and
expressed, was not generally a cause of neurosis; however,
the repression of simple fear and the existence of more

complicated fears and anxieties was a major cause of breakdowns among officers. "The private soldier has to think only or chiefly of himself;" wrote Dr. W. H. R. Rivers,

he has not to bear with him continually the thought that the lives of forty or fifty men are immediately, and of many more remotely, dependent on his success in controlling any expression of fear or apprehension.\(^{21}\)

Dr. Henry Head made a similar affirmation in his evidence to the War Office Committee of Enquiry:

The officer...is repressing all the time because, first of all, he must not show fear in any circumstances. In some circumstances all men are afraid, therefore he has to repress all that. Then again, he has an enormous responsibility thrown upon him. It is to a great extent anxiety on behalf of others.\(^{22}\)

\(^{21}\) Instinct and the Unconscious, p. 219.

\(^{22}\) War Office Enquiry into Shell-Shock, p. 70.
So it was often the man with a sense of responsibility who suffered most since not only did he suffer fear but he also had to suffer the anguish of giving way to fear in front of those for whom he was responsible. Lord Moran, describing a sergeant who shot himself at Armentières, commented,

It was plain enough then that he could not face war and was not certain what he might do and had taken the matter into his own hands before he did something dreadful that might bring disgrace on himself and on his regiment.²³

The thin line which separated the man labelled 'neurasthenic' from the man labelled 'coward' would perhaps not have been important were it not for the fact that cowardice was a military crime punishable by death. The man who gave way to fear risked exchanging the chance of injury or death in battle with the certainty of calculated and cold-blooded death at the hands of his own comrades. Who could truly map out the limits of endurance of another soul if we are to believe the medical evidence quoted above.

that every man given enough continuous strain, fear and 
anxiety was liable to break?

Herbert Read did not wish to be a realist poet: "...I'd 
rather write one 'pastoral' than a book of this realism," 
he wrote in his diary for 14 March 1918, "My heart is not 
in it: it is too objective." Yet by 1917 he had begun 
to wonder whether it was not "a sacred duty after all 'to 
paint the horrors'." The result was Naked Warriors first 
published in 1919. Throughout this short book fear plays 
a predominant part in the minds of Read's protagonists. 
Read himself was acutely aware of what I described above 
as the thin line which appeared to separate the neurasthenic 
from the coward. "Fear," he wrote,

Fear is a wave 
beating through the air 
and on taut nerves impinging 
till there it wins 
vibrating chords.

All goes well 
so long as you tune the instrument


25. 26 October 1917. op. cit. p. 112.
to simulate composure.
(So you will become
a gallant gentleman.)

But when the strings are broken
then you will grovel on the earth
and your rabbit eyes
will fill with the fragments of your shatter'd soul. 26

The simulated composure helps to underline the irony of
gallantry: the "gallant gentleman" is he who can pretend
well enough to go on pretending; such, Read implies, is
the difference between the brave man and the coward. The
brave man is able "to simulate composure" until death overtakes
him; if he breaks under the strain he becomes a coward.
The long poem from which "Fear" is taken culminates in
"The Execution of Cornelius Vane," 27 a moral tale in
which Cornelius is punished for his cowardice by death.
But at the end where the moral should come is the agonising
plea:

27. op. cit. pp. 40ff.
"What wrong have I done that I should leave those:
The bright sun rising
And the birds that sing?"

Our sympathy is required not for legality and courage but for the erring and fearful victim of war's terrors.

There is rarely reference in the poetry to simple fear, the experiencing of an emotion which ends with the experience itself, for fear was rarely simple. The poets were, in general concerned with the ultimate effects of fear—fear that drove a man to wound himself, to kill himself; or perhaps to be shot for cowardice; fear that snapped the nerves and drove a man to seeming madness. Like Read, both Owen and Sassoon were concerned with the fear which made a man feel that he had come to the end of the road.

In "S.I.W." Owen traces the military career of a young soldier from the moment when he leaves home with the encouragement of his family to be brave and to do nothing to disgrace himself. Owen emphasises the continual strain

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of week after week, month after month in the midst of battle until

Courage leaked, as sand
From the best sand-bags after years of rain.
But never leave, wound, fever, trench-foot, shock,
Untrapped the wretch. And death seemed still withheld...

So the young soldier found it necessary to accomplish his own death. It is a poem of justification. Fear must have an end or man must make the end of it for himself. He cannot live perpetually in a state of fear. Of this the poem leaves us in no doubt, just as the soldier himself was in no doubt:

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

Sassoon too allows no condemning of the "simple solder boy" who is driven to kill himself. Condemnation is reserved for the people back at home:
You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Snack home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go. 29

Each of these poems is concerned with a soldier who, having
no apparent inherent weakness, nevertheless found that he
had reached the limits of his endurance and could no longer
withstand fear. Both poets showed too the man who had
reached the same state within himself, yet did not choose
the escape route of suicide. Sassoon's "hero,"

cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner... 30

Was he more blameworthy than the soldier who killed himself?
than the soldier who was sent down from the front line
suffering from neurasthenia? than the soldier who was
killed in battle the night before "the mine/Went up at
Wicked Corner"? The questions are open-ended. The sting
of the poem lies not in the fact that hero was a coward

whose mother was made to believe that he died a hero,
but that here was a man who died unwillingly, "blown to
small bits", forced in the teeth of his fear to stay in
the trenches:

And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair. 30

Hero or anti-hero the result was the same. The poem not
only deflates ideas of heroic glory but also emphasises
the indifference of the world to the victims of war.

In "The Dead-Beat" 31 Owen shows us a soldier, apparently
unwounded, who simply broke down, "his pluck...all gone."
Was he a malingerer? The stretcher-bearers thought so;
the doctor thought so. But does one die of malingering
as this man died? Edmund Blunden recounted a similar
incident in which two soldiers put their heads out of a
pillbox and narrowly escaped death from a shell; yet one
was scratched by a splinter:

And out burst terrors that he'd striven to tame,
A good man, Hoad, for weeks. I'm blown to bits.
He groans, he screams....
The poor man lay at length and brief and mad
Flung out his cry of doom; soon ebb'd and dumb
He yielded....

It would seem from the evidence in the poems that both these deaths could be put down to commotional shell-shock, that is, the direct result of concussion by the blast of shell explosion. The War Office Enquiry into "Shell-Shock" summarised the evidence on commotional shock by stating,

Most of the witnesses who had front line experience had actually seen men lying dead without visible injury, as a result of the explosion of shells or mines.

Certainly the soldier in Owen's poem was considered a "stout lad...before that strafe" and Sergeant Hoad's apparent madness followed a moment of close proximity to an exploding shell (the splinter-scratch could have been incidental). Yet it is clear that in both cases in the brief period before death there were distinct signs of emotional instability

32. "The Pillbox". Undertones of War, p. 293.
33. p. 103.
which would normally be seen in emotional shell-shock.
The men had reached the limits of their endurance; to those around them it appeared that the strain of continuous fear and terror had killed them.

At the beginning of this chapter I mentioned fear and the depression which led to guilt as being the principal emotions leading to war neuroses. Feelings of guilt for the direct actions demanded by war service, however, are not very common. Men who had been brought up to believe that to kill another was both a legal crime and a spiritual sin were now placed in situations where not only did their duty towards the state require them to kill, but also the preservation of their own and their comrades' lives often depended on it. It is surprising how rarely revulsion against direct face-to-face killing is commented on in letters and diaries. It is the exception rather than the rule to find such statements as the following:

Personally I still shudder at the idea of sticking six inches of cold steel into another man's body or having his steel stuck into my body, but I shudder
merely with the natural instinct of repulsion which is common to at least all educated people. We must assume that, in general, any outward expression of repulsion was repressed. Dr. Millais Culpin reported one such repression describing it as a "war dream...of a common type":

Patient dreamed of cutting off a man's head; he said he had a vicious feeling whilst doing it. Association on the feeling recalled his going over the top; bayoneting two Germans and shooting one.

Much more widespread were generalised feelings of guilt: mankind's guilt for all the horrors of war; the guilt of the soldier engaged in war who became convinced that war was wrong, and conversely, (and perversely, for the same man often felt it), the guilt of the man on leave or wounded who wanted to be back in France supporting his comrades.

35. Psychoneuroses of War and Peace, p. 63.
Once more it seems that the Battle of the Somme was the decisive factor in changing enthusiasm into guilt and bitterness. It was the first major battle fought by a conscripted British army. The majority of cases of neurasthenia and shell-shock dated from mid-1916 onwards. There seemed no likely end to war.

Writing in his diary on 9 May 1918 Herbert Read expressed the guilt which many men felt at the continuance of war:

Most of the prisoners we took were boys under twenty. Our own recent reinforcements were all boys. Apart from uniforms, German and English are alike as two peas: beautiful fresh children. And they are massacred in inconceivable torment. 36

In *Death of a Hero*, in an interpolation by the narrator frightening in its intensity, Richard Aldington associated mankind in his vision of war-guilt:

What am I? O God, nothing, less than nothing, a husk, a leaving, a half-chewed morsel on the plate, a reject. But an

36. The Contrary Experience, p. 128.
impersonal vendetta, an unappeased conscience crying in the wilderness, a river of tears in the desert. What right have I to live? Is it five million, is it ten million, is it twenty million? What does the exact count matter? There they are, and we are responsible. Tortures of hell, we are responsible! When I meet an unmaimed man of my generation I want to shout at him: 'How did you escape? How did you dodge it? What dirty trick did you play? Why are you not dead, trickster....You, the war dead, I think you died in vain, I think you died for nothing, for a blast of wind, a blather, a humbug, a newspaper stunt, a politician's ramp. But at least you died. You did not reject the sharp, sweet shock of bullets, the sudden smash of the shell-burst, the insinuating agony of poison gas. You got rid of it all. You chose the better part....

During the ten years after the war, whilst Death of a Hero was gestating, it is clear that Aldington carried around with him his burden of guilt.

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37. p. 227.
Another source of guilt was to be found in the dilemma of the 'pacifist-soldier.' In 1914 many men who had no real belief in the efficacy of war nevertheless became soldiers. During the war, however, their feelings against it were strengthened. At the same time they felt that they could not simply opt out and leave the struggle to others. Hence they were at war, not only with the enemy soldiers, but within their own souls. In addition to the dilemma of conscience there was the fact that a man could be signing his own death warrant if, once in the army, he refused to fight. Arthur Graeme West returned from leave to France in mid-August 1916, convinced that he no longer believed in war:

I go down in an hour to the pit again,
less willingly, more hating it than ever.

What I have thought and read lately...
makes no doubt very much if I do well to go. This is the bitterest part of it.

I do ill to go. I ought to fight
no more. But death, I suppose, is the penalty, and public opinion and possible misunderstanding...

38. Letter to a friend. 21 August 1916. The Diary of a Dead Officer, p. 54.
One assumes that a gesture from Vest would have been misunderstood, just as Sassoon’s gesture almost a year later was misunderstood and rejected:

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it....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....

Sassoon’s attempts to express his guilt publicly and to withdraw from the war at whatever private cost and ignominy were defeated. He came before a Medical Board and was sent to Craiglockhart Hospital for ‘shell-shocked’ officers. The irony of this is that he was adjudged to be suffering from war-neurosis because he did not repress

39. The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston, p. 496.
his thoughts on war, whereas the principal method of treatment within the hospital was designed to bring back into men's memories the thoughts which they had repressed. However, one must at the same time see the diagnosis on Sassoon as humane. He could have been shot!

It has surprised me that in the War Office Report on Shell-Shock no mention is made of guilt as a factor contributing to neurosis yet guilt was widely felt, certainly amongst the more articulate men and officers, and the depression which fuels it is an emotion as disturbing to the mental and spiritual balance as is fear.

Wilfred Owen, who was also sent to Craiglockhart Hospital as a neurasthenic, was another 'pacifist-soldier' whose creed was firmly formulated during his first term of duty in the trenches:

Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace; but never resort to arms.
Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill....⁴⁰

A few lines later in the same letter he asks "...am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?" Yet his conscience continued to be seared for his dilemma was inescapable. If he had followed his doctrine of "Passivity at any price" he might well have suffered dishonour and disgrace but his guilt would have been no less; he would have remembered...

...the sighs of men, that have no skill
To speak of their distress, no, nor the will! 41

and would have felt that he was shirking his duty in not going out to France again in order "to cry [his] outcry, playing [his] part." 42

Even a brief absence in comfort and safety from his own company made Edmund Blunden feel guilty. He was directed to go for several weeks on a signalling course; his comment was,

It was wonderful to be promised an exeat from war for weeks, but I saw once again

the distasteful process of separation from the battalion, and felt as usual the injustice of my own temporary escape while others who had seen and suffered more went on in the mud and muck.43

One can see here that the writer's mind was divided against itself: there was joy at his own escape but guilt that he had to leave his company, many of whom appeared to him to deserve escape more. The desire to get back to the company of one's fellow-victims appears to have been common. Lord Moran explained it thus:

When you are in the trenches a cushy wound, a blighty business, seems the most desirable thing in the world, but when you are at the base the time comes sooner or later when you get restless and in the end you are glad to return. The good fellow knows there is something wrong with men who cling to jobs behind, he feels he is becoming one of them, loses his peace of mind and sees at last that in war there is but one thing to do, then he

43. Undertones of War, p. 252.
goes and does it...Such a man however
may and often does loathe every minute
of this business.\textsuperscript{44}

Feelings of guilt are frequently expressed in the
poetry of the period, though, as in the other writings,
any expression of guilt for performing the necessary
actions of war is unusual. Sassoon deals with this
aspect of the subject in one terrible poem called "Remorse":

\begin{quote}
...he saw those Germans run,
Screaming for mercy among the stumps of trees:
Green-faced, they dodged and darted: there was one
Livid with terror, clutching at his knees...
Our chaps were sticking 'em like pigs... '0 hell!'
He thought - 'there's things in war one dare not tell
Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads
Of dying heroes and their deathless deeds.'\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

However, although the poem is called "Remorse" its emphasis
is more on the contrast between the two lives—life in the
trenches and life at home—and upon the gulf between them.

Ivor Gurney, in "The Target," also writes of remorse

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{44} The Anatomy of Courage, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{45} Collected Poems, p. 91.
\end{flushright}
for killing another but with less bitterness and with
less immediacy than there is in Sassoon's poem. However,
one can see in this poem Gurney's deep-rooted spiritual
bewilderment: his mother worries for him; perhaps the
German boy he killed was "the only son", yet there is
no guidance to help the poet through his guilt:

... God keeps still, and does not say
A word of guidance any way. 46

Death alone can solve his problems, can set his mother's
fears at rest and can allow him to make peace with the
German boy he killed, yet for Gurney death in battle did
not come; what came to him was madness—the ultimate result
of the continuous strain of guilt and fear upon a man who,
without doubt, had an individual susceptibility to mental
and nervous disturbance. And as with Owen, the guilt
is returned upon those responsible for the war, the "They"
of "What's In Time":

46. War's Embers, p. 50.
They gave me to Hell black torture as surely
As God — if He judge them — shall judge for it.
They tortured my last nerve, and tortured my wit. 47

The sense of responsibility for the war which led to
Aldington's heartcry in Death of a Hero, quoted above, pp. 237f.
was reproduced in his poetry. Never again could he know
"pure happiness": 48

I was happy.
It was enough not to be dead,
Not to be a black spongy mass of decay
Half-buried on the edge of a trench...

but a whisper disturbed his happiness,

'This happiness is not yours;
It is stolen from other men.
Coward! You have shirked your fate.' 49

Sassoon too reproduced in poetry his sense of guilt at the

47. Poems, p. 35.
49. "In the Palace Garden". Complete Poems, p. 160.
continuance of the war. His responsibility as an
officer weighed heavily upon him:

    Can they guess
    The secret burden that is always mine? —
    Pride in their courage; pity for their distress;
    And burning bitterness
    That I must take them to the accursed line.\(^{50}\)

As with Aldington, his pity and responsibility developed
into a sense of generalized guilt for the waste, futility
and loss of war:

    0 martyred youth and manhood overthrown,
    The burden of your wrongs is on my head.\(^{51}\)

Guilt was probably always stronger away from the trenches
than in them. Aldington finally escaped from the war
through being severely gassed and it was at home, playing
at love and grasping for happiness that guilt overcame him.
Sassoon, in England on sick leave, dreamed of his comrades
who had been killed and felt guilt that he had escaped
through a lesser sacrifice:

\(^{50}\) "The Dream." \textit{Collected Poems}, pp. 93f.
\(^{51}\) "Autumn" \textit{op. cit.}, p. 88.
Why are you here with all your watches ended?  From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line.

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 our blood?"

It is interesting to observe that the guilt which Owen expressed was generally of a different kind. It was more a grievance than a personal guilt—a guilt which he wished on to the people at home who "by choice [had] made themselves immune to pity." Unlike Aldington and Sassoon he was less ready to associate himself with this guilt. He did so, however, in two very powerful poems, "Strange Meeting" and "Mental Cases."

In the first of these a meeting in Hell with his German doppelfänger apparently brought to the poet an awareness of guilt and remorse that two men with the same hopes and aspirations, the same gifts, the same powers should destroy each other and the world's future because they happened to be born in different countries; there was indeed cause to


nourn "the undone years,/The hopelessness." It is significant that the pity and terror of war, the humanity and the courage are expressed by the dead German; it is a poem of universal brotherhood and cannot be read without involving the reader in a sense of guilt at "man's inhumanity to man." 55

Before discussing "Mental Cases" I should like to return to a consideration of 'shell-shock.' The most distressing effect of the strain of guilt and fear was the temporary madness or insanity which was the hallmark of the war neurosis:

His wild heart beats with painful sobs
his strain'd hands clench an ice-cold rifle
his aching jaws grip a hot parch'd tongue
his wide eyes search unconsciously.

He cannot shriek.

Bloody saliva
Dribbles down his shapeless jacket.

I saw him stab
and stab again
a well-killed Boche... 56

Most of the realist poets wrote about this kind of inconsequential lunacy, which was to then the outward sign of war neurosis. There is no doubt that most soldiers had seen men suffering from the kind of mental imbalance that Sassoon described in "Survivors." Written at Craiglockhart the poem is a very accurate and evocative description of some of his fellow-sufferers, showing both those suffering from hysterical symptoms—hysterical dumbness, hysterical lameness—and those suffering from anxiety neuroses, who experienced fearful dreams and were often haunted by guilt:

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'—
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder...

Yet there is a certain ambivalence in Sassoon's attitude here: "No doubt they'll soon get well...They'll soon forget..." The irony is obvious; They were the words of the sacrificers, not of the victims; but they must also have been the words of Dr. Rivers whom Sassoon admired and trusted, for the general summary of medical evidence in the War Office Enquiry into "Shell-Shock" asserted that

From the evidence before the Committee, they are of opinion that there is no justification for the popular belief that "shell-shock" was a direct cause of insanity, or that the service patients still in asylums were originally cases of "shell-shock" who have since become insane.58

None of the medical evidence in this Report suggested that permanent insanity could develop from "shell-shock," though it was acknowledged that many "shell-shock" cases suffered from temporary confusional insanity, which normally disappeared within a day or so, and in almost every case within two weeks.

58. p. 145.
The chronic cases were, in fact, seen to be suffering (perhaps simultaneously with some form of neurasthenia) from mental disorders which did not have their origins in war conditions, though symptoms may well have appeared through the stresses of war. We must assume that this evidence is probably true, but we must also realize that it was not evidence that was public knowledge. It seemed to the soldiers fighting in the war that many of their comrades had been driven mad by the strains and stresses of their military lives. That they would, in fact, recover, or, alternatively that their madness had its origins in causes other than war was in a way immaterial. The presence of madness was a fact:

I'm going crazy; I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns. 59

Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad. 60

...poor young Jim...
'E's wounded, killed, and pris'ner, all the lot,
The bloody lot all rolled in one, Jim's mad. 61
In a letter to his mother on 25 May 1918 Wilfred Owen mentioned his "terrific poem... 'The Deranged'." This poem became "Mental Cases". It is a clear statement of connection between guilt and insanity and, progressing further, between insanity and guilt. Though medical evidence might refute it, to sensitive men like Owen the connection seemed to be clear: guilt for the crimes of war could, and demonstrably did, drive men mad:

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?  
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,  
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,  
Daring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?  
Stroke on stroke of pain, - but what slow panic,  
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?  
Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms  
Misery swelters....

The description is realistic, horrible, and suggests far more convincingly than Sassoon's poem, "Survivors," quoted above, p. 250, that these mental cases will not recover sanity. And the cause of their madness is their guilt for all the cruelties and futilities of war:

- 254 -

These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter....

The chain of reaction does not end there, however, for guilt
is returned upon those who, by their very existence in time
of war, allowed war to occur:

...their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knots of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

The last two lines of the poem revert to the theme of
universal brotherhood, but it is a brotherhood in guilt,
involving all those who are not the "mental cases." It
was Man who "dealt them war and madness."
MESSAGES AND SIGNALS.

 Prefix Code Words Charge
 Office of Origin and Service Instructions

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Date.

TO 4th R. 3 4th L. 0.311.


Sender's Number. Day of Month. In reply to Number.

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Fire from 52nd Div. beginning.

AAA Hostilities will cease at.

1100 on Nov. 11th. A A A: Troops.

will stand fast on line reached.

at that hour which will be reported to this Office. A A A.

Defensive precautions will be maintained.

AAA There will be no intercourse of any description with the enemy.

AAA Acknowledge A A A. All concerned.

AAA Ends A A A. Acknowledge.

From 156th I. 4. 1st D. 5th.

Place

Time

The above may be forwarded as now corrected. Major.

Signature or Address or person authorized to endorse in his behalf.

*This line should be erased if not required.*
Epilogue

From those appalled and personal throes
Time will dissolve the pain, one knows;
And days when direful news was heard
Be indistinct, unreal, and blurred.

I can remember, as a tiny child, being taken to Church on Armistice Day. I can remember standing at eleven o'clock, the whole vast congregation, many of them dressed in black, standing around me silent, sad-looking, some of the women crying, the men looking solemn, whilst I with my brothers and sister scarcely dared breathe, so heavy, so intimidating was the silence. Then from somewhere the thunder of guns would be heard, the women would blow their noses, the men would cough and the whole congregation would shuffle a bit before a voice would command silence with the words of Laurence Binyon's "For The Fallen":

With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free....
They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them....

Then we would sit down and the Vicar would preach a sermon about the war and we would try not to be bored, but would try to sit still because we felt uncomfortable that so many grown-up people around us had been crying. Then the sermon would end and we would all stand up and sing as loudly and cheerfully as possible, the hymn "For all the saints". We would sing it cheerfully because the Vicar had told us that we should not be sad that so many 'clean young Englishmen' had been willing to lay down their lives for their country.
Then we would pour out of the church and go home to a cold lunch because no one had been at home to cook it.

It must have been like that every year until 1939.
In that year my father went to war for a second time in his life and Armistice Day became "Remembrance Day for those who died in two world wars."

* * * * *

1. Frederick Brereton (ed.). An Anthology of War Poems, pp. 28f.
11 November 1918. In France a Signals message told the troops that the war had come to an end:

Hostilities will cease at 1100 on Nov 11th. Troops will stand fast on line reached at that hour which will be reported to this Office. Defensive precautions will be maintained. There will be no intercourse of any description with the enemy.\(^2\)

At home the church bells rang, flags were waved and people flocked into the streets shouting and cheering. But a sour note creeps into almost all the accounts of Armistice Day by those who had actually fought in the war. Joy there certainly was; it was expressed in straightforward terms by Will Judy in his diary for 11 November 1918:

The war is ended; everybody is shouting in happiness. Hardships and dangers have gone. We can now come out of our holes in the ground and breathe the air like free men. Let them sign

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2. Transcript of original Signals message.
any terms of peace they wish; we want to be natural, life-loving human beings again.\(^3\)

The next day he was still full of the thoughts of peace:

The world seems changed. When we look into the sky or walk to the top of the hill, or stand on an open road, we have no fear; today we stand up, stretch our arms, look everywhere, and speak with happy voice.\(^4\)

Perhaps the fact that Judy was an American made his joy more exuberant than that of most Englishmen. America had experienced only nineteen months of war.

The long, forlorn, relentless trend
From larger day to huger night\(^5\)

had for the Americans been less long and correspondingly less forlorn and relentless.

\(^3\) A Soldier's Diary, p. 154.
\(^4\) op. cit., p. 155.
For most Englishmen rejoicing was hardly a part of the emotions they experienced on Armistice Day. "It is over," wrote Ralph Scott simply,

These last few days I have hardly dared to hope for it, and now that it has come I can hardly realise exactly what it means... 6

Frank Richards' main feelings were of gratitude that the war had come to an end and that he was not maimed, but his awareness of those who had suffered appears to preclude joy:

[I was] thankful that I was not blind, that I had my limbs, that I was not horribly disfigured and that I was not an inmate in a mental home like tens of thousands of poor men... 7

D. H. Bell also felt gratitude, but mingled with it were fears for the future and sadness about the past:

6. A Soldier's Diary, p. 189.

7. Old Soldiers Never Die, pp. 320f.
Thank God the end of the awful blind waste and brutality of war has come, and let us pray it may never return. Man prays to God, because he feels instinctively there is a power outside himself, yet the answer to such prayer depends on man himself. After this lesson is man too little-minded and forgetful to banish the things that cause war?

I am feeling rather ill and depressed, in spite of all the rejoicing around me; immeasurably relieved, glad to be alive and glad we have won, but tired and a little sad.  

In Siegfried's Journey Sassoon describes the shouting and flag-waving in London on Armistice Day and tells how he hated it and wanted to be alone, yet how some compulsion led him to go to an Armistice party with a friend and how he almost quarrelled with the loud-mouthed civilians there. Herbert Read too felt the need to get away from everyone:

When the Armistic came... I had no feelings, except possibly of self-congratulation.... There were misty fields around us, and perhaps a pealing bell to celebrate our victory. But my heart was numb and my mind dismayed: I turned to the fields and walked away from all human contacts.¹⁰

So much then, for the immediate reactions to the Armistice. But the First World War seemed to change the men who fought in it as the Second World War did not. In the period between the wars those who had fought, particularly in France, seemed not to recover normality:

...they had not come back the same men, Something had altered in them. They were subject to queer moods, queer tempers, fits of profound depression alternating with a restless desire for pleasure....Something seemed to have snapped in them, their will-power.¹¹

Writer after writer expressed the feeling of lassitude and

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¹⁰ The Contrary Experience, p. 219.
enervation which had overcome them. They had put all
their energies, all their efforts into war and now there
was nothing left:

I am weary and tired of life myself; a mere
shell of a man, without health or strength,
whose vitality was eaten out by the Flanders mud. 12

wrote Ralph Scott, almost two years after the war had ended.
Edmund Blunden saw his post-war self as no longer a sentient
being. All emotions, all relationships were exhausted in
France and though he was physically alive his real self
was "Dead as the men [he] loved" 13; only the past had life:

Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,
I sit in solitude and only hear
Long silent laughers, murmurings of dismay,
The lost intensities of hope and fear... 13

Sassoon too gave the impression of being played out physically
and spiritually. His vision is of a self left behind in
France:

I. N. Parsons. p. 176.
...I seem to write these words of
someone who never returned from France,
someone whose effort to succeed in that
final experience was finished when he
lay down in the sunken road and wondered
what he ought to say.14

Scott Fitzgerald, whose war service, it is true, was rather
brief, nevertheless blamed the spirit which pervaded the
world after the war for his own lack of vitality:

After all life hasn't much to offer
except youth and...every man I've met
who's been to war, that is this war,
seems to have lost youth and faith in
man.15

It seemed that the experience of war had completely drained
the men who returned from it.—"The war bled the world
white," wrote Wyndham Lewis.16 All their energies and
emotions had been used up. The simplicities of life were

15. Letter to his cousin, Mrs. Richard Taylor, 10 June 1927;
16. Blasting and Bombardiering, p. 18.
tinged with past memories and bound up with the experience
of war so that wherever their thoughts turned, war intervened:

We who are left, how shall we look again
Happily on the sun, or feel the rain,
Without remembering how they who went
Ungrudgingly, and spent
Their all for us, loved, too, the sun and rain?

A bird among the rain-wet lilac sings —
But we, how shall we turn to little things
And listen to the birds and winds and streams
Made holy by their dreams,
Nor feel the heart-break in the heart of things?\(^{17}\)

Men had been altered by what they had seen and done and
nothing in the peace offered them consolation. Many had a
presentiment, in some cases a conviction, that peace was a
mere interim, that the lessons of 1914-1918 would be
forgotten. Already in March 1919 Siegfried Sassoon was
asking,

Have you forgotten yet?...
For the world's events have rumbled on since
those gagged days...
But the past is just the same — and War's a
bloody scam...
Have you forgotten yet?...
Look down, and swear by the slain of the war that
you'll never forget....

...Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going
to happen again?'...

Have you forgotten yet?...
Look up, and swear by the green of the spring
that you'll never forget.18

Osbert Sitwell too appeared to have little faith in the idea
of lasting peace for he saw the "alchemists/who had converted
blood into gold"19 preparing to create a memorial for those
who had died in the war, and

"What more fitting memorial for the fallen
Than that their children
Should fall for the same cause?"...

And the children
Went....

When war broke out again, and in the midst of the
misery of the Battle of Dunkirk in May 1940, Herbert Read
looked back at the years which had intervened since the
Armistice and traced the world's inevitable drift back
into war. His words are both a summing-up and a warning:

One of the dazed and disinherited
I crawled out of that mess
with two medals and a gift of blood-money.
No visible wounds to lick—only a resolve
to tell the truth without rhetoric
the truth about war and about men
involved in the indignities of war.

But the world was tired and would forget
forget the pain and squalor
forget the hunger and dread
forget the cry of those who died in agony
and the unbearable silence of those who suddenly
as we talked
fell sniped
with mouth still open and uncomprehending eyes.

It is right to forget
sights the mind cannot accommodate
terror that cannot be described
experience that cannot be exorcised in thought.
It is natural for others to resent
the parade of wounds
eyes haunted with unrevealed sorrows
the unholy pride of sacrifice.

Hunan to relapse
into the old ways, to resume
the normality so patiently acquired
in days of peace.

And so we drifted twenty years
down the stream of time
feeling that such a storm
could not break again. 20

Although many writers have glanced at Wilfred Owen's ideas of poetic truth, no one has fully defined and documented them; no one has followed him through the profound mental and spiritual struggles in which he was led to reject the kind of poetry which he had once most admired; no one has succeeded in fully correlating his final concept of truth, arrived at through agony and disillusionment, with the concept found in his earlier poems. In this article I am trying to do just that.

Owen's early poetry appears to be far removed in spirit from his later work. As a young man he was a natural romantic. His poetic idol was Keats and his first poetic effusions reflect his idolatry. From the age of ten he believed in his vocation as a poet, and year by year he steeped his mind and thoughts in poetry, particularly romantic poetry, and especially that of Keats.

* Published in The University of Kansas City Review, xxv.2, Winter 1958.
although his constant references to and quotations from
Shelley suggest that Shelley too had a considerable place
in his affections. When he was seventeen he celebrated
the memory of Keats in a sonnet; at eighteen he went
on a pilgrimage to Keats' house in Teignmouth; at
nineteen the sight of a lock of Keats' hair moved him
once more to laudatory verse. Yet he himself was, above
all, a poet, interested in the art of poetry and in poetic
truth.

It may be expected that to the youthful admirer of
Keats the famous dictum, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"
would be his accepted creed. And there is every evidence
that this was indeed so, for the sensuous perception of
beauty is very strong in his juvenilia, and the rich,
somewhat lush imagery would have justified Yeats' gibes in
his letter of December 21, 1936, to Dorothy Wellesley about
the "sucked sugar-stick" in Owen's poetry, if Yeats had
had no opportunity to read the mature work of Owen's last
years.

The subjects which Owen chose for his early poetry were closely connected with the conventional, romantic idea of beauty—golden hair, autumn, perfect beauty; he wrote of these subjects with a richness of vocabulary which almost dazzles in the brightness of its colors and the sparkling resplendence of its imagery. One has only to read his sonnet on "Golden Hair":

This is more like the aureoles of Aurora
The leaves of flames, the flame of her corona.
Not Petrarch wore such coronals, nor Laura,
Nor yet his orange-trees by old Verona,
Nor gay gold fruits that yellow Barcelona.²

or the even more lush version of this sonnet in the British Museum³—or, among the same manuscripts, many other passages rich with the names of precious stones and bright colors—to realize how deeply Owen was impressed by the sheer sensuous beauty of language, and how he became carried away by what he once described as "language sweet as sobs."⁴

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4. "On My Songs," a cancelled poem among the B.M. MSS.
The idea of beauty which pervades this early poetry is a purely external one, finding its origin in physical sensations—principally in appeals to the eye or the ear. An excellent illustration of the receptiveness of Owen's mind to such appeals is the poem "From My Diary, July 1914" (p. 45), in which not only is his subject matter drawn from visual and aural impressions, but also the poem itself is given a visual pattern to enhance the rhythmic pattern and to emphasize the experimental use of half-rhyme:

Leaves
   Kissing by myriads in the shimmering trees.
Lives
   Wakening with wonder in the Pyrenees.
Birds
   Cheerily chirping in the early day.
Bards
   Singing of summer scything thro' the hay.

This poem with its stamp of immaturity and of conscious artistry was written a week or so before war broke out. At that time Owen was in France. He was twenty-one years old. For him the pleasure of such simple joys and beauties in life were still the truth and could be interpreted in poetry.
When war descended with terrible suddenness on Europe, Owen was in France. In England a great wave of war eagerness swept over the country: The Times for 5 August 1914 reported that the London crowds were "filled with the war spirit"; in December Ben Keeling was writing, "I may possibly live to think differently, but at the present moment, assuming this war had to come, I feel nothing but gratitude to the gods for sending it in my time." Bertrand Russell remembers that "average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war." But in France there was no excitement, only a grim determination to protect the country from the threat of the German army.

An American woman, resident in France, wrote home in a letter on August 10, 1914:

After we were certain, on the 4th of August, that war was being declared...a sort of stupor settled on us all...Day after day I watched the men of the commune on their way to join their classe. There was hardly an hour of the day that I did


not nod over the hedge to groups of stern, silent men, accompanied by their women and leading the children by the hand, taking the short cut to the station... There are no marching soldiers, no flying flags, no bands of music. It is the rising up of a Nation as one man.7

Wilfred Owen was immediately faced with the negation of beauty as he had seen it:

The cyclone of the pressure on Berlin
Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
Are all art's ensigns. Verse moans. Now begin
Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
The grain of earth's great autumn rots, down-hurled (p. 10).

The idyllic beauty of the Pyrenees was threatened with desecration. What had seemed the simple truths of life were not large enough to take in the threat of war.

When Owen returned to Franco in January 1917 as an officer attached to the 2nd Manchester Regiment, he was briefly moved

by the spirit of excitement which had seized nearly every young man going to war for the first time: "There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France," he wrote to his mother (p. 12), but this feeling was in no way a reflection of his poetic beliefs which were finally shattered by his first contact with trench warfare. A month after the letter to his mother quoted above, he was writing to her again, "I suppose I can endure cold and fatigue and the face-to-face death as well as another; but extra for me there is the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language... everything unnatural, broken, blasted" (p. 19). This was the new truth with which he had to come to terms, and for which he strove to find expression. "The passion of a boy cannot endure long on a modern battlefield especially when he arrives upon that battlefield with little notion of what he must expect," wrote Robert Nichols, and he continues: "...the boy—if he manages to survive long enough—grows old with terrible rapidity." In 1917 Wilfred Owen was not quite twenty-four years old, but

maturing "with terrible rapidity" he became convinced of the inadequacy of his former poetic creed to express contemporary experience. Amidst the physical ugliness and horror of the trenches he saw beauty and truth emerge as spiritual qualities. The ephemeral exterior was unimportant; it could be rough as "the hoarse oaths" which hid the soldiers' courage; it could be as silent as the steadfastness of sentries on duty (p. 85).

Having come to a new realization of truth, Owen was ruthless with his own poetry: sentimentalism could have no place in a world at war, and it seems probable that had he lived, there would have been little trace of the romantic and conventionally "poetic" in his work, for with the sureness of the true artist he was expunging everything that was not meaningful from his writing. His mother told how he asked her to burn a whole sackful of his work; the extant manuscripts are full of cancellations and corrections; manuscripts of many of the published poems show with what care he sharpened and made more exact the language that he used. In addition to all this he looked upon poetry with

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8 - Introduction to Anthology of War Poetry, 1914-1918
a new eye, with mockery for the "poetic" epithet and the
euphemistic metaphor, with irony for the subjects that
were usually the stuff of poetry: women, love, nature,
patriotism. To write romantically of war was to encourage
the prolongation of horror and ugliness, to belie the
reality.

He had not renounced the poetry of the past, but he
had come to believe that it could not be an adequate
expression for the contemporary scene. There was a whole
area of experience which had not been explored by earlier
poetry, for past poets had not comprehended the truths of
twentieth century warfare. Owen placed a constant
emphasis upon the perfection, or completeness, of the
experience afforded to him and his contemporaries. Absolute
happiness, absolute misery, absolute serenity, absolute
identification with nature, were within the grasp of all
men as they had never been before. In a letter of June 26,
1917 he wrote,

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 always a great
child. (p. 26)

Of Shelley he wrote to Siegfried Sassoon, "Serenity Shelley
never dreamed of crowns me" (p. 35), and again in his poem,
"A Terre," he refers with slight irony to Shelley's expression
of pantheism in the forty-second stanza of "Adonais":

"I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,"
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:
The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.
"Pushing up daisies" is their creed, you know. (p. 88)

War was making a mockery of Shelley's philosophy, and Owen
believed that the common man had gone beyond the experience
of the romantic poet. The true poet had to interpret things
afresh in the face of new and larger demands.
It was an effort to push the Keatsian romantic behind him; the old poetic phrases sprang uncalled to his mind; the conventional epithet was written before it could be recalled. Yet the experience of war had given to Wilfred Owen a new set of values; he knew the power of poetry, and as a poet he believed that he could and should express the horror and pity of war:

For leaning out last midnight on my sill
I heard the sighs of men, that have no skill
To speak of their distress, no, nor the will.

(p. 100)

The ordinary soldiers responded to the demands made upon them; it was for the poet to watch "their sufferings [and] speak of them as well as a pleader can" (p. 38). Above all, it was for those who had the skill, to tell the truth about war—not the simple factual truth of loss and gain, of victory and defeat, but the whole complex truth which would never find its way into official accounts or published history-books: "Even the best war-correspondent accounts are lies, like most regimental histories, in that they do not record all the truth," wrote Henry Williamson. For this reason Owen could not relax his vigilance: his subject

was to be "War, and the pity of War" (p. 40):

Not this week nor this month dare I lie down
In languor under lime trees or smooth smile.
Love must not kiss my face pale that is brown
(p. 102).

His reaction to conventional and romantic poetry was to take its subject-matter, its imagery, and its epithets, and use them to give added pungency to his own message.

Owen was "not concerned with poetry" (p. 40) until poetic values were readjusted. Earlier poetry with its partial picture had helped to misrepresent war, because it repeatedly displayed only one aspect of battle, and that an aspect that soon lost its appeal to men who had to endure days, weeks, or months in the trenches. As Donald Hankey affirmed, "It is easy to talk of glory and heroism when one is away from it, when memory has softened the gruesome details. But here, in the presence of the mutilated and tortured dead, one can only feel the horror and wickedness of war."10 Another soldier, writing in his diary on October 7, 1918, angrily attacked the romantic view: "The only way to stop war is to...cut out the rot about the

In his poetry Owen tried to "cut out the rot." Because poetry had used the romantic image and the euphemistic description, he adopted a deliberately "anti-poetic" attitude. Describing in a letter the unburied dead strewn about the battlefield, he wrote that they were "the most execrable sights on earth," and immediately added, "In poetry we call them the most glorious" (p. 20). This cynical strain is repeated in his poems. In "A Terre" the dying soldier says

My glorious ribbons? - Ripped from my own back
In scarlet shreds. (That's for your poetry book.)
(p. 87).

In "Insensibility," the most powerfully condemnatory of all war poems, he uses the poetic euphemism, "The front line withers," but this is followed by the realistic retort,

But they are troops who fade, not flowers
For poets' tearful fooling. (p. 63)

The "anti-poetic" element which was developed in Wilfred

Owen's work was the more forceful because he was conversant with the terms and themes of romantic poetry; these he interpreted in his own way. The "pathetic fallacy" of nature was exposed; the soldiers could "only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy" (p. 53). The sympathies they attributed to nature were in themselves anti-romantic, for they were alien sympathies: dawn "mass[ed] in the east her melancholy army" and, like the opposing forces, "Attack[ed] once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray" (p. 53); heaven was "the highway for a shell" (p. 86); the air "shudder[ed] black with snow" which was more deadly than the flights of bullets (p. 53); to the war's "Mental Cases,"

Sunlight see[ed] a blood-smear; night [came] blood-black;
Dawn [broke] open like a wound that bleeds afresh... (p. 72)

the "fatuous sunbeams" no longer awoke the dying (p. 73). Poetic imagery was reversed and nature served to illustrate metaphorically the truths of war: a soldier's death was described in terms of a sunset.
I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell,
Like a Sun, in his last deep hour;
Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,
Clouding, half gleam, half glower... (p. 106)

Bullets were "these clouds, these rains, these sleets of lead" (p. 69); gas was a "green sea" (p. 66); No Man's Land was "Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe" (p. 59).

With poetic terms, as such, Owen had no quarrel. It was the sentimental falsification of the searing truths of war experience that made him claim that "English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of [heroes]" (p. 40). He described as "the old Lie" the words "Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori" (p. 66); his irony lit upon the hackneyed poeticisms, "our undying dead" (p. 114), or "Death sooner than dishonour" (p. 71). His own poetry spoke not of heroes, but of suffering men,

You shall not come to think them well content
By any jest of mine. These men are worth
Your tears. You are not worth their merriment
(p. 86).

Owen's attitude was not a negative one, however; he was not a mere iconoclast, destroying the old values and putting
nothing in their place. Going beyond anti-poeticism he created a new concept of poetic truth and beauty. His emphasis upon the perfection of experience is important. Nothing could be complete truth or complete beauty which was unable to stand up to the test of all human experience. Love in the context of sexual desire—"the binding of fair lips," "the soft silk of eyes that look and long" (p. 85), the red lips, soft voice and pale hands of the beloved (p. 62)—all this was not sufficient for every human situation. And in the midst of war its failure was apparent. Fellowship was true when,

...wound with war's hard wire whose stakes
are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong. (p. 85)

Love was beautiful when a man was willing to sacrifice everything that others should live—that is, the "greater love"\textsuperscript{12} of the New Testament (p. 62). The ordinary shows of religion—"the church Christ" (p. 109), the candles, prayers and bells (p. 80)—were not enough. Religion was

\textsuperscript{12} In an article entitled, "Wilfred Owen's Greater Love" in Tulane Studies in English, Volume VI, 1956, Dr. Joseph Cohen discusses the implications of the "Greater Love" in Owen's war poetry.
true when it endured the experience of war; God could be seen through "the mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled" (p. 85). True Christianity was to be found, not among those who preached, but among those who fulfilled.

They who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate. (p. 106)

For Owen, poetic truth could not be separated from spiritual truth, for they were the same. He wrote anti-war poetry because truth as he comprehended it was unrelentingly at variance with the pursuance of war: "one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price!...Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill...Christ is literally in 'no man's land.' There men often hear His voice: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for a friend.' Is it spoken in English only and French? I do not believe so" (p. 25). He fought because he believed that, under conditions of war, it was only thus that he could fulfil the demands made by the "Greater Love"; yet it was with a "very seared conscience" (p. 25) that he went into battle. His second
return to France, in September, 1918, was the
determination of a profound spiritual dilemma, but it
was a dilemma that many sincere and sensitive men who
fought in that war had faced. Edmund Blunden, hating
war and despising warmongers, nevertheless carried with
him a burden of guilt when he was sent away from the front
to attend a signalling school some miles behind the line.
"I...felt as usual," he wrote, "the injustice of my own
temporary escape while others who had seen and suffered
more went on in the mud and muck."\(^\text{13}\) Siegfried Sassoon,
after making a lone declaration against the continuance of
war in July, 1917, and refusing to serve further in the
army, returned to duty of his own choice. So Owen knew
that only there, in France, was he "able to cry [his] outcry"
(p. 34), and express his beliefs in the "greater love" not
only in words but also in deeds. Sir Philip Gibbs\(^\text{14}\) had
written of the war in 1915, "More passionate than any other
emotion that has stirred me through life, is my conviction
that any man who has seen these things must, if he has any
gift of expression, and any human pity, dedicate his brain

\(^{13}\) Undertones of War (London, 1935; first published in 1928).
\(^{14}\) He received his title later.
and heart to the sacred duty of preventing another war like this.""\textsuperscript{15} Owen faithfully accomplished this duty until his death on November 4, 1918. What he had to say was uncongenial to men and women at home in England; it was not about the conventionally "heroic," but about the true heroes, those who love the "greater love" and "lay down their life," without hate. (p. 103). It was incompatible with "glory, honor, might, majesty, dominion, power" (p. 40), for it was the pity and futility, the truth—as it seemed to him—of war.

\textsuperscript{15} The Soul of the War (London, 1915), p. 359.
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