

THE COLLAPSE OF THE HEROIC TRADITION
IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ENGLISH WAR POETRY

by

KATHLEEN MAUREEN McARTHUR

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PREFACE

In the last two decades there has been a growing interest in the English poetry of the First World War. One of the products of this interest has been a great deal of literary criticism culminating in three major studies: by John H. Johnston in 1964; Bernard Bergonzi in 1965; and John Silkin in 1972. All of these critics have felt the need to look back to the past to establish the literary forebears of the trench poets. Johnston believes that the roots of war poetry are in the Germanic and Greek epics; Bergonzi that they are in the anti-heroic poetry of the Elizabethans; and Silkin, in the liberal, humanitarian poetry of the Romantics. Their approaches are valuable in giving new insight into the poetry of the First World War and helping to place it in an historical perspective, but their surveys seem inadequate and even misleading. There is, for instance, no epic war poetry in English literature, and so Johnston's criticism of the trench poets for failing to maintain epic standards seems unjust; and while it is true that Owen, Sassoon and Rosenberg's work proceeded from the same impulse that stimulated the humanitarian poetry of Shakespeare and the Romantic poets, neither Bergonzi nor Silkin recognizes that the dominant tradition in English war poetry, from the Battle of Maldon to the outbreak of the First World War,

was an heroic one, and that the poets of the Great War wrote largely in reaction to this tradition.

In order to show the origins and nature of the heroic tradition which the First World War poets inherited, the first four chapters of this dissertation are a survey, from the Old English period to the beginning of the twentieth century, of the attitudes to war revealed in English poetry, drama and romance. The second part is a study of the poetry written during and in response to the two World Wars and the Spanish Civil War. The crux of the thesis is the First World War poets' reaction to the debased form of the heroic tradition current in 1914. The great poets of this period progressed from an initial urge to communicate the true nature of modern warfare to the civilian public to a tragic vision of the individual and the race struggling against vast forces of destruction.

PART ONE

SURVEY OF THE HEROIC TRADITION IN ENGLISH POETRY,
DRAMA AND ROMANCE FROM THE ANGLO-SAXONS TO THE
BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

CHAPTER 1

OLD ENGLISH HEROIC POETRY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The term "heroic poetry" usually denotes that poetry which emanated from societies that held heroic standards of conduct. Such societies were organized on a military basis for military ends, and they therefore believed that a man's greatness lay in the action of war. The poetry that survives from these people is narrative poetry, but it is rarely about men of their own time. The reason for this is that they believed they were descended from a race of men who, like themselves, lived by fighting, but who far surpassed them in the strength and control of their bodies, in the boundless nature of their aspirations and in the unremitting valour and energy they flung into the realization of these aspirations. No contemporary warrior could provide the inspiration found in the brilliant lives of legendary heroes, and thus the poets, whose function was to inspire and entertain, turned to the past for their settings.

As entertainment, legend had great advantage over the contemporary scene, for it provided far more scope for the narrative and imaginative resources of the poet. Although heroes moved in what was assumed to be a real world, and the poet was careful to establish a sense of reality, the sanction of tradition and the distance in time between his world and the world of heroes enabled him to heighten the human qualities of the hero and the ordeals which tested these qualities. Thus Achilles' great power and strength are shown on numerous occasions, but never more so than when he decides to go back to battle to avenge Patroclus' death, and he roars his battle cry from the ramparts:

Three times over the rampart Achilles shouted his battle cry
 Three times Trojans and allies were sheer amazed and confounded
 There and then were destroyed twelve men, most noble of Trojans
 Mid their chariots and spears.¹

The mere sight of Achilles and the sound of his voice are enough to cause terror and destruction.

Beowulf exhibits his great powers of strength and endurance by swimming for five days and nights against Breca in a wild sea and, later, by hanging on relentlessly until he has ripped an arm from the monster, Grendel. In the early Medieval French epic, "The Song of Roland", Roland and Oliver show their strength and prowess in the war against the Saracens. They slice men in two, cut off heads with single strokes, and drive their spears through massive armour.

Strength, endurance and prowess in battle are important heroic qualities, and every hero has them to a marked degree, but the essence of their heroism is their pursuit of honour. Ostensibly they might fight for a country or a king, but primarily they are bound to the winning of glory for themselves. Roland's supreme moment is when he refuses to summon aid in the face of the huge Saracen army advancing towards him. Inevitably, he is fatally wounded, but his death is a glorious one, because he has died fighting courageously against tremendous odds. Beowulf's spurning of the weapons and armour pressed on him for his fight against Grendel is solely because this makes the fight doubly honourable. The same motives inspired Patroclus' magnificent, reckless refusal to retire from his single-handed fight against the Trojans. All these incidents

¹ S E Basset, ed., "The Iliad" chapter XVII, lines 225 - 231, The Poetry of Homer, (Berkeley 1938) p. 210.

illustrate how much greater was the desire for individual glory than the interests of the king for whom the hero fought. As C M Bowra says, the heroic spirit is:

. . . the reflection of men's desire to be in the last degree themselves, to satisfy their ambitions in lives of abundant adventure, to be greater than other men in their superior gifts and to be bound by no obligation except to do their utmost in valour and endurance.²

The narrative power of heroic poetry is not only due to the elevation of certain human qualities and to the display of heroic spirit. A great part lies in the remarkably objective and comprehensive way the heroes and their adventures are narrated. Heroic poetry creates its own world of the imagination, in which heroes are made to reveal their greatness through their actions and speeches, and not through any overt praise on the part of the poet. This objectivity is because the poet wished to delight rather than instruct his audience, and he could think of no better entertainment than the stories of great men and their great deeds. He therefore concentrated on his story, making it as direct and vivid as he could, without moralizing or commenting.

The relationship between fluid, warlike society and heroic poetry is a close one. When societies were on the move and lived by fighting, as the Greeks did at the beginning of their history, or as the Anglo-Saxons did when they moved from the continent to England, heroic poetry was a complete expression of the age. As the warrior was the focal point of such societies, the epic hero perfectly represented their hopes and aspirations.

²C M Bowra, ed., From Virgil to Milton, (London 1945) p. 12.

However, once life became more settled and more complex, and war became part of, not the whole of a man's life, heroic poetry began to change or to disappear.

In Greece, where highly organized city-states began to be established as early as the seventh century B.C., heroic poetry was rapidly superseded by other art forms - such as lyric verse, choral song, and eventually tragedy - that better expressed the more dramatic spirit and communal consciousness. Heroic poetry on Homeric themes did continue to be composed in a small way for centuries after Homer, but it is significant that it came from the outskirts of the Greek world, where the city-state organization was not so highly developed. What little there is shows that poets attempted to make old tales more agreeable to their more sophisticated audiences by elaborating both the language and the content.

The frequent Norse, Scottish and Irish raids that occurred throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, and the serious Danish invasions in the ninth century made it necessary for the Anglo-Saxons to be far more orientated towards war than the Greeks of the City-States. Of necessity society continued to be organized on the Germanic military system of the warrior protecting the weaker in return for loyalty; the king, like Hrothgar in "Beowulf," was the chief warrior. As one would expect, the heroic tradition continued to be strong, but the new, civilizing influence of the Church, the series of strong West-Saxon kings and the beginnings of a national consciousness did bring about some important changes in heroic poetry. The changes that occur are to the subject matter, form and style, but the heroic spirit remained strong.

The most obvious change that took place was that the Anglo-Saxons turned away from the old Germanic legends and began to write about contemporary events. This abandonment of traditional material suggests that the Anglo-Saxons were sufficiently transplanted to want a heroic poetry that was emphatically their own. Certainly this impression is strengthened by the patriotic ring of these lines from the tenth century battle poem, "Maldon":

Seaman's messenger, take word to thy master,
 Tell to thy people more hateful tiding
 That here stands a noble earl with his soldiers
 Who will dare to stand in defence of this land,
 Land of Aethelred, Lord and master,
 Its people and soil.³

and by the fact that another tenth century battle poem, "Brunanburgh", is an expression of national triumph. It is not concerned with the adventures of the West-Saxon king Aethelstan, but with the prowess of the nation as a whole. Aethelstan's bravery is certainly noticed, but he is regarded as the champion and representative of his army. The old English epics such as "Beowulf" were devoid of national sentiment; the interest was centred in one or more individual characters, and in the adventures that befell them.

A sense of nationalism may account for an unusual feature in "The Battle of Maldon". When Brynoth makes the fatal, but wholly heroic decision to allow the Danish invaders to cross the ford so that the fight would be on equal terms, the poet uses the word "ofermode" to describe his mood. Since the only possible translation of "ofermode" is "overbearing pride", his use of the word may be viewed as a veiled criticism of untrammelled heroic action which places honour above the

³ C M Bowra, trans, "The Battle of Maldon" lines 49-54, Heroic Poetry, 4th edition (New York 1966) p. 113.

needs of the country, and brings about the destruction of a whole army.⁴

In all other respects, this poem is a flawless example of heroic poetry and it shows how alive the true heroic spirit was in late Anglo-Saxon times. Brytnoth, in throwing away the advantage of his position so that the fight would be an honourable one, was acting in exactly the same way that Beowulf did in the fight against Grendel, or as Roland did when he refused to blow his horn to summon aid. When Brytnoth is killed, his men maintain his defiant spirit, and fight until all are cut down. Their heroic resistance and endurance are summed up in the words of the "Old Companion" as he calls for a last effort -

Will shall be harder, heart the bolder,
 Courage the more, as our might lessens.⁵

Another important change is in the contraction of the epic form.

Although only fragments of the major Anglo-Saxon heroic poems "Maldon" and "Brunanburgh" are extant, it is clear that, even in their whole state, neither had the length and comprehensive treatment of the epic.

The old English epic, like the Greek, created a complete world of its own, weaving such matters as getting up, going to bed, feasting, sailing and celebrating in between the more impressive, obviously heroic actions. The Anglo-Saxon poems concentrate on the purely heroic aspects of a single heroic event. One way of interpreting this loss of comprehensiveness is that it reflects the more diverse nature of life in later Anglo-Saxon times. War was a frequent occurrence, but it was no longer the whole of life, and this led to a corresponding specialization of subject matter in poetry.

⁴ John van der Westhuizen, Senior Lecturer English Department, U.C.T. 1970, made this point.

⁵ C M Bowra, Heroic Poetry, lines 312 - 313, p. 113.

The concentration of the epic form is to some extent carried over to the style. Compelling though the language of "Maldon and "Brunanburgh" is, it lacks the richness and variety of "Beowulf" and many of the other Old English epics. This difference in style is clearly illustrated by a comparison of their treatment of the traditional notion that eagles and ravens hover over the battlefield, waiting to devour the slain:

In "Beowulf": The wan raven

Fond over the fallen full of news,
To the eagle shall say how at the eating he sped
When he with the wolf harried the corpses. ⁶

In "Maldon": Clamour arose, ravens were circling
Eagles carrion-greedy; there was crying on earth. ⁷

While the treatment in "Beowulf" is richer and more leisurely, the hard, economical style of the lines from "Maldon" conveys the realism of the scene, as well as imparting a sense of immediacy and urgency.

"The Battle of Maldon" illustrates the first of a long series of changes in the original heroic epic standard that were to take place in the English heroic tradition. As long as the warrior was the vital unit of society, and as long as war was on a small enough scale to allow individual prowess and courage, whether of a single warrior or a small group, the poets, like the people for whom they composed, continued to view war from the old heroic standpoint of their predecessors.

We thus find in the Middle Ages, that because the feudal system is essentially a military system with the knight as unit, the Medieval

⁶ C M Bowra, trans, "Beowulf" lines 3025 - 8, Heroic Poetry, p. 562.

⁷ C M Bowra, trans, "Maldon" lines 106 - 8, Heroic Poetry, p. 562.

writers of the chansons de gestes and the early romances continue to regard war in much the same way as the Anglo-Saxon or epic poets. Like them, they are interested in war only in so far as it provides a testing ground for the heroic virtues of the hero. In many of the romances, as in some of the epics, war is dispensed with altogether, and the hero proves himself against bizarre adversaries. Dragons, giants and elves were particularly popular opponents. The chanson de geste and the romance are therefore like the epic and the Anglo-Saxon battle poem, a poetry of the hero and not a poetry of war.

So strong has been the influence of the later romances that one is accustomed to think that the chivalrous knight, the pattern of courtesy, loyalty, largesse and prowess, was the characteristic hero of the whole of the Middle Ages. In fact, nothing could be less chivalrous in the fifteenth century meaning of the word than the heroes of the chansons de geste and early romances from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. In their unrestricted and usually ruthless quest for honour, and in their immoderate demonstrations of prowess they are far more akin to the warrior than to the gentle, knightly heroes of the later Middle Ages.

The most extreme example of this type of hero is Raoul de Cambrai, hero of the chanson de geste of the same name. Having been awarded land to which he has no valid claim, Raoul embarks on a series of bloodthirsty battles with the rightful heirs. So unrestricted and merciless is his behaviour that he gradually alienates all his best followers, and even the rabble that are left are horrified when he attacks a nunnery, orders his tent to be pitched in a church and has his hawks mewed to the crucifix.

Eventually even his faithful vassal Bernier turns on him, and kills him in battle. Despite his chronicler's disapproval: "a man who cannot hold himself in check is good for nothing", he obviously delighted in Raoul's superb prowess and immense energy. This is conveyed by his immensely vivid descriptions of Raoul in battle, by his reiteration of "Raoul the count was no coward", and by his remarks on Raoul's death:

Then the soul of the gentle chevalier took its flight, may God receive it - if we dare pray on his behalf. ⁸

As Raoul was noticeably lacking in all noble qualities but prowess and courage, it is clear that the chronicler meant little more from his description "gentil chevalier" than that Raoul was a bold and brilliant warrior of high birth. In the early Middle Ages, the meaning of "chivalry" had advanced only a little beyond its original, simple meaning: the state of being a chevalier or a knight. To be termed chivalrous, a knight had, like Raoul, to be strong and courageous and have a rudimentary idea of fair play. He might not kill a man from behind, nor with a thrown javelin; before attacking he had to issue a challenge, and if a truce were made he had to respect it. In these elementary rules of warfare are the rudiments of the courtesy which, in a greatly expanded and complex form, was the essence, the sine qua non of the later Medieval hero.

An idea of how greatly the meaning of chivalry had widened by the fifteenth century is provided by another extreme of the Medieval hero, Chaucer's "verray, parfit gentil knyght" - a hero who, in his Christlike meekness, could not be more remote from the vaunting, blasphemous Raoul.

⁸J. Crossland, trans Raoul de Cambrai (Harvard 1928) p. 155.

His only likeness to Raoul and the old warrior heroes is his great physical courage and brilliant achievement in war, but even these are tempered by the fact that he fought primarily to rid the Holy Land of the infidel, and thus not solely for his own honour. With his modest bearing, well-worn but serviceable clothes, and perfect, gentle manners - "He never yet no vileynye ne sayde/ In al his life unto no maner wight"⁹ - the knight is the epitome of courtesy in the late Medieval sense. By this time, courtesy had become an elaborate code, which governed the knight's behaviour on and off the battlefield. It laid down rules on dress, speech, the handling of horses and weapons, the entertainment and wooing of women, and on the correct procedures of fighting. But, as Eugene Waith says: "underlying this concern with courtesy is the conviction that it is the proper expression of man's social nature and hence a step toward the achievement of the ideal humanity to which the knight must aspire".¹⁰ The Christlike knight is Chaucer's expression of this ideal.

In addition to prowess, honour and courtesy, Chaucer's knight "loved trouthe and fredom", his equivalents of the better-known French terms "louatie" and "largesse". Loyalty, of course, was an integral virtue of the Germanic military system, as Beowulf's and Brynoth's retainers so amply demonstrated. In the later Middle Ages loyalty had lost none of its importance, but, with the introduction of courtly love, one finds that it often appears as devotion to the liege lady. Chaucer's knight, however, unlike Palamon and Arcite, the loyal rival lovers of his tale, gave expression

⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales, The Prologue* line 68-69 The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd. ed. (London 1968) p. 18.

¹⁰ Eugene Waith, Ideas of Greatness (London 1971) p. 12.

of his loyalty by fighting for his lord - "Ful worthy was he in his lordes ware". No direct illustration is given of the knight's "freedom", although his fustian "gypon" and habergon "al besmotered" suggest that he was entirely free from avarice, which was one aspect of this widely connotative virtue. Originally it meant only the lord's generous giving of rewards in return for faithful military service, but by the fourteenth century it had come to denote a generosity of mind as well as of the purse. Thus the exercise of pity, and indifference to material gain are other expressions of largesse.

The heroes of Romance are not as perfect as Chaucer's knight, although, in their deep respect for the elaborate conventions of chivalry, they resemble him much more than they do Raoul. They are therefore far more restricted and less individual heroes than their Germanic or Greek counterparts. For the modern reader, much of the interest comes from the occasions on which they transgress the bounds of their codes, but as such episodes are few, it seems that the later Medieval reader enjoyed descriptions of orthodox chivalric action. Moreover, in a society that survived through a particularly delicate balance of hierarchies, unfettered individualism of the old heroic type was extremely dangerous. The constant inter-baronial strife, and the occasional rebellion of baron against king provided more than enough real-life illustration for the Medieval court of the consequences of such individualism; it was therefore not politic for the writer of romance, who wrote predominantly for the court, to encourage it.

A compensation to the romance writers for the sameness of their heroes was that they were not bound by tradition or realism as the heroic poets were. Providing they kept the hero within the framework of chivalric virtues, they might give free rein to their fancy and ingenuity in inventing predicaments

that tested these virtues. An example of this ingenuity is found in the episode from the romance of Richard Coeur de Lion, which describes how Richard earned his title. After capturing Richard, his enemies try to kill him by admitting a fierce and ravenous lion to his cell. Richard meets the lion with a tremendous kick, and as the animal opens its jaws in a howl of pain, he thrusts his arm down the lion's throat and tears out its heart. Then, taking the still-warm heart, he goes into the hall, dips it into the salt and eats it, in front of the astonished court.

In the delightful romance "Gawain and the Green Knight", the poet devises an amusing way of testing Gawain's courtesy. When Gawain stays at a remote castle on his way to meet the Green Knight, he finds he has to contend with the amorous advances of the host's beautiful and charming wife. This is a stringent test for Gawain, as, out of loyalty to the lord of the castle, to whom he has sworn fidelity, he must refuse her, but at the same time the rules of courtesy demand that he must do so without insulting her. How he achieves this is best shown by the poet himself:

"God love you, gracious lady'." said Gawain then;
 "It is a pleasure and a peerless joy
 That one so worthy as you would willingly come
 And take the time and trouble to talk with your knight
 And content you with his company - it comforts my heart.
 But to take to myself the task of telling of love,
 And touch upon its texts, and treat of its themes
 To one that, I know well, wields more power
 In that art, by a half, than a hundred such
 As I am where I live, or am like to become,
 It were folly, fair dame, in the first degree!"¹¹

The extract indicates that love occupied an important place in the later romances, but it would be wrong to conclude that love supplanted heroic activity as the main ingredient of romance. In the English romances love,

¹¹ Marie Borroff, trans., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, new verse translation, lines 1535 -1545 (London 1968) p. 32.

when it appears, is either incidental or is used as the motivating force for the martial activities of the hero. This emphasis on martial activity in the romance is a reflection of the training of the upper classes in the Middle Ages, a training which, despite the civilizing influences of the gentler chivalric virtues, was a training in violence. Soldiering was still the hallmark of a gentleman and the means of gaining honour and fame.

So far the attitude to war and the hero in the Middle Ages has been gauged only from the romances. As the romances deal for the most part with mythical heroes set against mythical backgrounds, the question of how far they reflect attitudes to real war is raised. Were the chivalric ideals they present maintained when men were involved in wars as prolonged and as bloody as those fought between England and France in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and did all the classes share the same outlook on war?

The best indication of how the upper classes regarded war in the late Middle Ages comes from the chronicles of Jean Froissart, which he wrote in the period from 1337 - 1404, a period of almost continuous warfare for England, against France and against Scotland. Froissart came to England as secretary to Phillipa of Hainault when she married Edward III in 1361. As a member of the court he had splendid opportunities, of which he made full use, to gather material for his chronicles. That Froissart's Chronicles were an accurate reflection of the aristocratic outlook on war is proved by their immense popularity at the English court. "The great and noble Queen", he tells us, received his first volume "with great joy" and rewarded him generously. Thereafter, this and his following volumes were copied and

recopied in scores of manuscripts - a sure sign of the esteem in which his work was held. Almost a hundred years later, they were among the first books to be printed by Caxton, and in 1523, Lord Berner made his famous translation "at the high commandment of his most redoubted sovereign Lord, King Henry VIII".

Froissart's chronicles present a very readable and immediate account of the first half of the Hundred Years' War and Edward III's Scottish wars, but while his vivid style seems to have the effect of placing the reader in the midst of all the turmoil and excitement of a Medieval battle, his view is an essentially limited and aristocratic one. Froissart, it is true, does note some of the grim facts of war - the murder, rape and pillaging that came in the train of great battles - but this side of war is never dwelt upon. The passage most often cited to prove that Froissart had a broad view of war, encompassing both its horrors and its glories is his account of the assault on Durham.

In the mean season, the Scots assaulted the city of Durham with engines and other instruments so fiercely that they within could not defend themselves, but the city was won by force and robbed and clean burnt, and all manner of people put to death without mercy, men, women, and children, monks, priests and canons so that there abode alive no manner of person, house, nor church, but it was destroyed. The which was a great pity so to destroy Christian blood and the churches of God, wherein that God was honoured and served.¹²

The terse, extremely factual reporting of this incident hardly suggests that Froissart was moved beyond the conventional expression of pity with which he ends this account, and it must be noted too, that passages such as this form a very small fraction of the whole work. Froissart's

¹² Lord Berner, trans Froissart's Chronicles ed. William Anderson (London 1963) p. 49 - 50.

concern is to celebrate and promote chivalry, and this is shown by the emphasis he gives to chivalric behaviour in his descriptions of battles. So vividly does he bring to life the pageantry and movement of clashes between heavily armed, magnificently horsed knights, that it is not immediately apparent that his description is a highly selective one that almost completely excludes the common soldier and the grimmer aspects of war.

Both his style and technique are clearly illustrated in his account of the Battle of Poitiers, which was fought in 1356. In his account, he focusses his attention on the man who, more than any other, was an exemplar of chivalry, Lord James Audley. It is easy to see why Audley should have been so favoured, for in addition to exhibiting great prowess "he fought always in the chief of the battle and there did marvels in arms", he was quite as loyal, self-effacing and contemptuous of material gain as Chaucer's "verray, parfit, gentil knyght" - the type of humble, courteous hero that was much in vogue in the fourteenth century.

His opening request to the Black Prince that he might be granted the opportunity to fulfil a noble vow sets the tone of his conduct on the battlefield: "Sir, I have served always truly my lord your father and shall do as long as I live. I say this because I made once a vow that the first battle that either the king, your father or any of his children should be at, how that I would be one of the first setters on, or else to die in the pain - Therefore, I require your Grace, as in reward for any service that I did to the King, your father or to you, that you will give me licence to depart from you and set myself thereas I may accomplish my vow."¹³

¹³ Lord Berner, trans Froissart's Chronicles, p. 123.

In the detailed account that follows of the battle, Froissart describes the devastating effect of the English archers on the French cavalry: "They entered a - horseback into the way where the great hedges were on both sides set full of archers. As soon as the men of arms entered, the archers began to shoot on both sides and did stay and hurt horses and knights, so that the horses when they felt the sharp arrows they would in no wise go forward, but drew a back and flung and took on so fiercely, that they many of them fell on their masters so that for press they could not rise again."¹⁴

But it is to the heroic figure of Lord James Audley, fighting in the vanguard, as befitting a noble knight, that Froissart returns again and again. So determined was he to use all his energy in fighting that he left lesser men to take prisoner the high-born Frenchmen he defeated, and presumably to collect their ransoms as well:

The Lord James of Audley with his four squires was in the front of battle and by great prowess he came and fought with Sir Arnold d'Audreham under his own banner and there they fought long together and Sir Arnold was sore handled . . . And there was the Lord Arnold d'Audreham taken prisoner by other men than Sir James Audley or his four squires, for that day he never took prisoners, but always fought and went on his enemies.¹⁵

Despite being severely wounded in his body and face "as long as breath served him, he fought always in the chief of battle" until "at last at the end of the battle his four squires took and brought him out of the field and laid him under a hedge side for to refresh him and bound up his wounds as well as they could".

What is striking about Froissart's account of the end of the battle is the importance he attaches to courtesy and magnanimity. He spends

¹⁴ Lord Berner, trans Froissart's Chronicles, p. 122.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 123.

as many pages describing the gracious behaviour of the Black Prince in rewarding Audley and honouring the captured French King as he does in describing the battle itself. Of the English archers, who even from his cursory mention of them we gather were the decisive factor in the battle, he says no more. This, of course, is not surprising. The long-bowman had proved himself too useful in the English Medieval army to be actually maligned in English literature, but it is likely that Froissart and his aristocratic readers silently shared the sentiments of the French poet, Girard de Vienne who angrily wrote:

Cent dehaus ait qui archiers fu premier:
il fu couars, il n'osoit approchier.¹⁶

A hundred curses on the man who was first an archer; he was a coward, he was afraid to close with the enemy.

Froissart's way of handling features that proved that war was not wholly a noble game played according to the heroic rules of chivalry is carefully to avoid any involvement in them. The achievement of the English archers at Poitiers is thus left unsung, and the sufferings of the people of Durham are passed over as quickly as possible. In this way he could preserve the illusion that the Hundred Years War was a spectacle of honour identical to the fictional representations of war that we find in the romances,

As one would expect, the popular poets of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did not share the same reverence for chivalric ceremony as the court poets and writers when they wrote about war. Nevertheless, when the subject is foreign war as opposed to civil war, they come out rousing in favour of war, cheering on their army and heaping abuse on

¹⁶ F.S. Shears, Froissart, Chronicler and Poet, (London 1930) p. 157.

the enemy, but their reasons for favouring war are not always what one anticipates. In a poem addressed to King Henry V on the death of his father in 1413, the poet Thomas of Elmham urges the King to go to war. In explanation of this, he says that when the king is at home the warring nobility commit all sorts of violence and oppression, from which his subjects are released when the knights are led off to war. The King would weep, he says, if he knew how sorrowful the people are when the monarch returns from the wars.

Other reasons too, may lie behind the enthusiastic attitude to war found in popular medieval verse. V.J. Scattergood, in his book "Politics and Poetry of the Fifteenth Century", says that political verse was strictly controlled throughout the Middle Ages, and anybody unwise enough to write verses against the regime was liable to severe punishment. In 1124 Henry I condemned Lucas de la Barre to be deprived of his sight because he had written verses that made the King the laughing stock of his enemies. In 1377, the Bishop of Bangor threatened to excommunicate the writers of lampoons against John of Gaunt, and in 1456 John Holton was hanged, drawn and quartered for his verses against the King. Considering that the foreign policy of the Plantagenet and Lancastrian Kings was invariably warlike, it is likely that any anti-war verse was fiercely suppressed in the Middle Ages.

Typical of popular war verse of the fourteenth century is the song written by Lawrence Minot on Edward III's successful Normandy campaign in 1346, which culminated in the famous battle of Crécy. In these two verses, Minot boasts of the hearty knocks the English gave the French,

laughs at their discomfiture, and gleefully reviles King Francis and Philip of Valois, whom he brands as a girl.

Quite ertou, that wele we know,
Of catell and of drewris dere.
Therefore lies thi hert ful law,
That are was blith als brid on brere.
Inglis men sall zit to zere
Knok thi palet or thou pas,
And mak the polled like a frere;
And zit es Inglan als it was.

Was thou noght, Franceis with thi wapin
Bitwixen Cressy and Abvyle;
Whare thi felaws lien and gapin
For all thaire treget and thaire gile?
Bioschoppes war thare in that while
That songen all with outen stole.
Philip the Valas was a file,
He fled and durst not tak his dole. ¹⁷

We know well that you have been relieved of your property and your riches and therefore your heart, which before was as happy as bird on a briar, is now very low. Yet still this year, will Englishmen knock your headpiece from your head and make you shaven like a friar. And yet England remains as it was.

Were you not there Francis in all your battle array between Cressy and Abbeville? At that place where your men, for all their deceit and guile, lay and gazed at the sky? There were bishops there at that time that sang mass without their stoles. Philip the Valois was a worthless fellow. He fled and could not face his grief.

Nowadays, Minot's crude sarcasm and heavy scorn of the defeated enemy is considered distasteful, but in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries his verses were evidently much to the people's liking, for they were published in 1352, in 1392 and in 1415.

Whereas Froissart lovingly records instances of chivalric behaviour in the minutest detail, details of a more sensational nature are found in popular poetry. John Page, who was present at the siege of Rouen in 1419,

¹⁷ Thomas Wright, ed., Political Poems and Songs relating to English History from the Accession of Edward III to that of Richard III, II (London 1859) p. 78 - 79.

gives his readers a most graphic recital of the horrors of the siege, to the extent of informing them of the prices paid for animals by the starving people:

They etete the doggys, they ete cattys;
 They ete mysse, horse and rattys.
 For an hors quarter, lene or fatte,
 At Cs hyt was atte.
 A horsse hedde for halfe a pound;
 A dogge for e some mony round;
 For XXXd went a ratte
 For ij noblys went a catte. 18

They ate the dogs, cats, mice, horses and rats. A horse's hind-quarters lean or fat was valued at a hundred shillings. A horse's head cost half a pound and a dog went for the same round money, a rat cost thirty pence and a cat two nobles.

John Page is also notable for the genuine pity he expresses for the dying people of Rouen in this stark poetry:

Moche of the folke that were thereyn,
 They were but bonys and bare skyn,
 With holowe yeen and vysage sharpe,
 Unnethe they might brethe or carpe;
 With wan colour as the lede,
 Unlyke to lyvys men but unto dede. 19

Many of the folk that were in there were but bones and bare skin, with hollow eyes and gaunt faces. They could speak or breathe only with difficulty. With their colour as pale as lead, they seemed more like dead men than living ones.

Although this expression of humanity comes as a welcome relief to the excessive warmongering of the other popular poets and the too idealistic view of war expressed by the court writers, John Page certainly does not condemn war. He is tremendously proud to be an Englishman fighting under a king he considers to be "Of alle worschyppe" the pattern

¹⁸ John Page, "The Siege of Rouen," in Collections of a London Citizen. Camden Society 1859, ed. J Gairdner, p. 19.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 30.

of knighthood in all that he does, and although he has compassion for the victims, on the whole he supports King Henry's view that the people had brought their troubles on themselves:

I putte them not there, and þat wote ye
Nothyr hyt was not mine ordynaunce.

because they had denied him rightful possession of the city:

Ye have offended me with mysse,
And fro me i-kepte my cytte
That ys myn herrytage so fre,
And ye shalle be my lege men.²⁰

I did not put them there as you know and neither was it (their plight) by my arrangement.

You have offended me with your injurious behaviour and you have kept my city, my noble heritage from me. You will be my liege men.

The Wars of the Roses, which took the form of sporadic periods of bitter violence punctuated by periods of peace and stability during the years 1455 to 1485, stimulated a copious amount of verse. What chiefly concerned writers was the alarming prospect of Englishmen fighting Englishmen, but both the Lancastrian and Yorkist supporters used verse as propaganda. The verse of this period may thus be divided into that which voices a general hatred for war, and partisan verse aimed at discrediting the opposing side.

What is most striking about this verse is the lessening of the heroic spirit. Once war was transferred onto home soil it lost much of its chivalric appeal and its glamour and became a bitter, ugly experience. As in the great civil war of the seventeenth century, the propaganda poets make their appeal more by condemning the wickedness of the enemy who had made war necessary than by celebrating the military glories of their side.

²⁰

John Page, "The Siege of Rouen", p. 30.

Another feature of this verse, which makes it resemble the verse of the Civil War, is that the dividing line between court poetry and popular verse becomes blurred. Under the stress of the times, the court writers recognized the need to speak to a large public in simple, explicit language that would strike home quickly to men's minds.

One of the most vivid descriptions of the lawlessness and misery that civil war brings comes from the conclusion of John Hardyng's Chronicle, written after the first Battle of St. Albans in 1455:

In every shire with lakkes and Salades clere
 Myssereule doth ryse and maketh neyghbours werre;
 The wayker gothe benethe as ofte ys sene,
 The myghtyest his quarell wyll preferre,
 That pore mennes cause er putte on bakke full ferr;
 Which thugh the pese and lawe wele conserued
 Myght bene amende, and thanke of god deserved.

They kyll your men alway one by one,
 And who say ought he shall be bette doutlesse;
 For in your Rome Justyse of pese bene none
 That darr ought now the contekours oppresse.
 Such sekenesse now hath take thaym and accesse,
 That wyll nocht wytte of Ryot ne debate,
 So comon is it now in eche estate.²¹

In every shire, clad in jackets and bright helmets, Misrule arises and makes war on neighbours. The weaker goes under, as is often seen and the mightiest carries on his quarrel. The poor man's cause is put back, which if peace and law were maintained might be changed, and the mercy of God enjoyed. They kill men, stealthily (one by one) and any one who protests is without doubt beaten up. Even in your Rome, there would be no justice of peace that dare in any way now stand up to these trouble-makers. Such sickness now has overtaken the justices, such an attack of fever, that they close their ears to any rioting or quarrelling, so common are these maladies in every estate.

How greatly the people hated civil war can also be gauged from the enormous relief and thankfulness expressed in a poem that celebrates the

²¹ C.L. Kingsford, ed., Extracts from the First Version of Hardyng's Chronicles (London 1912) p. 749 - 750.

reconciliation that took place between the Yorkists and the Lancastrians
in March 1458:

For love hathe underlaide wratheful venjaunce,
Rejoise, Anglonde, our lordes acorded to be. ²²

For love has taken the place of wrathful vengeance. Rejoice
England, our lords are in accord.

There is some incidental pathos in this poem, because the reconciliation
he acclaims so joyously lasted only five short months; but what is interesting
is that in the next and following verses his thoughts turn to a complacent
contemplation of foreign war.

Our enemyes quaken and dreden ful sore
That peas is made wher was division. ²³

Our enemies quake and are sorely in dread that peace is made where
there was division.

and more explicitly:

France and Britayn repent shul thei;
For the bargayn shul thei abyee ful dere. ²⁴

France and Brittany shall repent; for the bargain shall they pay full
dearly.

Lines such as these show how separated in men's minds were the
issues of foreign and civil war. The experience of war in England might
provoke genuine pity for the dead and the wounded, as in these lines from
a poem on the Battle of Barnet, fought in 1471:

Sum hurte, sum slayn, sum cryinge "Alas":
Gretter multitude than I can tell.

²²R.H. Robbins, ed., Historical Poems of the Fourteenth & Fifteenth Centuries, (New York 1959) p. 79.

²³Ibid, p. 80.

²⁴Ibid, p. 80.

Sum waloying in blood, sum pale, sum wan
 Sum sekying thayre frendis in care and in wo. 25

However, a man's greatness was still largely measured in terms of his foreign military achievements. Thus, when Edward IV died suddenly in 1483, he is portrayed as a great warrior.

Wher is this Prince that conquered his right
 Within Ingland, master of all his ffoon;
 And after ffraunce, be very force and myght,
 Without stroke and afterward cam hoom;
 Made Scotland to yelde, and Berwyk wan he from. 26

Where is this prince that won his rightful position in England and became master of all his enemies? And who afterwards became a force and power in France without fighting a stroke; and who after that came home; who made Scotland yield and give up Berwick to him?

Strictly speaking Edward IV can hardly be said to have "conquered" France, since the sight of the large, well-equipped army that he took to France in 1475 was enough to make Louis XI settle for an immediate and, for the English, a highly lucrative peace. His success in Scotland was entirely due to Richard of Gloucester; but, clearly, it was as a military hero that the people wanted to remember him. He is thus variously described in the poem as "the worthiest and dowthiest knight", "the well of knyghtehood", "the lode sterre" of all earthly princes and "the lanterne and lighte" of his people, and above comparison with the heroes of history and romance:

In gestis, in romansis, in Chronicles nygh and ferre
 Well knowen it is, þer can no man it deferre,
 Pereless he was . . . 27

In stories, in romances, in chronicles far and wide, it is well known, that no man can set it aside, that he was without equal.

²⁶R.H. Robbins, ed., "The Death of Edward" in Historical Poems, p. 42.

²⁷Ibid, p. 112.

The impetus to produce poetry seems to have diminished in the final stages of the Wars of the Roses; probably because, as these lines from a poem by George Ashby suggest, men were heartily sickened by the nobility and their incessant wars:

There hath be in late daies right grete change
 Of high estates and grete division,
 Right meruelous, wonderful and eke strange
 To myche folke unportable punicion,
 Sorourful, paineful and tribulacion
 Whiche might have be eschewed. ²⁸

There have been, in recent times, many great changes in the upper classes, as well as great division amongst them. It is all marvellous, wonderful and also strange, but to many people it has brought unbearable, sorrowful and painful punishment and trouble, all of which might have been avoided.

Even Henry VII's momentous victory at Bosworth in 1485 went uncelebrated in contemporary verse, although Henry more than made up for this oversight once he was firmly on the throne by commissioning poets to write eulogies to himself to be sung in every town. Like his predecessors too, he made full use of verse propaganda to discredit his numerous enemies, and thus continued the use of poetry as a political weapon into Tudor times.

The long period surveyed in this chapter, stretching from the Anglo-Saxons to the end of the Middle Ages, represents the height of the heroic tradition in English literature. It has been seen that the heroic ideals which governed the lives of the Anglo-Saxon nobility, as those of the Ancient Greeks before them, were both modified and extended in accordance with the needs of a more settled and more sophisticated society - the principal change being to curb the individuality of the warrior.

²⁸ Mary Bateson, ed., George Ashby's Poems, (London 1899) p. 169.

We can now see that chivalry, the modified and extended heroic code of the Middle Ages, presented a set of ideals that men rarely managed to approach in their lives, either at home or on the battlefield. Nevertheless, however unchivalric a man's behaviour might be in reality, every nobleman paid homage to chivalry and believed that the world was ruled by it.

Chroniclers, court poets and writers of romance thus shaped and selected their material so that it would conform with the chivalric ideal. Their purpose was, as Froissart makes explicit, "to record the great marvels and fine feats of arms that have come to pass because of the great wars".²⁹

The poets who wrote for a wider public than the court, such as Lawrence Minot and John Page, did permit a glimpse at the seamy side of war lacking in courtly literature, but there is no suggestion in their poems that they disapproved of war. Indeed, their tendency to regard war as a hearty fight on a huge scale differs in no essential way from the nobility's view of war as a chivalric tournament. During the Wars of the Roses, both the popular poets and the writers of the court protested strongly against the war, but it becomes clear from the eagerness with which they lauded Edward IV's campaign in Scotland and France, that there was no genuine protest against war as such, merely an understandable dislike of having their lives disrupted. Men's belief that war was primarily an opportunity to exercise the chivalric virtues thus came out of the Middle Ages unchallenged. So powerful was this belief that it survived long after the feudal system had collapsed, and the ideals of honour, discipline and courtesy continued to be an inspirational force on the battlefield and to poets until the twentieth century.

²⁹ Lord Berner, Froissart's Chronicles, p. 7.

CHAPTER 2

THE TUDOR PERIOD

During the Middle Ages, the social organisation and mode of warfare had been ideal for the maintenance of the heroic tradition in English literature. English Medieval society was far more complex than the simple Military society of early Anglo-Saxon times, but the upper classes still retained their military function and held their land by promising to fight for their lord in time of war. Chivalry, the code which dominated and directed their lives, was primarily a military code which was intended to develop the military virtues of prowess, honour, courage and courtesy, and, until the end of the fifteenth century, the nature of warfare was such that it provided ample opportunity for the knight to exercise these virtues. Although the most telling single factor in the English victories of Crécy, Poitiers and Agincourt was the superb archery of the English yeomen, Medieval wars were, at least in outward appearance, enormous tournaments between heavily-armed knights. Moreover, the military organization was fluid enough and battles were sufficiently small for the performance of an individual knight to win the acclaim of the whole army and to influence the outcome of the battle.

By the end of the fifteenth century, the heyday of the knight was over. The disastrous closing stages of the Hundred Years' War and the domestic anarchy brought about by the Wars of the Roses set in motion political, social and economic changes that challenged the exclusive power of the upper classes and finally brought an end to the feudal system in England. The system that eventually replaced it was the strong National State of the Tudors, that had no place for the knight as a major political force. That this should have happened

was inevitable. Although the achievement of the yeomen archers in the Hundred Years' War was determinedly played down by Chroniclers and court poets, the commanders of the English armies were fully aware of their military importance. To an increasing extent, therefore, the heavily-armed, mounted knights were kept at the rear and battles were won by the skilful deployment of archers and by elaborate siege operations rather than by the ponderous charges of knights. The moment the knight began to lose his exclusive military and protective function he began to lose, in the old sense, his *raison d'être* in society.

One would therefore expect that Chivalry and the Romance, its chief literary expression, would disappear once the military function of the knight declined. In fact, just the opposite happened. Partly because the upheavals of the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of the Roses made the upper classes look for guidance in the values of the past, and partly because they strongly resisted all social changes that challenged the exclusiveness of their estate, there was a tremendous upsurge in chivalry at the end of the fifteenth century. Far from disappearing, the Romance, as well as other works which promoted chivalric ideals, proliferated; as much of this literature reveals, it was chivalry with a different accent. Even in the reign of Henry VII, it is clear that chivalric terminology was acquiring a new semantic content. Prowess, for example, meant not only the ability to wield weapons effectively, but also the ability to win wars through the use of non-chivalric tactics. In the "Six Town Chronicles" that dates from this period, the author describes Warwick the Kingmaker in chivalric terms, "He was named and taken in all places for the most courages and manliest knight living".¹ However, the "great feats

¹ Six Town Chronicles, ed. R Flenley (Oxford 1911) p. 147.

of arms" which caught the chronicler's attention were not, as one might suppose, personal exhibitions of prowess and courage. Warwick, as the author makes clear, organized rather than led his troops in battle, and used cannon, archers and siege operations to win Calais.

This widening and dulling of the chivalric concept is more evident in the chronicles than in the romances, because the late fifteenth century writers of romance reacted to the upheavals brought about by the Wars of the Roses by strongly reaffirming the ideals of chivalry. The only obvious change was their preference for material from the Arthurian cycle. The reason for this was that the content lent itself more readily to patriotic and nationalistic interpretation than those romances which had foreign or ancient backgrounds. It was easier for the nobility of the late fifteenth century to identify themselves with the knights of the Round Table than with the more remote Trojan Aeneas or Greek Alexander. Arthur's knights were English, or at least regarded as such, and, like the later nobles, were part of a highly organized system which centred on the king. The devotion and loyalty the knights paid to King Arthur and all that he stood for accorded well with the dynastic and national loyalty that the English Renaissance State expected of its noble subjects. In the earlier French version of the story, this loyalty is wholly personal, but in Malory's "Morte D'Arthur" it is shown to extend beyond the person of the king. When Lancelot's disloyalty brings about the dissolution of Arthur's court, Malory emphasizes that the knight's conduct caused not only the death of the king, but the ruin and dissolution of the whole realm.

Yet, despite Malory's effort to make chivalry relevant to Renaissance England and despite the efforts of Caxton and other apologists for the chivalric way of life, the chivalric revival was short-lived. By the death of Henry VIII,

the upper classes had accepted the new subordinate role that the State accorded them. The knight's new function was to carry out the policies of the State and administer the peace. From being the protector of the people and a minor suzerain, he had become a servant of the State.

What is curious is that the military fantasies of chivalry persisted so strongly under the Tudors. In the sixteenth century, war became gradually more technical and collective and thus, one would think, more antithetical to chivalry, but the soldiers who caught the imagination in the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were the knight errants "Who sought the bubble reputation even in the cannon's mouth".² The classic example of this type of hero is Sir Philip Sidney, who, while fighting with great valour and extreme recklessness, was fatally wounded at Zutphen in 1586. "Do not", his friend and mentor, Hubert Languet had warned him eight years before, "give the glorious name of courage to a fault resembling it. It is the folly of our age that most men of noble birth think it more honourable to do the work of soldiers than that of leaders, and would be rather praised for boldness than for judgment".³ It was a warning that went entirely unheeded. Sidney, as no doubt Languet realized, was, like most Elizabethan soldiers of his class, far more concerned with the exercise of the old heroic values of chivalry in battle than with strategy and leadership. On riding into his last battle, he noticed that his companion, Sir William Pelham, was not wearing leg armour, and so that they might run equal risk he flung off his own cuisses. It was this quixotic but wholly chivalric impulse that cost him his life. During his third charge against the Spanish he was

²William Shakespeare, "As You Like It" Act II Scene VII lines 152-153 in Shakespeare's Complete Works (London 1935)

³H R Fox-Bourne, Sir Philip Sidney, (London 1953) p. 343.

severely wounded by a musket ball in the thigh, and he died from gangrene a few weeks later. Fulke Greville, Sidney's friend, reports that his death plunged the nation into gloom and occasioned no less than five hundred elegies.

With the exception of the Queen, who was heard to grumble of Sidney's "inconsiderateness in getting himself killed, like any common soldier",⁴ none of the elegies to Sidney that survives reflects Lanquet's disapproval of extravagant heroic action. Yet until Essex proved how dangerous the thirst for individual glory could be by his conduct in the disastrous Irish campaign of 1599 and by his rebellion in 1600, the majority of Elizabethans delighted in reckless heroism. They were thrilled by Sir Richard Grenville's suicidal attempt to take on the whole Spanish navy single-handed in the Azores and entirely approved of Sir Humphrey Gilbert's fatal insistence that he would transfer to the tiny, ten-ton "Squirrel" on his way back from America, in case his men said that he was afraid of the sea.

Proof that approval of reckless heroic action was not confined to the upper classes is provided by the ballads of the day which give a fair indication of the attitudes and feelings of the working classes. Elizabethan martial ballads are invariably heroic and in one at least, "Brave Lord Willoughbey", it is possible to glimpse the treatment basically unheroic material went through to make it acceptable to the people. According to Thomas Percy, the battle that the ballad commemorates was no more than a skirmish in the Low Countries in 1587 when the English army, consisting of only 1 500 men and led by Sir William Norris and Lord Willoughbey was retreating to Grave-lines and was set upon by a small contingent of the Duke of Parma's army. In the hands of the ballad-writer, this somewhat insignificant incident is made to grow to heroic proportions so that instead of taking on a couple of

4 H R Fox-Bourne, Sir Philip Sidney, p.401

thousand Spaniards, the English faced the full force of the Spanish army:

With fifteen hundred fighting men,
 Alas! there were no more,
 They fought with fourteen thousand then,
 Upon the bloody shore. ⁵

That they were able to do this and to acquit themselves magnificently is attributed solely to the heroic inspiration of "brave Lord Willoughbey":

"Stand to it, noble pikemen,
 And look you round about:
 And shoot you right, you bowmen
 And we will keep them out.
 You musquet and calliver men,
 Do you prove true to me:
 I'll be the foremost man in fight,"
 Says brave Lord Willoughbey. ⁶

After these injunctions, the English went on to put the Spanish to rout, pausing only after seven hours of continuous fighting to refresh themselves:

And then upon dead horses
 Full savourly they eat
 And drank the puddle water
 They could no better get. ⁷

The climax of the ballad, when the Spanish General orders his large, but fast diminishing army to withdraw, must have been eminently satisfactory to the English public, who loved the idea of their leaders being figures of terror and awe to the enemy:

Then quoth the Spanish General,
 "Come let us march away;
 I fear we shall be spoiled all
 If here we longer stay:
 For yonder comes Lord Willoughbey
 With courage fierce and fell;
 He will not give one inch of way
 For all the devils in hell." ⁸

5, 6, 7, 8 Bishop Thomas Percy, Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, Volume 1 (London 1876) p. 403

Allied to the heroic outlook on war was a distaste for ordnance. The ordinary people still viewed guns with fear and suspicion and recalled nostalgically the English archer under the Plantagenets who, in the military jargon of the time "could nail a French varlet's breeches to his bum with a single arrow".⁹ The upper classes, however, had a more particular reason for their distaste. It was felt by many that the indiscriminate death dealt by shot and ball ruined war as a finishing school for the knightly character. What horrified them in particular was that gunpowder allowed a common soldier to kill the knight. "Blessed were the times" cried one English knight in 1590, "which lack the dreadful fury of those diabolical engines . . . an invention which allows a base and cowardly hand to take the life of a brave knight . . . and when I think of that, I am tempted to say it grieves me to the heart to have adopted this profession of knight-errantry in such a detestable age as we now live in. For although no danger frightens me, still it causes me misgivings to think that powder and lead may deprive me of the chance of winning fame and renown by the strength of my arm and the edge of my sword, over all the known earth".¹⁰

What both the working and the upper class Englishmen cherished in their military tradition was the idea of a few heroic English soldiers outwitting a multitude of scheming foreigners. Their most popular victory was Henry V's at Agincourt where "the happy few prevailed without stratagem". The Queen herself shared this disdain for "trickes and policies of warre".

"The Spaniards for all their boasts, will trust more to their devices

⁹ Corelli Barnett, Britain and her Army 1509 -1970, A Military, Political and Social Survey, (London 1970) p. 35.

¹⁰ John Hale, "War and Public Opinion in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries", Past & Present 22 (July 1961)

than anything to be had by force"¹¹ she informed one of her generals, presumably with the idea of putting him at ease.

With such an outlook on war and with the age itself producing so many flamboyant heroes, it was natural that the military hero should feature prominently in Elizabethan drama and that the plays and poems with martial themes should express an heroic view of war. Yet to categorize Elizabethan martial literature as heroic only, would be to generalize too broadly, for in many of the plays and in the prose there is a vigorous critical attitude to war. In the Middle Ages, warfare was so closely linked to the social organisation that there could be little opposition to war or even recognition of new methods of warfare in case they threatened the status quo. Froissart thus sees the battles of Poitiers and Crécy as tournaments between armed knights, and fails to grasp the significance of the longbow. But the Elizabethans, as Shakespeare in particular so amply proves, understood both the glory and the misery of war and wrote about it with intense interest. Robert Burton's anger was deeply roused by the adulation men paid to the honour of war and as he began writing the "Anatomy of Melancholy" towards the end of Elizabeth's reign, this passage from volume one may be taken to be representative of the turmoil of feeling that war and the pursuit of honour awoke, and the freedom with which opposing opinions were expressed: "And yet this supposed honour, popular applause, desire of immortality by this means, pride and vain glory spurs them on many times rashly and unadvisedly to make away with themselves and multitudes of others. Alexander was sorry because there were no more worlds for him

¹¹ Anon. Certain Discourse Concerning the Formes and Effects of divers sorts of Weapons, (1590) p. 29.

to conquer; he is admired by some for it, animosa vox videtur, et regina, 'twas spoken like a prince; but as wise Seneca censures him 'twas vox uni quissima et stultissima 'twas spoken like a bedlam fool".¹²

The condemnation of the heroic soldier and his attitude also manifested itself in fierce criticism of his difficulty in adapting himself to peacetime conditions. The Renaissance ideal was the complete gentleman - learned, courtly and valorous, epitomized by Bedford in Shakespeare's "Henry VI Part I":

A braver soldier never couched lance
A gentler heart did never sway in court.¹³

However, few of the Elizabethan generals managed successfully to combine the antithetical roles of soldier and courtier in real life, and most clashed seriously with the court at some time in their careers. Sir John Perrot affords one of the most dramatic examples of a warrior who annoyed the Queen. He encountered difficulty at court, Naunton reports, "out of a desire to be in command at home as he had been abroad".¹⁴ Thus he conducted himself with "a freedom and boldness of speech which drew him to a clouded setting and layd him upon the spleen and advantage of his enemies".¹⁵ His gravest indiscretion came, however, when an invasion from Spain seemed imminent and the Queen began treating him with unusual respect. According to Naunton "He sayd publicly in the great chamber at Dublin:- hoe now she is ready to be pisse herself, for feare of the Spaniards, I am againe one of her White-boys".¹⁶

¹² Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy Vol I, ed. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan Smith, (New York 1948) p. 60.

¹³ William Shakespeare, Henry VI Part I Act III, scene 2, lines 134 - 135 The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. W J Craig (London 1935)

^{14, 15, 16} Sir Robert Naunton, Fragmentia Regalia: Memoirs of Elizabeth, Her Court and Favourites. (London 1824)

In comparison with the furore Essex caused, Perrot's clash with the court was a minor one. Essex's determination to pursue his own course in the Irish campaign contrary to the instructions of the Privy Council and the Queen; his dramatic and unauthorised return to England; his even more dramatic rebellion against his banishment and his eventual execution, put the whole country into a state of furious excitement. His fate highlights the bitter conflict between courtier and warrior. At his trial it is significant that Essex's most scornful words were directed to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, one of the strongest beneficiaries of civil life. "You knowe well I hazarded myself and putt my life in adventure in those accions when you weare quiett and saffe at home"¹⁷ he cried to Cecil at one point; and even upon being sentenced, he, with his strong sense of the dramatic, maintained nobly his role as a soldier martyred by an ungrateful society. "I think it fit", he declared "my poor quarters that have done her Majesty true service in divers parts of the world should be sacrificed and disposed at her Majesty's pleasure".¹⁸

Essex's career powerfully influenced the dramas of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Its tragic pattern is thought to have influenced Hamlet, and to be clearly discernible not only in the late Shakespearean tragedies "Coriolanus" and "Timon of Athens", but in Daniel's "Philotas", in Chapman's "Biron" and in the character of Belarius in "Cymbeline". Yet long before Essex threw the conflict between courtier and warrior into stark relief, the misplaced warrior was a familiar character in Elizabethan drama. Titus Andronicus; Hotspur; Baltazar in the anonymous play "The Noble Soldier"; Memnon, the hero of the Beaumont and Fletcher play "The Mad

^{17, 18} T B Howell, A Complete Collection of State Trials, Vol. I (London 1812 - 1836) p. 1358.

Lover"; and Artegall in Book V of the "Fairie Queene" are all examples of simple, passionate soldiers who came to ruin in non-military situations.

It is evident that the Elizabethan conception of the hero would be a much more complex one than the clearly defined knightly hero of the Middle Ages. The hero that is closest to the Medieval ideal is Shakespeare's Henry V, yet even there the pattern of heroism is markedly different from that of the Medieval romance. In the plays that do not draw on English history for their material, the pattern of heroism diverges even more widely from the Medieval pattern. Tamburlaine, Bussy D'Ambois and Coriolanus, whom Bergonzi describes as "the loud mouthed colossi who strode across the dramatic stages of the time".¹⁹ are vivid re-enactments of the old heroic spirit with its stress on fierce individualism. No doubt this is due to the Renaissance influx of classical literature, but it is also reflective of the heroic spirit manifested by Grenville, Frobisher, Drake and Raleigh.

The most striking re-enactment of the classical hero in Elizabethan literature is Marlowe's "Tamburlaine". Like the Greek heroes, the fierce beauty of Tamburlaine's person, his ambition, his warlike valour and, above all, his confidence in himself are on such an immense scale that he transcends the merely human. Like them too, his world is a seemingly boundless one, that will brook no restriction, nor is subject to the morality of ordinary men. Critics, shocked by the enormity of Tamburlaine's cruelty, have attempted to prove that Marlowe presented it as a tragic flaw, but it is entirely consistent with the classical heroic character that ruthlessly destroys any obstacle that hinders the fulfilment of its aspirations. As in the Iliad there is no

¹⁹ Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight : a study of the literature of the Great War (London 1965) p. 12.

criticism in the play of the hero's terrible excesses, and at the end, the dying Tamburlaine, far from suffering any remorse, calls for a map on which he nostalgically traces his life, and points with sadness to the lands death will now prevent him from possessing:

"And shall I die and this unconquered?"²⁰

By refusing to stress the human limitation of Tamburlaine, who, despite being "the scourge of God", dies before his last ambition is fulfilled, and by avoiding any criticism of his heroic excess, Marlowe comes closer than any other Elizabethan playwright to the spirit of the Greek epic, where the dominant appeal is to the wonder aroused by vast heroic potential. The majority of plays, however, whose heroes are in the classical mould, deviate from the Greek norm in the emphasis that is put on the clash of the hero with society and in the retribution society exacts for heroic excess. This theme of conflict and retribution is the heart of Shakespeare's "Coriolanus."

Coriolanus' heroic stature comes entirely from his greatness as a warrior and from his warrior-like defiance of the conventions of peacetime society. This is apparent in the first act of the play, where every effort is made to augment his military virtuosity. He is not merely praised upon his return from war, but is seen vividly engaged in battle. It is in this early battle scene that we sense the quality of fierce individualism that is the essence of his heroism and the key to his downfall:

"I'll fight with none but thee, for I do hate thee
Worse than a promise breaker"²¹

he cries as he springs at Aufidius, the only man who approaches his heroic

²⁰ Christopher Marlowe, Tamburlaine the Great Part II Act V Scene II Line 150, ed. by Una Ellis-Fermor (London 1951)

²¹ William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Coriolanus Act I Scene VIII Lines 1-2, ed. by John Dover Wilson (Cambridge 1960)

stature.

This early image of him as an individual warrior is magnified to the superhuman when Cominius describes his descent on Rome at the head of the Volscian army:

He is their god. He leads them like a thing
 Made by some other deity than Nature,
 That shapes man better; and they follow him
 Against us brats, with no less confidence
 Than boys pursuing summer butterflies,
 Or butchers killing flies. 22

Like Shakespeare's great chivalric hero Henry V, Coriolanus' heroic power lies partly in his ability to inspire his troops. So great is his inspiration that the Volscians believe themselves to be vastly superior to the Romans; but this inspiration is of an entirely different nature from Henry's. Henry's inspiration lies in his eloquence and deep understanding of the men he leads, while Coriolanus inspires because he blazes with the intensity of his individual quest, which is to wreak revenge on Rome.

His last speech is dramatically fitting, for it is a magnificent assertion of his greatness as an independent warrior, and a defiance of Aufidius and Antium, who dare to challenge his superiority:

Cut me to pieces, Volscies; men and lads,
 Stain all your edges on me. Boy! False hound!
 If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there,
 That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I
 Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli:
 Alone I did it, Boy! 23

Coriolanus' conflict with Rome arises because it is impossible for him to bend to the demands of a conventional society that cannot tolerate a heroic,

²²Shakespeare, Coriolanus, Act IV Scene VI Lines 90 - 95.

²³Ibid, Act V Scene V Lines 112 - 117.

militant nature except in the crisis of war.

It is interesting to contrast Shakespeare's presentation of Coriolanus in conflict with the citizens of Rome with his presentation of Hotspur in rebellion against the rule of Henry IV. Although both characters have very similar qualities, which make them act in a way unacceptable to society, Hotspur never attains the heroic stature of Coriolanus, and his heroic excess is deeply censured.

The first impression that the audience receives of Hotspur, however, is a brilliantly heroic one. He is the vanquisher of the formidable Earl of Douglas with his army of "ten thousand bold Scots":

... the theme of honour's tongue ;
 Amongst a grove the very straightest plant ;
 Who is sweet Fortune's minion and her pride: ²⁴

The actual appearance of Hotspur on the stage brings vitality to this eulogistic image, for he at first seems to radiate energy and masculinity. Ignoring his father's laboured explanation of why he refused King Henry's order that he relinquish his noble Scottish prisoners at Holmedon, he leaps into an unconventional defence of his behaviour:

My liege, I did deny no prisoners:
 But I remember, when the fight was done,
 When I was dry with rage and extreme toil,
 Breathless and faint, leaning upon my sword,
 Came there a certain lord, neat, trimly dress'd,
 Fresh as a bridegroom; and his chin, new reap'd,
 Show'd like a stubble-land at harvest home;
 He was perfum'd like a milliner;
 And twixt his finger and his thumb he held
 A pouncet-box, which ever and anon
 He gave his nose, and took 't way again; ²⁵

²⁴ William Shakespeare, Henry IV Part I Act I Scene I Lines 81 - 83
 ed. J H Walker (London 1961)

²⁵ Ibid, Act I Scene III Lines 29 - 39

By transferring the audience to the battlefield in this speech, the only situation in which Hotspur appears to advantage, and by making his description of the effeminate courtier mincing among the soldiers amusing, Shakespeare imparts a great charm to his warrior hero. Yet, almost immediately he starts to darken the original brightness of Hotspur by making his impulsive spirited speech appear as uncontrolled raving. There is little that is charming or impressive in Hotspur's rants against the King who has dared to curb him, and after a few pages of it one agrees with Northumberland's exasperated remarks:

"Why, what a wasp-stung and impatient fool / Art thou. . ."²⁶

In acts two and three the consequences of this wasp-stung temperament are made clear, for Hotspur's impatience drives him to reveal the secret of the conspiracy to a nobleman who does not sympathize with the rebels' cause, and he seriously offends Glendower, their most important ally.

So different is the impression made by Coriolanus that it is difficult to realize that they are created from the same basic heroic material. Where Hotspur appears waspish and foolish in his speeches, Coriolanus is magnificent in his denunciation of the Romans who have threatened to hurl him off the Tarpeian rock. Like Hotspur's, his speech is lacking in moderation and proceeds from fury at those who attempt to check his ardent, militant nature; yet what a world of difference is there between Hotspur's hectic raving and Coriolanus' avalanche of words that are splendid and frightening:

²⁶Shakespeare, Henry IV Part I Act I Scene III Line 236.

You common cry of curs! Whose breath I hate
 As reek o' the rotten fens, whose loves I prize
 As the dead carcasses of unburied men
 That do corrupt my air,-I banish you; 27

Towards the end of "Henry IV Part I", Hotspur is placed in a situation where he is as isolated and as doomed as Coriolanus when Aufidius and the people of Antium turn against him. Hotspur, deserted by ^{his} father and Glendower on the eve of battle and facing, like Coriolanus, a numerically superior enemy, responds to a desperate situation by fighting with great recklessness and courage. But, whereas nothing is allowed to detract from the heroism of Coriolanus' end, Shakespeare chooses this moment in "Henry IV" to stress, through Prince Hal, the mortal limitations and dangers of the untrammelled heroic spirit:

Ill-weaved ambition, how much art thou shrunk!
 When that this body did contain a spirit,
 A kingdom for it was too small a bound;
 But now two paces of the vilest earth
 Is room enough: 28 . . .

Finally, he destroys deliberately the last shreds of Hotspur's heroism by making his body the prize of Falstaff, the embodiment of cowardice and scoffer at honour.

The image of Hotspur's body being lugged triumphantly off the battlefield by Falstaff, while Hal, the new hero, looks on uncaring that he is being robbed of the proof of his heroic prowess, is the dominant one at the end of this play. It provides an appropriate end, for it sums up the understanding Shakespeare had of the nature of heroism. Both the extreme heroism of

²⁷ Shakespeare, Coriolanus, Act III Scene III Lines 117 - 120

²⁸ Shakespeare, Henry IV Part I Act V Scene IV Lines 88 - 92

Hotspur and the extreme greed for life of Falstaff are censured, but these qualities are coalesced and balanced in the character of Prince Hal, who represents the ideal hero at this moment in the play. He has enough of Falstaff in him to realize the value of life, and thus undertakes no fighting solely to magnify his honour; but when war is necessary he fights with all the courage and ability of Hotspur.

It is the heroic view of Prince Hal, summed up by a member of the enemy camp, Sir Richard Vernon:

I saw young Harry, with his beaver on,
 His cuisses on his thighs, gallantly arm'd, -
 Rise from the ground like feather'd Mercury
 And vaulted with such ease into his seat,
 As if an angel dropp'd down from the clouds,
 To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus
 And witch the world with noble horsemanship. ²⁹

that receives full and brilliant expression in Shakespeare's play of military heroism, Henry V. Although it is not usually considered one of Shakespeare's great plays, in terms of the English heroic tradition it is unique, because in no other play or poem in English literature does one find such a fine balance between the glories and horrors of war, nor see more clearly, at what may be regarded as the very end of the medieval period, what constitutes the English chivalric hero.

What is interesting about the man, Henry V, is the harmonious fusion of the old heroic spirit with the chivalric. In the first two acts of the play, Henry differs little in spirit from the brilliant, Pagan heroes of the Elizabethan stage. The portrait of him in the prologue:

²⁹Shakespeare, Henry IV Part I, Act IV Scene I Lines 104 - 110

Then should the warlike Henry, like himself,
 Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,
 Leashed in like hounds, should Famine, Sword, and Fire
 Crouch for employment.³⁰

is reinforced by his proud, egoistical reply to the Dauphin's taunts:

But tell the Dauphin I will keep my state,
 Be like a king and show my sail of greatness
 When I do rouse me in my throne of France . . .
 But I will rise there with so full a glory
 That I will dazzle all the eyes of France,³¹

As Henry is King of England, these lines may also be interpreted as justifiable national pride and defiance, but their similarity to Tamburlaine's first splendid assertion of his power is striking:

I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chairs,
 And with my hand turn Fortunes's wheel about:
 And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere
 Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome.³²

In Act III, after he has terrified the citizens of Harfleur into capitulating, his resemblance to Tamburlaine ends, and heroic virtues which are appropriate to a leader and a chivalric hero come to the fore. The moment the town surrenders, his order is "Use mercy on them all" and he forbids any plundering or abuse of the French. The quality of mercy has long been valued in English commanders and there are few heroic war poems which do not stress it. In addition to being merciful to his enemies, Henry is deeply concerned for the welfare of his army. The historical fact that Henry, realizing the condition of his army, was anxious to return to Calais after Harfleur,

³⁰ William Shakespeare, Henry V, Chorus Lines 5 - 8 ed. J H Walker (London 1961)

³¹ Ibid, Act I Scene II Lines 274 - 276 and 279 - 280.

³² Christopher Marlowe, Tamburlaine the Great, Part I Act I Scene II Lines 174 - 177 ed. Una Ellis-Fermor (London 1951)

is shown very clearly in the play. The reason is not that Shakespeare wished to keep faithfully to history, but because, to an Englishman, there is nothing more heroic than the courageous stand of an English force against an overwhelming power. The climax of the play is thus not the victory of Agincourt, but Henry's speech to his army before the battle. From the moment Harfleur capitulates, the emphasis is on the desperate plight of the English cut off from Calais. Sick, weary and grossly outnumbered, none believes that he will withstand the coming battle. Henry's heroic power is in his ability to weld his tired, dispirited men into a unified fighting force, ready to do its utmost in valour and endurance. The moment of unity of his spirit with his soldiers is marked in the speech by the transition from "we", the royal plural, to the triumphant collective:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. 33

There is nothing else to equal this moment in the play. The actual victory is purposely played down to emphasize Henry's modesty and piety.

Praised be God, and not our strength, for it! 34

is his sole comment on Montjoy's announcement that the day is his. The English ideal hero is not merely the victorious leader, but the man who will fight courageously against hopeless odds and who can inspire his men to do likewise.

Almost half the prologue to Act IV is devoted to describing, "the cheerful semblance and sweet majesty" that increasingly animate Henry as

³³ Shakespeare, Henry V, Act IV Scene III Line 60, also the whole of the St. Crispin Day Speech.

³⁴ Ibid, Act IV Scene VII Line 84.

the battle nears. Laurence Olivier rightly made it the keynote of his St. Crispin's Day speech in the film version of the play. The last eight lines from "We few, we happy few," were roared with so infectious a gaiety that suddenly the rousing, dazzling effect the legendary Henry had on his troops seemed perfectly realised.

But the success of Shakespeare's portrayal of an English hero lies only partially in the vigorous display of martial and heroic qualities. What contributes to the crowning effect of Henry's heroism is the fine balance between the harsh realities of war and its splendours. Offsetting Henry's martial and courageous speeches are those of a number of characters who do not view war as a contest of honour. For the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely, war is a convenient way of diverting the King's attention from their illegal possession of temporal land; for Pistol, Bardolph and Nym war is an excellent means of enriching themselves, either by swindling their fellow soldiers or by plundering the French; and for Captain Fluellen, war is merely an exercise in strategy. One of the high points of this non-heroic view of war comes not in the speeches of any of these characters, but in the chilling comments that two English privates, Bates and Williams, make to the King on the morn of Agincourt. Firstly, the King has the unpleasant experience of having his heroism deflated by Bates:

He may show what outward courage he will; but I believe, as cold a night as 'tis, he could wish himself in the Thames up to the neck; - and so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures, so we were quit here. 35

³⁵Shakespeare, Henry V, Act IV Scene I Lines 112 - 116.

While the King is struggling to recover from this blow, Williams reminds him of the terrible cost of war:

. . . all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, "We died at such a place;" some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. 36

Henry is seriously shaken by Williams' indictment of war, and his attempts to justify it to them are very inadequate. He has no better success with himself as his chastened prayer painfully shows:

. . . Not today O Lord,
O not today, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown. 37

The reduction of Henry from the martial hero of Harfleur to the sombre man on the morn of Agincourt, and the parallel reduction of the war from a splendid adventure to an ugly *mêlée* of dying and wounded men cursing and crying for a surgeon makes an impression that is not wholly countered by Henry's St. Crispin's Day speech nor the English army's victory. Moreover, Williams and Bates' reminder of the innocent victims of war—"wives left behind" and "children rawly left"—is taken up in the closing stages of the play and expanded in the Duke of Burgundy's plea for peace. The Duke makes no reference to the horrors of battle in his speech; instead he builds up an ugly picture of the fertile countryside of France grown wild and corrupt through neglect, epitomized by the rusting plough, the dead vines and ruined meadows covered in burrs and thistles. The effect of this unnatural disturbance of the

³⁶ Shakespeare, Henry V, Act IV Scene I Lines 143- 149.

³⁷ Ibid, Act IV Scene I Lines 288 - 290.

life-giving rhythms is finally shown on the people:

And as our vineyards, follows, meads and hedges
 Defective in their nature, grow to wilderness,
 Even so our houses and ourselves and children
 Have lost, or do not learn for want of time,
 The sciences that should become our country,
 But grow like savages, - as soldiers will,
 That nothing do but meditate on blood, -
 To swearing and stern looks, diffus'd attire,
 And everything that seems unnatural. ³⁸

The dense texture of the imagery of this speech would suggest that Shakespeare was more imaginatively involved at this moment than in the martial scenes.

Yet although the language of contemplative poetry such as this has a richer fabric, it would be false to the total experience of the play to feel that Shakespeare intended an undercurrent criticism of Henry in the last act of the play. On the stage, the heroism of Henry dominates everything, and, instead of detracting from it, the anti-heroic speeches of Williams and Bates and the Duke of Burgundy's exposure of the corrupting effect of war seem to bring a depth and reality to Henry's achievements. They have the effect of emphasizing that Henry triumphed in a real war and not a chivalric tournament.

In his excellent book, "Shakespeare's Military World", Paul Jorgenson has suggested a new reason for Henry V's appeal on the stage. He points out that the play fulfils the Renaissance concept of war being a great musical harmony; a concept which he traces back to the influence of the epic tradition, in particular the Aeneid. In early Elizabethan martial dramas, Virgil's rhetorical amplification of sound and the thumping energy of his verse are evident in a passage such as this from the Spanish Tragedy:

³⁸ Shakespeare, Henry V, Act V Scene II Lines 54 - 62.

Both (armies) cheerly sounding trumpets, drums and fifes
 Both raising dreadful clamours to the skies,
 The vallies, hills and rivers mad rebound,
 And heaven it selfe was frighted with the sound. 39

In "Henry V", Shakespeare also borrows Virgil's style in Henry's ceremoniously phrased threat to the Governor of Harfleur, in which he describes the fate of the city if it does not yield:

If not, why, in a moment, look to see
 The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
 Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
 Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
 And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls;
 Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
 Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confus'd
 Do break the clouds . . . 40

Compare Virgil's:

But the inner lodging all with noise and woful wailing soundes
 With bousing thick and larums lowd the buildings all reboundes
 And howling women shoutes and cries the golden stars do suite. 41

Shakespeare, however, saw the limitations of this type of discourse, and after a satire of it in Kate's account of Hotspur's "tales of iron war" which she had heard him mumble in his sleep, he, as Jorgenson writes "gradually repudiated the dead meaningless sounds and rhetoric of the older narrative in favour of the realistic warfare which Henry V enacts, even though it does not get into his formal speeches. But while generally renouncing the messages with his stylized report of battle, Shakespeare retained from the discourse its most valued features: its dignity, connotativeness and above

³⁹ Thomas Kyd, The Works of Thomas Kyd, Act I Scene II Lines 16-19 ed. F S Boas (Oxford 1901)

⁴⁰ Shakespeare, Henry V, Act III Scene III Lines 33-38

⁴¹ Virgil, The XIII Bookes of Aeneides, Book IX Lines 486-488 Loeb edition, translated by Thomas Phaer (London 1922)

all its concentration on the sounds of battle".⁴²

Jorgenson has shown that the way Shakespeare enlarged his military theatre was not only by the way the Chorus suggests at the beginning of Henry V when the audience is asked to "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts",⁴³ but by the sonority of the speech, amplified by the use of musical instruments. This is most noticeable in the battle orations. Before Harfleur, Henry's battle cry "God for Harry, England and Saint George"⁴⁴ is stirringly taken up by the sound of the trumpet, the thunder of cannon and the shouts of the soldiers as they storm the walls of the city. In his Agincourt speech the magnificent and resonant line: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers"⁴⁵ is likewise dramatically echoed by the clamour of war in the following scene.

As well as the musical quality of the orations, the whole play is musically orchestrated. The sound images of the opening chorus are as striking as the visual and set the tone of the battle music that informs the whole play. The roar of battle is very clearly heard in these lines:

. . . . or may we cram
 Within this wooden O the very casques
 That did affright the air at Agincourt?⁴⁶

and this image is dramatically amplified by the roar of the stormy sea four lines later, when the scene changes to the two mighty monarchies:

Whose high uplifted and abutting fronts
 The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder.⁴⁷

⁴² Paul A Jorgenson, Shakespeare's Military World, (Berkeley Los Angeles, London 1956) Page 11.

⁴³ Shakespeare, Henry V, Chorus to Act I Line 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid, Act III Scene I Line 34

⁴⁵ Ibid, Act IV Scene III Line 60

⁴⁶ Ibid, Chorus to Act I Lines 12-14

⁴⁷ Ibid, Chorus to Act I Lines 21-22

It is significant that towards the end of the speech, when the scene is again shifted back to the battlefield, the appeal is as much to the ear as to the eye:

Think when we talk of horses that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth; 48

The thunder of hooves of the great war horses moving in battle formation is undoubtedly one of the most stirring sounds in the music of war.

The martial music of the opening chorus is gradually augmented in the following choruses. In Act II there are the sounds of the nation readying itself for war; in Act III there is the sound of the sea as Henry's ships breast "the lofty surge" enroute for Harfleur, and from these ships:

Hear the shrill whistle doth order give
to sounds confus'd. 49

The murmur of the soldiers in these ships swells, at the end of this speech, to the thunder of cannon:

... And the nimble gunner
With linstock now the devilish cannon touches,
(Alarum; and chambers go off) 49

The chorus to Act IV introduces a variation to the music of war. Instead of the grand martial strains, Shakespeare has sensitively recorded the subdued music of the camp, as the two armies wait round their fires for dawn and the coming battle:

From camp to camp, through the foul womb of night,
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fix'd sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch: 50

⁴⁸ Shakespeare, Henry V, Chorus to Act I Lines 26-27

⁴⁹ Ibid, Chorus to Act III Lines 9-10

⁵⁰ Ibid, Chorus to Act III Lines 32-33

⁵¹ Ibid, Chorus to Act IV Lines 4-7

The quietness of the scene is very dramatic, and captures perfectly the tense stillness of the English soldiers staring into their campfires. Only the boastful neighs of the war horses and the ominous tap of the armourers' hammers remind the audience of the battle that is to come.

The chorus to Act V is appropriately full of the happy sounds of cheering as the King's ships land on the beaches of Dover crowded with people.

Whose shouts and claps out-voice the deep-mouth'd sea.⁵²

Sound and music are not the only important aspects of Shakespearean warfare, as Jorgenson himself readily admits, but they do seem to account for much of the appeal that the play exerts when it is acted. If the sound and music are ignored - and Jorgenson feels that "they are the aspects most readily overlooked by present-day readers"⁵³ - the play becomes flat, for, except in the Duke of Burgundy's speech, the language lacks the richness and intricacy that one finds in the tragedies and the comedies. The Royal Shakespeare Company's production of "Henry V" in July 1965 provided an interesting illustration of how significant the tonal qualities of the play are, and how unfortunate is the effect if some are muted or ignored. Instead of delivering his orations with rousing force as Laurence Olivier did in the famous film version, Ian Holm, in the part of Henry, attempted to talk intimately to his troops, and there were no sound effects. The result was that the play had an emptiness that even Holm's sensitive interpretation of the King on the night before Agincourt failed to compensate. "Henry V"

⁵² Shakespeare, Henry V, Chorus to Act V Line 11.

⁵³ Paul Jorgenson, Shakespeare's Military World, p. 15.

was written to encompass all the various moods of the music of war, and to produce the play without the lyrical fervour of the orations is to rob it of its most essential quality. The heart of the play and, indeed, of the whole heroic tradition is the spirit of heroic splendour, chivalry and manliness that is suggested in the choruses and has its fullest expression in the battle orations.

"Henry V" is the key work in the English heroic tradition. It represents the culmination of the chivalric tradition of the Middle Ages and in its orchestration of sound and rhetoric it embodies the Renaissance conception of war as a musical harmony. Its greatest value, however, lies in the fact that in no other play or poem before or since the Elizabethans has war been presented with such completeness and with such understanding of the heroic spirit. Occasionally, poets have managed to portray significantly heroic moments in man's experience of war, but none in the centuries that span the gap between Shakespeare and the poets of the First World War has been able to view war with his breadth and intensity of vision.

The great movement in English war poetry of the twentieth century has been to reject the heroic view of war. On the battlefields of the Western Front from 1915 to 1918, such a view became to many a hideous joke, and few poets retained any vestige of their belief in the heroic myth after a single experience of modern warfare. But though much poetry of real merit was written out of the trench poet's anger and disillusionment in war and out of the Second World War poet's unheroic and more dispassionate assessment of their experience, the great poetry of the two wars came from those poets who understood the heroic spirit. Wilfred Owen abhorred the glorifying of war, yet, like Shakespeare, he reacted musically to this most dramatic and

catastrophic of human experiences. The result is that his poetry has a lyrical intensity that is deeply moving, and promotes an initial reaction that is strangely akin to the instinctive response that Henry's battle orations engender. If Owen was unaware of the influence of the heroic tradition on his poetry, Keith Douglas, the major poet of the Second World War, was not. In one of his poems, "The Trumpet", he writes of the pageantry and beauty of heroic warfare that he sees symbolized in the sound of the trumpet, but in the the last two verses, moving from a camp scene that is reminiscent of the English camp at Agincourt, he rejects the trumpet's message:

Tonight we heard it
 Who for weeks have only listened
 to the howls of inhuman voices.
 But, as the apprehensive ear rejoiced
 breathing the notes in, the sky glistened
 with a flight of bullets. We must be up early

tomorrow, to forget the cry and the crier
 as we forgot the conversation
 of our friends killed last month, last week
 and hear, crouching, the air shriek
 the crescendo, expectancy to elation
 violently arriving. The trumpet is a liar. 54

"The Trumpet" stands at the end of the heroic tradition in English war poetry, since it embodies what was beautiful and stirring in that tradition; but with a sensibility entirely different from the outraged reaction of the poetry of the First World War, the poem, in the last instance, denies the qualities that the trumpet signifies.

The trumpet is a liar.

⁵⁴ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, ed., John Waller, G S Fraser and J C Hall (London 1966) p. 126.

with an Olive Branch in his hand, but with a whole Forest of Olives round about him; for he brought not Peace to his Kingdome alone, but almost to all the Christian Kingdomes in Europe".³

It was only in the reign of Charles I, when the writers who had formed their ideas about war in Elizabeth's time were dead, that the real effect of the people's increasing remoteness from war becomes clear in literature. Charles I's accession to the throne was greeted with a flood of aggressive verse urging him to defend the Protestants of Bohemia, who were being crushed by the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian. Typical are these verses by Phineas Fletcher:

Here noble Charles, enter thy chevalrie;
The eagle scornes a lesser game to fly;
Onely this warres a match worthy thy realmes, and Thee.

Ah happy man, that lives to see that day!
Ah happy man, who in that warre shall bleed!
Happy who beares the standard in that fray!
Happy who quells the rising Babel seed!
Thrice happy who that whore shall doubly pay!
This (royall Charles) this be thy happy meed,⁴

The strident exclamatory tone of these lines, the unrealistic view of battle, and the exaggerated references to the enemy, "Babel seed" and "that whore", show that Phineas Fletcher, in common with most poets of his epoch, had only the vaguest idea of what war was about. Like the Victorian and Edwardian political poetry, this poetry relies on a vigorous display of emotion, which often, as in this case, conceals a real poverty of thought. This lack of thought is particularly reflected in the imprecise use of "chevalrie" in the exhortation to Charles "to enter thy chevalrie", which would seem to mean that Charles should defend the Protestant

³Gervase Markham, Honour in His Perfection, (London 1624) p. 24.

⁴Poetical Works of Giles 1588 - 1623 and Phineas Fletcher 1582 - 1650 Volume I (Cambridge 1908) p. 185.

certain day, and by that time the arms be all viewed, and the muster master hath had his pay (which is the chiefest thing many times he looks after) it draws towards dinner time; and indeed, officers love their bellies so well that they are loath to take too much pains about disciplining of their soldiers. Wherefore, after a little careless hurrying over of their postures . . . they make them charge their muskets and so prepare to give their captain a brave volley of shot at his entrance to his king; where after having solaced themselves for a while after this brave service every man repairs home.⁵

Not all poets were as effusive as Phineas Fletcher.

Sir John Suckling light-heartedly satirized the heroic effusions of the martial poets in some lines he addressed to William Davenant in 1635. Davenant had been so fired with enthusiasm by talk of a naval expedition to Madagascar in 1634, led by the King's nephew, that he dashed off a poem describing the Prince's valour in the conquest of the island and the subsequent establishment of his government. When the news that the expedition was called off coincided with the publication of Davenant's poem, Suckling gleefully wrote:

What princes poets are! Those things
 The great ones stick at, and our very Kings
 Lay down, they venture on; and with great ease
 Discover, conquer what and where they please.
 Some phlegmatic sea captain would have staid
 For money now, or victuals; not have weighed
 Anchor without 'em; thou (Will) dost not stay
 So much as for a wind, but go'st away,
 Landst, view'st the country, fight'st, put'st all to rout
 Before another could be putting out.
 And now the news in town is, Davenant's come
 From Madagascar fraught with laurel home;
 And welcome Will, for the first time, but prithee
 In thy next voyage bring the gold too with thee.⁶

The wit and balanced outlook that this passage reveals were to recur in the early poetry written by the Cavalier poets

⁵ C H Firth, Cromwell's Army, (London 1962) p. 8-9.

⁶ A H Thompson, ed., Works of Sir John Suckling, (London 1910) p. 19.

in the Civil War and it is these qualities that make their poetry more readable than the humourless, bitterly partisan verses the Parliamentary poets turned out. Until the King's death brought disillusionment and despair, the Cavalier poets maintained a gay, mocking spirit which reflects the gallant, but insouciant attitude of the Royalist army. However, on the whole, they wrote few heroic poems. The need to draw people to their cause, which is always the more pressing in civil war than in war against a foreign power, meant that most of the poetry of both sides tended to be propaganda rather than war poetry.

In the early stages of the war there were still strong traces of the complex and elaborate poems of the 1630s. On the King's escape, disguised as a serving man, John Cleveland wrote:

O the accursed stenography of fate!
Our princely eagle shrink into a bat!,⁷

and in a poem describing the notorious daring and extraordinary good luck of Prince Rupert, who had never been wounded, he used heightened classical allusions common in the elegant court poems of the thirties. The comparison of Rupert with Perseus, son of Danae, begotten by Jupiter in a shower of gold, is lavishly flattering, but it is also ingeniously apt and humorous:

He gags their guns, defeats their dire intent,
The cannons doe but lisp and compliment.
Sure, Jove descend in a leaden shower
To get this Perseus, hence the fatall power
Of shot is strangled: bullets thus allied
Fear to commit an act of Parricide.⁸

⁷ B Morris and E Withington, ed., The Poems of John Cleveland, (Oxford 1967) p. 48.

⁸ Ibid, p. 37.

More seriously, William Cartwright attempted a somewhat mannered treatment of the valiant stand of Sir Bevil Grenville at the battle of Lansdowne in 1643. Grenville, leading his Cornish pikemen, had forced his way up a steep bluff under heavy fire and had held this difficult position against four cavalry charges. As an eye-witness recounted: "They stood as upon the eaves of a house, but as unmoveable as a rock". This poem deserves to be quoted at length, for it is one of the few heroic poems of the Civil War, and is an interesting attempt to express a deed of great valour in the intellectual verse conventions of the time:

When now th' Incensed Rebell proudly came
Downe, like a Torrent without Bank, or Damm;
When Undeserv'd Successe urg'd on their force,
That Thunder must come downe to stop their Course,
Or Grenville must step in; Then Grenville stood,
And with Himselfe oppos'd and checkt the Flood.
Conquest, or Death, was all His Thought. So fire

Either Orecomes, or doth it selfe expire.
His Courage work't like flames, cast heate about,
Here, there, on this, on that side; None gave out;
Not any Pike in that Renowned Stand
But tooke new force from His Inspired Hand;
Souldier encourag'd Souldier, Man urg'd Man,
And He urg'd All: so much Example can.

Hurt upon Hurt, Wound upon Wound did call,
He was the But, the Mark, the Ayme of All:
His Soule this while retir'd from Cell to Cell,
At last flew up from all, and then He fell.
But the Devoted Stand, enraged more
From that his fate, ply'd hotter then before,
And proud to fall with Him, sworn not to yield,
Each sought an Honour'd Grave, and gain'd the Field.
Thus, He being fall'n, his Action fought anew;
And the dead conquer'd, whiles the Living slew.⁹

The precision of the style and the slow, deliberate pace of the lines lend a grandeur to this description of Grenville's last stand. The use of climax and antithesis is common in the

⁹G Blakemore Evans, ed., The Plays and Poems of William Cartwright, (Wisconsin 1951) p. 556 - 557.

laudatory verses of the seventeenth century, but in this passage, these devices have been utilized effectively to convey the huge onslaught of the enemy forces and to give emphasis to the heroic stature of Grenville. The description of his death may seem, to modern taste, overly intellectual, but it does bring out the great courage of the man, who fought on despite being mortally wounded.

The concentration on Grenville in this passage and in the whole poem, recalls Elizabethan war poetry and drama, where the army is presented as an anonymous body whose every heroic action derives solely from the inspiring force of its leader. This, in fact, was to be the pattern of heroic war poetry for the next two hundred years, until the advent of the war reporter in the Crimean War tended to shift the focus to the ordinary soldiers.

This poem also compares interestingly with the martial fantasy of Phineas Fletcher. Cartwright is obviously a superior poet, but, in addition, his description of the fighting has the authority of experience that is lacking in Fletcher's and other war poems written before the Civil War. Cartwright was a lecturer at Oxford, yet despite his academic background, at the beginning of the Civil War he was responsible for the organizing and training of bands of "privileged men of the University", in which the "schollers were promiscuously both Graduates and Undergraduates; a great many of them Masters of Art, yea devines allso".¹⁰ When the Parliamentary forces besieged the town, the scholar bands made a brief attempt

¹⁰H J C Grierson, ed., Metaphysical Poets; Donne to Butler, (London 1926) p. XXXVI.

to defend it for the king, and were rewarded for their efforts with a satirical poem by Richard Lluellin, a Royalist:

The East line common souldiers kept
 The North the Honest Townesmen Swept.
 The West was man'd by th' Loyall Schollers,
 Whose Gownes you slave are blacke as Colliers.
 They trow'd it faith their Gunnes would hit
 As sure as they had studied it.
 They ramm'd their Bullet, they would ha't in,
 Bounce went the Noise, like Greeke and Latine . . .
 These Knaves talkt much o th' siege of Troy
 And at this siege they leapt for Joy.¹¹

The best known Cavalier poet of the Civil War is Richard Lovelace. Of his poems, H J Grierson has said: "the majority of them are careless and extravagant, but the few good things are the finest expression of honour and chivalry in all the Cavalier poetry of the century, the only poems which suggest what 'Cavalier' came to mean when glorified by defeat".¹²

Outstanding of his poems is "To Lucasta, Going to the Warres", written in the opening stages of the Civil War:

Tell me not Sweet, I am unkinde,
 That from the Nunnerie
 Of thy chaste breast and quiet minde,
 To Warre and Armes I flie.

True; a new Mistresse now I chase,
 The first Foe in the Field;
 And with a stronger Faith imbrace
 A Sword, a Horse, a Shield.

Yet this Inconstancy is such,
 As you too shall adore;
 I could not love thee, Deare, so much,
 Lov'd I not Honour more.¹³

Central to the poem is the heroic idea that a man's primary function is to fight, and every word leads up to the

¹¹H J C Grierson, ed., Metaphysical Poets, p. 19.

¹²C H Hartman, The Cavalier Spirit, and its Influence on the Life and Work of Richard Lovelace, (London 1925) p. 117.

¹³Ibid, p. 79.

direct expression of this idea in the last two lines. The imagery of the nunnery is unusual in this context, and paradoxically suggests the deep peace of sexual fulfilment which contrasts sharply with the fulfilment man finds in fighting. There is nevertheless a link between the two, as the sexual images in the second verse make clear, but the greater attraction of the pursuit of honour in battle is brought out by the urgency of the last line of the first verse and the stirring quality of the age-old martial emblems "A Sword, a Horse, a shield".

One finds the same grace and chivalry in Robert Herrick's poem to King Charles when he advanced into the west country in the summer of 1644:

Welcome, most welcome to our vows and us,
 Most great and universal Genius.
 The drooping West which hitherto has stood
 As one in long lamented widowhood,
 Looks like a Bride now, or a bed of flowers
 Newly refresht both by the sun and showers.
 War which before was horrid now appears
 Lovely in you, brave Prince of Cavaliers.
 A deal of courage in each bosom springs
 By your access, O you the best of Kings,
 Ride on with all White Omens, so that where
 Your Standards up, we fix a Conquest there.¹⁴

The lyrical beauty of the similes that express the King's inspirational force culminates gracefully in his power to transform the ugliness of war into loveliness. In the last four lines the poet moves naturally to the climax of this inspiriting effect with the heroic image of the King riding to victory. The whole poem evinces a gaiety of spirit and lightness of touch that is reminiscent of the lyrical courtly poetry of the Elizabethans. Sadly, it was to be the

¹⁴L. C. Martin, ed., Works of Robert Herrick, 2nd edition (Oxford 1956) p. 25.

last time the Cavalier poets wrote in this strain, for their military situation was already beginning to appear critical, and they were turning their talents to satires on the enemy. Apart from the fact that it was impossible to maintain a lyrical optimistic mood when things were going badly for their side, they realized the power of satiric verse as a weapon of propaganda.

Some of their cleverest verses come from the pen of Sir John Denham. His attacks on the Parliamentarians written in the early part of the war still show the confident high spirits of the Cavaliers, but later, his poems were to become bitter. In 1643 a force of Cavaliers was surprised and routed at night during a storm by a small band of Parliamentarians in a skirmish on Sowton Down near Okehampton. Denham, very sensibly, instead of denying the overthrow, picked up the Parliamentarian version of the story and exaggerated it to ridicule.

Do you know, not a fortnight agoe,
 How they bragged of a Western wonder?
 Where a hundred and ten slew five thousand men
 With the help of Lightning and Thunder?

There Hopton was slain again and again
 Or else my Author did lye;
 With a new Thanksgiving, for the dead who are living,
 To God and his servant Chudleigh.¹⁵

Denham was immensely good-natured. In 1644 George Wither, the Parliamentarian poet, had attempted to seize Denham's estate, which lay behind the Parliamentarian lines, but when he was captured and there was talk of hanging him,

¹⁵ T H Banks Jr., ed., The Poetical Works of Sir John Denham, (Boston 1928) p. 130 - 131.

"Sir John Denham went to the King and desired his majesty not to hang him, for while George Wither lived he should not be the worst poet in England".¹⁶ Certainly, there is little to equal the lumbering ineptitude of Wither's recruiting poem which he produced in 1643:

Let valiant Essex, Warwick and Manchester,
Stout Fairfax, Waller, Roberts, Brook and Gray
-Who forward for the public safety were-
Be crowned with never dying bay.¹⁷

Considering the ample talent of the Cavalier poets, one looks with interest to what they produced in defeat. One expects in the period following the King's execution in 1649 a movement towards a more profound type of writing and a reassertion of the heroic spirit. In fact, nothing could be less heroic than the sour verses the Royalists produced in the early days of the Commonwealth, which sneer ineffectually at the their new rulers and advocate drink as the cure for their troubles. Alexander Brome wrote of:

. . . the thick darkness of these verseless times
These antigenius dayes, this boystrous age,
Where dwells nought of Poetry but rage . . .¹⁸

But there was little rage in their poetry. If there had been they might have produced something more memorable than their empty, disillusioned verses, typified by Brome's own efforts:

These politick would-bees do but shew themselves asses,
That other men's calling invade,
We only converse with pots and with glasses
Let the Rulers alone with their trade.¹⁹

¹⁶Anthony Powell, ed., Aubrey's Brief Lives, (London 1949) p. 83.

¹⁷Frank Sidgwick, ed., Poetry of George Wither, Vol. II (London 1902) p. 73.

¹⁸Alexander Brome, Songs and Poems, (London 1668) p. 72.

¹⁹Ibid, p. 73.

Brome was not the only Cavalier poet who looked to drink for solace. James Smith wrote:

And now, like wandring Knights we wend
Without a penny, or a friend:
Our score growes great from whence we goe,
And every alehouse turn'd a foe.²⁰

But, considering his humour and wit, it is Sir John Denham who most clearly shows the embittering effect defeat had on the poetry of the Cavaliers. He and several other Royalists were imprisoned by Cromwell in June 1655 because they were suspected of being involved in an uprising near Salisbury. His subject is his fellow prisoners, but so caustic is his humour and so degrading the picture he presents of them that a Parliamentary poet could hardly have been more biting.

Sir Frederick Cornwallis, without any malice
Who carryes more gutts than crimes,
Has the fortune to hitt, and be counted a witt,
Which hee could not in former tymes.
Dicke Nicols (they say) and Littleton stay
For the Governour's owne delight;
One serves him with play, att Tennis by day
And other with smoaking at night.
Ned Progers looks pale, but what does he ayle?
(For he dyetts with that fat Drolle.)
He must dwindle at length, that spends all his strength
Att the grill and the little hole.²¹

If the Cavalier verse degenerated in defeat, victory did little to improve the quality of the Parliamentarians'. Their most prolific poet was George Wither, author of the unfortunate recruiting verses mentioned earlier. The New Army's remarkable series of victories, often in the face of overwhelming odds as at Rathmines, seemed to imbue him with a hatred of the

²⁰ Sir John Mennis and James Smith, The Muse's Recreation, (London 1656) p. 10.

²¹ Sir John Denham, Poetical Works of Sir John Denham, p. 138 - 139.

Royalists. Of the insouciant attitude of the Royalists he wrote:

For, though (blinded by their sin)
 Outwardly, they jeer and grin
 Hellish horrors lurk within
 Filling their faint hearts with fears.²²

When he turned to his own side he was equally passionate, convinced that God was leading them:

Oh! what pen or tongue is there
 Fully able to declare
 What to us, God's Mercies were
 Since our Champion he hath beene?
 Nay, who can half that recite
 Which for us, in open sight,
 He hath done since Naseby Fight,
 Where, he first, was plainly seen?

He hath magnified his worth
 In most glorious marchings forth
 From the South unto the North
 And, through all our British Coasts,
 England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales,
 Towns and Fields, and Hills and Dales,
 Sea, and Land him, justly calls
 The Victorious Lord of Hoasts.²³

It is clear from the two extracts that neither Denham nor Wither had the artistic skill nor the necessary degree of impartiality to produce poetry at a time when feelings were running very high. Of course, this does not mean to imply that poetry cannot be written when a poet is deeply involved. Milton wrote his most powerful political sonnet from his horrified reaction to the Duke of Savoy's massacre of the Protestants of Vaudois. There is little to equal the magnificent opening lines that convey Milton's tragic anger and his sense of a vast avenging god:

²² George Wither, "Carmen Eucharisticum" in Poetry of George Wither, (London 1649) p.91

²³ Ibid, p. 91.

Avenge O Lord thy slaughter'd Saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold.²⁴

Unfortunately, Milton chose not to write poetry on the Civil War. The reason he did not can only be guessed at, but the lines he addressed to Fairfax at the close of the Second Civil War imply a distaste for a war between his own people and an awareness of the corruption and evil amongst the Parliamentarians. Since his mind moved on epic planes, such an attitude would have prevented him from turning his experience of the Civil War into poetry.

In view of the degenerative or inhibiting effect that involvement in the Civil War had on poets it is not surprising that the only poetry of really first-rate quality was written by the moderate, Andrew Marvell. Marvell had the remarkable ability to retain an objective view of the war and yet not to allow this detachment to inhibit any of the warmth, admiration and compassion he felt for men on both sides. His most famous lines are those on the execution of Charles I, which occur in the middle of a eulogy to Cromwell. The passage seems a fitting climax to Herrick's poem to Charles I written six years before. The sense of the king's grace of bearing, inspirational power and courage that Herrick imparted are all here, profoundly deepened by the tragic drama of the moment:

That thence the Royal Actor born
The Tragick Scaffold might adorn:
While round the armed Bands
Did clap their bloody hands.
He nothing common did or mean
Upon that memorable scene:
But with his keener Eye
The Axes edge did try:
Nor call'd the Gods with vulgar spight
To vindicate his helpless Right,

²⁴H C Beeching, ed., Milton's Poetical Works, (Oxford 1925) p. 84.

But bow'd his comely Head,
Down as upon a Bed.²⁵

No doubt, it was the likeness of the scaffold to a stage that suggested the play metaphor to Marvell, but in depicting the execution in this way he has brilliantly achieved a number of different effects that enrich the poetry. Firstly, it brings a dramatic intensity to the scene, forcing the reader to see the armed soldiers thronged round the scaffold, the executioner with his axe, and the lone figure of Charles dominating everything by the tragic grace and dignity of his bearing. Secondly, the metaphor has an aesthetic distancing effect that changes the execution from being pitiful to something that is impressive and tragic; and lastly, it suggests the sense of unreality that Marvell and many Englishmen must have felt at that event unprecedented in English history - the beheading of their anointed king. This sense of unreality is augmented by his mention of the soldiers clapping. So moved were they by the man's poise and courage that they forgot he was a condemned traitor. But the hands that applaud the "Royal Actor" are also the bloody hands that reveal the harshness of the "murder". In placing "bloody" in an emphatic position at the end of the first quatrain, Marvell has given it brutal force and this has the effect of heightening the King's calm and courageous behaviour. His last moments are made deeply moving by the profound simplicity of the language, the gradual slowing of the rhythm and the gentleness of the final simile.

²⁵ H M Margoliouth, ed., The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell, Third edition, Volume I of Poems, (Oxford 1971) p. 93.

There is a noticeable lessening of intensity in the poetry that was written on the Dutch Wars in the reign of Charles II, and this coincides with the formation of a professional army in the 1660s. It has been noted that, even during the reign of Elizabeth I, there was the beginning of a decline of interest in warfare amongst the upper classes. At the outbreak of the Civil War, fewer than half the Royalists had any training in arms, and their experience in fighting against the Parliamentary troops soured war for them. It confirmed that their traditionally individualistic and dashing way of fighting was no match for the hard discipline of the troops of Cromwell and Fairfax. Not surprisingly, the majority were left with a deep distaste for war, and thus the small professional bodyguard that Charles II appointed, of necessity grew into a professional army.

Occasionally, when an event was notable enough to arouse national feeling - usually when a victory was won - the more public-spirited poets wrote poems of praise. Such a poem is Dryden's "Annus Mirabilis", written partly to celebrate the Duke of Albemarle's naval victory over the Dutch in 1666. Dryden's rendering of the battle is one of the most imaginative and poetic accounts of a sea-fight in English Literature. Yet it is through these very merits that the poem fails to capture the urgency that one finds in war poems written out of a deep sense of involvement. At the most critical time in the battle, when the Dutch and Belgians were bearing down on the badly hit English fleet, Dryden writes:

Silent in smoke of cannon they come on:
 (Such vapours once did fiery Cacus hide.)
 In these the height of pleas'd revenge is shown,
 Who burn contented by another's side.²⁶

and as they close in:

Have you not seen when, whistled from the fist
 Some Falcon stoops at what her eye design'd
 And, with her eagerness, the quarry miss'd,
 Straight flies at cheek, and clips it down the wind,

The dastard Crow, that to the wood made wing,
 And sees the Groves no shelter can afford,
 With her loud Kaws her Craven kind does bring.
 Who safe in numbers cuff the noble Bird.

Among the Dutch thus Albermarl did fare:
 He could not conquer, and disdain'd to flie
 Past hope of safety, 'twas his latest care,
 Like falling Cesar decently to die.²⁷

The first line of this passage "Silent in smoke of cannon they come on" is a magnificent one and vividly captures the silent menace of the enemy fleet approaching through the fog of gun-smoke, but its dramatic effect is progressively lessened by the lengthy metaphorical comparisons that cram the following lines. What happens here is characteristic of the whole poem, and it thus seems that, for Dryden, the rendering of the Dutch war in verse was chiefly a literary exercise, rather than the expression of something he felt deeply. Certainly, this impression is strengthened by the letter he wrote on the poem to Sir Robert Howard, in which he discusses in detail why he chose to write in quatrains, and why Virgil rather than Ovid is his ". . . Master in this poem. I have followed him everywhere, I know not with what success, but I am sure with diligence enough: my Images are many of them

²⁶ Dryden, Poetry, Prose and Plays, Part 83 selected by Douglas Grant, (Cambridge 1952) p. 49.

²⁷ Ibid, Part 86 - 88, p. 49.

copied from him and the rest are imitations of him".²⁸

His other concern was to heroize the Duke of Albermarle and Prince Rupert, whom he felt had been shabbily treated: "they have been low and barren of praise and I have exalted them". Exalting them was a pleasurable duty, he was quick to point out, as "they are incomparably the best subject I have ever had, excepting onely the Royal Family". In exalting them he kept closely to the heroic formula first clearly apparent in early seventeenth century war poetry. Albermarle and Prince Rupert are model heroes. They shun the pomp of war, are compassionate to the wounded, and above all have the ability to inspire their men:

Diffusive of themselves where e'er they pass
They make that warmth in others they expect.²⁹

Dryden's suitable though essentially uninspired treatment of the Dutch Wars reflects the change that had taken place in the English people's consciousness of war since the reign of Elizabeth. The Elizabethans were vividly interested in war, and its merits and evils were a subject of constant and hot debate. In the Seventeenth century, helped on by James I's abhorrence of war and the traumatic experience of the Civil War, this interest faded. At the beginning of the century, many of James I's subjects paid lip service to his belief that the greatest blessing was peace, but secretly yearned for the martial glories of the past. Approximately sixty years later, the vast majority of Charles II's subjects regarded war as a

²⁸ Edward Niles Hooker, ed., The Works of John Dryden : Poems 1649 - 1680, Vol I, (Berkeley 1956) p. 55. Lines 19 - 23.

²⁹ John Dryden, Poetry, Prose and Plays, Part 53, p. 67.

necessary evil which they had as little to do with as possible. War became a business for the specialists, and until the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars, the poets - like Dryden serenely sailing in a boat discussing whether to rhyme or not to rhyme to the noise of guns further down the Channel - took only a cursory interest in it.

CHAPTER IV

THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES
AND THE PRELUDE TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In the eighteenth century, the poets' lack of involvement in war is even more pronounced than in the late seventeenth century. This was a century when the British army was continually engaged in war on the continent, in North America, in India and in Scotland, yet the poets on the whole remained unmoved by the wealth of material for war poems. William Cowper's boredom with war, which he expresses at the beginning of the second book of "The Task", probably echoed the feelings of many:

Oh for a lodge in some vast wilderness
Some boundless contiguity of shade,
Where rumour of oppression and deceit,
Of unsuccessful and successful war
Might never reach me more.¹

However, as in the seventeenth century, a great victory would stir poets to commemorate the event. Their treatment of the subject was invariably heroic; which was only to be expected, since they wrote from reports issued by the army. Any deficiencies in the official accounts were supplied by the poets' imagination. Joseph Addison thus rounds off his picture of Marlborough's dazzling series of victories at Blenheim, Malplaquet, Oudenarde and Ramillies by describing the dead in blood-thirsty detail:

With floods of gore that from the vanquish fell
The marshes stagnate and the rivers swell.
Mountains of slain lye heaped upon the ground
Or midst the roaring of the Danube drowned.²

He also highlights the modesty and heroism of Marlborough and his army by presenting the French army, as Shakespeare

¹William Michael Rossetti, ed., "The Task" in The Poetical Works of William Cowper (London N.D.) p. 133

²Joseph Addison, "The Campaign" in The Works of Joseph Addison, ed. H G Bohn (London 1903) p. 51.

did in "Henry V", as being haughty and insolent and making the fatal mistake of underrating the English.

Proudly he (General Tallard) marches on, and void of
 fear
 Laughs at the shaking of the British spear.
 Vain insolence! with native freedom brave
 The meanest Briton scorns the highest slave.³

Patriotic pride in Britain's traditional freedom forms the theme of two famous songs, "Rule Britannia" and "Hearts of Oak", that were written primarily to bolster the sailors' and soldiers' morale in the War of Jenkin's Ear in 1739 and the Seven Years War in 1757. Evidently one poet, Dr. Mark Akenside, felt too many of the upper classes were taking their freedom to live as they pleased too far, for in 1758, he wrote a lengthy poem sternly rebuking them for neglecting their traditional role of being protectors and leaders in time of war. The professional army had relieved them to a large extent of their military obligations, but they were still expected to officer the new county militias established in 1757. However, as they were allowed to appoint substitutes - which they did freely - the principle of universal personal obligation remained compromised. Akenside's poem is interesting though, for the very fact that he can exhort the gentry by such rhetorical questions and injunctions as these:

Shall war's heroic arts no more engage
 The unbought hand and unsubjected mind?
 Does valour to the race no more belong?

and

Rise! Arm! your Country's living safety prove
 And train her valiant youth and watch her shores,⁴

³ Joseph Addison, The Works Of Joseph Addison, p. 51.

⁴ Mark Akenside, Poetical Works of Dr. Mark Akenside with memoir and critical dissertation by G Gilfillan (Edinburgh 1857) p. 210.

indicates that they had not entirely shrugged off their belief in the traditional code of honour.

Akenside's attempts to awaken the heroic spirit in England undoubtedly went largely unheeded at the time, but towards the end of the century the French Revolution set in motion a chain of events that was to involve the civilian population in foreign war in a manner that was at the time unprecedented in English history. The ideological issues of liberty, nationalism and patriotism that underlay the conflict, as well as its huge scale, jerked the people out of their customary indifference to war, and the poetry of the Napoleonic Wars reflects this new awareness.

The poets most deeply concerned with this war were Coleridge, Southey and Wordsworth, who had passionately supported the French Revolution, regarding it as a triumph of liberty over oppression. According to Hazlitt, Coleridge "hailed the rising orb of liberty, since quenched in darkness and blood, and had kindled his affections at the blaze of the French Revolution and sang for joy when the towers of the Bastille and the proud places of the insolent and the oppressor fell".⁵ They were horrified when Britain joined the Coalition of monarchies in February 1793, which aimed at crushing the new republic. Torn between patriotism and radicalism, Coleridge, after affirming his love for Britain, wrote:

Yet still my voice, unaltered, sang defeat
To all that braved the tyrant-quelling lance,
And shame too long delay'd and vain retreat!
For ne'er, O Liberty! with partial aim
I dimm'd thy light or damped thy holy flame;

⁵Richard W Armour & Raymond Howes, ed., Coleridge The Talker. A series of contemporary descriptions and comments (New York 1960) p. 255.

But blessed the paeans of delivered France,
And hung my head and wept at Britain's name.⁶

Wordsworth records a very similar turmoil of feeling
in Book X of the "Prelude":

I rejoiced
Yea, afterwards - truth most painful to record!-
Exulted in the triumph of my soul,
When Englishmen by thousands were o'thrown....
A conflict of sensations without name
When in the congregation bending all
To their great Father, prayers were offered up.
Or praises for our Countries Victories
I only, like an uninvited Guest
Whom no one owned, sate silent, shall I add
Fed on the day of vengeance yet to come.⁷

But what is most interesting about their poetry is that their
hatred of this particular war led them to examine the grim
facts of war, which had been totally ignored since the
Elizabethans. Coleridge's condemnation of the people who sat
at home revelling in war, and who through ignorance were unable
to consider the terrible cost of war to the soldier, anticipates
the anger and bitterness of Siegfried Sassoon in the First
World War.

Secure from actual warfare, we have loved
To swell the war-whoop, passionate for war!
Alas! for ages ignorant of all
Its ghastlier workings (famine or blue plague,
Battle, or siege, or flight through wintry snows)
We, this whole people, have been clamorous
For war and bloodshed; animating sports
The which we for as a thing to talk of,
Spectators and not combatants ...

Boys and Girls,
And women that would groan to see a child
Pull off an insect's leg, all read of war,
The best amusement of our morning meal!
As if the soldier died without a wound;
As if the fibres of this Godlike frame
Were gored without a pang; as if the wretch
Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds
Passed off to Heaven, translated and not killed;

⁶ S T Coleridge, "France: An Ode" in The Complete Poetical and Dramatic Works of Samuel T Coleridge, ed. James Dykes Campbell (London 1893) p. 125.

⁷ William Wordsworth, The Prelude Book X (Lines 259 - 263 and 265 - 270) ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford 1959)

As though he had no wife to pine for him
 No God to judge him!⁸

The callous enjoyment of the civilians eagerly discussing war at breakfast time contrasts strikingly with the images of the wounded and the dead soldiers and the mourning wife. As in Shakespeare's indictment of war in Williams' speech in "Henry V," the soldier's fate is doubly terrible, because in doing bloody deeds he dies in a graceless state.

Wordsworth saw with sadness and bitterness that the threat from the anti-revolutionary and monarchical powers outside France's borders led directly to the rise of the extremist element in Paris:

In France, the Men who for their desperate ends
 Had plucked up mercy by the roots
 Were glad of this new enemy. Tyrants strong before
 In devilish pleas were ten times stronger now,
 And thus beset with foes on every side
 The goaded land wax'd mad.⁹

Few writers have conveyed more graphically than Wordsworth the appalling frenzy and the wild, indiscriminate slaughter of Robespierre's Reign of Terror, which started in September 1793. Beginning with the powerful metaphor:

Domestic carnage now filled all the year
 With Feast days¹⁰

that brings out the mad zest of Robespierre and the Jacobins he perverted, he suggests the unending thirst for blood by the rapid listing of their victims and by the hammering repetition of "head":

⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude" in Coleridge's Poetical Works, Lines 88 - 124, ed. E H Coleridge, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1969) p. 259.

⁹ William Wordsworth, The Prelude Book X (Lines 330 - 336) p. 382.

¹⁰ Ibid, Lines 356 - 363.

. . . the old Man from the chimney hook,
 The Maiden from the bosom of her Love,
 The Mother from the Cradle of her Babe,
 The Warrior from the Field, all perished, all
 Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks
 Head after head, and never heads enough
 For those that bade them fall.¹¹

Southey was not as fearlessly direct in his youth as Wordsworth and Coleridge, and certainly not a poet of their calibre. His poems are nevertheless of great interest, as they reflect an extreme change in attitude, which, to a lesser degree is reflected in Wordsworth's poetry. Southey's youthful sympathies with the French Revolution and his anger with Britain for joining the coalition of monarchies led him to denounce war - all war - completely. He did this by writing two ballads, which were published in the "Morning Post" in 1798, in which he pointed out the havoc and misery caused by two favourite English military heroes, Henry V and the Duke of Marlborough. In the ballad "Henry V and the Hermit of Dreux". the old hermit chastises the king for the suffering he has caused the innocent inhabitants of Dreux:

"I used to see the youths run down
 And watch the dripping oar,
 As pleasantly their viols
 Came softly to the shore.

King Henry, many a blacken'd corpse
 I now see floating down!
 Thou man of blood! repent in time,
 And leave this leagured town."¹²

"The Battle of Blenheim", which still finds place in school anthologies, is justly famous for the bland but immensely telling way it attacks war:

¹¹ Robert Southey, Southey's Poetical Works, ed. M L H Fitzgerald (London 1909) p. 625.

¹² Ibid, p. 365.

" With fire and sword the country round
 Was wasted far and wide,
 And many a chiding mother then,
 And new-born baby died;
 But things like that, you know, must be
 At every famous victory,

They say it was a shocking sight
 After the field was won:
 For many thousand bodies here
 Lay rotting in the sun;
 But things like that, you know, must be
 After a famous victory.¹³

In these verses, the jolly ballad metre, the refrain "famous victory" and the mild conversational tone of the father are used with striking ironic effect, contrasting as they do with the citation of war's horrors.

It is only when one comes to read the poetry written by Southey and Wordsworth in the last stages of the Napoleonic Wars, that one realises how transitory were their anti-war feelings. Both underwent a complete reversal of attitude and became ardent patriots. Whereas in the past they had sought to express their own personal views of the war, which ran sharply contrary to those of the majority ; by 1816, they had become the voice of the British public, which glorified in the victory of Waterloo and idolised Wellington.

Wordsworth attempted to rationalise his change of sentiment by reasoning that Napoleon had become a tyrant who threatened to subjugate the whole of Europe, and thus Britain had changed from being an oppressor to a liberator. This to a great extent was true, but what one misses in the series of poems entitled "Dedicated to Liberty" is the firm contact with

¹³ Robert Southey, Southey's Poetical Works, p. 365.

reality and the sensitivity to suffering evident in Book X of "The Prelude", written during and after the Revolutionary War. Only in his impressive poem on the French army's disastrous retreat from Moscow in the winter of 1812 does one see what a powerful war poet he could have been. As in his poems celebrating Waterloo, he works on a broad canvas; but while in the "Thanksgiving Odes" the images of war and of rejoicing England are vague and abstract, in this poem, the vision of the huge malignant force of the Russian winter, personified as a warrior king, mercilessly destroying the French Army, is a forceful and exact one. These lines from the last section of the poem capture vividly the hopelessness of the French army's position, pitted against winter, and the terrible desolation of the scene:

Fleet the Tartar's reinless steed,
 But fleeter far the pinions of the Wind,
 Which from the Siberian cave the Monarch freed,
 And sent him forth, with squadrons of his kind,
 And bade the snow their ample backs bestride
 And to the battle ride.
 No pitying voice commands a halt,
 No courage can repel their dire assault;
 Distracted, spiritless, benumbed and blind,
 Whole legions sink - and, in one instant find
 Burial and death: look for them - and descry,
 When morn returns, beneath the clear blue sky,
 A soundless waste, a trackless vacancy.¹⁴

Southey's writing of numerous patriotic and heroic war poems between 1813 and 1816 may be partly attributed to the fact that he was made Poet Laureate in 1813, a position with the principal duty of recording important national events in verse. But it was also clear from his metrical tales, "Joan of Arc", "Maeve" and "Roderick, the Last of the Goths", which he wrote

¹⁴William Wordsworth, "The French Army in Russia" in Poems of William Wordsworth VI, ed. W Knight (London 1896) p. 108 - 109.

between 1793 and 1816, that he was fascinated by the heroic, chivalrous side of war, even though he had only a vague, romantic notion of battle. It would seem therefore, that Southey constantly sympathized with the heroic tradition, and that his early early attack on war was ephemeral, perhaps a mere political expedient, to be cast aside with his youthful radicalism.

Southey and Wordsworth's volte face and subsequent heroic presentation of war did not escape the sharp satirical eye of Byron, and in the cantos from "Don Juan" that deal with the fall of Ismail, he mockingly castigates them for their euphemisms and lack of truth:

Oh blood and thunder! and oh, blood and wounds
 These are but vulgar oaths, as you may deem,
 Too gentle reader; and most shocking sounds:
 And so they are; yet thus is Glory's dream
 Unriddled, and as my true Muse expounds
 At present such things, since they are her theme,
 So be they her inspirers! Call them Mars,
 Bellona, what you will - they mean but wars.¹⁵

'Carnage (So Wordsworth tells you) is God's daughter'
 If he speak true, she is Christ's sister, and
 Just now behaved as in the Holy Land.¹⁶

But then the fact's a fact - and 'tis part
 Of a true poet to escape from fiction
 Whene'er he can; for there is little art
 In leaving verse more free from the restriction
 Of truth than prose, unless to suit the mart
 For what is sometimes called poetic diction
 And that outrageous appetite for lies
 Which Satan angles with for souls, like flies.¹⁷

He himself, like the poets of the First World War, attempted to drive home to the uncomprehending public the horror and savagery of war by stressing the physical suffering and the

¹⁵ George Gordon Byron (Lord), Don Juan (Canto 8 verse I)
 ed. John Austen (London 1926 rept. 1930) p. 204.

¹⁶ Ibid, Canto 8 Verse IX, p. 205

¹⁷ Ibid, Canto 8 Verse LXXXVI, p. 221.

ugliness of death. In these lines he describes graphically the state of innocent civilians:

. . . there lay
Thousands of slaughtered men, a yet warm group
Of murdered women...

A female child often tried to stoop
And hide her little palpitating breast
Amidst the bodies lull'd in bloody rest.¹⁸

Throughout the three cantos on war, he points back to the civilians, who, from indifference or from misguided ideas of honour and glory or from egotistical ambition, make the wars that bring destruction to thousands and reduce men to savagery. All the callousness of the civilians is concentrated in the appalling person of the Empress Catherine, who smiled in joy to hear that thirty thousand of the enemy had been slain, ignored the fact that almost as many of her soldiers had lost their lives in achieving this slaughter, was amused by General Suvorov's fumbling attempts to present this news in rhyme, and, all the while she was reading the dispatch, was flirting with Don Juan, who had conveyed it.

Although Byron concentrated on presenting the cruel and absurd side of war, he was honest and perceptive enough to recognise that there is a positive side to it, and there are many incidents in the siege of Ismail that reveal his admiration of courage and endurance. The satirical tone is not suspended for a moment, yet, as in these lines on the death of the Khan's deformed and illegitimate son who

. . . died all game and bottom,
To save a sire, who blush'd that he begot him.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lord Byron, Don Juan, Canto 8 Verse XCI, p. 222

¹⁹ Ibid, Canto 8 Verse CX, p. 225.

one can sense his approval of loyalty and sacrifice. Something too of the magnificence of the old Khan's death is captured in the verse that describes him, after seeing his five sons cut down, hurl himself furiously at the Russian bayonets.

So Byron does in fact make one of the most complete and articulate commentaries on war in the nineteenth century, yet in the context of the whole work neither his condemnation of war nor his presentation of courage, endurance and loyalty anger or stir as one would expect such subject matter to do. This is mainly because Byron's method is rambling and accretive. War, it seems, is just another of society's failings, not the ultimate failure, and this effect is increased by the constant levity of the tone and by Byron's inability to keep his personal hatred of various well-known people out of the poem. His attack on Wellington at the beginning of the ninth canto is obviously unbalanced, especially when he refers to him as "the best of cut-throats" and reduces Waterloo to a "lucky blunder". His attack may come as a welcome change from the rather sickening homage so many poets, including Southey, paid to Wellington, but it does have the unfortunate effect of making the reader question Byron's judgements in the whole poem.

Another major reason why Byron's condemnation of war fails to convince is put forward by Bernard Bergonzi: "Byron eloquently condemns war, but not without reservations: he runs up against the hard paradox that to be a complete pacifist is to acquiesce in tyranny. Some wars - wars in defence of freedom as opposed to wars fought for mere empty glory - are just.

And here the paradox closes its jaws, for all wars are claimed as being in defence of freedom by those who initiate them".²⁰ Byron's commitment to the cause of Greek independence, for which he was ultimately to give his life, is, of course, admirable, but it does highlight the gulf between his vision of war and that of the two major poets of the First World War, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, who condemned war - all war, totally and without reservation. "Already I have comprehended a light" wrote Owen from the Somme in 1917, "which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ's essential commands was passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace but never resort to arms".²¹ Byron unfortunately did not write any poetry out of actual experience of war, but one wonders, with his honesty and perception, whether he did continue to uphold his belief in the glory of the Greek cause when he was directly involved in the bloodthirsty struggle through which it was achieved.

Whether for any of the reasons cited above or not, Byron did not shake the heroic tradition in poetry. Poets continued to believe in the glory of battle and, in fact, the nineteenth century in England was a period of profound war nostalgia. It is in this period that poets, hungry for martial glory that the long peace after Waterloo had denied them, ransacked the past for heroic deeds. The Civil War and Armada provided excellent heroic material, but the most popular source was the battle-torn history of Scotland and Ireland, whose

²⁰Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight, (London 1965) p. 14.

²¹Wilfred Owen, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. C Day Lewis, quoted from the Memoirs of Edmund Blunde (Oxford 1931) p. 167.

heroes were sufficiently remote and clouded in mist to have an additional glamour. The taste for Highland heroes had been created by Scott's narrative poems, which began with "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" in 1805. They are full of bonneted heroes, with flashing eyes and swords, who fight indomitably until they are slashed down, and who speak an odd theatrical English spattered with words like "gang", "couthie" and "slee". Scott's successors were Campbell, Macaulay and Moore, whose poems and songs at their best have a bombastic, rousing enthusiasm and at their worst are cloyingly sentimental and jingoistic. Campbell's poem "The Young Hero" furnishes a good example of the latter variety. Beginning with:

How glorious fall the valiant, sword in hand
In front of battle for their native land!²²

He goes on to paint a dismal picture of the "recreant outcast, the stain of his breed" who will not fight, and who leaves his country's honour to be upheld by the aged.

Campbell's chief objection to such shoddy behaviour seems to be an aesthetic one:

Leave not . . . the man of age (a sight unbless'd)
To welter in the combat's foremost thrust,
His hoary head dishevell'd in the dust,
And venerable bosom bleeding bare.²³

Set against this "unbless'd" and presumably nauseating sight is the young hero's corpse, which for some unexamined reason Campbell imagines will be beautiful:

But youth's fair form, though fallen, is ever fair,
And beautiful in death the boy appears,
The hero boy, that dies in blooming years:

²²Arthur Burrell, ed., Heroic and Patriotic Verse, (London) p. 148.

²³Ibid, p. 149.

In man's regret he lives, and woman's tears,
 More sacred than in life, and lovelier far,
 For having perished in the front of war.²⁴

When war against Russia was declared in 1854, the poets who had sung England, Scotland, Ireland, and Imperial Rome's great battles with such fervour and enthusiasm were strangely silent. There is little doubt that this was due to the advent of the war-correspondent. A month after the outbreak of war, the Times commissioned William Howard Russell to go to the Crimea to send back eyewitness accounts of the war. Army headquarters did not welcome this innovation, but Russell was both determined enough and charming enough to get to where he wanted to be, which was in the thick of the fighting. Much to the annoyance and embarrassment of the commanders-in-chief, he severely criticized their mishandling of the war, and brought the appalling suffering of the soldiers to the notice of the people at home. For poets with their minds on heroes, Russell's graphic accounts of cholera, dysentery and futile sieges could not have been inspiring material, and on the whole they chose to ignore it. By the end of 1854 however, Tennyson, the Poet Laureate, seems to have felt that the British public's morale was in need of a boost, and ironically, he found his opportunity in one of the saddest bungles of the war, the charge of the Light Brigade.

Writing a few minutes after reading Russell's report of the charge, Tennyson produced a poem which turns a military disaster into a celebration of the magnificent discipline of the British soldier. No war poem has been more slated by modern

²⁴ Arthur Burrell, ed., Heroic and Patriotic Verse, p. 149.

critics than this one. Silkin says that it "bears little relation to actuality and tells us nothing about the fear of the men and nothing about their courage either".²⁵ Bergonzi describes it as "One of the most notorious and wretchedly unforgettable specimens in a thoroughly atavistic mode . . . Tennyson writes with a large and confident innocence about the state of mind of the unhappy cavalrymen forced to charge the Russian Guns".²⁶ It is true that Tennyson was oblivious to the private feelings of the individuals who made up the Light Brigade, but there is nothing in Cecil Woodham-Smith's carefully researched account to suggest that the manner in which Tennyson presented the Charge deviated from the truth. The outstanding features of the exploit were the perfect order in which the Light Brigade moved down the valley despite the devastating cross-fire, and the ferocity of the actual charge itself at the Russian guns; and these features Tennyson conveys vividly by the rhythm which echoes the beat of the horses' hooves trotting, then galloping down the valley, by the simple but compelling language and by the repetition. There are few poems in English literature that contain more of the excitement of battle, and Bergonzi and Silkin should admit that there can be excitement in war, especially in a cavalry charge, as well as the terror and boredom which predominate in modern mechanized warfare.

Silkin's condemnation of the attitude towards war that Tennyson expresses in *Maud* (1855) is justified, however. In

²⁵Jon Silkin, Out of Battle, (London 1972) p. 26.

²⁶Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight, p. 16.

²⁷Cecil Woodham-Smith, The Reason Why (London 1953)

the first part of the poem Tennyson exposes the moral sickness which he felt pervaded every stratum of English society in the 1850s, particularly the trading class. With alarming ignorance, he welcomes the war with Russia, because he regards it as a purging force that will restore the glory of British manhood.

And it was but a dream, yet it lighten'd my despair
 When I thought that a war would arise in defence of the
right,
 That an iron tyranny now should bend or cease,
 The glory of manhood stand on his ancient height.²⁸

The lack of realism in this attitude is made clear when he tries to visualize the coming war in more concrete terms. The strident tone evident in the lines above becomes more pronounced, and the imagery is melodramatic and confused, as in these two lines describing the flame from the cannon:

And dreadful-grinning mouths of the fortress, flames
 The blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire.²⁹

Silkin comments "For a major poet, 'blood-red blossom' subsuming blood within the image of blossom, is hardly the most credible truthful image..."³⁰ One is struck too by the jarring rhythm, which accentuates the offensiveness of the imagery. When Tennyson echoed in verse another man's direct experience of battle, as he did Russell's in the "Charge of the Light Brigade", he produced a poem which, although it celebrates only the heroic aspects of the men, is a stirring representation of that charge. Without such an aid he is startlingly ~~ingenuous~~ ingenuous.

The unfortunate features of Tennyson's war poetry - the romanticism of war, the remoteness from reality, and the strident

²⁸ Alfred Tennyson (Lord) "Maud" Part IV, The Works of Tennyson, ed. Hallam Tennyson (London 1910) p. 228.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 229.

³⁰ Jon Silkin, Out of Battle, p. 27.

or sentimental tone were to recur later in the century, from 1870, in war poems that recorded the British Army's imperialistic struggles in Africa and India. They reflect what the British public expected of its army in action, which was to be impeccably cool under fire, never to retreat, and to die praising God, Queen and country; despite the fact that at home, the non-ranking British soldier was still reviled and no respectable man would have dreamed of joining the ranks. The British Army's long unhappy history of poor relations with its public stretched back to the disbandment of the Commonwealth army at the time of the Restoration. Only five years after the disbandment an observer wrote of the guard at Sandown castle "A company of Foot was sent from Dover to help guard the place; pitiful weak fellows, half starved and eaten up with vermin, whom the Governor of Dover cheated of half their pay and the other half they spent in drink".³¹

As Corelli Barnett writes of this passage in his history of the British Army: "Such descriptions became increasingly general. A vicious spiral had begun. Soon soldiering reached the low place in British society it was to occupy until the Great War in 1914; an occupation despised by the middle and working classes as a disgrace hardly less than prison. Not until 1914 was the British army again generally to receive the rank and file of the social standing of Cromwell's troopers".³² But the man who began the change in the public's attitude to the soldier was Rudyard Kipling, who published his first verses on the British "Tommy" in 1892. He revealed to the

³¹ Corelli Barnett, *History of the British Standing Army A D 1660 to 1700* (London 1894) p. 448 in *Britain and Her Army, 1509 - 1970: A Political and Social Survey* (London 1970) p. 139.

³² *Ibid*, p. 139.

British people what sort of men made up "this fellowship of professional fighters, who rejected the proprieties and inhibitions of Victorian society, who appeared sometimes in the police court news as drunken disorderly reprobates, and sometimes as heroes of romance, the 'Thin Red Line' of Balaclava, the storming column of Delhi, the defenders of Rorke's Drift".³³ His achievement was that he gave the first adequate account of these men in literature since Shakespeare's "Henry V." Kipling had come into contact with British soldiers in India when he was a child, and later, when he returned to work there as a journalist. Talkative and inquisitive, Kipling took full advantage of his job to cultivate the acquaintance of both officers and men. So well did he get to know the rank and file, that it was to him that the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Frederick Roberts, turned when he wanted to find out their state of feeling.

The fruits of Kipling's observations of the ordinary soldier were a series of verses entitled "Barrack Room Ballads", written in the Cockney dialect. At first, they were directed at the civilians who spurned the soldier in peacetime and praised him in war:

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that,
And chuck him out, the brute
But it's Saviour of 'is country when the guns
begin to shoot: 34

Having made the intention behind his ballads clear, Kipling went on to bring his soldiers vividly alive by making them reveal themselves in first-person monologues. The impressive thing about these ballads is their honesty and their completeness.

³³ Corelli Barnett, Britain and Her Army, p. 139.

³⁴ Rudyard Kipling, "Tommy" in The Complete Barrack Room Ballads of Rudyard Kipling, ed. Charles Carrington, (London 1974) p. 33.

The British soldier appears as an unassuming hero, as well as a coward who, contrary to tradition, can break and run, and as an honest, kindly man who recognises the courage of his enemies:

So 'ere's to you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, at your 'ome in the
Soudan
You're a pore benighted 'eathen but a first class
fightin' man
And 'ere's to you Fuzzy-Wuzzy, with your
'ayrick head of 'air -
You big black boundin' beggar - for you broke
a British square.³⁵

Kipling's sense of mission was not confined to promoting better relations between soldiers and civilians. Towards the end of the century, he came under the influence of W E Henley, an imperialist poet whose belief in the supremacy of the British race and Empire bordered on fanaticism. Henley, who was described by his critics as a man of "Titanic individuality" and "a bare sack with his amazing passions and vast generousities"³⁶ regarded Kipling as a promising disciple, and dedicated "The Song of the Sword" to him. This is a poem of startling violence, which attempts to arouse the heroic spirit of the Anglo-Saxon warriors through his reference to the sword as:

The War thing, the Comrade
Father of honour
The giver of kingship ³⁷

In the last section of the poem the kennings give way to a bloodthirsty, but ecstatic contemplation of the sword in action:

Clear, singing, clean slicing
Sweet spoken, soft finishing;
Making death beautiful
Life but a coin.³⁸

³⁵ Rudyard Kipling, "Fuzzy Wuzzy (Soudan Expeditionary Force)" in Barrack Room Ballads, p. 54.

³⁶ The Athenaeum No 3951, July 18, 1903.

³⁷ W E Henley, "The Song of the Sword" in Poems: A Book of Verses : London Voluntanes (London 1901) p. 51.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 51.

arms race between Britain and the continental powers, which by the 1890s was approaching crisis point. There were very few voices of moderation which could stand up against the vociferousness of the imperialists, and Kipling, despite his frequent urges for stoicism and self control, was swept up with the majority.

When war did finally come in 1899 in the form of a confrontation between the British and the Boers, the English public looked to the imperialist poets, and especially to Kipling, to interpret the war in heroic terms. Kipling had by the 1890s become the unofficial poet-laureate, revered not only by the soldiers and the man in the street, but by the young intellectuals. H.G.Wells described his influence in one of his novels:

The prevailing force in my undergraduate day was not Socialism but Kiplingism . . . in the middle nineties this spectacled and moustached little figure with its heavy chin and general effect of vehement gesticulation, its wild shouts of boyish enthusiasm for effective force. . . became almost a national symbol.⁴¹

It seems from "The Old Issue", the poem that Kipling wrote two days before the outbreak of hostilities, that he did intend to fulfil the expectations of his public. The poem warns of the malignancy of Kruger's philosophy, and portrays him not as the reactionary, old leader of a bunch of Boer Farmers, but as an ancient and powerful king exceeding the evil of King John, who sought to crush English liberty. By elevating Kruger in this manner, Kipling was raising the whole war to the status of an heroic combat in defence of traditional English liberty.

⁴¹H G Wells, "The New Machiavelli" quoted in Goodbye Dolly Gray, The Story of the Boer War, by Rayne Kruger (London 1967) p. 21.

For a number of reasons, however, Kipling did not continue to treat the war heroically. Firstly, it was difficult to vaunt the imperial cause when things were going very badly for the British. In the first four months of the war, the British troops suffered three major defeats. Secondly, unlike Tennyson, who had made a stirring heroic poem out of a military blunder, Kipling was too immersed in the war. He continued to spend five months of every year in South Africa, and for a short while he was associate-editor of "The Friend" in Bloemfontein when it was taken over by the military for the benefit of the British troops in February 1900. This close association with the war seems to have had an inhibiting effect on his tendency to write in a grand, abstract manner. Instead of the moral counsels and incitements to battle for the imperial cause found in such a poem as "Hymn Before Action", he turned back to the style of "Barrack Room Ballads" and wrote a series of poems eulogizing the soldier in the ranks and various branches of the armed services. Unfortunately, these ballads are inferior to their predecessors, lacking their racy energy and directness; and certainly, they severely disappointed his more intellectual public in England:

We had hoped he would have stormed Parnassus rather than
to be content to stand with the mountebanks of rhyme
at the foot of the Olympian hill.⁴²

wrote Marie Corelli after reading his first contribution to the Boer War effort, "The Absent-Minded Beggar". It was an immensely popular and sentimental view of the typical English soldier

⁴² Marie Corelli, *A Social Note on the War : Patriotism or Self Advertisement?* Birmingham 1900, quoted in Drummer Hodge by M. van Wyk Smith, p. 105.

which came to be sung in every English musical hall.

Underneath this facade of jolly morale-boosting, Kipling was deeply distressed by the bungling ineptitude of the British conducting of the war. The gross mishandling of troops, the ignorance of conditions and the arrogance of the British command were completely at variance with his heroic vision of the Empire, but apart from "Stellenbosch", in which with bitter sarcasm he castigated the incompetence of some British generals, and a glimpse of a more sombre, sensitive mood in "Bridge in the Karoo" and "Chant Pagan" he held back his anger and disillusionment at the failure of the imperial cause until the end of the war.

W.E. Henley, on the other hand, felt all of Kipling's anger, but had none of his sensitivity. His reaction to "Black Week in December" 1899 was to remind the troops, in schoolboyish, belligerent language, of their heroic past, and to blast their performance with incredulous scorn:

Ours is the race
 That tore the Spaniard's ruff,
 That flung the Dutchman by the breech,
 The Frenchman by the scruff;
 Through his diurnal round of dawns
 Our drum-tap squires the sun;
 And yet, an old mad burgher- man
 Can put us on the run!⁴³

Hopelessly out of touch with the real military situation in South Africa and inadequate as poetry though "Remonstrance" may seem to be nowadays, at the time it did express the heroic and bellicose sentiments of a large number of people in England

⁴³ W E Henley, "Remonstrance" in For England's Sake: Verses and Songs in Time of War, (London 1900) p. 2.

and set the tone for a host of similar martial poems which were eagerly published in the daily newspapers and literary periodicals such as the "Athenaeum" and the "Academy". Apart from Henley, the best known exponents of the heroic myth were the poet-laureate Alfred Austin, Algernon Swinburne and Henry Newbolt. In spite of their popularity, Austin's and Swinburne's verse on the Boer War may be dismissed, for it merely echoes Henley's views of the war and adumbrates his faults. Newbolt's is more interesting, for as well as the occasional flash of real poetic merit, it gives expression to the public-school ethos that informed the attitudes of the majority of the English officers of the Boer War.

The poem that had made his reputation and summed up the message that carried men, clear-eyed and confident through the years before the war and into war itself was "Vitai Lampada", 1897, with its refrain of:

"Play up! play up! and play the game!"⁴⁴

In the opening stanza the hero-to-be is encouraged to play an honourable game of cricket for his school by these words from the captain, accompanied by a manly blow on his shoulder. The second stanza, however, is the really significant part of the poem, as it shows how Newbolt saw the public school ethic translated into the heroic ethic of the adult world:

The sand of the desert is sodden red, -
 Red with the wreck of the 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!" 45

⁴⁴ Henry Newbolt, Collected Poems, 1897 - 1907 (London 1907) p. 131.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 131.

The splendid though often foolishly wasteful conduct of many of the ex-public-school officers in the Boer War provided Newbolt with excellent material for poems in the mode of "Vital Lampada". He wrote four, but none has the verve of the original poem, which, if it makes modern readers smile, at least transmits something of the attraction of the public school heroic code. Newbolt's critics, however, were delighted with his Boer War contribution. "The Academy", 16 December 1899, rated "The Volunteer" as the best poem the war produced, and Newbolt's reputation flourished, so that when Kipling retired from public life in 1902, he was the new favourite. There is one poem, however, "Waggon Hill", in his collection of Boer War poems, that the critics might with some justification have singled out. It too is a celebration of the English heroic spirit, but instead of unalloyed public-school sentiments and images of the playing fields, he recalls the gallantry of Sir Francis Drake, and makes impressive use of elemental imagery of wind, rain and sea. The effect of this is to impart dignity and a feeling of tradition to the heroic action of Colonel Ian Hamilton and his thousand men at "Waggon Hill" near Ladysmith on 5 January 1900. They held the Platrand ridge against double the number of Boers and eventually, after sixteen hours of desperate fighting in torrential rain and wind, beat them off. In the lines below, Newbolt conveys the terrible effort and endurance of the Gordons and the Devonians in this battle by his use of bleak storm images and the number of words which suggest extreme muscular tension. The regular rhythm enhances the effect of the images, for it conveys a sense of the perfect discipline of the men who beat off attack after attack:

Valour of England gaunt and whitening,
 Far in a South land brought to bay,
 Locked in a death grip all day tightening,
 Waited the end in twilight gray.
 Battle and storm and the sea-dog's way!
 Drake from his long rest turned again,
 Victory lit thy steel with lightning,
 Devon, O Devon in wind and rain!"⁴⁶

While it was the imperialist poets that dominated the literary response to the war, there were several poets, the most notable being Thomas Hardy, who reacted sharply to the jingoistic form of heroism that Henley and his fellows served up.

Hardy's response to "Black Week" was a strange, evocative poem, "The Souls of the Slain", in which the returning souls of the men killed in battle discover that they are remembered not for their brave deeds but for their

". . . old homely acts,
 And the long-ago commonplace facts
 Of our lives - held by us as scarce part of our story
 And rated as nought!"⁴⁷

The poem thus cuts at the core of the heroic tradition, which holds that fame on the battlefield is of more value than life. In a slightly lighter vein, but also written with the intention of debunking the heroic myth, is "The Colonel's Soliloquy". The old colonel, honourably scarred from past wars and going out to fight what he knows will be his last battle, presents an ideal subject for an heroic eulogy, but Hardy deliberately deflates him:

"And where those villians ripped me in the flitch
 With their old iron in my early time,
 I'm apt at a change of wind to feel a twitch
 Or at a change of clime."⁴⁸

⁴⁶Henry Newbolt, Collected Poems p. 141.

⁴⁷Thomas Hardy, Poems of the Past and Present, (London 1927) p. 28.

⁴⁸Ibid, p. 10.

Yet, despite the earthiness of "flitch", the ageing man's aches and pains, and the blotchiness of his face described in the following verse, there is no hint of satire in the poem, and what emerges through the British understatement is a very real awareness of the old colonel's gallantry.

Hardy's treatment of the colonel indicates that he hated cant and the sentimentalization of the soldier, but that he recognized and admired the heroic spirit. This combination of insistence on unvarnished reality and the need to find heroism in war is also found in "Drummer Hodge", which Malvern van Wyk Smith, in his recent study of the poetry of the Boer War, considered his best war poem and "a full and profoundly moving record of the humanitarian response to war."⁴⁹

The hero in this poem is an unknown and homely young soldier whose death is so unimportant and unremarkable that, to his fellow men, it is merely a matter of hasty disposal of the body:

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
 Uncoffined - just as found:
 His landmark is a kopje crest
 That breaks the veldt around;
 And foreign constellations west
 Each night above his mound.

Young Hodge the Drummer never knew -
 Fresh from his Wessex home -
 The meaning of the broad Karoo,
 The Bush, the dusty loam,
 And why uprose to nightly view
 Strange stars amid the gloam

Yet portion of that unknown plain
 Will Hodge for ever be;
 His homely Northern breast and brain
 Grow to some Southern tree,
 And strange-eyed constellations reign
 His stars eternally.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Malvern van Wyk Smith, Drummer Hodge, The Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902, (Oxford 1978) p. 146.

⁵⁰ Thomas Hardy, Poems of the Past & Present, p. 19.

The casual, impersonal nature of Hodge's burial, established by the use of a pronoun to refer to other soldiers and the word "throw" at the beginning of the poem, contrasts with the very different treatment nature accords his body. The monuments that she gives him, the kopje and the stars, are immeasurably grander than anything man can raise to his heroes and thus Hodge, unhonoured and forgotten, is apotheosized.

The heroic transformation of Hodge is admirably done, for by the stark reality of the first two lines, the insistence on his homeliness and the concreteness of the imagery, Hardy has brought a veracity which underlies the more elevated parts of the poem and allows them their full emotive force without any shade of sentimentality.

"Drummer Hodge" is the finest war poem in the stream of anti-imperialist and pacifist poetry that the liberal, humanitarian movements of the nineteenth century inspired. It compares closely and favourably with another fine, and deceptively simple poem, "Futility", written by Wilfred Owen in 1917. The starting point of "Futility" is also the death in battle of a young soldier from a rural background and nature, not man, is again the compassionate force:

Move him into the sun -
Gently its touch awoke him once⁵¹..

It is in the second half of "Futility" that one sees how the sensibility of the two poets diverges. Like Hardy, Owen gradually invests the comforting nature imagery with a cosmic grandeur, to reveal the symbolic significance of this single death; but whereas the constellations proclaim the heroism of

⁵¹ Wilfred Owen, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 58.

Hodge's sacrifice and that of all seemingly insignificant men caught in the cataclysmic experience of war, Owen's image of the sun waking the cold earth only emphasizes the tragic destruction of this life, and of the whole evolutionary process it represents.

The parallel between "Drummer Hodge" and "Futility" substantiates Malvern van Wyk Smith's important thesis "that the Boer War marked the clear emergence of the kind of poetry we have come to associate almost exclusively with World War I". As well as pointing out the significance of "Drummer Hodge", M. van Wyk Smith has brought to light a number of poems, mostly unknown, which express the anger and sense of protest of the trench poems. Of these, the most impressive are "War" by A G Harman, and "Astronomy" by A E Housman.

Although it does not relate directly to the events of the Boer War, Harman's sonnet was written during the conflict, and it reflects the anti-war feeling of the time. The poem takes the form of a harsh corollary to some lines from a letter of Napoleon to Josephine, in which he expresses breezy confidence about the coming battle. The army clichés "affairs go well", "day will tell the issue" and the brisk, businesslike tone of Napoleon's style contrast vividly with the anguish and bitterness of the "issue":

Fate ran out the spell
Of fifty thousand in that game of hell.
Rotting they lay, recorded by no pain 52

The poem ends with a dramatic half line that recalls

⁵²E.G.Harman, Poems (London 1920) quoted in M. van Wyk Smith :Drummer Hodge, p. 150 - 151.

the sadness and bitterness of Owen's ending of "Dulce et Decorum Est":

Friend, that was war. 53

A.E.Housman's "Astronomy" is reminiscent of "Drummer Hodge", since it too divests a soldier's death of any heroic glamour, and substitutes for it the grand immensity of the southern stars. As in the comparison between "Drummer Hodge" and "Futility", Housman differs from Hardy in his view of nature's attitude to man. The great constellations move over the body of the dead soldier with sublime indifference to his fate, and far from bequeathing him any nobility, they point to the absurdity of his aspirations:

For pay and medals, name and rank,
 Things he has not found,
 He hove the Cross to heaven and sank
 The pole-star underground.

And now he does not even see
 Signs of the nadir roll
 At night over the ground where he
 Is buried with the pole. 54

These few examples from the work of Hardy, Harman and Housman do indicate that qualities normally regarded as peculiar to the poetry written out of the experience on the Western Front from 1916 to 1918 were present in some of the pacifist verse of the Boer War. Harman's view of war antecedes the bleak, satirical vision of Sassoon and there is much of Owen and Rosenberg's feeling of cosmic immensity in "Drummer Hodge" and "Astronomy".

Yet despite the force and real merit of these poems

⁵³ E.G. Harman, Poems, quoted in M. van Wyk Smith's Drummer Hodge, p. 150 - 151.

⁵⁴ A.E. Housman, Last Poems, (London 1922) p. 25.

they made little impact on the literary world or on the general public during the Boer War and in the twelve years preceding the Great War. This can be gauged in part from the fact that, of the large number of soldiers who wrote verse on their experiences during the Boer War, the vast majority wrote in the heroic vein of the imperialist poets, or imitated Kipling's barrack-room style. Julian Ralph, writing from Bloemfontein in 1900, described the huge popularity of Kipling and his effect on aspiring soldier poets:

So deeply has Kipling stirred the Tommy's heart with those verses which treat of or appeal to the soldier that - not to exaggerate ridiculously - one fancies that every tenth man in the ranks aspires to be regarded as a disciple of this inspired and inspiring master.⁵⁵

If Newbolt did not provide quite the same literary inspiration as Kipling, his "Vitai Lampada" certainly rivalled Kipling's verse as a morale-booster, judging from a letter written to the "Spectator" in 1902 by an army chaplain, the Revd. R.H. Rose: "Over and over again, the sick man wasted by wounds and disease; the strong man doomed to inaction on the lines of communication; the man at the very front, - almost within range of the enemy's fire - has been nerved and cheered 'to play the game' against all odds".⁵⁶

A possible reason that the poetry of the anti-imperialist poets did not seriously challenge the dominance of Kipling and Newbolt was that a great deal of the Boer War verse remained uncollected, its public life being as ephemeral as the copy of the newspaper or periodical that printed it. Only

⁵⁵ At Pretoria (London 1901) quoted by M. van Wyk Smith: Drummer Hodge, p. 109 - 110.

⁵⁶ Spectator, 89 (1902) p. 566.

the contributions of the popular established poets went on to be read again in bound volumes, and of these poets, only Hardy could claim to be "established". Thus it was, that fourteen years after the Boer War, Isaac Rosenberg could find no literary mentors in English war poetry, and after ploughing his way through the thumping verse of this period concluded that Walt Whitman in "Beat, Drums, Beat": "has said the noblest thing on war".

Far from slackening, the imperialistic and bellicose fervour of Kipling, Newbolt and Austin increased after the Boer War. In 1902, Kipling poured out his pent-up anger and disillusionment at the failure of the British to live up to his idealistic notion of empire in a long, strident poem, "The Islanders". As well as expressing Kipling's disappointment, this poem also reflected the militant hysteria of the time.

The poor military performance of the British in the Boer War had not escaped the notice of France, Russia and Germany, and after the peace of Vereeniging she found herself faced with increasingly aggressive attitudes. The British reaction was to redouble its efforts to build as many battleships as the combined fleets of Russia and France - a plan conceived before the war; to devise and construct ever more powerful weapons; to encourage volunteer military training and even to consider conscription.

One of the unfortunate effects of this war-mongering was that it made men myopic or reactionary to the social and internal political struggles around them. The followers of Newbolt, who had taken the place of Kipling since his retirement from public life in 1903, either ignored the working-

class and Irish upheavals, or, like William Watson, encouraged stern disciplinary measures:

Arise and conquer while ye can
The foe that in your midst resides.⁵⁷

It is now certain that the frustration caused by such implacable attitudes would have boiled over if the outbreak of war in August 1914 had not brought a temporary end to dissension.

Predictably, the imperialist poets were foremost in encouraging the tremendous enthusiasm for war which swept England then, bringing cheering crowds to Buckingham Palace and thousands of men to the recruiting offices. William Watson outdid himself writing a stream of invective against the Germans, but the most characteristic attitude was to welcome war as a necessary blood-letting, bringing an end to slothfulness, and as a grand opportunity for men to prove they were worthy of their heroic heritage. How soon were the lessons of the Boer War forgotten.

The most unlikely poet to be caught up in the clamour for war was Thomas Hardy. In 1908, Hardy had confirmed the pacifist feeling that informs his Boer War poetry by publishing "The Dynasts." This epic drama of the Napoleonic Wars is Hardy's greatest contribution to the literature of war, for it is one of the most balanced and forceful denunciations of armed conflict that ever has been written. Hardy saw with complete clarity the whole brutal pattern of war was to be faithfully repeated in the years 1914 - 1918. He saw that even the weapons of the early nineteenth century made the old heroic mode of fighting

⁵⁷ William Watson, The Poems of William Watson, The True Imperialism, ed. John Jane (London 1904) p. 92.

largely anachronistic (see the destruction of the heroic French guards' regiments by the English cannon at Waterloo); that the best men are invariably killed early in the struggle; that there is an increasing indifference to the expenditure of human life and suffering; and that in the face of such expenditure, victory is hollow. Although Hardy focusses on Napoleon, whom he reveals as a man who steadily loses his humanity, he does not spare the English. The battle of Waterloo is portrayed not as a great victory, but as a holocaust of carnage and suffering. Underlying the brutality is Hardy's deep compassion and his consciousness of the frailty and vulnerability of man. This is particularly movingly conveyed in the "Chorus of the Years", where he speaks with sensitivity and simplicity of the spoliation of nature :

Trodden and bruised to a miry tomb
 Are ears that have greened but will never be gold
 And flowers in the bud that will never bloom.⁵⁸

Many of the poets of the First World War used the spoliation of nature as a means of forcing the reader to understand the horrors perpetrated on man in war, but none exceeds Hardy's pathos.

There is no trace of the superb comprehensiveness and insight into war of "The Dynasts" and "Drummer Hodge" in "Men Who March Away", which Hardy published on 5 September 1914. The poem comes as a complete contrast to "The Dynasts", reflecting as it does the aggressive, tub-thumping spirit that surged through England at this time. Hardy himself volunteered no reasons why his attitude to war had changed so radically, but

⁵⁸Thomas Hardy, "The Dynasts . An Epic Drama" in The Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy II, Part Third, scene VIII, (London 1923) p. 483.

one remembers his heroic response in certain of his Boer War poems, and possibly it was this desire to find heroism in war combined with the infectious bellicosity of the nation that swept away his rationality.

The worst feature of "Men Who March Away", as Charles Hamilton Sorley recognised, was its lack of truth. Of the whole poem, and especially the most unfortunate verse which is reminiscent of a bad Salvation Army Hymn:

In our heart of hearts believing
 Victory crowns the just,
 And the braggarts must
 Surely bite the dust,
 Press we to the field ungrieving
 In our heart of hearts believing
 Victory crowns the just.⁵⁹

Sorley wrote in November 1914: "Curiously enough, I think that 'Men Who March Away' is the most arid poem in the book, besides being untrue of the sentiments of the ranksmen going to war: 'Victory crowns the just' is the worst line he ever wrote - filched from the leading article in the 'Morning Post', and unworthy of him who had always previously disdained to insult Justice by offering it a martial crown like Victory".⁶⁰

Few poets had Sorley's ability to remain cool and objective in the last months of 1914. The majority, like Thomas Hardy, abandoned themselves to the mood of patriotism and heroism, and produced poems true to the martial tradition of the previous three hundred years. It has been seen that, with few exceptions, this was an essentially romantic tradition with little contact with reality, and one in which the lack of thought was masked by language drawn from the chivalric code of the Middle Ages.

⁶⁰ Charles Hamilton Sorley, Letters (Cambridge 1919)

But as long as war retained some of its traditional pageantry and excitement, as it did even in the Boer War, the gap between the poet's representation and reality was not glaringly obvious. Few wars can have been more dismal and disastrous than the Crimean War, and no action in it was more futile than the Charge of the Light Brigade, yet Tennyson's poem was acceptable even to the survivors of the Light Brigade, because there undoubtedly were elements of chivalry in that perfectly disciplined, mounted advance of the six hundred towards the Russian guns.

Except for its very early stages, the First World War offered no such justification for the traditional heroic response, for the immense scale of the war, the unprecedented destructive power of modern weapons, and the stalemate reached in 1915 made heroic behaviour of the old type impossible. There was heroism, but it was heroism in enduring courageously rather than in fighting courageously.

Once they had seen that the old rhetoric and gestures of heroism were intolerable, the poets' problem in this war was to find an adequate response to totally new conditions. They would have found some guidance in the anti-imperialistic poetry of the Boer War, but as it has happened throughout history, the lessons of the war were forgotten almost as soon as peace was restored.

PART TWO

THE COLLAPSE OF THE HEROIC TRADITION

CHAPTER V

ENGLISH POETRY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In 1944 Francis Brett Young wrote a poem, "The Island", in which he reviewed England's history of warfare, and traced the changes in men's attitude to war over the centuries. Writing with the advantage of twenty-six years' hindsight, he sums up very clearly in the section entitled "Whitehall, November 14th 1920" the main features of the poetry which was written from experience of the Western Front in the First World War:

There was an age when feckless poets sought
 Vicarious raptures in the clash of swords;
 Nay even in war's hideous features traced
 A hideous splendour. Tell us who fought
 With Prussia's brutish hordes
 That war breeds aught but butchery and waste.
 Spare us your threadbare cant of chivalry:
 War is no princely sport
 But a fool's game in which Death loads the die
 So speak the truth for our dead comrades' sakes -
 War maims and kills more heroes than it makes.¹

Here he has conveyed the angry rejection of the heroic tradition, the pity for comrades, and anti-heroism that have become the characteristic marks of the poetry of the First World War. It has been seen from the survey of the heroic tradition in English War poetry that there were times in the Civil War and in the Napoleonic Wars when the heroic tradition was attacked, but these attacks rarely proceeded from a conviction that war itself was wrong. In the Civil War, men stopped viewing war as a "princely sport" because it disrupted life, and they abhorred the idea of Englishman fighting Englishman; in the Napoleonic War the anti-heroic war poems were written because the poets were disenchanted with the

¹Francis Brett Young, The Island, (London 1944) p. 423.

government, which they considered repressive and reactionary. In both cases, the poets were ready enough to find glory in war once their grievances had been removed. The response of poets to the Boer War differs from that of earlier wars and in many ways anticipates the reaction of the 1914 - 1918 poets, because for the first time a considerable amount of verse was written which proceeded from a genuine abhorrence of war rather than from political motives. Proof though this is that the first flowering of anti-war and anti-heroic poetry was not on the mudbanks of the Somme, the effect of the anti-imperialist poets of the Boer War on the public's attitude to war was negligible. The influence of the Trench poets on the sensibility of the twentieth century has been immeasurably great. So searing was their experience of war and so absolute and forceful was their denunciation of it that they destroyed for their generation and for the generations that followed the heroic view of war, and the rhetoric of war poetry. The voice of modern war poetry is anti-heroic, and its tone originates in the First World War.

There was little indication in the opening stages of the war that the heroic tradition was to disintegrate. The enthusiasm of the civilian poets for the war has been discussed in chapter four, but what greatly strengthened their and the British public's attitude was that, amidst the thousands of educated young men who volunteered for active service, there was a substantial number of poets who were as idealistic and as heroic as they were. Of the many soldier poets who attempted to put into verse the mood of exaltation and

patriotism that swept England in 1914, Rupert Brooke was the one who caught the public's imagination. Brooke's fame lies partly in his five war sonnets - which said what everybody hoped and expected a young volunteer soldier to feel - and partly because he himself fulfilled the public's idea of a hero. He was brilliantly good-looking, fearlessly eager to give his life for England, and he died on active service. The fact that he actually died from blood-poisoning on the way to Gallipoli on 23 April 1915 and had thus seen little fighting was ignored. He became a myth, and even today he remains for many people the only poet of the First World War.

It is not difficult to see why Brooke's sonnets had such appeal, even divorced from their 1914-15 context and from the heroic aura of Brooke. As these lines from "The Soldier", Brooke's most famous sonnet, show clearly, Brooke had a marked sense of the dramatic, a great facility of language and the ability to convey intense emotion - in this case patriotism:

If I should die, think only this of me:
 That there's some corner of a foreign field
 That is forever England. There shall be
 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
 A body of England's, breathing English air,
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.²

But if Brooke's oratorical skill is undeniable, like much oratory, the poem crumbles on closer analysis. The most unpleasant feature of this poem is that it is excessively self-regarding. One is not sure whether Brooke is praising England or himself; and as Charles Hamilton Sorley pointed

²Rupert Brooke, The Poetical Works of Rupert Brooke, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London 1960) p. 23.

out in April 1915 "He is far too obsessed with his own sacrifice, regarding the going to war of himself as a highly intense, remarkable and sacrificial exploit, whereas it is merely the conduct demanded of him (and others) by the turn of circumstances, where non-compliance with this demand would have made life intolerable. . . He has clothed his attitude in fine words: but he has taken the sentimental attitude".³

The sentimental attitude Sorley notices is particularly obvious in the above lines in the lax, too-pretty images of rural England. Brooke was a typical Georgian poet, with the typical Georgian fault of using rural imagery liberally to evoke sentiment, without bothering about the exactness of the images.

Another poet who, through his poem "Into Battle", written in April 1915, has acquired a reputation that almost rivals Brooke's is Julian Grenfell. Grenfell is one of the most interesting poets of the war, because he was the only Regular Army officer to write any poetry of note, and because his response to war was different from that of his contemporaries. Like the Greeks and the knights of the Middle Ages, he saw war as a splendid game which was the supreme test of manhood. Such an attitude was wholly anachronistic amidst the shells, the trenches and the machine-guns of the 1914 - 1918 war, but in his short war-time life, he grasped at every opportunity for exploits of individual heroism that an essentially technological war afforded him. He volunteered repeatedly for single-handed raiding expeditions into No Man's Land, and to

³ Charles Hamilton Sorley, The letters of Charles Hamilton Sorley, (London 1919) p. 263.

bring in wounded men under fire, and, not surprisingly, won the D.S.O. and was mentioned twice in despatches.

His intrepid spirit shows clearly through the lines of "Into Battle". This poem is a forceful expression of a belief central to Grenfell's being, that the true instinct of man is to fight, and he conveys this belief through the identification of the soldier with Nature. The poem opens with a lyric praise of spring, and then makes a sudden but natural transition from the burgeoning life of nature to the rising of the fighting spirit in man. Like the cyclic process of nature, the death of the soldier in battle is not death, but an enrichment, bringing through his sacrifice the opportunities for new life:

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 striving evermore for these;
 And he is dead who will not fight;
 And who dies fighting has increase.

The fighting men shall from the sun
 Take warmth, and life from the glowing earth;
 Speed with the light-foot winds to run,
 And with the trees to newer birth;
 And find, when fighting shall be done,
 Great rest, and fullness after dearth.⁴

Grenfell is obviously a good deal more familiar with nature than Brooke, but the impressive quality of this poem comes not from the nature images, even though they carry the main theme, but from his concentrated use of verbs. They accumulate to give an effect of dynamic movement, reflecting

⁴J. Grenfell, in Up the Line to Death :The War Poets, ed. Brian Gardner (London 1969) p. 34

Grenfell's own boundless energy and the surge of nature in spring.

One wonders how much longer Grenfell would have been able to maintain his aristocratic, positive outlook on war. One of his letters - also written in April 1915 - shows that he was reluctantly sensing the inadequacy of the heroic code in the face of technological warfare:

About the shells, after a day of them, one's nerves are absolutely beaten down. I can understand now why our infantry have to retreat sometimes; a sight which came as a shock to me at first, after being brought up in the belief that the English infantry cannot retreat.⁵

Before any note of disillusion could come through into his poetry, he was dead, from wounds received in May 1915, and thus he, like Brooke, remains one of the famous idealistic poets of the war.

The established notions about war were not generally discredited until late 1916, but even in the early phase there were poets who, either because they had more insight into war or because they had less resilience than Grenfell, wrote very differently.

Charles Hamilton Sorley, who had criticized Hardy and Brooke so perceptively, himself wrote some very interesting and individualistic poetry on the war, that has none of their idealism or patriotism, and suggests that he was moving towards a far harder, yet more penetrating vision of the war. Most of his war poems show a pre-occupation with death that is also shown in Brooke's poems, but his view of death differs radically from Brooke's romantic vision.

⁵J. Grenfell, Pages from a Family Journal 1888 - 1915 (privately printed 1916) p. 452.

This is highlighted particularly in one of his sonnets where he directly attacks "The Dead", a sonnet in which Brooke romantically conceives death in battle as the soldiers' means of winning back holiness and honour - as the coming into their proud English heritage. In place of the traditional heroic rewards that Brooke envisages, he asserts the strange "otherness of death", which he suggests makes the dead alien, beyond and indifferent to the honour and pity that we wish to heap on them:

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. The blind eyes see not your tears flow.
 Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
 Say only this, "They are dead". Then add thereto,
 "Yet many a better one has died before."
 Thus, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
 Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
 It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
 Great death has made all his for evermore.⁶

This poem, written in May 1915, the month of Grenfell's death, points the transition from the traditional heroic response in the combatant^s' poetry. Sorley was one of the first poets to deny the solace of the heroic vision and the first to apprehend something of the enormity of death in this war. Yet Sorley's verbal expression was not at this stage entirely adequate for his vision. One notices in particular the clumsiness of the twelfth and the thirteenth lines where the word "spook" is particularly jarring, and although in this poem it is clear that he senses the gulf between the living and the dead, he was killed before he could explore it in greater depth. He

⁶ Charles Hamilton Sorley, *Untitled* in Up the Line to Death, p. 45 - 46.

saw the unsuitability of the heroic modes for expressing the nature of the First World War, but had not yet fully worked out an alternate mode nor completely clarified his own vision.

Arthur Graeme West was another poet who rejected the heroic tradition early in 1915, when idealism was at its height. It is clear, however, from his diary and some of his poems, which show a deeply depressed absorption in himself, that he hated war; not because of his insight into it, but because it failed to provide a solution to his personal problems. Nevertheless, two of his poems are very strong and indicate the direction poetry was to take after the Battle of the Somme. In "God! How I hate you, you cheerful young men" he anticipates Sassoon's and Owen's angry reaction to the poets who determinedly clung to the heroic tradition:

Hark how one chants -
 "Oh happy to have lived these epic days" -
 These epic days! And he's been to France
 And seen the trenches, glimpsed the huddled dead
 In the periscope, hung on rusty wire:
 Choked by their sickly foetor, day and night
 Blown down his throat: stumbled through ruined hearths
 Proved all that muddy brown monotony
 Where blood's the only coloured thing.⁷

In this poem and in his fine "Night Patrol" dated March 1916, one sees for the first time the extreme realism that was to be the dominant mode by 1917. West makes his point very forcefully in his description of the sickening smell of the dead, which mocks the glib epithet "epic", but it is a weakness that his own revulsion comes so strongly through the lines. "Night Patrol" is a more impressive and forceful poem

⁷ Arthur Graeme West, The Diary of a Dead Officer, (London 1919) p. 93.

because instead of commenting he makes a piece of bleak exact description register his anti-heroic attitude implicitly:

And we placed
 Our hands on the topmost sand-bags, leapt and stood
 A second with curved backs, then crept to the wire,
 Wormed ourselves tinkling through, glanced back and
dropped.
 The sodden ground was splashed with shallow pools,
 And tufts of crackling cornstalks, two years old,
 No man reaped, and patches of spring grass,
 Half seen, as rose and sank the flares, were strewn
 With wrecks of our attacks: the bandoliers,
 Packs, rifles, bayonets, belts, and haversacks
 Shell fragments and the huge whole form of shells
 Shot fruitlessly - and everywhere the dead.
 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,
 Infecting earth and air.⁸

West has recreated here the experience of going into No Man's Land at night with a new clarity and vividness. One can feel, through the skilled use of rhythm and syntax, the tension of the men as they come over the top, can follow their frightened yet rigidly controlled movements, and seem to see the desolate, ugly sights as they saw them in the rising and falling light of the flares. His selection of physical detail is impressive and finely balanced. He seems merely to note objects as he passes them, yet there is a subtle, ironic contrast between the wasted, unreaped corn and the waste of abandoned equipment including the "shells / Shot fruitlessly" and finally, there is the terrible wastage and desecration of human life, which, through its stench, dominates everything.

The strong individualism and intelligence of Sorley

⁸Frederick Brereton, ed., An Anthology of War Poems (London 1930) p. 161.

and the anti-social temperament of West equipped them better than the majority of poets in 1914 and 1915 to write the poetry of a war whose huge dimensions, use of sophisticated modern weapons and lack of mobility distinguished it from any war in the past. They were the first to sense the inadequacy of the traditional heroic response, and their poems which have been discussed here register their disapproval of the idealistic outlook, and illustrate their attempts to tell the truth about war. In revolting against the ideals of the mainstream of traditional war poetry, they were well in advance of most of the other soldier poets, who did not reject the heroic mode until the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

What killed their heroic spirit was not so much the hardship of the trenches, or even exposure to high explosives and devastating machine-gun fire, but the realization that the Allies and Germany were caught in a terrible deadlock which no heroic effort on their part nor sacrifice of themselves could break. For the British this realization did not come until after the Battle of the Somme in November 1916. Up to July 1916, the French had borne the brunt of the German attacks, and the British army, not having been fully tried, believed that they would win the war. The four months of fighting on the Somme shattered this belief and all the idealism and enthusiasm of the British soldiers. They saw that the vast losses they had sustained (420 000 casualties) and the gruelling hardships they had endured had been for nothing, for the gains of territory were negligible, and despite equally terrible losses on the German side, they were no more weakened or

dispirited than the British. The war, they now believed, would go on forever; a nightmare repetition of indecisive battles, endless slaughter and nothing achieved.

It was one thing for the poets to be forced by circumstances to reject the heroic tradition, but quite another for them to find a satisfactory way of expressing a war which they now dimly saw was a vast holocaust, unlike any war in history. With very few exceptions, of whom Rosenberg, Owen and Sassoon are the most notable, the majority of poets were unable to find any pattern or direction in the tumult around them, and they expressed their shock by writing stark, realistic descriptions of the horrors that engulfed them.

Judging by C.M. Bowra's survey⁹ of the European poetry of the First World War, there seems to have been a greater shock reaction to war amongst the English soldier poets than amongst the French, German or Italian. The reason for this is probably that, apart from Rosenberg, all the known poets of the First World War were products of the English public schools, which then inculcated heroic ideals that have their clearest poetic expression in the verse of Sir Henry Newbolt. For the soldier poets, therefore, the Somme was more than a gruelling experience, it was the shattering of basic beliefs that had been fostered in them from early boyhood, and at first even the best poets at this time were disorientated and in search of a more valid frame of reference.

The transition from heroic optimism to horror and despair is very noticeable in the poetry of Edward Wyndham

⁹C.M. Bowra, Poetry of the First World War, (Taylorian Lecture 1961).

Tennant, who was killed in action on 22 September 1916.

Tennant's earlier poetry is typical of the minor Georgians, tending to be mawkish and imprecise, but touching in its expression of hopefulness and in the readiness to find beauty. In "Home Thoughts from Laventie", he writes of the unexpected joy of finding a garden amidst the ruins of the town:

At length we rose up from this ease
 Of tranquil happy mind,
 And searched the garden's little length
 A fresh pleasance to find;
 And there some yellow daffodils and jasmine hanging high
 Did rest the tired eye. 10

Just before he was killed and after enduring the terrible months of July and August on the Somme, he sent his mother a poem "The Mad Soldier". The poem, written in the form of a monologue, records the nightmarish fate of a soldier who has been trapped in a shell-hole for three weeks with his companions who are dead:

I dropp'd here three weeks ago, yes - I know,
 And its bitter cold at night, since the fight -
 I could tell you if I chose - no one knows
 Excep' me and four or five, what ain't alive . . .

.
 . . . Ssh! boys; what's that noise?
 Do you know what these rats eat? Body meat!

.
 . . . By damn, I'm not asleep - there's a heap
 Of us wond'ring why the hell we're not well
 Leastways I am - since I came it's the same
 With the others - they don't know what I do,
 Or they wouldn't gape and grin. - It's a sin
 To say that Hell is hot - 'cause it's not:
 Mind you, I know very well we're in hell. -
 In a twisted hump we lie - heaping high,
 Yes! an'higher every day. - Oh I say,
 This chap's heavy on my thighs - damn his eyes. 11

¹⁰Brian Gardner, ed., Up the Line to Death 1914 - 1918
 (London 1964) p. 120.

¹¹Ibid p. 132.

There is no sparing of horror in this poem. In place of the daffodils and jasmine are the grim details - the rats devouring human flesh, the ugly, decomposing, grinning faces of his companions, the heap of corpses getting higher every day as they become more bloated, the crushing weight of the corpse pinning him down. The madness of the soldier is conveyed by the casual conversational tone and the internal rhyme, which stands in stark contrast to the horrors that are enumerated. It is the tone that accounts for most of the poem's effectiveness. Without it, there would have been no control and the poem would have been a mere catalogue. It would seem from this poem that Tennant's appalling experiences did bring a degree of maturity to his work that is lacking in the trivial "Home Thoughts from Laventie". He was forced by circumstances to jettison the stylized diction and archaisms of the earlier poem, and to become more precise in his images.

The shock effect of the Battle of the Somme is also very noticeable in the poetry of a far more talented poet, Robert Graves. This is unexpected, as Graves, unlike his contemporaries, had tried from the beginning to maintain a more detached view of the war, and had adopted an attitude which was a mixture of admiration of and amusement at the heroic ideals and behaviour of his comrades.

This attitude is evident in a poem he wrote about a captain who was killed in a hopeless attack on the German line at La Bassée in September 1915. Graves describes the prelude to his charge in "Goodbye to All That": "A few minutes later, Captain Samson with 'C' company and the remainder of 'B' reached

our front line. Finding the gas cylinders still whistling and the trench full of dying men, he decided to go over too - he could not have it said that the Royal Welch had let down the Middlesex".¹² Later, they found him:

We found the little captain at the head;
His men lay well aligned.
We touched his hand - stone cold - and he was dead
And they, all dead behind,
Had never reached their goal, but they died well
They charged in line, and in the same line fell.

The well-known rosy colours of his face
Were almost lost in grey.
We saw that, dying and in hopeless case,
For others' sake that day
He'd smothered all rebellious groans: in death
His fingers were tight clenched between his teeth.

For those who live uprightly and die true
Heaven has no bars or locks,
And serves all taste . . . Or what's for him to-do
Up there, but hunt the fox?
Angelic choirs? No, Justice must provide
For one who rode straight and at hunting died.

So if Heaven had no Hunt before he came,
Why, it must find one now:
If any shirk and doubt they know the game,
There's one to teach them how:
And the whole host of Seraphim complete
Must jog in scarlet to his opening Meet.¹³

This poem has been quoted in full because, although it was later disparaged by Graves as "inexcusable even as juvenilia", it does show the gaiety, compassion and satirical outlook that marked his earlier war poetry.

The element of humour and fancy in the treatment of his subject in this poem does not disguise the fact that Graves at this time, while not cherishing any romantic notions

¹²Robert Graves, Goodbye to All That, (New York 1957 First published 1927) p. 155.

¹³Robert Graves, "The Dead Foxhunter" in Over the Brazier (London 1916) p. 29.

of war, did find solace for the grimness of it in his comrades' ability to make good their heroic ideals in action. His admiration for the courage and discipline of Captain Samson and his men, who had kept their line under fire, is reminiscent of Tennyson's admiration of the Light Brigade, who also maintained their formation in impossible conditions.

On the occasions when the heroic attitude did disintegrate in the face of battle, Graves was shocked. This is apparent in the poem "Big Words", in which a young soldier convinces himself that he is not afraid to die, in terms that recall Rupert Brooke:

I've lived these years from roof to cellar floor
 And feel, like grey-beards touching their four score,
 Ready so soon as the need comes to die:
 And I'm satisfied.
 For winning confidence in those quiet days
 Of peace . . .

. . . and I know I'll feel small sorrow,
 Confess no sins and make no weak delays
 If death ends all and I must die tomorrow.

But on the firestep, waiting to attack
 He cursed, prayed, sweated, wished the proud words back.¹⁴

As the war intensified in 1916 and so many of the first volunteers who came to France in 1914 and 1915 were killed, Graves ceased to find the same consolation in manifestations of the heroic code. The poem "David and Goliath", written after his close friend David Thomas was killed at Fricourt in March 1916, is a bitter comment on the fate of the old type of heroism. He makes this comment by using the biblical story of David's heroic encounter with the Philistine; only in his version, David's stone is parried by Goliath's shield. As Goliath moves in for the kill, David stands his ground, heroic and

¹⁴ Robert Graves, Over the Brazier, p. 28.

defiant - and foolish :

Says foolish David "Damn your shield!
And damn my sling! but I'll not yield!"
He takes his staff of Mamre oak,

. . .
Loud laughs Goliath, and that laugh
Can scatter chariots like blown chaff
To rout: but David, calm and brave,
Holds his ground, for God will save.
Steel crosses wood, a flash and oh!
Shame for beauty's overthrow!
(God's eyes are dim. His ears are shut.)
One cruel, backhand sabre cut -
"I'm killed!" young David cries,
Throws blindly forward, chokes . . . and dies.
And look, spike-helmeted, grey, grim
Goliath straddles over him.¹⁵

It is illuminating to compare this poem with the earlier "Dead Foxhunter". He says in "Goodbye to All That" that he felt David Thomas' death worse than any other since he had been in France; yet he appears much more remote from his subject in this poem than he does in his treatment of the death of Captain Samson. Whereas the fanciful, gay vision of Captain Samson's heavenly Meet brings warmth and compassion, the Biblical myth has a strong distancing effect. Because of this, the down-to-earth diction and homely rhythm common to both poems have a very different effect. In the earlier poem they lend an additional gaiety and gentleness; in the later, they increase the detachment, at times making the tone callously withdrawn :

Steel crosses wood, a flash and oh!
Shame for Beauty's overthrow!¹⁶

Graves' increased detachment as the war worsened was, of course, a very human reaction necessary for sanity and survival. Owen was to feel this too, and in October 1918, wrote to Sassoon "I shall feel again as soon as I dare, but

^{15, 16} Edward Marsh, ed., Georgian Poetry 1916 - 1917
(London, November 1917) p. 105.

now I must not. I don't take the cigarette out of my mouth when I write 'Deceased' over their letters"¹⁷ Yet Owen never allowed the soldier and the officer's need for tight control of his feelings to affect his poetry adversely, as Graves did. His poetry benefited immeasurably from his experiences as an officer, for through them, he learnt that fine and difficult balance between control and pity that makes his war poetry great.

Graves, with his unusually mature outlook on the war in 1915, seemed to have so much potential as a war poet, yet under the stress of war he retreated more and more from open expression of feeling into a blanket of myth. His pride in the perfect discipline, fighting ability and courage of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, with whom he served in France in 1915 and 1916, comes very clearly through the laconic, understated style of "Goodbye to All That". When his original battalion was almost completely obliterated by the battles at Fricourt and the Somme in 1916, Graves was deeply affected. There seemed nothing left in war but "mud, blood and desolation", (his words) and he escaped from the unbearable actuality of war into fantasy. When he did try to confront the horror, as in "The Dead Boche", he was overwhelmed, unable, like Owen, Rosenberg and Sassoon, to synthesize it into poetry:

Where propped against a shattered trunk
 In a great mass of things unclean,
 Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
 With clothes and face a sodden green,
 Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
 Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.¹⁸

G.S. Fraser, who has compared this poem with one on

¹⁷ Wilfred Owen, *Letter in Collected Poems*, p. 176.

¹⁸ Robert Graves, *Fairies and Fusiliers*, (London 1917) p. 20

the same subject written during the Second World War, Keith Douglas' very fine "Vergissmeinit", remarks that Graves lacks Douglas' control. "He merely presents unpleasant raw material, too close to him to be art. And neither verbs nor nouns are used in Graves' passage so as to activate the line. He has one terribly feeble inversion ('things unclean') and he makes his main descriptive effort in the weakest way by piling up adjectives".¹⁹ Apart from its technical weaknesses, the shocking thing about this poem is that it is an expression of mere disgust. Graves could feel neither the pity of Owen nor the anger of Sassoon in contemplating the dead man.

Of all the poets whose outlook and style were radically changed by the Battle of the Somme, Siegfried Sassoon was the most remarkable. Judging by his war poems of 1914 and 1915, which were wholly in the Brookian pastiche, Sassoon seemed much less fitted than Graves to express the anti-heroic and anti-war temper of the later years of the First World War. He had too many serious disadvantages in his background, temperament and prewar artistic development to give any hint that he would pioneer the new type of war poetry.

Before the war, Sassoon, having a comfortable private income, had lived the life of a country gentleman. He hunted five days a week in the season and filled up his summers with golf, cricket and collecting old books, more for their covers than their contents. He differed from the average country squire only in his interest in poetry, and prior to 1914 had written several volumes of rural poems. Of these, only one poem, "The Daffodil Murderer", a parody of Masfield's

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"Everlasting Mercy", gives any hint of the brilliant satiric powers that were to emerge in 1917. On the whole, his talent was a pleasant but minor one, showing the typical Georgian faults of lack of originality and conservatism in style. Unlike Rosenberg and Owen, he did not experiment. This was partly because he had, at this time, a slightly deprecating attitude to his poetry, regarding it more as a pleasant, gentlemanly pursuit than as a fierce dedication.

In outlook too, he was characteristically Georgian. "The Sherston Memoirs"²⁰ that tell the story of his youth and young manhood so well, show that Sassoon had the ability of the upper and middle classes to see the world as a harmonious whole, and to shut out any discordant elements from this view - such as the Ulster revolts, the conditions of the working class and the suffragettes. Predictably, he was one of the first to enlist, desperately eager, like Brooke, to protect the England that had given him such a pleasant start in life.

The clearest statement on Sassoon's changes in attitude to war and the conditions that forced these changes was made by himself in 1930. By this time the whole war had fallen into perspective and he could see himself as in a war drama:

. . . A lighthearted First Act which was unwilling to look ahead from its background of sunlight and the glorying beauty of beech forests. Life at the Army School, with its superb physical health, had been like a prelude to some really conclusive sacrifice of high-spirited youth. Act II had carried me along to the fateful First of July. Act III had sent me home to think things over. The autumn attacks had been a sprawling muddle of attrition and inconclusiveness. In the early summer the Fourth Army had been ready to advance with the new impetus. Now it was stuck

in the frozen mud of Bapaume, like a derelict tank. And the story was the same all the way up to Ypres. Bellicose politicians and journalists were fond of using the word "crusade". But the "chivalry" (which I'd seen in epitome at Army School) had been mown down and blown up in July, August and September, and its remnant had finished the year's "crusade" in a morass of torment and frustration".²¹

The pattern of change in attitude is clearly reflected in his poetry, which moved from lyrical verse filled with heroic ideals, to a harder poetry that faithfully and realistically recorded his early experiences of battle, and finally, to the biting satires that form Sassoon's most valuable contribution to war poetry.

What strikes one about his early poems, written in 1914 and 1915 before he went out to France, is how abstract they are. Like Brooke, he had a strong, preconceived idea of the glory of battle. War was ennobling: a grand crusade, and the means of gaining honour and immortality; yet even less than Brooke, did he ground these high-flown notions in reality. The poem, "To My Brother", written to commemorate his brother's death in action at Gallipoli in 1915, is perhaps the clearest illustration of how caught up in heroic idealism Sassoon was, for the poem is extraordinarily impersonal, completely lacking in any real feeling:

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face
 Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame
 For we have made an end of all things base.
 We are returning by the road we came.

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead.
 And I am in the field where men must fight
 But in the gloom I see your laurelled head
 And through your victory I shall win the light.²²

^{20, 21} Siegfried Sassoon, "The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston" in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (London 1940)

²² Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems of Siegfried Sassoon 1908 - 1956 (London 1961) p. 11

The last two lines in particular, reveal how romantic and idealistic was Sassoon's conception of war and death at this time, but after a lecture on the use of the bayonet at Army School late in 1915, his outlook took on a surprising dimension that he records in "The Kiss":

To these I turn, in these I trust
 Brother Lead and Sister Steel.
 To his blind power I make appeal,
 I guard her beauty clean from rust.

He spins and burns and loves the air,
 And splits a skull to win my praise;
 But up the nobly marching days
 She glitters cold and fair.

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:
 That in good fury he may feel
 The body where he sets his heel
 Quail from your downward darting kiss.²³

The trust in and attachment of the warrior to his weapons is an age-old epic and chivalric convention, but this poem is more than an echo of tradition, it is the expression of a ferocious fighting spirit. Later, he was to offer it as a satire, but Graves, who knew him well, makes it clear that there was a bellicose side to Sassoon:

While in France, I had never seen such a fire-eater (as Sassoon) - the number of Germans whom I killed or caused to be killed could hardly be compared with his wholesale slaughter".²⁴

Apart from revealing an unsuspected facet of Sassoon's character, which he was soon to channel into bitter anger against those that sought to prolong the war, "The Kiss" is important because it represents his first inclination towards realism.

²³ Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 15.

²⁴ Robert Graves, Goodbye to All That, p. 195.

A few months later, realism was to be the axiom of his war poetry, and he began writing what he describes in "Siegfried's Journey" as "genuine trench poems, dictated by my resolve to record my surroundings . . . These poems aimed at impersonal description of frontline conditions, and could at least claim to be the first things of their kind".²⁵

How much Sassoon had been changed from his first months in the trenches is evident in "A Working Party" written in June 1916. The fervid emotion and idealism of his early war poetry are gone, replaced by a quiet documentary style. In this poem he follows not a hero, but a very ordinary young soldier "a decent chap / Who did his work and had'nt much to say" stumbling down a muddy trench in the dark to his dreary endless task of piling sandbags along the parapet. His thoughts are not of the war or even of his "meagre wife / And two small children in a Midland town", but of the tot of rum he will get at "half-past twelve" and of sleep in a stale dug out. And then he is shot, killed, as prosaically and undramatically as he had lived, while pushing up yet another sandbag:

He pushed another bag along the top
 Craning his body outward; then a flare
 Gave one white glimpse of No Man's Land and wire;
 And as he dropped his head the instant split
 His startled life with lead, and all went out.²⁶

Four months in the trenches were enough to demolish Sassoon's romantic, heroic notions, but it was not until he was sent home on sick leave in October 1916, after going through the gruelling torment of the Battle of the Somme, that he found a true direction for his poetry. Deeply shocked by his

²⁵ Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey 1916 - 1920 (London 1945) p. 17.

²⁶ Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 19 & 20.

experiences, he was disturbed and angered to find how uncomprehending and complacent were the civilians about the war, and it was then that he began to use his poetry as a means of forcibly impressing on people the true nature of war.

He began by making a radical onslaught on the traditional heroic view of war. In "The Hero", he juxtaposes the heroic dream a proud mother has of her dead son with the man in reality:

. . . . her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how "Jack", cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
To get sent home, and how, at last he died,
Blown to small bits.²⁷

"One-Legged Man", another poem designed to shock, also relies for its effect on a startling juxtaposition. The poem opens with a deceptive rural scene of a farmer looking at his land with contentment, contemplating with quiet satisfaction the peaceful life ahead. And then in the final couplet he strikes the blow:

He hobbled blithely through the garden gate
And thought: "Thank God they had to amputate".²⁸

Both "The Hero" and "One-Legged Man" aim at hammering home the unpleasant truth that, far from being inflamed with heroic ideals, the majority of troops wished only that they might get a "blighty one", a wound serious enough for them to be invalided out of the army, and so escape the horrors of war.

²⁷ Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 29.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 26.

Towards the end of his leave, which he found increasingly painful as he became more and more aware of the widening gulf between civilians and soldiers, his verse became more epigrammatic and satirical. "Blighters", his farewell poem to England, is an angry attack on the Music Halls, whose jokes and songs Sassoon felt were a vulgar mockery of the dead and of what the soldiers were enduring:

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

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
 Lurching to rag-time tunes or "Home, Sweet Home"
 And there'd be no more jokes in Music-Halls
 To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume .29

In "Blighters", Sassoon had found his style: "two or three harsh, peremptory, and colloquial stanzas with a knock-out blow in the last line".³⁰ This was the simple, brilliantly effective formula of the best poems of his next volume, "Counter Attack", and one that, because of its simplicity, conveys most directly and forcefully the anger and pity that dominate his later war poetry. By this time, Sassoon was not seeking to write poetry, as such, but was using poetry as one of the best and most effective means of convincing ignorant civilians of the horrors of the war they still stubbornly believed, despite the huge casualty lists, was a glorious and ennobling mission.

Between the publication of his first volume of poetry and "Counter Attack", Sassoon had another six-month spell at the

²⁹ Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 21

³⁰ Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey, p. 29.

Front, which had the effect of kindling his anti-war sentiments into a burning conviction. He believed that the war was being unjustifiably prolonged, and in August 1917, made a statement protesting against the continuation of the war to his commanding officer, which was later published in the press. He had hoped that he would be court-martialed, to get publicity for his protest, but Robert Graves intervened and convinced the War Office that Sassoon was shell-shocked, so that, instead of being sent to prison, he went to the Craiglockhart Hospital for neurasthenic cases. Having had his one-man campaign against the war thwarted, he directed his anger and bitterness into his poetry, and it is through the sense of violent spontaneous passion that his later war poems make their impact. The principal target of Sassoon's poetry continued to be the civilians, but within this area he extended his range considerably. "Glory of Women" is a devastating attack on the women who, even in 1917, continued to be "fondly thrilled" by the war:

You love us when we're heroes home on leave
 Or wounded in a mentionable place.
 You worship decorations; you believe
 That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
 You make us shells. You listen with delight,
 By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.³¹

It is Sassoon's ability to pinpoint the unpleasant coyness of the women's limited response to war, particularly in "fondly thrilled" and "wounded in a mentionable place", that makes his sarcasm so cutting in this poem. As in his earlier satires he uses the technique of the knock-out blow, by

³¹Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 49.

juxtaposing the women's glamourized heroic view complete with its platitudes of "chivalry redeeming the war's disgrace" and "laurelled memories" with the stark, terrible vision of the troops the women can't believe "retire", broken and maddened by yet another impossible and insane attack:

When hell's last horror breaks them and they run
Trampling the terrible corpses - blind with blood.³²

"Does It Matter?" is another poem which gains much of its effect from Sassoon's ability to echo precisely the tone of complacent civilian platitudes. Here, they help to convey, through their contrast with the terrible image of soldiers maimed by war, a degree of pathos which the poet had not hitherto achieved:

Does it matter? - losing your sight? . . .
There's such splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be kind,
As you sit on the terrace remembering
And turning your face to the light.³³

A special variety of non-combatant, even more abhorrent to the soldiers than war-mongering civilians, was the staff officer who issued orders from miles behind the Front - what Ross, Sassoon's friend, described as "the screaming, scarlet majors". In "Base Details", Sassoon successfully demolishes them by blowing them up to grotesque proportions:

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath
I'd live with scarlet majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour. "Poor young chap"
I'd say - "I used to know his father well;

³²Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 49.

³³Ibid, p. 76.

Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap".³⁴

As in his satires on civilians, Sassoon makes his most devastating thrust by inserting a snippet of conversation. He exposes an appalling indifference to human life in the old man's description of the last and terrible battle as "this last scrap", and this callousness is underlined by the careful nurturing of himself: "guzzling and gulping in the best hotel".

These satires represent Sassoon at his best, yet despite the hard clarity of his mature style and the intensity of feeling they convey, they have the limitations inherent in the satiric mode, which cannot, at the expense of losing its attacking force, attempting any complexity of language or more profound insights into war. Committed to this mode by his anger, Sassoon performed a valuable service in debunking the falsely romantic heroic myth of war, but he could not in the interests of thematic unity portray any positive action or achievement.

Sassoon's poetic development in the war has been examined here in some detail because it offers the clearest illustration of the drastic transformation in attitude and corresponding poetic growth that took place in the Great War in reaction to the cataclysmic events of 1916 and 1917, and it thus provides a yardstick by which to measure the response and achievement of other poets. The majority, like Graves, were at a loss when the heroic tradition, with its time-worn attitudes and rhetoric, proved to be wholly inadequate for

³⁴ Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems of Siegfried Sassoon, p. 75.

expressing the horror of stagnant trench warfare. They either escaped, as he did, into a saner dream world, or numbly attempted to record realistically the horror around them. Sassoon was the first to go beyond this stage and see the powerful possibilities of poetry as a means of attacking civilian complacency, which he rightly felt was helping to prolong a futile and appallingly destructive war. The poems which resulted from this realization are of great value, for they struck a new incisive note into the poetry of war, and, perhaps more important, they stimulated the development of a far greater war poet, Wilfred Owen.

CHAPTER VI

WILFRED OWEN

The cataclysmic events of the Western Front in 1916 and 1917 had forced a new hard realism into the poetry of war, and thus, almost in spite of themselves, the poets who survived the ordeal on the Somme long enough to write about it had fulfilled the expectations of Ezra Pound who, in 1912, viewing with disdain the over-sensuous and unrealistic pastoral poetry of the Georgians, had written: "the poetry which I expect to see written during the next decade or so . . . will, I think, move against poppy-cock, it will be harder and saner, it will be . . . 'nearer the bone' . . . its force will lie in its truth".¹ Though their poetry records vividly the horror of modern technological warfare, one is struck, even in the brilliant, harsh satires of Siegfried Sassoon, with a sense of void. The absolute rejection in 1916 of all the old heroic positives that men and poets had once found in war left a profoundly despairing, negative view of war. The greatness of Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg lies in their ability to transcend the despair, and to find in all the horror a beauty - a beauty which is entirely different from the beauty and inspiration poets found in the fulfilment of the old heroic ideals.

The poetry of Wilfred Owen follows naturally on that of Sassoon, for while Owen went far beyond him in range and depth of feeling, in the magnitude of his vision and in poetic technique, there are strong elements of Sassoon in his poetry. Moreover, it is now certain that Sassoon was the

¹Poetry Review 1912 in Pelican Guide to English Literature VII ed. Boris Ford (London 1969) p. 169.

crucial influence in his career as a poet.

Before he met Sassoon at Craiglockhart in August 1917, Owen was floundering in his poetry, unable to find a balance between his Romantic belief that poetry should be beautiful, and the violent, ugly reality of his first experiences of the trenches from January to May 1917. His reaction was to avoid the war in his poetry and to continue to write lyrical, too-mellifluous sonnets on set subjects ("Golden Hair", "Music" and "My Shy Hand") devised by himself and his cousin, Leslie Gunston. These sonnets contrast oddly with his letters, which are graphic and eloquent accounts of the trenches that spare his parents little of the horror: "No Man's land under the snow is like the face of the moon: chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness. . . . We were marooned on a frozen desert. There is not a sign of life on the horizon and a thousand signs of death. Not a blade of grass, not an insect; once or twice a day the shadow of a big hawk, scenting carrion. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language, and nothing but foul, even from one's own mouth (for all are devil ridden), everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dugouts all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth."²

In only two poems of this period does he permit himself to write about the war. The first, "Happiness", began as a "set subject", and is for the most part a sentimental poem to

²Harold Owen and John Bell, ed., The Collected Letters of Wilfred Owen (London 1967) p. 430

his mother, but in the last three lines there are signs of the mature Owen. His recognition of the blighting effect of the war on the spirit of the soldiers, and the pathos of their hope for survival was to recur as a major theme in his later poems. So too was his use of a lyrical verse structure to convey the grim or sad subject matter. The two combine, as in these lines, to give a musical elegiac effect that is deeply moving, and one that is peculiar only to Owen:

The former happiness is unreturning:
Boys' griefs are not so grievous as youths' yearning,
Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope.³

"Le Christianisme" is a very minor poem, which, no doubt, Owen later recognized, as he excluded it from the table of contents for his projected volume of war poems. What is interesting about the poem is that it is a rebuke to the Church for failing to extend its sympathy to those enduring war; but as quotation of its two verses makes clear, the theme is very imperfectly realized, and its effects are gained cheaply by sentimental detail and contrast:

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 haloed with an old tin hat,
But a piece of hell will batter her.⁴

Sassoon was later embarrassed that he was slow to recognize "the exceptional quality of his poetic gift" when Owen first tentatively showed him his poems at Craiglockhart.

³Wilfred Owen, War Poems and Others, ed. Dominic Hibberd (London 1973) p. 59.

⁴Ibid, p. 70.

In fact there was little indication in the poetry that Owen had written up to August 1917 to suggest his extraordinary gifts, especially as it has now definitely been established by Jon Stallworthy and Dominic Hibberd that the fine, mature poem "Exposure" was not written until 1918.* Until 1973 it was believed, due to a slip of Owen's pen, that this poem was written in February 1917, and critics have therefore felt that, though the encounter with Sassoon was opportune and confirmed Owen in his path, he would have developed into a major poet without Sassoon's aid.

This now seems unlikely. With "Exposure" excluded from his early repertoire, Owen had not yet found "an authentic utterance of his own" as Sassoon claims in "Siegfried's Journey", and although he had been writing poetry fairly regularly from the time he was evacuated from the trenches in May 1917 with shell-shock, "Le Christianisme" (early May 1917) was the only war poem produced in this period. Principally, what Sassoon

* For their evidence see:

- (a) Jon Stallworthy, Wilfred Owen . . . A Biography (London 1974) p. 246.
- (b) Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others, ed. with introduction and notes by Dominic Hibberd (London 1973) p. 125.
- (c) Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey. "The manuscript of one of his most dynamically descriptive war poems, "Exposure", is dated February 1917,* and proves that he had found an authentic utterance of his own. (For some reason he withheld this poem from me while we were together)" p. 60

The manuscript was actually dated February 1916 - obviously incorrect since the experience Owen describes did not take place until February 1917. Hibberd says that the paper on which drafts of the poem were written was identical to the paper Owen used for a minor poem definitely dated 1918.

did for Owen was to make him see the vast potential of war as a subject for poetry, and thus to show him a channel for his accumulated experience on the Western Front. This Sassoon did mainly by the example of his own war poems, which Owen had read in "The Old Huntsman" just before they met. Their effect on Owen was dramatic, as this letter to his mother records:

"I have just been reading Siegfried Sassoon, and am feeling at a very high pitch of emotion. Nothing like his trench-life sketches has ever been written, or ever will be written. Shakespeare reads vapid after this. Not of course because Sassoon is a greater artist, but because of the subjects, I mean. I think if I had the choice of making friends with Tennyson or Sassoon, I should go to Sassoon.

That is why I have not yet dared to go up to him and parley in the casual way".⁶

Clearly, the intense anger and bitterness of Sassoon's satires crystalized the feelings that the shell-shocked Owen had about war at this stage. He had had no gradual immersion into the horror of war, as those who went out in 1914 and 1915, but had been thrown into one of the worst sectors on the Western Front in 1917, Beaumont-Hamel. There he had endured such appalling experiences as being bombarded continuously for twelve days in midwinter in a trench that was little more than a shallow ditch.

Of all the published poets in 1917, Sassoon was the only one who had voiced this horror effectively. Not surprisingly, he spoke more meaningfully to Owen than either Shakespeare or

⁶Jon Stallworthy, Wilfred Owen: A Biography, quotation of letter (London 1974) p. 204.

Tennyson did. To a man who had seen "the most execrable sights on earth", Tennyson, an early enthusiast, had become absurdly innocent and remote. "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 meaning 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 at the Bar? - Tennyson, it seems, was always a great child. So should I have been, but for Beaumont-Hamel."⁷

The impact that Sassoon had on Owen is vividly seen in his attempts, a few days after their meeting, to write two poems in Sassoon's bitterly epigrammatic vein. The poems, "The Dead Beat" and "The Next War" are fair imitations of Sassoon's colloquial style, and follow his formula of two harsh stanzas with a knock-out blow in the last line, but they lack the intensity and punch of Sassoon. No poet could have been quicker than Owen to realize that he was writing in a style that did not suit his talents. A fortnight after writing "The Next War", he produced "Anthem for Doomed Youth"; a poem that is unlike anything of Sassoon's and one that established without any doubt that he had found a voice that was uniquely his own:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
 -Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
 Can patter out their hasty orisons.
 No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,-
 The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

⁷Harold Owen & John Bell, ed., Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters' (London 1967) p. 430.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
 Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
 Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.⁸

These lines are evidence of Owen's ability to see far beyond the urgent, but limited issues that Sassoon developed in his poetry.

Like Sorley, Owen saw that there was a terrible discrepancy between the heroic and religious attitudes, that sanctioned the sacrifice of thousands of lives in war, and the actuality of that sacrifice. But, whereas the magnitude and nature of death in a modern, technological war made Sorley reject all heroic and religious consolations "Say only this. They're dead"; Owen makes subtle and complex use of Christian sentiment and ritual in this poem. Opening with a magnificently strong line, he questions the adequacy of Christian ritual to encompass the enormity of death in war, and then makes the inadequacy explicit in the octet through a controlled pattern of auditory images, that contrast the consolatory ceremonies of mourning with the brutal nature of death in action. The eighth line makes the transition to the sestet, for, by its gentle haunting tone, he suggests the theme of the sestet; that there is an area far beyond that of conventional mourning which adequately expresses sorrow for the dead soldiers. He conveys this theme by merging the images of Christian ritual with images of human grief, and finally, with the sombre image of dusk. "Candles",

⁸ Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" in Wilfred Owen War Poems and Others, p. 76.

"pall", "flowers" and "closed blinds" are symbols of a grief they no longer adequately express, but the analogies they suggest to Owen convey a sorrow far beyond that of formal mourning.

It is not absolutely clear how strong an indictment Owen intended this poem to be. The difficulty lies in the phrase "No mockeries now for them" at the beginning of the fifth line. It suggests that not only were the traditional Christian consolations inadequate for death in modern warfare, but that the Church was so out of touch with the magnitude and hideous nature of death caused by modern weapons, that the consolations they proffered appeared as mockeries to the soldiers. It is tempting to make "No mockeries now for them" the key phrase of the poem, because it accords well with the unorthodox, anti-Church views Owen had in 1917. Yet the gentle tone of the sestet and the use he makes in the whole poem of the images of mourning ritual to lend a beauty and a solemnity to the death of the soldiers contradicts this interpretation.

It is significant that "No mockeries now for them" appears only in the sixth and last draft of this poem as a substitution for the mild "No chants for you", which is much more consonant with the theme of tragic inadequacy expressed in the other lines of the poem. It is probable that this phrase was due to the influence of Sassoon, who saw and made amendments to all six drafts of this poem. He writes in "Siegfried's Journey" that he had severely criticized the "almost embarrassing sweetness" and emotionalism in Owen's earlier poetry, and it seems likely that "no mockeries" was an attempt

of Owen's to harden the poem in response to Sassoon's general criticism of his work. The phrase obviously had Sassoon's approval, as he has scored out in pencil the alternative "No music" as well as writing in "noy" and "no".

Nation

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
 - Only the monstrous anger of the guns
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
 Can patter out their hasty orisons.
 No ^{music for all them} ~~music~~ ^{noy} ~~trickeries~~ for them from ^{noy} ~~prayers~~ or bells
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,
 The shrill ^{anted} ~~dissonant~~ ^{dissonant} choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling ^{sad} ~~for them~~ ^{across the} ~~from sad~~ ^{shires.}

What candles may be held to speed them all?
 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
 Shall shine the lily glimmers of goodbyes.
 And the pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
 Their flowers the tenderness of ^{silent patient} ~~brave~~ ^{silent patient} minds,
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

9

It is to Sassoon's credit that he recognized the excellence of "Anthem for Doomed Youth", for the rich complexity of the style is very unlike his own hard, simple style. Owen, as Sassoon realized, had a deeper and wider response to war than himself, which is evident in the "sumptuous" epithets, large-scale imagery and moving tonal quality of the

⁹ Photograph of the sixth draft of "Anthem for Doomed Youth" appears in Wilfred Owen: A Biography, by Jon Stallworthy, p. 221.

of the verse. Sassoon's reaction was primarily one of anger at the continuation of a futile and apparently destructive war, and at civilian apathy. Owen, too, felt anger, as is evident in "passing-bells for these who die as cattle"; but stronger than the anger in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is his deep compassion for the slaughtered. The two emotions complement each other, and permit a more flexible comprehension of war than Sassoon's poems, which work on only one level of understanding. In addition to a larger range of feeling, Owen had a greater awareness of the enormity of modern war. In his later poems he was to develop a universal view of the war, but there is in "die as cattle", "monstrous anger of the guns" and the "shrill demented choirs of wailing shells" a sense of the vast scale of death in war and of the hugeness of the mechanical forces of destruction pitted against man.

The monstrous and devastating effects on man of modern sophisticated weapons was a constant preoccupation with Owen and is one of the dominant themes of his poetry. In theory, there is no difference between being killed or maimed by a sword or bullet and being killed or maimed by gas or high explosive, but such is the force of Owen's poetry that he ensured that death and mutilation in modern war could never be glorified in the traditional manner again. While at Craiglockhart he wrote "Dulce et Decorum Est", which recreates in language that is vivid, precise and terrible, the horror of a gas attack. The poem opens with a description of an exhausted ^{troop} stumbling back through the mud from the front line:

...Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, bloodshod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.¹⁰

Then comes the gas attack, and the tempo of the verse changes dramatically to convey the terrified haste of the soldiers:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;¹¹

The change in speed and the feeling of frantic urgency in these lines is achieved by his omission of the unstressed syllables that helped to give the exhausted, dragging movement of the earlier lines, and by his use of direct speech. Silkin has noticed too, that our sense of horror is heightened by Owen's daring use of the word "ecstasy". Ecstasy can produce fevered movement, but here it is terror of the gas that produces a fumbling so akin to joyous excitement and yet so opposite to it.

One soldier fails to fit on his helmet in time and in nightmarish sea-imagery Owen recreates with vivid intensity the sight of the man floundering and dying before him:

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.¹²

So real is Owen's recreation of the experience that the reader is made to participate fully in the horror of the sight, and share with Owen the feeling of desperate helplessness, trapped behind the panes of his helmet, able only to watch in

¹⁰ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others
 p. 79.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 79.

¹² Ibid, p. 79.

horrified fascination. Much of the effect of reality comes from the contrast between the terrible plunging, dying movement of the soldier in the gas and the tense fixity of the observers.

In the last twelve lines of the poem, the scene shifts from the experience itself to a recollection of it, and it is here that the didactic element implicit in the title appears:

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.¹³

The handling of the moral in these lines is superbly done. With masterly rhetorical suspension, the passionate indignation rises to an agonized outcry against the poetess who had glibly written:

Who's for the khaki suit -
 Are you my laddie?
 Who longs to charge and shoot
 Do you my laddie?
 Who's keen on getting fit,
 Who means to show his grit,
 And who'd rather wait a bit -
 Would you my laddie? ¹⁴

A glance at Jessie Pope's disturbing martial variation of the "Who's for tennis" formula confirms why Owen was driven to insist, with such detailed intensity, on the horrifying effects of gas. There is much of Sassoon in this poem - in the harsh insistence on war's horrors and in the open attack on uncomprehending civilians, but, unlike Sassoon, Owen includes no bitterly ironic or savage comment. His outcry

¹³Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others, p. 79. (Earlier drafts of this poem contained the bracketed subtitle "To Jessie Pope etc, To a certain poetess)

¹⁴Jessie Pope, Jessie Pope's War Poems (London 1915) p. 22.

to the poetess is one of anguish and sadness.

It is evident from "Dulce et Decorum Est" that what particularly horrified Owen about war was its terrible corrupting and mutilating effect on man. The soldier who was whole becomes in moments a writhing, plunging thing, spewing and gargling froth and blood from his mutilated lungs. At least, his death is imminent, for so searing are his descriptions of the physically and mentally maimed who live on in desolate or nightmare-ridden worlds, that death seems infinitely preferable. "Disabled", another poem written at Craiglockhart, is a sensitive and compassionate portrayal of a young soldier mutilated and made prematurely old by the war.

The pathos of the maimed soldier - legless, grey and shivering - strapped in his wheelchair is intensified by a series of comparisons Owen makes of his present crippled state with the vigorous, entirely physical life before he joined up. Once a hero of the football field and the darling of the girls:

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

. . .
Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.

One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
After the matches, carried shoulder high.¹⁵

The stress on physical loss and on his past sexual and physical prowess makes clear how pathetically ill-equipped he is to adjust to the life of a cripple. For him the over-

¹⁵ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others, p. 76.

overwhelming cruelty is the aversion of women. Having no resources to alleviate the pain, he has become a querulous old man:

Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong man that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him to bed? Why don't they come?¹⁶

The proximity of the "women" to the pathetic refrain "Why don't they come?" suggests that he is not only longing for the oblivion of sleep, but is still struggling to understand why the women avoid him.

Though the main part of this poem explores the psychological effects of being maimed, Owen also exposes how mentally ill-equipped the boy was for war. He introduces this by the comparison between the blood which spurted from the shattered veins and arteries in his thigh in war, and the blood-smear down his leg in a football match. There is the suggestion in the line "One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg" that he had equated war with the heroics and rough-and-tumble of a football match. This suggestion is reinforced later in the third verse by his hazy heroic dream of war:

. . . He thought of jewelled hilts
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.¹⁷

This poem has its counterpart in Sassoon's "Does it Matter?", yet there is a marked difference in the treatment of the theme. Sassoon's anger and bitterness at civilian callousness permits none of the insight into the minds of the maimed that is found here. The women in this poem, and the well-meaning man who enquired about his soul - when it

¹⁶Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others, p.78

¹⁷Ibid, p. 77

was his shattered body which was overwhelmingly crying out for concern - are examples of civilian callousness, but Owen presents them without comment, so that the indignation their behaviour engenders becomes a strengthening element in the predominantly compassionate reaction.

Even more searing in its effect than "Disabled" is Owen's examination of the hideous mental mutilation of war in "Mental Cases". Here the grotesquely slobbering, leering and grimacing faces of the deranged, and their ceaselessly pawing hands are outward manifestations of the mental dereliction within them. They are trapped in hell, for they can never escape the memories of:

Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.

. . .
Carnage incomparable, and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.¹⁸

For them there is no oblivion in sleep, as there was for the physically maimed soldier. "night comes blood-black"; sunlight has none of the restorative power traditionally associated with it. Dawn brings no hope.

Sunlight seems a blood-smear. . .
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.¹⁹

The blood imagery in these lines powerfully conveys how the carnage and horror they have endured have flooded and dominated their minds, so that they are forever alienated from life, condemned to: "Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander, / Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter."

To reinforce and amplify the ceaseless horror these men are condemned to, Owen has modelled his style closely on the rhetorical style of the journey through Hell in Dante's

¹⁸ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others, p.98.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.

"Inferno". Like the first words of the visitor appalled by his first sight of the damned, the opening lines of this poem are a series of horrified rhetorical questions:

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?²⁰

The parallel with Dante suggests the extremity of these men made mad by war. Like the damned in hell, they have no hope of recovery: they are doomed to endless torment.

From detailed consideration of the hideous forms of death and mutilation in modern war, Owen moved to a nightmare vision of the whole war in his most terrifying poem "The Show". The terrible transformation war effects on men, turning them from whole men to shattered beings, broken in body and mind, that is made vivid in "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Disabled" and "Mental Cases", is brought to its ultimate in "The Show". The poem is devoid of any human reference. The troops have become a mass of caterpillars, writhing and devouring each other in a desolate, scabrous landscape. What intensifies the horror is that there is no end to this process of corruption. As the caterpillars consume each other, more and more are sucked in from green fields to the mire of war:

On dithering feet upgathered, more and more,
Brown strings, towards strings of grey, with bristling
spines
All migrants from green fields, intent on mire.

Those that were grey, of more abundant spawns,
Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten.

I saw their bitten backs curve, loop, and straighten.
I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.²¹

²⁰ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others, p. 98.

²¹ Ibid, 92.

These lines make clear the terrible uncontrolled escalation of war, where the dead demand more and more deaths, and against all natural instincts, the living and the healthy move as if drawn by a malignant force into the foulness of war.

The extreme unnaturalness of this process is reinforced by the ugliness and horror of the imagery. The columns of German and British troops with fixed bayonets have become the grey and brown caterpillars with bristling spines, and their death throes the hideous, contorted, twisting movements of squashed caterpillars which are heightened by the jagged pattern of the verse. Owen has departed from the usual stanza form by making each sentence a separate stanza, and the unevenness and dissonance this produces is increased by the half rhyme.

The climax comes when the poet discovers that he had been part of the crawling mass - the head of one caterpillar "And the fresh-severed head of it, my head" and "its feet the feet of many men". This involvement of himself completes the horror, deliberately destroying the distancing effect of the opening line "My soul looked down from a vague height, with Death".

The total effect of the poem is to create a vision of war which, in its horror and ugliness, is the extreme opposite to the heroic vision that presents war and death in action as beautiful and ennobling. It is Owen's most horrifying poem, because there is no alleviating pity; the predominant feeling

is a blend of nausea and anguish. This blend of feeling sets "The Show" apart from the other poems that deal with war's horrors. Shattered wrecks though the gassed soldier, the mutilated boy and the mental cases are, they retain enough of their human identity to engender a deep pity for what they have become, as well as anger at the civilian powers that forced them into the hell of war. The transformation of the soldiers into caterpillars has the effect of stifling pity, for so aggressive and repulsive is the image, that the caterpillars appear the real criminals of war not it's victims. "The Show" marks the extreme limit of Owen's vision of the horror of war, but it by no means represents his total vision of war. More than any other poet who wrote during the First World War, Owen was concerned with presenting as many different aspects of it as possible. As well as destroying "the old lie" that it is sweet and decorous to die for one's country, he revealed there is beauty amidst all the suffering.

The most direct statement Owen made of this beauty is in "Apologia pro Poemate Meo", written while he was still at Craiglockhart in October 1917. The poem is an immensely interesting one, because the theme is the traditional war poet's heroic theme of the glory of war, but the experiential basis of Owen's perceptions makes it totally different from the traditional heroic war poem:

I, too, saw God through mud, -
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.²²

The heroism here is in the ability of the soldiers to

²²Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others, p. 82.

smile at all, subjected as they were to the appalling conditions of the Western Front.

With the fearless honesty characteristic of his poetry, Owen reveals in the second and third verses the joy and exhilaration there is in killing without guilt and remorse. The spirit of these lines is more reminiscent of "The Iliad" than the later heroic war poems, which cloak the primitive joy man finds in fighting and killing in vague romantic imagery:

Merry it was to laugh there -
 Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
 For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
 Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.

I, too, have dropped off Fear -
 Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon,²³

However, the most valuable experience of the war was the fellowship between the men who had fought and suffered together in the trenches. Owen makes clear the passionate intensity of this bond by contrasting it with fragile bonds of romantic love:

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.²⁴

The strength of the soldiers' relationship is reflected in the hard realism of the imagery: "war's hard wire whose stakes are strong". By contrast, romantic love appears nebulous. A fierce exclusiveness in the soldiers' camaraderie is implied in these lines, which is made explicit in the last

²³Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others, p. 82.

²⁴Ibid, p. 82.

two verses of the poem. Civilian sympathy and understanding is coldly forbidden:

Nevertheless, except you share
 With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,
 . . .
 You shall not hear their mirth:
 These men are worth
 Your tears. You are not worth their merriment.²⁵

At this stage Owen was still strongly under the influence of Sassoon, whose bitter feeling against the civilians was at its height. It is also a true reflection of the feeling at the Front, where the troops, alienated from the people at home who could not or would not understand what the war was like, turned more and more to each other, forming a fellowship that became more exclusive, passionate and fiercely scornful as the war dragged on.

Owen must have realized the limitations of this subjective and experiential approach, for by 1918, instead of insisting upon the exclusiveness of the soldiers' experience, he was dwelling upon its universality. This is apparent in "Greater Love", a poem of the ultimate in fellowship - the laying down of life for a friend. This poem is written with the passionate intensity of *Apologia*, and there is the same use of contrast between sexual love and the love of men on the battlefield; but unlike the earlier poem, "Greater Love" invites the pity of all mankind. It is one of the best illustrations of the statement he made in the fragmentary preface he wrote for his poems a few months before he was killed:

²⁵Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others. p. 82.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
 My subject is War, and the pity of War.
 The Poetry is in the pity.²⁶

In this poem the images of romantic love (the "stuff of poetry" at the turn of the century) are used to draw out the more profound and terrible contrasting implications of sacrificial love. In the first stanza for instance, the redness and warm life of the lover's lips are contrasted with the redness of blood and the insensate coldness of stone and death; the lure of eyes with the terrible vacancy of the blinded:

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.
 O Love, your eyes lose lure
 When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!²⁷

The horrifying consummation of "Greater Love" is conveyed by an explicit sexual analogy. Just as the sexual act is the consummation of sensuous love, the fulfilment of "greater love" is the writhing agony of death:

Your slender attitude
 Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,
 Rolling and rolling there
 Where God seems not to care;
 Till the fierce Love they bear
 Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude.²⁸

The fourth line of this stanza suggests the terrible isolation of the soldiers abandoned by God in death, and recalls one who was also ostensibly forsaken by God in his dying agony - Jesus Christ. This suggestion is carried into the last stanza where there is an identification of the soldiers' sacrificial role with that of Christ:

²⁶ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others, p.137.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 68.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 68.

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.²⁹

So powerfully do the images of the greater love transcend those of romantic love in this poem that the daring comparison of the modern soldiers with Christ appears the only possible one to express the enormity and selfless nature of their sacrifice. It is a sacrifice that literally and spiritually removes the soldier forever from the civilian. He is dead, and through his act of ultimate selflessness he is spiritually beyond them "for you may touch them not". All they can do is to weep for the absoluteness of their loss and weep with an appalled sympathy for those who must obey the terrible demands of Greater Love.

Despite the fact that the purity and intensity of the "greater love" shame the ordinary expressions of love between man and woman, there is no scornful exclusiveness in this poem. Implicit in the passionate sadness of the tone is a plea for the compassion and understanding of the people at home, and although the images of romantic love are used to show that the "greater love" is immeasurably superior, they are not derided. There is a depth of gentleness and sadness in his treatment of female beauty:

Your voice sings not so soft, -
 Though even as wind murmuring through raftered loft, -
 Your dear voice is not dear,
 Gentle, and evening clear, . . .³⁰

²⁹ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others, p.68

³⁰ Ibid, p. 68.

Much of the beauty of this poem comes from its poignant musical tone. It is created by the lyric form and regular metre and the fragile sensuous beauty of the romantic images, which are merged with delicate artistry into the violent and terrible images of war. To hear a recording of a reading of this poem by Robert Donat is a moving experience, which makes one aware of how vital a part sound plays in Owen's poetry. It is chiefly through the music of "Greater Love" that one understands the tragic beauty of human suffering.

Owen's unusually wide range of visualization and extreme sensitivity made him see beauty where other poets saw only ugliness and horror. The sonnet "On Seeing a Piece of our Heavy Artillery brought into Action" makes manifest the terrible malign beauty of modern weapons:

Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm,
Great gun towering towards Heaven, about to curse;
Sway steep against them, and for years rehearse
Huge imprecations like a blasting charm!³¹

The grandeur of the rhetorical language, the sinister evil imagery, and the heaviness of these lines dramatically convey the massiveness of the gun and the evil beauty of its power, that arrogantly defies heaven. In a short untitled poem written early in 1918, the face of a dying soldier, bleeding at the mouth, is made beautiful by the use of a startling conceit - the comparison of life leaving his face to a sunset sky:

I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen
Like a Sun in his last deep hour;
.
And in his eyes
The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak
In different skies.³²

³¹Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p. 61.

³²Ibid, p. 68.

On one level the last image captures the poignancy and mystery of the moment of death, but its cosmic grandeur and evocative power suggest that Owen saw in this death of a single soldier a vision of a whole doomed world.

"Spring Offensive", Owen's last poem, is a powerful revelation of the wild beauty of battle, and the magnificence of heroism, and yet, at the same time, is an indictment of the heroic code and the unnaturalness of war.

The poem opens with a description of troops waiting for the order to attack, harmonizing in this moment of peace and quietness with a serene Spring landscape "murmurous with wasp and midge". So unified are the silent men with their surroundings "They breathe like trees unstirred" and as they are like the plants, so the plants have taken on human qualities. The little brambles in the valley they have just come through cling like sorrowing women to them, and the buttercups "Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up". Yet in this warm and peaceful scene the more sensitive are aware of an undercurrent of menace. There is warning in "the stark, blank sky behind the ridge" that nature, which seems so benevolent, will destroy them if they break its peace by attacking. It is for this reason that:

Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass,
Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass. 33

When the order to attack comes, it is the certain knowledge that nature will unleash her fury on them that make their defiance of her appear so heroic. Owen suggests that

³³Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p. 108.

theirs is a deeper heroism than the traditional flag-flying, bugle-blowing kind by comparing these ostentatious symbols of courage to the brief flare in the men's eyes as they launch themselves into the attack:

... No alarms
 Of bugles, no high flags, no clamorous haste, -
 Only a lift and flare of eyes that faced
 The sun, like a friend with whom their love is done.
 O larger shone that smile against the sun, -
 Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned.³⁴

In defying the sun the men are for a brief, magnificent instant mightier than it, but as they race over the hill, the whole of nature responds with fury, and the peaceful landscape dissolves into a raging turmoil:

So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together
 Over an open stretch of herb and heather
 Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned
 With fury against them; earth set sudden cups
 In thousands for their blood; and the green slope
 Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.³⁵

The speed of the lines, that matches the exhilarating speed of the racing men, is suddenly stopped by the dramatic force of the caesura that brilliantly conveys the sudden terrible onslaught of explosives and bullets on the vulnerable, exposed bodies of the men. The buttercups, which nature scattered over their boots, have now become chalices for their blood, and the earth opens into a terrible void into which the men topple:

. . . plunged and fell away past this world's verge,
 Some say God caught them even before they fell.³⁶

³⁴Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p.108.

³⁵Ibid, p. 108.

³⁶Ibid, p. 108.

The conventional heroic idea that God saves those who fall in battle is not shared by the poet. The note of doubt he introduces in "Some say", becomes a certainty in the last verse when he turns to the few who survive. Because they ventured with them to the brink of existence, they must know what has happened to their comrades, but they are silent. Clearly, they do not believe there has been any divine salvation:

But what say such as from existence' brink
 Ventured but drave too swift to sink,
 The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,
 And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames
 With superhuman inhumanities,
 Long - famous glories, immemorial shames -
 And crawling slowly back, have by degrees
 Regained cool peaceful air in wonder -
 Why speak not they of comrades that went under?³⁷

Their silent denial of any belief in a peaceful heaven for their comrades is made the more terrible by the reduction of heroic prowess in battle to an "out-fiending with superhuman inhumanities" and "immemorial shames". In this context the phrase "long-famous glories" is ironic, and a direct mockery of the belief that fighting is glorious.

The hostility of nature to the soldier is brilliantly portrayed also in "Exposure", a poem that describes Owen's experiences of holding an advance line at Beaumont Hamel in midwinter. It is one of Owen's most important poems, for, apart from being an example of his technical mastery, it makes clear the tedium and passive suffering of appalling conditions that was the most characteristic experience of fighting in the First World War.

The first four stanzas depict the numbing wretchedness

³⁷Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p.108.

of night and early dawn in No Man's Land. There is little enemy activity, but the men are subjected to the terrible and malign force of nature, more threatening than enemy action:

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow,³⁸

Nature's cruel power is established by the use of personification. She is depicted as a vast and pitiless enemy, who, after knifing the men with her merciless icy east winds, attacks remorselessly with endless drenching rain. She metes out not sudden death, but a long slow agony that is dramatically conveyed by the exceptionally long lines, made even longer by the slow, heavy stresses and strong punctuation, and the dissonant half-rhymes:

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow . . .
We only know war lasts, rain soaks and clouds sag stormy.
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,
 But nothing happens.³⁹

The frozen bodies of the troops are matched by their frozen minds. All that they can comprehend of the war is the immediate physical reality of the rain, the coming storm and the dreary endlessness of it all. This seems to intensify the power of Nature, whose methodical organization in attack makes all too clear that she is a master of the techniques of a war of attrition.

In the fifth stanza the descriptive focus shifts. Overcome by the misery and monotony of war, the men fall into a trance-like state, in which they dream of spring. The transition from battlefield to the English Spring Countryside

³⁸Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p.91.

Move him into the sun -
 Gently its touch awoke him once,
 At home, whispering of fields unsown.
 Always it woke him, even in France,
 Until this morning and this snow.
 If anything might rouse him now
 The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds,-
 Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
 Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
 Full-nerved, - still warm, - too hard to stir?
 Was it for this the clay grew tall?
 - O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
 To break earth's sleep at all?⁴¹

It was the sun which awoke in the young man an awareness of the possibilities of life and of his own unrealized potential ("whispering of fields unsown"), and aroused in him a will to live even on the battlefields of France. Yet for all its generative power it is unable to stir the still-warm body of the soldier to life.

It is in the second stanza that this single futile death is made to point to a futility in the whole order of life on this planet. The burgeoning life of the young soldier, and his cruelly premature death, expands to a cosmic image of the awakening of life on earth, leading ultimately to the emergence of man - and, through his senseless unleashing of destruction upon himself, to the doom of all mankind. The essence of the poem is in the three rhetorical questions that rise on a note of increasing despair to the terrible anguish of the last. For Owen the war was not merely a military struggle between England and Germany, but the huge unleashing of forces of evil against human life and everything that is valuable in life.

The despairing vision of a doomed mankind that is

⁴¹Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p.98.

found in "Futility" has its fullest expression in "Strange Meeting". This poem looks with prophetic insight from the vast destruction of life and the unrealized potentialities of that life that war causes, to the even more terrible after-effects of war. Owen saw that the First World War would not bring lasting peace, as most people believed, but a further regression from humanity, leading to more bloodshed.

The opening of "Strange Meeting" is a magnificently dramatic description of the poet's vision of his arrival in hell:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
 Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
 Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
 Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
 Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
 Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
 With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
 Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
 And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
 By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.⁴²

The dramatic force of this passage is derived mainly from the suspension of the narrator's realization that he is in hell until he sees the dead smile of the wakened sleeper, and from the fact that this hell and this inmate differ from the conventional conception of hell and its occupants. The tunnel, the narrow hall and the encumbered sleepers are sufficiently like trenches and dugouts filled with exhausted soldiers loaded with kit to carry the idea that this hell is a product of the First World War. The "strange friend", as the wakened sleeper is later called, seems, with his compassionate eyes and hands raised in a gesture of blessedness, to be oddly at variance with the atmosphere of the "sullen hall", until in the following lines it becomes clear that he, whose

⁴²Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p. 102.

face is "grained with a thousand pains", epitomizes not the evil, but the tragedy of war - the tragedy that lies in the futile destruction of promising life.

The rest of this poem is in the form of a colloquy which assesses the nature of this tragedy and its terrible implications for generations. It is indicative of Owen's high and exacting conception of a poet and his role in the First World War that he chooses to make a poet, the "strange friend" whose loss represents the loss of all the potentially brilliant and wise young men in the war. Above all men, the poet must be compassionate, wise and skilful, for it is his function to tell "the truth untold / The pity of war, the pity war distilled"; in the retrogressive world that Owen foresaw the war would breed, it would be necessary for the poet courageously to assert his faith in civilized and humane values.

Even before he begins to speak, it is evident that the "strange friend" is compassionate, for he forgets his own predicament in his pity for hell's newest arrival, and it is suggested that his suffering face is grained not by physical pain but by sorrowful wisdom:

With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.⁴³

His colloquy begins on a note of profound pessimism, that deepens as it is revealed how much humanity has lost by his death. It has lost one who had the ability to stir men to joy and grief by his poetry, and one who, through his compassionate insight and skill, had the power to make men

⁴³ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p. 102.

understand the violence, suffering and pity of war:

For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.⁴⁴

But the greatness of his loss is comprehended only after the proleptic vision of a disintegrating world split into rival totalitarian ideologies intent on the destruction of anything in their path:

Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.⁴⁵

How accurately Owen predicted the predatory, intolerant nature of the totalitarian states that were to rise after the war! He did not foresee that the poet could prevent their rise, but he did believe that a poet who had learnt humanity and compassion in the First World War might speak fearlessly through his poetry to men sickened by bloodshed, and restore them to truth:

Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint. ⁴⁶

This hopeful vision of dedicated service to humanity fades back into the bleak melancholy of hell and the grim bloodshed of war. The poem ends on a note of deep depression, with the poet turning finally away from the troubled world "Let us sleep now . . .":

I am the enemy you killed my friend.
I know you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . .⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p.102.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 102.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 103.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 103.

Critics have found relief from the deep pessimism of this poem in the dramatic revelation that begins the last verse: "I am the enemy you killed my friend". Complete reconciliation is implied in the words "my friend" and the knowledge that the poet is speaking to his killer makes his compassionate forgiveness in the first stanza appear Christlike. Yet Owen implies that it is a reconciliation that can take place only in death. His vision of the bloody world, with nation striving against nation seems to hold little hope for such a reconciliation in life.

"Strange Meeting" is an example of Owen's most successful use of half-rhyme to create a deep mournful music that is entirely in accordance with the bleak impressiveness of the "sullen hall" and the tragic aspect of the dead soldier-poet. Michael Roberts analysed accurately the effect of the half-rhyme in this and Owen's other poems when he observed that: "In Owen's War poetry, the half-rhymes almost invariably fall from a note of high pitch to one of low . . . producing an effect of frustration, disappointment, hopelessness".⁴⁸ One might also add that the dissonances produced by the half-rhymes contribute forcefully to the sense of pain inherent in such words as "groined and groaned"; and "moan and mourn".

While the dark and massive conception of hell and the prophetic vision of an ugly, militaristic post-war world makes thus one of Owen's most impressive poems, it is also one of his most flawed. Numerous lines are highly obscure, and some have eloquence rather than precision; all of which detracts

⁴⁸Michael Roberts, ed., The Faber Book of Modern Verse, (2nd ed. 1951) p. 28.

from the power of the poem.

The most obscure passage is the soldier poet's description of his earlier poetic pursuits:

. . . I went hunting wild
 After the wildest beauty in the world,
 Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
 But mocks the steady running of the hour,
 And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.⁴⁹

"The wildest beauty in the world" suggests the Romantic poet's dedication to the pursuit of beauty, and in particular, the wild beauty of the enchantress that enthralled the knight in Keats' poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". This poem, however, ends with the despairing image of the knight doomed forever to seek the lady whom he will never find on the desolate hillside. The beauty that the knight sought was the antithesis of the ideal beauty that the Romantics attempted to capture, which had the quality of eternal calmness, and so it is unlikely that Owen is here describing his prewar Romantic poetry. It seems plausible that "wildest beauty" refers to the wild beauty of war, which would explain the next puzzling line. "But mocks the steady running of the hour". The tumultuous nature of war is, in a sense, a mockery of the calm permanent Beauty of the Romantic poets. Yet Owen's poetic development in the war was not a movement from glorifying in the savage magnificence of battle to the more profound vision of compassion that this passage suggests, nor is it a movement characteristic of other war poets.

The image contained in "then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels" is poetic rather than precise

⁴⁹Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p.102

in the context of modern war, and as Bergonzi has remarked "in the following lines one has free-wheeling eloquence rather than the poetic concentration of other parts of the poem":

Courage was mine and I had mystery
 Wisdom was mine and I had mastery:
 To miss the march of this retreating world
 Into vain citadels that are not walled.⁵⁰

"Strange Meeting" is Owen's most famous poem. Siegfried Sassoon described it as "Owen's ultimate testament, his passport to immortality and the elegy for the 'Unknown Warrior' of all nations"⁵¹, and even T S Eliot roused himself from his customary indifference to war poetry to comment, "'Strange Meeting' is a poem of permanent value and one, I think, will never be forgotten".⁵² However, the fame of "Strange Meeting" does place too much emphasis on a theme that is not representative of Owen's war poetry as a whole. Owen's central concern in "Strange Meeting" is with the destruction of his potential as a poet, and not with the suffering of the soldier. It is therefore not an elegy for the "Unknown Warrior", as Sassoon thought, but an elegy for the Warrior-Poet - for himself in particular - and this makes it the war poem least true of the spirit of his preface.

It is significant that "Strange Meeting" was not Owen's last poem, as critics thought until 1960, when D.S. Welland established that it was written before Owen left for France for the last time in August 1918. If it had been his "ultimate testament" it would suggest that Owen became more concerned with poetry than with pity in the last months of his life.

⁵⁰ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p.103.

⁵¹ Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey, (London, 1945) p.59

⁵² T S Eliot in A Tribute to Wilfred Owen, ed. T J Walsh, (London, 1964) p.28.

His last poems "Smile, Smile, Smile" and "Spring Offensive" testify that he went back dedicated to his task of "watching their (the troops') sufferings, that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can". And he spoke well.

"Spring Offensive", discussed above, is a vivid indication of maturity. With superb skill ^{he} combines the conflicting aspects of war - its wild beauty and its extreme unnaturalness; the stirring courage of the soldiers and the horror of killing - into a magnificently harmonious whole.

"Smile, Smile, Smile" is a powerful satire in Sassoon's manner, but with considerably more profundity of thought in the last six lines than Sassoon achieved in his satires.

The motivating force for this poem was Clemenceau's speech to the French Senate on the 19th September 1918, which was quoted in full in "The Times", in which he insisted on total victory. It enraged Owen and the troops, but was acclaimed by the British civilian public. In these lines Owen brilliantly captures the tone of Clemenceau's inflated rhetoric:

"...Peace would do wrong to our undying dead, -
 The sons we offered might regret they died
 If we got nothing lasting in their stead.
 We must be solidly indemnified.
 Though all be worthy Victory which all bought,
 We rulers sitting in this ancient spot
 Would wrong our very selves if we forgot
 The greatest glory will be theirs who fought,
 Who kept this nation in integrity."⁵³

It is the cold business-like terms "If we got nothing lasting" and "We must be solidly indemnified" that render the emotional clichés "our undying dead", "the sons we offered", "the greatest glory" so sickening and horrible. They make clear the underlying truth that the soldiers are mere pawns -

⁵³ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p106.

the human means of achieving political ambition. The most vivid image in this passage is of the politicians themselves, sitting smug and secure, miles from the front in their ancient capital. The thick heavy sound of "spot" rhyming with "forgot" emphasizes their smugness and pomposity. The physical impression of the well-padded bodies of the politicians, that comes from the solid inertness of "We rulers sitting" and the bombastic sound of the words contrasts painfully with the "sunk-eyed wounded" who are reading this speech in the newspaper. Instead of becoming enraged by this speech, the half-limbed readers merely smile derisively. They smile because they have a secret unknown to any civilian in England:

That England one by one had fled to France,
Not many elsewhere now, save under France.⁵⁴

There can be no great national victory now, as the politicians fatuously envisage, for the men who made England England or France France have all been killed. The final irony comes in the civilians' tragic mis-interpretation of the very smiles of the wounded:

Pictures of these broad smiles appear each week,
And people in whose voice real feeling rings
Say: How they smile! They're happy now, poor things.⁵⁵

Wilfred Owen was killed on the 4th November 1918, seven days before Armistice. How much was lost to English poetry by his death on the bank of the Ors Canal must remain speculation. The monstrous and uncontrolled devastation of the First World War and its unparalleled loss of life created a set of conditions that Owen's poetic gifts were peculiarly well suited to express.

⁵⁴ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p.106.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 106.

Over-sensuous and over-emotional though his juvenilia are, they do make evident that he wrote with total commitment, and that his vision even at this early stage was deeply sensitive and compassionate. It is these two qualities that make his war poems profoundly moving and are the reason why he wrote more eloquently than other poets of the tragedy of young men killed in the war. But whereas the lyrical and poignant intensity of:

And in his eyes
The cold stars lighting very old and bleak
In different skies.⁵⁶

will always be great poetry whether one reads these lines with a knowledge of the Great War or not, one wonders how such a talent would have fared in the complex, drab, cold world of post-war England - the world of Eliot's "Wasteland". It shrivelled the talent of Siegfried Sassoon; and although Owen is the greater poet, with a far wider and more profound vision, the life force in both their poetry is the quality of compassionate conviction that was born out of the war. What we do know is that English poetry gained immeasurably from Beaumont Hamel. It was Owen's experiences there that provided the material for all his war poems, save "Smile, Smile, Smile", and it was his experiences there that ultimately led to his meeting Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart - the beginning of the most dramatic development of a poet's gifts in the history of twentieth century English poetry. In one year: "he gave the poetry of the anti-heroic attitude as absolute an expression as the traditional heroic attitude had received in the countless epics and dramas of the Western tradition."⁵⁷ Modern technology

⁵⁶ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems & Others, p.84.

⁵⁷ Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight p. 126.

had changed the nature of warfare, and it is the achievement of Wilfred Owen that he distilled compassionate, accurate observation into great poetry, which would change forever the way warfare was regarded by the British public.

CHAPTER VII

ISAAC ROSENBERG

The only poet of the First World War whose stature rivals that of Wilfred Owen is Isaac Rosenberg. As with Owen, his poetry came to a brilliant maturity in the war; like Owen, he was a casualty in the last year of the war, but there the likeness ends. No two poets could differ more in outlook, personality and in their conception of poetry. Yet, in the context of the poetry of the First World War, they are complementary rather than antithetical figures. To Owen's deep personal commitment and compassionate vision the poetry of Isaac Rosenberg gives an extended and more detached dimension. Although Owen's vision does range from the compassionate examination of a single, suffering soldier to a view of the suffering and futility of the whole war, the note of personal involvement is never lost, and nor would Owen have wished it to be - "The Poetry is in the pity". Rosenberg's poetry is on a more objective and tragic scale than Owen's. He too saw the pity of war, but for him this was not the whole of war: as clearly, he saw the grandeur of man's stand against the vast forces of destruction he had blindly unleashed upon himself. In "Spring Offensive", Owen came very close to this vision of war, but it is a single instant, and to a large extent he negates it in the last stanza when he describes the fighting as:

. superhuman inhumanities
 Long famous glories, immemorial shames.¹

¹ Wilfred Owen : War Poems and Others, p.108

Pity in Rosenberg's poetry is not the intense human compassion of Owen for the helpless victims of war, but the more impersonal, more splendid pity of tragedy. His victims have an heroic strength and stoicism that arouse awe as well as pity. They are never shown maimed or ugly in death, as Owen often shows them, but as "haughty athletes" stopped short and held in their beauty and strength.

Rosenberg's greater detachment enabled him to treat war more aesthetically and more dialectically than was possible for Owen, wholly immersed as the latter was in the horror and suffering. Rosenberg could thus depict a louse hunt as a savagely beautiful primitive dance, and with a Donne-like wit speculate on a "queer, sardonic rat's" opinion of the men in the trenches.

It is this extraordinary detachment that makes Rosenberg so different from Owen and many well-known poets of the First World War who regarded war as an anathema to normal life and shared a messianic impulse to alleviate the suffering of the troops by speaking for them through their poetry. Rosenberg had no such sense of mission. He regarded war as a part of life and as a unique experience to be examined and explored thoroughly. "I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up" he wrote to Binyon on joining the army "but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life".²

The reasons for Rosenberg's very different outlook

²Isaac Rosenberg, letter to Laurence Binyon (1916) in The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg, ed. Gordon Bottomley and Denys Harding (London 1937) p. 375.

on war stem from his background; one that was wholly unlike the comfortable, middle-class background of the majority of the soldier poets. In comparison to them he would seem to have faced a multitude of disadvantages. He was extremely poor; uneducated in the conventional sense; Jewish; and in the army he never rose above the rank of private. The son of emigrants from Russia, he was brought up in the East End of London in a small, overcrowded tenement house. Their poverty did not, however, prevent the family from being a close and loving one, and the parents engendered a pride and interest in Judaism in their children.

When Isaac Rosenberg was fourteen he was forced to leave school and become apprenticed to an engraver. He loathed the work, but, fortunately, his considerable artistic talents were brought to the attention of three wealthy Jewish women, who paid for him to go to the Slade from 1911 to 1914. It seems however, that this money was not granted entirely freely or unpatronizingly. His letters to these women are very defensive, and make it clear that he was subjected to a great deal of criticism and accusations of ingratitude. "I am very sorry I have disappointed you" he wrote one of them in September 1912. "If you tell me what was expected of me I shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing by how much I have erred. . . I cannot conceive who gave you the idea that I had such big notions about myself. Are you sure the people you enquired of know me and meant me? . . . I am not very inquisitive naturally, but I think it concerns me to know what you mean by poses and mannerisms - and whose advice do I not take

who are in a position to give - and what more healthy style of work do you wish me to adopt?"³

In addition to suffering poverty and a great deal of humiliation, Rosenberg was never robust. When he was eighteen he was thought to have tuberculosis, and the family borrowed twelve pounds for a passage to Cape Town, as the doctor thought he would benefit from some sun. Actually, he had congestion of the lungs, which cleared up rapidly in Cape Town, but he continued to be delicate, and it is an indication of how desperate the British Army was for troops that it passed him fit for active service when he enlisted in November 1915. His reasons for enlisting were primarily financial, incredible as that might seem when one considers that a private's pay was seven and six a week with an additional separation allowance of sixteen and six a month paid to his family.

"I never joined the army for patriotic reasons" he wrote to Edward Marsh. "Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must fight to get the trouble over. Anyhow, before the war I helped out when I could and I did other things to keep things going. I thought if I'd join, there would a separation allowance for my mother".⁴

It is difficult to conceive of more frustrating and difficult conditions for an aspiring poet, and yet in the Georgian era and in the First World War they helped him attain an independent and objective viewpoint impossible for the other soldier poets, whose public school training and

³Isaac Rosenberg, "Letter to Mrs. Cohen" in Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg, p. 334.

⁴Ibid, p. 305.

position as officers fixed them in their role as leaders and mouth-pieces for the men who served under them. Rosenberg was free of the heavy sense of responsibility that weighed on Owen and Sassoon, and could regard the whole war situation more independently. His detachment was strengthened by a sense of alienation from his fellow soldiers, which even the shared hardships and dangers of the trenches did not wholly dispel. His letters home present a picture that is both heroic and pathetic of him: stoically enduring the gruelling, ugly life of a private in the front line; desperately working at his poetry whenever he had respite from digging, wiring and being punished for his absent-mindedness; surrounded by what he had described in his period of training as "our horrible rabble - Falstaff's scarecrows were nothing to these. Three out of every four have been scavengers, the fourth is a ticket-of-leave".⁵ His poetic vision was magnanimous enough to pity them when they flung into the appalling battles of Arras, Passchendaele and the Somme, but underlying detachment is always there, giving his war poems a measure of classical coolness that is rare in the poetry that was written out of battle.

Rosenberg's lack of formal education had the effect of making his taste in poetry far more catholic than the average educated Georgian's. "Nobody" he told a friend, Miss Winifred Seaton in 1910, "ever told me what to read or put poetry in my way"⁶ and so he read poetry omnivorously, discovering poets who were not widely read before the First World War. He did admire the Georgian favourites - Keats,

⁵Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 329.

⁶Ibid, p. 364.

But no tender thoughts to crown the fiery dreams that float
 Around those sinuous rhythms and dim languours of your breast .⁸

Over-sensuous though these lines are to the point of being cloying, in the era in which they were written they stand out for their intensity and honesty. Rosenberg's recognition of the cruelty of sex is not found in pre-war Georgian love poems, which tend to be deeply inhibited and cosy. Not surprisingly, the Georgians usually avoided sex and other awkward subjects altogether and kept to the safe English countryside. The Georgian Poetry books from 1911 to 1914, which were supposed to contain the best contemporary poems, are filled with pleasant rural poems, with twittering swallows, the scent of hedgerows and quaint country folk. No wonder Edward Marsh, the editor and somewhat patronizing friend of Rosenberg, was baffled by much of what he wrote. He found Rosenberg's conception of God particularly baffling, and certainly this portrait of God which Rosenberg sent him in 1914 is original and violent:

In his malodorous brain what slugs and mire,
 Lanthorned in his oblique eyes, guttering burned!
 His body lodged a rat where men nursed souls.
 The world flashed grape-green eyes of a foiled cat
 To him. On fragments of an old shrunk power,
 On shy and maimed, on women wrung awry,
 He lay, a bullying hulk, to crush them more.
 But when one, fearless, turned and clawed like bronze,
 Cringing was easy to blunt these stern paws,
 And he would weigh the heavier on those after.

Who rests in God's mean flattery now? Your wealth
 Is but his cunning to make death more hard.
 Your iron sinews take more pain in breaking.
 And he has made the market for your beauty
 Too poor to buy, although you die to sell.
 Only that he has never heard of sleep;
 And when the cats come out the rats are sly.
 Here we are safe till he slinks in at dawn.

⁸ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 174.

But he has gnawed a fibre from strange roots,
 And in the morning some pale wonder ceases.
 Things are not strange and strange things are forgetful.
 Ah! if the day were arid, somehow lost
 Out of us, but it is as hair of us,
 And only in the hush no wind stirs it.
 And in the light vague trouble lifts and breathes,
 And restlessness still shadows the lost ways.
 The fingers shut on voices that pass through,
 Where blind farewells are taken easily . . .

Ah! this miasma of a rotting God!⁹

This long poem has been quoted in full because it clearly illustrates Rosenberg's strength and weaknesses as a poet during this period of his development. Marsh's criticism that it is extremely obscure is true of the last stanza, where the vivid, concrete imagery of the first fifteen lines dissolves into a romantic flaccidity that only vaguely suggests his theme, that man is constantly cheated by God's cunning. One notices too the abrupt awkwardness of the transitional line "Only that he has never heard of sleep" and the ambiguity in "Here we are safe till he slinks in at dawn". "Slinks in" suggests that God has been busy at night gnawing away at man's wonder and joy in life, but why then does Rosenberg suggest that man is safe at night from his malign influence?

The merit of the poem comes mainly from the originality of the imagery. Most striking is "The world flashed grape green eyes of a foiled cat / To him" which conveys the desperate fierce energy of man's resistance of God as well as his helpless, baffled fury at God's sly, indirect methods of beating him. Equally striking is the reduction of God's soul to a rat's, which, combined with the image of his sly, evil eyes glimmering dimly out of his vast hulk, give a powerful

⁹Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 63.

impression of his furtive cunning and tenacity, against which man is helpless. The rat image is maintained throughout the poem. In the last stanza man finds to his bewilderment that God, the rat, has slyly gnawed away the wonder and mystery of life, leaving him desolate and cheated; but the force of the exclamatory last line

Ah! this miasma of a rotting God!

suggests defiance as well as helpless fury.

Apart from the application of such imagery to God, this poem is a clear indication that Rosenberg had the potential to render his experiences of a vast, utterly destructive and chaotic war into meaningful poetry. His conception of a sly, bullying God and man's courageous yet desperate defiance of him would have been incomprehensible to the majority of soldier poets before the war, yet amidst the terrible, endless slaughter of the Western Front, almost all who survived longer than a few months were shocked into the belief that God had abandoned them. This substantially increased the feeling of anger and bewilderment brought about by the destruction of the heroic myth. Rosenberg's view of man as a heroic rebel fighting an unequal battle against an evil God gave him the advantage of being able to face the war with something approaching a tragic composure. It was to him another more intense and unequal struggle against vast, malign forces, and, in a way impossible for poets brought up with public school values, he could see the stoic heroism of man's hopeless resistance.

Rosenberg's clearest exposition of his theme of man's

rebellion against an evil, oppressive power occurs in the poetic drama "Moses", which he completed in 1915 just after joining the army. The play is far too static to be effective on the stage, but certain of Moses' speeches blaze with energy and excitement. At these moments, one sees very clearly Rosenberg's conception of heroic man - as a being possessing enormous primitive energy and confidence in his power:

See in my brain
 What mad men hav rushed through,
 And like a tornado
 Torn up the tight roots
 Of some dead universe.
 The old clay is broken
 For a power to soak in and knit
 It all into tougher tissues
 To hold life,
 Pricking my nerves till the brain might crack
 It boils to my finger tips,
 Till my hands ache to grip
 The hammer - the lone hammer
 That breaks lives into a road
 Through which my genius drives.
 Pharaoh well peruked and oiled,
 And your admirable pyramids,
 And your interminable procession
 Of crowded kings,
 You are my little fishing rods
 Wherewith I catch the fish
 To suit my hungry belly. 10

In this speech Moses appears a Hebrew Tamburlaine, having the same fierce strength and god-like self-confidence and aspirations. As in Tamburlaine's first revelation of his heroic power, the force of Moses is conveyed by the dense concentration of kinetic verbs and raw physical images of human effort that contrast strikingly with the images of an evil and debilitated Egypt.

An awareness of the fascination the old heroic concept held for Rosenberg is vitally important in the

¹⁰Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 48.

appreciation of his war poetry, for, essentially, it is his recognition of the heroic element in the fighting of the First World War, as well as his detachment, that makes his poetry so different from the other trench poetry. His conception of heroism had nothing of the romantic patriotism of Brooke. It was the stoic, classical conception of the Greeks and the Old English, that comes from a knowledge of the enormous expenditure of human effort and endurance war calls forth, and regards this in itself as an absolute value.

Rosenberg's reaction to the outbreak of war in August 1914 has far more affinity with the German and Russian poets' reaction than with the patriotic, idealistic one of his compatriots. Like Georg Heym and Stefan George in Germany and Victor Klebnikov in Russia, he foresaw the catastrophic nature of war, and like them, a part of him was attracted by war's fierce, elemental disorder and the reduction of life to primitive terms. This reaction is apparent in two war poems he wrote before he enlisted. The first, "On Receiving News of the War", which he wrote in Cape Town, reveals a considerable insight into the approaching violence. War is a tearing with red fangs at the face of God and a crimson curse:

Snow is a strange white word.
 No ice or frost
 Has asked of bud or bird
 For Winter's cost.

Yet ice and frost and snow
 From earth to sky
 This Summer land doth know.
 No man knows why.

In all men's hearts it is.
 Some spirit old
 Hath turned with malign kiss
 Our lives to mould.

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

O!ancient crimson curse!
 Corrode, consume.
 Give back this universe
 Its pristine bloom.¹¹

The linguistic compression of these lines and the controlled manipulation of the symbolic images, which move from expression of a sense of doom to the violent explicit images of the last two verses, reveal that the war had a sharpening effect on Rosenberg's poetry, causing him to discard the romantic vagueness that marred his earlier poetry. This sudden development of his poetic powers is also noticeable in his second war poem, "August 1914", which explores with deep perception the transforming effect of war on the lives of men. Again, one notices the linguistic compression and the control of his images, which can be viewed on both a literal and symbolic level:

Iron are our lives
 Molten right through our youth.
 A burnt space through ripe fields
 A fair mouth's broken tooth.¹²

The first two lines suggest that war has transformed "our lives" into a hard, inexorable pattern, but they suggest too the massive slaughter of youth by iron - the shell splinters and hot bullets piercing young bodies. In the third line the "burnt space" may be in apposition to "youth" - a symbolic image of the devastation of young soldiers or as a literal presentation of a common sight in France in the

¹¹Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 127.

¹²Ibid, p. 70.

autumn of 1914, the burnt cornfields caused by the advancing German armies. So too, "a fair mouth's broken tooth" may be seen as the gap in the fine French army after the Battle of Mons, or, more extensively, as an image of the brutalizing effect of war on human life.

Rosenberg was not unconscious of the individuality of his style and his outlook on war. In a letter he wrote in June 1916 to Mrs. Cohen, who had sent him "The Poetry Review" containing Rupert Brooke's much vaunted sonnets, he astutely summed up Brooke's principal weaknesses and expressed his own views on how war should be treated in poetry:

The poems by the soldier are vigorous but, I feel a bit commonplace. I did not like Rupert Brooke's begloried sonnets for the same reason. What I mean is second-hand phrases "lambent fires" etc. takes from its reality and strength. It should be approached in a colder way, more abstract, with less of the million feelings everybody feels; or all these should be concentrated in one distinguished emotion. Walt Whitman in "Beat, drums, beat" has said the noblest thing on war".¹³

The poems Rosenberg wrote from direct experience of war are a reflection of these views. Despite finding army life gruelling almost beyond endurance and suffering intensely from the bullying of "schoolboy pups of officers", the detachment and profundity of thought apparent in the two poems he wrote before enlisting remain unimpaired.

The very fine poem "Marching", that has a classical coolness and control, is a particularly good illustration of how Rosenberg was able to rise above his personal concerns in his war poetry, for it was written during his training

¹³ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 348.

period; undoubtedly the most miserable time in his army life. His letters to Marsh reveal that he was shunned by his fellow soldiers because he was a Jew, he had to march miles with lacerated feet because of crude, ill-fitting boots, and he was subjected to an unending series of petty punishments. Nothing of this emerges in the poem which portrays the soldiers from an heroic viewpoint:

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

We husband the ancient glory
 In these bared necks and hands.
 Not broke is the forge of Mars;
 But a subtler brain beats iron
 To shoe the hoofs of death
 (Who paws dynamic air now).
 Blind fingers loose an iron cloud
 To rain immortal darkness
 On strong eyes.¹⁴

By placing himself within the column and by confining himself to only those details that would have been apparent to him in this position, Rosenberg gives a vivid and immediate impression of the marching soldiers. Their proud strength is brought out by his concentration on their muscular necks which glint with ruddy life, and the sense of power is heightened by the contrast of the living colour with the khaki and the mechanical marching rhythm. In the second stanza Rosenberg directly links these modern infantrymen with the classic heroes forged by Mars, and thus makes clear that, although

¹⁴ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 66.

modern warfare lacks the splendid martial paraphernalia of former battles, these soldiers have one of the essential heroic qualities - superb physical strength and manliness.

After demonstrating the viability of the heroic mode in modern warfare, Rosenberg implies the changed nature of war in a series of complex metaphors: "But a subtler brain beats iron / To shoe the hoofs of death" suggests the fiendish intelligence of modern weapons which mock the old direct methods of fighting. "Who paws dynamic air now" is either a direct statement of the superiority of modern weapons or a challenging rhetorical questioning of man's power as a fighting force. The closing lines convey the terrible impersonality of death in modern war; but as in his early poem, "God", he seems to concede a heroic grandeur in man's resistance. In "strong eyes" one has the idea of proud defiance and this suggestion of an heroic stance is reinforced by his representation of death as "immortal darkness".

Up to now, no mention has been made of the influence of Rosenberg's art on his poetry. The reason is that, until he enlisted, Rosenberg seemed to keep the two separate. The prints of his pre-war paintings and sketches that appear in the collection of his work reveal a strong sense of form and pattern, and a considerable talent for portraiture, but the overall impression is one of woodenness. It seems as though Rosenberg was too inhibited by his training at the Slade to reveal much of the strong sexual and rebellious feelings that inform his pre-war poetry, and thus he used poetry, not art, as an emotional outlet. There are signs in his pre-war poems that he was struggling to impose the form and order that one finds in his art on the welter of feeling expressed in his

poetry, but he did not fully achieve this until he was in the army. The reason why the army had this maturing effect on his poetry can only be speculated upon. It is possible that the rigid military discipline assisted him in imposing an orderliness and continuity that his life had previously lacked, and that as the crowded conditions of the barracks and the trenches made painting an impossibility, he had to channel his intellectual and emotional energies into his poetry. Certainly, the precisely observed visual detail that one finds in "Marching" is far more obvious in his war poems than in the vague, sensuous poems of his earlier period.

The experience of the trenches had the effect of deepening the tragic element in Rosenberg's vision of war. The soldiers still retain the heroic beauty and strength made vivid in "Marching", but, more and more, he emphasizes the vastness and power of the destructive forces ranged against them, and shows how hopeless is their resistance. "Break of Day in the Trenches", July 1916, one of the first poems that Rosenberg wrote in France, is a very clear exposition of how the actual experience of war had modified his basic heroic vision.

In this poem, Rosenberg uses two natural objects - a poppy and a rat - to point to the transience of human life in modern warfare and to the tragic futility of man's self-victimization. The manner in which these themes are presented is quiet and meditative, completely unlike the angry and disillusioned tone of the majority of First World War poetry, and the themes develop naturally out of a single unremarkable incident.

The darkness crumbles away -
 It is the same old druid Time as ever.
 Only a live thing leaps my hand -
 A queer sardonic rat -
 As I pull the parapet's poppy
 To stick behind my ear.
 Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
 Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
 Now you have touched this English hand
 You will do the same to a German -
 Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
 To cross the sleeping green between.
 It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
 Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes
 Less chanced than you for life,
 Bonds to the whims of murder,
 Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
 The torn fields of France.
 What do you see in our eyes
 At the shrieking iron and flame
 Hurlled through still heavens?
 What quaver - what heart aghast?
 Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
 Drop, and are ever dropping;
 But mine in my ear is safe,
 Just a little white with the dust.¹⁵

Despite its brevity and apparent simplicity, this is one of Rosenberg's most richly complex poems. The "queer sardonic rat", that grins because the soldiers he scuttles past are doomed, dramatizes, through the contrast between his low, ugly vitality and their athletic beauty, the difference between this and earlier wars. In this war the old heroic qualities of strength, pride and courage - which these soldiers have in abundance - merely make their inevitable destruction by high-explosives or machine-guns the more pathetic and poignant. Warfare has changed to such an extent that now man and the rat, most repulsive of animals, have been transposed. The rat has the freedom to run along the parapet and cross over No Man's Land if he wishes, while the soldier is trapped rat-like in the trenches, almost certain to be shot if he lifts

¹⁵ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 73.

his head above the parapet, and able to venture out only stealthily at night. While the soldiers resemble in their fine physical condition the proud warriors of the past, the rat can see through their fearless eyes to the murderous horror of "the shrieking iron and flame" that they have been through, and soon must go through again.

All the while that the soldier is addressing the rat, one is aware of the poppy. The gesture of plucking it and sticking it behind his ear seems, in the context of the trenches, to be both ludicrous and charming - a sort of jaunty nose-thumbing by the soldier at the war. But the revelation of what lies in the depths of his and the other troops' eyes adds a terrible pathos to this gesture, so that in the last instance it becomes an act of heroic defiance in the face of death, and the fragile poppy itself a symbol of his own frailty.

In employing the poppy image and the notion that poppies are red because they are nourished by the blood of dead soldiers, Rosenberg was drawing on a long-established literary tradition that saw an intimate connection between nature and the soldier, and believed that nature had a sympathetic reaction to the fallen warrior. As far back as the Middle Ages one reads of crimson roses springing up on the graves of brave knights, symbolizing their sacrificial love. In this poem the short-lived beauty of the poppies is directly reflective of the transience of the soldiers, whose haughtiness, strength and fineness are of no avail. This makes the word "safe" in the penultimate line ironic, for it is apparent from their fate that the plucked poppy's safety is

only delusive - as delusive as that of the soldier.

The last line of the poem "Just a little white from the dust" confirms how ephemeral the moment of safety is, for although it means the literal dust of the hot summer of 1916, the symbolic associations of "dust" predominate over the literal in this context. If the poppy is now just a little powdered it will soon be turned wholly to dust.

Most critics rate "Break of Day in the Trenches" and "Dead Man's Dump" as his masterpieces, but the poem Rosenberg himself considered his best, and one that took him over a year to write is "Daughters of War", which he eventually completed in May 1917. It is significant that he should have valued this poem so highly for, of all his poems written from the trenches, it is one where the heroic element of his vision is at its strongest.

His aim, as he wrote to a friend, John Rodker, was "to get the sense of inexorableness the human (or inhuman) side this war has".¹⁶ He achieved this through conceiving the savage, relentless spirit of war as huge, wild female creatures that lust for the souls of the soldiers.

There is no direct evidence that Rosenberg had read the Scandinavian heroic myths of the Valkyries, yet the "Daughters of War" closely resemble the weird handmaidens of Odin who hovered over the battle determining its course and selecting brave warriors to be their lovers in Valhalla. Like the Valkyries, Rosenberg's Daughters are strong, savagely beautiful spirits whose love "the sons of valour" are helpless to resist, for to attain them the Daughters blow the spark of war into a corrosive fire that destroys their mortal

¹⁵ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 301.

bodies.

The poem opens with the wild sexual dance of the Daughters, that both expresses their exultation at being united with their human lovers and lures the souls of the newly dead from their corpses.

Space beats the ruddy freedom of their limbs -
 Their naked dances with man's spirit naked
 By the root side of the tree of life
 (The under side of things
 And shut from earth's profoundest eyes).

I saw in prophetic gleams
 These mighty daughters in their dances
 Beckon each soul aghast from its crimson corpse
 To mix in their glittering dances.
 I heard the mighty daughters' giant sighs
 In sleepless passion for the sons of valour,
 And envy of the days of flesh
 Barring their love with mortal boughs across -
 The mortal boughs, the mortal tree of life.
 The old bark burnt with iron wars
 They blow to a live flame
 To char the young green days
 And reach the occult soul; they have no softer lure -
 No softer lure than the savage ways of death.¹⁷

It is unusual in the poetry of the First World War to find war expressed in wholly symbolic terms as it is here. Rosenberg's use of such a mode suggests that he was attempting to go beyond the immediate reality and express the deeply complex nature of war that could not adequately be expressed by realism. For him the attraction of the symbolic mode must have been that, by its very vagueness, he could suggest the vast power of war and the immensity of its scale. In the above lines, the mighty Daughters, caught up in their frenzied dance, do convey the tumult and ferocious energy of artillery warfare, and their unending lust the inexorable demand

¹⁷ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 85.

for human lives. The image of the flame charring "the young green days" accurately conveys the blighting effect that high-explosives and machine-gun fire had on whole divisions of the army. The majority of men flung into the holocaust of battle never encountered the enemy at close quarters, for they were destroyed the moment they climbed out of the trenches. It was, then, a strange impersonal, inhuman type of warfare, and the weird Daughters who operate unseen and unknown, but with an irresistible power, do symbolize the feeling of the troops that they were caught up in something that had long passed out of human control.

Despite the fact that the soldiers are helpless against the might of the Daughters, they, like the Nordic warriors who went to Valhalla, are heroic not pathetic victims. They are the "sons of valour", godlike in the beauty of their faces and the strength of their bodies:

Though there are human faces
 Best sculptures of Deity,
 And sinews lusted after
 By the Archangels tall,
 Even these must leap to the love-heat of these
 maidens --18

Lines such as these reveal how different was Rosenberg's vision from Owen's. Even after two years of fighting in the trenches, where he saw death in all its most execrable and pathetic forms, he could not depict death as something revolting and animal as Owen does in "Dulce et Decorum Est".

¹⁸ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 85.

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, ¹⁹

Owen's brutal realism in this extract has the effect of highlighting the main weakness of "Daughters of War".

One can see from its ambitious scale and the grandeur of its conceptions why Rosenberg liked the poem. It was an attempt to capture the essential qualities of the whole war in poetry, yet although he does succeed in conveying a sense of the immensity and inexorableness of the First World War, the poem lacks the strength and emotional force that the counterpointing of the real with the symbolic gives to his best poetry.

Rosenberg's heroic representation of the soldier in "Daughters of War" has an important qualifying effect on a poem that follows it in his *Collected Works*, "Soldier: Twentieth Century". In this poem a woman addresses her soldier lover:

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

Out of unthinkable torture,
 Eyes kissed by death,
 Won back to the world again,
 Lost and won in a breath,

Cruel men are made immortal,
 Out of your pain born.
 They have stolen the sun's power
 With their feet on your shoulders
 worn.

¹⁹ Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen; War Poems and Others, p.79.

Let them shrink from your girth,
That has outgrown the pallid days,
When you slept like Circe's swine,
Or a word in the brain's ways. 20

Jon Silkin has commented that this poem "recreates the phenomenon C.E.Montague recorded in "Disenchantment", where women, who before the war were suffragettes, suddenly found the soldier desirable, regardless of his personal quality. What attracted them seems to have been the generalized image of his predatoriness and power, his heroic dimensions which war, of course, and his actions in it, provided . . . What one reads is not Rosenberg's praise of war but his observations of a woman's distorted view of the soldier".²¹

Silkin's comments would be plausible if it were not for the heroic element that appears so strongly in "Marching", and "Daughters of War" and to a lesser extent in "Break of Day in the Trenches". Because he has linked modern infantrymen in "Marching" with the classical heroes forged by Mars, and envisaged them as "sons of valour" in "Daughters of War" one cannot imply, as Silkin does, that this poem is a satire attacking the romantic heroic view of the women at home. Admittedly, read out of the context of Rosenberg's other poems and the heroic play, "Moses", the woman's image of her lover as a "great new Titan" and her belief that he is cast in the same heroic mould as Caesar and Napoleon might suggest the unbalanced, unrealistic attitudes of some women in the First World War. But this is only if the poem is read in isolation,

²⁰Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 87.

²¹Jon Silkin, Out of Battle (London 1972) p. 294 - 295.

and only if one ignores the third verse where the sensitive images of suffering make it impossible that Rosenberg meant this poem as a satire.

What angered Owen and Sassoon was that civilians, particularly female civilians, either could not comprehend or were indifferent to the anguish that the soldiers had endured, yet were "fondly thrilled" by the aura of manliness and courage war generated:

You love us when we're heroes home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.²²

Apart from the fact that Rosenberg's poem has none of this cutting stringency of tone, his woman is completely different from these unpleasant predatory females. She is aware that her lover's heroism is born out of suffering, not glamorous heroic exploit, and the truth of her vision is made clear not so much by "unthinkable torture" and "eyes kissed by death", which have a slightly melodramatic ring, but by the stark image of the burdened, exhausted soldier in the third verse. She sees that it is he and thousands like him that have borne the terrible cost of war, yet it is not they, but the "cruel men", presumably those who began it and wilfully continue it, that are immortalized.

How much of this image of heroism was Rosenberg's own? His portrait of Moses as a splendid rebel of boundless self-confidence and power, and the stress on the link between

²²Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems 1908 - 1956, (London 1961) p. 79.

the modern soldier and the Greek and Roman heroes establish that in the early years of the war he had a classical conception of heroism. But this was before he experienced trench warfare. In "Break of Day in the Trenches" and in "Daughters of War" a darkening of his heroic vision is discernible. His soldiers still retain the beauty and strength of heroes, but they have been overshadowed by the dark enormity of the forces opposing them. This poem, with its emphasis on the soldier, seems a logical movement from:

The shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens 23

to a more detailed consideration of the human being flung into their midst. It is an attempt to establish the possibility of heroism in the context of an unheroic war.

In the last verse Rosenberg confirms the idea, suggested earlier by the proximity of the heroic image to the images of suffering, that the soldier is enlarged to heroic proportions by his experiences in war. Yet the feeling of pride and strength in the imperative lines:

Let them shrink from your girth
That has outgrown the pallid days.

suggests that Rosenberg was envisaging a heroism that goes beyond passive endurance to a more active, more splendid heroism, strong enough to subdue the evil of the "cruel men". Despite the militant images in the first verse, the focus of suffering in the body of the poem makes it clear that Rosenberg did not see the new type of hero in physical terms. The

23 "Break of Day in the Trenches" in Collected Works, p. 73.

soldier's heroism is derived from the growth of his spiritual integrity, and it is this that he sees as the only sane power to oppose the evil and violence of war. He had experienced enough of modern warfare to realize the futility of opposing violence with violence.

"Soldier: Twentieth Century" is more important as an indication of Rosenberg's need to find a heroic positive amidst the devastation and confusion of war than for its poetic merit. The juxtaposition of the heroic images with the romantic images is roughly done and one questions too the appropriateness of Titan. Of all the Greek Gods the Titans were the most cruel and primitive. Rosenberg obviously used the word to emphasize only the increased stature and strength of the twentieth-century soldier, but it is difficult to dissociate the image of the stories of Cronos slashing at Uranus with his scythe, or gulping down his children.

No war poet was more aware than Rosenberg of the need for time to rewrite and refine his work. He mentions this often in his letters to Edward Marsh, but most memorably he wrote to Laurence Binyon in December 1916: "I am determined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poeting; ^(sic) that is if I am lucky enough to come through it all right. I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and it will all refine itself into poetry later on".²⁴

²⁴ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 373.

"Soldier: Twentieth Century" represents a vital part of Rosenberg's consciousness of war. Its heroic portrayal of the soldier would have been both refined and developed had he survived. This impression is substantiated by what we can gather from his letters in 1918 of his future literary plans. He mentions three times to his brother and John Rodker that he wanted "to write a battle-song for the Judaeans, but so far I can think of nothing noble and weighty enough" and in 1917 he had begun plans for a play, "The Unicorn", which he wanted to symbolize the whole war. The draft of the play and the fragments he wrote for it are in too rough and unfinished a form to be assessed fairly, but it is significant that the central character, Tel, king of a race that is dying for lack of women, is a primitive but heroic figure, possessing the fierce simplicity, courage and huge physical strength of the classical heroes.

The heroic element in Rosenberg's work has been greatly stressed because it appears vital to an understanding of much of his poetry. As his letter to Binyon indicates however, his vision was a comprehensive one and there are important poems in which he reveals other facets of war.

Such a poem is "Dead Man's Dump", which is undoubtedly Rosenberg's greatest war poem, and the one that Bergonzi and Alvarez agree is "the greatest poem by an Englishman to have been produced by the war".²⁵

On 8 May 1917 Rosenberg wrote laconically to Marsh of the poem's inception "I've written some lines

²⁵Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight, (London 1965) p. 116.

suggested by going out wiring, or rather carrying wire up the line on limbers and running over dead bodies lying about. I dont think what I've written is very good but I think the substance is, and when I work on it I'll make it fine".²⁶

What he actually produced was an extraordinarily powerful rendering of the experience of battle and an exploration of the mysteries of death. The poem follows the terrible path of the lurching limber as it is dragged over corpses and through the howling chaos of high-explosives. John H. Johnston sees this poem as a series of inchoate impressions of death only loosely bound together by the movement of the limber. In fact, the poem forms a magnificently orchestrated whole that centres on two crucial questions in the fourth stanza:

Earth! have they gone into you!
Somewhere they must have gone,
And flung on your hard back
Is their soul's sack
Emptied of God-ancestralled essences.
Who hurled them out? Who hurled?²⁷

The answer to the first question is gradually revealed in the body of the poem by a series of images of death that emphasize with increasing intensity and clarity that there is no after life. The men who are killed in battle are far more dead than the devastated wasteland on which they lie.

The opening stanzas present the dead whose fate is deeply examined in the poem:

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,
Their shut mouths made no moan.²⁸

²⁶ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 316.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 81.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 81.

In these lines one senses a conflict of response within the poet. His conscious intelligence tells him that the mutilation of the bodies of the corpses by the heavy wheels of the limber does not matter, for they are dead, but the words "lurched" and "crunched" and his desperate insistence that they felt no pain reveal that emotionally he cannot accept that they are dead. This suggestion is intensified in the lines that follow by the assertion of their human origin

They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,
Man born of man, and born of woman,
And shells go crying over them
From night till night and now.²⁹

As in Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth", the desolation of death in battle is increased, not mitigated by the endless crying of the shells seeming to be the only token of mourning for the dead. In both poems the poet's pity comes forcefully through the sombre imagery, but Rosenberg's reaches across the boundary of war to include the enemy corpses.

If the lament of the shells and the graphic description of the crushing of the corpses give the impression that Rosenberg is to treat death in the manner of Owen, this is removed by the next stanza where he views the corpses not as mutilated victims, but as young warriors arrested at the peak of their virility:

Now she (the earth) has them at last!
In the strength of their strength
Suspended - stopped and held.³⁰

This conception of death as the summary suspension of vivid life receives increasing emphasis in this poem, and

²⁹ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 81.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 81.

contrasts with the images of total death, so that by the end of the poem it becomes clear that Rosenberg believed that the only life man has is his mortal one, and that the moment of death throws into relief the value of life.

In the fourth stanza one sees the beginning of his vision of the finality of death, when he suddenly reduces the heroic image of the soldiers contained in the above lines to:

. . . . soul's sack
Emptied of God-ancestral essences.³¹

The feeling of deadness is here so strong that although he has not yet rejected the possibility of an after life, the force of the image denies it.

The climax of the poem is reached in the ninth and tenth stanzas, when the wide focus on all the dead strewn in and along the path of the limber is narrowed onto a single man dying on a stretcher. His fate, which is to pass from being a man, the object of human tenderness, to something alien and inhuman, is representative of the fate of all the dead on the battlefield.

The moment of his death, the splattering of his brains on the stretcher-bearer's face, is made deliberately graphic and painful to emphasize the gulf between the just dead and the older dead, who have been strange and remote, their human identity gone:

A man's brains splattered
On a stretcher-bearer's face
His shook shoulders slipped their load,
But when they bent to look again

³¹Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 81.

The drowning soul was sunk too deep
For human tenderness.

They left this dead with the older dead,
Stretched at the cross roads.³²

It is possible that the dead were actually placed at a crossroads so that they could be the more easily found when there was an opportunity to bury them, but since in the past it was customary to bury highwaymen and other social outcasts at a crossroads, it is possible that Rosenberg meant this image to operate on a symbolic level as well, to reinforce the feeling of alienation that is so strong in the following lines:

Burnt black by strange decay
Their sinister faces lie,
The lid over each eye,
The grass and coloured clay
More motion have than they,
Joined to the great sunk silences.³³

This is the culmination of all the images of deadness in the poem and one of the most powerful and explicit expressions of the finality of death in the literature of the First World War. It is the answer to the question "Earth! have they gone into you?" that he asked in the fourth stanza. There is no Wordsworthian optimism--no harmonious blending of the dead men with nature - for they have become infinitely strange, more dead than the grass and clay, which in time will come to life again. They are part of a great void; which is very different from the unifying spirit to which Wordsworth believed Man and Nature belonged and would return.

³² Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 83.

³³ Ibid, p. 81.

The last part of the poem is a sombre corollary to this stanza. It describes the efforts of a dying man to cry out to the living. He succeeds, but as the wheels of the limber touch his face, he too is beyond human help and tenderness:

We heard his ^{very} last sound
And our wheels grazed his dead face. 34

The point that the lines dramatize^t is not the failure of the living to reach the dying man, for it is clear he is past their help. It is the desperate clinging of the man to life, in this instance represented by the plunging limber:

His dark hearing caught our far wheels,
And the choked soul stretched weak hands
To reach the living word the far wheels said;
The blood-dazed intelligence beating for light,
Crying through the suspense of the far-torturing wheels
"Will they come? Will they ever come?"³⁵

The terrible effort in the soldier's struggle to stay alive, conveyed by the verbs "caught", "stretched", "reach", "beating" and "crying", and the urgency of the rhythm, end hopelessly and finally in a weak scream. That Rosenberg should have made this soldier's last sound a scream is significant, because of the terror and sense of protest this word connotes. It seems in this last moment of the poem to be Rosenberg's final denial that there is an after life.

The second question asked in the fourth stanza "Who hurled them out? Who Hurlled?" is answered directly in the middle of the poem in a single stanza that conveys powerfully the

34 ³⁴Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 83.

³⁵Ibid, p. 83.

the might and terror of modern warfare. From the last line of this stanza it is evident that Rosenberg believed that man was ultimately responsible for the devastation of human life but only in so far as he had ignorantly and blindly unleashed vast forces that were beyond his power to control. To convey the might of these forces, he portrays them as Earth, whom he envisages as a female figure that, like the "Daughters of War", lusts for the spirits of men. In the third verse she is shown waiting with menacing impatience for them to be returned to her, but in this stanza her forgetfulness erupts into maniacal fury:

Maniac Earth! howling and flying, your bowel
 Seared by the jagged fire, the iron love,
 The impetuous storm of savage love.
 Dark Earth! dark Heavens! swinging in chemic smoke,
 What dead are born when you kiss each soundless soul
 With lightning and thunder from your mined heart,
 Which man's self dug, and his blind fingers loosed? 36

Much of the forcefulness of these lines comes from the combination of images of violent pain with images of equally violent sex. Earth's huge paroxysms are therefore both the agonizing pain of her "seared bowel" and mined heart" and the orgasmic love for the men who have blindly woken her into frenzied life. The wild activity of the howling earth makes the question "what dead are born" rhetorical, for it is clear no man can survive her disruptions. This is reinforced by the image of earth and heaven swinging together in a hell of chemic smoke, and the feeling of man's passivity and helplessness suggested by the one quiet image "soundless soul".

³⁶ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 82.

In its totality this poem is beautifully balanced. The focus shifts constantly from the particular to the cosmic, so that the images of individual deaths merge into a vision of vast destruction, and at the end, the weak scream of the dying man to the men on the limber seems to be the cry against untimely death of all the soldiers in this war and of all men in all wars.

Another poem which explores death in war is "Returning, We Hear the Larks". Like "Break of Day in the Trenches", it appears ineffably simple, but is in fact a deeply sensitive apprehension of the effect of the constant menace of death on the human spirit:

Sombre the night is.
And though we have our lives, we know
What sinister threat lurks there.

Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know
This poison-blasted track opens on our camp-
On a little safe sleep.

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

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song -
But song only dropped,
Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides,
Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,
Or her kisses where a serpent hides.³⁷

The first two stanzas, that describe the exhausted men dragging themselves back to the camp after a period in the trenches, establish how blighting is the effect of war on man's sensibility. They have survived the night, but their whole consciousness is so flooded by death they feel no relief, and

are aware only of the ugliness that surrounds them and has pervaded them. The track to the camp is "poison-blasted" and their limbs are "anguished". A little safe sleep appears a bitter comment, since "little" indicates how short this respite will be.

By bringing their awareness of death so close upon the lark's song, the undercurrent of death is sensed in their ecstasy even before it is made explicit in the last stanza.

He is obviously thinking of Shelley's "To A Skylark" - there is the same ecstatic perception of beauty and the same imagery of showering music and the same varied use of similes to express the precise quality of his inner experience. But whereas Shelley's similes make explicit his conception of an ideal beauty, Rosenberg's seek to evoke a sense of the menace that lies in beauty. He saw that in this war the only reality is death and suffering, and that beauty is a dangerous dream.

The selection of war poems considered in this chapter show that , in comparison to the other poets who wrote during the war, Rosenberg had an usually wide range of visualization. In determining "to saturate (himself) with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life" he sometimes dealt with aspects of the war that were either ignored or mentioned only incidentally by other poets. For example, lice formed a major part of the soldier's experience of war, but only Rosenberg saw them as a subject for poetry.

The better-known of his two poems about lice, "Louse Hunting", is a revelation of his originality, for, apart from the unusualness of the subject matter, he does

not consider the misery of the lice-infested soldiers as, say, Owen would have done, but concentrates on the weird leaping patterns the soldiers make in trying to rid themselves of the lice:

Nudes - stark and glistening,
Yelling in lurid glee. Grinning faces
And raging limbs
Whirl over the floor one fire.³⁸

One can see in these opening lines the influence of Rosenberg's training as a painter. He has arrested in the manner of an artist the wild conglomeration of leaping bodies and raging limbs, but, though the effect is, as Marius Bewley puts it "like the sculptured narration of lost souls from a church porch",³⁹ the rhythm prevents the scene from being static. Later in the poem, the momentum of the dance seems to reach frenzied heights as the lines become shorter and the number of unstressed syllables decreases:

Soon like a demon's pantomime
The place was raging.
See the silhouettes agape,
See the glibbering shadows
Mixed with the battled arms on the wall.
See gargantuan hooked fingers
Pluck in supreme flesh
To smutch supreme littleness.⁴⁰

The wild movement of the dance culminates in the extreme sensuousness of the actual hooking of the lice out of the flesh. So strong are the tactile images created by "gargantuan hooked fingers", "pluck", "flesh" and "smutch" that the louse hunt takes on the appearance of a mad orgy. "Smutch" is particularly vivid, for it suggests both the dirt of the

³⁸ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 79.

³⁹ Marius Bewley, "The Poetry of Isaac Rosenberg" in Commentary Vol. 7 January to June 1949.

⁴⁰ Isaac Rosenberg, Collected Works, p. 79.

lice and the dark smear to which the frantic squeezing fingers reduce the creatures. The whole scene is heightened by the poet's sense of ironic contrast. The contortions of the twisting bodies magnified grotesquely by the shadows they throw in the candlelight, the violent animal energy, is all to smutch the extreme littleness of the lice.

On 1 April 1918 Isaac Rosenberg was killed in action. Of all the major poets, his achievement was the slowest to be recognized. In 1922 Gordon Bottomley published an edition of his poems, to which Siegfried Sassoon wrote a characteristically generous introduction - generous because Rosenberg's approach to war was very different from his own, and Rosenberg himself had not been overly impressed by Sassoon's poetry. In 1936 Denys Harding produced a fine critical appraisal of his war poems in "Scrutiny", but neither this nor Sassoon's introduction was enough to make even the literary public read Rosenberg, and it was only in the 1960s that he became established as a war poet whose only equal is Wilfred Owen.

The worst oversight on the part of the critics was Robert Nichols' exclusion of his poetry from his 1943 anthology of the Great War. This anthology came out at a time when poets were having considerable difficulty in finding a suitable idiom to express a war whose very nature was recalcitrant to poetry. In his lengthy introduction, Nichols recognized the poet's need for guidance, but his hope that they would find it in the passionately committed and angry poems of his anthology was not realistic, for the nature of the two wars was too different.

By the Second World War, advances in technology had largely destroyed the issues that motivated the First World War poets. There was no need to warn the public, when the public itself was liable to violent death, and the development in the aeroplane and the tank prevented the enervating stagnation that had made the trench poets angrily question the prolonging of the war. Moreover, the First World War was fought against enemies who were close and recognizably human, and much of the poet's protest arose out of their sense of a common humanity on the battlefield. In the Second World War the enemy was usually remote. The pilot high in the air could hardly imagine the life he was destroying: on the ground long-range weapons and tanks isolated the killer from the victim.

Of all the First World War poetry, only Rosenberg's was sufficiently detached from the appalling circumstances out of which it was written, and wide enough in its vision to provide an inspiration to poets dealing with an immense, cold and mechanized conflict.

One poet, Keith Douglas, did discover Rosenberg and there is little doubt that his poetry gained immeasurably. He acknowledges Rosenberg's influence only once:

Living in a wide landscape are the flowers
Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying.⁴¹

but Rosenberg's mark is on every poem that he wrote in the war. One sees it in the cool clarity of his style, in the controlled manipulation of his imagery and in his recognition of the viability of heroism in an unheroic war.

⁴¹Keith Douglas, "Desert Flowers" in Collected Poems of Keith Douglas, ed. J.Walker, G S Fraser and J C Hall (London 1966) p. 129.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BRITISH POETS IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

It is generally agreed that the main achievement of the trench poets was to undermine the traditional heroic response to war so completely that poets were never again to glorify war. This is only partially true, for although the dominant reaction of the poets of the Second World War was anti-heroic and undramatic, a large proportion of the poets who wrote about the Spanish Civil War viewed it as an heroic crusade against the evil forces of Fascism.

The reason for their heroic response was that the Spanish Civil War was primarily a revolution - the last in a series of revolutions that began with the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Like the French Revolution, and the Greek Revolution in 1821, the Spanish Civil War had an appeal that went far beyond national boundaries, for its issues were fundamental to liberal-thinking men. It was, or seemed to be, the struggle of freedom, tolerance and humanity against militaristic oppressive powers. "For all its blood, cruelty, intrigue and corruption," an historian writes, "there was something pure about the Spanish War. The enthusiasm it engendered was a springtime that briefly loosened the wintry grip of a world grown old and weary and cynical. As did no event in our time, it caught the conscience of a generation".¹

Left-wing groups all over the world were aroused to tremendous fervour and excitement. In England, the Spanish Civil War had particular relevance for the Socialists, Radicals

¹Dante A. Puzzo, Spain and the Great Powers 1936 - 1941 (New York, 1962) p. v.

and Liberals, for it seemed to them to mirror and crystallize their own efforts, begun in 1930, to undermine a system of government they considered reactionary and retrogressive, in order to establish a liberal society.

With the exception of Roy Campbell, all the English poets involved in the Spanish Civil War were Leftists. They blamed the Nationalistic government, largely composed of Conservatives, for the multitude of problems that beset England in the thirties - the massive unemployment; the poverty; the disparity of wealth; and more profoundly, they blamed it for the sterility of spirit that T.S. Eliot had epitomized in "The Waste Land". It was the Communist party, which in 1930 had only three hundred members, that proffered the most radical solution. They believed that England should follow the example of Russia and establish a classless state by revolution. It must be pointed out, however, that they were either ignorant of or deliberately closed their eyes to the suffering and tyranny in Russia. George Bernard Shaw and Lady Astor, who had visited Russia in 1930 as Stalin's distinguished guests, were loud in their praise of Soviet progress, but it is, of course, certain they saw only what Stalin intended them to see. Nevertheless, the dynamism of Communism attracted an increasing number of students, liberals and members of the professional classes, so that by 1937, membership of the Party had risen to 11,000. Despite the accent of English Communist doctrine on equality of opportunity, the Labour Party would have nothing to do with the Communist party, and condemned Communist and Nazi dictatorships in a manifesto called "Democracy versus Dictatorship".

Another important reason that the Communist Party increased its membership was that it offered the only organized opposition to Fascism. The Left-wing had watched with increasing alarm the rise of Fascist powers in the early thirties, and when they realized that the League of Nations was powerless to stop the aggrandisement of Germany, Italy and Japan, many either joined a Communist Party or, responding to an appeal by the Communists to join with them in presenting a united front against Fascism, supported its Popular Front policy.

Thus it was, when the Spanish Civil War broke out, that although the energy and passion for the cause came from those representing a broad spectrum of liberal values, the organization was Communist.

The poetry that was produced by the Left-wing prior to the Spanish War is of interest because it makes very clear the form that the poet's response was going to take in the war. In their expression of their hopes for a new and better life to replace the worn-out and stultified life of post-war England and in their determination to fight Fascism one finds abundant idealism, but it is an idealism that takes little cognizance of reality. Liberal, socialistic poetry dominated the literary scene in the thirties, because people were tired of reflections of a weary, spiritless world that the poets of the twenties had given them; but few noticed that the fervent tone obscured essentially vapid imagery and a lack of direction.

Stephen Spender wrote with vigour and excitement:

Oh, Comrades step beautifully from the solid wall
Advance to rebuild and sleep with friend on hill²

²Stephen Spender, Collected Poems 1928 - 1953
(London 1940) p. 22.

and one finds the same hope and desire for change in poem after poem that appeared in the literary periodicals of the Left-wing, "New Signatures", "New Country" and "Left Review". Rex Warner called for a renewal of youth in his "Hymn" in "New Country":

Come then, companions. This is the spring of blood
heart's hey-day, movement of masses, beginning of good.³

and Cecil Day Lewis looked forward to a new life and a new England with joyful expectation in the opening of "Magnetic Mountain":

Broad let our valleys embrace the morning
And satisfied see a good day dying,
Accepting the shadow, sure of seed.⁴

The poets were aware that breaking with the past and establishing a new classless society could not be accomplished without a struggle, and their poetry is as much devoted to instilling a fighting spirit as it is to inspiring a feeling of hope. Cecil Day Lewis sounded the rallying call with great fervour:

Though we fall once, though we often, (sic)
Though we fall to rise not again,
From our horizon sons begin;
When we go down, they will be tall ones.⁵

Stephen Spender wrote with similar heroic fervour, but with a greater awareness of the pain and hardship the struggle would involve:

When those who were pillars of that day's gold roof
Shrink in their clothes: surely from hunger
We may strike fire, like fire from flint?
And our strength is now the strength of our bones
Clean and equal like the shine from snow
And the strength of famine and our enforced idleness

³ Rex Warner, "New Country" edited by Michael Roberts (London 1933) p. 254.

⁴ C.D. Lewis, "Magnetic Mountain", in Collected Poems 1954, (London 1954) p. 9.

⁵

C.D. Lewis, "Learning to Talk" in Time to Dance and Other Poems, (London 1955) p. 8.

And it is the strength of our love for each other.⁶

W.H. Auden recognised that the struggle would call for a different kind of courage from the flamboyant, flag-waving variety:

Bravery is now
Not in the dying breath
But resisting the temptations
To sky-line operations.⁷

and in "Which Side am I Supposed to be on?" he impressed on his readers the need for readiness and training for battle.

Yet, despite the conviction of the poets, one does not find in their poetry, or indeed in any of the English Social writings of the period, any clear conception of how they were going to bring about a revolution, or what was to be the nature of their classless society. Even Cecil Day Lewis, an ardent and active Communist, does not commit himself to a more precise picture of Communist England in his "Letter to a Young Revolutionary" than to assure his friend that it will be very different from Communist Russia.

In reality, the poets were attempting to record and diagnose a vast complex of disorders that nobody understood, perhaps least of all the politicians and economists. No doubt it was due to the extreme complexity of the situation that poets expressed the struggle in very general or allegorical terms. The excerpts above illustrate how they avoided precise detail, and when the conflict was given lengthier treatment they tended to resort to allegory, as Cecil Day Lewis does in "Magnetic Mountain". The cause is represented by the mountain itself,

⁶ Stephen Spender, "After they have Tired" in Poetry of the 1930s, ed. A. Rodway (London 1967) p. 53.

⁷ W.H. Auden, "Reported Missing" in Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957, (London 1966) p. 21.

whose sheer and barren sides the people must struggle to climb.

The lack of any definite course in their poetry gives rise to speculation on how long the Left-wing intellectual movement of the early Thirties would have lasted had the Spanish Civil War not broken out in 1936. Julian Bell, who was to fight and die in Spain, touched at the crux of the matter in a letter to Cecil Day Lewis when he criticised the English Marxist attitude:

It is a humanitarian, romantic attitude at heart; like a child of nineteenth century liberalism . . . it has its origins in the uneasiness of converts from the bourgeoisie and in the bitterness and even more the snobbery of déclassé proletarians become intellectuals.⁷

The Communists and Liberals were romantics who were to a great extent vowed to a myth. It took the Spanish Civil War to shatter this myth, and though the poets who lived through this experience generally wrote better afterwards, poetry has rarely been as idealistic or as polemical since.

The first news of the Spanish conflict had an electrifying effect on the English Left-wing. Suddenly, they had a centre and an outlet for all the militant thoughts and the aspirations that had been fermenting in the early 1930s. Viewed against the Second World War, the Spanish Civil War nowadays seems little more than a skirmish, but to the young writers of the day it was "the rallying ground on which to fight for all the heroic qualities the century had either starved with poverty and unemployment, swamped in mass production, or

⁸ Mildred Davidson, The Poetry is in the Pity (London 1972) p. 41.

failed to inspire in a commercialised civilisation".

Christopher Isherwood summed it up as "the test of manhood".⁹

The question was what form this test of manhood was to take. The majority of poets felt that their writing was sufficient commitment to the cause and thus, of the forty or so poets who wrote about the Spanish Civil War, only twelve volunteered to fight.

In the First World War there had been large differences between combatant and non-combatant poetry, mainly because civilian poets had been unaware that the nature of warfare had changed, and thus they presented a technological war of attrition in the heroic modes of the past. There is not the same discrepancy in the poetry of the Spanish Civil War. Firstly, the non-combatant poets had read enough of Wilfred Owen and the prose accounts of surviving soldiers to be aware that war - any war - involves suffering and horror.

Apart from their poetry's lacking some of the immediacy that comes from direct experience of fighting, they have as firm and imaginative a grasp of war as the combatant poets have of its reality. Secondly, the peculiar nature of the Spanish Civil War brought about a similar response in both combatant and non-combatant poets. Every English poet involved in the Spanish Civil War believed that it was a war of freedom against oppression that had relevance, not just to Spain, but to the whole free world. It was the active expression of their own aspirations in England, and this meant that, whatever private reservations they might have had about the war, they tended to keep these to themselves for fear of harming the cause.

⁹ Mildred Davidson, The Poetry is in the Pity (London 1972) p. 41.

The majority devoted themselves to presenting the war as an heroic contest between Right and Wrong.

This tendency of the poets to present a black-and-white view of the war, in which Fascists appear as the forces of evil and darkness and the Loyalists as the forces of good and light, was partly due to their own conviction and partly because they were subjected to pressure from the Communist Party. The Communist Party in England formed the only organized support of the Spanish Republican government. They recruited troops for the brigades; organized the medical units and the collection and distribution of supplies for Spain and they also made it their business to encourage poets to join the party and write poetry that would promote the cause. Every poet (with the exception of Roy Campbell) discussed in this chapter, was, at least for some period during the war, a member of the Communist Party, and, on the whole, few were able to resist entirely the pressure to use their art as a political tool. In fact, much of the poetry written by English poets in the Spanish War is little more than poorly synthesized Communist propaganda.

Hugh Ford and Stanley Weintraub have singled out Cecil Day Lewis as a poet who, despite his dedication to the Communist Party, steadfastly refused to bring politics into his poetry. In fact his major poem of the war, "The Nabara", which is a celebration of the heroism of the Basque people, is very obviously a politically motivated poem. The opening lines have a didactic tone common in propaganda:

Freedom is more than a word, more than the base coinage
Of statesmen, the tyrant's dishonoured cheque, or the
Inflated currency. She is mortal, we know, and made
dreamer's mad

In the image of simple men who have no taste for carnage
But sooner kill and are killed than see the image betrayed.¹⁰

Apart from the tone, there is an uneasy mixture of metaphors that make it evident that Lewis was too involved in his cause to pay close attention to his art. This is one of the faults throughout the long, detailed account of the Nabara's heroic struggle against the rebel cruiser, the Canarias. He uses phrases that have a rhetorical appeal, but when one gets beyond the roll of the words, one finds that they are too easy and too second-hand. This is particularly evident in the much quoted passage that relates the last moments of the struggle:

Canarias lowered a launch that swept in a greyhound's
curve
Pitiless to pursue
And cut them off. But that bloodless and all but
phantom crew
Still gave no soft concessions to fate: they strung their
nerve
For one last fling of defiance; they shipped their
oars and threw
Hand grenades at the launch as it circled about to
board them.
But the strength of their hands that had carved them
a hold on history
Failed them at last: the grenades fell short of the enemy,
Who grappled and overpowered them,
While the Nabara sank by the stern in the hushed
Cantabrian sea.¹¹

"No soft concessions to fate", "strung their nerve" and "one last fling of defiance" are strongly reminiscent of the style used by sports writers in newspapers. "Carved them a hold on history" does have a dramatic grandeur, but how often has one heard this before? In addition to the journalistic

¹⁰C.D. Lewis, Overtures to Death (London 1938) p. 41.

¹¹Ibid, p. 51.

style, the conception of the enemy as a dog closing in on its prey detracts from the dignity of the theme. Critics see this poem as being in the tradition of "The Charge of the Light Brigade," but it is significant that in Tennyson's celebration of heroism there is no blackening of the enemy.

"The Nabara" however, does have its merits. Lewis has a strong sense of the dramatic, which is apparent in this verse. Through withholding the hurling of the grenades for four lines, he has conveyed the desperate effort that this last rash and magnificent act of defiance cost the Basque fishermen. There is dramatic appropriateness too in the quiet sinking of the Nabara into the silent sea, just as the last of her crew are finally overpowered.

Another poet who was inspired by the heroism of the Spanish people was Roy Campbell, who supported Franco. The greater part of his war effort consisted of writing savage, satirical poems on the poets who supported the republic, but, in the heroic defence of the soldiers and monks of the Alcazar, he was moved to write with intense feeling and humility. The story of the Alcazar is inextricably bound with the terrible, but magnificent reply of Colonel José Moscardo to the enemy's threat that they would shoot his son if he did not surrender the fortress, that the heroism of the other inmates tends to be eclipsed. Campbell's tribute to the monks, who worked cheerfully and unceasingly, restores the balance. That he was particularly impressed by their holiness as well as their courage is suggested by his description of the part they played in the Alcazar's defence:

The Carmelites, all terror quelled,
 The first of the toreros came
 In "clothes of light" whose ghostly flame
 Was only of the soul beheld,
 To flaunt their crimson one by one.
 And death, in turn by each was felled
 Till valour seemed to fix the sun.¹²

The comparisons of the monks to bullfighters reveals Campbell's love of action and physical courage. If it seems, at first, too flamboyant an image for the non-combatant role the monks played, one remembers that these monks, in ministering to the spiritual needs of the troops, and especially to those of the dying, did show the calm courage and disregard for danger that one associates with bullfighters. They were an inspiring spiritual and moral force in the fortress and Campbell conveys this in the "clothes of light" image. The brilliant "suit of lights" of the matador becomes the radiance of the truly godly, and their heroism, in giving extreme unction to dying men while under fire, the flaunting crimson cloak that defied and drew the attention of the enemy. In the second-last line the bullfighter metaphor is completed with the "felling" of the bull, Death, and the radiant light of their holiness and courage is amplified in the last line to a blazing light that transfixes the sun.

This poem of heroism ends fittingly on a note of dramatic intensity, when Campbell expresses his belief in the significance of the defence of the Alcazar. The Alcazar, despite being reduced to a heap of rubble, held out until it was relieved by Franco's forces. The smouldering ruin, he believed, was a symbol of the phoenix birth that Spain would

¹²Roy Campbell, "The Carmelites of Toledo" in Collected Poems of Roy Campbell (London 1957) p. 30.

undergo under the Roman Catholic Church and Franco:

A phoenix from its ash to father
 A greater, in its turn to sire -
 It was to be the Alcazar
 What the Alcazar is to Spain,
 And Spain to the world entire;
 Unanimous in blood and fire
 A single purpose lit the twain.¹³

It now appears that Campbell was not the frontline soldier he claimed to be during the Spanish War. Graves, for example, wrote that Campbell was evacuated early in 1936 and returned only as "a well-protected war correspondent", and Campbell himself once said that the authorities discouraged him from volunteering since "they had enough swords but not enough poems". Whatever Campbell's true role in the war, however, no other poet was able to write as vividly as he did on the experience of fighting. His attitude to battle was entirely heroic, since he regarded it as a glorious contest not much different, at least in the danger and excitement it involved, from breaking in a wild horse or fighting a bull. In "Flowering Rifle" he describes with ecstasy riding into battle:

How thrilling sweet, as in the dawn of Time,
 Under our horses smokes the pounded thyme
 As we go forward; streaming into battle
 Down on the road the crowded lorries rattle
 Wherein the gay blue-shirted boys are singing,
 As to a football match the rowdies bringing-
 But of this match the wide earth is the ball
 And by its end shall Europe stand or fall.¹⁴

Lines such as these indicate how well Campbell could have written about the war had he not felt compelled to use his poetry to fight a virulent campaign against the Republicans and English Leftists. He conveys here the intense excitement

¹³Roy Campbell, Collected Poems, p. 32.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 235.

of mobile warfare, which is an aspect of war that has been much written about in prose, but rarely in poetry. "As in the dawn of Time" suggests the deep, almost elemental thrill of riding a horse into battle in the company of other mounted soldiers. The fierce energy of the movement merges with the excitement of the soldiers, and with typical agility, Campbell expands the image of the football to a global scale to show the significance of this single battle.

Unfortunately, Campbell, even in his depiction of the excitement of battle, could not long refrain from making savagely prejudiced remarks about the enemy soldiers. His favourite device is to make them physically and morally repulsive. Thus he slashes with his sabre at "their bulging napes", the Russian prisoners are "blown out of shape with oratory gas", the men trapped in a tank they blew up are described as "yodelling wildly" and the British pressman who is to write "the blazing Headline of the Liar" scoops the enemy's story in "his red receivers" because, as Campbell explains in his footnote with a South African's contempt for the "Rooinek", "Englishmen's ears always go red in the Spanish sunlight".¹⁵

This savage denigration of the enemy comes as a shock after the English poetry of the First World War, where even civilian poets who believed the war was being fought in the cause of freedom did not often resort to invective and anti-German propaganda. The combatant poets reflect an almost chivalrous attitude to the enemy - an attitude that manifested itself in the ceasefire and fraternization of the German and

¹⁵Roy Campbell, Collected Poems, II p. 236 - 239.

British troops on the Western Front on Christmas Day 1915.

The only First World War poetry to compare with Campbell's are the attacks of Siegfried Sassoon on war-mongering staff officers and civilians, yet even here there is a great difference. Sassoon's satires well up out of his impassioned grief and anger at the meaningless slaughter and suffering of human life; Campbell's from pique at being slighted by the British Leftists, and from hatred of anything they supported. Campbell was quite unable to control his spiteful feelings: and it is due to this lack of control that his works are marred by an endless and exhausting invective.

Nevertheless, despite the wearying overall effect of his Spanish war poems, he has the distinction of having written war poetry in which the heroism of the Spanish people is dominant rather than the cause for which they fought. The Spanish War did inspire a heroic reaction amongst poets in England, but, in expressing it, few were able to free themselves from party dogma. This is illustrated by the poems that were written on the death of the poet Garcia Lorca, by John Brownowski and Geoffrey Parsons.

For no good reason, the Fascists shot Lorca outside Granada in 1936 and burnt his books in the market-place. No single event in the Spanish War aroused more interest among the English poets, and it was from twenty or so poems on Lorca that Stephen Spender and John Lehmann selected Brownowski's and Parsons' for their anthology, "Poems for Spain".

Both poets treat Lorca as a hero. Parsons describes him walking proudly to his death:

Straight as a tree and knowing to what end¹⁶

The heart of the poem, when Lorca stops, and turns fearlessly to meet his end, is told with considerable dramatic force:

And he stopped and turned and faced them, standing still;
He stared at their aiming eyes, his imminent murder;
He was one with the people of Spain and he stood as
they stand.¹⁷

The courage of the man in the calm, deliberate way he turned to face the firing squad is suggested by the long lines, the repetition of "and" and the firmness of the caesuras. In the last line, Parsons, in the manner of Lewis and Campbell, extends this single act of courage to symbolise the courage of the whole people of Spain.

If Parsons had confined himself to the subject of these lines - Lorca and the courageous way he went to his death - this poem would have been a moving tribute to the dead poet; but, to the detriment of his poetry, he was more interested in the political significance of Lorca's death than in the man himself. For instance, in his account of Lorca's last walk he detracts from Lorca's humanity and dignity by his denigration of the Fascists:

The Fascists have only one answer for a poet

...
And for Lorca the civil guard had a special hatred
A personal spite: there were certain deeds in the past
Had been pilloried, had been whistled through Spain
in a ballad
So they smelt him out and marched through the town
to the trees,
He walking as straight as a tree, and knowing to what
end.¹⁸

¹⁶ Geoffrey Parsons, "Lorca" in Poems of Spain ed. Stephen Spender and John Lehmann (London 1939) p. 103.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 103.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 103.

Lorca's death is announced by "the foul-mouthed general" in Seville and he pictures all "the generals and colonels who feared to be put in a ballad" drinking to "that easy death". The poem ends with an affirmation of Lorca's immortality, for throughout Spain, even amongst the Fascists, his songs will be remembered and sung.

J. Bronowski's poem "The Death of Garcia Lorca" opens impressively with a description of Lorca's cortege marching under a night sky to the fields outside Granada. The slow cadence of the lines imparts a feeling of awe and sadness:

Step after step into the darkened landscape
we mourners walk with you: until the guns speak.
Speak to the muffled dead for the loss
of the gypsy's glory and the matador's.¹⁹

The sadness of his loss is deepened in the poem by the suggestion that some of those Lorca befriended have turned against the people with whom he felt most at ease, - the gypsies, tramps, matadors and peasants - and who, Bronowski believes, will soon share Lorca's fate:

Call to your friend
or the gunman, but neither is with those
you loved: the spendthrift, the mumming, the toreros.
None walked so far the roads of the tramps
and the singers to the gypsy camps,
and joked with the sharpers and dancers and whores.²⁰

There is here a much greater awareness of Lorca, the man and poet, than one finds in Parsons' poem. The great variety of people mentioned here, with whom Lorca associated and with whom he filled his poems, suggests the vivid life of the man, and thus the real sadness of its being

¹⁹J. Bronowski, Poems for Spain, p. 104.

²⁰Ibid, p. 105.

so abruptly cut off. But even Bronowski cannot prevent himself from reading a political message into Lorca's death:

Call to your friends, but we are one
with the gunmen then. Ours is the cause
of the grinding mill and the crowded house
and the ~~wen~~ who walk between mill and home.
Our future is not easy come.²¹

The forcing of Lorca's death into a political context is not as jarring in this poem as in Parsons', mainly because the language is not as strident, but it too detracts from what was really important - the pitiful loss of a humane and compassionate man and poet.

If a non-combatant poet of the merit and sensibility of Bronowski had been unable to avoid bringing communist doctrine into his poetry, it was a problem far more difficult for the combatants immersed in the struggle. Instead of merely proselytizing, they were prepared to fight and die for the cause. Their dedication created a set of conditions that made it nearly impossible for them to write freely. They could not, as Owen had done, write about the pity and horror of war, as this might harm the cause. They had to believe that the cause justified all the slaughter, even if they were shocked and revolted by it, as many indeed were. They could not, or most felt they could not, write objectively about the struggle, as this too might be considered a tacit betrayal of the cause. And they could not entirely glorify the war, as they were aware that it was widely known that even a just war in a glorious cause could not be without savagery and brutality.

Faced then with the problem of how to reconcile their

²¹J. Bronowski, Poems for Spain, p. 105.

political beliefs with the grim reality of war, most of the poets tried a compromise. They recorded enough of their actual experiences of war to give their poetry authenticity, and, at the same time, tried to fulfil what they believed to be their political obligations. Usually this compromise proved fatal to their poetry. Most of the poems written by combatants in the Spanish Civil War are an uneasy mixture of horror and dogma. One presumes that they have survived more because they form part of the historical records of the famous International Brigade than for their merit as poetry.

The poetry of John Cornford, however, stands out, for despite being a dedicated Communist, he had the ability to synthesize his beliefs into poetry. Like most of his comrades, he viewed the war as an heroic struggle of the forces of good against the forces of evil, but unlike them he understood the terrible effort of upholding this belief by fighting for it. It is significant that he prefaced his poems with two lines from the heroic speech of the old retainer in the Battle of Maldon--

Courage the keener; mind shall be harder
Mood the more: as our might lessens.²²

for he saw that the courage this war called forth was the courage of enduring, of struggling to uphold one's beliefs in the face of hardship and death. The most moving parts of his poetry are when he exposes his loneliness and fear, and expresses the desperate hope that they will be overcome in "the welded front our fight preserves":

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

²²John Cornford, "Full Moon at Tierz" in Poems for Spain, p. 28.

Oh, be invincible as the strong sun,
 Hard as the metal of my gun,
 Oh, let the mounting tempo of the train
 Sweep where my footsteps slipped in vain.
 October in the rhythm of its run.²³

The sharp contrast between the two verses - between the images of a frightened and lonely human being and the images of hardness and disciplined strength - brings out the extreme tension in the man, about to face battle for the first time, and his touching reliance on the discipline of the brigade being strong enough to sweep him forward. "October in the rhythm of its run" may be a reference to the October revolution in Russia, when the Bolsheviks surged forward to victory, or it could suggest Cornford's belief that the Communist effort in Spain was a natural, powerful process - as natural and as powerful as Shelley's autumnal wind that destroys the diseased leaves in order to bring new life.

Amidst all the strident and aggressive poetry that came out of the Spanish War, lines such as these strike a welcome, human note. They make one see that this war was fought not by political automata, but by men who felt fear and whose performance did not always match the grandeur of their ideals.

But considering how recalcitrant an element politics is in poetry, perhaps Cornford's achievement should be measured by his ability to convey Communist doctrines as poetry. The opening of the poem "Full Moon at Tierz", from which the above lines are taken, expresses the Communist belief that with great human effort the inevitable victory of the proletariat can be

²³ John Cornford, Poems of Spain, p. 28.

brought about before its time in history:

The past, a glacier, gripped the mountain wall,
 And time was inches, dark was all.
 But here it scales the end of the range,
 The dialectic's point of change,
 Crashes in light and minutes to its fall.

Time present is a cataract whose force
 Breaks down the banks even at its source,
 And history forming in our hands
 Not plasticene but roaring sands,
 Yet we must swing it to its final course.²⁴

What is impressive is the imaginative force with which this well-worn doctrine is expressed. The dark glacier of the past, that suggests centuries of coldness and suffering, dissolves into the swirling, chaotic image of the present, out of which the future must be shaped. In the next verse he expands on the idea that the form of the future is their, the soldiers' responsibility in the coming battle of Huesca:

Crooked as the road that we must tread
 Straight as our bullets fly ahead.
 We are the future. The last fight let us face.²⁵

These lines have a fine heroic ring about them, but the later sections of the poem reveal how much it cost Cornford to live up to these beliefs.

Cornford is remembered too, for his writing the only known love poem of the war. It is an ineffably simple and moving little poem that is of interest here because he might so easily have placed the probability of his death in an heroic aura as Brooke and even Lovelace did in a similar situation.

The wind rises in the evening
 Reminds that autumn is near
 I am afraid to lose you,
 I am afraid of my fear.²⁶

²⁴John Cornford, Poems of Spain, p. 27.

²⁵Ibid, p. 27.

²⁶Ibid, "Heart of the Heartless World" p. 21.

These lines are poignant because they are the unguarded expression of a man's love. There is no cleverness, no heroic posturing; only a stark communication of his feeling, that becomes hauntingly sad when he exposes the double fear. In the last verse he avoids any self-dramatisation by using the slangy phrase "bad luck" instead of some grander phrase for death.

And if bad luck should lay my strength
 Into the shallow grave,
 Remember all the good you can
 Don't forget my love.²⁷

In sharp contrast to the sensitive, very human poetry of John Cornford is the verse of Commissioner Tom Wintringham, dominated entirely by political considerations. A veteran of the First World War, he was undoubtedly better prepared for combat than Cornford and the other youthful volunteers, and thus his verse reveals none of the fear and strain evident in "Full Moon at Tierz". Moreover, as a brigade commissar, he felt committed to furthering the cause both on the battlefield and in his verse. According to Hugh D. Ford, he rarely missed an opportunity to lecture his men on the cause, and this didactic commitment is obvious in everything he wrote.

As one would expect, his poetry presents a very clear-cut view of the conflict, with the Fascists being portrayed as wholly evil and the Loyalists wholly good. In "Granen" he goes as far as to make "our enemies" into necromaniacs, while the Loyalists are linked with the sun and the torchlight that enables the surgeon to save life:

²⁷ John Cornford, "Heart of the Heartless World" in Poems for Spain, p. 21.

Our enemies can praise death and adore death;
 For us endurance, the sun; and now this night
 The electric torch, feeble waning, but close-set
 Follows the surgeon's fingers; we are allied with
 This light.²⁸

Apparently not all the Loyalists were worthy of this aura, for in "Barcelona Nerves" he suggests that many of them had been succumbing to the black death-world of the Fascists by seeking refuge from death in brothels. He attributes all evil to the Fascists, from the pathetic corpse of the girl killed in an air raid, to the spread of venereal disease amongst the Loyalists:

Death means the girl's corpse warm - alive when buried
 Death means the retching brothels where on black
 Death-ride, death fear, an army of boys is carried
 To a pox-wreck.

And life's a matter of beating this, of breaking
 By own hardness.²⁹

As a means of inspiring troops, Wintringham's verses probably proved very useful, for the uncompromising view they present of the conflict, combined with their forceful energy of tone, must have helped to remove any private misgivings.

However, in the last years of the war, when the outlook for the Loyalists became darker and darker, Wintringham's verses lost their validity, even as vehicles of political inspiration. In "Monument : A Poem for the Spanish Front", which he wrote at the end of 1938 on the withdrawal of the International Brigade and on the eve of the Republican Government's collapse, he assured the "heroic Spanish people" they were going on to victory alone and to a golden future:

²⁸ Tom Wintringham, Volunteer for Liberty I (Nov. 17, 1937)

²⁹ Tom Wintringham, "Barcelona Nerves" in Poems for Spain p. 29.

You have won victory
 People of Spain,
 And the tower into which your earth is built, and
 Your blood and ours, shall state Spain's
 Unity, happiness, strength, it shall face the breath
 Of the east, of the dawn, of the future when
 There will be no strangers.³⁰

Even if the hopeless situation of the Republicans had not precluded any possibility of their victory, to picture the future of war-ravaged Spain in the romantic terms he does here is fatuous and unrealistic. The important consideration is, however, the quality of the verse itself. This passage does have rhetorical force that comes partly from the regular rhythm and partly from the large number of words that are strongly emotive. But however strong their emotive appeal, it is momentary only, for a second reading reveals how clichéd they are and how the rhythm has been used to sweep the reader along. Wintringham has, in fact, used the techniques of a copywriter, and while this verse undoubtedly served as effective copy for his cause, it cannot be considered to be poetry.

Wintringham and Cornford give a fairly representative idea of the way poets, deeply committed to a political ideal, coped with a war they believed would bring its realization. Both poets viewed the war as an heroic struggle, but because Cornford was more sensitive than Wintringham and less didactic in his aim, and possibly also because he was less inured to war, he did not sacrifice his poetry to politics. He saw the war as a poet; Wintringham as a brigade commissar. In the end, Wintringham's attempts to justify the pain of war degenerated into falsehood, while Cornford's poems, on the whole, remain true

³⁰ Tom Wintringham, Volunteer for Liberty II (Nov. 7, 1938) ed. Ralph Bates, Edwin Rolfe and John Tisa.

reflections of human experience, even divorced from the context of the Spanish War.

Most English poets who fought in the Spanish Civil War inclined more towards Wintringham than Cornford in their treatment of war, unable like him to synthesize their political ideas with their craft, but, more humanly, registering shock, fear and excitement.

Many people in England expected the Oxford poets - Auden, Spender, Day Lewis and Mac Niece-who had spearheaded the socialist movement in literature in the early Thirties, to play a similarly prominent role in the poetry of the Spanish Civil War. Cecil Day Lewis, at least, was considered to live up to expectations. He celebrated, as people hoped, the courage of the Spanish in "The Nabara" and of the members of the International Brigade in "The Volunteers", and in "Bombers and Landscapes" he wrote with compassion on the victims of the German air raids. Moreover, he had the artistic sensitivity to avoid being overtly Marxist in his poetry and focussed primarily on the cause of human freedom, which is a timeless and politically neutral theme.

Auden wrote only one poem, "Spain", on the Spanish War - a poem which Lehmann and Spender considered "the finest poetic statement on the Republican cause". The poem, it is true, does have qualities lacking in poems written out of fervour of political feeling or in the heat of battle. It is a beautifully constructed assessment of the Republican situation, in which, by making the past reflect on the present, he clarifies how the war came about and what issues are at stake. In comparison

to other poems on the Spanish Civil War, "Spain" is remarkable for its objectivity. It is theoretical and impersonal and there is no trace of the once politically committed man in it. Yet this very objectivity, which obviously attracted Lehmann and Spender, makes this poem the least exciting in their anthology. As Hugh Ford says, "It sounds more like a well-deliberated history lesson in verse than a poem about a revolutionary struggle by a poet who had professed Republican sympathies".³¹ The last verse, that envisages the defeat of the Republic, is the best illustration of the impersonal nature of this poem:

The stars are dead. The animals will not look.
We are left alone with our day and the time is short, and
History to the defeated
May say Alas, but cannot help or pardon.³²

This bland contemplation of the defeated Republic, shunned by nature and regarded with a rather indifferent pity by history, is the antithesis of the heroic and, towards the end, tragic spirit that imbued the Loyalists in this war.

Spender says that Auden became severely disillusioned with the Loyalist cause when he went to Spain in January 1937 to offer his services as a stretcher-bearer in an ambulance unit. After only two months he returned to England, and never told anybody what had happened there. He may have been angered, as Spender was, by the Communist domination of the brigades, and by their methods of recruiting troops under the guise that they represented the Popular Front of the Republic. Whatever happened, there is no hint in "Spain", but the coolness of his pre-war

³¹Hugh D. Ford, A Poet's War : British Poets and the Spanish Civil War (Philadelphia 1965) p. 208.

³²W.H. Auden, Poems of Spain, p. 58.

poetry, which contrasts with the other poets' emotional writings, does suggest that he would view the war dispassionately and not heroically.

Of all the members of the Oxford group, Stephen Spender was the most emotionally involved in the Spanish War. He was also the most independent poet of the group, steadfastly refusing to admit what he called the "public vision" into his poetry, and writing only about what he himself had experienced. This meant that, despite his being a member of the Communist party, his poetry excludes political references, and because he felt that the heroic view of the war was engendered by party propaganda and not by the poet's experience, it is determinedly anti-heroic. He made this attitude clear in two articles. In the first, August 1937, after speaking of being annoyed by "the uncritical and heroic attitude towards the war" so many poets assumed in their verse, he defined his own feelings: "I, myself, because I am not a writer of heroics, have felt rather isolated from the cause and people I greatly care for, because I do not share this uncritical attitude."³³

The second was in the form of an apologia in "The Still Centre" 1939: "As I have decidedly supported one side - the Republican - in that conflict, perhaps I should explain why I do not strike a more heroic note. My reason is that a poet can only write about what is true to his own experience, not about what he would like to be true to experience. . . .

Poetry does not state truth, it states conditions

³³ Stephen Spender, "Spain Invites the World" in New Writing IV August 1937 (Periodical) p. 250.

within which something felt is true. Even while he is writing about the little portion of reality which is part of his experience, the poet may be conscious of a different reality outside".³⁴

These statements are of interest not only for what they reveal of Spender's attitude, but for what they reveal of the public's reaction to poetry of the Spanish Civil War. It is clear from Spender's defensive tone that he had been under considerable pressure to present an heroic view of the war. Although the type of person who read the poetry of the Spanish Civil War had probably read the poetry of Owen - who had shown unequivocally that all wars involve suffering and horror - it was apparently expected that this struggle would be glorified.

Spender's poems on the Spanish War (all written out of his experience of it, which involved three brief visits) may be divided into two groups: those that show the impact of war on himself and those that make some effort to view the war objectively.

In "Port Bou" he defines his objective attitude imaginatively by describing himself sitting on a bridge that divides a village from some hills where Republican militiamen are having firing practice. The villagers, in contrast to Spender, are in a ferment of excitement, and headed by an old man "with three teeth like bullets spitting out pom - pom - pom" all dash up the hill to watch the firing. And Spender is:

...left alone on the bridge at the exact centre
 Where the cleaving river trickles like saliva
 At the exact centre, solitary as a target
 Where nothing moves against a background of cardboard
 houses.³⁵

³⁴ Stephen Spender, The Still Centre (London 1939) p. 10.

³⁵ Stephen Spender, Poems for Spain, p. 89.

The air of remoteness these lines convey and the poet's location perfectly represent his disengagement from the struggle. He blends with the scenery, not with the excited villagers or with the friendly, simple militiamen, who had stopped to ask him for news and offered him cigarettes.

However, at the end of the poem, there are indications that Spender would not be able to keep this detachment for long:

I tell myself that the shooting is only for practice
 But my body seems a cloth which the machine-gun stitches
 And the solitary, irregular thin "puffs" from the
carbines
 Draw on long needles white threads through my navel.³⁶

The image of his body being sewn through with the threads of war suggests that Spender was becoming deeply and painfully involved in the war. There is an intensification of this image in the last line when the mechanical stitching of the fabric of his body becomes the more explicit and painful stabbing of long needles into his navel.

"Port Bou" was to be the transition to a period of disillusionment with the Communists' handling of the war, and a deep compassion for the victims of war. The poems written out of these feelings show the strong influence Wilfred Owen's war poems had on Spender. They have a similar solemnity of tone and impassioned feeling. Like Owen, Spender conceives of war itself being a great destroying and brutalizing force that impersonally maims and kills human beings and thus creates a bond between combatants of both sides:

³⁶ Stephen Spender, Poems for Spain p. 90.

Deep in the winter plain, two armies
 Dig their machinery, to destroy each other.
 Men freeze and hunger. No-one is given leave
 On either side, except the dead, and wounded.

All have become so nervous and so cold
 That each man hates the cause and distant words
 Which brought him here, more terribly than bullets.

From their numb harvest all would flee, except
 For discipline drilled once in an iron school
 Which holds them at the point of a revolver.³⁷

This poem, reminiscent of Owen's terrible "Exposure", is a remarkable one to have been written in this most partisan and heroic of wars. All the elements that one associates with the poetry of the First World War are here - the defeatist sentiments, the impassioned yet lyrical style, the exposure of hardships and the idea of the authorities being the cruel executives of war. Spender had been shocked by the ruthless methods used by the Communists to maintain their superiority in the brigades and to force men to stay in the line, among which firing on a "comrade" was not unknown.

Joined by a common suffering:

Finally they cease to hate: for although hate
 Bursts from the air and whips the earth like hail
 Or pours it up in fountains to marvel at,
 And although hundreds fall, who can connect
 The inexhaustible anger of the guns
 With the dumb patience of these tormented animals!³⁸

The patience and passivity of the troops are the antithesis of the vigorous and heroic images of Campbell and Cecil Day Lewis. Energy, which is an heroic virtue for Campbell, becomes a malignant force in these lines, that destroys the

³⁷ Stephen Spender, "Two Armies" in The Still Centre (London 1939) p. 55..

³⁸ Stephen Spender, Poems for Spain, p. 55.

troops and drains them of all feeling.

In one way, Spender was more negative in outlook than the poets of the First World War, for although he believed that war forged a bond of common suffering between the troops, there is nothing in his poetry of the comradeship that inspired Owen to write:

I, too, saw God through mud, -
 The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.
 War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
 And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child.³⁹

For all its anger and compassion, Spender's poetry remains that of an onlooker. Because he lacked their intimate experience, he was unable, as Rosenberg and Owen were^{able}, to see beauty amidst the suffering, or to view, with Cornford, the enduring of hardship as an heroic virtue.

One of the main causes of his disillusionment with the war was the fate of his friend, Jimmy Younger. Younger, according to Spender, had joined the International Brigade believing that it was a liberal and democratic force. When he got to Spain he was shocked to find that it was controlled entirely by Communists, with whom he disagreed. His situation was made worse by his discovery that he was a poor soldier. After the bloody battle of Jarama he deserted, was captured and imprisoned. Spender spent months trying to get the authorities to release Younger, and this was no doubt why he speaks for the cowardly and the weak in his poetry. To Spender, the real villains were not the cowards, but the propagandists whose "false promises" tricked idealistic young men into fighting.

³⁹Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others, p.82

His most sympathetic defence of the coward is in a poem of that name in which he examines with some insight the psychology of a coward . He shows that the coward's whole life is made up of a "tower of lies" that in one terrible instant crashes down, and it is this, not the bullet, that kills him:

A man was killed, not like a soldier
 With lead, but with rings of terror.
 To him, that instant was the birth
 Of the final hidden truth . . .

. . .
 Flesh, bone, muscle and eyes
 Assembled in a tower of lies
 Were scattered on an icy breeze
 When the perceiving past betrayed
 All their perceptions in one instant.⁴⁰

Spender feels only pity for this pathetic case:

I gather all my life and pour
 Out its love and comfort here.
 And to bring his ghost release,
 My love and pity shall not cease
 For a lifetime at least.⁴¹

Spender's deep concern for those hopelessly unable to cope with the demands of war, and his exposure of the "unheroic truth" that the experience of war shattered the idealism of many of the volunteers, balances the overall heroic picture that the poetry of this war presents. Yet, while Spender's view of the war provides a welcome broadening and deepening of the picture, in many of his war poems he relies too heavily on emotionality . This is particularly clear in "The Coward", where there is no concreteness underlying the emotional surge of feeling. One gathers that the coward died of terror and the horror of having the reality of war thrust suddenly upon him,

⁴⁰ Stephen Spender, "The Coward" in The Still Centre p. 59

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 59,

but not for an instant does the human being become real.

Louis MacNiece, like Auden, wrote only one poem, "Autumn Journal", on the Spanish Civil War. It is of great interest, because unlike the other Oxford poets, MacNiece was never a Communist, and so he wrote neither out of a desire to promote the cause nor from disillusionment with it. He represents the view of a sensitive but non-partisan person. His interest in Spain centred on the will of the people to maintain their human values, even under the most inhuman of conditions, and not in the political issues of the struggle.

In the first part of "Autumn Journal" he recounts a visit that he and some other "trippers" made to Spain just before the outbreak of war. Typical tourists, they are bored with the sights and complain endlessly about the facilities and the inconveniences of travel. "Avila was cold"; "Segovia picturesque and smelly, the Spanish throw their garbage on the ramparts of Toledo, the bullfighting at Seville was clumsy, the cigarettes came to pieces" and they "caught heavy colds at Cordova". They are surrounded by signs of the coming war - posters "promising bread or guns or an amnesty"; "a mob in Algeciras that divests a church of its aura and images" and the writings on the walls "Hammer and sickle, Boicot, Viva, Muerra" yet they remain uncomprehending and sail off from Gibraltar, ignorant of the role Spain will assume in their lives:

And next day took the boat
 For home, forgetting Spain, not realizing
 That Spain would soon denote
 Our grief, our aspirations
 Not knowing that our blunt
 Ideals would find their whetstone, that our spirit

Would find its frontier on the Spanish front
Its body in a rag-tag army.⁴²

These lines suggest that not only did MacNiece lose his indifference and naiveté, but that Spain awakened his nascent idealism. This is in fact what happened, but his response was humanistic not political. In Part XXIII of "Autumn Journal" he describes Barcelona, which he visited in 1938. What moves him deeply are the people, worn down by the terrible hardships, but not dispirited:

The shops are empty and in Barcelona the eye-
Sockets of the houses are empty
But still they manage to laugh
Though they have no eggs, no milk, no fish, no fruit
no tobacco, no butter
Though they live upon lentils and sleep in the Metro,
Though the old order is gone and the golden calf
Of Catalan industry shattered;
The human values remain, purged in the fire,
And it appears that every man's desire
Is life rather than victuals.

Life being more, it seems, than merely the bare
Permission to keep alive and receive orders,
Humanity being more than a mechanism
To be oiled and greased and for ever unaware
Of the work it is turning out, of why the wheels
keep turning;
Here at least the soul has found its voice
Though not indeed by choice.⁴³

The stark facts of the people of Barcelona's existence, which he avoids making melodramatic; the slow cadence of the movement of the lines, and the solemnity of the tone make this passage impressive, and impart a sense of the dignity and courage of the people of Barcelona.

The Spanish Civil War was the great crucible for

⁴²Louis MacNiece, Autumn Journal Part VI (London 1939) p. 29.

⁴³Ibid, p. 89 - 90.

all the liberal aspirations and ideals of an era. When the Republican cause, that had been the embodiment of this aspiration and idealism, was lost, all was lost, and British poets were rarely again to write on a social event with such fervency and hope.

Long before the war ended, however, their belief in the rightness of the cause for which they wrote began to wane. With the exception of MacNiece, every poet who either fought in the war or visited Spain in this period had difficulty in maintaining his initial view of the war as an heroic contest between the forces of good and evil. Cornford's poetry reveals that he wrote under great strain, torn between a horror of the war and the need to believe in the cause. The frenetic tone of Wintringham's later verse suggests that even he was being assailed by doubts towards the end. Spender, who had viewed the liberals' pre-war struggle heroically, was horrified by the war, and wrote poetry that in its anti-war sentiment and pity is redolent of Owen and Sassoon. Auden's reaction is revealed more by what he omits than what he wrote. The careful avoidance of realistic detail in "Spain" and the absence of emotion are so curious in a once-committed Communist, that they suggest that he, like Spender, was shocked by the war when he came face to face with it, but that rather than harm the cause in which he had believed, he chose to withdraw. It was perhaps a less honest response than Spender's.

On 29 March 1939 the Spanish Civil War was over. There can have been few wars in history in which so many

splendid and heroic ideals were more cruelly shattered. The English poets' contribution to the poetry of this war echoes something of the high idealism of the Loyalists, but sadly and more truly, it reflects to a greater degree the difficulty these men had in continuing to believe in the cause that brought them to Spain. Some measure of their waning enthusiasm has been attributed to their disillusionment with Communism, but the real reason was that their faith dwindled when they came face to face with the horror and sickness that abounded in this war. It was perhaps because of this, because the Spanish Civil War taught anew the lesson of the First World War, that the poets' response to the Second World War was marked by a spirit of bleak resolution. They might justifiably have treated it as a heroic crusade against the monstrous evils of totalitarianism, but despite considerable urging from the press and from some politicians to do so, no poet of any merit chose to glorify the struggle.

CHAPTER IX

ENGLISH POETRY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In contrast to the euphoria and hysteria in England at the outbreak of the First World War, and the mood of heroic dedication of those who volunteered to fight for the Spanish Republic in 1936, the declaration of war against Germany on 3 September 1939 was greeted by most people in England with resignation. There was some relief that the period of non-intervention was over, for many had felt that the betrayal of Czechoslovakia was shameful, but even among these there was none of the flag-waving, cheering enthusiasm that had heralded the start of the First World War.

Instead, in a spirit of surprising calm considering the enormous disruption it brought to life, people complied with the authorities' plans to combat the new, blitzkrieg type of warfare that Hitler had used in Spain, in Czechoslovakia and was using in Poland. In the first days of the war, thousands of children and women were evacuated from London and other industrial centres which the government knew would be targets for the Luftwaffe's bombs. In addition to the evacuation, every young man who was fit enough, and whose work did not fall into the category of essential services, was called up, and within forty-eight hours there were thousands on their way to training camps. By 31 December 1939 over one-and-a-half million men were in the army, navy and air force and 43 000 women had volunteered for the women's services. Of the men and women that were left, very few had not volunteered themselves for or had not been organized into some form of

war work.

The propagandists heroized this new and strange situation of a whole society caught up in war - a war in which a baby had almost as great a chance of dying a violent death as a man in the armed forces - but the greatest promoter of the heroic myth was Winston Churchill, who became prime minister on 10 May 1940.

Churchill was able to convince the nation, or at least the greater part of it, that it was embroiled in a mighty and heroic struggle, because his whole being was fired by the dramatic and the heroic, and had always been so. Before the First World War, when he had used a few thousand troops for the no grander purpose than that of breaking a coal strike, A G Gardiner wrote of him: "He is always unconsciously playing a part - an heroic part. And he is himself his most astonished spectator. He sees himself moving through the smoke of battle-triumphant, terrible, his brow clothed with thunder, his legions looking to him and not looking in vain. He thinks of Napoleon, he thinks of his great ancestor. Thus did they bear themselves, thus, in this rugged and awful crisis, will he bear himself".¹

In the comparably more critical times of the Second World War, and especially in the moments when Britain stood alone, Churchill's heroic imagination and oratorical gifts were stimulated to splendid heights:

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say - "This was their finest hour".²

¹A G Gardiner, Pillars of Society, (London 1913) p. 57-58.

²C Eade, ed., Winston Churchill, War Speeches, Vol I (London 1951) p. 240.

There is no doubt at all that the people were inspired by Churchill, and that on hearing him felt that they were standing on the heroic landscape of his imagination with the spirits of Nelson and Marlborough, but it is also as certain that most of them responded to him only in moments of crisis. For the rest of the time the majority of soldiers and civilians took a very undramatic view of the war. "I am distressed to hear from many sides", wrote Bishop Hensley Henson in his diary in May 1941, "that the prevailing temper of our troops is a half-cynical boredom, as remote as possible from the high crusading fervour which their situation authorizes and requires. They are not pacifists, nor disloyal, but 'bored stark'. Religion makes little appeal and patriotism. They have neither the enthusiasm of youth, nor the deliberate purpose of age, but just acquiescence in an absurd and unwelcome necessity".³

The disappointment felt in the outlook of the troops was reflected in the reaction of the people to the poetry that was being written and was starting to appear in bookshops and on news stands at stations. Many of the older people were waiting hopefully for a Second World War Rupert Brooke to emerge - some young poet with Brooke's good looks, fervour and the ability to translate Winston Churchill's spirit into moving poetry. Despite the efforts of a few poets and poetesses, apparently nobody matched up to Brooke, for in 1944 Beverley Baxter, a conservative M.P. announced in the press that many people were "turning to the dead Adonis of the last war for the solace

³Andrew Calder, The People's War, (London 1971) p. 60 - 61.

denied them by the living".⁴

A number of the Left Wing were equally dissatisfied, because they expected poetry expressing the impassioned grief and anger of Wilfred Owen. His poetry had been widely read by the Auden generation in the Twenties and Thirties, and in their minds this had become the prototype for twentieth century war poetry. Although Owen's influence is evident in the poetry of Alun Lewis, no Second World War poet could write as he did, for the circumstances were too different. Owen wrote in the belief that if he could only make clear to people at home the horror and suffering of war, the war could be stopped. In 1939 people were perfectly aware of the horror of war, but had seen too many attempts to prevent it fail in the Thirties to believe that it could be stopped; thus Owen's passionate rejection of war seemed to most poets to be as unfitting as attempts to glorify it.

The majority of poets turned away from public poetry, into which category the poetry of both Owen and Brooke falls, and sought to explore their own small area of experience intensely. Their main concern was to assert the value of life in what R C Currey has called "a damned inhuman sort of war" in his poem "Unseen Fire":

This is a damned inhuman sort of war.
I have been fighting in a dressing-gown
Most of the night. I cannot see the guns,
The sweating gun-detachments or the planes.

I sweat down here before a symbol thrown
Upon a screen, sift facts, initiate
Swift calculations and swift orders; wait
For the precise split-second to order fire.

⁴Beverley Baxter, "Our Poets are Silent", Bristol Evening Post 18 April 1944.

We chant our rituals; beyond the phones
 A ghost repeats the orders to the guns
 One Fire . . . Two Fire . . . Ghosts answer : the guns roar
 Abruptly: and an aircraft waging war
 Inhumanly from nearly five miles height
 Meets our bouquet of death - and turns sharp right.⁵

This poem on Currey's experience of commanding an anti-aircraft battery deals, of course, with only one small aspect of the war, but the feeling of remoteness from the enemy aircraft they were shooting at and from the men he was commanding was a very common one in this conflict. It points to the difference between the two World Wars. In the First World War there was bombardment with high explosives and gas from an enemy hidden in trenches, but the bayonet attack was an essential part of warfare, and this was enough to preserve the feeling that this was a war between men. In the Second World War, hand-to-hand fighting was the experience of very few. For the most part, men were incarcerated in machines - in tanks, in submarines, in aeroplanes and in ships - or, like Currey, in the underground control room of an anti-aircraft gun, where fighting had become a matter of calculation. It was an unnatural, impersonal form of warfare, that culminated in the atomic bomb in 1945.

Robert Graves pinpointed the distinction between the two wars when he commented on how the Germans fought in the First World War:

On the whole they fought fairly and courageously and I felt most grateful, after Loos, when they held their fire and allowed us to get our wounded in from no-man's land. "Kaiser Bill" might deserve hanging, as Lloyd George claimed, but he was no Hitler. The need to regard Hitler's Nazis as a horde of criminal lunatics robbed war of its few remaining decencies and the idea of

⁵Brian Gardner, ed., The Terrible Rain, The War Poets 1939 - 1945, (London 1968) p. 50.

fraternising with them would have been ridiculous from the very start".⁶

Graves is exaggerating here. The majority of German troops in the Second World War fought as fairly and courageously, at least in the West, as their fathers had done twenty-five years before, but it was certainly a less chivalrous war than the last, and there was none of the fellow-feeling that the First World War troops felt so strongly.

The poets' response to this unchivalrous, technological war was varied, as shall be seen, but in a large number of poems it is possible to trace a reaction to its impersonal, dehumanizing nature.

In "Naming of Parts", one of the brilliant poems of the war, Henry Reed wittily and effectively made clear the shocking contrast between the murderous purposes of weapons and the purposes of life. The scene is a class for new recruits:

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.⁷

⁶Robert Graves, The Observer, 9 November 1958

⁷Brian Gardner, The Terrible Rain, p. 35.
ed.

The contrast between the laboured language of the sergeant instructing the troops on the parts of the rifle, and the lovely, lyrical description of the garden makes its own comment on the awkwardness and unnaturalness of man at war. But the brilliance of the poem is in the graceful witty way Reed picks up the ponderous instruction of the sergeant and the clumsy movements of the recruits and applies them to the trees, flowers and bees. With economy and grace he makes nature point to the absurdity and pathos of war.

Reed's poem was written early in 1941, soon after he was called up, and at this stage, he could only point to the unnaturalness of war and its effect on men. Others with more experience of war and battle explored Reed's theme more deeply. The most profound exposure of the devastating effects of war on the human soul is F T Prince's poem "Soldiers Bathing". He wrote this poem after watching his troops, dirty and exhausted after fighting in the North African desert, bathe in the Mediterranean Sea.

The central image of this poem is the fragile, luminous beauty that the sea seems to lend the war-stained bodies of the soldiers. The image is a momentary one, for almost the entire poem deals with the ugly effects of war on the body and on the mind, but throughout the poem it stands as a tragic reminder of what man could be. He introduces this image by first describing the physical desecrating effects of war on the men:

The body that was gross
 Rank, ravenous, disgusting in the act or in repose,
 All fever, filth and sweat, its bestial strength
 And bestial decay . . . 8

This conception of the body being made bestial and revolting by war is the ~~opposite~~ of the heroic and chivalric conception where warlike activity was viewed as the highest and most noble activity of manhood. In Prince's poem, the body of the soldier gains grace and innocence only when it is stripped of the accoutrements of war, and when, in childlike play in the waves, it can forget the terrible pressures of war. It :

. . . grows at length
 Fragile and luminous. "Poor bare forked animal"
 Conscious of its desires and needs and flesh that rise
 and fall,
 Stands in the soft air, tasting after toil
 The sweetness of his nakedness: letting the sea-waves coil
 Their frothy tongues about his feet, forgets
 His hatred of war, its terrible pressure that begets
 A machinery of death and slavery,
 Each being a slave and making slaves of others: finds that he
 Remembers his old freedom in a game.⁹

The fragility of the body is emphasized by the quotation from "King Lear" and it suggests too that like Lear, only in nakedness, only in the complete rejection of all the false values of man's world, can truth and beauty be found. In the rest of the passage the sensuousness of the imagery "soft air", "tasting after toil", "the sweetness of his nakedness", "sea-waves coil their frothy tongues" combines to suggest a fullness and richness of life that is in stark contrast to the sterility of the images of war.

⁸ Brian Gardner, The Terrible Rain, p. 96.

⁹ Ibid, p. 96.

The games of the soldiers in the waves seem here to be happy and innocent expressions of their freedom and release from the enslaving pressures of war, but in the next verse the poet shows how easy it is for this innocence to be transformed into blood-thirstiness. He does this by recalling the cartoon Michelangelo did of soldiers bathing during the Pisan wars:

And reading in the shadows of his pallid flesh, I see
 The idea of Michelangelo's cartoon
 Of soldiers breaking off before they were half done
 At some sortie of the enemy, an episode
 Of the Pisan wars with Florence. I remember how he
showed
 Their muscular limbs that clamber from the water
 And heads that turn across the shoulder, eager for the
slaughter
 Forgetful of their bodies that are bare,
 And hot to buckle on and use the weapons lying there.¹⁰

To appreciate fully what the poet means by "eager for the slaughter" and "hot to buckle on and use the weapons lying there" one needs to see Michelangelo's cartoon. It is a horrifying depiction of men at war in which the classic perfection of the soldiers' bodies is in shocking contrast to their faces, made contorted and ugly by their lust for slaughter.

Michelangelo's image is extended in the following lines by the poet's memory of a naked battle painted by another fifteenth century Florentine, Pollaiuolo. In this painting all vestiges of beauty are gone, the men wildly hacking each other to death are wholly bestial and savage:

Warriors straddled, hacked the foe
 Dug their bare toes into the soil and slew
 The brother naked man who lay between their feet and drew
 His lips back from his teeth in a grimace.¹¹

¹⁰Brian Gardner, The Terrible Rain, p. 97

¹¹Ibid, p. 97.

The nakedness, that in Prince's soldiers playing in the sea had lent their bodies an innocence and pathos, now seems to enhance the brutal savagery of this scene. "Dug their bare toes into the soil" suggests the violent muscular effort of the warriors hacking at their foe (compare the sea-waves gently coiling about the toes of the soldiers earlier) and the horror of what they are doing is emphasized by "brother naked man". This phrase conveys the real meaning of war. It is not men fighting against their enemies, but the preying of man upon man. The last image, that of the victim, is closely linked to the image of the slaughterers by the rhyming of "slew" and "drew". "Slew" has been used so often in literature that it has become a comparatively neutral, but through linking it here with: "drew / His lips back from his teeth in a grimace" the poet brings out its connotations of savagery and pain.

In the following verses, the poet reveals a sense of horror at modern man's predicament by implying that there is a deficiency in him not found in fifteenth-century Italy as represented by Michelangelo and Pollaiuolo:

They were Italians who knew war's sorrow and disgrace
And showed the thing suspended, stripped : a theme
Born out of the experience of war's horrible extreme
Beneath a sky where even the air flows
With lacrimae Christi.¹²

It is their certainty that war is the antithesis of the reason Christ suffered and died upon the cross that makes the difference between their age and ours. Modern man shares their sense of the bitterness and pity of war, but lacks their consciousness of sin:

¹²Brian Gardner, The Terrible Rain, p. 97.

And we too have our bitterness and pity that engage
 Blood, spirit in this war. But night begins
 Night of the mind: who nowadays is conscious of our sins?¹³

The sky which was washed with the tears of Christ has now become wholly black, and through this image the poet reveals his sense of the deepening evil in man. Towards the end of this poem, he shows that there is a further dimension to the difference between modern times and the Renaissance, for he suggests that while, in the past, the knowledge of Christ's love made men feel the shame of war, that love has now become a terrible burden, which makes men recoil in fury:

And even we must know, what nobody has understood
 That some great love is over all we do,
 And that is what has driven us to this fury, for so few
 Can suffer all the terror of that love:
 The terror of that love has set us spinning in this groove
 Greased with our blood.¹⁴

The poet's vision of modern man would then seem to be centrally a bleak and terrible one, summed up in the last image of him endlessly spinning in the bloody groove he has made for himself; but in the following five lines of the poem, there is a strong suggestion that, emotionally at least, he cannot believe completely in this vision:

Yet, as I drink the dusky air
 I feel a strange delight that fills me full,
 Strange gratitude, as if evil itself were beautiful
 And kiss the wound in thought, while in the west
 I watch a streak of red that might have issued from
 Christ's breast.¹⁵

The return to the initial scene of the poem and the sensuousness of the language "drink", "fills me full", "kiss

¹³ Brian Gardner, The Terrible Rain, p. 97.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 97.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 98.

the wound" recall the image of the innocence and beauty of the human body. It is the strength of this image in the poet's mind that would seem to account for the ambivalence in his attitude "I feel a strange delight" and "strange gratitude, as if evil itself were beautiful" suggest that, against all rational convictions, he believes that there is a goodness in man that all the contaminating, evil power of war has not destroyed. The black image of night has given place to a sunset sky, which suggests a feeling of hope. In his being reminded by the blood of Christ by the streak of red in the sky he suggests too that he has not rejected a belief in the ultimate Christian salvation of man.

"Soldiers Bathing" is the broadest and deepest exploration in poetic terms of the corrupting effects of war on men, but there are several poems that explore particular aspects of this corruption. One of the most interesting is John Jarmain's "The Innocent Shall Suffer". The poem centres on a young bomber pilot who has allowed his aesthetic delight in the savage beauty of destruction to function independently of his moral sense. After a bombing raid he describes his sensations:

How in the far perspective of his height
 He saw the white heat at the flower's heart glow,
 And feathery rings of flaking petals spread
 Profuse from each bright centre, till he said
 No rose in all the earth blossomed so.¹⁶

These lines can be seen as a corollary to Currey's "Unseen Fire", for they illustrate the unfortunate but almost inevitable psychological effect on the killer who is remote

¹⁶John Jarmain, Poems, (London 1945) p. 38.

from his victim. Due to the distance, all the normal human reactions of pity, horror or even bloodlust become suspended, and a heady sense of power and a fascination in the erupting growth of the fire dominates the mind. Here Jarmain's blossoming rose image is very powerful, for it suggests the strange beauty of the sight - the terrible yet fascinating growth of the fire. Because the rose is normally associated with innocence and purity, his use of it here shocks the senses. Particularly striking are the alliterated words "feathery" and "flaking" that convey the light, beautifully patterned growth of the fire.

In the next verse Jarmain begins to show "the deep-scarred harm" this suspension of his normal morality does to the young pilot. Although he "loves and seeks in some girl's heart repose / Peace on her lips and comfort in her hair" should he:

. . . confide
 This beauty of the city sown with fire
 Would she not chill and stiffen by his side,
 Feeling as woman women there below?
 Though boyish still and smilingly he lies
 Will she not scan his face with different eyes,
 Seeing so clear what he must surely know?¹⁷

Setting the pilot's knowledge of the girl's reaction to his memory of the burning German city in the form of two questions helps to emphasize the inner turmoil of his mind. The sadness of what is happening to him is made clear by the contrast between the boyish innocence of his appearance and the savagely beautiful yet evil vision of the fire in his mind.

In the rest of the poem Jarmain develops the implications

¹⁷ John Jarmain, Poems, p. 38.

of the pilot's feeling. The aesthetic detachment that he has shown is a manifestation of a complete loss of feeling that is one of the most terrible legacies of war. It has come about through his deliberately shielding his mind from full comprehension of his actions:

And coldly as a man that rules a line
 The aimer looses his huge malison
 On sleep, whose end he dare not contemplate:
 He dare not see, for he must go again,
 Again destroy. What man can stop his eyes
 And shut his mind to cities red with pain
 - His work - but in his heart compassion dies
 And leaves an empty place? What deep-scarred harm
 Is cut into the hearts of these who kill.¹⁸

The contrast between the image of the pilot here as the cool methodical killer, and the earlier image of him lying smiling and boyish in the arms of the woman brings out the dichotomy that war effects in the human personality. The end is made clear in the rhetorical question - eventually the mind becomes completely hardened, emptied of the humanizing virtue of compassion. The phrase "cities red with pain" also contrasts sharply with the dramatic beauty of the pilot's view of the burning cities earlier in the poem, and this makes clear the inhumanity of his aesthetic detachment.

Jarman's use of "malison" is interesting, for as it is an archaic and unusual word it suggests he had read Wilfred Owen's sonnet "On Seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought into Action", the only poem of Owen's that shows clearly that, despite his humanitarian, compassionate outlook, he, too, was at times fascinated by the weapons of war. This is especially apparent in the opening lines, when he invests the great gun with a

¹⁸ John Jarman, Poems, p. 39.

malignant splendour:

Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm
Great gun towering toward Heaven, about to curse.¹⁹

Owen is able to channel safely his feeling of awe into a desire that the massive power of the gun will be used to destroy the arrogance and hate that has caused war:

Yet for men's sakes whom thy vast malison
Must wither innocent of enmity.²⁰

Nevertheless, it remains a sublimation of the same feeling that the pilot had looking down at the inferno his incendiary bombs had created in a German city.

The recognition that there was a beauty in the destructive powers of war and in the weapons that caused it, disturbed poets other than Jarman in the Second World War. Norman Hampson found himself ensnared by the beautiful yet functional lines of his corvette. Her grace and harmony of movement are augmented by the lyrical sea images:

She plunges and the noisy foam leaps widely
Marbling the moon grey sea. Loud in the shrouds
Untrammelled winds roar songs of liberty,
Free as the petrels hovering astern
Her long lithe body answers to the swell.²¹

Like Jarman, Hampson jumps guiltily away from his admiration of the ship. His way of reconciling his feelings of admiration for the machine of war, and his recognition of its lethal purpose is to read into its beauty a hope for the future. Whether the finding of beauty in an unlikely situation promises beauty in peace-time, or whether he feels that it is

¹⁹ Wilfred Owen, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. C Day Lewis (London 1971) p. 85.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 85.

²¹ Norman Hampson, "Corvette" in The Terrible Rain, p. 117.

only in the utilization of such a machine that peace can be achieved he does not make clear. In comparison to the lyrical beauty of the first verse, the poem ends ambiguously and awkwardly:

Even this grey machinery of murder
Holds beauty and a promise of the future.²²

John Pudney, the best known poet of the R.A.F., also saw the contrast between the beauty of a machine of war and the ugliness of its purpose. In the poem, "Combat Report", he enlarges on a fighter pilot's laconic account of a dog fight in lyrical language:

Just then I saw the bloody Hun.
You saw the Hun? You light and easy
Carving the soundless daylight. I was breezy
When I saw that Hun. O wonder
Pattern of stress, of nerve poise flyer
Overtaking time. He came out under
Nine-tenths-cloud, but I was higher.
Did Michelangelo aspire
Painting the laughing Cumulus to ride
The majesty of air.²³

The series of exalted if trite images, seeks to captivate the lightness and grace of flight. Yet the total view they present is a romantic, remote one - the view of the man on the ground - an effect increased somewhat obviously by the contrast with the realism of the pilot's slang.

In the second half of the poem, the pilot's voice begins to dominate the dreamlike beauty of the images of flight, until, in the end, the reader sees what all the pilot's skill and the grace and power of the aircraft lead to - the explosion

²²Brian Gardner, The Terrible Rain, p. 117.

²³Ibid, 76 - 77.

of the enemy aircraft:

He burnt out in the air ; that's how the poor sod died.²⁴

In making this the last line, the poet changes the whole effect of the poem. The phrase "poor sod" removes the anonymity of the enemy. Suddenly, he becomes a man, and a pathetic victim of the air battle; the final impression that the poem makes is of the human loss.

In one way Pudney's poem can be seen as a deliberate suppression of an heroic urge. His admiration for the pilot's superb mastery of his machine is very strong, yet the focussing in the last line on the horrible end of the German fighter pilot, combined with the crude colloquialism of the pilot's speech suggest that he was deliberately stifling this urge to present the pilot as "a knight of the air", as Winston Churchill referred to the R.A.F..

It is interesting that those poets who did give free rein to their feelings of admiration for the heroism that the war brought forth did not, on the whole, produce any noticeable poetry. As in the First World War, these poets tended to express themselves in clichés, and seem out of touch with the reality of the situation. Most of their poems have been forgotten, as modern anthologists have rightly excluded them, but one finds a large number of slim volumes containing these poems in second-hand bookshops. The abundance of these collections testifies to their popularity during the war. They might be, as Keith Douglas described them, "immense bullshit" or as

²⁴Brian Gardner, The Terrible Rain, p. 76 - 77.

Richard Hillary referred to them "all that sop about our Island Fortress" yet for a number of people, the sort of people who were hoping for a Rupert Brooke, they did express the true spirit of the war.

One of the worst and one of the most popular was Magdalen Girdlestone, a London air-raid warden. She specialized in poems to rouse and bolster up the spirits in the bleakest moments of the war. After the collapse of France in 1940 she emitted this rallying cry:

Glorious Land in thy star-crownèd splendour
High by thy ramparts rides wrathful the sea
Fortress beleaguered, yet Freedom's defender
Still through the ages thy title shall be

Rally then now the Oppressed and Forsaken
Close then thy gates against Falsehood and Shame
Stand up alone, undismayed and unshaken
Bright be thy honour and stainless thy Fame.²⁵

Dorothy Sayers was similarly aroused, her imagination fired too by her awareness of England as a beleaguered island. This poem appeared in the Times Literary Supplement in 1940:

Praise God now, for an English War -
The grey tide and the sullen coast
The menace of the urgent hour,
The single island like a tower
Ringed with an angry host.²⁶

After reminding the English of their valiant history, she turned sternly to the "wishful men", presumably those who were hoping that the war would soon end:

No dangerous dreams of wishful men
Whose homes are safe, who never feel
The flying death that swoops and stuns
The kissing of the curtseying guns
Slavering the streets with steel.²⁷

²⁵ M Girdlestone, "To England" from Poems of a London Warden (London 1942) p. 5.

²⁶ Dorothy L Sayers, "The English War" in The Terrible Rain p. 45-46.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 45-46.

It is clear that neither of these women was equal to the challenge of writing a public poem at a time of great national crisis. The First World War has shown that public poetry is enormously difficult. Only a poet of the calibre of Hardy was able to reflect the dominant feeling of the nation without either sentimentalizing it or losing his grip on the reality of the situation. Both Magdalen Girdlestone and Dorothy Sayers fail, because, in their efforts to whip up a national heroic feeling, they resort to clichés, and are so unrestrained in their emotion that the emotion itself becomes discredited. In the verse that begins "No dangerous dreams" Dorothy Sayers has made an effort at originality, but with such unfortunate results that one feels that her worn out image in the first verse, of little England battered on all sides by her enemies and sea, is preferable. "Curtseying guns" is presumably an attempt to represent the recoil of a big gun, but the word curtseying, has such strong associations with bobbing females that the whole image becomes absurd, especially when she abruptly changes her metaphor to a rabid dog in the next line.

These two poems are extreme examples of the bastardisation of heroic feeling. A less extreme example, but one that also shows how easy it is to fall into the pit of stale language when stirred by heroic behaviour, is Herbert Corby's tribute to the airmen who lost their lives in the war. He writes in the vein of Rupert Brooke, drawing freely from the language of "The Soldier":

Think of them. You did not die as these
 caged in an aircraft that did not return.
 Whenever hearts have song and minds have peace
 or in your eyes the pride of banners burn,
 think of these who dreamed and loved as you,
 and gave their laughter, gave their sun and snow
 their English grave blessed by their native dew
 that you would live.²⁸

Apart from the fact that there must be little difference between dying caged in an aircraft and dying caged in a room or indeed dying violently anywhere, the imagery of the poem is painfully second-hand. Isaac Rosenberg had felt that the language of Brooke's sonnets was lacking in originality and freshness, and Corby's borrowing of it thirty years later is inexcusable.

One poet whose imagination was wholly caught by the heroic, and yet avoided melodramatic and outworn language, was Patrick Hore-Ruthven, the son of the governor-general of Australia. Hore-Ruthven was an aristocrat by birth and in temperament, and it is interesting that his career and outlook closely parallels that of Julian Grenfell. Like Grenfell, he joined the professional army after taking his degree at Cambridge. He found the army a perfect outlet for his love of physical activity, the outdoors and his sense of adventure. When war broke out he was, in the words of his sergeant, "completely happy . . . and many times when we were in tight spots behind the enemy lines he said to me 'I call this real soldiering'".²⁹

He was posted to Palestine in 1939 and the first poem

²⁸ Herbert Corby, "The Lost" in The Terrible Rain, p. 80.

²⁹ P Hore-Ruthven, Introduction to Desert Warrior, (London 1944) p. 6.

he wrote there, "Biddya", reveals an heroic attitude of the old Anglo-Saxon type. The poem is a description of a surprise Arab attack upon the village, Biddya:

The heat of the day gave way to heat of battle;
 Blood added scarlet to the grey of dust;
 Bullets woke the village
 With sudden song,
 With strange, untoward exhilaration.³⁰

It is significant that he feels not the horror of the bullets that shattered the peace of the village and brought death to the villagers, but the excitement of the fight. Thus the high pitched-whine of the bullets is described as a sudden song.

In the next verse the poet draws an heroic portrait of one of the defenders, dwelling on his physical prowess and splendour of his body:

The negro from Kap Dih fought splendidly
 Knifed two of Hamid's followers, then
 Himself shot, died immediately,
 Ear-ringed in jet magnificence.³¹

The fact that the negro fought splendidly with a knife reveals the nostalgia that the poet had for the old heroic way of fighting, when the strength of a man's body and his skill at arms were all-important. It is also revealing of his attitude that he portrays the negro as magnificent in death as he had been in life. This is very different from the way death is normally portrayed by modern war poets. For them there is little beauty or dignity in violent death, and they dwell on the pathetic awkwardness of crumpled bodies:

³⁰P Hore-Ruthven, Desert Warrior, p. 21

³¹Ibid, p. 21.

This sorry, stained and crumpled rag was lately
A man whose life was made of little things that mattered.³²

Hore-Ruthven's tribute to his friend Geoffrey Keyes, who was killed in a commando raid on Rommel's headquarters in 1941, is a further illustration of how totally caught up Hore-Ruthven's imagination was in the heroic, chivalric wars of the past. His approach was to avoid any elements in modern warfare that would jar with the chivalric, and in this poem he writes wholly metaphorically, attempting to convey the gallant, heroic spirit of Keyes by picturing him as a young knight riding out to the hunt:

On his wrist,
On his wrist,
With a hawk upon his wrist
As the dawn was breaking clearly,
A gentleman rode early
With a hawk, a hooded hawk
Upon his wrist.³³

When he deals with Keyes' death, there is not even the vaguest reference to the circumstances, only an expression of the heroic belief that the valiant are immortalized by their deeds, and a return to the chivalric image of the young knight that opened the poem.

Hore-Ruthven's poetry is of interest because it presents an heroic attitude of the old type, that is unaffected by the jingoism and sentimentality that mars the "heroic" poems of the First and Second World Wars. He writes wholly in the tradition of Julian Grenfell, and while nothing he wrote has the power and quality of "Into Battle", he does help to destroy the illusion that is harboured about Grenfell. From the single example of "Into Battle", it is felt that Grenfell, had he

³² Ruthven Todd, "These are Facts" in The Terrible Rain, p. 65.

³³ P Hore-Ruthven, "To A Young Man Who Died", in Desert Warrior, p. 24

lived, might have produced a valid body of poetry that would have offset the anti-heroic poetry of the trench poets. Hore-Ruthven's poetry highlights the principal weakness of all heroic poetry in the twentieth century - that in order to evoke the old heroic standards, the poet has to cut himself off from the imagery and idiom of modern warfare. "Biddya" is a successful poem, because it deals with a skirmish between unsophisticated fighters, but as soon as the poet had to deal with modern artillery warfare, he had to avoid realism and write metaphorically. The result is "To a Young Man Who Died", a nostalgic piece that is as remote from the twentieth century as Chaucer's "Knight's Tale". His few poems are as clear a proof as Magdalen Girdlestone's, that the heroic myth is untenable in this century.

John Jarman was one of several poets who reacted to the heroic poets' and their public's determination to romanticize war. "El Alamein" is his answer to them, and in it he shows how far from the reality of battle is the heroic view. As in Pudney's "Combat Report", the poem makes its effect by contrast - the contrast between the public's conception of El Alamein and the soldiers' memory of it:

There are flowers now, they say, at Alamein;
 Yes, flowers in the minefields now.
 So those that come to view that vacant scene
 Where death remains and agony has been
 Will find the lilies grow -
 Flowers, and nothing that we know.³⁴

From the parenthesis "they say" in the first line, the

³⁴ John Jarman, Poems, (London 1945) p. 21 - 22.

poet isolates himself and the other combatants from the public's view of the battle. The feeling of isolation is strengthened by the incongruity of the flowers amidst the desolate battlefield strewn with mines. The false romanticism of the flowers is reinforced by the poet's making the flowers lilies, in the second last line, which have strong associations with chivalry and a mode of warfare that is alien to the present.

The rest of the poem is an expansion of these contrasting views. In the third verse he demonstrates the romantic height of the public's conception of the battle:

Like Troy or Agincourt its single fame
 Will be the garland for our brow, our claim,
 On us a fleck of glory to the end:
 And there our dead will keep their holy ground.³⁵

The emotive vagueness of the heroic images above is only made clear by the hard concreteness of the soldiers' memory of the battle in the following verse. Set against the misty romanticism of Troy and Agincourt, and the phrases "garland for our brow", "fleck of glory", "their holy ground" is the stark reality:

But this is not the place that we recall
 The crowded desert crossed with foaming tracks,
 The one blotched building, lacking half a wall
 The grey-faced men, sand-powdered over all;³⁶

The concluding verse of this poem expresses a feeling of exclusiveness that is common in the poetry of the First World War, but rare in this war:

So be it: none but us has known that land:
 El Alamein will still be only ours
 And those ten days of chaos in the sand.
 Others will come who cannot understand,
 Will halt beside the rusty minefield wires
 And find there - flowers.³⁷

³⁵John Jarman, Poems, p. 22.

³⁶Ibid, p. 22.

³⁷Ibid, p. 22.

Yet, although he asserts that none but those who went through "the ten days of chaos in the sand" can have any real understanding of Alamein, the poet expresses none of the fierce pride that characterized the trench poets. There is nothing of the scornful intensity with which Owen shuts the public off from the combatant soldiers:

... These men are worth
Your tears. You are not worth their merriment. 38

and in "Greater Love":

Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not. 39

Instead, Jarman seems to look with compassion on the people at home, who, despite all the concrete evidence to the contrary, will still find flowers at Alamein. This is suggested by the gentle tone of the last line, and the break before "flowers" that suggest the poet was half smiling at the people's persistent romanticism. After this line, the "so be it" at the beginning implies a gentle tolerance of both views - the soldiers will keep their memory and experience of the real battle; the public their romantic, heroic view.

Jarman's linking of Troy and Agincourt with the public's romantic conception of war suggests that he was questioning the truth of the traditional view of these battles. Had he gone further he would no doubt have shown that these battles were as painful and as chaotic as Alamein.

One Second World War poet, Sidney Keyes, did look back from his experience of battle in 1942 to the great battles of the distant past and recent past and strip them of their

³⁸ Wilfred Owen, "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" in Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 40

³⁹ Wilfred Owen, "Greater Love" in Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 41.

first is that of Scipio Africanus, the Roman general who defeated Hannibal. Scipio would seem to be one soldier whose belief in the glory of battle and conquest was not diminished, as he died at the height of his fame; but the agonized, undignified pain of his death reduces all the glory to a sham, bearing out the truth of his initial statement:

Let me speak out
 Against this sham of policy, for pain
 Alone is true I spoke of fame and glory.
 Women grabbed at my robe. Great poets praised me
 I died of cancer, screaming, in a year.⁴¹

Building up to the last line in this manner has the effect of the roaring adulation of Rome being drowned by the man's screams of agony.

Scipio's statement is also corroborated by the next voice: the voice of a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, whose heroic ideals are violently destroyed by the searing pain of his fatal wound:

I fell on a black Spanish hillside
 Under the thorn-hedge, fighting for a dream
 That troubled me in Paris; vomited
 My faith and courage out among the stones . . .⁴²

Although the pain is the final truth and the end of high idealism, the bleak images "black Spanish hillside" and "under the thorn-hedge" imply that this has been a progressive disillusionment.

From dealing with soldiers in specific battles and using concrete imagery, the poet becomes disconcertingly vague in the voice:

I was a barb of light, a burning cross
 Of wood and canvas, falling through the night.⁴³

⁴¹Sidney Keyes, Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes, p. 73.

⁴²Ibid, p. 73.

⁴³Ibid, p. 73.

It is not clear whether the poet is referring to a fighter pilot being shot down, or whether he is using a crucifixion metaphor which he has done at other times to show the burden of suffering the soldier must carry. If this is so here, "falling through the night" implies that the soldier, unlike Christ, is unequal to the burden. One also questions the phrase "barb of light", since a barb is not the sharp, stabbing part of an arrow that the sense would seem to require, but the part that points backward and impedes withdrawal.

Read in the context of the passage, the inaccuracy and vagueness of this section is not obvious, as the images do imply death and disillusionment, but they do point to Keyes' defects as a poet. His work on the whole tends to be imprecise, and gives the impression that he ^{is} groping for meaning. This is better illustrated by an earlier passage from "The Foreign Gate", which, with "The Wilderness", is proclaimed by critics as Keyes' great contribution to the poetry of the Second World War:

The moon is a poor woman.
 The moon returns to weep with us. The crosses
 Burn raw and white upon the night's stiff banners.
 The wooden crosses and the marble trees
 Shrink from the foreign moon.
 The iron gate glitters. Here the soldiers lie.
 Fold up the flags, muffle the soldier's drum;
 Silence the calling fife.⁴⁴

This passage expresses part of Keyes' effort to evolve a philosophy in the face of his conviction that he was about to be killed. He is here discarding the old symbols of war. The jerkiness of the movement of these lines, and the number of conflicting, undeveloped images reveal a serious lack of technical mastery of his medium, and immaturity of thought.

⁴⁴ Sidney Keyes, Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes, p. 71.

Keyes' rapturous approbation by the critics during the war can partly be attributed to the almost desperate search for a war poet who would speak for his generation in the way that Rupert Brooke did for the innocent young men who were eager to sacrifice themselves in 1914; or in the way that Wilfred Owen did for the disillusioned and embittered youth of 1917. Keyes' "intellectual" style, which owes much to Eliot but lacks his precision, aroused the critics' enthusiasm, for it seemed to them to promise a new type of war poetry representative of the large number of university students and graduates in the forces. Michael Meyer wrote in 1944: "In articulating the dumb courage of a generation, he breathed new life into many of the traditions of English poetry, the dramatic monologue, the landscape, the macabre and especially blank verse. Above all, he was the first truly English poet effectively to marry Continental symbolism to the English Romantic tradition; and with his exceptional sensibility to the face of Nature, his detailed knowledge of legend and his intuitive assessment of the conjuring power of words, he fashioned symbolism into a precision instrument".⁴⁵

One feels that only in wartime and at a time when the need for a poetic spokesman was felt to be urgent, would a critic manage to find precision in poetry that is remarkable for its lack of it, and is packed with a conglomeration of vague, romantic images. But the enthusiasm of the critics was not confined to wartime. As recently as 1967 R N Currey rated Keyes, Alun Lewis and Keith Douglas as "worthy successors to

⁴⁵Michael Meyer, Introduction to the Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes, p. xx.

Owen, assimilating his poetic situation and carrying it forward into a world situation he did not live to see".⁴⁶

This seems an extraordinarily inaccurate assessment of Keyes' work. There is nothing of Owen's compassionate humanity in Keyes, who was essentially a self-regarding private poet, working out a solution to his conviction that he was about to die. Nor is there anything of Owen's technical mastery in Keyes' work. One only has to compare a poem such as "Futility" with either of the passages from "The Foreign Gate" quoted above to be struck by the gulf of difference between the two. Every word in "Futility" works for its place in the poem, more than half of the words in "Foreign Gate" are loose and redundant.

Currey's selection of Alun Lewis as a worthy successor to Owen is more justified. Lewis viewed war with Owen's compassionate eyes, and his clear, often lyrical style reveals a sureness of purpose and feeling that one finds in Owen. In one of his earliest war poems, "After Dunkirk", he spoke as Owen would have done for those who had endured the chaos and horror of the retreat from Belgium and the beach at Dunkirk.

I have been silent a lifetime
As a stabbed man,
And stolid, showing nothing
But inwardly I have wept.⁴⁷

These lines are in sharp contrast to the heroic presentation of this event by Winston Churchill and the Press. Lewis saw beyond the forced smiles of the survivors in the newspaper photographs to the horror and shock of what they had been through. As he reveals later in the poem, he wept because he sensed the harm that such an experience does to the

⁴⁶ R N Currey, Poets of the 1939 - 1945 War, (London 1967) p.7.

⁴⁷ Alun Lewis, Raider's Dawn, (London 1942) p. 31

human soul. He saw his purpose as Owen did when he wrote:

"My subject is War and the pity of War . . . All a poet can do today is warn".

But now I have this boon to speak again
 I have no more desire to express
 The old relationships, of love fulfilled
 Or stultified, capacity for pain,
 Nor to say gracefully all that the poets have said
 Of one or other of the old compulsions
 For now the times are gathered for confessions.

First then, remember Faith
 Haggard with thoughts that complicate
 What statesmen's speeches try to simplify.
 Horror of war, the ear half-catching
 Rumours of rape in crumbling towns;
 Love of mankind, impelling men
 To murder and to mutilate.⁴⁸

Yet, although Lewis was deeply aware of the corrupting effect of war, and warned his generation of it with Owen's blend of bitterness and compassion, he was soon to discover that the different circumstances of the Second World War made speaking in Owen's voice impossible. The very short periods of combat and danger, interspersed with the very long periods of inactivity, and the constant mobility of the fighting forces made the Owen-like intensity with which he writes here out of place. The soldiers Lewis wrote for suffered boredom and disruption of their lives; which was very different to suffering intense physical hardships, almost constant bombardment and the knowledge that the only escape was through death or a serious wound. Lewis's fellow soldiers might in the end be as war-scarred mentally and physically as "the boys with old men's faces" that Sassoon and Owen led, but the process was a gradual one and one that was shared equally by civilians in the cities. It seems too that the troops were unaware of what was happening

⁴⁸Alun Lewis, Raider's Dawn, p. 31

to them, and were either indifferent to or resented any revelations of their fate; for instead of the warm brotherhood that Owen and Sassoon felt for their inarticulate comrades, Lewis soon started to feel alienated from his fellows.

In "The Soldier" there is an almost humorous pathos in the contrast between the feeling of impending doom that he alone was experiencing, and the cheerful indifference of his "fellow soldiers":

I within me holding
 Turbulence and Time
 - Volcanic fires deep beneath the glacier
 Feel the dark cancer in my vitals.

.
 But leisurely my fellow soldiers stroll among the trees
 The cheapest dance-song utters all they feel.⁴⁹

Unintentionally, Lewis made clear in these lines why no poet could write as the trench poets did in the Second World War. The image of the cheerfully insensitive soldiers strolling in the park make the dark, turbulent feelings of the poet seem melodramatic and incongruous.

If Lewis had confined himself to being a Second World War Cassandra, his poetry would have been a sad anachronism. Fortunately, he used his perceptiveness and sensitivity to evoke the atmosphere of the places where he was stationed. There was no other poet in the forces who managed to convey the day-to-day experience of life in the army as well as he. His masterpiece is "All Day it has Rained", a poem that has been rightly called his "Exposure"; for just as "Exposure" crystallized the whole experience of life in the trenches in winter, so this poem captures the boredom, resignation and feeling of alienation that was life in the army for the majority

⁴⁹Alun Lewis, Raider's Dawn, p. 17.

experience in Troy was brutal and degrading, very different from courtship of the "women in the vineyards".

The whole poem is a strong indictment of war and of the glorifying of it. Like Keyes, Lewis felt the need to cut through the layers of romantic myth accruing to heroic legends to what he believed to be the reality beyond. He does this by portraying Odysseus not as Tennyson and legend presented him, but as an ageing, insecure man, so guilt-ridden by the horrors he has wreaked on Troy that he drags his men on an endless journey in a desperate attempt to forget. His men feel they are shackled to a madman, and regard his efforts to blot out Troy with weary contempt:

And everywhere he feasted long and bragged
More than was decent of his ancient exploits

What did he fear to find at the end of his voyage?

 • • •
 He drank too much and
 boasted
 Too much about his ancient violence
His eyes were mad each time he talked of Troy.⁵²

In the last part of this poem, the narrator reveals that in following Odysseus the men are not only condemned to share his desperate meanderings, but his guilt and punishment as well. From the moment they left Ithaca to fight the Trojans:

The pastoral life, the common satisfaction
Forfeited when we answered wrong with wrong.⁵³

They are doomed, like their master, to be forever haunted by Troy and by the terrible knowledge that, in conquering it, they have started the irreversible ruin of their civilization:

And still at sunset we beheld the bastions
And burning towers of the lovely city

⁵² Alun Lewis, Raider's Dawn, p. 78

⁵³ Ibid, p. 78.

Immortalized by its destruction.
 We knew the vision of a ruined age
 To be the shape our minds and deeds had fashioned,
 And we ourselves to be a wretched omen.⁵⁴

The lyrical quality of the first three lines is very moving, and it conveys the tragic, poignant beauty of Troy in flames as well as the anguish of Odysseus.

The last three lines make clear the significance of this vision. Burning Troy is a symbol of the end of the old Greek civilization, for once the Greeks began to make war they negated everything that was of value in their civilization.

Like John Cornford in the Spanish Civil War, Alun Lewis is known by many people for an ineffably simple yet beautiful love poem :

If I should go away
 Beloved do not say
 "He has forgotten me"
 For you abide
 A singing rib within my dreaming side.⁵⁵

A great deal of love poetry was written in the Second World War, but none that has quite the unforced lyric quality of this poem. Another entirely different love poem, but one that is as successful and well known is George Barker's "To My Mother". It is one of the deepest expressions of love and one of the most humorous poems of the war:

Most near, most dear, most loved and most far.
 Under the window where I often found her
 Sitting as huge as Asia, seismic with laughter,
 Gin and chicken in her Irish hand,
 Irresistible as Rabelais, but most tender for
 The lame dogs and hurt birds that surround her, -
 She is a procession that no one can follow after
 But be like a little dog following a brass band.

⁵⁴ Alun Lewis, Raider's Dawn, p. 78.

⁵⁵ Ibid, "Postscript for Gweno", p.45

She will not glance up at the bomber, or condescend
 To drop her gin and scuttle to a cellar,
 But lean on the mahogany table like a mountain
 Whom only faith can move, and so I send
 O all my faith and all my love to tell her
 That she will move from mourning into morning.⁵⁶

The effectiveness of this poem comes from the enormously vivid life of the woman. She is as real and as humorous an evocation as Chaucer's Wife of Bath, but, partly due to the war setting of this poem, she also emerges as an heroic figure. Her refusal to allow the German bombers to disturb her life, the vastness of her size, her enormous uninhibited laughter, her great compassion and her ribald stories make her both a parody of the hero and yet an authentic example of the hero in the old Greek sense. Like the Greek heroes, her qualities are all very human and possessed to an unusual degree, and like them her defiant courage is at once impractical and magnificent.

"To My Mother" concludes this discussion of the English poetry of the Second World War because it highlights the essential difference between this war and all the other major wars of the past. It was, above all, a people's war, in which every civilian was involved. As Churchill told the world in the summer of 1940 "this is a war of unknown warriors". . . . "The whole of the warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers, but the entire population, men, women and children".⁵⁷ "To My Mother" is a tribute to the heroic spirit of the civilians in the cities, who refused to be intimidated by the devastation wreaked on them by the German bombers, and who, time after time, set about bringing normality to the chaos around them.

⁵⁶ George Barker, Inscapes, ed. Robin Malan (Cape Town 1969) p. 174.

⁵⁷ Winston Churchill, War Speeches I (London 1951) p. 233, 235.

From the number of diverse poems examined in this chapter some conclusions can be drawn about the nature of the poetry of the Second World War.

Firstly, there is little real continuity of outlook between the Trench poets and poets of the Second World War, despite the efforts of critics such as R N Currey and Edmund Blunden to prove that the Second World War poets continued where Owen and Sassoon left off.

It is true the majority of the Second World War poets did not view the war heroically. That much they had learnt from the First World War, but beyond this they found that there was little in what the Trench poets had said, or about the way in which they had said it, that had relevance to their war. Alun Lewis was determined, at the beginning of the war, to emulate Owen, but he soon saw that the very different circumstances made writing with Owen's intensity, or even with his compassion, incongruous.

Secondly, with the exception of Keith Douglas, whose poetry will be discussed in the next chapter, no poet of the stature of Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon emerged. There are some fine poems - "Soldiers Bathing", "Naming of Parts", "To My Mother" and "All Day It has Rained" are examples - but none of the four poets was able to sustain this excellence. In particular Henry Reed's other poems are surprisingly mediocre, with the possible exception of "Judging Distances", a companion piece to "Naming of Parts".

The lack of major poets in the Second World War did not surprise Robert Graves. He gave his reasons why no major poet had emerged, nor was likely to emerge, in a radio talk in 1941.

He said that, in the first place, the soldiers in the Second World War were not under the same strain as the troops of the First World War. "The constant tension for the soldier at the Front in World War I brought a war neurosis whose mental rhythm was one of jagged ups and downs: the up-curves representing despairing nervous energy, which, when converted to poetic use, resulted in poems terrifyingly beyond the poet's normal capacity". He pointed out, too that the army of the Second World War lacked the informality of the "amateur, desperate, happy-go-lucky, ragtime, lousy army of World War I".⁵⁸ He felt the professionalism crushed the individualism essential to the creativity of the poet.

He concluded with the point that the first-class war correspondents in the Second World War, who were in the thick of battle, had taken over the job of the war poets. The main-spring of the poet's inspiration in the First World War had been the urgent need to inform the civilians of the conditions at the front.

Finally, although no poet worthy of the name attempted to render the heroic and patriotic propaganda of the radio and press as poetry, a number of poets felt the need to expose the falseness of the heroic view of war. John Jarman showed how romantic was the public's conception of the battle of El Alamein, Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes looked back to historical and legendary battles and heroes and stripped them of their glory. That these poets felt the need to destroy the heroic myth anew indicates how persistent was the public's belief in it, and how readily many people had shrugged off the bitter lesson that their predecessors had learnt in the First World War.

⁵⁸ Robert Graves, "War Poetry in this War", *The Listener* 23 October 1941, p. 566.

CHAPTER X

KEITH DOUGLAS

The outstanding poet of the Second World War is Keith Castellain Douglas, who was killed at the age of twenty-four in Normandy in June 1944. What distinguishes Douglas from his contemporaries is that he did what no other poet of this war was able to do - he produced a collection of war poems of high quality. Despite his youth, his work has a completeness and maturity.

As has been seen in the last chapter on the poetry of the Second World War, a number of poets wrote excellent, even brilliant poems, but none of them was able to sustain this excellence for more than one or two works. Robert Graves noted this phenomenon, and attributed it to the highly technological nature of the war, which he felt was alien to poetry; to the lack of volunteer pride; and to the fact that the situation of the troops was no more dangerous than that of many civilians. There is much truth in what he says. Henry Reed, for instance, after an initial burst of enthusiasm and brilliance engendered by the novelty of the war situation, seems to have succumbed to the general feeling of weary resignation so that nothing he wrote after his military training begins to approach the wit and pathos of "Naming of Parts". He and other poets lacked the stimulus of constant danger and hardship that had forced the poets of the Western Front in the First World War to an extraordinary if uneven maturity. There was, however, another factor, which Graves did not mention, and that was the Second World War poets' lack of poetic craftsmanship. This was also true of the trench poets but, because they were working within a restricted area of experience, the limitations of their technique are not

obvious. One only becomes aware of Sassoon's technical deficiencies as a poet when one reads the poetry he wrote after the war. The Second World War made considerably more demands on its poets because the area of experience was greatly expanded. Most poets had difficulty when they attempted to display its varied facets. Alun Lewis, for example, coped with great success with wartime England in his poetry, but many of his attempts to write about India are inadequate. His language tends to become heavy and stale when he tries to convey his sense of the corruption and underlying menace of the Far Eastern theatre.

The reasons Keith Douglas did not succumb to the "khaki-blancomist", as Graves describes it, or flounder in the bog of poetic style are various, but the most important are that he retained a keen and vivid interest in war that had begun in his childhood; and that from his early teens he had mastered the intricacies of poetic technique. This enabled him to deal with subjects of complexity with such sureness and ease that his war poems read with the utmost fluency.

His talent in poetry showed very early. When he was eight his History master observed, after reading his poem "Waterloo" (set as a class exercise), that he had "quite a sense of style".¹ By the time Douglas was fifteen his "sense of style" had developed into a technical mastery of his poetry, and corresponding with this stylistic maturity came a need to break away from the fanciful world of his childish imagination - a world inhabited by dryads, elves and animals or by legendary heroes. Significantly for his later career as a war poet, his

¹ Desmond Graham, Keith Douglas (London : O.U.P. 1974), p.15.

first attempt to deal with adulthood was ".303", a poem about a gun and the cynical and insensitive view of life it represents:

I have looked through the pine-trees
Cooling their sun-warmed needles in the night,
I saw the moon's face white
Beautiful as the breeze.

Yet you have seen the boughs sway with the night's breath
Wave like dead arms, repudiating the stars
And the moon, circular and useless, pass
Pock-marked with death.

Through the machine-gun's sights
I saw men curse, weep, cough, sprawl in their entrails;
You did not know the gardener in the vales,
Only efficiency delights you. ²

The delicacy of the poet's vision repudiates the sterile ugliness of the weapon's view of the same scene, yet the last line of the poem suggests that the poet cannot wholly dismiss the weapon. He does not refute the weapon's view as he might have done, and this is enough to suggest that he was accepting that there were views of life antithetical to his own.

Douglas' realization that his own attitude to an experience was not the only valid or possible one had an important effect on his poetry and style. After ".303", his poems acquire a sense of detachment. He could and did write with the complete involvement of his childhood and early teens, but somewhere in every poem he seems to step back and view his subject from a distance. This is apparent even in his first love poem "Kristin". The poem begins with an image of Spring that expresses gracefully both the season's and the girl's young loveliness :

² Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, ed. J. Waller, G.S. Fraser and J.C. Hall (London : Faber and Faber 1966), p. 31.

This season like a child on airy points
 Has crept behind you in an evening time
 To take you unawares and touch your hair
 With a gift of gold; . . . 3

The freshness of the language suggests a sincerity of feeling, yet, surprisingly in a boy of sixteen, Douglas is able to be detached enough from his feelings to know that his love will not last. The poem ends:

Take this, these limpid days will not be constant;
 They will forsake you, will not reappear. 4

Douglas' enjoyment of experiment is obvious in a later poem "Commission", written when he was seventeen. In this poem he appropriates the jaunty pulpit manner of the socialist poets, and, no doubt with private amusement, makes their imagery of social observation express a viewpoint antithetical to theirs. The theme of the poem is the poet's role in society :

Love is King's English; lust its cockney accent,
 Now leap and learn it, no need to decry then
 The present age, when aitches are so lacking.
 Speak to them splendidly; do not deny them

The sun, point him out ere the clouds climb him.
 Not their muck shew. You must demonstrate
 Not stones but what's beneath. Set them amiming
 The gods, each friend with friend and satiate. 5

This poem demonstrates Douglas' powers of assimilation and wit, for, without resorting to any actual borrowing, he captures perfectly the hectoring tone of Lewis and Spender at their worst. He throws their imagery into ridicule by producing some of his own that is only slightly more incongruous : "Love is King's English; lust its cockney accent" and "Not their muck shew".

3, 4 Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 36.

5 Graham, Keith Douglas, p. 53.

Soon after Douglas went up to Oxford in September 1938, he met and fell in love with a Chinese girl, Yingcheng. This had a marked effect on his poetry. The exploratory and experimental approach was dropped: the more devoted to Yingcheng he became, the more lyrically and romantically he wrote. His poem to Kristin had indicated his gift for this type of poetry, but in the poems he wrote to the beautiful and somewhat detached Yingcheng one finds a far greater intensity of feeling. The delicate, pretty images have been replaced by images garnered from "The Tempest" and Tennyson's "Ulysses". The lover is both Ferdinand shipwrecked and lost on Prospero's strange island and Ulysses at the end of his quest for the blessed isles :

What in the pattern of your face
 Was writing to my eye, that journeyed once
 Like an explorer in your beauty's land,
 To find that venerable secret stand
 Somehow carved there; and ever since
 Has rested still, enchanted by the place?

Cast up along your eyes' dark shore
 There, or within the cool red cave of lips,
 My heart would spend a solitary spell,
 Delighted hermit in his royal cell.
 For your eyes and your precious mouth perhaps
 Are blessed isles once found and found no more.

You are the whole continent of love
 For me, the windy sailor on this ocean,
 Who'd lose his ragged vessel to the waves
 And call on you, the strange land, to save.
 Here I set up my altar and devotion,
 And let no storm blot out the place I have. 6

The influence of the Elizabethan love poets and Donne is apparent in the elaborate extended metaphor of the wrecked sailor trapped and enchanted in the land of her beauty. Yet, however fanciful and literary the style, there

⁶ Keith Douglas, "Stranger (for Y.C.S)" in Collected Poems p. 44.

is no mistaking the passion behind the images. There is a voluptuousness in his dwelling on the eyes and "the carved red cave of lips", and he exposes his vulnerability in the image of the ragged vessel lost to the waves, and in the intensity of the plea contained in the last line.

Yingcheng rejected him after six months, but she was to haunt him and his poetry for the rest of his life, despite his having three other serious love affairs and numerous casual ones. She was the cause of the dark, bitter phase he went through in his poetry in the latter half of 1939. The emotions of a rejected lover - vindictive despair, resignation, emptiness, reproach, and desperate hope of reunion - pervade his work of this period. In one poem, "Leukothea", he imagined her dead; buried by her lover, who believes that nothing will corrupt her beauty. One notices here the cool, almost clinical precision of description that was to be a feature of his war poems :

...I remember when they put you there
 your too expressive living eye
 being covered by the dark eyelash
 and by its lid for a cerement. ⁷

In the end he discovers that his trust in the earth and its creatures has been betrayed, and that she, like everybody else, is reduced to a heap of bones.

Douglas' bitterness also manifested itself in poems that made no reference to love. One such poem is "Russians", which Douglas wrote after reading that a Russian regiment had frozen to death in Finland

⁷ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 53.

during the Russian winter campaign there in 1939. It was reported that they were found in battle formation, holding their rifles at the ready :

How silly that soldier is pointing his gun at the wood:
he doesn't know it isn't any good.
You see, the cold and cruel northern wind
has frozen the whole battalion where they stand.

That's never a corporal: even now he's frozen
you could see he's only a commercial artist
whom they took and put these clothes on,
and told him he was one of the smartest.

Even now they're in ice it's easy to know
what a shock it was, a long shock
that's been coming home to them wherever they go,
with their mazy minds taking stock.

Walk among the innocuous parade
and touch them if you like, they're properly stayed:
keep out of their line of sight and they won't look.
Think of them as waxworks, or think they're struck

with a dumb immobile spell
to wake in a thousand years with the sweet force
of spring upon them in the merry world. Well,
at least forget what happens when it thaws. 8

The sneering note of the opening line sets the tone of the poem. It would have been possible to find in this incident the courage and discipline that Tennyson celebrated in "The Charge of the Light Brigade", but Douglas chooses only to emphasize the absurd and grotesque nature of the situation. The corporal is stripped of his soldierly position and dignity : "He's only a commercial artist" on whom a nasty joke has been played. The rest of the regiment is similarly reduced to ridicule by Douglas' suggestion that they are hoodwinked fools, who have become frozen by the shock of realizing that they had been "trapped". In the fourth verse the callous

⁸ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 68.

tone takes on the breezy note of a guide steering tourists round a sight. The frozen soldiers "innocuous and properly stayed" have become objects to be stared at and prodded. The nastiest line in the poem is the last, when, after pretending momentarily that the soldiers are enchanted, like the warriors the magician Punchkin encapsulated in trees and rocks, the poet abruptly turns away from the brief hint of romance to deliver the final shock.

One feels that the cynicism is too overt and the tone too at variance with the subject matter for this poem to be entirely genuine. Douglas enjoyed shocking, and the soldier, who was traditionally treated by poets with respect or compassion, provided a splendid target for his black moods. It is noteworthy that, as his bitterness over Yingcheng changed into nostalgic melancholy, so his attitude to the soldier changed. This is clearly illustrated by the modifications he made to another cynical war poem just before he left Oxford. The original poem began :

John Anderson with stubborn mind
advancing in the first wave of the attack
took one in the face that came out behind

his creative brain split and he fell back
rolling in the dust (for it was summer there)
the blood fell out and turned his tunic black 9

Zeus looks on and he "cannot abide" the corpse's stare. The poem ends with him summoning Apollo to "take him away and conceal him somewhere". Zeus' distaste for the corpse is the final sickening factor in this brutal and cynical poem. As in "Russians", value and credibility are destroyed by the excessive cynicism. Yet, a few months later, he took this unpromising

⁹Graham, Keith Douglas, p. 101.

material and built it into a gently humorous and moving poem. The first two verses have small, but significant alterations : the brutal detail has been cut down to a level where it is not obtrusive, and the reference to the weather in the second verse is made the more pedantic because the poet wishes to emphasize the pedantry of John Anderson, the scholarly gentleman, who is the most unlikely of heroes. But the real change in the poet's attitude becomes evident from the fourth verse, when Zeus looks down, and with gentle compassion orders Apollo to cleanse "the stain of dark blood from the body of John Anderson" and to :

Give him to Death and Sleep,
who'll bear him as they can

out of the range of darts to the broad vale
of Lycia; there lay him in a deep
solemn content on some bright dale. ¹⁰

Douglas has thus lifted his poem from the negativism of cynicism to the dignity of an elegy.. Because he has kept a distance from his subject, he has been able to impart a gentle humour from the suggestion that the improbable heroic fate John Anderson is borne off to is just the end that he, the classical scholar, would have secretly envisaged for himself. The poem recalls the gentle humour of Robert Graves' elegy to Captain Sampson, and his speculation about the nature of his heaven.

Keith Douglas' treatment of "John Anderson" is significant, because it indicates that he had stopped using war as an outlet for his cynicism and bitterness. It marks the end of a mood that had first showed itself in ".303", when he had used war as the antithesis of beauty and sensitivity.

¹⁰Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 70.

This new-found maturity of attitude is also evident in the last poems he wrote to Yingcheng before he left Oxford. Particularly striking is "Canoe", in which his capacity for lyricism reached a new height. It remains one of his finest poems, and demonstrates his gift for combining speech rhythms and lyrical description with the graceful ease that comes from complete mastery of his technique :

Well, I am thinking this may be my last
summer, but cannot lose even a part
of pleasure in the old-fashioned art of
idleness. I cannot stand aghast

at whatever doom hovers in the background;
while grass and buildings and the somnolent river,
who know they are allowed to last for ever,
exchange between them the whole subdued sound

of this hot time, What sudden fearful fate
can deter my shade wandering next year
from a return? Whistle and I will hear
and come another evening, when this boat

travels with you alone towards Iffley:
as you lie looking up for thunder again,
this cool touch does not betoken rain;
it is my spirit that kisses your mouth lightly. 11

The poem flows with the river and the canoe floating serenely down towards Iffley. This effect is created by the naturalness of the speech that merges imperceptibly with the poetic diction of : "I cannot stand aghast / at whatever doom hovers in the background"; with the number of run-on lines, the image of the age-old buildings, lawn and river, the impression of heat and the poignant beauty of the image of the girl in the last verse. The poet's awareness of the dangerous time in which he is living, and the hint of his impending doom are not allowed to obtrude

¹¹ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 73.

or even contrast with the present: rather, they add a deep tone to the lyrical music of the whole.

This survey of Douglas' poetry before he became a combatant shows how technically equipped he was to write the poetry of the Second World War. He had put himself through a long and varied apprenticeship in his craft, and was therefore more competent than the majority of his young contemporaries to deal with the difficulties of creating poetry in circumstances that would normally be regarded as unfavourable.

Douglas' superior technique was not the only factor in his success as a war poet. As mentioned above, he took a keen interest in war which made him different from the majority of his fellow poets, who either regarded war with repugnance, or accepted it with weary resignation. His interest in war began early. He wrote this about himself when he was fourteen:

As a child he was a militarist, and like many of his warlike elders, built up heroic opinions upon little information - some scrappy war stories of his father. Most of the time he was down in the field, busy, with an absurdly purposeful look on his round face, about a tent made of an old sheet, and signposted with a board saying 'Sergeants' mess'. He was quite at home there for hours, while he was four or five, telling himself stories as he ran about, and sometimes stopping a moment to contemplate the calf who shared that field, a normally quiet animal, but given to jumping five-barred gates. As you would expect, he played with lead soldiers, and toy artillery, and was most fond of the cavalry and the highlanders. Unlike the other troops who either marched sedately with sloped arms or sat bolt upright on their caracoling steeds, the highlanders were charging, their kilts flying at a swift angle out behind them and the plumes upon their heads also flying out, though often in the wrong direction for the broken heads were fixed back on with matches and swivelled easily. 12

Almost every small boy goes through a similar phase of playing soldier, and being thrilled by the heroic aspects of war. With Keith Douglas

¹² Keith Douglas, quoted by Desmond Graham in Keith Douglas p. 1.

however, it was no passing phase. He remained a militarist throughout his life, and although he was later able to see the inadequacies of the heroic code and the outlook on war it engenders, there was a part of him that continued to admire the heroic type and flamboyant, heroic behaviour.

When he was at Christ's Hospital, a school that put more emphasis on academic than on sporting achievement and suffered its O.T.C. rather than encouraged it, Douglas joined the Corps with great enthusiasm. His friends, who hated every moment of drill, were astonished at his keenness, but they had a far less tempestuous time than he did. Douglas constantly fell foul of the major who instructed them. The attraction of the Corps lay in his taste for military ceremony and efficiency, in the excitement of handling guns, and in the opportunities for imaginative games of defence and attack. It did not extend to what he termed "bullying" and "fascism", qualities that he imputed to the major. Despite his frequent clashes with the major, his platoon won the Somers Clark Trophy competition in drill, turn-out, map-reading, weapon-training and tactics. This was to be expected, as Douglas had spent far longer than anybody else drilling his platoon and, with the help of a regular N.C.O. he had befriended, he had fitted them out with new tight-fitting uniforms.

Of all the military activities of the Corps, it was drill that attracted him most. He was fascinated by the ritual, precision and discipline that welds individuals into a single efficient fighting unit. One sees this love of discipline and precision in the style and form of his poetry: in one poem, "Stars", that he wrote in 1940, he expresses this love openly:

The stars still marching in extended order
 Move out of nowhere into nowhere. Look, they are halted
 On a vast field tonight, true no man's land.
 Far down the sky with sword and belt must stand
 Orion. For commissariat of this exalted
 War-company, the Wain. No fabulous border

Could swallow all this bravery. No band
 Will ever face them: nothing but discipline
 Has mobilized and still maintains them. Thus
 Time and his ancestors have seen them. Thus
 Always to fight disorder is their business,
 And victory continues in their hand. ¹³

This love of order and discipline was, however, completely at variance with other of his qualities. His career at school was renowned for turbulent individualism. He had great difficulty in conforming to the usual boarding-school regulations, and it was only through the tolerance and understanding of some of the masters that he avoided expulsion on several occasions. At Oxford his work was spasmodic. One of his friends, Margaret Stanley-Wrench, remembers that in lectures "he breathed loudly, creaked his seat and looked ostentatiously at his watch, broadcasting boredom". His energies were mostly taken up with a huge variety of other activities - pursuing Yingcheng and later other women; writing poetry; editing "The Cherwell", a university literary magazine; acting; riding borrowed horses with more dash than style; rugby; the O.T.C.; gymnastics; and drawing, painting and modelling, at which he was exceptionally talented. His untidy room, aswirl with paintings, drawings and poems, was usually crammed with people, as Douglas was highly entertaining; but he put off as many people as he attracted, with his acerbic tongue and intolerance of opinions that did not agree with his own. He was especially intolerant of liberal socialistic ideals; for him politics was mythology and he could not stand the Socialists'

¹³ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 53.

belief that they offered realistic and logical answers. He himself maintained an upperclass, élitist view of life that stemmed from his studies in History and Art. His hero was Michelangelo, whom he regarded as an embattled warrior courageously fighting for his beliefs against the sloth and ignorance of the masses. This intolerance was also shown in his editorship of "The Cherwell" in 1940. He was inclined to reject poems that were submitted, returning them with letters that pointed out the artistic and personal deficiencies of the poet in such a manner that few tried a second time. This meant that Douglas himself supplied many of the poems that appeared that year. He used different pseudonyms and once had to deny strenuously that the poems of Shotaro Oshima were his own. He also used "The Cherwell" to attack cant about the war, and in the first editorial he wrote scathingly about those who believed "that we are fighting a race of sub-men, of whom every member from birth is certainly a brutal moron".¹⁴ A friend, David Beaty, recalls going to the cinema with him during this time, where they saw the usual newsreel in which an aerial dog-fight was concluded with a German aircraft spinning to the ground in flames. The audience cheered, and Douglas, trembling with fury, leapt onto his seat shouting "You shits! You shits! You shits!" until he was forcibly removed.

The humane and gallant attitude to the enemy that underlies his behaviour in this incident was, in part, a manifestation of the heroic ideals of his boyhood. How strong these ideals still were is shown by his enjoyment of the early part of his Officer Cadet Training course at Weedon, the Army Equitation School. The Royal Scots Greys who trained them embodied and preached the values of the old cavalry army of Balaclava. Douglas and another

¹⁴Graham, Keith Douglas, p. 100.

Oxford cadet, David Lockie, derived endless amusement from the lectures. They especially enjoyed one in which the instructor debated the relative merits of the horse and the tank, and concluded that the horse was superior because it was quieter! Nevertheless, although he laughed at the course, he retained a nostalgic affection for the ideals and the attitude to war it promoted. This is apparent in several of his war poems, the most memorable being "Aristocrats". It is also apparent in his keenness to do well. His appearance at this stage was a model of military smartness; in fact, the brilliance of his boots was so impressive that a visiting friend took a photograph of them. He was desperately eager to improve his horsemanship. David Lockie recalls that he spent much of the little leisure time allowed them riding without stirrups to improve his seat. Not surprisingly, his report on leaving Weedon was excellent. His nostalgia for the old type of warfare is also apparent in the change that came over him when he was sent to Sandhurst for the second part of his training. The course there was as technological and modern as the course at Weedon had been unmechanical and backward-looking. Douglas hated every minute of it, and was only to regain his enthusiasm for warfare when he was fighting in the Western Desert. There he found that tank warfare afforded moments of great exhilaration, and opportunities for individualism that suited his heroic outlook on fighting.

Douglas' creative urge was at a very low ebb during his period of training, but he did write one significant poem at Sandhurst. It is "The Prisoner", and it indicates that, despite his lack of productivity, his talent was still developing. The poem is an expression of the changes in his relationship with Yingcheng:

Today, Cheng, I touched your face
 with two fingers, as a gesture of love;
 for I can never prove enough
 by sight or sense your strange grace,

but mothwise my hands return
 to your fair cheek, as luminous
 as a lamp in a paper house,
 and touch, to teach love and learn.

I think a hundred hours are gone
 that so, like gods, we'd occupy.
 But alas, Cheng, I cannot tell why,
 today I touched a mask stretched on the stone

person of death. There was the urge
 to break the bright flesh and emerge
 of the ambitious cruel bone.

15

The movement of the lover's hand over the girl's face traces with grace and economy the whole course of the love affair. What is impressive is how these movements convey a range of emotion; from the wondering tenderness of new love to the violent destructive feelings of the rejected lover, whose ugliness is reinforced by the extraordinarily abrupt syntax of the last two lines. The image of the hand breaking the flesh conveys something in addition to violence. The urge to expose the bone suggests Douglas' need at this stage in his life to examine his love for Yingcheng without any romantic blurring. Yet, despite the depth of feeling these images convey, the poet has attained a degree of detachment through the thoughtful tone established by the phrases "Today, Cheng", "I think" and "But alas, Cheng" and the large number of full-stops and semi-colons.

This combination of emotion and detachment is one that is encountered

¹⁵ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 81.

in Douglas' best war poems, but more significant is the desire to examine his experiences and feelings with ruthless honesty. In "The Prisoner" he does no more than express this desire, but it was to be the foundation of his credo for war poetry, as this extract from a letter he wrote to J.C.Hall on 10th August 1943 shows very clearly:

. . . Incidentally you say I fail as a poet, when you mean I fail as a lyricist. Only someone who is out of touch, by which I mean first hand touch, with what has happened outside England - and from a cultural point of view I wish it had affected English life more - could make that criticism. I am surprised you should still expect me to produce musical verse. A lyric form and a lyric approach will do even less good than a journalese approach to the subjects we have to discuss now. I don't know if you have come across the word Bullshit - it is an army word and signifies humbug and unnecessary detail. It symbolizes what I think must be got rid of - the mass of irrelevancies, of 'attitudes', 'approaches', propaganda, ivory towers, etc. that stands between us and our problems and what we have to do about them. To write on the themes which have been concerning me lately in lyric and abstract form would be immense bullshitting.¹⁶

This desire to be completely honest in his treatment of war in his poetry manifested itself in a never-ending search for the pattern that lay behind the many faces of war. To find it he believed that it was vitally necessary to have as wide an experience of war as possible. He might have had a very 'safe' war had he chosen, for he was seconded to Army Headquarters in Egypt as a camouflage staff officer (in February 1942). There, he almost certainly would have stayed for the duration if he had not run away to join his regiment at El Alamein, for his repeated requests to join a fighting unit were met with blank refusal. Of this his mother has written: "He always loathed the 'safety-first' idea, holding that one might as well be dead as afraid to move. He believed in venturing and having - or losing if need be."¹⁷

¹⁶ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 149.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 15.

Keith Douglas' war poems may be divided into two groups. Those of the first group were written before he had any direct experience of battle, and thus the fighting only influences his way of writing, and is not the subject: all but one of his poems of the second group were written out of his experiences as a tank commander with the Sherwood Rangers.

The first of Douglas' poems to show the impact of war is "Simplify Me When I'm Dead", which he wrote just before his departure for Egypt in July 1941. It was thus written at an identical stage in his life to that of Rupert Brooke when he wrote "The Soldier", and it is interesting to compare the two poets' handling of a similar situation. Douglas was under some strain, as Brooke was, as both poets were going to a foreign land and both were convinced they would die, but whereas Brooke sought relief in romanticizing his situation, Douglas found his solace in examining the process of his death, and the reaction of people to it, with clinical precision. "The Soldier" is a highly emotive poem, but although there is emotion inherent in Douglas' situation, he avoids any exploitation of it by ^{the} cool detached tone he adopts, and by the starkness of his images:

Remember me when I am dead
And simplify me when I'm dead

As the processes of earth
Strip off the colour and the skin
take the brown hair and blue eye

and leave me simpler than at birth,
When hairless I came howling
as the moon entered the cold sky.

Of my skeleton perhaps
so stripped, a learned man will say
'He was of such a type and intelligence' no more

Time's wrong way telescope will show
 a minute man ten years hence
 and by distance simplified. 18

Later, when Douglas had settled into the war, he balanced this extreme detachment with an admission of feeling. Having determinedly checked any urge to be sentimental about his fate in this poem, he was ready to move the focus from himself to the war.

"Negative Information", his first Middle East poem, begins his search for a pattern in the life that war had disrupted. His point of departure is his inability to discover the significance of lines:

. . . discovered in the clouds,
 idly made on paper or by the feet of crowds
 on sand, . . . 19

which he feels must be clear to some other intelligence. As the poem develops the meaning that eludes him in the clouds and desert sand becomes symptomatic of his general inability to understand his recent experiences. While he was on board the troopship bringing him to Egypt he had a mystical experience one moonlit night. He believed that, momentarily, he was in touch with a greater intelligence, gaining expanded awareness and astral projection:

Perhaps you remember the fantastic moon
 in the Atlantic - we desecrated the prisoner laden
 with the thornbush and the lantern -
 the phosphorescence, the ship singing a sea-tune.

How we lost our circumstances that night
 and like spirits attendant on the ship
 now at the mast, now on the waves, might almost dip
 and soar as lightly as our entranced sight. 20

Yet the very lyricism of these lines, the images of moonlight, phosphorescence and the sea, and the transformation of the men into spirits suggest too, that, ecstatic though this experience was, it was a delusion: if they had had contact

¹⁸ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 89.
^{19, 20} Ibid, p. 93.

with a mystical power, its meaning remained closed to them.

In the sixth verse he turns to the war, and his inability to comprehend it:

And in general, the account of many deaths -
Whose portents, which should have undone the sky,
had never come - is now received casually.
You and I are careless of these millions of wraiths

for as often as not we meet
in dreams our own dishevelled ghosts;
And opposite, the modest hosts
of our ambition stare them out. ²¹

Set against his casual acceptance of the account of many deaths is the suggestion of a vast unleashing of cosmic energy symbolizing destruction.

He implies that, had he been less terrestrially bound, he would have responded to these portents of death. The seventh verse hints at the reason he was so out of touch with cosmic sympathy. "We meet our own dishevelled ghosts" suggests that when he tried to contemplate the massive human destruction of war, he was unable to comprehend it, for his mind was flooded with the consciousness of his own death. "The modest hosts / of our ambition stare them out" gives a further reason for his inability to respond to the portents, for he implies that the ambition to live prevents any deep examination of either his own death or that of the multitudes "which should have undone the sky".

The most remarkable poem to be born out of his search for a pattern is "The Sea Bird". The framework of the poem is the image of the dead bird and it has the effect of intensifying the brilliant passage of the live bird and pointing to its underlying sadness:

²¹ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 93.

Walking along beside the beach
 Where the Mediterranean turns in sleep
 under the cliff's demiarch

through a curtain of thought I see
 a dead bird and a live bird
 the dead eyeless, but with a bright eye

the live bird discovered me
 and stepped from a black rock into the air -
 I turn from the dead bird to watch him fly,

electric, brilliant blue,
 beneath he is orange, like flame,
 colours I can't believe are so,

as legendary flowers bloom
 incendiary in tint, so swift he
 searches about the sky for room,

towering like the cliffs of this coast
 with his stiletto wing
 and orange on his breast:

he has consumed and drained
 the colours of the sea
 and the yellow of this tidal ground

till he escapes the eye, or is a ghost
 and in a moment has come down
 crept into the dead bird, ceased to exist.²²

The poem is a powerful visual image of the brevity and beauty of life. For a moment, the bird seems to achieve an immortality, so intense is the power of his flight and brilliance of his colour that "consumed and drained the colours of the sea".

The strength of this poem comes partly from the development of precisely observed natural details into images of heroic splendour: "stepped from the black rock into the air" is a precise description of the way seabirds launch themselves into flight, and it is this naturalness and realism that

²² Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 99.

allow the hyperboles "searches about the sky for room" and "towering like the cliffs of this coast" to achieve their effect of power.

In the same way the brilliance of his colour is gradually built up from: "brilliant blue, / beneath he is orange, like flame," to the superb climax of the penultimate verse.

The syntax of the poem is effectively utilized to elucidate its meaning. The single sentence suggests the passage of the bird, and that it is a passage from death to death is suggested at the beginning by the placing of the image of the dead bird in the same line as the image of the live one. This link is tightened in the next line by the poet's delaying the discovery that the bright eye is that of the live bird. The poem may be read without any reference to the war, but in its context it is unlikely that Douglas felt it to be independent.

The last poem in which he attempts to find the pattern of the whole war is "The Offensive", written in October 1942 just before Douglas went into the battle of El Alamein. He heard the huge barrage which announced the opening stages of the battle twenty miles behind the lines, and it was this that inspired the poem.

What is interesting is that although the poem is remote and romantic at the beginning, it moves gradually toward a philosophical realism. It therefore seems that Douglas was suppressing an urge to treat the battle heroically.

The first verse establishes the sense of tense expectancy before battle, in the image of the night being a cup from which the last moments of peace are running:

Tonight's a moonlit cup
and holds the liquid time
that will run out in flame
in poison we shall sup. 23

Flame, poison and the archaic word "sup" conjure an image of the traditional battle, which is strengthened by the personification of the moon in the following verse into the foreboding lady and the sun as her "martial lord". Time, not the sun, however, is conceived as the controlling force of the battle:

The moon's at home in a passion
of foreboding. Her lord
the martial sun, abroad
this month, will see Time fashion

the action we begin
and Time will cage again
the devils we let run
whether we lose or win: 24

The significance of Time, which is emphasized increasingly in the poem, is here made clear: that whoever wins or loses is, in the end, unimportant, for Time will eventually nullify the effect of victory or of the defeat. The poem ends as it begins with this truth:

And the officious sun goes round
organizing life; and what he's planned
Time comes and eats.

The sun goes round and the stars go round
the nature of eternity is circular
and man must spend his life to find
all our successes and failures are similar. 25

The reduction of the sun at the end from being the symbol of man's martial splendour and activity to the "officious sun" is significant. Suddenly, the sun has become busy and foolish, reminiscent of Donne's "Busy Old Fool". Similarly, man himself is reduced from being a warrior who had the power to unleash devils, to a fool, who has to lose his life to learn that, in the final analysis, there is no difference between victory and defeat.

The poems that Douglas wrote while he was with Army Headquarters in Egypt as Camouflage Staff Officer from February to October 1942, on the whole, are inferior to his early Middle East poems. They lack the keen questing spirit and although he reflects well enough in "Egyptian Sentry", "Christodoulos", and "Egypt", the lassitude, indifference and corruption of the people he encountered in Cairo and Alexandria, they are touristy pieces and make clear that it was essential for his art that he was "mentally and emotionally stimulated by the life of action".²⁶

There are two poems of this period, however, that cannot be so dismissed. One of them, "Syria", was a reworking of a rough draft he had made after visiting the country one weekend in November 1941. He was impressed by its beauty and its women, but this pleasure was tempered by an awareness of a hostility that he felt emanated even from nature:

The grasses, ancient enemies
waiting at the edge of towns
conceal a movement of live stones,
the lizards with hooded eyes
of hostile miraculous age.²⁷

The metaphors "ancient enemies waiting" and "live stones" are skilfully accurate pictorial images of the stiff spiky grass and the strange, patterned texture of the lizard's skin; at the same time they give a sense of underlying menace. "Ancient enemies" combined with "hostile miraculous age" suggests too that this hostility stretches back to prehistoric times and has been handed down to modern Syria in the strange, primordial forms of its landscapes.

In contrast to their menacing outskirts, the towns are white-washed

²⁶ Geoffrey Wagner, "The Poetry of J.C. Hall" in Poetry Quarterly, winter 1951/2, p. 177.

²⁷ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 95.

and serene with trees laden with fruit and girls whose heritage is neither "nefarious" nor the ancient evil of the lizard and the grass, but:

. . . velvet beauty,
handed down to them, gentle ornaments. 28

Yet their beauty and gentleness are not enough to dispel the menace in the first verse and it is this that affects the poet's response to the people:

Here I am a stranger clothed
in the separative glass cloak
of strangeness. The dark eyes, the bright-mouthed
smiles, glance on the glass and break,
falling like fine strange insects 29

The insect metaphor suggests how fragile and uncertain are the people's attempts to make contact with him and the whole lamp/insect image thus implies a strong criticism of the poet who will not respond to their shy overtures. His use of "strange" to describe them as well as himself suggests how complete his alienation is - he has cut himself off from them and he has condemned them for the strangeness in himself.

Nothing of this sense of alienation or mystery is apparent in the poems Douglas wrote in Egypt. The reason was probably that he made a large number of female friends who invited him to their homes. Of these, there was one, Milena, with whom he had a short but exceedingly passionate love affair. She rejected him for his school and university friend, Norman Illett.

The poem, "The Knife", which he wrote immediately she had thrown him over, is uncharacteristically disorganized, the image patterns are mixed and he jumps confusingly from the symbolic to the literal. However, the last two verses, which are the essence of the poem - the ecstasy of their sexual relationship and Milena's sudden baffling indifference to it - indicate

28, 29 Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 95.

that this could have been a fine poem if Douglas had had time to work on it:

Yes, to touch two fingers made us worlds,
 stars, waters, promontories, chaos,
 Swooning in elements without form or time
 Come down through long seas among sea marvels
 embracing like survivors on our islands. 30

The extraordinary power of sexual attraction is conveyed by the wealth of imagery that is set off by the touch of a finger. The images move from the definite confines of "worlds" and "stars" to the swirling vagueness of "chaos" and a mysterious underwater world: in this movement is conveyed the ecstatic loss of identity and reality that takes place in love. This verse recalls Douglas' first love poem to Yingcheng, but the sea imagery is more synthesized and avoids the over-literary quality that marred the earlier poem. The revelation of deep passion adds a sadness to the last verse, for it is in striking contrast to the woman's absence of feeling. "Now no shadow of it flickers in your hand" suggests how complete her indifference is. This impression is strengthened by her eyes and the impersonal nature of the last three images:

your eyes look down on banal streets.
 If I talk to you I might be a bird
 with a message, a dead man, a photograph. 31

That her eyes should have reduced the infinite variety of the streets to the banal is perhaps the strongest suggestion that no magic of love remains for her.

The shock of being jilted for a second time was one of the reasons why Douglas defected from his office job in Cairo to his regiment, which was embroiled in the Battle of El Alamein. The first poem he wrote after

two weeks of fighting was "Cairo Jag". Both the effect of the broken affair and the first experience of desert fighting are discernible in the poem. His view of Cairo is soured, and in his description of the wreckage after battle, there is a new authority. The elaborate imagery of "The Offensive" is gone, replaced by the hard, realistic detail that comes from direct observation. The subject of the first verse is three women Douglas knew in Cairo - a Syrian, a Turk and a Parisian - but from the beginning they are divested of any glamour their nationalities might have lent them by the crude army term for sex, and by the fact that getting drunk is considered as a viable alternative to their favours:

Shall I get drunk or cut myself a piece of cake,
 a pasty Syrian with a few words of English
 or the Turk who says she is a princess - she dances
 apparently by levitation? Or Marcelle, Parisienne
 always preoccupied with her dull dead lover:
 She has all the photographs and his letters
 tied in a bundle and stamped Décédé in mauve ink.
 All this takes place in a stink of jasmin.³²

The pattern of the first verse is repeated in the second. There is the same surface variety in the streets of Cairo as there was between the three women, but the underlying core is the wearisome sameness. The legless beggars, the "women offering their children brown-paper breasts" and all the people who do nothing but sleep are all "rags afflicted by fatalism and hashish".

In the second half of the stanza Douglas links the people in the street with the three women through Marcelle. She seemed the most different, but in a trice she can discard her tragic air and behave exactly as everybody else behaves; she:

³² Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 115.

. . . suddenly shrieks in Arabic about the fare
with the cabman, links herself so
with the somnambulists and legless beggars:
it is all one, all as you have heard.

But by a day's travelling you reach a new world
the vegetation is of iron
dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery
the metal brambles have no flowers or berries
and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine
the dead themselves, their boots, and possessions
clinging to the ground, a man with no head
has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli. ³³

The variety of Cairo could be reduced to an essential sameness,
but not the battlefield. It offers sights which can be clearly imagined,
but which express an irreducible strangeness. The incongruity of the
plant metaphor in this context has the effect of emphasizing this strangeness.
In particular, the comfortably familiar image of garden manure contrasts
weirdly with the detritus of the battlefield - shattered mortals intermingled
with their possessions. Douglas was deeply disturbed by the sight
of the dead at El Alamein, for immediately after completing "Cairo Jag"
he wrote "Dead Men", a poem in which he tries to work out for himself
an attitude that would allow him to comprehend them clear-sightedly. The
problem of how to regard the dead is common to every combatant soldier.
Charles Hamilton Sorley had given his hard unsentimental solution in
his untitled sonnet:

Say only this, 'They are dead'. ³⁴

Douglas comes to essentially the same conclusion.

³³ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 115.

³⁴ C.H.Sorley, English Poetry of World War I, p. 32.

Again, the opening of "Dead Men" is set in Cairo, but this time Cairo is a place of moonlight and romance, peopled by lovers, the girls in "white dresses glimmer like moths", and the smell of jasmin now a scent that heightens romance.

The transition from the dreamlike first verse to the reality of the dead abandoned in the desert is subtly effected by Douglas' referring to them first as sleepers, and then by breaking this image that harmonizes with the first verse by his use of intrusive rhymes and an uneven rhythm:

. . . Sleepers who are condemned or reprieved
and those whom their ambitions have deceived;
the dead men whom the wind
powders till they are like dolls: . . . 35

"Like dolls" is a peculiarly effective simile that conveys the uniformity of colour that the fine sand has brought to the dead, their stiff immobility and their absence of life. They are now unlike the living, and this prepares for their ultimate fate:

. . . in their shallow graves the wild dog
discovered and exhumed a face or a leg
for food: the human virtue round them
is a vapour tasteless to a dog's chops. 36

The precise, emotionless description of the consumption of the dead is in itself a salve for the mind, since it prevents any horrified reaction. The dog's indiscriminate appetite is made to comment on the attitude of the living men in the following verse:

You would not know now the mind's flame is gone
more than the dog knows: you would forget
but that you see your own mind burning yet. 37

That men complicate the simple fact of death by still seeing the dead as human beings is emphasized by the link between the extinguished flame of the dead and the "burning" minds of the living.

In the fifth verse the precise cool tone takes on a didactic note, as he drives home his conclusion:

Then leave the dead in the earth, an organism
not capable of resurrection, like mines,
less durable than the metal of a gun,
a casual meal for a dog, nothing but the bone
so soon. But tonight no lovers see the lines
of the moon's face as the lines of cynicism.³⁸

The comparison of the dead bodies to the weapons of war emphasizes their fragility and uselessness. They are fit for nothing but to be the "casual meal for a dog". The abrupt return to the lovers seems at first surprising, but it is deliberate, since the poet wishes to point to an alternate way of accepting death. He makes this alternative clear in the last verse, but the last two lines, that show the lover's inability to see the moon as anything but a "tacit encouragement" to love, and thus are oblivious of the cynical reality that the moon illumines, make this conclusion almost a tautology:

And the wise man is the lover
who in his planetary love resolves
without the traction of reason or time's control
and the wise dog finding meat in a hole
is a philosopher. The prudent mind resolves
on the lover's or the dog's attitude forever.³⁹

The strong didactic element in "Dead Men", and the over-stressing of the point that death must be faced without sentimentality indicate that

^{38, 39} Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 116 - 117.

Douglas was writing under acute strain, and that he desperately needed to find a satisfactory solution to his own fear of death. Apparently, "Dead Men" did strengthen him, for, two months later (November 1942), he was able to write on the shattered town of Mersa Matruh with considerably more poise. There is no direct mention of the inhabitants, but the sadness and compassion that he expresses for the gutted buildings extend to those who are either dead or scattered.

The poem makes its effect through the contrast between the "skeletal" calm of the town and the human drama implied by the devastated buildings:

This blue half circle of sea
 moving transparently
 on sand as pale as salt
 was Cleopatra's hotel:

here is a guest house built
 and broken utterly since.
 An amorous modern prince
 lived in this scoured shell.

Now from the skeletal town
 the cherry-skinned soldiers stroll down
 to undress to idle on the white beach.
 Up there the immensely long road goes by

to Tripoli: the wind and dust reach
 the secrets of the whole
 poor town whose masks would still
 deceive a passer-by; . . . 40

The poignancy of the scene is caught in the contrast between the reminder of the lusty life that the buildings once contained and the absence of life in the stark remains. The temporary occupants concentrate on living, and extracting only what is left in the little town for the living

⁴⁰ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 118.

to enjoy. This "sensible" indifference to the heartbreak of war was the attitude Douglas reached at the end of "Dead Men", but now he has been able to advance beyond the protective shield of indifference. He avoids any hint of emotional indulgence by balancing a literal description of the town with the words that convey his feeling. After the penultimate verse, where he shows his compassion and sadness, he is careful to offset the emotion with the pragmatic fish:

faces with sightless doors
for eyes, with cracks like tears
oozing at the corners. A dead tank alone
leans where the gossips stood.

I see my feet like stones
underwater. The logical little fish
converge and nip the flesh
imagining I am one of the dead. 41

The last verse tips the balance in the direction of "Dead Men" - that the reality is death, not the passerby's view, nor even the soldiers' who regarded Mersa merely as a place from which they could bathe.

Douglas' concern not to be sentimental or over-emotional about war was expressed very strongly in a simple, satirical poem entitled "Gallantry". He explained its origin in a letter he wrote to a friend, Olga, who lived in Tel Aviv:

I was discussing Rupert Brooke with someone the other day, who has a book which a very sentimental hospital sister has lent him. I wrote a poem to slip into the book when he gives it back (unsigned of course) which I hope will shock her sentimentality a bit. 42

41 Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 118.

42 Graham, Keith Douglas, p. 119.

The poem is an answer to the notion of heroism that Brooke's war sonnets convey - that merely to die in war is an heroic act.

Despite the apparent casualness of its conception, the poem is carefully constructed, and is linked by the pattern of sound. The colonel's voice making a joke through the microphone becomes through no fault of his, the voice of doom, and instead of the laughter of the men, there is the hideous laughter of the bullets and shells.

Set in this satirical framework are three "heroes", who die before they hear the punchline of the joke. Without making any reference to the manner in which they died, Douglas effectively undermines their heroism with three brief biographical details:

Into the ears of the doomed boy, the fool
whose perfectly mannered flesh fell
in opening the door for a shell
as he had learnt to do at school.

Conrad luckily survived the winter:
he wrote a letter to welcome
the suspicious spring; only his silken
intentions severed with a single splinter

Was George fond of little boys?
we always suspected it,
but who will say: since George was hit
we never mention our surmise. 43

In another poem, "The Trumpet", Douglas considered the accepted notions of heroism at a far deeper level. The poem is one of Douglas' most interesting achievements since, through his utilization of its form combined with auditory images, he managed to convey powerfully the sounds of the trumpet, and through this to engender an understanding of the emotive responses of men to it.

⁴³ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 120.

The tone of the opening verse is stirring and joyful. This is achieved through the oratorical preamble, the fact that the verse is a rhetorical question, and the gaiety and excitement suggested by "laughter", "shout" and "crying that war is sweet". This effect is reinforced by the gradual lengthening of line that suggests the grand, swelling note of the trumpet.

Since the ascendancy of the star Arcturus was regarded in Ancient Greece as the time for gathering grapes and bringing the cattle down from their upland pastures, the phrase "after Arcturus" suggests the sound of the trumpet ringing out over the vineyards and mountains of Greece, and this image adds to the attraction of its cry:

O how after Arcturus
 have you and your companions
 heard the laughter and the distant shout
 of this long tube a man sets to his mouth
 crying that war is sweet, and the men you
 see asleep after fighting will fight in the day before us? 44

In the second verse, the cry of the trumpet changes from the triumphal martial sound suggested by the image of the warriors in arrogant battle array:

Since with manual skill
 men dressed to kill in purple 45

to the deep sad note that announced the death of Hector, that was the beginning of the end for Troy. Again, this meaning is reinforced by the length of the lines, for the shortness of the last line suggests the moving, falling note of the trumpet that is heard in "The Last Post":

44, 45 Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 126.

. . . with how many strange tongues
cried the trumpet, that cried once
for the death of Hector from Troy steeple
that cried when a hundred hopes fell. 46

"Strange tongues" and the last line of this verse widen the context of this poem, for they suggest that these sounds of the trumpet have been heard throughout history, and that Troy's fall was only one of a hundred such disasters.

In the third verse Douglas begins to relate the significance of the trumpet to his situation:

Tonight we heard it
who for weeks have only listened
to the howls of inhuman voices.
But, as the apprehensive ear rejoiced
breathing the notes in, the sky glistened
with a flight of bullets. . . 47

"Howls of inhuman voices" recalls the weird howls of the wild dogs in the desert and this contrasts with the sound of the trumpet and intensifies the poignant beauty of its sound in the night air. The delicate if inconsistent image "apprehensive ear rejoiced breathing the notes in" suggests the men's tremulous delight in the sound. Yet, as in the second verse, when "dressed to kill in purple" lent a menacing undertone to the triumphal sound, the same effect is created in this verse by the flight of bullets. This marks the beginning of the battle and of an experience that (as Douglas makes clear in the last verse) the sound of the trumpet cannot encompass.

In this context, the strong build-up of run-on lines to the musical term, "crescendo", the marked use of rhyme and a regular rhythmic pattern all suggest a powerful music, but, as the first and last line clearly

46, 47 Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 126.

establish, it is a music that has no relation to the cry of the trumpet:

. . . We must be up early
 tomorrow to forget the cry and the crier
 as we forgot the conversation
 of our friends killed last month, last week
 and hear, crouching, the air shriek
 the crescendo, expectancy to elation
 violently arriving. The trumpet is a liar.⁴⁸

The nature of this music, which is the music of modern warfare, is expressed in "shriek" and "expectancy to elation violently arriving". The words sum up the wild violence of the sound of bombardment, the moments of unbearable tension before attack, and the sudden activity and feeling of elation that comes with the attack. Neither the stirring sweetness of the trumpet's cry nor its moving sadness captures any shade of this moment. The trumpet is a liar because war is neither glorious nor tragic.

Only a poet who had himself felt the intense attraction of the old heroic code could have written this poem, and one entitled "Aristocrats", that is the celebration of the heroism of the Sherwood Rangers' colonel and lieutenant-colonel, who were both killed in Tunisia in 1943. Both men had county backgrounds and were steeped in the cavalry traditions of the past. They bitterly regretted the change in the regiment (in 1940) from a cavalry to a mechanized force and they continued to maintain a nonchalant, sporting attitude to the war. In battle, they communicated with each other and the rest of the regiment in either cricketing or hunting terms, and regarded everybody who did not share their "huntin' and fishin'" background with a feudal benevolence. Colonel Kellet died characteristically. While under heavy fire, he was standing up in the turret of his tank shaving

⁴⁸ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 126.

when he was hit by a bullet. Lieutenant-Colonel Player is best summed up in a note that Douglas attached to the manuscript of "Aristocrats":

Lt-Col. J O Player, killed in Tunisia, Enfidaville, February 1943, left £ 3, 000 to the Beaufort Hunt and directed that the incumbent of the living should be a "man who approves of hunting, shooting and all manly sports, which are the backbone of the nation".⁴⁹

According to the surviving members of the Sherwood Rangers, the first verse is cunning portrait of Lieutenant-Colonel Player, and it is one that he himself would probably have been flattered by, since he passionately adored horses:

The noble horse with courage in his eye
clean in the bone, looks up at a shellburst:
Away fly the images of the shires
but he puts the pipe back in his mouth.⁵⁰

The comparison of Player to an English Thoroughbred is humorously apt, since he abundantly shared its air of fine breeding, courage and grace. The nature of his heroism is superbly caught in the gesture of putting his pipe back in his mouth. The shell burst is enough to drive away his daydreams of hunting, but not enough to disturb his habitual nonchalance.

The hero of the second verse shows the extremities of this type of nonchalance:

Peter was unfortunately killed by an 88:
It took his leg away, he died in the ambulance.
I saw him crawling in the sand; he said
It's most unfair, they've shot my foot off.⁵¹

The factual account of the man's death and wounds in the first three lines gives emphasis to the blend of nonchalance and fortitude that is

⁴⁹

Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 154.

^{50, 51}

Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 124.

expressed in the euphemistic understatement of the man's words.

Yet stupid though their heroism is, this part of the poem makes clear the virtue that lies in their determination not to be contaminated by war but to remain supremely themselves whatever the circumstances.

In the third verse Douglas sums up his own reaction to their heroism in the ambivalent "and not weep" which expresses both his exasperation and his pity:

How can I live amongst this gentle
obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?
Unicorns, almost
for they are falling into two legends
in which their stupidity and chivalry
are celebrated. Each, fool and hero, will be an
immortal.⁵²

"Celebrated" and "immortal" lead the poem into the final verse, where Douglas transforms the sporting clichés of their radio code into a language of true elegy:

The plains were their cricket pitch
and in the mountains the tremendous drop fences
brought down some of the runners. Here then
under the stones and earth they dispose themselves,
I think with their famous unconcern.
It is not gunfire I hear but a hunting horn.⁵³

In the manner of Spender's "I think continually of those who were truly great", Douglas makes use of elevated nature images "plains" and "mountains" to convey their simplicity and their heroism. In "dispose themselves" he blends both the aristocratic grace of their disposition and the disposal of their bodies, and by returning to the irony and humour of the earlier part of the poem in the penultimate line he makes way for the

^{52, 53} Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 124.

final superb gesture which, as Sir John Waller has remarked, has
 "an echo of Roncesvalles".⁵⁴

The comparison and understanding that Douglas showed in "Aristocrats"
 is paralleled in another poem he wrote in Tunisia, "Enfidaville". He
 visited the town after it had been devastated and deserted by its inhabitants.
 His sympathy is manifest in the simile of the first line, which expresses
 the grace and gentleness of the images of the Virgin and St. Theresa in the
 ruined church:

In the church fallen like dancers
 lie the Virgin and St. Thérèse
 on little pillows of dust.
 The detonations of the last few days
 tore down the ornamental plasters
 shivered the hands of Christ.⁵⁵

The simplicity of language which continues throughout the poem,
 accentuates the tenderness lying behind the description of the simulacra
 and permits a whole-hearted compassionate response to the scene.

"Shivered the hands of Christ" suggests both the shattered image and the
 outraged town and this underlines the feeling of desolation in the second
 verse:

The men and women who moved like candles
 in and out of the houses and the streets
 are all gone. The white houses are bare
 black cages. No one is left to greet
 the ghosts tugging at doorhandles
 opening doors that are not there.⁵⁶

The series of bleak images contrasts sharply with the memory of the
 warmth and life of the town conveyed in the simile "like candles". This

⁵⁴ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 154.

^{55, 56} Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 123.

image suggests the simplicity and gentle humanity of the people, and the impression is strengthened by the childlike quality of the words "are all gone". The poet's personification of the sunlight in the third verse allows a movement towards a compassion for people that he had never before expressed so openly. For this sunlight "peering about among the wreckage" and passing:

. . . Some corners as though with averted head
not looking at the pain this town holds,⁵⁷

anticipates the return of the people to Enfidaville:

But already they are coming back; to search
like ants, poking in the débris, finding in it
a bed or a piano and carrying it out.
Who would not love them at this minute?
I seem again to meet
The blue eyes of the images in the church.⁵⁸

The bravery and the pathos of the first tentative moves to restore the shattered pattern of their lives are summed up in his question and in his reference to the images in the church.

In Douglas' finest war poem, "Vergissmeinnicht", there is a delicate balance between the sort of compassion he expresses in "Enfidaville" and the combatant soldiers' casual irony and satisfaction in the death of an enemy gunner who had hit their tank. The poem opens with Douglas and his tank crew back on the scene of battle:

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone,
returning over the nightmare ground
we found the place again, and found
the soldier sprawling in the sun.⁵⁹

"Nightmare" recalls the horror and death of the battle, which has

57, 58. Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 123.

59 Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 121.

now assumed an air of unreality. Reinforcing this image of the battle is a subtle use of concealed rhyme and repetition to suggest the lumbering motion of the tank moving relentlessly on. This recollection of the battle shatters the momentary deception in the fourth line, that the German soldier is sunbathing, but the moment of deception brings horror to the discovery.

The factual style of the first verse is maintained for the remainder of his account of the scene, and this suggests the casual acceptance of the professional soldier. As "nightmare" indicates, it is only in his recollection of the battle that there is any hint of emotion. "Like a demon" conveys the force and ferocity of the shell as well as a faint hint of swaggering excitement:

. . . As we came on
that day, he hit my tank with one
like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil
the dishonoured picture of his girl
who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeинicht
in a copybook gothic script. 60

"Look" suggests the sudden curiosity of the soldiers, and it also has the effect of directing the reader's attention to the photograph and to the fact that it and the carefully written message point to a world outside war. It is a world that bravely denies the soldier's immunity to feeling, but, as the sadness and pathos inherent in the irony of "Vergissmeинicht" suggests, it is one that is brutally harmed by war.

The cool professionalism of the soldiers' attitude and their "football match" reactions to the scene and the drama it recalls culminate in their

⁶⁰ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 121.

response to the corpse:

We see him, almost with content
 abased, and seeming to have paid
 and mocked at by his own equipment
 that's hard and good when he's decayed.⁶¹

The surface world of the soldiers allows no deeper emotion than satisfaction that the gunner who struck them is so thoroughly repaid. In the following verse Douglas comments on the limitations of this attitude by revealing the humanity of the girl's reaction:

But she would weep to see today
 how on his skin the swart flies move;
 the dust upon the paper eye
 and the burst stomach like a cave.⁶²

The girl's reaction is given an extraordinary dignity and truth by the understatement "she would weep" and by Douglas' preventing the description of the soldier from becoming repellent by the deliberate formality of the syntax, his choice of a literary adjective, "swart" instead of "black" and by the objective precision of his description.

However, the holding true to the visual facts is enough to suggest that this is also the observation of the soldiers, and this fusion of the two worlds allows a final sensitive comprehension of the scene:

For here the lover and killer are mingled
 who had one body and one heart.
 And death who had the soldier singled
 has done the lover mortal hurt.⁶³

With perfect control Douglas collects the significance of the whole experience: that war is a violator and a destroyer of man and of the humane laws that should govern his existence,

61, 62, 63

Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 121.

"Vergissmeinicht" is evidence of how far Douglas had travelled from "Dead Men" and his denial of feeling for the dead. As he himself had realised, the experience of combat had been of inestimable benefit to his art, for from it had come a maturity of feeling and a new fearlessness. This fearlessness is revealed in his acknowledgement of his compassionate feelings in "Enfidaville" and "Vergissmeinicht" and in his critical exposure of the soldiers' immunity to feeling. In another poem of this period, "How to Kill", he courageously faced one of the most disturbing truths that war exposes; that many men, even civilised men like himself, become fascinated by killing. The terrible ease with which this corruption takes place is made clear in the first verse in an implied analogy between a child tossing a ball and a man tossing a hand grenade. The evil fascination of the weapon of death that turns the man from an innocent child to an inhuman killer is brilliantly effected in these lines:

The ball fell in my hand, it sang
 in the closed fist: Open, Open
Behold a gift designed to kill. 64

The fantasy language of the child's magic story has been transformed into a whisper of evil by the force of the word "kill".

In the second verse, the transformation is complete, and the killer in the role of a sniper watches his victim through the telescopic sights of his rifle:

Now in my dial of glass appears
 The soldier who is going to die
 He smiles, and moves about in ways
 his mother knows, habits of his.
 The wires touch his face: I cry
 NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears . . . 65

The careful description of the movement of the victim into the centre of the telescopic sights, which culminates in the violence of "NOW", reveals the tense excitement of the waiting sniper and the moment of wild elation as he squeezes the trigger. The horror of this elation is, however, topped by the effect of the details of the victim's movements, which, as well as revealing his humanity and therefore the sadness of his untimely destruction, assert the sensuous force of the killer's imagination. This is stressed in the following verse where the extent of the killer's depravity is made clear:

. . . Death like a familiar, hears
 and look, has made a man of dust
 of a man of flesh. This sorcery
 I do. Being damned, I am amused
 to see the centre of love diffused
 and the waves of love travel into vacancy.
 How easy it is to make a ghost. 66

The ease of killing and the enormity of what he does are the heart of the killer's fascination. This is suggested by the effortless way in which the second verse slips into the third, and by the structure of the antithesis in the first two lines. The repetition of "a man of" suggests the extraordinary nearness of life and death, while the gulf between dust and flesh emphasizes the greatness of this transformation.

As the details of the victim's movements suggested, the edge to the killer's enjoyment is lent by his knowledge that he is destroying someone who is loved.

The horror of this depravity is heightened by the way in which Douglas has suggested that the killer's reactions are insane. "And look" and "amused" suggest a total suspension of normal human feeling, that is

⁶⁶ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 122.

accentuated by the jolliness of the rhyming couplet at the centre of the verse. Added to this is the direct revelation of his fantasy world:

. . . This sorcery
I do. . . 67

In the last verse the lucid metaphysical language removes all doubt that the man is not fully aware of what he is doing:

The weightless mosquito touches
her tiny shadow on the stone,
and with how like, how infinite
a lightness, man and shadow meet.
They fuse. A shadow is a man
when the mosquito death approaches. 68

In what is believed to be the last poem he wrote in the Middle East, Douglas reveals the cost to himself of this new widened vision. The poem, "Landscape with Figures" consists of three sections:

The first section opens with a view of the battlefield that recalls Owen's terrible vision in "The Show". Both poets look down from a great height on a scene that reveals the agony and futility of war. The scene is so devoid of humanity that neither poet expresses it in human terms, but in place of Owen's writhing worms, Douglas has used beetles to represent the machines of war:

Perched on a great fall of air
a pilot or an angel looking down
on some eccentric chart, the plain
dotted with the useless furniture
discerns crouching on the sand vehicles
squashed dead or still entire, stunned
like beetles: scattered wing cases and
legs, heads, show when the haze settles. 68

67, 68 Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 122.

69 Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 127 - 128.

In the second half of the section Douglas contrasts his naturalistic approach with that of an emotional observer, who despite a close examination of the detritus of battle, finds it glorious and beautiful:

But you who like Thomas come
to poke fingers in the wounds
find monuments, and metal posies:
on each disordered tomb
the steel is torn into fronds
by the lunatic explosive.
70

The incongruity of "monuments" and "metal posies" reveals the dishonesty of this type of poetry, and this effect is reinforced by the mocking parody of it summed up in the grotesque image of the steel "torn into fronds".

In the second section Douglas changes his perspective from a distant view of landscape to a close involvement with scenery and figures as seen on a stage. At Oxford he had described poetry as "like a man, whom thinking you know all his movements and appearance, you will presently come upon in such a posture that for a moment you can hardly believe it a position of the limbs you know". This section reveals how deeply rooted this analogy was; for no other poet has captured more graphically the contorted positions of men violently killed:

On scrub and sand the dead men wriggle
in their dowdy clothes. They are mimes
who express silence and futile aims
enacting this prone and motionless struggle
at a queer angle to the scenery
crawling on the boards of the stage like walls,
deaf to the one who opens his mouth and calls
silently. The décor is terrible tracery
of iron. The eye and mouth of each figure
bear the cosmetic blood and hectic
colours death has the only list of.
71

He has achieved this extraordinary pictorial representation of death by combining a series of kinetic images - "wriggle", "enacting this . . . struggle" and "crawling", that suggest desperate effort and abasement - with the images of the stage, that make clear that this movement is a delusion and that the struggle the dead soldiers are enacting is peculiarly different from life. This difference is suggested by his stress on the "queer angle to the scenery". The use of angled scenery to stress unreality is a feature of "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari", a film which leaves haunting memories. Douglas was an avid film-goer and he would almost certainly have seen and been affected by this surrealistic work. In the poem, the dead men are unlike the living because they play their part "prone and motionless" and even when their crawling suggests an upward striving it is enacted flat on the ground. The significance of their play is expressed directly in the third line and in the last terrible image of the man who calls futilely and silently.

The play metaphor also gives visual clarity to the colour of the dead men's faces and stresses how unrelated these colours are to the colours of life; while the ghastly hues of decomposing flesh contrast with the romantic paleness of the traditional image of the dead warrior.

In the last three lines Douglas relates himself to this tableau:

A yard more, and my little finger
 could trace the maquillage of these stony actors;
 I am the figure writhing on the backcloth. ⁷²

The yard expresses how small and yet how infinite is the distance between himself and the dead and therefore, why he can feel the agony

⁷² Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 127 - 128

of the drama of death but not be part of it. It is the anguish expressed in the last line that Douglas takes up in the final section. In extending the play metaphor he reveals the multitude of other roles that the poet plays in war:

I am the figure burning in hell
 and the figure of the grave priest
 observing everyone who passed
 and that of the lover. I am all
 the aimless pilgrims, the pedants and courtiers:
 more easily you believe me a pioneer
 and a murdering villain without fear
 without remorse hacking at the throat. Yes,
 I am all these and I am the craven,
 the remorseful, the distressed
 penitent:⁷³

The multiplicity of roles encompasses the whole human condition, and the play metaphor thus expresses the poet's awareness of the enormously exacting nature of his task. Above all, he must understand man's suffering and make it part of himself. This is made clear by the image of the first line, whose stressed position and dramatic intensity make it dominate all the others. In the sixth line, the introduction of the view of an outsider who recognizes the speaker most easily as a brutal soldier also has the effect of emphasising this role and suggests why the poet feels an overwhelming burden of guilt expressed in the build-up of adjectives qualifying "penitent". In the last five lines of the poem Douglas inverts Plato's concept of the state as being man writ large, and describes the sensitive poet as the world writ small:

. . . not passing from life to life
 but all these angels and devils are driven
 into my mind like beasts. I am possessed,
 the house whose wall contains the dark strife
 the arguments of hell with heaven.⁷⁴

⁷³ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 127 - 128

⁷⁴ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p.

The incantatory style of this final section of the poem is entirely new in Douglas and it suggests a painful and intense recognition of the grandeur and responsibility of his duty as a poet.

The poem is a fitting conclusion to the study of Keith Douglas' war poetry, for it is a dramatic revelation of the whole course of his development. The progressive intensity of the three sections - from the distant, almost objective view of the first to the deeply personal, anguished view of the last - sums up the growth of his maturity that the experience of battle had brought about. It was a growth that in many ways was akin to Wilfred Owen's. On his arrival in France, Owen described the exhausted, beaten men he saw at the Étaples transit camp as "expressionless lumps". A year later he was to reflect on the same faces. "It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's. It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them".⁷⁵ Douglas too went into war with Owen's keen, but objective curiosity and like him gained greatly in eloquence and honesty from the experience. At the end of his letter to J C Hall (part of which was quoted earlier) Douglas had written:

To be sentimental and emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others: To trust anyone or to admit any hope of a better world is criminally foolish, as foolish as it is to stop working for it. It sounds silly to say work without hope, but it can be done; it's only a form of insurance; it doesn't mean work hopelessly. ⁷⁶

Douglas did not write sentimentally or emotionally in the sense that he he did not allow sentiment or emotion to cloud his very clear view of what

⁷⁵Wilfred Owen, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. C Day Lewis (London) p. 173.

⁷⁶Keith Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 150.

he saw, but towards the end, he learnt that to be true to himself and to his poetry he had to express the love, compassion and anguish inherent in his vision of war. As he foresaw, his deepened maturity and insight did not bring any hope of a better world, but in his last war poems he proved beyond doubt that he had learnt to understand the human struggle and how the essential qualities of man are revealed unfalsified by the cataclysmic experience of war.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this study of twentieth century English war poetry is on the way poets felt and wrote about war after they had rejected the traditional heroic mode of earlier war poets.

The survey of English war poetry from the ninth century to the beginning of the twentieth reveals that the heroic, aristocratic presentation of war had its origins in "Beowulf" and the Anglo-Saxon war poems, and in the Romances of the Middle Ages. In these periods, to treat war heroically was inevitable, for society was dominated by aristocrats who held their position through their ability to fight and to protect the weak. Heroic martial literature was therefore a natural expression of these societies. When the military function of the aristocrat declined towards the end of the Middle Ages, the Romances gradually disappeared, but the chivalric values they had cherished persisted, and continued to be an inspiration to many of the nobility on the battlefield, as well as to the poets and dramatists of the Tudor period. Shakespeare's Henry V is the embodiment of chivalry, but during the same period there were more atavistic stage heroes - such as Tamburlaine, Coriolanus and Titus Andronicus - in the tradition of classical heroic literature that had come to England during the Renaissance.

For a large number of reasons, the most important being the heroic spirit of the age itself, the reign of Elizabeth I represents the zenith of English heroic war poetry

The martial dramas and poems of this period have a great vitality, and present war with a completeness that is found neither in the Romances nor in the war poetry in the ages that followed. Indeed, English war poetry from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the First World War degenerated, primarily because it was written by poets who had no experience of war and who wrote to please an equally ignorant public. Their ignorance about wars and the men who fought them had several main causes: the British army had become professional from the end of the seventeenth century; all Britain's wars had been fought overseas; and at least half the troops who had fought under the British flag were foreigners. Ignorance was coupled with a few cherished beliefs: that war was a splendid contest and trial of British manhood; that British troops were the best in the world; that they conducted themselves heroically at all times - never retreating, but standing until the last man was cut down; and that they were led by gallant generals. Poets showed occasional deviations from these attitudes: - for example, Tennyson's concession that Lord Raglan had blundered over the Charge of the Light Brigade, or Byron's revelation of the ugliness of war and the suffering it involved - but on the whole they did little to disturb the heroic image. In addition to having what amounts to a set formula for presenting the subject matter, poets had implemented a system of high diction to express it. Paul Fussell has set out this "raised", essentially feudal language in a table of equivalents in "The Great War and Modern Memory". The essence of this is

quoted here, as it sums up how effete and romantic the heroic tradition had become by the beginning of the First World War:

A friend is a	comrade	
The enemy is	the foe or the host	
Danger is	peril	
To conquer is	to vanquish	
To attack is	to assail	
The dead on the battlefield are	the fallen	
The front is	the field	
Obedient soldiers are	the brave	
To show cowardice is to	swerve	etc. ¹

It is immensely to the credit of Charles Hamilton Sorley and Isaac Rosenberg that they sensed at the beginning of the First World War that this diction was totally unsuitable for expressing the nature of the conflict Britain had entered. Certainly, the critics did not. As late as 1916, the literary critic of "The Spectator" was writing of a soldier poet's "slim volume" of verse:

Altogether, this is a worthy record of a gallant soldier, whose heroic end crowned and fulfilled the ideals expressed in his verse.²

and of Herbert Asquith's "Volunteer":

All lovers of good verse joined to high courage,
the joy of battle, and the fighting spirit in its
happiest and most exalted mood will delight in
Mr. Herbert Asquith's "The Volunteer".³

One can see why "The Volunteer" met with such approval, for its rhetoric and sentiments are precisely in accordance with the critic's own:

And now those waiting dreams are satisfied;
From twilight to the halls of dawn he went;
His lance is broken; but he lies content
With that high hour, in which he lived and died.

¹Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, (New York & London 1975) p. 21

²"The Spectator", 27 May 1916.

³"The Spectator", 1 January 1916.

And falling thus, he wants no recompense,
 Who found his battle in the last resort;
 Nor needs he any hearse to bear him hence,
 Who goes to join the men of Agincourt.⁴

Most poets needed no more than a few days on the Western Front for "The Volunteer" and like verse to become a mockery, so far removed was the experience it hallows from the actual experience in a war of attrition conducted on a vast scale between modern industrial empires. A brief two weeks after his arrival in France, Wilfred Owen, who had written on his way up to the front: "There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France and I am in perfect spirits"⁵, was to point out the terrible irony of traditional heroic war poetry:

Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language . . .
 everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion
 of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the
 dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable
 sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most
 glorious.⁶

But the achievement of Owen and other major trench poets was not only that they revealed the horrors that Owen describes here; it was that, in a war which by 1916 seemed to have passed out of all human control, they in their human compassion spoke with such eloquence and understanding for the victims alive and dead, that they wrought a change in the sensibility of their generation and in the generations that followed. The dominant voice of twentieth century English war poetry is anti-heroic and anti-war, and it is so

⁴Herbert Asquith, Georgian Poetry 1916-1917, ed. E. Marsh (London 1917) p. 181.

⁵Wilfred Owen, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. C. Day Lewis (London 1963) from: Memoir by Edmund Blunden, p. 155.

⁶Wilfred Owen, Collected Poems, p. 22.

because the poets of the First World War spoke with such passion and conviction. Yet Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg did more than this. Amidst the vast confusion of war they were able, through the intense exploration of their own narrow area of experience, to glimpse, at times, the pattern of the whole war. It is at these moments that their poetry has a tragic grandeur, but it is at these moments too, that the differences in their visions are revealed. Owen's view of the war was a bleak and terrible one, mitigated only by the love that is born out of shared suffering:

I, too, saw God through mud -
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.⁷

Rosenberg's vision is more akin to the old heroic poets', for his imagination was fired by the vast unleashing of energy that war entails, and he saw a tragic beauty in man's hopeless opposition of these forces, just as the Ancient Greeks found delight in the grand, but often doomed aspirations of their heroes.

Owen and Rosenberg, then, stand out from their contemporaries because they found new modes of beauty in war to replace the traditional values, of honour, and glory in battle, that their predecessors had enshrined in their poetry. They are justly considered to be the two major English war poets of this century, for, in the intrinsic excellence of their verse, in their ability to go beyond their immediate situation, and in their finding new positives in war, they set a standard for the war poets who followed them.

⁷Wilfred Owen, Collected Poems, p. 39.

Very few English poets of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War approached the excellence of Owen and Rosenberg. F.T. Prince came near to their cosmic and tragic vision in "Soldiers Bathing", but did not sustain it beyond this single poem; Henry Reed gave promise of a brilliant new satirical insight in "Naming of Parts", yet his later poems show nothing of his earlier wit and grace; in "Before the Storming of Huesca", John Cornford spoke movingly and sensitively for all the soldiers of the Spanish Civil War, when he revealed the loneliness and human effort involved in fighting for the Republican cause; but he was killed before his poetry could do more than give promise of a considerable talent.

In the light of the fragmentary achievement of these poets, what Keith Douglas accomplished appears very great. His collection of war poems has an evenness of standard, that comes from the mastery of his craft and his finding constant inspiration in his subject matter. His attitude to war has nothing of the negativism or pacifism of his contemporaries. At the beginning it was heroic, and although he was eventually to change, he never lost the positive outlook on war that such an attitude engenders. Behind everything he wrote one senses an eager curiosity and a determination to uncover the many faces of war. In this way he was very like Isaac Rosenberg, but his last poems reveal that, towards the end, he was reaching the tragic and compassionate view of Wilfred Owen.

It is only in the 1970s that critics have recognized the valuable and lasting contribution that Wilfred Owen,

Isaac Rosenberg and Keith Douglas have made to the English poetry of this century. Until this decade, critics have been influenced by the stringent criteria laid down by T.S. Eliot, who wrote: "It seems likely that poets in our civilization as it exists at present must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language to his meaning."⁸ The conditions under which the poets of both World Wars wrote were unfavourable to the production of "difficult" objective poetry. As Rosenberg, writing from the trenches in 1916, described to Edward Marsh: "If you are not free, you can only, when the ideas come hot, seize them with the skin in tatters, raw and crude, in some parts beautiful, in others monstrous".⁹

Eliot and his followers tended to concentrate only on the rawness of English war poetry, and lamented the lack of epic form and detachment they had found in the heroic poets of Ancient Greece. In their search for qualities impossible in poetry written out of the immediacy of war, they missed its real value - a value that Rosenberg was urgently aware of, as the rest of the paragraph in his letter to Marsh makes clear: "Why print it then? Because these rare parts must not be lost. I work and move as I write into depth and lucidity".¹⁰

⁸ T.S. Eliot, "Essay on Metaphysical Poets" in Selected Prose, ed. John Hayward (Oxford 1953) p. 111.

⁹ Isaac Rosenberg, letter to Edward Marsh, August 6th, 1916, Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg, p. 310

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 311

Amidst the "tatters" of crude and forced composition there are many "rare parts" in the English war poetry of this century which illumine war in a way that has not been done since Shakespeare. The experience of modern war made it impossible for poets to recapture the old heroic values, but the best of them revealed a sombre beauty which is as stirring and as splendid. It is a beauty which comes from their comprehension of the immensity of the conflict in which they were involved, and from their ability to show that the great human qualities of compassion and love were intensified, and not destroyed by the holocaust of war.

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