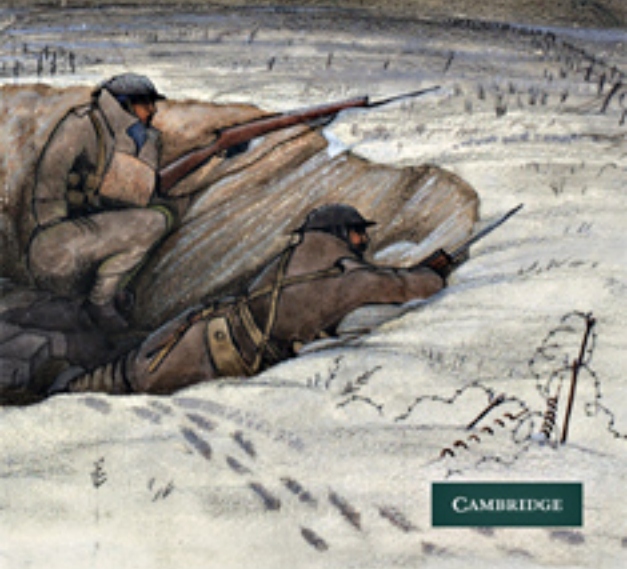
Jon Stallworthy

Survivors' Songs

From Maldon to the Somme



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SURVIVORS' SONGS

From Homer to Heaney, the voices of men and women have seldom been more piercing, more poignant, than in time of conflict. For fifty years, Jon Stallworthy has been attuned to such voices. In *Survivors' Songs* he explores a series of poetic encounters with war, with essays on Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and others. Beautifully written, this moving book sets the poetry and prose of the First World War and its aftermath in the wider context of writing about warfare from prehistoric Troy to Anglo-Saxon England; from Agincourt to Flanders; from El Alamein to Vietnam; from the wars of yesterday to the wars of tomorrow.

JON STALLWORTHY is a poet and a Fellow of the British Academy. Formerly Professor of English Literature at Wolfson College, Oxford, he is the author of prize-winning biographies of Wilfred Owen and Louis MacNeice, the editor of Owen's *Complete Poems and Fragments* and of *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*. He has published many volumes of poems, works of literary criticism, anthologies of poetry, and a memoir, *Singing School: The Making of a Poet*.

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JON STALLWORTHY

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WITH A POPPY

for Macnair Jon Stallworthy

11.11.01–

What was it for,
that War to End Wars?
It was for us.
It was for you and yours.

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Voice over

When W.H. Auden, acknowledging the powerlessness of the unacknowledged legislator to alter the events of 1 September 1939, wrote 'All I have is a voice', he articulated a general truth about his calling, his mystery. All any poet has is a voice. Apart from the finger-print, the human voice-print is arguably our most distinctive feature and one that alters less than most from youth to age. Some voices do not then fall silent but continue, from age to age, speaking to an ever-increasing audience 'Of what is past or passing or to come'.

By 1939, Auden had lost his belief in the poet's voice as an agent of effective political change: 'poetry makes nothing happen', his elegy 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' declared. He would not have dared say that to the living Yeats, who saw painters, poets, playwrights, sculptors as the architects of civilization, generally, and in his own time and place, specifically, those who made the 1916 Easter Rising 'happen', 'When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side'.

History suggests that the voices of Auden and Yeats each articulate a truth. In the short term, 'poetry makes nothing happen'. British, French, Spanish, German, and Italian poets of Auden's 'low dishonest decade' could not avert the Spanish Civil War or the Second World War. In the longer term, however, the writers of the Irish Renaissance can be credited with educating and energizing the freedom-fighters

of 1916 and after; much as the poets of the First World War – the principal subject of the essays in this book – can be credited with kindling the anti-war fury that blazed through the streets of London in February 2003.

I have spent many of the most rewarding hours of my life listening to the voices of absent friends – Thomas Hardy, William Yeats, Wilfred Owen, David Jones, Wystan Auden, Keith Douglas, and Old Uncle Tom Eliot and all – singing

> of human unsuccess
> In a rapture of distress;

and I think of the essays in this book as thank-you letters expressing gratitude in terms that, I hope, may lead other readers to *listen* to their voices and hear in them what I have heard.

Good poets are survivors – even if, like Keats and Owen, they die at twenty-five – and it pleases me to remember a poem I learnt as a boy, one of the few to break the sound-barrier of translation, William Cory's version of Callimachus's 2,000-year-old epigram:

> They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
> They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
> I wept as I remembered how often you and I
> Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.
>
> And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
> A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,
> Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
> For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

Wolfson College,
Oxford

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'Owen's Afterlife' in my selection of Wilfred Owen's *Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004);

'Henry Reed and the Great Good Place' in Henry Reed's *Collected Poems* (Oxford University Press, 1991, and Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2007); and

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CHAPTER I

The death of the hero

'Poetry', Wordsworth reminds us, 'is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', and there can be no area of human experience that has generated a wider range of powerful feelings than war: hope and fear; exhilaration and humiliation; hatred – not only for the enemy, but also for generals, politicians, and war-profiteers; love – for fellow soldiers, for women and children left behind, for country (often) and cause (occasionally).

Man's early war-songs and love-songs were generally exhortations to action, or celebrations of action, in one or other field, but no such similarity exists between what we now more broadly define as love poetry and war poetry. Whereas most love poems have been in favour of love, much – and most recent – war poetry has been implicitly, if not explicitly, anti-war. So long as warrior met warrior in equal combat with sword and lance, poets could celebrate their courage and chivalry, but as technology put ever-increasing distance between combatants and, then, ceased to distinguish between combatant and civilian, poets more and more responded to 'man's inhumanity to man'. Not that heroic societies were oblivious to the domestic consequences of their heroes' 'brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art'. *The Iliad* ends with Andromache watching from the walls of Troy, as her husband's broken body is dragged away behind

his killer's chariot: 'she mourned, and the women wailed in answer'.[1] Similarly, as the hero's funeral pyre is lit at the close of the Old English epic, written 1,500 years later,

> A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
> with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
> of her worst fears, a wild litany
> of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
> enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
> slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.[2]

Hers, however, is not the last word. That is spoken by Beowulf's warriors:

> So the Geat people, his hearth-companions,
> sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
> They said that of all the kings upon the earth
> he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
> kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.[3]

Such societies recognized the cost of warfare, but the code to which they subscribed counted it a necessary price for the pursuit of fame, honour, renown. This was to be acquired by generosity in peace, mighty deeds in war, loyalty to the living and loyalty to the dead.

That heroic tradition died, and another was transplanted to English soil, when King Harold's foot-soldiers were cut down on a ridge above Hastings by the cavalry of William, Duke of Normandy. Less than a hundred years before, one of the last Old English poets had chanted or declaimed in a Saxon hall the poem we know as 'The Battle of Maldon'.[4] And three hundred years after Harold and his housecarls had gone the way of Byrhtnoth and his thanes, cut down on the shore of the Blackwater estuary, the first new English poet introduced to a more cultivated audience

> A knight […] a worthy man,
> That fro the time that he first bigan
> To ridden out, he loved chivalry […][5]

The intervening years had seen Duke William's son Henry, in the words of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 'dubbed a rider', married to a Saxon girl, and the two peoples and the two languages fused and intermingled. Under the influence of the troubadours, the Church, and the new learning out of Italy, *chivalry* had come to mean more than *cavalry*, that other derivative of the Latin *caballarius*, a horseman. The descendant of Duke William's superbly efficient but hardly sophisticated *chevalier* could, like Chaucer's Squire,

> Wel […] sitte on hors, and faire ride;
> He coude songes make, and wel endite,
> Juste and eek daunce, and wel purtreye and write.

The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge had been founded before Chaucer was born, and in his lifetime the first of the so-called 'public schools', Winchester, opened its doors to the sons of noblemen and gentlemen. By 1440, when Eton was founded, the word *gentleman* had come to denote a clearly defined social status, inferior to nobility and superior to the yeomanry, but not necessarily dependent on ancestry. These schools and those others later modelled on them grafted the 'classical learning of the monastic schools upon the chivalric training in honour, in sport, in military exercise, in social intercourse, in courtesy and generosity, in reverence and devotion, of the schools of Christian knighthood'.[6]

Chaucer had seen military service – had been captured and ransomed – in France, where two centuries later fought and was wounded Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who returned to translate Books III and IV of the *Aeneid* into blank verse. Raleigh served in the Huguenot army at Jarnac

and Moncoutour; Gascoigne saw military service in Holland; Donne took part in the Earl of Essex's two expeditions to Cadiz; Davenant was knighted by Charles I at the siege of Gloucester; Lovelace served in the Scottish expeditions of 1639; and the Earl of Rochester showed conspicuous courage in the Second Dutch War of 1665–6.

The chivalric tradition, transmuted into the courtly tradition of the High Renaissance, required proficiency in the arts of war as well as in such peaceable arts as music and poetry. The courtier–poet was expected to serve his king in much the same way as the Anglo-Saxon *scop* took his place in the shield-wall with his lord. The Earl of Surrey left a moving elegy to his Squire;[7] Gascoigne, a rueful account of his capture and ransom;[8] and Donne condensed his experience of Cadiz into an epigram.[9] Considering how many courtier–poets had experience of battle, however, the reader in a later century – when war poems are commonly written by those who have never seen a battlefield – may be surprised by how rarely Renaissance poets write of war. Conventions had changed. Love had become the subject proper to a poet. On the rare occasion when the blast of war blows through a poem, it is likely to be the carefully orchestrated overture to a protestation of devotion, such as Lovelace, the dashing Cavalier, offers 'To Lucasta, Going to the Wars'.[10] Paradoxically, the convention that proclaimed the subject of warfare too gross for the polite art of poetry sanctioned, and indeed required, a select use of military terminology in the imagery of the love lyric. Cupid is an archer. The besieging lover, having no shield proof against his darts, can only hope that his Beloved in a spirit of Christian compassion will surrender.

During the eighteenth century, soldiering reached the low place in British society that it was to hold until the Great

War, an occupation despised by the middle and working classes as a disgrace hardly less than prison. If an eighteenth-century poet wrote of war – which he seldom did – it was as a remote phenomenon. So John Scott of Amwell declares:

> I hate that drum's discordant sound,
> Parading round, and round, and round:
> To me it talks of ravaged plains,
> And burning towns, and ruined swains,
> And mangled limbs, and dying groans,
> And widows' tears, and orphans' moans;
> And all that Misery's hand bestows,
> To fill the catalogue of human woes.[11]

As the French Revolution made its contribution to that catalogue, warfare once more became a subject of interest to British poets. The Napoleonic wars moved Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Campbell to patriotic outpourings.[12] Coleridge and Wordsworth, on the other hand, 'hailed the rising orb of liberty'. Both were subsequently disillusioned, and in Book 4 of *The Prelude* Wordsworth writes movingly of his meeting with a battered veteran of Wellington's armies. No poet of the Romantic period, however, was more alive to the horrors of war than Byron; alive not only to sufferings of the combatants but to the domestic consequences. The eyes of the dying Gladiator in *Childe Harold* are

> with his heart and that was far away;
> He reck'd not of the life he lost nor prize,
> But where his rude hut by the Danube lay
> *There* were his young barbarians all at play,
> *There* was their Dacian mother – he, their sire,
> Butcher'd to make a Roman holiday […][13]

Byron, as a schoolboy at Harrow, had been steeped in the classics. He visited Greece in 1809 and 1810 and the first two

cantos of *Childe Harold*, based on his experiences, launched a tidal wave of literary philhellenism.

> By the time of the Greek Revolution in 1821, the educated public in Europe had been deeply immersed in three attractive ideas – that Ancient Greece had been a paradise inhabited by supermen; that the Modern Greeks were the true descendants of the Ancient Greeks; and that a war against the Turks could somehow 'regenerate' the Modern Greeks and restore the former glories.[14]

Invoking the example of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans, commemorated in Simonides' epigram,[15] Byron sounded the call to arms:

> Must *we* but weep o'er days more blest?
> Must *we* but blush? – Our fathers bled.
> Earth! Render back from out thy breast
> A remnant of our Spartan dead!
> Of the three hundred grant but three,
> To make a new Thermopylae.[16]

His love for the land of Pericles and Homer proving stronger than his hatred of war, he set off for Greece with half a dozen military uniforms and a couple of helmets, gilded, crested, and bearing the family motto: 'Crede Byron'.

Like every other philhellene who took that road, he was to learn how unrelated were the reality and the dream. Those more fortunate, who returned with their lives, brought tales of betrayal and brutality, squalor and needless suffering, that anticipate the war correspondents' revelations from the Crimea thirty years later. The philanthropic spirit of the age that urged Florence Nightingale to the hospitals of Scutari found expression in anti-war poems by Thackeray[17] and others, but these were counterbalanced by many sounding a savage note, and the one poem from the Crimean War to have survived in the popular memory celebrates a heroic exploit. Significantly, since Tennyson's imagination had long been

engaged with the chivalric world of King Arthur and his knights, it was the *cavalry* charge of the Light Brigade in 1854 that spurred him into song.[18]

It is one thing to 'Honour the charge' of professional cavalrymen of one's own country against foreign gunners thousands of miles away, but quite another to watch one's own countrymen – many of them boy civilians in uniform – killing and maiming each other. Walt Whitman was drawn into the American Civil War by a brother, wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg, who was in need of nursing. He remained, long after his brother was better, a non-combatant witness to the horrors of war, tending his wounded:

> Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
> Straight and swift to my wounded I go […][19]

He regards them as '*my* wounded', seeing the results of cavalry action from a markedly *un*-Tennysonian perspective:

> The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine,
> Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard,
> (Come sweet death! Be persuaded O beautiful death!
> In mercy come quickly.)

His eyes unclouded by the chivalric vision, his tongue untrammelled by the chivalric diction and rhetoric, he perceives 'in camp in the daybreak grey and dim' what Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were to perceive in the trenches of the Western Front:

> Young man I think I know you – I think this face is the face of the Christ himself,
> Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.[20]

While America was forging a new society in the fires of civil war, Britain was making one of those cautious

adjustments to the old society by which she had avoided civil strife for three hundred years. Thomas Arnold, as headmaster of Rugby from 1827 to 1842, had revitalized the public-school system. Perceiving that the country and the empire needed more – and more efficient – civil servants and managers than the aristocracy and landed gentry could supply, he and the headmasters of the many Anglican boarding schools that opened their gates in the 1850s sought to make 'Christian gentlemen' of the sons of the middle classes. The ethos of these schools was essentially chivalric. As readers of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* will remember, schoolboy fights were elevated into gentlemanly duels, and on the playing fields the same code of etiquette called for 'fair play' and 'the team spirit'. Each school was dominated by its chapel, which suited the philistine respectability of the devout bourgeois, and the curriculum was dominated by Latin, and to a lesser extent, Greek. In 1884 there were twenty-eight classics masters at Eton, six mathematics masters, one historian, no modern-language teachers, and no scientists. As late as 1905, classics masters still formed more than half the teaching staff.

The poet–spokesman for the public schools at the end of the nineteenth century was Henry Newbolt. The title of his poem 'Clifton Chapel' acknowledges a debt to Matthew Arnold's 'Rugby Chapel', but whereas the headmaster's son addressed his father and 'the noble and great who are gone', Newbolt exhorts a new generation of imperialists:

> To set the cause above renown,
> To love the game beyond the prize,
> To honour, while you strike him down,
> The foe that comes with fearless eyes;
> To count the life of battle good,
> And dear the land that gave you birth,

And dearer yet the brotherhood
That binds the brave of all the earth.
[…]

God send you fortune, yet be sure,
Among the lights that gleam and pass,
You'll live to follow none more pure
Than that which glows on yonder brass:
'*Qui procul hinc*,' the legend's writ, –
The frontier-grave is far away –
'*Qui ante diem periit*:
Sed miles, sed pro patria.'[21]

In a more famous or notorious poem, 'Vitaï Lampada' – a title taken from Lucretius, meaning '[They pass on] the Torch of Life' – he envisaged the public-school ethic at work on a frontier far away:

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!'[22]

Newbolt's repeated celebration of the imperialist officer and gentleman, carrying to his country's battlefields a sporting code acquired on the playing fields of his public school, parallels a poetic reappraisal of the private soldier initiated by Kipling's *Barrack-room Ballads* and sustained by Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*.

Requirements for a commission in the army had altered radically since the 1850s. 'In place of the old patronage system came, first, limited competition – examination for the select few whom the authorities had personally nominated – and then, in 1870, open competition.'[23] The year 1870, of course, saw the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War that inaugurated the era of violence in international politics,

precipitating further army reforms, the rapid mechanization of warfare, and the growth of imperialist ideologies. Malvern van Wyk Smith has shown how in Britain, at the start of the Boer War, militarist and pacifist doctrines were clearly defined and opposed; and how, because the Education Acts of 1870 and 1876 had made the army that sailed for South Africa the first literate army in history, the British Tommy sent home letters and poems that anticipate those his sons were to send back from the Western Front.[24]

These factual and often bitter accounts of combat, to say nothing of the greater poems by Thomas Hardy,[25] had been forgotten by 1914 when that War we still – many wars later – know by the adjective Great was greeted in some quarters with a curious gaiety and exhilaration. Rupert Brooke captured the mood of that moment in a sonnet to which he gave the paradoxical title of 'Peace'.[26] His first line 'Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour' – and the 'hand' and the 'hearts' that follow reveal one of his sources: the hymn, and ironically it is a hymn translated from the German, beginning

> Now thank we all our God
> With heart, and hands, and voices […]

Shortly before Brooke's death, the Dean of St Paul's read aloud in a sermon from the Cathedral pulpit another of his 'war sonnets', 'The Soldier'.[27] So the soldier-poet was canonized by the Church, and many other poets – civilians and soldiers alike – found inspiration for their battle-hymns, elegies, exhortations, in the well-thumbed pages of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

Most of the British poets we associate with the years 1914 and 1915 had a public-school education and this, more than any other factor, distinguishes them from those we associate

with the later phases of the war. The early poems return again and again to the appallingly anachronistic concept of war as a game, a concept most clearly articulated by E. B. Osborn, in the introduction to his bestselling anthology *The Muse in Arms*, published in 1917. He wrote:

> Modern battles are so vast and so extended in both space and time that composed battle-pieces, such as have come down to us from the far-off centuries of archery and ballad-making, may no longer be looked for. The thread on which all such pictures are strung – the new impressions such as 'The Assault' [a poem by Robert Nichols] and old ballads such as 'Agincourt, or the English Bowman's Glory' – is the insular conception of fighting as the greatest of all great games, that which is the most shrewdly spiced with deadly danger. The Germans, and even our allies, cannot understand why this stout old nation persists in thinking of war as a sport; they do not know that sportsmanship is our new homely name, derived from a racial predilection for comparing great things with small, for the *chevalerie* of the Middle Ages. In 'The English Bowman's Glory', written before any of our co-operative pastimes were thought of, the fine idea is veiled in this homely term:
>
> Agincourt, Agincourt!
> Know ye not Agincourt?
> Oh, it was noble sport!
> Then did we owe men;
> Men, who a victory won us
> 'Gainst any odds among us:
> Such were our bowmen.
>
> Light is thrown on this phase of the British Soldier's mentality by the verse [...] he writes in honour of the games and the field-sports in which he acquired the basal elements of all true discipline – confidence in his companions and readiness to sacrifice the desire for personal distinction to the common interest of his team, which is, of course, a mimic army in being.[28]

The legacy of the public-school classroom was as significant for the poets as that of the playing field. Paul Fussell

rightly points out in his stimulating book, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, that the British soldier tended to look at the war through literary spectacles. He evidences the popularity of Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse*, but surprisingly overlooks the extent to which the public-school poets' attitude to war was conditioned by their years of immersion in the works of Caesar, Virgil, Horace, and Homer. A reading of these authors would leave no intelligent boy in any doubt that war was a brutal business, but by setting 'The Kaiser's War' in a long and, dare one say, a time-honoured tradition, the classics encouraged a detached perspective – quite apart from offering the soldier, by analogy, the intoxicating prospect of a place in history and literature. In the poems of 1914 and the first half of 1915, there are countless references to sword and legion, not a few to chariot and oriflamme, but almost none to gun and platoon. Siegfried Sassoon writes, in a poem of 1916, 'We are the happy legion'; while Herbert Asquith begins his elegy 'The Volunteer':

> Here lies a clerk who half his life had spent
> Toiling at ledgers in a city grey,
> Thinking that so his days would drift away
> With no lance broken in life's tournament.
> Yet ever 'twixt the books and his bright eyes
> The gleaming eagles of the legions came,
> And horsemen, charging under phantom skies,
> Went thundering past beneath the oriflamme.[29]

A similar vision prompted Rupert Brooke, under orders for the Dardanelles, to write to Asquith's sister, Violet:

> Do you think *perhaps* the fort on the Asiatic corner will want quelling, and we'll land and come at it from behind and they'll make a sortie and meet us on the plains of Troy? […]

I've never been quite so happy in my life, I think. Not quite so *pervasively* happy; like a stream flowing entirely to one end. I suddenly realize that the ambition of my life has been – since I was two – to go on a military expedition against Constantinople.[30]

On the troopship, he and his friends read Homer to each other, and in a verse-letter from the trenches, Charles Hamilton Sorley remembers how Homer sang

> Tales of great war and strong hearts wrung,
> Of clash of arms, of council's brawl,
> Of beauty that must early fall,
> Of battle hate and battle joy
> By the old windy walls of Troy.
> […]
> And now the fight begins again,
> The old war-joy, the old war-pain.
> Sons of one school across the sea
> We have no fear to fight […][31]

The poems of these young men move us, as human documents, more than many better poems. They illustrate the hypnotic power of a long cultural tradition; the tragic outcome of educating a generation to face not the future but the past. By the end of 1915, Brooke, Sorley, and many lesser public-school poets were dead. Sassoon, it is true, survived to follow Sorley's lead and break the code of his upbringing – and all honour to him. By publicly protesting in 1917 against the continuance of the war, and by lashing the leaders of Church and State and the Armed Forces in his poems, he rejected the obedience to authority that is one of the prime tenets of the public-school system. The poets who followed him – Owen, Rosenberg, Gurney – had no such conventions to reject. They went to war, as Whitman had done, with no Homeric expectations, and set themselves to expose what Owen called

> The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
> Pro patria mori.[32]

One, indeed, had Whitman in mind. 'When I think of "Drum Taps"', wrote Rosenberg three months before he was killed, '[*my* poems] are absurd.'[33]

It is often assumed that chivalry died with the cavalry, scythed by machine guns, in the Battle of the Somme. Auden, characterizing the past in his poem 'Spain 1937', wrote:

> Yesterday the belief in the absolute value of Greek;
> The fall of the curtain upon the death of a hero […][34]

The curtain may have fallen, but it was to rise and fall again. It is a commonplace that traditions die hard, and none die harder than military ones. Leaving Oxford in 1940 to join a cavalry regiment, Keith Douglas embellished a photograph of himself in uniform – humorously, it must be said – with the scrolled caption 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'. Two years later, chafing at his enforced inactivity behind the lines while his regiment was engaging Rommel's tanks in the Western Desert, Douglas drove off – in a two-ton truck and direct disobedience of orders – to join them; earning thereby his batman's commendation: 'I like you, sir. You're shit or bust!' His subsequent achievement as a poet was to celebrate the last stand of the chivalric hero,

> 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.[35]

In 1915, on the Western Front, Julian Grenfell had written of the cavalryman that

> In dreary, doubtful waiting hours,
> Before the brazen frenzy starts,

> The horses show him nobler powers;
> O patient eyes, courageous hearts![36]

So Douglas, in his fine elegy, 'Aristocrats',[37] takes the horse as the natural symbol for his anachronistic hero, and in its last line we seem to hear the last echo from the Pass at Roncesvalles: 'It is not gunfire I hear but a hunting horn.' That poem succeeds where most poems of 1914 and 1915 fail. It is sharply focused, acknowledging both the stupidity and the chivalry, the folly and the glamour of cavalrymen on mechanical mounts duelling in the desert. Douglas's language, finely responsive to his theme, fuses ancient and modern: his heroes are 'gentle' – like Chaucer's 'verray parfit gentil knight' – and at the same time 'obsolescent'.

Sidney Keyes was killed on his first patrol in North Africa, but in such poems of 1942 as 'Orestes and the Furies' and 'Rome Remember' he sees the Gorgon-head reflected in the classical shield he had acquired at a public school. He wrote:

> I am the man who groped for words and found
> An arrow in my hand.[38]

Not a rifle, but an arrow. Henry Reed celebrated the rifle in the first of his 'Lessons of the War',[39] but the ironic detachment of these superb meditations on war and peace owes something to Horace, whose lines, saucily emended, stand as epigraph to the sequence and cunningly announce and encapsulate the theme of his Lessons.[40]

By no means all British poets of the Second World War came from public schools, and many more spoke a language that had more in common with Owen and Rosenberg. None, however, offers so sharp a contrast to the work of Douglas and Keyes as the American infantryman-poets, Louis Simpson and Lincoln Kirstein. Simpson tells us that after the war he suffered from amnesia, eventually broken by

dreams of battle that – as with Owen – released his poems. He has, indeed, other resemblances to Owen – admiration for the soldier's endurance, compassion for his suffering, of which he writes with something of the same reverberant simplicity:

> Most clearly of that battle I remember
> The tiredness in eyes, how hands looked thin
> Around a cigarette, and the bright ember
> Would pulse with all the life there was within.[41]

In his long poem 'The Runner', Simpson's college-boy anti-hero Dodd is humiliated by the rest of his platoon for a momentary act of cowardice; although like the Youth in *The Red Badge of Courage* he redeems himself subsequently. Cowardice, a taboo subject to poets in the chivalric tradition, is a theme of Kirstein's *Rhymes of a PFC*, the first poem of which ends:

> The rage of armies is the shame of boys;
> A hero's panic or a coward's whim
> Is triggered by nerve or nervousness.
> We wish to sink. We do not choose to swim.[42]

Where Douglas had asked, in 'Gallantry', 'Was George fond of little boys?' and had answered

> who will say: since George was hit
> We never mention our surmise[43]

Kirstein writes openly and tenderly of homosexual love. Similarly, he and Simpson share – and show in their poems – what Simpson has described as 'the dog-face's suspicion of the officer class, with their abstract language and indifference to individual, human suffering'.[44] It is interesting that Simpson identifies the general infantryman with the animal that used to run beside the huntsman-cavalryman's horse.

Simpson and Kirstein speak for the civilian stuffed into uniform not very tidily and against his will. They write of a wider range of military experience – not excluding cowardice and homosexuality – because they write as men rather than as soldiers conscious of soldierly tradition.

What may be termed the anti-heroic tradition is at least as old as Falstaff. It makes sporadic appearances in eighteenth-century English poetry, but does not oust its older rival until transplanted to America in the next century. A civil war fought by large numbers of conscripted civilians, a high proportion of them literate (but few versed in classical literature), was a new kind of conflict, and America's produced a new kind of poetry. Its principal poets, Whitman and Melville, were civilians and they established a perspective and a tone that would be adopted by those that followed them, combatant and civilian alike: so James Dickey, veteran of a hundred combat missions, begins 'The Firebombing': 'Homeowners unite'.[45] That, surely, is the one hope for the human race. Only if the poets' perception that we are all civilians gains universal acceptance will we be spared the fulfilment of Peter Porter's dark prophecy, 'Your Attention Please':

> The Polar DEW has just warned that
> A nuclear rocket strike of
> At least one thousand megatons
> Has been launched by the enemy
> Directly at our major cities.
> […]
> All flags are flying fully dressed
> On Government buildings – the sun is shining.
> Death is the least we have to fear.
> We are all in the hands of God,
> Whatever happens happens by His Will.
> Now go quickly to your shelters.[46]

CHAPTER 2

Survivors' songs

One of the first poets from these islands to raise a lasting elegy for companions killed in a battle he himself survived was Aneirin, sixth-century author of a sequence of elegies known as *Y* [*The*] *Gododdin*.

> Of three hundred champions who charged on Catraeth,
> It is tragic, but one man came back.[1]

This brings to mind another text, one perhaps known to Aneirin:

> And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them:
>
> And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped to tell thee. […]
>
> While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, the Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped to tell thee.[2]

Whether Aneirin intended it or not, the double coincidence of the three hundred – elsewhere in *The Gododdin* defined as three bands – and the one survivor, adds a tragic resonance to his poem. Not that it is a narrative, although a narrative emerges from the elegies with which the poet celebrates

the exploits of those who fell at Catraeth – or *some* of those who fell at Catraeth. For Aneirin, as a man of rank, extols the officers and gentlemen but makes no mention of the 'other ranks', the infantry, whom scholars assume to have accompanied each mounted knight. He extols them not as an obituarist or war-correspondent, but as kinsman and friend:

> In a shining array they fed together round the wine-vessel. My heart has become full of grief for the feast of Mynyddog, I have lost too many of my true kinsmen. Out of three hundred wearing gold torques who hastened to Catraeth, alas, none escaped but for one man.[3]

We hear that Cibno, before 'the uproar of battle', took communion, but the three hundred seem bound together by the secular sacrament of the mead cup. Over this they utter not prayers but boasts, pledging themselves to deeds of valour, which they are thereby obliged to perform or to perish in the attempt.

On the night before they set off for Catraeth, we can imagine one of the company in the hall of Mynyddog, who drinks from the cup but does not join in the boasting. Instead, he sings. Perhaps, as David Jones says in the Preface to *In Parenthesis*,[4] 'He is instructed to sing […] the song of the Battle of Camlann' – the song, now lost, that lies behind Malory's *Morte Darthur*. 'This tale Sir Bedivere, a Knight of the Table Round, made it to be written'; Sir Bedivere, who left the battlefield echoing Job's messenger: 'I only am escaped to tell thee.'

Perhaps Aneirin sang on the field of Catraeth – as Taillefer was to sing the *Chanson de Roland* riding in front of the Normans at Hastings, tossing his sword in the air. At all events, we know how Aneirin left the battlefield:

> Aeron's two war-hounds and tough Cynon,
> And myself, soaked in blood, for my song's sake.[5]

His escape indicates no act of cowardice. That blood testifies to an active role in the battle, but a poet of the heroic age was not primarily a warrior. His function was to ensure that his friends did not die unsung. He must escape that he may *tell*; bear witness that what was promised in the hall was performed on the field. 'Bleiddig son of Eli was a wild boar for fierceness'; 'the son of Nwython slew a hundred princes wearing gold torques so that he might be celebrated'; 'the son of Sywno (the soothsayer foreknew it) sold his life that his glory might be told forth […] because of his pledge […], he charged forwards in the forefront of the men of Gwynedd.'

Aneirin, of course, was neither the first not the last Welsh poet to bear such witness. Taliesin told *his* listeners:

> There was many a corpse beside Argoed Llwyfain;
> From warriors ravens grew red,
> And with their leader a host attacked.
> For a whole year I shall sing their triumph.
>
> And when I'm grown old, with death hard upon me,
> I'll not be happy save to praise Urien.[6]

In the twelfth century, Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr praised his patron, Owain Gwynedd, in similar terms; and in the fifteenth, Llywelyn ab y Moel told of the Battle of Waun Gaseg – with less pride in his calling than Aneirin displayed after the Battle of Catraeth:

> For me – ah! poor pre-eminence –
> The sole advantage I had thence
> Was but that with surpassing haste
> I ran, my fellows far-outpaced,
> Across the gorge in full view
> Of foes who knew me – too well they knew!
> Dull fool is he who in white coat strays,
> Courting ill hap, on the mountain ways.[7]

There are survivors' songs also in Old English: most notably 'The Battle of Maldon', of all Anglo-Saxon poems the closest in tone to *The Gododdin*. Its unknown poet knows and names his warriors, distinguishing their weapons, reporting their speeches, persuading us that he too had his place in their shield-wall. But if he did, and if Bryhtnoth's hearth-companions were true to their boasts that they would not leave their leader's body, how did the poem come to be written? I see him at the last, taking leave of his companions and escaping, like Aneirin, soaked in blood, for his song's sake.

Almost one thousand years later, in 1919, there was published a new translation of the *Chanson de Roland*.[8] Made by Charles Scott Moncrieff, it was dedicated

To three men
scholars, poets, soldiers
who came to their Roncesvals
in September, October, and November
nineteen hundred and eighteen
I dedicate my part in a book
of which their friendship
quickened the beginning
their example has
justified the continuing

Philip Bainbridge
Wilfred Owen
Ian Mackenzie

The translator had been a close friend of Wilfred Owen, among whose papers an earlier form of dedication is to be found:

To Mr W.O.

To you, my master in assonance, I dedicate my part in this assonant poem: that you may cover the faults in my handiwork with the

protection of your name […] At this time lessons are to be found in the Song of Roland that all of us may profitably learn. To pursue chivalry, to avoid and punish treachery and to fight uncomplaining when support is withheld from us; to live, in fine, honourably and to die gallantly. So I have worked and written that the song our Saxon forbears heard our Norman forbears shout at Hastings – may not be altogether unheard in their children's armies.[9]

The accompanying manuscript draft of Moncrieff's first 179 lines confirms that Owen was familiar with *The Song of Roland*, and we are left with the problem of whether the dedication was altered simply because he was dead, or whether – as I prefer to think – he had expressed himself unhappy to be associated with the chivalric tradition. Before he died, however, he had testified in the tradition of his Welsh forbears:

> It seemed that out of battle I escaped
> Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
> Through granites which titantic wars had groined.[10]

'I only am escaped to tell thee.' But what he tells us is not what Aneirin tells us, testifying to the heroic exploits of his friends. Though Owen also speaks of a friend, it is of a 'strange friend' who tells him:

> I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
> I knew you in the 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 …

Much of the force of this derives from the Christian subversion of the pagan heroic terms; a subversion proclaimed by another Welsh poet of the Great War, David Jones, in his Dedication to *In Parenthesis*:

THIS WRITING IS FOR MY FRIENDS
IN MIND OF ALL COMMON & HIDDEN
MEN AND OF THE SECRET PRINCES
AND TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE
WITH ME IN THE COVERT AND IN
THE OPEN […]
AND TO THE ENEMY
FRONT-FIGHTERS WHO SHARED OUR
PAINS AGAINST WHOM WE FOUND
OURSELVES BY MISADVENTURE

Jones, like Owen, accords the enemy the status of honorary friends.

Unlike Owen, however, he was able to reflect on the experience of the trenches for almost twenty years before putting pen to paper, and by then had come to see that experience in a wider historical context. His Preface speaks, in terms of which Charles Scott Moncrieff would have approved, of 'the intimate, continuing, domestic life of small contingents of men, within whose structure Roland could find, and, for a reasonable while, enjoy, his Oliver'.[11] Echoes of the *Chanson de Roland* reverberate throughout *In Parenthesis*. John Ball has a friend, the signaller Olivier, of whom we are reminded when the poet numbers among the dead

Taillefer the maker,[12]
and on the same day,
thirty thousand other ranks.
And in the country of Béarn – Oliver
and all the rest – so many without memento
beneath the tumuli on the high hills
and under the harvest places.

At the end of *In Parenthesis*, Jones gives Turold, the maker of the *Chanson de Roland*, the honour of the last word:

The geste says this and the man who was on the field … and who wrote the book … the man who does not know this has not understood anything.[13]

In Parenthesis is a difficult work. Jones called it a 'writing', at once acknowledging and dodging his reader's first question: 'Is it poetry or prose?' Having read it, we know the answer is 'both'. It has the narrative structure we associate with the novel, but its language at many points takes on the allusiveness, density, and momentum of poetry. This blending of categories, like its blending of matter ancient and modern, unsettles the reader – as, clearly, Jones meant us to be unsettled – and leaves us with the problem of how 'this writing' is to be read. Some of its most attentive readers have come to different conclusions. Herbert Read found it 'as near a great epic of the war as ever the war generation will reach';[14] a judgement John H. Johnston endorsed,[15] though neither, I think, has satisfactorily explained how the reader's epic expectations are manipulated, confirmed, and denied by Jones's modernist variations of his form. Paul Fussell, who holds that the Great War 'will not be understood in traditional terms', finds *In Parenthesis* 'curiously ambiguous and indecisive' and 'a deeply conservative work which uses the past not, as it often pretends to do, to shame the present, but really to ennoble it'.[16] In Fussell's view, the book is an 'honourable miscarriage' by a 'turgid allusionist'.[17] I disagree with him, but his criticisms raise crucial questions, which bear on how 'this writing' is to be read; and that problem I should now like to consider.

Setting aside for the moment Jones's Preface, in which he speaks frankly and informally, as author to reader, we are introduced in the Dedication to the more hieratic intonation of the poet. Its opening words proclaim it part of the work – THIS WRITING IS FOR MY FRIENDS. Printed in capital

letters and without punctuation, it looks like a war memorial and sounds like a poem. The Dedication states the theme, which is the commemoration of the dead – friends and enemies who shared the same pains. Dedication is followed by Prologue, by the title of Part I and its epigraph – three quotations, three chords if you like, extending and developing the echoes of the Dedication. In the Prologue, quoting from Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of *The Mabinogion*, David Jones speaks through the lips of the teller of the tale of Branwen the Daughter of Llŷr:

> Evil betide me if I do not open the door to know if that is true which is said concerning it. So he opened the door … and when they had looked, they were conscious of all the evils they had ever sustained, and of all the friends and companions they had lost … and because of their perturbation they could not rest.

The same recognition of friends and companions lost, the same perturbation preventing rest, are transmitted by the title of Part I: 'THE MANY MEN SO BEAUTIFUL'. On the white page below or in the silence that follows, we can imagine the rest of Coleridge's stanza taking shape:

> And they all dead did lie:
> And a thousand thousand slimy things
> Lived on; and so did I.[18]

So with the epigraph to Part I, in which another lone survivor, sufferer of a similar loss and a similar perturbation, speaks:

> Men marched, they kept equal step …
> Men marched, they had been nurtured together.[19]

Even a Welsh reader might not recognize the source of these lines as *The Gododdin*, but neither will an Irish reader recognize the source of every quotation in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Modernist writers, however, have taught their readers how to respond to this strategy and, if the author of *In Parenthesis* is a 'turgid allusionist', as Fussell charges, the authors of *Ulysses*, 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberly', and *The Waste Land* must stand indicted of the same offence – and to a greater degree, in that their allusions are culled from wider fields of reference.

Jones, unlike Joyce, assists his reader with notes, so there can be no mistaking the one message of his three preliminary quotations. They introduce the action like the voice of the chorus in Greek tragedy, and the descendants of those who died at Catraeth once again keep 'equal step':

> '49 Wyatt, 01549 Wyatt.
> Coming sergeant.
> Pick 'em up, pick 'em up – I'll stalk within yer chamber.
> Private Leg … sick.
> Private Ball … absent.[20]

The shift of tone – from tragic poetry to comic prose – is bold and brilliantly successful. One must not overlook the jokes: that at the expense of the most famous poem by Sir Thomas Wyatt, whose book, *Certayne Psalms*, was published in 1549 – '01549 Wyatt' – and, more important, Jones's pun on his hero's name. Fussell misses two thirds of the point when he says that John Ball is 'named after the priest who led the Peasants' Revolt in 1381'. Our Private Ball, who follows Private Leg in the sergeant's roster, is sacerdotal, surely, but also ballistic and – it must be said – anatomical. When finally he comes on parade, 'that silence peculiar to parade grounds and to refectories' is broken – but broken liturgically:

> Captain Gwyn does not turn or move or give any sign.
> Have that man's name taken if you please, Mr. Jenkins.
> Take that man's name, Sergeant Snell.
> Take his name, corporal.

Take his name take his number – charge him –late on parade – the Battalion being paraded for overseas – warn him for Company Office.

Have you got his name Corporal Quilter.

Temporary unpaid Lance-Corporal Aneirin Merddyn Lewis had somewhere in his Welsh depths a remembrance of the nature of man, of how a lance-corporal's stripe is but held vicariously and from on high, is of one texture with an eternal economy. He brings in a manner, baptism, and metaphysical order to the bankruptcy of the occasion.

'01 Ball is it – there was a man in Bethesda late for the last bloody judgment.

Corporal Quilter on the other hand knew nothing of these things.[21]

The narrator, like his Lance-Corporal, brings a metaphysical order to the bankruptcy of the occasion. A prosaic manner is appropriate to an age all-but-bankrupt in terms of heroic and religious values, but we are reminded that some hierarchies are still observed. Lance-Corporal Aneirin – named, no doubt, after the poet – holds his stripe vicariously (like a vicar) and from on high, and his joke has a prophetic ring: ''01 Ball is it – there was a man in Bethesda late for the last bloody judgment.' Ball, the survivor, will be late for the last bloody judgment attended by the rest of his platoon. The Welshman has in his depths a remembrance, but the English Corporal Quilter on the other hand 'knew nothing of these things'.

The Lance-Corporal's bardic namesake had celebrated the high-ranking heroes of *The Gododdin* in a high style. The low-ranking celebrant of a more democratic age suits his style to his lower-ranking heroes, though his ear is marvellously attuned to social distinctions. As befits a poet whose first memory 'was of a thing of great marvel – a troop of horses moving in a column to the *tarantara* of bugles', and who thereupon resolved 'some day I shall ride on horseback',[22] his mounted officers are generally presented in

chivalric terms. Mr. Jenkins, in keeping with his lower station, is presented in gentlemanly terms – 'The Squire from the Rout of San Romano smokes Melachrino No. 9' – and presented affectionately:

> Mr. Jenkins got his full lieutenancy on his twenty-first birthday, and a parcel from Fortnum and Mason; he grieved for his friend, Talbot Rhys (killed and left hanging on the wire), and felt an indifference to the spring offensive – and why was non-conforming Captain Gwyn so stuffy about the trebled whisky chits.[23]

With the exception of 'that shit Major Lillywhite' and one other officer, all the characters in *In Parenthesis* are presented sympathetically, including 'the enemy front-fighters' and those who pray for them behind the lines:

> But all the old women in Bavaria are busy with their novenas, you bet your life, and don't sleep lest the watch should fail, nor weave for the wire might trip his darling feet and the dead Karl might not come home.[24]

Jones has his indignation, but it is reserved for a certain category of non-combatants first referred to in Part 2. Entitled 'CHAMBERS GO OFF, CORPORALS STAY', this opens with the troops being lectured 'in the barn, with its great roof, sprung, upreaching, humane, and redolent of a vanished order'.[25] There are lectures on hygiene by the medical officer, 'whose heroism and humanity reached toward sanctity'.[26] Like the great roof of the barn, *upreaching*, *humane*, he speaks of a vanished order; as, in a sense, does the Adjutant when he addresses them on the history of the Regiment. But 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new', and Jones portrays the representative of the new less kindly:

> the Bombing Officer […] told them lightly of the efficacy of his trade; he predicted an important future for the new Mills Mk. IV

grenade, just on the market; he discussed the improvised jam-tins of the veterans, of the bombs of after the Marne, grenades of Loos and Lavantie – he compared these elementary, amateurish, inefficiencies with the compact and supremely satisfactory invention of this Mr. Mills, to whom his country was so greatly indebted.[27]

Long before the Bombing Officer takes his leave 'like a departing commercial traveller', Jones's scornful irony has told us that he is no gentleman and has no understanding of history, heroism, or humanity. This theme is developed further at the end of Part 2, when the 'Chambers Go Off' and our hero is introduced to the supremely satisfactory invention of someone in Mr. Mills's line of trade:

John Ball would have followed, but stood fixed and alone in the little yard – his senses highly alert, his body incapable of movement or response. The exact disposition of small things – the precise shapes of trees, the lilt of a bucket, the movement of a straw, the disappearing right boot of Sergeant Snell – all minute noises, separate and distinct, in a stillness charged through with some approaching violence – registered not by the ear nor any single faculty – an on-rushing pervasion, saturating all existence; with exactitude, logarithmic, dial-timed, millesimal – of calculated velocity, some mean chemist's contrivance, a stinking physicist's destroying toy.[28]

The indictment of the scientist, delivered with all the explosive force of that rhetorical suspension, is delivered more coolly and more searchingly in the Preface:

We feel a rubicon has been passed between striking with a hand weapon as men used to do and loosing poison from the sky as we do ourselves. We doubt the decency of our own inventions […][29]

Not everyone would feel the same about the *decency* of 'striking with a hand weapon', but Jones's use of the word is revealing. *Decency* is the distinguishing characteristic of the gentleman, that nineteenth-century mutation of the mediaeval knight. The traditions of the gentleman were

chivalric, humanistic, and tended to produce a deep distrust of science. The subject of *In Parenthesis* is the destruction of an old order – still recognizably chivalric – by a new *dis*order, here represented by 'some mean chemist's contrivance, a stinking physicist's destroying toy'.

The imminence of that destruction reinforces the tragic dignity with which Mr. Jenkins's platoon prepares for what the reader senses will be its last battle. Two moments of preparation, in particular, evoke the rituals of the old order, and at both the narrator adopts the shorter line, the higher style of poetry. As Cibno took communion and his comrades drank together before setting off for Catraeth, so the men of No. 1 section receive the sacrament – 'one-third part of a loaf' and a share of the 'half mess-tin of rum':

> Come off it Moses – dole out the issue.
> Dispense salvation,
> strictly apportion it,
> let us taste and see,
> let us be renewed,
> for christ's sake let us be warm.
> […]
>
> Each one in turn, and humbly, receives his meagre benefit. This lance-jack sustains them from his iron spoon; and this is thank-worthy.[30]

The sacrament of Last Supper is followed – as the mead-drinking in the hall of Mynyddog was followed – by the boast. Dai Great-coat

> articulates his English with an alien care.
> My fathers were with the Black Prinse of Wales
> at the passion of
> the blind Bohemian king.
> They served in these fields […][31]

Dai's boast, modelled on Taliesin's in *The Mabinogion*, asserts that he was present at all the major moments in the

history of the 'hand weapon', from the primal war in Heaven to the Crucifixion, from Roncesvalles to Camlann. That history begins its last chapter with Part 7 of *In Parenthesis*, entitled 'THE FIVE UNMISTAKABLE MARKS'.[32] The allusion to the five wounds of the crucified Christ is balanced by the secular epigraph:

> Gododdin I demand thy support.
> It is our duty to sing: a meeting
> place has been found.[33]

Invoking Aneirin's aid, in Aneirin's words, Jones procedes to discharge his duty as a poet: he *sings* – there is more poetry in Part 7 than in any other – of the meeting at Mametz Wood in July 1916. As the platoon waits to go over the top on 'the place of a skull', the first of the comrades is killed:

> No one to care there for Aneirin Lewis spilled there
> who worshipped his ancestors like a Chink
> who sleeps in Arthur's lap […][34]

His elegist apportions blame, but not to the enemy:

> Properly organized chemists can let make more riving power
> than ever Twrch Trwyth;
> more blistered he is than painted Troy Towers
> and unwholer, limb from limb, than any of them fallen at Catraeth
> […][35]

At zero hour, 'Mr Jenkins takes them over' and almost at once

> Lurched over, jerked iron saucer over tilted brow,
> clampt unkindly over lip and chin
> nor no ventaille to this darkening
> and masked face lifts to grope the air […][36]

Ventaille – the Old French word for a helmet's movable visor – reminds us that it is the Squire from the Rout of San Romano

who has fallen. But the Disciplines of the Wars are maintained 'and Sergeant T. Quilter takes over'. One by one, however, the 'family' – Jones's word – is cut down until Private Ball finds himself, first, 'alone in a denseness of hazel-brush', and then shot in the legs. He crawls away, encumbered by his rifle:

> Slung so, it swings its full weight. With you going blindly on all paws, it slews its whole length, to hang at your bowed neck like the Mariner's white oblation.
> […]
> Hung so about, you make […] your close escape.[37]

Once again we hear the voice of the survivor: 'I only am *escaped* to tell thee.' But his elegy for his friends is not yet finished, and we share the wounded man's pastoral hallucination of the Queen of the Woods dispensing garlands to the dead:

> She plaits torques of equal splendour for Mr. Jenkins and Billy Crower.
>
> Hansel with Gronwy share dog-violets for a palm, where they lie in serious embrace beneath the twisted tripod.[38]

The modern poet makes no distinction between officer and private soldier; they receive 'torques of equal splendour' – we remember the gold torques of *The Gododdin* – and German and Welshman, friend and so-called enemy, embrace. At the last, the survivor disengages himself from his rifle, as the Ancient Mariner (with whom he had earlier identified himself) had disengaged himself from his albatross. I think we are meant to infer that he, too, has expiated his guilt as a killer and, having *escaped*, must *tell*. His message, however, is not that of Aneirin and Turold: the celebration of the heroic dead, that their names may live and their example be followed. David Jones bears witness to the death of friends who never saw the men that killed them.

When Fussell calls *In Parenthesis* a work 'which uses the past not, as it often pretends to do, to shame the present, but really to ennoble it',[39] he fails to recognize that Jones's present is a battlefield on which past and future clash in unequal combat. The poet celebrates the traditional humanity his heroes show to one another, their courage in the face of almost certain death, as he execrates the inhumanity of the mechanistic forces brought against them.

Twenty-seven years after Private Jones of the Royal Welch Fusiliers escaped from that stricken field, Lieutenant Alun Lewis of the South Wales Borderers lay on an operating table in an Indian hospital. Afterwards he wrote: 'I surrendered to what Edward Thomas foresaw – the land he must enter and leave alone.'[40] He also wrote a poem, 'Burma Casualty'. In this, a wounded survivor escapes death a second time – on the operating table:

> He went alone: knew nothing: and returned
> Retching and blind with pain, and yet alive.
>
> IV
> Mending, with books and papers and a fan
> Sunlight on parquet floors and bowls of flame
> He heard quite casually that his friends were dead.
> His regiment too butchered to reform.
> And he lay in the lightness of the ward
> Thinking of all the lads the dark enfolds
> So secretly.
> And yet a man may walk
> Into and through it, and return alive.[41]

The tone is Owen's: the disarming adverb 'casually' setting up the reader for the shock of what follows: first, the general news 'that his friends were dead'; then the more specific information that, in Owen's phrase, they had died 'as cattle' – 'His regiment too *butchered* to reform'.

In another of Lewis's poems, 'The Run-In', a soldier on a landing craft is contemplating this question against the enemy, and thinking

> Always when I awake there is a little wind on my skin and
> I sweat and cannot find any consolation and cannot tell
> What point in the universe I am. There is no retention.
> Life transfers itself; the dead have friendships with the living,
> And the living often hold their profoundest loyalties with the dead.
> And most of us owe something both to the dead and the living, and
> move almost unconsciously between worlds.[42]

Aneirin, Owen, Jones, and Lewis come to us – as the four messengers came to Job – saying in turn: 'I only am escaped to tell thee.' They come to tell the living of the dead and, hearing them bear witness to how they lived and how they died, we become aware of the paradox that it is the song and not the singer that escapes. As Auden reminds us:

> The words of a dead man
> Are modified in the guts of the living.[43]

All our words were once the property of the dead. In the Preface to *In Parenthesis*, Jones says: 'I did not intend this as a "War Book" – it happens to be concerned with war.'[44] The message of the so-called 'war poet' is essentially the same as that of his fellow poet in times of so-called 'peace'. He pays his dues to the living in the currency of the dead. Over and over again we see a poet's appetite for life sharpened by an awareness of how it tasted on the tongue, sounded on the tongue, of the dead. Knowing himself a survivor – one who lives above (*super vivere*) as well as beyond the dead – he tells his listener, as the Ancient Mariner the wedding-guest: 'I only am escaped to tell thee.'

CHAPTER 3

England's epic?

Beowulf (a Scandinavian saga, albeit one brilliantly translated from Anglo-Saxon by an Irish bard)?[1] Malory's *Morte Darthur*? Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*? Doughty's *The Dawn in Britain*? No. None can compare with Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid* as England's foundational epic. Let me propose another and, to my mind, stronger candidate: *The Golden Warrior* by Hope Muntz.

Published in 1948, this was reprinted three times in its first year and twice more before its reissue in paperback in 1966. Its all-too-brief bestsellerdom was the result of fortunate timing and virtues justly celebrated in a Foreword by the doyen of British historians, G.M. Trevelyan, that begins:

> I regard it as an honour to be asked to introduce to the public this remarkable book. The author [...] has a deep knowledge and love of the island she has twice seen threatened with invasion. This is the story of the successful invasion of England long ago.
>
> It is not an ordinary historical novel, for the historical novel usually avoids the great personages and the famous scenes, and fills its canvas with imaginary characters. But this book is a Saga of Harold and William. The other personages, English and European, are historical portraits; they are subordinate to the two protagonists, but each of them stands as a clear-cut figure in the tapestry.[2]

The Golden Warrior is not 'an ordinary historical novel' in any sense. These, and even extraordinary historical novels

like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, tend to be written by novelists after a period of historical research. Hope Muntz (1897–1981), however, was a historian, Fellow of both the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Historical Society, and co-editor of a volume in the Oxford Mediaeval Texts. Having lived more than half her imaginative life with Earl Harold Godwinson and Duke William the Bastard, she astonished those expecting a scholarly monograph by producing a magnificent novel.

When Trevelyan speaks of the book's 'historical portraits', each standing 'as a clear-cut figure in the tapestry', his metaphor is at once accurate, suggestive in its allusion to the Bayeux Tapestry, and at the same time misleading. Nothing could be further from the immobility of a portrait or the two-dimensional comic/tragic strip of a mediaeval tapestry than the breathing figures in Muntz's story. Her narrative has an epic shape, a variant form of the traditional quest, as her protagonists seek and compete for 'an heirloom fashioned like the Wessex Dragon, a golden arm-ring [...] the royal ring, which all the Kings [of the English Royal House] had borne'.[3] A serpentine coil rather than a simple circlet, this has an envenomed reputation as 'a thing accursed'.[4] Two of its royal owners have been murdered before Muntz's narrative begins and when Earl Harold, receiving his father's inheritance, 'saw the royal ring, the Golden Dragon of Wessex, lying on blood-red silk',[5] the omens become audible. Resisting ambition (a key-word in the book), Harold sends the royal ring to Edgar Atheling, heir to Edward the Confessor's throne, and only after the Atheling's premature death ('coughing blood') does Harold agree to wear it.

The land symbolized by the Wessex Dragon is the prize for which the English Hector and Norman Achilles compete. Both are master strategists on the battlefield and in

the political arena at home and abroad. Well matched in physical strength and raw courage, their differences are significant and skilfully delineated. Harold, the Golden Warrior, is said to have hair 'like shining bronze',[6] while William's is 'black as coal',[7] and their styles of leadership are as different as day and night. Harold's radiant charisma inspires love and loyalty in both men and women, whereas William's dark power generates awe and fear. Both find sexual fulfilment outside the ordinances of the Church: Harold is raising a family with a much-loved handfast wife, Edith Swan-neck, until obliged to weld the halves of his kingdom together by marriage with a daughter of the northern House of Leofric; William entering into a marriage banned by the Holy See. Ever the cynical strategist, he subsequently negotiates atonement and a papal blessing on his imperial ambitions against England.

Women – mothers, wives, daughters – play major roles in Muntz's narrative, and it is as much a love story as a war story. Nothing so vividly shows the crucial difference between the protagonists as their leave-taking of their women before their final battle: William, coldly and with self-deceiving self-justification;[8] Harold, tenderly,

> his voice far off and low: 'Do you remember the mown meadow, Edith, and St. John's Eve; the dancing round the baal-fire and the songs, and then we two alone under the apple-trees? If it were sin, yet surely we loved much.'
>
> She did not answer. […]
>
> They were long silent. The King lay with his eyes closed. At last his hand that held hers loosed its hold. Edith sat unmoving. The candles guttered and went out. The fire was ashes. When she looked down, she could not see his face.
>
> King Harold rode from Nazeing after Midnight. Edith stood with the boy Harold in her arms and the old nurse beside her. They watched until the torches vanished in the deep forest.[9]

In 1064, Harold had been shipwrecked on the coast of Normandy, imprisoned by the Count of Panthieu, but ransomed by Duke William. For a time they became friends, each recognizing the other's strengths and, more importantly, the one recognizing the other's weakness: 'In mighty matters and in small,' says William, 'his heart will sway him.'[10] The recognition comes to him witnessing Harold risk his life to rescue two common soldiers from a quicksand. 'William asked him: "Why did you do it?" "I could not bear to hear them yell," said Harold.'[11] His compassion is a manifestation of a humanity reinforced by strong religious belief. Bishop Wulfstan 'was the Earl's confessor and his dearest friend'.[12] We hear nothing of the Duke's confessor. Had he wanted one (which may seem unlikely), that role would no doubt have been taken by his brother, Bishop Odo, a monster of avarice and brutality. Wulfstan, by contrast, was a good shepherd in his Master's image, a compassionate man of simple tastes and strong faith. When Harold's life was threatened by a mysterious illness, he asked Wulfstan whether he should visit the shrine in the Bishop's cathedral and there make prayers and offerings. The Bishop wrote back: 'Look higher than this place, dear son, as God shall teach you.'[13] With his letter he sent an illuminated manuscript book of Old English poems. That night Edith leant over the stricken Earl. 'She wore a little golden cross, his gift on the first night. It swung between them like a star.'[14] The star supplies the answer to Wulfstan's riddling injunction: Waltham Holy Cross, the young lovers' forest church, where 'many poor folk had found healing'.[15] Harold orders his men to take gifts to the humble shrine and there offer Masses for his recovery. Then, opening Wulfstan's book at the Bishop's marker, he reads in 'The Dream of the Rood':

> On me the Son of God suffered for a space;
> Wherefore now I rise glorious beneath the heavens,
> And I can heal all who fear me.[16]

His faith rewarded, Harold recovers and, in due course, receives the royal ring from the hand of the dying King Edward. When Duke William contests his claim, the scrupulous historian's reader already understands the complex interaction of ambition, chance, rights and wrongs, in each claimant's case. Both men are heroes of Shakespearean stature, heroes to their peoples and to each other. Both have flaws; the difference being that Harold's is a tragic flaw, long recognized by his adversary. He is undone by his most admirable qualities: compassion, sensitivity, self-knowledge. He will not allow himself to take the Holy Cross as the emblem on his standard, because he had earlier violated an oath sworn, under duress, on holy relics. His courage is heroic but, like Beowulf (hero of a poem he knows), he takes risks appropriate in a warrior, inappropriate in a king; and with the same tragic outcome. He fights his final battles under a standard, embroidered by his mother, bearing the image of a golden warrior; and when some of his men desert, there is at least an implication that they might have stood firm under the Holy Cross. The battles of Stamford Bridge and Hastings are set-pieces that will stand comparison with Stendhal's Waterloo and Tolstoy's Borodino.[17] After the King has fallen and the Duke has taken possession of 'an arm-ring wet with blood', the last of Harold's Housecarles wield their axes, chanting the words of the 'The Battle of Maldon':

> I am grown grey-hair'd; go hence I will not,
> But I here abiding with my bread-giver,
> By so loved a man look to perish.[18]

The braided themes of love and war are united after dark, as Edith searches among the stripped bodies for that of her lord.

She finds him and he is buried at dawn with her cross in his cold hand.

The Golden Warrior has a grand and intricate narrative, coiled like an arm-ring, but that alone would not make it a great novel. As with other great novels, its distinction lies in an ideal marriage of language and structure: they are one flesh. 'Ordinary historical novels' are all too often as clearly a product of their author's period as of their subject's: eighteenth-century props – crinolines and cutlasses – at variance with twentieth-century psychology and turns of phrase. Not so *The Golden Warrior*. Hope Muntz had studied the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle longer than a London clubman *The Times*, and has given us a composite, brilliantly fleshed-out, 'translation' of non-existent Anglo-Saxon and Norman chronicles of the years 1051–66. Her chapter titles set the tone: 'Of Harold's Heirship-ale', 'Of Duke William's Marriage', 'Of the Atheling'. Heirship-ale and Atheling are not 'explained' (any more than Landfather or Wayfaring Bread). Context makes the meaning clear. Muntz's sentences are short, simple and declarative, in the manner of eleventh-century chronicles. They make little use of metaphor or simile, but her speakers have a gift for the apt proverb: 'Let him slay the bear […] before he sell the bearskin'; 'There is little for the rake after the besom'; 'Small fish are better than no fish.'[19] The master-stroke that makes the masterpiece, however, will already be apparent from my quotations: the scarcity of words with a Greek or Latinate root, particularly in the mouths of Old English speakers. Muntz paints her great canvas from a sombre Anglo-Saxon palette, her rare touches of bright colour frequently symbolic – as in the 'blood-red silk' cushioning the royal ring, or the phoenix-like image at the book's end:

Odo spoke again. His words were given in the English tongue. The warriors shouted anew. The clarions and the trumpets rang.

A third time the Bishop spoke, thundering his words: 'Hail your deliverer, men of England. King William comes to make you free.'

The trumpet-calls and shouts rang out unanswered. Then a man cried aloud in English. The people stirred and murmured, their faces changed.

'What does he say?' said the Duke.

'Sire,' said Malet, 'he says their King cannot be slain, that he will come to save them.'

Odo said to Duke William: 'Have the fellow seized. You will not win this people with fair words.'

'Let him go,' said William. 'Let them all depart.'

He turned his horse and rode at a foot-pace towards the camp. His Barons and his captains followed. The dawn wind struck cold to their wounds; weariness beyond telling was upon them.

William turned his head and looked across the sea. The sun rose up in splendour and the day grew bright. He saw far out the sails of warships, coming from Normandy.[20]

Hope Muntz's Godwinsaga is an epic in everything but the texture of its telling. Herbert Read called David Jones's prose poem, *In Parenthesis*, 'as near a great epic of the [Great] war as ever the war generation will reach'.[21] In the same way, and by the same standard, *The Golden Warrior* may be called as near a great epic of the Norman Conquest as any generation will reach. That said, it is tempting to imagine the national epic England *might* have had if Thomas Hardy had taken Harold and William, rather than Wellington and Napoleon, as the protagonists of *The Dynasts/An Epic-Drama*. Perhaps Yeats, author himself of a would-be national epic, *The Wanderings of Oisin*, should have the last word:

> Though the great song return no more
> There's keen delight in what we have:
> The rattle of pebbles on the shore
> Under the receding wave.[22]

CHAPTER 4

Who was Rupert Brooke?

This was a question asked by the poet's oldest friend forty years after his death. Geoffrey Keynes, having selected and edited his letters, had just sent a set of proofs to each of his fellow literary trustees and to a few of Brooke's other friends. To his consternation, several responded with horror, saying in effect: 'The letters to me show the *real* Rupert, but his posturing in the others distorts the portrait out of all recognition.' In vain did Keynes point out that they each regarded the letters to him or to her (Frances Cornford was one of those most troubled) as expressing the *real* Rupert and shook their heads over the rest. In vain did he remind them of Brooke's undergraduate letter to *him* saying 'I attempt to be "all things to all men"; rather "cultured" among the cultured, faintly athletic among athletes, a little blasphemous among blasphemers, slightly insincere to myself …'[1] So strong was the feeling among the poet's friends that Keynes's selection misrepresented him that the book was put on ice, and Christopher Hassall was commissioned to write a biography that would reveal the *real* Rupert Brooke.

What is interesting here is not that he adopted a different tone in writing to different people – we all do that – but that they cared so passionately that the world should know the *real* Rupert, *their* Rupert. It is worth remembering, too, who they were, these friends who valued him so highly; friends

that included the Asquiths, the Cornfords, Hugh Dalton, E.M. Forster, David Garnett, Edmund Gosse, Henry James, Geoffrey and Maynard Keynes, Cathleen Nesbitt, Stanley Spencer, Edward Thomas, and Virginia Woolf.

Looking for an answer to the question, 'Who was Rupert Brooke?' I went back to the testimony of his friends and found a common denominator that had hitherto escaped my attention – and the attention of most who never met him. Geoffrey and Margaret Keynes used to say how funny he was, and in a letter of 1905 Rupert asks Geoffrey, 'Have I not often made you laugh?'[2] Frances Cornford wrote, in a poem entitled 'Rupert Brooke':

> Perhaps
> A thousand years ago some Greek boy died,
> So lovely-bodied, so adored, so young,
> Like us they grieved and treasured little things
> (And laughed with tears remembering his laughter).[3]

David Garnett remembered him as 'tall and well built, loosely put together, with a careless animal grace and a face made for smiling and sudden laughter':[4] while A.C. Benson recalled him laughing 'rather huddled, in his chair'.[5] Sybil Pye wrote: 'His gay unembarrassed laugh of pleasure still rings in one's head – one knew so well the sound of it.'[6]

Brooke himself set great store by laughter, writing to Jacques Raverat from the South Seas:

> laughter is the very garland on the head of friendship. I will not love, and I will not be loved. But I will have friends round me continually, all the days of my life, and in whatever lands I may be. So we shall laugh and eat and sing and go great journeys […][7]

Returning to England in 1914, he was introduced to Lascelles Abercrombie and reported to Ka Cox: 'He laughs very well.'[8] There is much talk of laughter in Brooke's letters

and much occasion for it. It is hard not to warm to the Rugby schoolboy who, suffering from pink-eye, explains that 'The disease comes of gazing too often on Butterfield's architecture';[9] or to the dying man who, informed that Dean Inge had read his sonnet 'The Soldier' aloud in St Paul's, praising it but saying 'it fell somewhat short of Isaiah's vision', responded that 'he was sorry Inge did not think him quite as good as Isaiah'.[10] I suspect a fear that this Brooke – the laughing Brooke – would be overshadowed by the tormented lover may have been a factor in the adverse reaction to Keynes's original *Selected Letters*. The figure to emerge from Hassall's biography (1964) and Keynes's edition of *The Letters* (1968) was much more complicated, confused, and credible than the 'young Apollo' of Marsh's Memoir in the *Collected Poems* (1918). Most critical attention since has tended to concentrate on the tormented lover of 1911–13, losing sight of the happier man who, in the years before and after, wrote the poems by which he is today remembered.

The quality Brooke looked for in his friends he celebrated in a review of the 1912 edition of his favourite poet:

> as Donne saw everything through his intellect, it follows, in some degree, that he could see everything humorously. He could see it the other way, too. But humour was always at his command. It was part of his realism; especially in the bulk of his work, his poems dealing with love. There is no true lover but has sometimes laughed at his mistress, and often at himself. But you would not guess that from the love-songs of many poets. Their poems run the risk of looking a little flat. They are unreal by the side of Donne. For while his passion enabled him to see the face of love, his humour allowed him to look at it from the other side. So we behold his affairs in the round.
>
> But it must not appear that his humour, or his wit, and his passion, alternated. The other two are his passion's handmaids. It should not be forgotten that Donne was one of the first great English satirists, and the

most typical and prominent figure of a satirical age. Satire comes with the Bible of truth in one hand and sword of laughter in the other.[11]

In an earlier essay, Brooke had quoted the remark of Hugo to Baudelaire, 'You have created a new shudder', and went on to suggest that one might say of Ernest Dowson, 'He has created a new sigh.'[12] Similarly, one might say of Brooke that he created a new laugh. Laughter is audible in no less than a third of the poems and fragments in Keynes's edition, a statistic doubly surprising given the nature of his central subject. This emerges in one of his earliest poems, 'It Is Well',[13] written when he was sixteen. It begins:

> Nay, love, I weep not, but laugh o'er my dead,
> My dreams long perished; though I forfeited
> To save thee sorrow, joy unutterable –
> I would not have it otherwise; 'twas well.

I suspect *that* laughter was meant to sound despairing, but it is possible to hear it also as self-mocking in wry acknowledgement of the nineties' archaic diction, the dreams and sorrow borrowed from Yeats and others. The laughter and death, life and death, juxtaposed in the first line re-emerge in the poem's last stanza:

> And, when our Death dawns pale, and we must go,
> Though infinite space may part us, this I know;
> If, looking upward through the bars of Hell,
> I see that face in Heaven, it will be well.

We notice, however, that the vision is conditional: '*If* looking upward'. The speaker may not – or may not be able to – look upward.

Two years later, flaunting the fashionable nihilism of the decadent poets of the nineties, Brooke addresses one of their favourite themes in his poem 'Man':

> Time drew towards its ending: every where
> Bent with their little sorrows and old pain,
> Men cried to God.

As Apocalypse approaches, the poet records that cry:

> Why are we vexed with yearning? Surely it is
> Enough for us to crouch about the fire
> And laugh the irretrievable hours away,
> Heedless of what may wait us in the gloom,
> The muttering night beyond? Yet though we strive
> So to live in the present and forget,
> Ever the voice returning wakes again
> The old insatiate yearning in our hearts,
> Whispering words incomprehensible,
> Infinity, Eternity, and – God.

Man's lament ends with a call to the incomprehensible Godhead for an incomprehensibly 'eternal End'. Brooke's letters of this time play with eschatological themes: 'With advancing years I find one's thoughts turn increasingly towards the Hereafter and the Serious Things of Life.'[14] And again: 'I love to think of myself as seated on the greyness of Lethe's banks, and showering ghosts of epigrams and shadowy paradoxes upon the assembled wan-eyed dead.'[15] A sonnet of 1905, beginning 'When on my night of life the Dawn shall break', shows him playing once again with just such a fantasy. The beloved is more sharply imagined than in the earlier dawn of 'It Is Well'. She now has a 'brave smile', 'bright swift eyes', and a Yeatsian, Pre-Raphaelite, 'pale cloud of […] tossing hair', but the earlier conditional ('If, looking upward … / I see that face in Heaven') reappears reformulated:

> Only – I fear me that I may not find
> That brave smile […]

The death of God is a recurrent theme of Brooke's early poems, but the Great Incomprehensible (and His Mother) return in a sonnet in 1907, 'My Song', to preside over another vision of the last dawn, another version of the beloved's entry into the Hereafter:

> Yes, in the wonder of the last day-break,
> God's Mother, on the threshold of His house,
> Shall welcome in your white and perfect soul,
> Kissing your brown hair softly for my sake;
> And God's own hand will lay, as aureole,
> My song, a flame of scarlet, on your brows.

We are not told whether the poet is to be present at the investiture, but he is certainly and centrally present in the final retake of this scene, a sonnet written in April 1909:

> Oh! Death will find me, long before I tire
> Of watching you; and swing me suddenly
> Into the shade and loneliness and mire
> Of the last land! There, waiting patiently,
>
> One day, I think, I'll feel the cool wind blowing,
> See a slow light across the Stygian tide,
> And hear the Dead about me stir, unknowing,
> And tremble. And *I* shall know that you have died,
>
> And watch you, a broad-browed and smiling dream,
> Pass, light as ever, through the lightless host,
> Quietly ponder, start, and sway, and gleam –
> Most individual and bewildering ghost! –
>
> And turn, and toss your brown delightful head
> Amusedly, among the ancient Dead.

This is a dramatic advance on anything Brooke had written before – a fact he recognised by putting it first in his first book of poems. The voice is a relaxed voice of 1909 rather than a literary voice of the 1890s. The speaker is now at the

centre of the poem, and the solemnity of the occasion – a solemnity that had made the earlier poems portentous – is held in check by the good-humoured tone and the fact that the *ghost* is good-humoured, a 'smiling dream'. Seen first as a 'a slow light' in the shade of the last land, she passes 'light as ever, through the lightless host', her light and lightness lightly re-emphasized when he sees her

> turn, and toss your brown delightful head
> Amusedly, among the ancient Dead.

Amusedly – the key word – is quintessential Brooke, as is the ironic counterpoint on which the poem comes to rest. Alliteration links that adverb to 'the ancient Dead' (just as the new ghost is linked to the old), but the fact that she views them *amusedly* mocks and calls in question their ancient authority.

Brooke himself continually questioned, and increasingly denied, the ancient and modern authorities, positing the existence of an afterlife. His handling of this theme takes on the character of a debate. 'The Hill', a sonnet of 1910, rejects the comforting mythology of 'Oh! Death will find me'. The setting is *this* world, which the poet endows with the splendour ascribed by others to the *next*:

> 'And when we die
> All's over that is ours; and life burns on
> Through other lovers, other lips,' said I,
> 'Heart of my heart, our heaven is now, is won!'
>
> 'We are Earth's best, that learnt her lesson here.
> Life is our cry. We have kept the faith!' we said;
> 'We shall go down with unreluctant tread
> Rose-crowned into the darkness!' … Proud we were,
> And laughed, that had such brave true things to say.
> – And then you suddenly cried, and turned away.

Brooke's rhetoric here gets the better of him, and the turn from laughter to tears is markedly less successful than the earlier sonnet's turn from solemnity to amusement.

It is generally agreed that his best period was his *Wanderjahr* in the South Seas, and finishing a poem 'Mutability' begun in London, he puts both sides of the debate. The ancient Dead are quoted first:

> They say there's a high windless world and strange,
> Out of the wash of days and temporal tide,
> Where Faith and Good, Wisdom and Truth abide,
> *Æterna corpora*, subject to no change.

The counter-argument, however, carries the day and, as in so many of Brooke's other poems, *laugh* seems synonymous with *life*:

> Dear, we know only that we sigh, kiss, smile;
> Each kiss lasts but the kissing; and grief goes over;
> Love has no habitation but the heart.
> Poor straws! on the dark flood we catch awhile,
> Cling, and are borne into the night apart.
> The laugh dies with the lips, 'Love' with the lover.

The debate continues in two other sonnets of 1913. 'Suggested by some of the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research' and 'Clouds' both appear to reject the idea of a remote heaven but settle for an intermediate state not perhaps so very different. In the sestet of 'Clouds', the ancient Dead and the speaker seem to agree:

> They say that the Dead die not, but remain
> Near to the rich heirs of their grief and mirth.
> I think they ride the calm mid-heaven, as these,
> In wise majestic melancholy train,
> And watch the moon, and the still-raging seas,
> And men, coming and going on the earth.

The authorities, the ancient Dead, are cited again in the poem 'Heaven', only now it is not '*They* say' but '*Fish* say':

> Oh! never fly conceals a hook,
> Fish say, in the Eternal Brook,
> But more than mundane weeds are there,
> And mud, celestially fair;
> Fat caterpillars drift around,
> And Paradisal grubs are found;
> Unfading moths, immortal flies,
> And the worm that never dies.
> And in that Heaven of all their wish,
> There shall be no more land, say fish.

This is a more cunning version of the debate than any hitherto, in that the authorities seem to have the floor to themselves, but of course their testimony is invalidated by the speaker's satiric voice. The targets of his satire are generally taken to be Platonism and Christianity, but there is I think another target: that signalled by 'the Eternal Brook', the poet so attracted to representations of an afterlife. This poem is not only a more cunning but also a more successful version of the Eternal Brooke's eternal debate, partly as a result of his switch to the shorter line. The slow march of the iambic pentameter encouraged his tendency to indulge in what, with characteristic self-mockery, he described as 'the purest Nineteenth Century grandiose thoughts, about the Destiny of Man, the Irresistibility of Fate, the Doom of Nations, the fact that Death awaits us All, and so forth. Wordsworth Redivivus. Oh dear! oh dear!'[16]

He continued to have such grandiose thoughts, but in his best poems he engages them with 'the sword of laughter'. Both the tone and the rhetorical structure of 'Tiare Tahiti' owe something to Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'. Brooke's mistress, the Mamua of his poem, was not coy so he does not

have to persuade her to surrender to his advances, but he opens with another playful vision of a Platonic eternity:

> Mamua, when our laughter ends,
> And hearts and bodies, brown as white,
> Are dust about the doors of friends,
> Or scent a-blowing down the night,
> Then, oh! then, the wise agree,
> Comes our immortality.
> Mamua, there waits a land
> Hard for us to understand.
> Out of time, beyond the sun,
> All are one in Paradise,
> You and Pupure are one,
> And Taü, and the ungainly wise.
> There the Eternals are, and there
> The Good, the Lovely, and the True,
> And Types, whose earthly copies were
> The foolish broken things we knew;
> There is the Face, whose ghosts we are;
> The real, the never-setting Star;
> And the Flower, of which we love
> Faint and fading shadows here;
> Never a tear, but only Grief;
> Dance, but not the limbs that move;
> Songs in Song shall disappear;
> Instead of lovers, Love shall be;
> For hearts, Immutability;
> And there, on the Ideal Reef,
> Thunders the Everlasting Sea!

The first movement of the poem puts the arguments of 'the wise' but simultaneously undermines them. Its conclusion:

> And there's an end, I think, of kissing,
> When our mouths are one with Mouth …

is at once more light-hearted and more tender than the comparable conclusion of Marvell's first movement:

> The grave's a fine and private place,
> But none, I think, do there embrace.

The wise had celebrated

> Types, whose earthly copies were
> The foolish broken things we knew;

but in the poem's second movement Brooke introduces a re-evaluation of their terms. Their wisdom is the 'foolishness' to be washed away 'in the water's soft caress', the Pacific tide that hears and answers 'the calling of the moon', unlike 'the Everlasting Sea' of the Platonic realm where 'moons are lost in endless Day'. The poem earns its conclusion – 'There's little comfort in the wise' – and convinces us (I doubt if Mamua needed convincing) that there is more than comfort in those 'foolish things' that time will break.

'Tiare Tahiti' is dated February 1914. Brooke left Tahiti in April, writing to Cathleen Nesbitt:

> It was only yesterday, when I knew that the Southern Cross had left me, that I suddenly realised that I'd left behind those lovely places and lovely people, perhaps for ever. I reflected that there was surely nothing else like them in this world and very probably nothing in the next […][17]

Four months later, the outbreak of war prompted a general resurgence of 'grandiose thoughts about the Destiny of Man, the Irresistibility of Fate, the Doom of Nations, the fact that Death awaits us All, and so forth'. In South Africa, Isaac Rosenberg, envisioning an exhausted civilization rejuvenated by conflict, ended his poem 'On Receiving News of the War':

> O! ancient crimson curse!
> Corrode, consume.
> Give back this universe
> Its pristine bloom.[18]

In France, Wilfred Owen used the same word at the same time to develop a similar natural image in the sestet of his sonnet '1914':

> For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
> And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
> An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
> A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
> But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
> Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.[19]

In England, Brooke began work on the first of the 1914 sonnets that were to make his name. Paradoxically entitled 'Peace', it celebrates the discovery of a cause, a vision resembling Owen's and Rosenberg's: the regeneration of 'a world grown old and cold and weary'. The solemnity of the occasion prompted grandiose thoughts and, forsaking Marvellian tetrameters for Tennysonian pentameters, Brooke yielded to the temptations of a high style that in his better poems he had resisted. Despite the change of style, however, his subject remains the same: the place of life and laughter after death. His fourth sonnet, 'The Dead', comes to the same conclusion as 'Tiare Tahiti':

> These had seen movement, and heard music; known
> Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
> Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
> Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.
>
> There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
> And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,
> Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
> And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
> Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
> A width, a shining peace, under the night.

What is new in this is the closing metaphor's implication that human laughter has returned to its natural source, is now a

part of nature. Although 'Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance', sun and moon will in time release them and the changing winds blow them to laughter once again.

Brooke's fifth and most famous sonnet reverts, in its sestet, to the Platonic position he had so often mocked:

> And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
> A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
> Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given […]

'The Soldier' would not have had the success it has had if it were not, in its way, a good poem, but I wonder whether some of the unease that over the years has crept into its readers' response may not be related to a lack of conviction on the part of its author as he tried to convince himself of the existence of an afterlife in which he did not believe. The irony is, of course, that whether or not Brooke *is* now 'A pulse in the eternal mind', he *does* give back, in the best of his poems:

> the thoughts by England given;
> Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
> And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
> In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Rupert Brooke is not a War Poet. He is a poet of peace, a celebrant of friendship, love, and laughter.

CHAPTER 5

Christ and the soldier

Siegfried Sassoon is commonly called a 'War Poet' – hardly a satisfactory label at the best of times, and more than usually unsatisfactory in Sassoon's case. But if he is not simply a War Poet, what is he? Late in life, he wrote to Dame Felicitas Corrigan, the nun who had guided him into the Roman Catholic Church: 'almost all [the critics] have ignored the fact that I am a religious poet'.[1]

A review of the evidence for such a claim must start with biography, especially in the case of a poet whose autobiographical writings are a necessary complement to his poems. Surviving the war, Sassoon recovered quickly from his wounds, but the psychological damage war had inflicted took much longer to heal. By 1926, however, he was able to begin work on the obsessive autobiographical enterprise which was to occupy the rest of his life. The first three volumes (later collected under the title, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*) were *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), and *Sherston's Progress* (1936). This trilogy was followed by two volumes covering his early life: *The Old Century and Seven More Years* (1938) and *The Weald of Youth* (1942). A final volume, *Siegfried's Journey* (1945), dealt with his literary activity during the Great War and after – a subject almost totally omitted from the Sherston trilogy. Other subjects totally

omitted have since emerged with the publication of his diaries and the biographies by Moorcroft Wilson, Roberts, and Egremont: a long period of tormented homosexuality, a marriage, the birth of a son, and the breakdown of his marriage. In 1957 he became a Roman Catholic and in 1967, at the age of eighty, he died.

Paul Fussell sums up Sassoon's career: 'Exactly half his life he had spent plowing and re-plowing the earlier half, motivated by what – dichotomizing to the end – he calls "my queer craving to revisit the past and give the modern world the slip". The life he cared to consider ran from 1895 to 1920 only.'[2] Sassoon's diaries show he cared that his successors – though not his contemporaries – *should* consider his life beyond 1920. Fussell is right, however, about Sassoon's dichotomizing; what he calls his 'binary vision'. The last of the memoirs published in his lifetime, *Siegfried's Journey*, ends with a long shot of its hero: 'Picturing him in the clear afternoon light, in his New York straw hat, with the National Gallery in the background, I can almost believe that I have been looking at a faded photograph.'[3] The Prelude to Sassoon's *Diaries 1920–1922* opens: 'Writing the last words of a book, more than four years ago, I left a man – young for his age, though nearly thirty-four – standing in Trafalgar Square, vaguely conscious that his career had reached a point where he must begin it all over again.'[4] The careful splicing of that film calls attention to its double image – he and I – and, when the soldier–poet makes his choice at the crossroads (appropriately commemorating a battle), he takes with him a troubling sense of doubleness. The Prelude ends: 'Inconsistency – double life – as usual – trying to be serious about life and work – buying a horse and dreaming of winning the Vale of the White Horse point-to-point.' The way in which this binary vision operates, ordering

memory and imagination into structural polarities, becomes clear as we follow him in his ploughing and re-ploughing.

At the start of *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, we are told: 'My father and mother died before I was capable of remembering them.'[5] Having removed them from the scene – perhaps because he was embarrassed to speak of their separation – he replaces them with surrogate parents, Aunt Evelyn and Dixon, her groom; *he* determined to make a man of Master George, *she* fearful that he will break his neck on one of the ponies – and then horses – to which Dixon introduces him. Deprived of parental love, and '[a]s a consequence of my loneliness', he says, 'I created in my childish day-dreams an ideal companion who became much more of a reality than such unfriendly boys as I encountered at Christmas parties.'[6] The search for that ideal companion leads – by way of a succession of friendships with admired figures – ultimately, I believe, to his religious conversion, the union with God.

Fussell says that four-fifths of *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* is pastoral romance, adding perceptively that

> The reader sensitive to the thematic architecture of the book will do his own remembering […] of the numerous prewar 'stand-to's', delighted anticipatory dawn-watches, of young Sherston back in Kent. One is especially memorable, on the morning of his triumphant performance at the Flower-Show Cricket Match, on a day destined to bring him nothing but joy:
>
> > I loved the early morning; it was luxurious to lie there, half-awake, and half-aware that there was a pleasantly eventful day in front of me. … Soon I was up and staring at the tree-tops which loomed motionless against a flushed and brightening sky. … There was no sound except the first chirruping of the sparrows in the ivy. [Downstairs] there was the familiar photograph of 'Love and Death', by Watts, with its secret meaning which I could never quite formulate in a thought, though it often touched me with a vague emotion

> of pathos. When I unlocked the door into the garden the early morning air met me with its cold purity […] How little I knew of the enormous world beyond the valley and those low green hills.[7]

In the final two chapters of the book, we follow George Sherston out of the valley, from hunting field to battlefield where he will begin to learn the meaning of Love and Death. The polarities are starkly contrasted, but we perceive numerous cunning connections between these disparate spheres. George had grown up in a society conscious of its imperial and martial past. There was General FitzAlan – 'He'd been in the Indian Mutiny' – and Jack Barchard – 'recently returned from the Boer War'. George acquires on the hunting field the courage he will display so conspicuously on the battlefield. We overhear a Master of Foxhounds urging an audience of hunt supporters 'to do everything in their power to eliminate the most dangerous enemy of the hunting-man' – he meant 'barbed wire'. In the final chapter, barbed wire appears as an enemy of the fighting man. A telegram informs George that his boyhood friend Stephen has been killed. He shows it to his latest friend, Dick, and shortly afterwards Dick is killed – on a wiring-party. Sassoon's fox-hunting man becomes a Boche-hunting one, as George goes out on patrol determined to take revenge. The polarities are cunningly juxtaposed as we leave him, 'staring across at the enemy I'd never seen. Somewhere out of sight beyond the splintered tree-tops of Hidden Wood a bird had begun to sing. Without knowing why, I remembered that it was Easter Sunday. Standing in that dismal ditch, I could find no consolation in the thought that Christ was risen.'[8]

Christ was risen, but Dick has fallen. George, at this stage, has no belief in a Christian afterlife and is consistently critical of the role of the Established Church: 'The Brigade chaplain',

he wrote, 'did not exhort us to love our enemies. He was content to lead off with the hymn "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds"!'[9]

The dynamics of Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* are, as Fussell says, 'penetration and withdrawal: repeated entrances into the center of trench experience, repeated returns to the world of "home"'. The grotesque disparity between these worlds, and the fact that they were so close, make this the dominant polarity of the book. In Spring 1916, Sherston leaves the trenches, and what he calls 'my personal grievance against the Germans', to go on a course behind the lines. Returning, he plays a courageous part in a disastrous raid, wins the Military Cross, and is granted seven days' leave, which he spends in pastoral Kent. Back, then, to watch in the worst day's fighting of the war, the opening of the Battle of the Somme, from a ridge some five hundred yards behind the British trenches. Between 9 o'clock in the morning and 3.30 in the afternoon of 1 July 1916, the British Army lost 19,000 men killed and 38,000 wounded. On 3 July, Sassoon was himself involved in heavy fighting but, shortly after, was invalided home for seven months with what was diagnosed as enteritis but was probably typhoid. Returning to the Front in April 1917, he was shot through the shoulder and invalided once more. 'At Charing Cross a woman handed me a bunch of flowers and a leaflet by the Bishop of London who earnestly advised me to lead a clean life and attend Holy Communion.'[10] Such bitter ironies, such wilful ignorance at home of the horrors of the Front, lead Sherston to a momentous decision. 'It was', he says, 'a case of direct inspiration; I had, so to speak, received the call, and the editor of the *Unconservative Weekly* [H.W. Massingham, editor of the *Nation*] seemed the most likely man to put me on the shortest road to martyrdom.'[11] The religious

phraseology of 'call' and 'martyrdom' – for all its defensive irony – is revealing. He makes the public protest that he expects, and perhaps hopes, will lead to a well-publicized court-martial, but the book's final irony is the futility and ultimate failure of that protest.

In case anyone should miss the allusion in the title of the last volume in the trilogy, *Sherston's Progress*, Sassoon adds an epigraph from *Pilgrim's Progress*: 'I told him I was a Pilgrim going to the Celestial City.' The next step on that road was the shell-shock hospital, Craiglockhart, to which he had been committed by the military medical authorities. He arrived there, he says,

> still inclined to regard myself in the role of a 'ripe man of martyrdom.' But the unhistoric part of my mind remembered that the neurologist member of my medical board had mentioned someone called Rivers. 'Rivers will look after you when you get there.' […] Rivers was evidently some sort of great man: anyhow his name had obvious free associations with pleasant landscapes and unruffled estuaries.[12]

W.H.R. Rivers, a distinguished neurologist, becomes over the five months of Sassoon's stay at the hospital the most important of his ideal companions,[13] a substitute for the father he never knew. Another companion crucial to his development was Wilfred Owen, a genuine shell-shock case (as Sassoon was not). He is not mentioned in *Sherston's Progress* – though he is in *Siegfried's Journey* – but it is hard to believe that Owen, with his strong religious background and beliefs, did not take the would-be martyr further along the road to the Celestial City. At all events, Sherston/Sassoon comes to believe that a different form of martyrdom is required of him. He must return to his men and, if necessary, give his life for them. Dichotomizing still, he concludes that 'going back to the War as soon as possible was my only

chance of peace'. He returns to the Front, again is shot, again survives, and again has failed to make himself a martyr. Rivers visits him in hospital, and *Sherston's Progress* ends with the wisdom that he brings: 'He did not tell me that I had done my best to justify his belief in me. He merely made me feel that he took all that for granted, and now we must go on to something better still. And this was the beginning of the new life toward which he had shown me the way.'[14] The veiled religious phraseology – 'the new life', 'the way' – is the more interesting in that it would be another twenty years before Sassoon would come within sight of the Celestial City and, entering the Roman Catholic Church, would have his last lesson in the secret meaning of Love and Death.

The trilogy, focusing on the man of action, makes virtually no mention of the poet or his poems, though even the fox-hunting boy had been as committed to his writing as to his riding. His mother had introduced her son to Eddie Marsh, Winston Churchill's private secretary, friend and patron of the poets whose work he was to include in the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies (the first of them published in 1912). Marsh introduced Sassoon to a number of their contributors, among them Rupert Brooke, and his initial reaction – as reported in *The Weald of Youth* – is revealing:

> The unromantic and provocative character of Brooke's 1911 volume had produced a vividly disturbing effect on my mind. Slow to recognize its abundant graces, I was prevented – by my prejudice against what I designated 'modern ugliness' – from perceiving his lovely and never prettified work as it really was.[15]

Sassoon was a true Georgian, never a modernist. In 1922, he 'looked at a few pages of James Joyce's new and enormous novel and found it repellent', and though happy to have T.S. Eliot as his publisher, he never cared for his poetry.

The title of his first 'war poem', 'Absolution',[16] written in mid-1915, leads one to expect a religious theme, but far from having anything to do with the forgiveness of sins, it involves the freeing of the eyes – to see what? 'Beauty shines in all that we can see.' In confusing contradiction, the speaker acknowledges

> Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,
> And loss of things desired […]

(hardly a prophetic reckoning of the cost of the years 1914–18) but, he consoles himself, 'all these must pass'. In the meantime, 'We are the happy legion' – an echo of the public-school classroom – and 'What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?' When his own brother, Hamo, was killed at Gallipoli, his elegy ended with a similarly optimistic and, it must be said, confused blending of pagan classical and Christian:

> 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 laurell'd head
> And through your victory I shall win the light.[17]

The title of his first poem to be written from experience of the front line, 'The Redeemer',[18] again seems to promise a Christian theme, an expectation not fulfilled by the first, scene-setting stanza:

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

The graphic realism of this – much more down-to-earth than Rupert Brooke's 'modern ugliness' – disguises the underlying dichotomy of darkness and light, a dichotomy dramatically brought into prominence in the stanzas that follow:

> I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;
> A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,
> And lit the face of what had been a form
> Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;
> I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare;
> And leaning forward from His burdening task,
> Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine
> Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
> Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine.
>
> No thorny crown, only a woollen cap
> He wore – an English soldier […]

This is a powerful image, but the longer we look at it, the less convincing it becomes. Like countless other representations of the infantryman as Christ laying down his life for his friends – representations not only in poems but in sermons and leading articles – the similarity dissolves as we remember that infantrymen carry more than planks, and that Christ endorsed the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.' We sense some suppressed recognition of this when, in the last stanza, Sassoon's speaker repeats his assertion. He seems to protest too much:

> I say that He was Christ, who wrought to bless
> All groping things with freedom bright as air,
> And with His mercy washed and made them fair.
> Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,
> While we began to struggle along the ditch;
> And someone flung his burden in the muck,
> Mumbling: 'O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!'

For all its bad theology, the poem does have a certain dramatic force – much of it derived from the explosive colloquialism of

the last line. This use of direct speech, learnt from Sassoon's reading of his admired Thomas Hardy in 1914, brings us literally down to earth, whereas the ending of 'Absolution' had left us uncomfortably in the air.

The theological and stylistic limitations of 'The Redeemer', written before the Battle of the Somme, stand out more sharply if it is compared with 'Christ and the Soldier',[19] written a month after Sassoon's experience of that terrible first of July. It begins:

> The straggled soldier halted – stared at Him –
> Then clumsily dumped down upon his knees,
> Gasping, 'O blessed crucifix, I'm beat!'
> And Christ, still sentried by the seraphim,
> Near the front-line, between two splintered trees,
> Spoke him: 'My son, behold these hands and feet.'
>
> The soldier eyed Him upward, limb by limb,
> Paused at the Face; then muttered, 'Wounds like these
> Would shift a bloke to Blighty just a treat!'
> Christ, gazing downward, grieving and ungrim,
> Whispered, 'I made for you the mysteries,
> Beyond all the battles moves the Paraclete.'

This is incomparably more dramatic than anything he had written before. The figure on the Crucifix is seen through the eyes of the astonished soldier, 'sentried by the seraphim', and the immeasurable distance between the two speakers is brilliantly, satirically, captured by their two dictions:

> 'Wounds like these
> Would shift a bloke to Blighty just a treat!'
> Christ, gazing downward, grieving and ungrim,
> Whispered, 'I made for you the mysteries,
> Beyond all the battles moves the Paraclete.'

Christ should have known that the soldier would not have known a Paraclete from a Paradox.

In the second part of the poem, when the soldier says: 'O Christ Almighty, stop this bleeding fight!'

> Christ asked all pitying, 'Can you put no trust
> In my known word that shrives each faithful head?
> Am I not resurrection, life and light?'

In part three, at the third time of asking, the soldier says:

> 'But be you for both sides? I'm paid to kill
> And if I shoot a man his mother grieves.
> Does that come into what your teaching tells?'

Not surprisingly, the figure on the Cross is silent and the soldier has the last word:

> 'Lord Jesus, ain't you got no more to say?'
> Bowed hung that head below the crown of thorns.
> The soldier shifted, and picked up his pack,
> And slung his gun, and stumbled on his way.
> 'O God,' he groaned, 'why ever was I born?' …
> The battle boomed, and no reply came back.

The indignation that, like an electrical current, generates the spark between the positive and negative poles of this poem provides the power behind most of Sassoon's better poems of the war years. Almost all are structured around a central dichotomy, and frequently this involves the juxtaposition of innocent Young and guilty Old: the boys and the Bishop in the scathingly anti-clerical 'They'; the boys and the General in the anti-High-Command 'The General'; the corpses and the chorus girls in the anti-Home-Front 'Blighters'; or that other variant of the same polarization of men and women, 'Glory of Women':[20]

> 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.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.
You can't believe that British troops 'retire'
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses – blind with blood.
O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

Like many of Sassoon's later war poems, this is launched at the reader like a grenade. The sudden switch from British women to German mother detonates the brutal irony of the last sentence, whereby the one mother is knitting socks for a son already trodden into mud by the feet of those presumably wearing socks knitted by the other mothers. The German mother is presented ambiguously: we sense that the speaker both pities her and blames her for the reasons that he blames the British women. He blames them for believing 'That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace', but who invented chivalry, celebrated it, and taught women to celebrate it? Men. Sassoon may present the German mother ambiguously, but no such ambiguity attends his presentation of German sons. In 'Christ and the Soldier', the soldier had asked the Son of God: 'be you for both sides?' He had received no answer, but Sassoon leaves us in no doubt that *he* is for both sides: his concern, his tenderness, is for the young victims of the old men on both sides. Like Charles Sorley before him, Wilfred Owen and David Jones after him, he stresses the similarities rather than the differences of the front-line soldiers who face each other in their trenches. In 'A Night Attack',[21] he makes this point in characteristically dichtomizing fashion. A group of British soldiers are talking:

One says 'The bloody Bosche has got the knock;
And soon they'll crumple up and chuck their games.
We've got the beggars on the run at last!'
Then I remembered someone that I'd seen
Dead in a squalid, miserable ditch,
Heedless of toiling feet that trod him down.
He was a Prussian with a decent face,
Young, fresh, and pleasant, so I dare to say.
No doubt he loathed the war and longed for peace,
And cursed our souls because we'd killed his friends.

Robert Graves, attempting to explain Sassoon's sympathy for such victims, once wrote with brutal frankness that, as a homosexual, he felt about a battlefield strewn with dead men much as he, Graves, would feel about a battlefield strewn with dead women. There may be truth in this, but it fails to acknowledge the emotions of pity, caritas, and respect for human dignity displayed throughout Sassoon's poetry and prose. It would seem that, in a sense, the pressures and challenges of the war held the divided warrior together, but that when he had taken off his Sam Browne belt for the last time, he felt his selves to be coming apart. One dreamt of writing a Proustian masterpiece, but the other, a puritanical censor, forbade that. In due course, he retired – in both civilian and the military senses of that verb – to live the life of a reclusive, eighteenth-century country gentleman.

In 1957, he made what he called his 'unconditional surrender' to God and, if the devotional poems of his last years lack the vitality and power of those written during – and, later, about – the Great War, that is because he was, by nature, a poet of polarity and protest rather than of union and acceptance. Whatever one thinks of his last poems, however, his war poems surely justify his claim to be a religious poet.

CHAPTER 6

Owen's afterlife

When, on New Year's Eve 1917, Wilfred Owen proudly told his mother 'I am a poet's poet',[1] he spoke more truly than he knew. He meant, as he wrote, that he was 'held peer by the Georgians', poets associated with the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies edited by Edward Marsh. His work had been praised first (and for him most importantly) by Siegfried Sassoon, and then by Robert Graves and Harold Monro.

We can see him now as 'a poet's poet' in two other senses, only one of which he would have recognized. As a boy, he had bound himself apprentice to a Master, John Keats, and by close study and emulation grafted his own early work onto the Romantic tradition. It was a fortunate – not to say inspired – choice, because he and Keats had more in common, in terms of temperament and talent, than he could have known. Owen warmed to the sensuality and musicality of the older poet, and Keats's physicality (heightened by his study of anatomy and experience of illness) accorded with his apprentice's own precocious awareness of the human body. Owen's earliest extant poem, 'To Poesy' (written in 1909–10),[2] owes much to the theme and diction of Keats's 'The Fall of Hyperion' and speaks of arms, face, eyes, hands, heart, tongue, brow, brain. 'Uriconium' (written in 1913) anticipates even more clearly the tender physicality of Owen's mature work. Porphyro, in Keats's 'Eve of St Agnes', had 'set / A table'

with delicacies for the sleeping Madeline. This would seem to be subconsciously recalled by the twenty-year-old Owen contemplating the excavated ruins of the Roman city of Uriconium, which, with its inhabitants (his guidebook told him), 'perished by fire and sword':

> For here lie remnants from a banquet-table,
> – Oysters and marrow-bones, and seeds of grape –
> The statement of whose age must sound a fable;
> And Samian jars, whose sheen and flawless shape
> Look fresh from potter's mould.
> Plasters with Roman finger-marks impressed;
> Bracelets, that from the warm Italian arm
> Might seem to be scarce cold;
> And spears – the same that pushed the Cymry west,
> Unblunted yet […]

Owen's compassionate awareness of the victims' *bodies* – so prominent a feature of his later and greater poems – enables him to feel those

> Plasters with Roman *finger-marks* impressed;
> Bracelets, that from the *warm Italian arm*
> Might seem to be *scarce cold*;

and it sharpens his perceptions of the weapons that killed them – 'spears […] / *Unblunted* yet'.

A priggish and self-centred child had, by 1913, grown into a compassionate young man; a transformation encouraged by a second apprenticeship to a second Romantic poet. Two years earlier, while working as a lay assistant to the Vicar of Dunsden, Owen had come upon the poems of Shelley and soon discovered, as he delightedly told his sister,

> Shelley lived at a cottage within easy cycling distance from here. And I was very surprised (tho' really I don't know why) to find that he used to 'visit the sick in their beds; kept a regular list of the

industrious poor whom he assisted to make up their accounts'; and for a time walked the hospitals in order to be more useful to the poor he visited! I *knew* the lives of men who produced such marvellous verse could not be otherwise than lovely, and I am being confirmed in this continually.[3]

Owen's devout and devoted mother hoped that her son's experience of Dunsden might lead to a career in the Church. He was to help the Vicar with his parish duties, in return for free board and lodging and some tuition to prepare him for the university entrance exam. The arrangement was not a success. The Vicar had no interest in literature, and Owen soon lost interest in theology, the only topic offered for tuition. Disillusioned, too, by what he called 'The Vicar's Strong Conservation', he was forced to recognize that literature meant more to him than evangelical religion. This had to be explained to the Vicar. They quarrelled and, in February 1913, Owen left Dunsden on the verge of a nervous breakdown. That summer he sat a scholarship exam for University College, Reading, but failed, and in mid-September crossed the Channel to take up a part-time post teaching English at the Berlitz School in Bordeaux. Over the next two years, he grew to love France, its language and its literature, and had reached perhaps the highest point of happiness that life would offer him, tutoring an eleven-year-old French girl in her parents' Pyrenean villa, when, on 4 August 1914, Germany invaded Belgium and war was declared.

The same month, he wrote to his mother:

I feel my own life all the more precious and more dear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe. While it is true that the guns will effect a little useful weeding, I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds which were to have excelled the civilization of ten thousand years, are being annihilated – and bodies, the product of aeons of Natural Selection, melted down to pay for political statues.[4]

Those sentiments and the insensitive imagery of *deflowering*, *weeding*, *melted down* show a reversion to Owen's earlier self-regarding priggishness, but a visit to a hospital for the wounded soon brought him to his senses. A September letter to his brother Harold reveals the compassionate concern for the bodies of victims evidenced in his poem 'Uriconium':

> One poor devil had his shin-bone crushed by a gun-carriage wheel, and the doctor had to twist it about and push it like a piston to get out the pus. Another had a hole right through the knee […][5]

For a year, Owen debated with himself whether or not to risk the 'melting down' of his own body. He considered joining the French Army; then contemplated applying for a Commission in the (British) Artists' Rifles; then thought he would 'like to join the Italian Cavalry; for reasons both aesthetic and practical'.[6] His delayed decision indicates an understandable reluctance to go to war, but at no point do his letters speak of any principled aversion to fighting. 'Do you know what would hold me together on a battlefield?' he asked his mother. 'The sense that I was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote!'[7] Finally, returning to England with two boys he had been tutoring in Mérignac, near Bordeaux, he said goodbye to his family and, on 21 October 1915, enlisted in the Artists' Rifles.

The following June, Owen was commissioned into the 5th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, which in January 1917 was thrown into the Battle of the Somme. He was engaged in fierce fighting until May, when he was found to be suffering from shell-shock and invalided back to Craiglockhart War Hospital, on the outskirts of Edinburgh. There he met Sassoon and, with his advice and encouragement, began writing the poems that would constitute his own powerful contribution to 'the language in which Keats and the

rest of them wrote'. Discharged from Craiglockhart in November 1917, he returned to France in August 1918. He won the Military Cross in a successful assault on the Germans' Beaurevoir-Fonsomme line, but was killed on 4 November, attempting to lead his company across the Sambre and Oise Canal. A week later, the Armistice bells were ringing in Shrewsbury when his parents' front-door bell sounded its small chime, heralding the telegram they had dreaded for two years.

There is a second sense in which Owen is 'a poet's poet'. W. H. Auden, in his great elegy 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', wrote:

> The words of a dead man
> Are modified in the guts of the living.

And surely no aspect of Owen's afterlife would have pleased him more than the way his words have been modified in the guts of living poets and contributed to the poetry that came after him. Siegfried Sassoon and Edith Sitwell edited the first edition of his poems that appeared in 1920. More influential was Edmund Blunden's edition of 1931 – influential, in that it was this edition that was read, marked, learnt, and inwardly digested by the next generation of poets, those who would be known as 'the Poets of the Thirties'.

The first to respond in print to Owen was almost certainly Auden, who ended a poem of 1933:

> The Priory clock chimes briefly and I recollect
> I am expected to return alive
> My will effective and my nerves in order
> To my situation.
> 'The poetry is in the pity', Wilfred said,
> And Kathy in her journal, 'To be rooted in life,
> That's what I want.'
> These moods give no permission to be idle,

> For men are changed by what they do;
> And through loss and anger the hands of the unlucky
> Love one another.[8]

There are two quotations from Owen here: the first, his assurance (to his mother) of 4 October 1918, 'My nerves are in perfect order'; the second, a famous statement from the draft Preface to his poems that would be repeated over the years like a mantra, a passage of scripture: 'The poetry is in the pity.'

It was clearly Owen's example – the poet as witness to the horrors of war – that led to Auden's decision trumpeted in a banner headline of the *Daily Worker* on 12 January 1937: 'FAMOUS POET TO DRIVE AMBULANCE IN SPAIN'. Explaining his decision to a friend, Auden wrote: 'I shall probably be a bloody bad soldier but how can I speak to/ for them without becoming one?'[9] This echoes a letter of Owen's to his mother: 'I came out in order to help these boys – directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can.'[10] In the event, Auden did not stay long in Spain. He was horrified by what he saw, particularly the burnt-out churches, and the one poem he wrote, overtly, about the Spanish Civil War owes nothing to Owen.

Stephen Spender was more impressionable. His critical book, *The Destructive Element* (1935), shows him to be deeply influenced by Owen. He repeats 'The poetry is in the pity' twice and compares Owen's poems with those of Yeats and Eliot – to the younger poet's advantage. Spender also went to Spain, where he helped the Republicans with radio propaganda and wrote poems such as 'The Coward' and 'The Deserter', which each owe something to Owen's 'S.I.W.', as does his 'Ultima Ratio Regum' to Owen's 'Disabled'.

Rupert John Cornford was named after his mother's friend Rupert Brooke but when, unlike Auden and Spender, he went

to fight in the Spanish Civil War, it was Owen who influenced his most famous poem, 'A Letter from Aragon'.[11] Cornford was dead but the Spanish Civil War still in progress when, in 1937, Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* was published. No poem of Owen's was included and, in his Introduction, Yeats spent more time justifying his exclusion than the inclusion of most other poets:

> I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war […] The writers of these poems were invariably officers of exceptional courage and capacity, one a man constantly selected for dangerous work, all, I think, had the Military Cross; their letters are vivid and humorous, they were not without joy – for all skill is joyful – but felt bound, in the words of the best known, to plead the suffering of their men. In poems that had for a time considerable fame, written in the first person, they made that suffering their own. I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry.

Some of Yeats's inclusions – Grenfell's 'Into Battle', and seventeen poems by Oliver St John Gogarty (praised for his 'heroic song') – reveal his belief that the poet was one of the principal architects of civilization; his task, the representation of the great pagan images of love and war, passion and courage. The draft Preface to Owen's poems would, therefore, have seemed to him pernicious heresy, an abdication of the poet's traditional 'responsibility'. In the light of the furious debate prompted by Yeats's statement that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry', Owen's exclusion from the *Oxford Book* probably benefited – rather than harmed – his reputation.

It was Edmund Blunden, editor of the second edition of Owen's poems, who the following year introduced them to Keith Douglas, one of his undergraduates at Merton College, Oxford. That introduction was to play a part in shaping,

arguably, the finest British poet of the Second World War. Temperamentally, Douglas was as unlike Owen as it was possible to be. The son of a decorated veteran of the Great War, he had long had a romantic interest in warfare and, enlisting in a cavalry regiment in 1940, enscrolled a photograph of himself in uniform with the words 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'. Yeats would have approved of his *sprezzatura* and surely considered 'heroic song' Douglas's poem 'Gallantry', which begins:

> The Colonel in a casual voice
> spoke into the microphone a joke
> which through a hundred earphones broke
> into the ears of a doomed race.
>
> 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.[12]

One wonders what Owen – who wrote that his book was 'not about heroes' – would have made of this poem about 'three heroes'; its echo of his 'Doomed Youth'; its use of the pararhyme he pioneered (fool/fell); its thematic and linguistic links with his own poem 'The Last Laugh'. Douglas was not the first poet of the Second World War to echo Owen. On the other side of the Atlantic, Weldon Kees introduced his poem 'June 1940' with two epigraphs

> Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn.
>
> The old Lie: Dulce et Decorum est
> Pro patria mori.[13]

The voice of Wilfred Owen has continued to inspire his successors not only in time of war. Ted Hughes grew up in a

Yorkshire household darkened by his father's reminiscences of Gallipoli and his uncle Walter's of the Somme. In the 1950s, he wrote 'Wilfred Owen's Photographs', but a closer engagement with Owen emerges in one of his posthumous *Birthday Letters*, 'A Picture of Otto'. At a 'Strange Meeting' in hell (or hell on earth) with the ghost of Otto Plath, his wife Sylvia's father, Hughes echoes Owen's Preface – 'if the spirit of [this book] survives – survives Prussia –' when he says:

> A big shock for so much of your Prussian backbone
> As can be conjured into poetry
> To find yourself so tangled with me –
> Rising from your coffin, a big shock
>
> To meet me face to face in the dark adit […]

As in Owen's 'Strange Meeting', friend and enemy are conflated:

> This underworld, my friend, is her heart's home.
> Inseparable, here we must remain,
>
> Everything forgiven and in common –
> Not that I see her behind you, where I face you,
> But like Owen, after his dark poem,
> Under the battle, in the catacomb,
>
> Sleeping with his German as if alone.

So much for the published evidence of the imaginative impact of Owen, the 'poet's poet', on the work of his successors. Its subconscious or subterranean impact is harder to determine, but Seamus Heaney gives us a rare glimpse of it in his lecture, 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven':

> By the time I wrote 'Bogland', I had been lecturing for a couple of years in Queen's University, and spoke every week to the students in First Arts English on the subject of modern poetry. One of the set books I most enjoyed teaching was Wilfred Owen's *Collected Poems*

and one of the Owen poems I liked to focus on was 'Miners', which I myself had first encountered as a sixth former. It had come up as an unseen poem, an exercise in 'critical analysis and appreciation', and it made an unforgettable impression on me. Many things come together in it. The poet's comfort by a coal fire, for example, leads him to remember all those who, like coalminers and front-line soldiers, toil comfortlessly at the bottom of the social pyramid, carry its weight, are exploited by it, crushed by it, but still suffer in silence and retain their dignity. What makes the poem a real imaginative feat is the fact that Owen's moral indignation doesn't peel away from his sensuous language: the poet in him and the protester feel their way down the same intuitive paths, and while the burning coal shifts in the grate, these paths lead from a domestic interior to a geological and evolutionary panorama where all things are in a state of vegetal, even arcadian, bliss […]

Harold Bloom's phrase 'the anxiety of influence', has had a great airing in the past couple of decades, but it is probably not the right way to describe how a poet feels about his or her susceptibility to another earlier poet's work. For example, when I remembered in the course of preparing this lecture that Owen's poem had been in my mind when I wrote 'Bogland', what I felt was closer to gratitude than anxiety. 'Miners' wasn't being imitated by me, but 'Bogland' was affected by the way 'Miners' shifted itself forward, its combination of free association and internal logic, its floating levels of earth and time. The movement and method of Owen's poem worked like a moving stair under my own, and are likely to have been more important than the archaeological data and bits of local boglore that made up much of the content.[14]

Why have so many poets – not to mention so many general readers – responded so deeply to the work of a poet who, dying at twenty-five, saw only five of his poems in print and left many others to be re/constructed from manuscript by his editors? At the most superficial level, there is the romance of an early death that has come to seem emblematic of all the tragedies of the Great War. Young poets are often (in T.S. Eliot's phrase) 'much possessed by death'. I was myself,

but never read Owen's poems with any care until I was in my thirties and came to them by a curiously circuitous route. I was then 'much possessed' by Yeats and, invited to write an essay for a volume to be published in his centenary year, I encountered the problem of why he omitted – and so disapproved of – Owen's work. The answer to this question quickened my interest in the younger poet.[15]

Although Owen's Preface insists that his book 'is not about heroes', there is also the manifest heroism of a reluctant and vulnerable young officer, who led his 'boys' as well as a leader can and spoke of their sufferings as well as a pleader can. The power of his pleading challenges the validity of Yeats's pontifical dictum that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'. Milton's sonnet on his blindness and many elegies speak of passive suffering, but are unquestionably poetry of the highest order. Moreover, as in the case of Milton's sonnet and elegies that similarly offer consolation, Owen's poems tend to make an active response to the suffering of which they speak. He is a classic example of what would become a quintessentially twentieth-century figure: the poet as witness – and not a passive witness. Most of his later and greater poems are fuelled by indignation. Introduced by Sassoon to the genre of the 'protest poem', he soon outgrew the two-dimensional poster-poem (such as 'The Dead-Beat') and tapped deeper and richer imaginative levels than ever Sassoon would reach.

The subject of his protest is often indicated by a title which the poem will subvert – 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', 'Smile, Smile, Smile', and 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. A similar strategy appears in his subversion of the literary epigraphs chosen for 'The Show', 'S.I.W.', and 'The Next War'; and the indignant response to other texts that kick-start 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', 'Dulce et

Decorum Est', and the fragment 'Cramped in that funnelled hole'.[16]

Owen's readiness to express his feelings – of grief, tenderness, delight, as well as indignation – is a significant part of his appeal. Readers are often moved by the immediacy of his work before they appreciate the subtle density of its literary allusion. So with its music. In February 1918, he told Leslie Gunston: 'I suppose I am doing in poetry what the advanced composers are doing in music.'[17] Apprenticed to Keats and Shelley, he had absorbed the traditions of harmony and rhetoric they inherited and extended. The harmonic tradition he himself extended with his pioneering use of 'pararhymes': escaped/scooped, groined/groaned. In 'Strange Meeting', from which these examples are taken, the second rhyme is usually lower in pitch than the first, giving the couplet 'a dying fall' that musically reinforces the poem's meaning; the tragedy of the German poet (one manuscript reads 'I was a German conscript, and your friend'), his life cut short by the British poet whom he meets in Hell. In the poem 'Miners', the pitch of the pararhymes rises and falls as the sense moves from grief to happiness and back to grief again:

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

The same poem offers an example of another of Owen's harmonic innovations – the punning internal rhyme of 'wry […] writhing', found also in the 'Men […] Many' of 'Dulce and Decorum Est'.

What finally sets him apart from all but his most major contemporaries, however, is a breadth and depth of vision

that in 'Futility', for example, can hold – as it were in the palm of a hand – the grand and the granular together:

> Move him into the sun –
> Gently its touch awoke him once,
> At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
> 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?

So, in the larger meditative structure of 'Insensibility', Owen can move with no loss of tension from the colloquial to the cosmic, from 'poets' tearful fooling' to 'the eternal reciprocity of tears', a phrase that even Shakespeare might have envied.

CHAPTER 7

Owen and his editors

There is yet another sense in which Wilfred Owen, proclaiming himself 'a poet's poet',[1] wrote more prophetically than he knew. The four substantive editions of his poems have been edited by five poets: Sassoon and Edith Sitwell (1920), Blunden (1931), Day Lewis (1963), and Stallworthy (1983).

He died having seen only five of his poems in print: 'Song of Songs' in *The Hydra/Journal of the Craiglockhart War Hospital* and *The Bookman*; 'The Next War' in *The Hydra*; and 'Miners', 'Futility', and 'Hospital Barge' in the *Nation*. In June 1918, two and a half months before Owen's return to France for the last time, Edith and Osbert Sitwell encouraged him to submit poems for the 1918 edition of their anthology, *Wheels*. He sent them eight,[2] but it seems likely that they arrived too late for inclusion. After his death his mother sent a further selection, and *Wheels* (1919), edited by Edith Sitwell, was dedicated 'TO THE MEMORY/OF/ WILFRED OWEN, M.C.'. It contained seven of his poems: 'The Show', 'Strange Meeting', 'À Terre', 'The Sentry', 'Disabled', 'The Dead-Beat', and 'The Chances'.

It was almost certainly Edith's enthusiasm for these that prompted the first edition of Owen's *Poems* published by Chatto & Windus in 1920. Sassoon has been credited with its editing because, as Owen's friend and better-known fellow

soldier, he agreed to write the Introduction. This was rushed and unrevealing as, he wrote to Dennis Welland, 'the whole business was utterly painful to me'.[3] It must have been more painful still when, after publication, studying Owen's manuscripts for the first time, he began to recognize the inaccuracy of the texts Edith Sitwell had printed. For example, from the early pages of her edition:

p. 6, 'The Show', *line 5 reads* fitted *for* pitted
p. 8, 'Mental Cases', *line 7 reads* hand *for* hands'
p. 9, 'Parable of the Old Men [sic] and the Young',

lines 12–15 read
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son ….
for
Neither do anything to him, thy son.
Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

p. 10, 'Arms and the Boy', *line 5 reads* bullet-heads *for* bullet-leads

and lines 7–8 read
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.
for
Or give him cartridges whose fine zinc teeth
Are sharp with sharpness of grief and death.[4]

The reviews and sales of this first edition justified a reprint in 1921.[5] One poem was added – 'The End' ('After the blast of lightning from the east'), appropriately at the end of the

book – and a few errors were corrected, but none of those listed above.

As the 1920s advanced and Owen's reputation grew, the need for a fuller and better edition became clear, and Sassoon persuaded his friend and fellow soldier-poet, Edmund Blunden, to undertake it.[6] An experienced biographer, critic, and editor (as Sassoon and Sitwell were not), he was an excellent choice, and his commitment to the work of a younger soldier-poet was apparent in every aspect of the second edition of *The Poems* (1931). It began with a comprehensive Memoir (though he and Owen never met). When he sent Susan Owen his judicious, sympathetic, and elegant handwritten draft of this, she – like Rupert Brooke's mother before her – required certain changes to burnish the halo of her Saint-and-Martyr son. To the twenty-four poems printed in the 1921 reissue of the first edition, all reprinted by Blunden, he added a further thirty-seven,[7] though two were halves of the same poem ('The Calls') and another, printed as a fragment ('It is not death'), he failed to recognize as the concluding stanzas of another fragment ('Has your soul sipped') quoted in the Memoir. Though far from perfect – as all editions of Owen's poems have been – Blunden's is a marked improvement on Sassoon and Sitwell's. For example, he corrects the errors noted in 'The Show' and 'Mental Cases' on p. 82 above but not all of those in 'Arms and the Boy' and 'The Parable of the Old Men [sic] and the Young'.

Blunden's 1931 edition helped to consolidate Owen's reputation and elevate him to the iconic status he was to hold for poets and readers of poetry in the 1930s and after. The book contributed to the success of a public appeal for money – orchestrated by Blunden and Sassoon – with which to purchase from Owen's family his manuscripts for the nation. Fair copies of a number of poems had been included

in his letters to his mother and these, naturally, she had kept. Most of his other manuscripts (apart from a sackful she had burnt on his instructions)[8] had been held in his desk at 'Mahim', the family's Shrewsbury home. Blunden and Sassoon selected fair copies, final and near-final drafts of the more important poems, and Sassoon had them mounted in two handsome volumes, bound in scarlet morocco. The success of their campaign was announced on 16 April 1934, when *The Times* reported the British Museum's acquisition of an autograph collection of Owen's poems as a gift from the Friends of the National Libraries, 'the first manuscript of a modern author to be bought by the Friends for presentation to a library'.

Later in the 1930s, Wilfred Owen's poems went to war in Spain, and in the 1940s to war in Europe and North Africa;[9] but it was not until after the Second World War that his reputation crossed the frontiers of English-speaking countries to become truly international. Making that journey, Owen travelled not on his own passport but that of Benjamin Britten. On 16 February 1961, Britten wrote to Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau:

> Please forgive me for writing to such a busy man as yourself […] Coventry Cathedral, like so many wonderful buildings in Europe, was destroyed in the last war. It has now been rebuilt in a very remarkable fashion, and for the reconsecration of the new building they are holding a big Festival at the end of May and beginning of June next year. I have been asked to write a new work for what is to us all a most significant occasion.
>
> I am writing what I think will be one of my most important works. It is a full-scale Requiem Mass for chorus and orchestra (in memory of those of all nations who died in the last war), and I am interspersing the Latin text with many poems of a great English poet, Wilfred Owen, who was killed in the First World War. These magnificent poems, full of the hate of destruction, are a kind of commentary on

the Mass; they are, of course, in English. These poems will be set for tenor and baritone, with an accompaniment of chamber orchestra, placed in the middle of the other forces. They will need singing with the utmost beauty, intensity and sincerity.

Peter Pears has agreed to sing the tenor part, and with great temerity I am asking you whether you would sing the baritone.[10]

The answer of course was yes. Britten's *War Requiem* was first performed at the reconsecration of the Cathedral on 30 May 1962. Afterwards, the composer wrote to his friend, the poet William Plomer:

'dear Heather Harper did splendidly;[11] and weren't the two chaps marvellous? Poor F-Dieskau was so upset at the end that Peter couldn't get him out of the choir-stalls! It was that wonderful "Strange Meeting"' – the setting, which concludes the *War Requiem*, of Owen's poem in which a dead British soldier meets the German he has killed. Fischer-Dieskau confirms this in his memoirs: 'I was completely undone; I did not know where to hide my face. Dead friends and past suffering arose in my mind.' The playwright Peter Shaffer, reviewing the performance for *Time & Tide*, was equally moved: 'I believe it to be the most impressive and moving piece of sacred music ever to be composed in this country […] the most profound and moving thing which this most committed of geniuses has so far achieved. It makes criticism impertinent.'[12]

Britten's respect for Owen showed in his treatment of the poems. He let them speak for themselves without distortion or orchestral competition. The *War Requiem* caught the public imagination more than any other musical event of 1962. Concert-goers and radio-listeners in the British Isles and beyond asked themselves: 'Who is this Wilfred Owen?' Sales of his poems soared and his publishers, Chatto & Windus (who now owned their copyright), commissioned a new edition from the poet Cecil Day Lewis, a member of their editorial staff. This appeared in 1963, a year in which Decca sold 200,000 copies of their two-disc set of the *War*

Requiem 'in a striking black box with white lettering, of the recording that Britten had directed'.[13] The third edition, [mis]called *The Collected Poems*, contained all those printed in the first and second editions, with the two halves of 'Has your soul sipped' and 'The Calls' reunited, and seven poems and fragments added from the substantial body of unpublished material. Day Lewis improved Blunden's texts at a number of points: for example, he corrected the errors in 'Arms and the Boy' and that in the title of 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young'.[14] He followed Blunden's reading of lines 12–15 of the latter, but printed what would prove Owen's later revision in a footnote. In this and other such notes, Day Lewis offered a simple (and sometimes incomplete) list of a poem's drafts, their whereabouts, and some variant readings. As he admitted, however, in a critical Introduction complementing Blunden's biographical Memoir, which he printed as an appendix,

> it is not always possible to determine the order in which these drafts were composed. [… And since] it is not possible to date a great number of these poems, I have arranged them in a non-chronological order. Part One gives all the completed poems which are directly concerned with the war […] In Part Two I have placed poems on other subjects, or not primarily concerned with the war, together with some fragments. Part Three offers a selection of Owen's juvenilia and minor poems […][15]

This, effectively, reverses their order of composition and gives a misleading impression of the poet's development.

My own engagement with Owen began in the 1960s. Invited to contribute to a volume of essays marking the centenary of Yeats's birth in 1865, I immersed myself in the Clarendon Press file of his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) and wrote a piece on 'Yeats as Anthologist'.[16] His brilliant polemical Introduction to the *Oxford Book* introduced me to

my favourite poet's *un*favourite poet, and prompted me to open – for the first time – *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*. When I asked myself why the Old Man, celebrant of conflict and heroism, should have so detested the work of the Young, the answer was inescapable: they represented competing value-systems – Ancient and Modern, Homeric and humane – and in the 1930s, let alone the 1960s, there could be no competition.[17]

My essay was read by Dame Helen Gardner, who had earlier persuaded the Delegates of Oxford University Press to publish my book, *Between the Lines: W.B. Yeats's Poetry in the Making* (1963), and now persuaded colleagues in the British Academy to invite me to give their annual Chatterton Lecture on an English Poet. I chose Wilfred Owen as my Chattertonian poet, and was introduced to his brother Harold by my colleague John Bell, who had edited his trilogy, *Journey from Obscurity: Memoirs of the Owen Family* (1963, 1964, 1965). Harold kindly gave me access to his family's manuscript holdings, which proved more extensive and more interesting than a statement of Day Lewis's had suggested: 'The bulk of Wilfred Owen's autograph poems are in the British Museum.'[18] My lecture, on Owen's poetic development, was written in a seaside cottage some miles north-east of the Cape of Good Hope, with a driftwood fire crackling at my back and an October gale laying down a barrage beyond my quaking window. When I came to bombard the British Academy,[19] Harold Owen was in the front line, and afterwards asked if I would write a biography of his brother and edit a comprehensive edition of the poems and fragments. I said yes.

The biography was to be written first, to generate a larger audience for an edition expensive to produce and expensive to buy, but this made better publishing sense than scholarly

sense. Day Lewis had identified a major problem with his edition, as with his predecessors', and with all the secondary literature on Owen and his work: 'it is not possible to date a great number of these poems'. I would have written a better biography had I edited the poems first and, in so doing, solved the major problem. My predecessors had tended to assume that Owen's fair copies – where they existed – reflected his final intentions but, as I worked on the biography, it seemed to me there were often literary-critical arguments indicating that some heavily corrected draft post-dated the fair copy. So, how to proceed?

A curious feature of the manuscripts, I had noticed, was that many carried a watermark: I could distinguish twenty-four in the 600-plus surviving folios carrying Owen's poems and fragments, and guessed that, being poor, he tended to buy small quantities of good-quality paper. Matching the watermarks solved a few of the dating problems: where a watermarked folio could be detected, it seemed reasonable to assume that others with the same watermark came from the same period. However, not until after the biography was published in 1974 did it occur to me that Owen's letters are dated and, if written on the same paper as his poems, one could arrive at an approximate dating of at least the watermarked folios. The letters had been sold to the Humanities Research Center at Austin, Texas (for £9,000, having been offered first to the Bodleian for £3,000), so with Harold Owen's blessing I packed up the family's manuscripts and bought two air-tickets to Texas.

My wife and I had an uneventful flight until, an hour out of Atlanta, turbulence struck. The aircraft responded like a bronco released from a rodeo stall, bucking and rearing until it seemed its spine must snap. Then it plunged and oxygen masks dropped like oranges from their overhead

compartments. I pressed mine to my stiff upper lip and inhaled. Nothing came through and, glancing down the aisle, I could see other passengers having the same trouble. My ears were beginning to ache. It was a moment for Last Thoughts: 'The *children*'? No. 'The *manuscripts*'! Under the seat in front of me, an orange ruck-sack – a blue ruck-sack under the seat in front of my wife – crouched imperturbably, as if they contained climbing gear rather than half the surviving verse manuscripts of Wilfred Owen. Had they survived gunfire and gas on the Western Front, a gas-chamber at the Cornell University Library (to rid them of their British bacilli), only to be incinerated in a Texas plane-crash? And what about us? '*Was it for this the clay grew tall*?' Striving for a small immortality as editor of Owen's poems, I should be remembered only as the man who fed them to the flames.

Suddenly, it all made sense. I was a Literary Resurrection Man, and the first manuscripts I had exhumed were those of Yeats, who wrote:

> Accursed who brings to light to day
> The writings I have cast away!

Yeats had thought Owen 'unworthy of the poet's corner of a country newspaper', and I had incurred his curse. Clearly, it was about to be fulfilled.

An ashen-faced stewardess inched down the aisle, gripping the shoulders of the seats to left and right, whispering to their occupants. … She said: 'There's no cause for alarm. We're not at the altitude at which oxygen is supplied to the masks. I'm sorry about your ears. Would you like a sweet?' Yeats had let me off with a caution.

When I unpacked my rucksacks in the Humanities Research Center and matched the watermarks of the verse

manuscripts with those of the letters, the results were gratifying. The two sets of papers had sixteen watermarks in common, and since the letters with a particular watermark seldom dated from more – and frequently from less – than a couple of consecutive months, one could be reasonably sure that verse manuscripts with the same watermark dated from roughly the same period. Those sixteen watermarks and the matching of papers, inks and pencil made possible for the first time a detailed chronology of individual drafts of many poems. They confirmed my hypothesis that scribbled drafts were often later than tidy fair copies, but solving some problems, they presented others. How, for example, should poems finished and unfinished be differentiated and arranged: by presumed date of earliest draft or latest?

Chatto & Windus, with courage and vision worthy of their author, had commissioned an edition of *The Complete Poems and Fragments* more elaborate than any previously undertaken for a twentieth-century poet in the English language. When so many of an author's texts are, of necessity, editorial constructions, a sceptical reader needs to see the raw material from which they are constructed. The new edition was to be in two volumes, enabling readers to have text, notes, and manuscript material before them at the same time. Poems and fragments would be numbered in chronological sequence and ordered by date of final revision rather than first composition. Since the text in each case should reflect Owen's latest intentions, it would have been misleading to place the poems and fragments in a chronology determined by his earliest intentions. The successive stages of composition were to be detailed and dated in a footnote to each poem, followed by any information relevant to its biographical, historical, and literary context. The first volume would contain plain texts of all finished poems,

each with its accompanying note; and the second volume, supporting manuscript material – in the form of typeset facsimile – for 110 poems that could be called finished and 67 fragments. Together, these would more than double the 79 poems and fragments in the 1963 *Collected Poems*. The second volume was to conclude with Appendixes presenting Owen's draft Preface for his poems; his draft Lists of Contents; and a table detailing the paper sizes and watermarks of his manuscripts. Information contained in the last of these would explain the rationale behind the dating or re-dating of drafts and the consequent need to revise previously published texts.

During the inevitably incomplete reconstruction of Owen's manuscript mosaic, in which I was assisted by Dr Dominic Hibberd, some re-dating was found to have more than textual significance. The date of his discovery or rediscovery of the pararhyme (as Blunden called it) is a case in point. Blunden's Memoir states:[20]

> In July 1914 Owen, like most of his contemporaries, was intent upon the brighter side of experience, and that month he wrote the ingenious and fresh verses beginning
>
> Leaves
> Murmuring by myriads in the shimmering trees.
> Lives
> Wakening with wonder in the Pyrenees.
> Birds
> Cheerily chirping in the early day.
> Bards
> Singing of summer scything thro' the hay.

Day Lewis accepts Blunden's dating and calls 'From My Diary, July 1914' 'the earliest finished example of Owen's use of consonantal rhyming'.[21] D.S.R. Welland is slightly more cautious:

the earliest dated poem in which he tries out the new device is 'From My Diary, July 1914', a poem which, if the date of its title is the date of composition, was written in France in the year following the publication of [Jules Romains's] *Odes et prières*.[22]

The only manuscript of this poem carries a POMPEIAN/PARCHMENT watermark to be found in letters dating from 5 November 1917 and 24 January 1918 and several poems of that period. So far as is known, Owen was keeping no diary in 1914 and, in fact, did not reach his hosts' Villa Lorenzo in the Pyrenees until 31 July. He presumably dated his 'diary entry' July, rather than August, to suggest the last days of peace, and his poem becomes much more poignant when one imagines him trying to recover his mental equilibrium, thinking himself back to a life 'Wakening with wonder', a wonder all too soon to be eclipsed by the horrors of the Somme.

'From My Diary, July 1914' was almost certainly not his first poem in pararhyme: 'Song of Songs' was written between late June and mid-August 1917, and 'Has your soul sipped' between July and August that year. The origin of this form of 'consonantal rhyming' has been much debated:

> Critics have suggested many sources for it, from ancient Welsh verse to recent French experiments, but no fully pararhymed poem earlier than Wilfred's has yet been discovered. Robert Graves believed Wilfred had got the idea from him, and there certainly is a partly pararhymed poem in Graves's first book. However, there is no evidence Wilfred had read any Graves before writing 'Song of Songs'. He may well have worked out the system for himself, having been interested in musical effects ever since Bordeaux.[23]

An earlier pararhymed poem *has* now been discovered, William Barnes's 'On the Road':[24]

> Still green on the limbs of the oak were the leaves,
> Where the sloe daily *grew*, with its skin-bloom of *grey*,
> Though in fields, summer-*burnt*, stood the *bent*-grass, well brown'd,

And the stubble of *wheat* fields was withering *white*,
While sooner the sunlight now sank from the sight,
And *longer* now *linger'd* the dim-roaded night.

But bright was the daylight that dried up the dew,
As the foam-water fill'd the wide pool in its fall,
And as I came to climb, by the chalk of the cliff,
The white road full *steep* to the wayfaring *step*,
Where along by the hill, with a high-beating breast,
Went the girl or the man to the feast in their best.

There the horse pranced along, with his neck a high bow,
And uptoss'd his broad *nose* over outspringing *knees*;
And the ox, with sleek *hide*, and with low-swinging *head*;
And the sheep, little *knee'd*, with a quick-dipping *nod*;
And a girl, with her head carried on in a proud
Gait of walking, as smooth as an air-swimming cloud. [My italics]

This poem has elements in common with Owen's: skin-bloom/bloom; summer-burnt/summer; daylight/day; dew/dews; foam-water/waterbrooks; pool/pond; a girl/A maid. The similarities may be no more than a curious coincidence. Owen did not own a copy of Barnes's *Poems*, but if he and Sassoon had spoken of Hardy – and it is hard to believe they did not – Sassoon might have prompted him to look at Barnes.

Watermarks also facilitated the re-dating of 'Exposure', which, as Blunden noted, 'Owen dates […] February 1916, but I take that to be a slip of the pen for 1917.' Day Lewis agreed. The earliest page of rough working, however, carries a HIERATICA/BOND/BRITISH MAKE/JS & Co Ltd watermark found in letters dated 25 November 1917 and 3 December 1917; while one page of a heavily corrected draft carries a SOCIETY BOND/JW & Co watermark found in letters dating from late January to 28 February 1918. The (necessarily later) heavily corrected fair copy appears to be dated 'Feb 1916', suggesting that Owen's '6' is either a mistake or, more likely, an incomplete '8'. This dating is confirmed by the

fact that the poem beginning 'Cramped in that funnelled hole', brilliantly reconstructed by Blunden, can be dated late-1917; and carries an early form of line 16 of 'Exposure'.

The texts of Owen's three poems published in the *Nation* presented different problems. Sitwell and Sassoon, Blunden, and Day Lewis all seemed unaware that there was a printed text of 'Hospital Barge' that they could follow, adopting instead a corrected fair copy inferior in its punctuation and, in line 9, printing 'One reading by that sunset raised his eyes' rather than the *Nation*'s version: 'One reading by that calm bank shaded eyes'. Again, all earlier editors appear to have overlooked the printed text of 'Futility', following instead a corrected fair copy with inferior punctuation and one substantive variation from the final form of line 3: 'whispering of fields unsown' for the *Nation*'s 'whispering of fields half-sown'. The third poem published in that magazine, 'Miners', does follow the printed text, but in my view should not. The one manuscript, a corrected fair copy, has a curious feature not noticed by its earlier editors. Three of its 'corrections' are, in fact demurely bracketed *alternatives* in Sassoon's unmistakable hand above, beside, or below Owen's uncancelled words. I print Sassoon's alternatives in italics:

(For many hearts with coal are charred),
Line 19. Many the muscled bodies charred
21. *I (*And*)* thought of some who worked dark pits
34. Left in the ground.
(Lost)

I suspect that Owen, hero-worshipping Sassoon, allowed the senior poet's alternatives to take precedence (against his better judgement) over his own uncancelled words. Consequently – and perhaps questionably – I follow the uncancelled manuscript rather than the printed text.

The Complete Poems and Fragments departs from earlier editions at hundreds of less contentious points in the texts they have in common, and the typeset facsimiles of volume II offer justification for such changes. Is the *CP&F*, then, completely accurate? Of course not. I am aware of some twenty errors – all minor – that would call for correction in the unlikely event of a reprint being affordable; and no doubt there are errors of which I am not aware. Is the *CP&F* a complete compendium of all Owen's surviving poems and fragments? To the best of my knowledge, I would say yes – with one interesting exception. I have long known that Harold Owen gave the occasional manuscript to a deserving friend, and believed I had traced them all. Ten years after *CP&F* was published, however, I learnt of the most important such gift: the second of six surviving drafts of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', given to Benjamin Britten in gratitude for his setting of that and other of Owen's poems in the *War Requiem*. Since it does not appear in *CP&F*, I give a transcript here (ink in Roman type, pencil in italics):[25]

Anthem for Dead Youth

What passing bells for you who die in herds?
~~sullen~~ monstrous
Only the ~~monstrous~~ anger of the guns!
long monotony
Only the stuttering rifles' rattled words
Can patter out your hasty orisons. *low*
wreaths *or* ~~pomps~~ *balms no ~~sweet~~-voiced*
No ~~chants~~ for you, ~~nor~~ ~~balms~~, nor ~~chanting~~ choirs,
wailful { cry ~~dole~~ / ~~griefs~~ but –
Nor any ~~voice of grief~~ – ~~save~~ ~~walful~~ shells.
And ~~grief [?] save~~ shrill
~~Our~~ bugles calling ~~sadly~~ but save wailful

for you from ~~sad~~ shires
your
~~Leave a deep silence by the village wells~~.
Saddening the twilight: { T / these are our farewells ~~farewells~~.
boys
What candles may ~~we~~ hold to speed you all?
Not in { ir / the } hands ~~of boys~~, but in their eyes ~~sweetly~~ ~~*hollow*~~.
~~lights long~~ ~~*the*~~ your
~~*quiet*~~ ~~gleams~~
Shall Shine the ~~holy gleams~~ of ~~your~~ goodbyes.
quivering ~~*flowers*~~ *of*
~~The pall~~. The pallor of girls' brows must be your pall.
~~Pale are girls' brows; and they must be your pall~~.
~~dying~~
Your flowers: the tenderness of ~~comradly~~ minds
~~comrade's~~
mortal
And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.

Like other of Owen's poems,[26] 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' appears to have been triggered by a strong adverse reaction to another text, in this case *Poems of Today: an Anthology* (1916), of which he owned the December 1916 reprint. The anonymous Prefatory Note to this declared:

> This book has been compiled in order that *boys* and *girls* already perhaps familiar with the great classics of the English speech may also know something of the newer poetry of their own day. Most of the writers are living, and the rest are still vivid memories among us, while one of the youngest almost as these words are written, has gone singing to lay down his life for his country's cause [...] there is no arbitrary isolation of one theme from another; they mingle and interpenetrate throughout, to the music of Pan's flute, and of Love's viol, and the *bugle-call* of Endeavour, and the *passing-bell* of Death. [*My italics*]

Owen's angry question, 'What passing bells …?' invites the answer, None: 'no prayers nor bells', but the bells invoked in his 'Anthem' have tolled across the century since it was composed. And since 1962 they have tolled more loudly, more insistently, thanks to Benjamin Britten. Harold Owen could not have chosen a more deserving recipient for the manuscript, nor provided a more salutary reminder of the fallibility of editors.

CHAPTER 8

The legacy of the Somme

If you look at a British coin, what do you see? On one side, the realistic profile of a real Queen, and on the other, an imaginative representation of Britannia ruling the waves (until her proposed dethronement), a heraldic thistle or a heraldic rose. Here are two ways of looking at history: the one realistic, the other symbolic – but symbolic of what? Something other, older, and larger than the monarchy.

Historians are engaged in a search for the real – what really happened. They require imagination in reading the evidence and assessing probability where there is a gap in the evidence, but they require it less often and to a lesser degree than imaginative writers, dramatists, novelists, and poets. Historical evidence, historical writing, however, cannot alone account for the perception of historic events in a country's cultural history. Take, for example, the sack of two cities: Constantinople in 1453, and Troy in the Bronze Age. Two historical events: the first, of greater historical importance; the second, of greater cultural importance. Homer gave us Troy in a poem more often and more widely translated than any other book apart from the Bible; a poem that has inspired other poems, plays, paintings, sculpture, operas, novels, films. Why? Because Troy has come to stand for, to symbolize, more than itself. Homer's account contains all the archetypes of heroic literature, decked out in the primary

colours of romance: Love, Lust, Ambition, Courage, Cruelty, Cunning. By contrast, the sack of Constantinople has no such cultural, symbolic, accretions – at least in English.

Again, take the Battles of Stamford Bridge and Hastings: the second more historically important than the first, but would Hastings feature so prominently in our cultural history were it not for its artistic accretions: the Bayeux tapestry, two novels successful in their day – Bulwer-Lytton's *Harold* (1848) and Hope Muntz's *The Golden Warrior* (1948)[1] – and, last but not least, Sellar and Yeatman's *1066 and All That*? These contribute to our understanding that the Battle of Hastings stands for more than the archetypal Gallant British Defeat. It symbolizes the merging of Norman and Saxon, the confluence of two languages that gave the English-speaking peoples the English they speak.

Now, crossing the Channel, let me pause in my slow march to the Somme at the battlefields of Crécy and Agincourt, the latter eclipsing the former in Our Island Story thanks to Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Laurence Olivier's film of that play. Why did the British Government commission and subsidize Olivier's film in the 1940s? For propaganda: Agincourt as precedent for a great victory won – against overwhelming odds – by an army symbolizing a united kingdom, represented by the English Bardolph, Nym and Pistol; the Welsh Fluellen; the Irish MacMorris; and the Scottish Jamy.

So at last I come to the Somme and the question that has engaged revisionist historians since the 1980s: why has one bloody battle come to overshadow the winning of the war? There were few (if any) professional writers among the professional soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force, who bore the brunt of the battles of 1914 and 1915. Sub-Lieutenant Brooke was horrified by the sight of refugees fleeing from Antwerp, but wrote of his horror only in letters.

Captain Grenfell's obituary appeared in *The Times* only a month after Brooke's, and with it his death-and-glory poem 'Into Battle', for a time as famous as Brooke's sonnet 'The Soldier'. Captain Sorley fought at Loos and, after his death in 1915, there was found in his kit-bag the manuscript of perhaps the first poem of the Great War to get the numbers right and strike the anti-heroic note. It begins:

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

Private Ledwidge fought at Gallipoli and 2nd Lieutenant Hodgson at Loos. Both wrote fine poems. Both were killed on the Western Front. None of these poets lived to write an autobiography, nor after the war was there a prose account of Gallipoli or the other battles of 1914–15 that made an impact comparable to those of 1916–17.

By contrast, however, with the relative scarcity of literary testimony to the battles of 1914–15, probably no battle in world history was witnessed by more writers than were present at the Somme. They include (and this is by no means a comprehensive roll-call of even the British ones): Richard Aldington, Mary Borden, Edmund Blunden, Charles Carrington, Ford Madox Ford, Gilbert Frankau, Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, Basil Liddell Hart, David Jones, Frederic Manning, John Masefield, Wilfred Owen, Herbert Read, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, John Ronald Tolkien, Arthur Graeme West, and Henry Williamson. None of these was a professional

soldier. All were civilians in uniform, all were intelligent, all educated – even if (like Rosenberg) largely self-educated.

In an important and influential lecture on 'A Military Historian's View of the Great War',[2] Corelli Barnett made a frontal attack on 'the war writers' for propagating a distorted view of the war that would later unbalance public opinion and encourage appeasement when the country should have been arming itself against Hitler. He claimed that

> with the exception of Manning and Rosenberg they came from the sheltered, well-off, upper or upper-middle classes. They had had an absurd upbringing at home and at their public schools which gave them no knowledge or understanding of the real world of their time, but instead a set of ludicrously romantic attitudes, most famously expressed in Rupert Brooke's excruciating poem 'Now God be Thanked'. They were in fact the repositories of the liberalism and romanticism of Victorian England. They all lived at Howards End, having delicate emotional responses to the aesthetic stimulus of landscape, and cherishing a knightly idealism.

Barnett has a case, but in the way of powerful polemicists, he overstates it. Of the twenty writers I have named as present at the Somme only seven went to a public school, and only three or four could be said to have lived at Forster's 'Howards End'.

Ninety Julys after the opening of the battle, how should we view their alleged distortions? Barnett and other historians criticize the imaginative writers' over-emphasis on casualties, and cite comparable numbers killed in the Napoleonic wars and the American Civil War. Sassoon was no historian, but one of his childhood neighbours was Jack Barchard, 'recently returned from the Boer War'. Young Siegfried would have heard of defeats that rocked the nation: Colenso (143 Britons killed) and Spion Kop (243 killed). When, on 1 July 1916, he

found himself the survivor of a day that saw more than *twice* the number of British soldiers killed by enemy action (19,000) than were killed by enemy action in the *entire* Boer War (7,774), is it surprising that he should have thought casualties worthy of emphasis? *The Memoirs of George Sherston* are largely transcribed from Sassoon's diaries, and all but five days of the front-line action he describes is on the Somme. His memoirs are memoirs of that battle, not of the war. The same is true of Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, the poems of Ivor Gurney and Isaac Rosenberg, and all but a handful of Owen's. Far from *over*-emphasizing the casualties of the Somme, John Masefield *under*-emphasized them in *The Old Front Line or The Beginning of the Battle of the Somme*, a book subsidized by the government propaganda bureau at Wellington House. In an autumn 1916 letter to his wife, he wrote:

> We went into a wood, which we will call Chunk-of-Corpse-Wood, for its main features were chunks of corpse, partly human, partly trees. There was a cat eating a man's brain, & such a wreck of war as I never did see, & the wounded coming by, dripping blood on the track, & one walked on blood or rotten flesh, & saw bags of men being carried to the grave. They were shovelling parts of men into blankets.[3]

Nothing so graphic found its way into his book, which has more of the pastoral than the charnel about it; and not one dead body to be seen in its sixteen photographs of the battlefield.

A second distortion for which these 'sensitive intellectuals' have been held responsible is their holding the generals responsible for avoidable casualties. Certainly, school-children who study the war will encounter Sassoon's poems 'The General', 'The March-Past', and 'Base Details', but they will find no criticism of the General Staff in his 1917 protest,

little in his prose, or in the trench memoirs of Blunden and Graves, or in the letters of Owen and Rosenberg. Brian Bond finds 'Sassoon's failure to address the complex issues of military strategy, foreign policy and diplomacy in 1917 […] understandable'.[4] I think anyone would. The view from the trench periscope is, of course, restricted – that is its limitation – but when the viewer's life depends on what he sees, its sharp focus is its strength. The combatant poets called attention to the casualties, but they left it to their readers and reviewers to draw their own conclusions. Historians rightly speak of the generals' 'learning curve' at the Somme, but given some of their tactical misjudgements in that battle, one might have expected more criticism – rather than less – from the trench memoirs and poems of 1916.

A third alleged distortion of the so-called 'sensitive intellectuals' is said by some to be their over-emphasis on the uncongenial conditions of trench life. Corelli Barnett offers a useful corrective to the myth of the golden Edwardian afternoon when he reminds us that

> Nearly a third of the British population lived their entire lives in [squalid] conditions. Descriptions of contemporary British slums remarkably echo those of the trenches. Thus
>
> > Two rooms, seven inmates […] Dirty flock bedding in living-room placed on box and two chairs. Smell of dirt and bad air unbearable […]
>
> Or:
>
> > There is no water supply in the house, the eight families having to share one water-tap with eight other families.[5]

Thus, Barnett concludes, 'it is hardly surprising that the rank and file did not take things so hard as the war writers.

Many of them were better off in the army than in peacetime life.' No doubt the war writers were sometimes guilty of over-statement in their passionate reminiscences. Most of us are sometimes guilty of over-statement when our passions are aroused: even historians. I wonder about the seven inmates of those two rooms: a husband, wife and five children perhaps? Might not such a husband prefer to spend his nights with his family, his days in a farmyard, shop, or mill, than with other men huddled in a wet trench? I wonder, too, what Wilfred Owen (unpaid assistant to the vicar of a poverty-stricken rural parish) or Isaac Rosenberg ('chained', as he put it, 'to a fiendish mangling engraving machine' in the East End of London) would think of Barnett's assertion that 'The social, aesthetic, intellectual, and moral world in which the war writers lived before the war was in fact almost as unreal as the pastoral play-acting of the French royal court before the Revolution.'[6]

The British public, of course (or 25–35 million of them: more than half the total population of the country), were not introduced to the Somme by those unrealists, but by the most popular news film of the war, *The Battle of the Somme*. More graphic than Masefield's despatches from that Front,

> The film concentrated on the scale of the offensive bombardment and presented the battle as a clear British victory, but to an audience unused to such images it was a shocking introduction to what the Western Front looked like, and how men appeared when they returned from combat. At the emotional climax of the film, as British troops went over the top and advanced into the smoke, the piano accompaniment ceased. The dramatic silence was filled with screams from the audience as they saw men fall.[7]

As in the American Civil War and the Boer War, the photographic image reinforced the printed word in bringing home to the public some (but not all) of the horrors of the Front.

Ironically, while many newspapers published the appalling casualty lists in full, editors were prevented by government edict from printing photographs of British dead. As the war progressed, the official War Artists Scheme sent painters of the calibre of Percy Wyndham Lewis, Paul Nash, John Singer Sargent, and Stanley Spencer to one or other battle-zone, and some of their pictures – notably Singer Sargent's 'Gassed' – further contributed to the emerging belief that the Somme 'spelt the end of innocence'.[8] As Private David Jones, painter and poet, wrote in the Preface to *In Parenthesis*:

> [July 1916] roughly marks a change in the character of our lives in the Infantry on the West Front. From then onward things hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair, took on a more sinister aspect. The wholesale slaughter of the later years, the conscripted levies filling the gaps in every file of four, knocked the bottom out of the intimate, continuing, domestic life of small contingents of men, within whose structure Roland could find, and, for a reasonable while, enjoy, his Oliver.[9]

In recent decades, military historians have countered the myth of the 'lions led by donkeys', showing that 'the Somme was the muddy grave of the German field army'[10] and made possible the final 'Forgotten Victory'.[11] Few who survived the Somme wrote about its aftermath. Two who did were Wilfred Owen and R.C. Sherriff. Owen, far from anticipating victory on his return to the Front in August 1918, there completed his last three poems – 'The Sentry', 'Smile, Smile, Smile', and 'Spring Offensive' – all focused on the death of 'comrades that went under'. A good deal of ink has been wasted trying to square the action and the language of *Journey's End*, set in March 1918, with Sherriff's later view of it as 'a war play in which not a word was spoken against the war, in which no word of condemnation was uttered by any of its characters'.[12] He was forgetting the word 'murder',

twice used (on pp. 87–8) to describe a raid the company commander calls 'absurd' (p. 75) and the Colonel says he would 'give anything to cancel'. It does prove to be murder, and we are left in no doubt that the end of the company's journey is under an artillery barrage. Sherriff's curious misreading of his play's unambiguous message is understandable in psychological terms: his loyalty towards the 'simple, unquestioning men' (as distinct from insufficiently questioning staff officers) with whom he had been proud to serve. Literary critics have long known to distrust the singer, not the song.

For almost a decade after the Armistice, all was quiet on – and from – the Western Front, as veterans and their families and the families of the bereaved tried to forget their pain and rebuild broken lives. Then came the Return of the Repressed. In 1926, six books of personal trench reminiscence were published; in 1927, fifteen; and in 1928, the tsunami crested with the publication of Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and Blunden's *Undertones of War*. Their success was followed – and in some cases exceeded – in 1929 by that of Graves's *Goodbye to All That*,[13] Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Sherriff's *Journey's End*, and Aldington's *Death of a Hero*. The memoirs of the three poets were set on the Somme, as their poems (like Gurney's, Owen's, and Rosenberg's) had been, and as Aldington's novel also was. Last, but by no means least, of the great imaginative writings about that battle was David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937).[14]

A second phase of major literature centred on the Somme began, like the first, with the work of a poet: Ted Hughes. Three poems in his first book, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), derive from his uncle Walter's accounts of the battle: 'Bayonet Charge', 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers', and 'Six Young Men'.[15]

A similar family memory would give Michael Longley his 'Wounds', beginning:

> Here are two pictures from my father's head –
> I have kept them like secrets until now:
> First, the Ulster Division at the Somme
> Going over the top with 'Fuck the Pope!'
> 'No Surrender!': a boy about to die,
> Screaming 'Give 'em one for the Shankill!'[16]

The exploits of the Ulster Division on 1 July 1916 have a mythic resonance for Irish Protestants, that day being the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. At the end of Frank McGuinness's play *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1986), the Ulstermen exchange their Orange sashes and the Younger Pyper prays:

> God in heaven, if you hear the words of man [...] Let this day at the Somme be as glorious in the memory of Ulster as that day at the Boyne, when you scattered our enemies. Lead us back from this exile. [...] Let us fight bravely. Let us win gloriously. Lord, look down on us. Spare us. I love – . Observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme.

Something of the order of 750 books on the Great War were published between 1939 and 1987.[17] This second tsunami, far from diminishing, crested in the 1990s with a succession of bestselling novels centred on the Somme. They followed Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* (1971), a novel that took its title from Owen's most famous poem and explored the relationship between two front-line soldiers with a delicacy worthy of the poet.[18] Central to Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy*[19] is the relationship between Owen and Sassoon, for which she drew heavily on their writings and on the books about them. Again, the title of Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* (1993), the most recent and most

successful of Somme novels, suggests the influence of Sassoon's lines: 'O, but Everyone / Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.'[20] In a new Introduction to the paperback edition of *Birdsong*, Faulks writes: 'As an epigraph, I took the line from Rabindranath Tagore that Wilfred Owen had quoted in his final letter to his mother before his return to the Front, where he was killed in November 1918.' Tagore wrote: 'When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.'

The shades of Owen and Sassoon, if not directly invoked as here, can be sensed in the hellscape of these and other novels. In their poems, letters and memoirs, the poets of the Somme gave our culture its defining symbolic image of the Great War: the trench mouth as the mouth of Hell. The sumptuous brochure of Martin Randall, 'Travel Company of the Year', offers tours to such cultural sites as 'Ancient Egypt', 'Russian Palaces and Gardens', and 'Poets and the Somme'. Numbered among the 'poets whose works are included' are Charles Sorley (who died at Loos), Edward Thomas (who died at Arras), and several who never saw the Western Front at all.

Due to its cultural accretions, the Somme – like Troy, Hastings, and Agincourt – has come to stand for, to symbolize, something other and larger than itself: nothing less than the First World War, specifically, and modern mechanized warfare, generally. Much as I applaud the work of military historians in setting the 1916–18 record straight, the cultural historian in me believes that, unless a bestselling novel and film can rescue the Battle of Amiens from anonymity, whenever you spin the Somme coin outside a conference of military historians, it will come down symbol side up.

CHAPTER 9

The iconography of the Waste Land

T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* records a journey through hell: an inner hell lit by the flames, haunted by the flickering images, of an outer hellscape from which Western Europe was only then beginning to emerge. Shaw, in his 1919 Preface to *Heartbreak House*, had said that 'the earth is still bursting with the dead bodies of the victors'[1] and the speaker of 'The Burial of the Dead' cries out:

> 'Stetson!
> 'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
> 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?'[2]

What makes that at once so horrible and so memorable is the unexpected superimposition of a corpse on a garden. This is a miniature example of the theme, the territory, I mean to explore.

In 1918, Wilfred Owen wrote to a friend:

> For 14 hours yesterday I was at work – teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt; I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet to see that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands to attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.[3]

My subject is the topography of Golgotha. Owen was a believing Christian, as Sassoon in 1918 was not, but from the very first the older man's writings about the war were steeped in Christian imagery. His first war poem was called 'Absolution', his second 'The Redeemer' and, early in 1916, he wrote 'Golgotha' and 'Stand-to: Good Friday Morning'.[4] In the middle of the latter sketch of the trenches, three lines are typographically indented:

> Dawn was misty; the skies were still;
> Larks were singing, discordant, shrill;
> *They* seemed happy; but *I* felt ill.

The same polarities are as cunningly juxtaposed at the end of *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*:

> Somewhere out of sight beyond the splinters of tree-tops of Hidden Wood a bird had begun to sing. Without knowing why, I remembered that it was Easter Sunday. Standing in that dismal ditch, I could find no consolation in the thought that Christ was risen.[5]

With the trenches suggestive of graves, those splintered trees suggestive of crosses are the dominant images of the hell-scape of the Western Front. We see them again in 'Christ and the Soldier':[6]

> The straggled soldier halted – stared at Him –
> Then clumsily dumped down upon his knees,
> Gasping, 'O blessed crucifix, I'm beat!'
> And Christ, still sentried by the seraphim,
> Near the front-line, between two splintered trees,
> Spoke him: 'My Son, behold these hands and feet.'

The conjunction, the conflation, of Christ and soldier is as old as St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (6:11–17), and Sassoon's icon has a significant resemblance to the Anglo-Saxon 'Dream of the Rood'. In this, the Tree climbed by 'the young warrior' says:

'Now, I desire thee, my dear son,
that thou reveal this vision to men,
declare in plain words that it is the Cross of Glory,
which Almighty God agonised upon
for the manifold sins of mankind,
and for the ancient offence of Adam.'[7]

This alludes to the tradition encapsulated by Donne:

We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one Place […][8]

It is customary to give Eliot the credit for the vision of a post-war world as the Waste Land named and traversed by Malory, re-traversed by Tennyson, but we should not forget the earlier version of his great contemporary: Yeats's 'The Second Coming'. 'The Dream of the Rood' has given place to nightmare. If 'somewhere in sands of the desert' a rough beast 'Slouches towards Bethlehem', might it not also be slouching towards Golgotha? Yeats's poem may or may not have influenced Eliot's, but we know that Conrad's vision of the Heart of Darkness did, because its original epigraph was a quotation from that novel:

Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision, – he cried out twice, a cry that was not more than a breath –
'The horror! The horror!'[9]

Marlow's quest had led him down 'a mighty big river, […] resembling an immense snake' not to the primal garden, but to a house in the primal forest flanked by

a dozen slim posts […] roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with round curved balls […] Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs

were not ornamental but symbolic […] I returned deliberately to the first I had seen – and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids – a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber.[10]

Although Eliot in 1922 was no closer to being a Christian than Conrad, Sassoon, or Yeats, his *Waste Land* shows topographical features resembling theirs. He looks back to a vanishing Eden, a world of pastoral all but passed:

> The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
> Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
> Crosses the brown land unheard. The nymphs are departed.[11]

The quester's route across the Waste Land goes by way of Golgotha:

> After the agony in stony places
> The shouting and the crying
> Prison and palace and reverberation
> Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
> He who was living is now dead […][12]

I approach the iconography of the Waste Land by way of three pairs of more recent texts: first, a pair of poems. In 1934, Geoffrey Grigson canvassed contemporary poets on the state of their art and, in response to his question 'Do you think there can now be a use for narrative poetry?' David Gascoyne replied:

> What might be useful now would be a poem expressing the ever-rising feeling of crisis, anxiety and panic; a poem that would treat this feeling in a loose, universal and epic sort of way. I mean a poem narrating the contemporary Zeitgeist of Europe, or even of the World.[13]

Some years later, Gascoyne followed his own prescription, albeit with a lyric rather than an epic. His poem 'Ecce Homo' begins:

> Whose is this horrifying face,
> This putrid flesh, discoloured, flayed,
> Fed on by flies, scorched by the sun?
> Whose are these hollow red-filmed eyes
> And thorn-spiked head and spear-stuck side?
> Behold the Man: He is Man's Son [...]
>
> And on his either side hang dead
> A labourer and a factory hand,
> Or one is maybe a lynched Jew
> And one a Negro or a Red,
> Coolie or Ethiopian, Irishman,
> Spaniard or German democrat.[14]

This Christ re-crucified is on 'the tree of human pain', that tree proclaiming its descent from the Tree of Life, and behind it lies the Waste Land located between Eden and Golgotha:

> Besieged by drifting sands
> And clefted landslides our about-to-be
> Bombed and abandoned cities stand.

In the wake of the Second World War prophetically envisioned in that poem, Auden wrote 'The Shield of Achilles',[15] a title directing the reader to Book 18 of *The Iliad*, a condensed version of which his poem offers, albeit a version as modernized as Gascoyne's revision of the Gospels' account of the Crucifixion. Homer's description of the shield Hephaestos makes for Achilles highlights the antithesis between peace and war, an antithesis that Auden develops further. We see the armourer at work through the eyes of the hero's mother, Thetis, who hopes for a prophecy of good fortune for her son:

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas […]

As so often in depictions of pastoral or a golden age, this is counterbalanced by a harsher and darker alternative:

But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.

In place of the natural vines and olive trees of pre-Christian pastoral, she sees an artificial – that is to say unnatural – wilderness made by the arts of man. The antithetical structure of the poem is developed by its alternating stanza forms: the two buoyant ballad-like quatrains of that opening suggest a mythic past far removed from the slower, flatter movement of the rhyme royal that follows with its vision of a modern Waste Land:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown.
No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Looking for positives and peace, Thetis can see only negatives and the outbreak of war:

Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

She looks again, hoping for the happier omen of a scene that Auden borrows from Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':[16]

She looked over his shoulder
For ritual pieties,
White flower-garlanded heifers,
Libation and sacrifice,
But there on the shining metal
Where the altar should have been,
She saw by his flickering forge-light
Quite another scene.

The light of the ancient forge reveals modern barbed wire, and in place of ritual pieties she witnesses the ultimate impiety: the sacrifice not of heifers but of the Lamb of God:

three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The posts – reminiscent of those flanking Mister Kurtz's hut – are reminders also of the vines and olive trees of the alternate world of pastoral. The pagan goddess, having been granted this vision of the death of a later God, fails to understand the implications of that 'libation and sacrifice' and turns to the next panel on the armourer's shield:

She looked over his shoulder
For athletes at their games,
Men and women in a dance
Moving their sweet limbs
Quick, quick, to music,
But there on the shining shield
His hands had set no dancing-floor
But a weed-choked field.

Far from seeing men and women moving together in harmony, a dance proleptic of a closer movement of 'their sweet limbs', she witnesses disharmony, alienation, man murderously out of tune with nature and his own kind:

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept.

Only now does Thetis 'of the shining breasts' (emblematic of love, fecundity, and her eternal life) understand, at least in part, the prophecy of the shield. Auden's juxtaposition of idealized golden age with a recognizably modern leaden age in which Christ is crucified, or re-crucified, posits a Christian era as brutal and sterile as that in which 'man-slaying Achilles […] would not live long'.

The spatial constraints of the lyric form restrict these representations of the Waste Land to the status of peopled landscapes, but two twentieth-century novels are concerned with process rather than stasis: the journey from Eden to Golgotha. The first, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), is set in the closest modern equivalent of the primal garden, a South Sea (one can hardly say Pacific) island. The reader's first view of this is directed to a 'long scar smashed into the jungle'.[17] Right at the outset, man has wounded nature: a plane has crashed, the victim of an attack, and somewhere else, we learn, an atom bomb has exploded. Golding's depiction of the Waste Land, like Auden's and others from the decade of the 1950s that I will be discussing later, is clearly prompted by the Second World War, as was Eliot's poem by the First.

In his opening pages, Golding gives notice that he is re-working an older fable. One of the survivors 'undid the snake-clasp of his belt, lugged off his shorts and pants, and stood there naked'.[18] The snake is not native to the island.

The boys bring it with them. They expect it to be there. Later, one of the younger boys will claim to have seen 'A snake-thing. Ever so big.' He will be reassured by Ralph, whose belt had the snake-clasp: 'You couldn't have a beastie, a snake-thing, on an island this size [...] You only get them in big countries like Africa, or India.'[19] We are also reminded of the older fable when 'the fat boy', delighted by the rich variety of fruit, says: 'I expect we'll want to know all their names.'[20] This variation of Adam's naming of the beasts is developed when the boy confesses to his own animal nickname: Piggy. Although he and Ralph of the snake-clasp subsequently display less animal behaviour than most of the other survivors, Golding's point is clear: not only is man an animal, but a predatory animal. Armed with their spears, the boys single out a sow 'sunk in deep maternal bliss'.[21] Not one is moved – as, clearly, the reader is meant to be moved – by the fact that 'the great bladder of her belly was fringed with a row of piglets that slept or burrowed and squeaked'.[22] After her ferocious killing, one of the hunters giggles while the others smear their faces with her blood.

Just as Auden highlights the horror of his Waste Land by contrasting it with a pastoral alternative, Golding emphasizes the horror of his island story by contrasting it with an earlier classic of the genre, R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*. In this novel of the *18*50s, the castaways Jack, Ralph, and Peterkin rise to the occasion as decent, courageous, and resourceful young Britons were supposed to. They live an idyllic life on their island – interrupted, it is true, by black cannibals and white pirates, but the cannibals are converted to Christianity and the pirates deservedly destroyed. Golding takes over the names Jack and Ralph and, by converting Peterkin to Simon, announces the religious significance of his central figure. He has said in an interview:

I intended a Christ figure in the novel, because Christ figures occur in humanity, really, but I couldn't have the full picture, or as near as full a possible picture of human potentiality, unless one was potentially a Christ figure. So Simon is the little boy who goes off into the bushes to pray. He is the only one to take any notice of the little 'uns – who actually hands them food, gets food from places where they can't reach it and hands it down to them. He is the one who is tempted of the devil: he has this interview with the pig's head on the stick, with Beelzebub, or Satan, the devil, whatever you'd like to call it, and the devil says, 'Clear off, you're not wanted. Just go back to the others. We'll forget the whole thing.'[23]

Beelzebub is the Greek form of a Hebrew word meaning 'lord of insects', but the devil who tempts Simon in the wilderness is, of course, an emblem, a projection, of the evil that the boys bring with them. This Lord of the Flies is the severed head of the maternal sow, set on a stick sharpened at both ends like the heads outside Kurtz's house; and, like other twentieth-century depictions of the Waste Land, Golding at one point appears to acknowledge his debt to *Heart of Darkness*. At the end of this scene, 'Simon found he was looking into a vast mouth. There was blackness within, a blackness that spread […] Simon was within the mouth' much as Marlow saw the dying Kurtz 'open his mouth wide – it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him'.[24]

Simon resists the temptation to 'forget the whole thing', climbs the mountain, and there finds another Lord of the Flies, the corpse of the parachutist still held upright by his harness. With Christ-like compassion, we are told,

he took the lines in hands; he freed them from the rocks and the figure from the wind's indignity […]

The beast was harmless and horrible; and the news must reach the others as soon as possible. He started down the mountain […][25]

He descends to the accompaniment of thunder and the hunters' choric chant – '*Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!*'[26] – reminiscent of an earlier refrain: 'Crucify him!' Simon's death, like Christ's, is marked by a cosmic convulsion, one that mirrors and magnifies the book's opening image of the scar: 'The dark sky was shattered by a blue-white scar [...] The blue-white scar was constant, the noise unendurable. Simon was crying out something about a dead man on a hill.'[27]

Patrick White's *Voss* (1957) was published three years after *The Lord of the Flies*. It opens with the arrival of its eponymous hero at the house of Mr Bonner, sponsor of his projected expedition across the Australian desert. He is received by Bonner's niece, Laura Trevelyan, who says: 'You must see the garden [...] Uncle has made it his hobby. Even at the Botanic Gardens I doubt there is such a collection of shrubs.'[28] Once again we embark on a journey from fertility to sterility, Eden to Golgotha, albeit with a hint of redemption and resurrection beyond. On the eve of the expedition's departure, the Bonners give a party at which Voss and Laura, meeting by chance in the luxuriant garden, have a curious conversation:

'You are so vast and ugly,' Laura Trevelyan was repeating the words; 'I can imagine some desert, with rocks, rocks of prejudice, and, yes, even hatred. You are so isolated. That is why you are fascinated by the prospect of desert places, in which you will find your own situation taken for granted, or more than that, exalted. You sometimes scatter kind words or bits of poetry to people, who soon realise the extent of their illusion. Everything is for yourself. Human emotions, when you have them, are quite flattering to you. If those emotions strike sparks from others, that also is flattering. But most flattering, I think, when you experience it, is the hatred, or even the mere irritation of weaker characters.'

'Do you hate me, perhaps?' asked Voss, in darkness.

'I am fascinated by you,' laughed Laura Trevelyan, with such candour that her admission did not seem immodest. '*You* are *my* desert!'[29]

Gradually it emerges that he in his pride and she in her humility complement each other. As Carolyn Bliss puts it:

> Voss's purposes require him to renounce all gentler emotions, avoid all human relationships, and utterly repudiate the comforts of the flesh. This side of life he condemns as weakness, identifies with the feminine in general and Laura in particular, and rejects as inappropriate to incipient deity. Thus when we meet Voss he is already fragmented, having denied so much of his full self. As Laura knows, man's nature partakes of both the human and the divine. If he is to reclaim his wholeness, he must do justice to the godlike in himself by embracing the human, or that which Laura represents and encourages. It is this crucial failure, this surrender of Voss to the whole self, which the novel traces.[30]

En route to the desert the expedition pauses to refresh itself in an Edenic valley known as Rhine Towers. Sanderson, the owner of this property, 'tended his flocks and herds like any other Christian [...] and both he and his wife would wash their servants' feet in many thoughtful and imperceptible ways'.[31] Moved by their loving relationship, Voss writes to propose marriage to Laura, whose letter of acceptance introduces a familiar feature of the landscape of the Waste Land:

> I do truthfully believe that you are always lurking somewhere on the fringes of my dreams, though I seldom see your face, and cannot even distinguish your form. I only know it is you, I *know*, just as I have sat beside you beneath certain trees, although I could not describe their shape, nor recite their Latin names. I have touched their bark, however.[32]

I think we know their shape.

Voss and Laura never meet again in the body, but spiritually they cross the desert together and, at the moment of

his death, she breaks free from what was thought to be a fatal fever to echo the words of Christ on the Cross: '"O God," cried the girl, at last, tearing it out. "It is over. It is over."'[33] On the other side of the continent, an exhausted Voss has been awaiting death at the hands of aborigines alarmed by the appearance beside the Southern Cross of a comet they see as a snake. Voss, too, in his new-found humility and humanity is frightened, we are told,

> of the arms, or sticks, reaching down from the eternal tree, and tears of blood, and candle-wax. Of the great legend becoming truth […]
>
> So the explorer waited. He did not fear tortures of the body, for little enough of that remained. It was some final torment of the spirit that he might not have the strength to endure. For a long time that night he did not dare raise his eyes towards the sky. When he did, at last, there were the nails of the Cross still eating into it, but the Comet, he saw, was gone.[34]

Eventually decapitated, like one of Kurtz's victims or the Lord of the Flies, Voss is not a traditional Christ-figure. Rather, he exemplifies Laura's statement that 'When man is truly humbled, when he has learned that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so. In the end he may ascend.'[35]

I pass now from a modernist to a post-modernist Waste Land: '*A country road. A tree*'.[36] The scene, stripped of all features but these, is Beckett's, though the road has been travelled by many: some I have already mentioned, and others include Oedipus, Christian, and Charlie Chaplin. Estragon and Vladimir, descendants of the last of these, are waiting for Godot: 'He said by the tree.'[37] What species of tree is unspecified. 'What is it?' asks Estragon. 'I don't know.' Vladimir replies: 'A willow.' We remember the unidentified trees whose bark White's Laura had touched. Whether or not Beckett's tree is a willow, it is certainly a tree

of weeping: its tears being those of both the first Adam (Estragon tells Pozzo his name is Adam) and the second.

VLADIMIR: (*Silence. Estragon looks attentively at the tree.*)
What do we do now?
ESTRAGON: Wait.
VLADIMIR: Yes, but while waiting.
ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?
VLADIMIR: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.
ESTRAGON: (*highly excited*). An erection! […]
Let's hang ourselves immediately![38]

This is potentially a tree both of sterile sexuality and suicide, a tree of life and death. The second aspect is more emphasized in Act I where the talk turns to 'Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour'.[39] Bert States, one of Beckett's more enlightening critics, comments:

I've wondered if there isn't a possible connection between Didi and Gogo and Dysmas and Gestas, the names given to the two thieves in the Middle Ages (see the apocryphal *Acts of Pilate*) […] Dysmas (crucified to Christ's right) was the repentant thief. He entered heaven with a cross on his shoulders, the first mortal redeemed by Christ's death. But which tramp should have the honor? Didi seems the logical beneficiary, given his preoccupation with repentance and crucifixion throughout the play; and at the end he does speak the words, 'Christ have mercy upon us.' Unfortunately, this would consign Gogo to a fate worse than death and that is hardly what the play has in mind. But if the reader finds the idea far-fetched, consider one propounded by Beckett himself on Estragon's chances: 'One of Estragon's feet is blessed, and the other damned. The boot won't go on the foot that is damned; and it will go on the foot that is not. It is like the two thieves on the cross' (Harold Hobson, 'Samuel Beckett,' p. 153). I simply don't know what to make of this: it seems to be carrying thievery to the limit of subtlety (Should one presume, or despair?). Perhaps we should call it a stand-off: Estragon gets at least one foot in the gate, which is more than we can clearly say for Vladimir.[40]

As Act I draws to a close, a stage direction announces: '*The light suddenly fails. In a moment it is night.*' We remember St Luke (23:43); 'There was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.' In Beckett's darkness, Estragon decides to abandon his boots, prompting the play's most savage exchange:

VLADIMIR: But you can't go barefoot!
ESTRAGON: Christ did.
VLADIMIR: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it? You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!
ESTRAGON: All my life I've compared myself to him.
VALDIMIR: But where he lived it was warm, it was dry!
ESTRAGON: Yes. And they crucified quick.[41]

Act II, we are told, takes place '*Next day. Same Time. Same Place.*' The landscape, however, has changed: '*The tree has four or five leaves.*' Estragon exclaims: 'It must be the Spring.' But no sooner are we lulled into thinking that the tree of death may have turned back into the tree of life, than we learn that disaster has struck Pozzo and Lucky. Finally, confirming how little progress they have made across the Waste Land,

Estragon draws Vladimir towards the tree. They stand motionless before it. Silence.

ESTRAGON: Why don't we hang ourselves?[42]

Beckett's God may be busy elsewhere, exiled, resting, or dead, but the playwright has re-made Man in His image; and we find much the same situation – as well as the same black comedy – in Ted Hughes's *Crow*. He has said of this cycle of poems,

My main concern was to produce something with the minimum cultural accretions of the museum sort – something autochthonous and

complete in itself, as it might be invented after the holocaust and demolition of all libraries, where essential things spring again – if at all – only from their seeds in nature – and are not lugged around or hoarded as preserved harvests from the past. So the comparative religion/mythology background was irrelevant to me, except as I could forget it.[43]

He cannot of course forget it. Keith Sagar says that 'Crow has a distinguished lineage in mythology',[44] but the Waste Land over which it flies seems more familiar than Hughes or Sagar allow. God the Father may be sleeping in several of these poems, outwitted by Crow in others, but the mythology they inhabit is predominantly Christian. It is rendered as a montage of fragments, somewhat in the manner of Eliot's *Waste Land*, which it echoes at a number of points. This is hardly surprising since Hughes's work, even more than Eliot's, is a response to domestic disaster projected on to a cosmic screen. Confronted, not simply with 'The horror! The horror!' but more specifically with 'the horror of Creation', he attacks the Creator by attempting to re-write the Old and New Testaments. In the darkness – rather than the light – of his experience, he parodies God's promise,

> a black rainbow
> Bent in emptiness
> over emptiness[45]

and revises the primal myth: 'In the beginning was the Scream'. The 'Lineage', with which this opens, leads to a God

> Who begat Nothing
> Who begat Never
> Never Never Never
>
> Who begat Crow [.][46]

The echo of Lear's anguished cry over Cordelia, 'Never, never, never, never, never', is significant in a work dedicated to the memory of a tragic mother and her child. Crow 'is stronger than death', the survivor in a Waste Land more grotesque than Lear's heath, a battlefield like that imaged in Eliot's poem: 'he took the battle of the Somme in one hand'.[47] 'Crow's Account of the Battle' describes 'legs in a treetop', a tree sprung surely from a seed of the Tree in the Garden where Crow played 'A Childish Prank':

> Crow laughed.
> He bit the Worm, God's only son,
> Into two writhing halves.
>
> He stuffed into man the tail half
> With the wounded end hanging out.
>
> He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman
> And it crept in deeper and up
> To peer out through her eyes
> Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly
> Because O it was painful.[48]

As in the phantasmagoria of Eliot's *Waste Land*, sex is the root of the problem; and the serpent rears its cobra-head again in the poem 'Apple Tragedy',[49] another Hughesian variation of the Genesis story, that ends with Adam trying 'to hang himself in the orchard'. There is no such *Godot*-like solution to the problem more conventionally – and I think more movingly – presented in the book's final treatment of this theme:

Snake Hymn

> The snake in the garden
> If it was not God
> It was the gliding
> And push of Adam's blood.

The blood in Adam's body
That slid into Eve
Was the everlasting thing
Adam swore was love.

The blood in Eve's body
That slid from her womb –
Knotted on the cross
It had no name.

Nothing else has happened.
The love that cannot die
Sheds the million faces
And skin of agony

To hang, an empty husk.
Still no suffering
Darkens the garden
Or the snake's song.[50]

I take this to mean that Fall and Crucifixion are endlessly re-enacted; that the body on the Cross has no *one* name; and that lovers in the Garden, seduced by the snake's song, hear no cries from Golgotha until they hear their own.

These crossings of the Waste Land seem, despite their differences of genre and tonality, remarkable for their similarities. And what are we to infer from the persistence of their iconography? Firstly, that far from being an image of exclusively twentieth-century alienation and despair, the Waste Land is perceived as a timeless image of the human condition, the nightmare of history, that has no end this side of Golgotha. However, the persistent representation of the trees marking the extremities of that terrain – and particularly their representation by non-Christians – indicates the archetypal power of the Christian story. Lastly, I am led by the example of Sassoon and Eliot, who made their crossings without the shield of faith, to

wonder whether the icons themselves might not sometimes be stepping-stones across the Slough of Despond; whether representations of some stage of the journey from the Garden to Golgotha – musical, pictorial, sculptural, as well as textual representations – might not be catalysts in the experience of conversion.

CHAPTER 10

War and peace

Central to British mythology of the First World War is the figure of the poet who descends like Orpheus into the Underworld, like Dante into the Inferno, and comes back singing of what he has seen. Several of the poets also wrote immensely successful prose accounts – sometimes lightly fictionalized – of their underworldly experience, with the result that British novels of the war have tended to be overshadowed by those memoirs and by translations of such foreign masterpieces as Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (published in English as *Under Fire*, 1917) and Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (published in English as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1939.) Sometimes, too, the often lethal legacy of the war in novels written after it – novels in which the violence has already occurred, as in Greek tragedy, offstage – tends to be obscured by other events.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) opens in

> the middle of June. The War was over, except for someone like Mrs Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite killed; but it was over; thank Heaven – over.[1]

'The War was over, *except* …' At the centre of the novel, at the centre of Clarissa Dalloway's world, of Virginia Woolf's

world, are the exceptions that show in a very real sense that the war was not over. More will be heard of Lady Bexborough, a figure based on Lady Desborough, mother of Julian Grenfell, whose poem 'Into Battle' had been printed in *The Times* on 24 April 1915, the same day as his obituary.

Richard Dalloway, walking home, reflects:

> Really it was a miracle thinking of the war, and thousands of poor chaps, with all their lives before them, shovelled together, already half forgotten; it was a miracle. Here he was walking across London to say to Clarissa in so many words that he loved her.[2]

He may have half forgotten those poor chaps, but it is the tragedy of Septimus Warren Smith that he cannot forget Evans, his officer, killed just before the Armistice. Woolf's own experience of mental disturbance admits her to the horrors of Septimus Warren Smith's shell-shocked hallucinations: 'A voice spoke from behind the screen. Evans was speaking. The dead were with him. "Evans, Evans!" he cried.'[3] The dead are with him more palpably than the living, but finally it is the ignorance and insensitivity of the doctor who refuses to acknowledge this that drives him to his suicide. Septimus had been decorated for bravery in the war, but when he hurls himself from the window, 'down on to Mrs Filmer's area railings', the doctor exclaims 'The coward!' So at last the war intrudes on Mrs Dalloway's party and her consciousness: 'The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself.'[4] That sentence tolls in her head like a refrain, like Big Ben striking the hour. 'The War was over, except …

Two years later, Woolf muses in her diary:

> I luxuriate most in a whole day alone […] slipping tranquilly off into the deep water of my own thoughts navigating the underworld […] I am making up 'To the Lighthouse' – the sea is to be heard all

through it. I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel'. A new – by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?[5]

To the Lighthouse is an elegy for her parents, for the world of her childhood, a world destroyed by the Great War. The elegy commemorates, but also questions. Mrs Ramsay is aware 'that her daughters – Prue, Nancy, Rose – could sport with infidel ideas […] there was in all their minds a mute questioning of deference and chivalry'.[6] Half a lifetime and millions of lives later, Julia Stephen's daughter Virginia (no longer mute) can be heard questioning deference and chivalry as she depicts Mr Ramsay terrifying Lily Briscoe:

> Indeed, he almost knocked her easel over, coming down upon her with his hands waving, shouting out 'Boldly we rode and well', but, mercifully, he turned sharp, and rode off, to die gloriously she supposed upon the heights of Balaclava. Never was anybody at once so ridiculous and so alarming.[7]

'The Charge of the Light Brigade' is Mr Ramsay's theme-song, intoned over and over in Part I of the novel. It celebrates a military episode far removed from that of which we hear in a documentary aside in Part II: '[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]'[8] Was it twenty, or was it thirty? One might think it important, but when the casualty figures are in thousands or in tens of thousands, who cares whether it was twenty or thirty? So much for Andrew's father's fantasies of chivalric death and glory.

The Great War is, in every sense, at the centre of *To the Lighthouse*, although we only hear it off-stage in the 'Time Passes' section. When we emerge from that dark tunnel, the world has changed; and we are surely meant to understand that it has been changed in part by the awful result of those male

fantasies of death and glory represented by Mr Ramsay's *pre*-war favourite poem. In Part III he intones not Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade' but Cowper's 'The Castaway'; death and glory having been replaced by death without glory, fantasy by the reality of a depressive widower:

> No voice divine the storm allayed,
> No light propitious shone,
> When, snatched from all effectual aid,
> We perished, each alone;
> But I beneath a rougher sea,
> And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

One of the most searching examinations in fiction of post-war England and the English was, in fact, started before the war. In 1912, the year D.H. Lawrence met and fell in love with Frieda Weekley, he began a novel he planned to call 'The Sisters'. It was to be a more searching examination of the nature of love than he had previously attempted, but was set aside in 1914. The first half of what he retitled *The Wedding Ring* (a novel rejected by Methuen in 1914) became *The Rainbow*, which was attacked by reviewers for its overt sexuality, then withdrawn from sale and, finally, banned for obscenity in November 1915. Disillusioned with England and hating the war, Lawrence retreated to Cornwall and the following spring started revising the second half of 'The Sisters' manuscript. After rewriting it twice, he had a finished version of what had become *Women in Love* twelve months after the banning of *The Rainbow*. This again was rejected by publishers, and only in 1921 did the final version appear.

Lawrence's experience of love had deepened during the painfully protracted gestation of his novel, and his view of England and the English had darkened. The book's original title survives in that of its opening chapter, 'Sisters', where the 'flame'-like Ursula and the 'cold' Gudrun meet their

matching men, Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich. To Gudrun, Gerald looked

> pure as an arctic thing. Perhaps he was thirty years old, perhaps more. His gleaming beauty, maleness, like a young, good-humoured smiling wolf, did not blind her to the significant, sinister stillness in his bearing, the lurking danger of his unsubdued temper. 'His totem is the wolf,' she repeated to herself.[9]

Gudrun's first impression is confirmed as his portrait emerges under Lawrence's hand: 'Gerald was Cain, if anybody. […] Gerald as a boy had accidentally killed his brother.'[10] His old nurse's testimony seems to call into question the nature of that accident: 'that Gerald was a demon if ever there was one, a proper demon, ay, at six months old'.[11] The narrator tells us that 'During his childhood and his boyhood [Gerald] had wanted a sort of savagedom. The days of Homer were his ideal, when a man was chief of an army of heroes.'[12] He sounds like Julian Grenfell and any number of other public schoolboys with a classical education. 'School had been torture to him', we learn. 'Yet he had not questioned whether one should go through this torture.'[13] Confirming the law that 'Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return',[14] Gerald as a boy 'was filled with the wildest excitement and delight' when soldiers came to break a strike at his mine-owner father's pit-head. 'He longed to go with the soldiers to shoot the men.'[15]

Leaving school, he refused to go to Oxford and was then offered an opportunity to indulge the appetite for savagedom that the miners' strike had not assuaged: 'he must try war'.[16] We are told nothing of his wartime experience; only that when it was over he resigned his commission.[17] One might expect someone who had survived 'the torture of lying machinally shelled'[18] at Gallipoli or on the Western Front

to question the social benefits of the new machines. Not so Gerald Crich, 'soldier, […] explorer and a Napoleon of industry',[19] as he became on his return home, assuming managerial responsibility in his father's firm.

'Now he had a vision of power':[20] the power of machines to enforce the managerial will and extend its reach.

> He was the God of the machine. […]
>
> And it was his will to subjugate Matter to his own ends. The subjugation itself was the point, the *fight* was the be-all, the fruits of *victory* were mere results. […] His will was now, to take the coal out of the earth, profitably. The profit was merely the condition of *victory*, but the *victory* itself lay in the feat achieved. He vibrated with zest before the *challenge*. Every day he was in the mines, examining, testing, he consulted experts, he gradually gathered the whole situation into his mind, as *a general grasps the plan of his campaign*. [My italics][21]

Gerald's use of *subjugate/subjugation* indicates an unconscious belief in industrialization as a continuation of war by other means, and his military imagery contrasts brutally with the Christian idiom clothing his father's confused philanthropy:

> He wanted to be a pure Christian, one and equal with all men. He even wanted to give away all he had, to the poor. Yet he was a great promoter of industry, and he knew perfectly that he must keep his goods and keep his authority.[22]

To Gerald, 'The whole Christian attitude of love and self-sacrifice was old hat.' Not the least of the novel's ironies is the 'arctic' warrior's suicide (a prohibited perversion of Christian self-sacrifice) on the snow-slope. Lawrence would seem to imply that, but for the war, Gerald's life, the lives of his workforce and their families – and, by extension, the society they represent – might have followed a more life-enhancing trajectory. His double portrait of Victorian father and Edwardian

soldier son stands at the centre of a nation altered forever by the Great War.

The war is again all but invisibly at the centre of L.P. Hartley's fine novel, *The Go-Between* (1953), another study of martial fantasy, sex, and death in a divided nation. Hartley announces a debt to Proust in his opening sentence: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' And the sixty-year-old narrator (seven years younger than the novelist) revisits that country to exhume the secret buried by a traumatized subconscious in his diary for the year 1900. Opening that book – for the first time in almost fifty years – he sees

> round the year thus confidently heralded, the first year of the century, winged with hope, clustered the signs of the zodiac, each somehow contriving to suggest a plenitude of life and power, each glorious, though differing from the others in glory. […]
>
> In my zodiacal fantasies there was one jarring note, to which, when I indulged them, I tried not to listen, for it flawed the experience. This was my own role in it. […]
>
> I was between twelve and thirteen, and I wanted to think of myself as a man.
>
> There were only two candidates, the Archer and the Water-carrier […] I leaned to the Archer as the more romantic, and because the idea of shooting appealed to me.[23]

The boy's martial fantasies of glory are encouraged by his admiration for an aristocratic veteran of the Boer War (then in progress) whom he meets when spending the long hot summer of 1900 at a school friend's country house. As the drama unfolds, the boy becomes neither Archer nor Water-carrier, but instead a Go-between, carrying messages between the aristocratic veteran (the Archer), a tenant farmer (the Water-Carrier), and the daughter of the Big House (the Virgin of the zodiac), for whose favours the two men are competing.

The Boer War – and again the conflict is off-stage – plays at once a literal and a metaphorical role in the book. When the owners and guests of the Big House field a cricket team to play the village, the twelve-year-old narrator sees the match in military terms:

> it crossed my mind that perhaps the village team were like the Boers, who did not have much in the way of equipment by our standards, but could give a good account of themselves, none the less […]
>
> […] disasters followed. […] These Boers in their motley raiment, triumphantly throwing the ball into the air after each kill, how I disliked them! The spectators disposed along the boundary, standing, sitting, lying, or propped against trees, I imagined to be animated by a revolutionary spirit, and revelling in the downfall of their betters.[24]

Hartley's subject is the boy's fall from innocence into traumatic experience; that action set in the sunlit garden of late-Victorian England, where the snake is already at work. A divided and corrupted society is moving towards its own expulsion from the garden into the traumatic experience of the trenches. Far from realizing the dream of glory offered by his diary's constellation of zodiacal signs, the boy is forced to betray his exploitative friends, Virgin and Water-carrier, and witness their love-making. His unwilling betrayal results in – causes, it must seem to him – the Water-carrier's self-inflicted death by gunshot. And so the martial dream turns to nightmare. From this he escapes into neurasthenic amnesia, such as Louis Simpson would suffer in the wake of the Second World War; a form of forgetting that Wilfred Owen might have preferred to nightmares of a sentry he had positioned and for whose subsequent blinding he felt responsible: 'I try not to remember these things now', he wrote, but when he tries to forget them, he finds 'Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids', / Watch my dreams still.'[25]

Chronologically, the Great War is at the centre of *The Go-Between* in much the same way as it is at the centre of *To the Lighthouse*, although Hartley's narrator only mentions it once. Having confronted – and, one must hope, exorcised – the horrors that caused his amnesia, he looks back on his life as a bachelor librarian:

> the life of facts proved no bad substitute for the facts of life. It did not let me down; on the contrary, it upheld me and probably saved my life; for when the first war came, my skill in marshalling facts was held to be more important than any service I was likely to perform on the field. So I missed that experience, along with many others, spooning among them.[26]

The Big House of Hartley's novel, with its elaborate hierarchy of family, guests, and servants, is an emblem of late-Victorian society. Called Brandham Hall, it does *brand them all*. It is another Heartbreak House, and in Bernard Shaw's Preface to the play of that title, he excoriates the selfish indolence of the owners of Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall.

> They hated politics. They did not wish to realise Utopia for the common people: they wished to realise their favourite fictions and poems in their own lives; and, when they could, they lived without scruple on incomes which they did nothing to earn. […] They took the only part of our society in which there was leisure for high culture, and made it an economic, political, and, as far as practicable, a moral vacuum.[27]

Unlike the non-combatants, Woolf, Lawrence, and Hartley, Ford Madox Ford enlisted at forty-one and saw action in the Battle of the Somme, not from a front-line trench but close enough to be blown up and gassed. Severely concussed by an exploding shell, he lost his memory like the Go-between and Louis Simpson, and for some days was

unable to remember even his own name. He survived that descent into the underworld of trenches and, in 1918, published a book of survivors' songs, *On Heaven and Poems Written on Active Service*. These have little of the vision, precision, or lyrical intensity of his younger contemporaries, Blunden, Owen, Rosenberg, and Sassoon, but the eye and ear of the poet Ford Madox Hueffer were to play their part in creating the modernist masterpiece of the novelist Ford Madox Ford (who changed his name in 1919), the quartet now known as *Parade's End*. This consists of *Some Do Not* (1924), *No More Parades* (1925), *A Man Could Stand Up* (1926), and *Last Post* (1928), and their action is played out against the indolent background of Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall. Unlike the war memoirs of his fellow poets, Ford's fictional quartet is both centred on the war and as concerned as the novels of Woolf, Lawrence, and Hartley with the painful transition from pre-war to post-war England.

The story of Christopher Tietjens began to take shape in his imagination shortly after he had been invalided home from the Western Front. His memory was haunted by the dead and, increasingly, by one dead man in particular. Arthur Marwood had been the son of a well-known Yorkshire family, a brilliant mathematician in the government office of statistics, and Ford's associate in publishing the *English Review*. 'He possessed', said Ford, 'the clear, eighteenth century English mind which has disappeared from the earth, leaving the earth very much the poorer.'[28] Tuberculosis forced him into inactive retirement, but he re-emerged from his friend's imagination metamorphosed into Christopher Tietjens.

> I seemed [said Ford] to see him stand in some high place in France during the period of hostilities taking in not only what was visible but

all the causes and all the motive powers of infinitely distant places. And I seemed to hear his infinitely scornful comment on those places. It was as if he lived again.[29]

Ford made the hero of his tetralogy a good deal more attractive than he makes Marwood sound. In Christopher Tietjens, the half-German novelist created a German Romantic's idealization of an English gentleman. More 'bohemian' than 'gentleman' himself, Ford had studied the type with an artist's eye and loaded him with history. Like other artists with a strong sense of tradition – Tennyson dreaming of Camelot, Yeats of an eighteenth-century 'Romantic Ireland' – he endowed his hero with a past that never existed. Ford's imagination was rooted in an eighteenth-century 'Romantic England' of pastoral patriarchy: a High Tory earth under a High Tory heaven, in which Tietjens can picture the Almighty

as, on a colossal scale, a great English Landowner, benevolently awful, a colossal duke who never left his study and was thus invisible, but knowing all about the estate down to the last hind at the home farm and the last oak; Christ, an almost too benevolent Land Steward, son of the Owner, knowing all about the estate down to the last child at the porter's lodge, apt to be got round by the more detrimental tenants; the Third Person of the Trinity, the spirit of the estate […][30]

Satirical as this may seem, it illustrates a serious theme. *Christ*-opher *Teach*-ens, younger son of an English Landowner, is presented as a Christ-like figure.[31] 'He wants', says his awful, adulterous wife Sylvia, 'to play the part of Jesus Christ';[32] and again, 'Our Lord was a gentleman … Christopher is playing at being our Lord calling on the woman taken in adultery.'[33] He gives to the poor; has remarkable prophetic and telepathic power; is said to have a 'mania for sacrificing himself';[34] and

on four occasions in the last volume his saintliness is mentioned. This identification may have been suggested or reinforced by the image, popular in the early years of the war, of the soldier as a type of Christ. Commonly used in the press and the pulpit, it also found its way into poems such as Owen's 'Greater Love' ('Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends')[35] and Sassoon's 'The Redeemer'.[36]

Tietjens's story begins in time of peace. *Some Do Not* opens with an image of comfort, tranquillity, and good order:

> they were of the English public official class – sat in the perfectly appointed railway carriage. The leather straps to the windows were of virgin newness; the mirrors beneath the new luggage racks immaculate as if they had reflected very little; the bulging upholstery in its luxuriant, regulated curves was scarlet and yellow in an intricate, minute dragon pattern, the design of a geometrician in Cologne. The compartment smelt faintly, hygienically of admirable varnish; the train ran as smoothly – Tietjens remembered thinking – as British gilt-edged securities.[37]

The carriage may be 'perfectly appointed', but the fact that its mirrors look as if they 'had reflected very little' might be thought to suggest something about 'the English public official class'. The train may have run 'as smoothly […] as British gilt-edged securities', but in fact it was not running from London to Rye as its passengers supposed. It was running instead from the past into the future, into the Waste Land of the war, where Tietjens will find himself preparing to send a draft of Canadian troops 'up the line to death'. But where are they? Held up somewhere by a train crash. So what will happen to the men they are supposed to relieve? Now the Canadians have been found. And now the original orders have been found. But now the original orders have been countermanded.

All that may still be in the future, but Tietjens, the brilliant statistician, can foresee the future. He had prophesied

> that about the time grouse-shooting began, in 1914, a European conflagration would take place which would shut up half the houses in Mayfair and beggar their inhabitants. He had patiently supported his prophecy with financial statistics as to the approaching bankruptcy of various European powers and the growingly acquisitive skill and rapacity of the inhabitants of Great Britain.[38]

In one of the time-shifts characteristic of Ford's narrative strategy, we see Tietjens (in a flash-forward) returned from the war and greatly changed. Sylvia asks him

> 'What really happened to you in France? What is really the matter with your memory? Or your brain, is it?'
>
> He said carefully:
>
> 'It's half of it, an irregular piece of it, dead. Or rather pale. Without a proper blood supply…. So a great portion of it, in the shape of memory, has gone.' […]
>
> [He] had at last convinced her that he had not been, for the last four months, acting hypochondriacal or merely lying to obtain sympathy or extended sick leave. Amongst Sylvia's friends a wangle known as shell-shock was cynically laughed at and quite approved of.[39]

Tietjens is made of tougher stuff than Woolf's shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith. He reloads his memory by reading the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and prepares to return to the trenches.

Time-shifts like this – juxtaposing peacetime with wartime – point up the cruelty and moral chaos they have in common. Sylvia betrays her husband, runs off with another man and, when she runs back, delights to torment him with the possibility that he may not be the father of her son. His banker dishonours Tietjens's cheques so that he will be disgraced and (his banker hopes) divorced by Sylvia whom *he* wishes to marry. Any last doubt we may have that their

society is rotten is removed when Tietjens's false friend Macmaster is knighted for work that Tietjens did for him; the dishonest stay-at-home elevated, the honest patriot ruined. All this Tietjens stoically endures in a manner reminiscent of the Old Testament prophecy of Christ: 'as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth'.[40] His decency, goodness, generosity compound his problems. These qualities serve as a reproach to others and lead them to treat him worse.

The second volume of the tetralogy, *No More Parades* (a phrase repeated again and again until it comes to have the force of a refrain), brings us to within range of the front. Enter then Captain McKechnie, whose wife has betrayed him, with an Egyptologist, and a private soldier, O Nine Morgan, whose wife has betrayed him with a prize-fighter. Tietjens has just rejected the private's application for compassionate leave (having been advised that the prize-fighter would probably kill him) when a shell saves the prize-fighter that effort. The scene will haunt Tietjens's memory as Wilfred Owen was haunted by the eyes of his blinded sentry. At such moments Tietjens is sustained by the talismanic thought of the poet George Herbert, on a hill above his country parsonage, composing the lines:

> Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
> The bridal of the earth and sky […][41]

The poem offers a vision of sanity and serenity, reminding him of a natural order in which – despite the unnatural disorder surrounding him – he still believes. If he can hold on to that, perhaps he will survive to see peace again: peace – when a man could stand up on a hill.

The third volume takes its title from this phrase: *A Man Could Stand Up*. It opens on Armistice Day 1918 with a

telephone call telling us that Tietjens has survived, has come home, but has apparently lost his mind. A time-shift then takes us back to a day in the trenches where Tietjens is in command of his regiment, its over-taxed Colonel having slid into drunkenness. This extended flashback is presented mainly as impressionistic interior monologue. A modernist *tour de force*, it reaches its climax when a shell falls, burying Tietjens, young Lieutenant Aranjuez, and Lance-Corporal Duckett. Tietjens, as always, is victim; in keeping with his Christ-like role, we never see him shooting or injuring anybody. On this occasion, he crawls out of the sucking mud and sets to work rescuing Aranjuez. 'If Tietjens's heroism takes the form of salvation,' Max Saunders reminds us, 'his attempts to save are themselves ambiguous. Lance-Corporal Duckett is already dead. Aranjuez gets shot in the eye while Tietjens is carrying him, which causes Tietjens to feel that far from saving him he has actually been responsible for injuring him.'[42] Such failures do not invalidate the Christ-like parallel. Tietjens is not a miracle-worker, but Christ saved neither himself nor those crucified with him; and the salvation he promised his disciples did not always preclude martyrdom. Tietjens is not martyred. Here, fighting for his sanity, he seizes on peaceable analogies and takes strength from the talismanic vision of what peace means: standing up on a hill, 'On the moors above Groby. April sunlight. Lots of sunlight and larks.'[43] No sooner has he extricated the boy, than he has to face another hazard, an inspecting General, who explodes with fury at his filthy appearance and relieves him of his command.

With that ironic twist, the war ends for Christopher Tietjens. Another time-shift returns us to Armistice Day, when he and the young woman he loves, Valentine Wannop, are reunited in his empty London house; she quoting to

herself the biblical Song of Solomon (symbolic of Christ's marriage to his Church). But then, just as the war scenes were interrupted with memories of peacetime, so now the lovers' reunion is interrupted with reminders of war. The mad officer McKechnie knocks at Tietjens's door. Shell-shocked, he has lost his mind. Then Aranjuez turns up – he has lost an eye – and, after him, an officer who has lost an arm. The books ends with a wild party and a dance parodic of the marriage dance that ends so many comedies on the stage:

> They were prancing. The whole world round them was yelling and prancing round. They were the centre of unending roaring circles. The man with the eye-glass had stuck a half-crown in his other eye.[44]

This offers a bitter contrast to Sassoon's better-known response to the Armistice:

> Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
> And beauty came like the setting sun:
> My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
> Drifted away … O, but Everyone
> Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the
> singing will never be done.[45]

A reader of Ford's twentieth-century *War and Peace* might expect that, with the return of peace, the modernist fragmentation so well suited to the wartime narrative might give place to the traditional linear progression of the pre-war narrative. That, however, would imply a new peace resembling the old; order succeeding the anarchic disorder of war, which both the structure and texture of *Last Post* show it has not. Robie Macauley defines its dark structure with an illuminating analogy:

> Christopher Tietjens is present physically for only one moment at the end of the book and yet he is the most central being in it. The system

of the book might be thought of as a temporarily eclipsed sun with a number of visible satellite consciousnesses surrounding and defining its position. There are nine relative and interconnected interior monologues representing several people in the general vicinity of the cottage to which Christopher and Valentine and [Christopher's older brother] Mark and his long-time French mistress (now his wife) have gone after the war.[46]

In the midst of battle, Tietjens had clung to a pastoral vision of 'the moors above Groby', the family's country house. Peace found his vision translated into rural (rather than pastoral) reality. The rise of the monied middle class at the expense of the landed gentry – apparent in the aristocratic Archer's leasing of Brandham Hall to the middle-class Virgin's father in *The Go-Between* – has necessitated the lease of Groby Hall to tenants with no feeling for Tietjens family tradition. As Mark Tietjens, head of the family, is dying in a crowded cottage, he hears that the ancestral Groby Great Tree has been felled:

Christopher was at the foot of his bed. Holding a bicycle and a lump of wood. Aromatic wood, a chunk sawn from a tree. His face was white; his eyes stuck out. Blue pebbles. He gazed at his brother and said:

'Half Groby wall is down. Your bedroom's wrecked. I found your case of sea-birds thrown on a rubble heap.'[47]

Before Mark dies, however, holding the hand of his brother's new wife Valentine, he breaks a long silence to speak of the child shortly to be born to her and Christopher. Many people see the Last Word of Ford's tetralogy as that of its title, which echoes a prophecy of the adjutant at the disbanding of the battalion:

'the adjutant saying *There will be no more parades* … For there won't. There won't, there damn well won't. … No more Hope, no more Glory, no more parades for you and me any more. Nor for the country … nor for the world, I dare say … None … Gone … Na poo, finny!'[48]

In its context, this is offered as bad news, but at the end of a war that had claimed millions of lives and ruined many more, it strikes a more optimistic note. This is confirmed by the fact that Christopher and Valentine are in love; in renewed contact with the earth, living on what their hands can grow; and about to have a child to inherit their values and help form a society saner than that shattered by the Great War. For *Parade's End*, as for *Women in Love*, the war is over and life-renewing peace a possibility unimaginable in the No Man's Landscape of Jones's *In Parenthesis*, Blunden's *Undertones of War*, and many other memoirs of the Western Front.

CHAPTER 11

The fire from heaven

The image of the trench is so ubiquitous in writings about the First World War that one can forget it was fought in the air as well as on the ground. Yeats had eulogized and elegized 'An Irish Airman', Major Robert Gregory, RFC, MC, Legion of Honour, killed on the Italian Front in January 1918. And just as the trench had its mythic dimension as the mouth of hell, so 'the daring young men in their flying machines' were to enter popular mythology as heirs to the wings of Daedalus and Icarus. The aviator as hero becomes a common figure in the literature of the 1930s. At the hopeful start of that decade, Cecil Day Lewis begins a poem 'Come out in the sun, for a man is born today!' and prophesies:

> Now shall the airman vertically banking
> Out of the blue write a new sky-sign […][1]

When he wants to celebrate his *literary* hero, Auden, he elevates him to the skies: 'Look west, Wystan, lone flyer, birdman, my bully boy!' And in *A Time to Dance* (1935), his modern mini-*Odyssey* begins:

> Sing we the two lieutenants, Parer and M'Intosh,
> After the War wishing to hie them home to Australia,
> Planned they would take a high way, a hazardous crazy air-way:
> Death their foregone conclusion, a flight headlong to failure,

We said. For no silver posh
Plane was their pigeon, no dandy dancer quick-stepping through heaven,
But a craft of obsolete design, a condemned D. H. nine;
Sold for a song it was, patched up though to write an heroic
Line across the world as it reeled on its obstinate stoic
Course to that southern haven.[2]

As the decade advanced and darkened, however, the image of the aviator began to acquire other associations. At the start of Yeats's poem 'Lapis Lazuli', written in the last months of the Spanish Civil War, hysterical women say:

> everybody knows or else should know
> That if nothing drastic is done
> Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out,
> Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
> Until the town lie beaten flat.[3]

After the indiscriminate killing of civilians in a bombing raid – by German aircraft – on the Spanish town of Guernica in 1937, everybody knew or else should have known that the emblem of the Next War would be the bomb, the fire from heaven.

So it proved. On 1 September 1939, Germany, in pursuit of imperial ambitions and without warning, launched a savage attack on Poland by land and air. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany. By the end of the month, Germany and her ally Russia had between them defeated and partitioned Poland. It was then Russia's turn to attack Finland and, in April 1940, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway. For Britain and France, the period of inactivity that came to be known as "The Phoney War" ended in May, when the German Army overran Luxembourg, invaded the Netherlands and Belgium, and their armoured columns raced for the English Channel. Cut off, the British forces were evacuated by sea, with

heavy losses, from Dunkirk and, in June, France signed an armistice with Germany. In August, as prelude to an invasion, the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, attacked England. Over the months that followed, the fighter pilots of the Royal Air Force challenged the enemy bombers' nightly Blitz of London and other major cities. The Battle of Britain, as it came to be called, cost the Luftwaffe 2,300 planes, the RAF 900. And the heroes of that battle were the fighter pilots who, in their bullet-riddled Spitfires and Hurricanes, eventually caused the Germans to abandon their plans for invasion. One of those pilots, Richard Hillary, wrote a memoir in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* (the novel of education) that was highly influential in helping to crystallize and complicate the image of the aviator as hero.

His book, *The Last Enemy* (published in 1942), begins with a Proem, or preamble, which introduces us to 603 Squadron as it takes off to engage the German raiders. When the narrator confesses to 'the usual sick feeling in the pit of the stomach, as though I was about to row a race', one wonders whether this signals a return to the War-as-Sport theme so common in literature of the First World War. It does. But first we see him shot down – 'thinking "So this is it!" and putting both hands to [his] eyes' (a detail of some significance in the light of what follows).[4] He is rescued from the English Channel, horribly burned, and the Proem ends: 'The foundations of an experience of which this crash was, if not the climax, at least the turning point were laid in Oxford before the war.'[5]

Book One goes back in time to Hillary's life at university, of which he says:

> Perhaps as good a cross-section of opinion and sentiment as any at Oxford was to be found in Trinity, the college where I spent those two years rowing a great deal, flying a little – I was a member of the University Air Squadron – and reading somewhat.[6]

He describes a community of well-to-do and snobbish young men, radiating an 'alert Philistinism', and reports a conversation with a pacifist friend about what they would do in the event of war:

> I told him […] I should of course join the Air Force. 'In the first place,' I said, 'I shall get paid and have good food. Secondly, I have none of your sentiments about killing, much as I admire them. In a fighter plane, I believe, we have found a way to return to war as it ought to be, war which is individual combat between two people, in which one either kills or is killed. It's exciting, it's individual, and it's disinterested. I shan't be sitting behind a long-range gun working out how to kill people sixty miles away. I shan't get maimed: either I shall get killed or I shall get a few pleasant putty medals and enjoy being stared at in a night club. Your unfortunate convictions, worthy as they are, will get you at best a few white feathers, and at worst locked up.'
>
> 'Thank god,' said David, 'that I at least have the courage of my convictions.'[7]

We know from the Proem that the narrator was to be badly burned, and so sense an irony in the statement 'I shan't get maimed', though the full and bitter force of that irony will only be revealed later.

In July 1938, Hillary was one of a group of Oxford oarsmen who went to row in a German regatta for what had been known as the Kaiser Fours, but had recently become General Goering's Prize Fours. Looking back at that race from 1942, he finds it

> a surprisingly accurate pointer to the course of the war. We were quite untrained, lacked any form of organization and were really quite hopelessly casual. We even arrived late at the start, where all five German crews were lined up, eager to go.[8]

At the half-way mark they were five lengths behind, but as they passed under a bridge somebody spat at them.

> It was a tactical error. Sammy Stockton, who was stroking the boat, took us up the next half of the course as though pursued by all the fiends in hell and we won the race by two-fifths of a second. General Goering had to surrender his cup and we took it back with us to England. It was a gold shell-case mounted with the German eagle and disgraced our rooms in Oxford for nearly a year until we could stand it no longer and sent it back through the German Embassy.[9]

Hillary admits that, for purely selfish reasons, he welcomed the war. It 'solved all problems of a career, and promised a chance of self-realization that would normally take years to achieve.'[10] He imagined himself, as a would-be writer, acquiring the imaginative capital on which he would draw once the war was over. Embarking on what one might call his 'higher education', he has no awareness of human suffering. His first feeling after his first kill was

> of the essential rightness of it all […] I realized in that moment just how lucky a fighter pilot is. He has none of the personalized emotions of the soldier, handed a rifle and bayonet and told to charge. He does not even have to share the dangerous emotions of the bomber pilot who night after night must experience that childhood longing for smashing things. The fighter pilot's emotions are those of the duellist – cool, precise, impersonal.[11]

But, he adds, 'From this flight Broody Benson did not return', introducing what shortly comes to have the force of a refrain: 'From this flight [Larry Cunningham/Bubble Waterston] did not return.'

From one such mission he himself returns burned almost beyond recognition. There follows a painful account of plastic surgery undergone in a medical unit known as 'the Beauty Shop', where he is fitted with new eyelids. All this he endures – if one can trust the evidence of his book – with stoical courage and with no sign of bitterness towards the enemy or Fate or others more lucky than himself. In this, he

abides by the duellist's code he had earlier articulated, but one does begin to sense that his vaunted impersonality is beginning to be eroded by a visit from the lifeboat crew who had rescued him; by the plight of his fellow patients; and (most of all) by the support of a friend's fiancée after his friend is killed. These prepare for the subsequent crisis – and the book clearly has a place in the long tradition of crisis-autobiography that extends from St Augustine's *Confessions* to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* and beyond – but it is from another woman, a stranger, that he learns his final lesson.

One evening in 1941 he is out of hospital and walking through London in an air-raid. He takes shelter in a pub, only to have it collapse about him from a direct hit. With his half-healed hands he helps to drag the masonry from a buried mother and child.

> Finally we made a gap wide enough for the bed to be drawn out. The woman who lay there looked middle-aged. She lay on her back and her eyes were closed. Her face, through the dirt and streaked blood, was the face of a thousand working women; her body under the cotton night-dress was heavy. The nightdress was drawn up to her knees and one leg was twisted under her. There was no dignity about that figure.[12]

We realize that Hillary cares about dignity, and we remember the similar perception in John Cornford's 'Letter from Aragon': 'Death was not dignified.'[13] But this woman was not dead. She opens her eyes and, looking into his, with their grafted eyelids, says: 'I see they got you too.'[14] The man who had earlier imagined himself bemedalled, and enjoying 'being stared at in a night club', finds the reality very different and himself, for the first time, afraid:

> I wanted to run, to run anywhere away from that scene, from myself, from the terror that was inside me, the terror of something that was about to happen and which I had not the power to stop.

It started small, small but insistent deep inside of me, sharp as a needle, then welling up uncontrollable, spurting, flowing over, choking me. I was drowning, helpless in a rage that caught and twisted and hurled me on, mouthing in a blind unthinking frenzy. I heard myself cursing, the words pouring out, shrill, meaningless, and as my mind cleared a little I knew that it was the woman I cursed. Yes, the women that I reviled, hating her that she should die like that for me to see, loathing that silly bloody twisted face that had said those words: 'I see they got you too.' That she should have spoken to me, why, oh Christ, to me? Could she not have died the next night, ten minutes later, or in the next street? Could she not have died without speaking, without raising those cow eyes to mine?

'I see they got you too.' All humanity had been in those few words, and I had cursed her. Slowly the frenzy died in me, the rage oozed out of me, leaving me cold, shivering, and bitterly ashamed. I had cursed her, cursed her, I realized as I grew calmer, for she had been the one thing that my rage surging uncontrollably had had to fasten on, the one thing to which my mind, overwhelmed by the sense of something so huge and beyond the range of thought, could cling. Her death was unjust, a crime, an outrage, a sin against mankind – weak inadequate words which even as they passed through my mind mocked me with their futility.

That that woman should so die was an enormity so great that it was terrifying in its implications, in its lifting of the veil on possibilities of thought so far beyond the grasp of the human mind. It was not just the German bombs, or the German Air Force, or even the German mentality, but a feeling of the very essence of anti-life that no words could convey. This was what I had been cursing – in part, for I had recognized in that moment what it was that Peter and the others had instantly recognized as evil and to be destroyed utterly. I saw now that it was not crime; it was Evil itself – something of which until then I had not even sensed the existence. And it was in the end, at bottom, myself against which I had raged, myself I had cursed. With awful clarity I was myself suddenly as I was. Great God, that I could have been so arrogant![15]

The unknown woman's opened eyes had opened his – those eyes over which he had put his hands in the blazing cockpit.

What finally brings him through his crisis is the recognition that he can make atonement by writing of what he has learnt:

> I would write of these men [his fellow fighter pilots …] I would write for them and would write with them. They would be at my side. And to whom would I address this book, to whom would I be speaking when I spoke of these men? And that, too, I knew. To Humanity, for Humanity must be the public of any book. Yes, that despised Humanity which I had so scorned and ridiculed […][16]

If this seems unsubtle – in the same way, and for the same reason, that the coda to Cornford's 'Letter from Aragon' was unsubtle – we must remember the urgency of the occasion. Hillary was twenty-one when he wrote the book, and it is clear that he wrote it in the spirit of Wilfred Owen's Preface to his poems: 'All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.'

Hillary's intention was also to warn but, unlike Owen, he did not offer 'the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. His biographer, Sebastian Faulks, reveals that the final chapter of *The Last Enemy*, 'I See They Got You Too', was invented. 'He did change,' Faulks adds, 'but the process was slow.'[17] It cannot have been very slow, since Hillary was shot down in September 1940; appears to have begun writing in summer 1941; and had proofs of his book by October of that year. His change of heart about 'war as it ought to be' was evidently more gradual than the Pauline conversion he describes, but there seems no reason to doubt its authenticity, and it gives his narrative the dramatic climax a crisis-autobiography requires. The woman in the rubble may have been a fiction, but it is surely significant that so macho a 'duellist' should have shown himself converted by a woman.

Women had no need of conversion to 'that despised Humanity', and they made their voices heard in the poetry

of those sulphurous days: Edith Sitwell with 'Still Falls the Rain: the Raids, 1940', and H.D. [Hilda Doolittle] with *The Walls do not Fall* (1944). At the same time, Eliot and MacNeice were both fire-watchers: Eliot taking his turn with the stirrup-pump and the sand-bucket on the roof of Faber and Faber. Embarking on the last of his *Four Quartets* in 1942, that experience provided an image for the trials through which the quester must pass on his way to the Chapel Perilous. *Little Gidding* completes the *Four Quartets*, and can also be seen as completing the larger quest whose first movement, *The Waste Land*, was undertaken in the wake of an earlier war. With the second section of *Little Gidding*, the reader moves from the English countryside to the fire-bombed city of MacNeice's 'Brother Fire' and 'The Streets of Laredo':[18]

> O early one morning I walked out like Agag,
> Early one morning to walk through the fire
> Dodging the pythons that leaked on the pavements
> With tinkle of glasses and tangle of wire;
>
> When grimed to the eyebrows I met an old fireman
> Who looked at me wryly and thus did he say:
> 'The streets of Laredo are closed to all traffic,
> We won't never master this joker today.
>
> 'O hold the branch tightly and wield the axe brightly,
> The bank is in powder, the banker's in hell,
> But loot is still free on the streets of Laredo
> And when we drive home we drive home on the bell.'

Eliot and H.D. were both American, as were two of the most powerful poetic witnesses to the war in the air. The first, Randall Jarrell enlisted in the US Army Air Corps at the age of twenty-eight, failed to qualify as a pilot, and served as a control-tower operator, working with B-29 bomber crews. His war poems are to be found in two books, *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945) and *Losses* (1948).

The epigraph for the first is taken from an exchange between a bomber and its fighter escort. 'Then I heard the bomber call me in: "Little Friend, Little Friend, I got two engines on fire. Can you see me, Little Friend?" I said "I'm crossing right over you. Let's go home."' *Losses* was the stock euphemism for casualties – as in "Our losses were light today" – and both titles suggest Jarrell's concern with victims. His most famous victim was the subject of his poem, 'The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner':

> From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
> And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
> Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
> I woke to black flak and nightmare fighters.
> When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.[19]

To get the full force of this, one has to know that a ball turret was a plexiglass sphere set into the belly of a bomber and contained two machine guns and one small man – he had to be small. When this gunner tracked with his machine gun a fighter attacking his bomber from below, he revolved with the turret. Hunched upside down in his little sphere, he looked like a foetus in a womb. Jarrell gives us a life compressed into five lines; the first of them recalling the Book of Genesis: 'And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman.'[20] Eve was born into the state of innocence, from which she and Adam subsequently fell, which gives an ironic vibration to the Ball Turret Gunner's statement: 'From my mother's sleep I fell into the State' – both the nation-state and the state of experience – one brilliantly metamorphosed into metaphor: 'And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.' That

fur, the fleece lining of the airman's jacket and helmet, reminds us that man is one of the more savage members of the animal kingdom. This man wakens from a dream of life to the reality of death, 'to black flak and the nightmare fighters'. 'When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.' The euphemism of the first half of that sentence – 'When I died' (not 'When I was torn apart by shrapnel') – and the gentle verb 'washed' leave us quite unprepared for what follows. Only with the last word – 'hose' (and it would have been a *steam* hose) – does the full force of the abortion metaphor hit us. Aeroplanes and steam hoses are machines, and airmen are more dependent on machines than infantrymen. It is not, therefore, surprising that machines, and their murderous inhumanity, play a larger role in writings about the war in the air than in writings about the war on the ground.

James Dickey was a bomber pilot in the Pacific, and is forced to relive that experience – rather like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner – in his poem 'The Firebombing'.[21] This has two epigraphs. The first is from the German of Gunter Eich:

> *Denke daran, dass nacht den grossen Zerstörungen*
> *Jedermann beweisen wird, dass er unschuldig war.*[22]

The second, from the biblical Book of Job – 'Or hast thou an arm like God?'[23] – is echoed early in the poem as its suburbanite speaker remembers, twenty years before,

> some technical-minded stranger with my hands
> Is sitting in a glass treasure-hole of blue light,
> Having potential fire under the undeodorized arms
> Of his wings, on thin bomb-shackles,
> The 'tear-drop-shaped' 300-gallon drop-tanks
> Filled with napalm and gasoline.

Like some sort of mythological god, he takes off for Japan and, in his recollection, obeys Gunter Eich's injunction – '*Denke*':

Think of this think of this

I did not think of my house
But think of my house now

Where the lawn mower rests on its laurels
Where the diet exists
For my own good where I try to drop
Twenty years, eating figs in the pantry
Blinded by each and all
Of the eye-catching cans that gladly have caught my wife's eye
Until I cannot say
Where the screwdriver is where the children
Get off the bus where the new
Scoutmaster lives where the fly
Hones his front legs where the hammock folds
Its erotic daydreams where the Sunday
School text for the day has been put where the fire
Wood is […]

He cannot now escape from thoughts of fire any more than his victims then could escape from the reality:

Fire hangs not yet fire
In the air above Beppu
For I am fulfilling

An 'anti-morale' raid upon it.
All leashes of dogs
Break under the first bomb, around those
In bed, or late in the public baths: around those
Who inch forward on their hands
Into medicinal waters.
Their heads come up with a roar
Of Chicago fire:
Come up with the carp pond showing

The bathhouse upside down,
Standing stiller to show it more
As I sail artistically over
The resort town followed by farms,
Singing and twisting
All the handles in heaven kicking
The small cattle off their feet
In a red costly blast
Flinging jelly over the walls
As in a chemical war-
fare field demonstration.
With fire of mine like a cat

Holding onto another man's walls,
My hat should crawl on my head
In streetcars, thinking of it,
The fat on my body should pale.

The poet recognizes the pilot's 'anti-morale' raid for what it was – Orwellian Newspeak for 'murder' – and hearing himself 'sail artistically over' the harmless civilian target, delivers a double indictment. He condemns the pilot for his self-congratulatory detachment then, the poet for his artistic detachment now, and goes on to make that implicit accusation explicit:

One is cool and enthralled in the cockpit,
Turned blue by the power of beauty,
In a pale treasure-hole of soft light
Deep in aesthetic contemplation,
Seeing the ponds catch fire
[…]
It is this detachment,
The honoured aesthetic evil,
The greatest sense of power in one's life,
That must be shed in bars, or by whatever
Means, by starvation
Visions in well-stocked pantries:

The moment when the moon sails in between
The tail-booms the rudders nod I swing
Over directly over the heart
The *heart* of the fire.

The poet is honest enough to question the nature and form of this confession, to question his motives in making an art-object out of a murderous act. Would silence be better? Wilfred Owen provided an answer when, in his Preface, he wrote: 'All a poet can do today in warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.' James Dickey persuades this reader, at least, that 'The Firebombing' is essentially truthful.

Having completed his 'anti-morale' raid, the poet–pilot heads for home and returns from past to present:

All this, and I am still hungry,
Still twenty years overweight, still unable
To get down there or see
What really happened.
                But it may be that I could not,
If I tried, say to any
Who lived there, deep in my flames: say, in cold
Grinning sweat, as to another
Of these homeowners who are always curving
Near me down the different-grassed street: say
As though to the neighbor
I borrowed the hedge-clippers from
On the darker-grassed side of the two,
Come in, my house is yours, come in
If you can, if you
Can pass this unfired door. It is that I can imagine
At the threshold nothing
With its ears crackling off
Like powdery leaves,
Nothing with children of ashes, nothing not
Amiable, gentle, well-meaning,
A little nervous for no
Reason a little worried a little too loud

> Or too easygoing nothing I haven't lived with
> For twenty years, still nothing not as
> American as I am, and proud of it.
>
> Absolution? Sentence? No matter;
> The thing itself is in that.

'I can imagine', he says, but what he imagines is then cancelled by the five-fold repetition of 'nothing'. His imagination, his poem, is not equal to its task. So has his confession earned him 'Absolution? Sentence?' Self-convicted, self-sentenced, he is condemned to repeat his confession every time 'The Firebombing' is read. Like the Ancient Mariner,

> The man hath penance done
> And penance more will do.

These and the other (relatively few) poems about the war in the air tend to be structurally less traditional – which is not to suggest they are better or worse – than the ground-war poems of Louis Simpson,[24] Lincoln Kirstein, Keith Douglas,[25] or Alun Lewis,[26] many of which show the influence of First World War trench poetry. In much the same way, the major novels of the war in the air, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), are structurally less traditional, more innovative, than such major novels of the war on the ground as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* trilogy (1965).

These comparisons lend support to the hypothesis that, despite triumphant modernist examples of battlefield poetry and prose, David Jones's *In Parenthesis*[27] and Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* tetralogy, later writings about traditional warfare on the ground tend themselves to be traditional, whereas writings about the new war in the air tend to take new forms. Poetry and prose fiction, however, have proved

unequal to the task of recording the dominant image of that war in its final form, the mushroom cloud. No imaginative writing has matched the power of the photographic image, though the absence of a towering cloud from the apocalyptic climax of J.G. Ballard's novel, *Empire of the Sun* (1984), an absence requiring us to imagine its presence elsewhere, contributes to the restrained intensity of that scene:

> A flash of light filled the stadium, flaring over the stands in the south-west corner of the football field, as if an immense American bomb had exploded somewhere to the north-east of Shanghai. The sentry hesitated, looking over his shoulder as the light behind him grew more intense. It faded within the stadium, the looted furniture in the stands, the cars behind the goal posts, the prisoners on the grass. They were sitting on the floor of a furnace heated by a second sun.
>
> Jim stared at his white hands and knees, and at the pinched face of the Japanese soldier, who seemed disconcerted by the light. Both of them were waiting for the rumble of sound that followed the bomb-flashes, but an unbroken silence lay over the stadium and the surrounding land, as if the sun had blinked, losing heart for a few seconds. Jim smiled at the Japanese, wishing that he could tell him that the light was a premonition of his death, the sight of his small soul joining the larger soul of the dying world.[28]

CHAPTER 12

Henry Reed and the Great Good Place

The author of 'Naming of Parts', probably the most anthologized English poem of the Second World War, has too often been held to be that and that only. Like Julian Grenfell, author of 'Into Battle', he is seen as the saddest freak of the literary fairground: the one-poem poet. His *Collected Poems* give the lie to that gross misperception.[1]

Henry Reed was born, in Birmingham, on 22 February 1914 and named after his father, a master bricklayer and foreman in charge of forcing at Nocks' Brickworks. Henry senior was nothing if not forceful, a serious drinker and womanizer, who as well as his legitimate children fathered an illegitimate son who died during the Second World War. In this, he may have been following ancestral precedent: family legend had it that the Reeds were descended from a bastard son of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Earl of Dudley. Henry senior's other enthusiasms included reading, but the literary abilities of his son Henry junior seem, paradoxically, to have been inherited from a mother who was illiterate. Born Mary Ann Ball, the eldest child of a large family that had migrated from Tipton to Birmingham, she could not be spared from her labours at home during what should have been her schooldays, and when, in her late middle age, her granddaughter tried, unsuccessfully, to teach her to read, she wept with frustration and shame. Mary Ann

Reed had a remarkable memory, however, and a well-stocked repertoire of fairy stories – told with great verve – and songs to enchant her children and grandchild.

A daughter, Gladys, born in 1908, was encouraged to make the most of the schooling her mother had not had. She was a good student and in due course became a good teacher, discovering her vocation in teaching her younger brother. Gladys played a crucial role in the education of Henry (or Hal, as he was known in the family, a name perhaps borrowed from Shakespeare's hero) and was to become and remain the most important woman in his life. He was not an easy child. On one occasion dismembering his teddy bear, he buried its head, limbs, and torso around the garden and went howling to his mother. She was obliged to exhume the scattered parts, wash, and reassemble them for the little tyrant. At the state primary school in Erdington, he clashed with a hated teacher who pronounced him educationally subnormal. A psychiatrist was called in and, having examined the child, claimed to have detected promise of mathematical genius.

Moving on to King Edward VI Grammar School in Aston, Reed specialized in Classics. Since Greek was not taught, he taught himself, and went on to win the Temperley Latin prize and a scholarship to Birmingham University. There he was taught and befriended – as were his Birmingham contemporaries Walter Allen and Reggie Smith – by a young Lecturer in the Classics Department, Louis MacNeice. Reed had a remarkable speaking voice and a gift for mimicry (and for assuming the accents of a class not his own), and, as an undergraduate, he acted in and produced plays, which may have led to his career in radio; in any case, for the rest of his life he delighted in the company of actors – partly perhaps because he was acting a part himself: that of the debonair, even aristocratic, literary man about town.

He gained a first-class degree at Birmingham in 1934 and wrote a notable thesis on Thomas Hardy, leaving the University two years later as its youngest MA. Like most of his Birmingham contemporaries, he had so far lived at home, but was not a happy member of the household. Hal was ashamed of his parents, or so they felt, and only his sister Gladys had much sympathy for the elegant butterfly struggling to break free from the Brummagem chrysalis. There was another factor, though how much Reed's parents knew of this is uncertain: he had had his first sexual, homosexual, experience when he was nineteen, and later had a tormented affair with a boy who developed paranoia. It was clearly time for him to leave home.

Like many other writers of the 1930s, he tried teaching – at his old school – and, again like most of them, hated it and left to make his way as a freelance writer and critic. He began the research for a full-scale life of Thomas Hardy, and his father financed a first trip to Italy. There he was taken to the ample bosom of a Neapolitan family he found more congenial than his own and would later celebrate in a radio play, *Return to Naples* (1950). Before he could himself return, Mussolini had to be overthrown, and in the summer of 1941 a Hal much less heroic than Shakespeare's was conscripted into the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. On 10 July, he wrote to his sister (now Mrs Winfield and mother of a daughter, Jane):

> We have begun our departmental training – which means that army training has to be concentrated into $\frac{1}{8}$ of the day, and is therefore increasing in savagery. This blitztraining is, to my mind, absurd. The RAOC lost 10% of its personnel in Belgium, through being non-combatant. They aim, therefore, at making us combatant, in 9 weeks; at the end of that time we are expected to be able to shoot accurately, to manage a bren gun, an anti-tank gun & various other kinds, to use

a bayonet, to throw hand-grenades & whatnot and to fire at aircraft. I do not think the management of a tank is included in the course, but pretty well everything else is.

Our departmental training, some of which is an official secret, known only to the British & German armies, has consisted mainly of learning the strategic disposition of the RAOC in the field: this is based, not, as I feared, on the Boer War, but on the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. It is taught by lecturers who rarely manage to conceal their dubiety at what they are teaching. But it is restful after the other things, & we are allowed to attend in PT 'kit'. This is nicely balanced by the fact that we attend PT wearing *all* our 'kit', except blankets. (I will never call a child of mine Christopher).

The same letter gives, incidentally, a clear view of the left-wing political position that Reed, for all his aristocratic fantasies, was never to abandon: 'I hope', he wrote, 'a good deal from Russia, of course, but rather joylessly: the scale of it all is beyond my grasp, & it is terrible to see a country which, with all its faults, has been alone in working to give the fruits of labour to the people who have earned them, thus attacked […]'

Reed served – 'or rather *studied*', as he preferred to put it – in the Ordnance Corps until 1942 when, following a serious bout of pneumonia and a prolonged convalescence, he was transferred to the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley. At first he was employed as a cryptographer in the Italian Section, but was subsequently moved to the Japanese Section, where he learned the language and worked as a translator. In the evenings he wrote much of his first radio play, *Moby Dick*, and many of the poems later to be published in *A Map of Verona*. It was not a life he would have chosen, but it had its compensations: security, time for his own work, and the start of an important – perhaps his most important – homosexual relationship.

Michael Ramsbotham was also a writer, five years younger than Henry Reed, and from a more privileged background.

After Charterhouse, from which he was expelled, he went up to King's College, Cambridge. At the end of his second year, in June 1940, he was called up and given a commission in the RNVR. His active service ended in September 1941, when he was posted to the Italian Section of Naval Intelligence at Bletchley. In 1943, he and Reed would sometimes escape the monotony of the canteen for a civilian lunch in Leighton Buzzard. The following year, they went on leave together twice to Charlestown, a little fishing harbour near St Austell in Cornwall. Reed by this time had lost all trace of his Birmingham accent and acquired a somewhat Sitwellian manner. A quick wit and a staggering memory – especially for Shakespeare – made him an engaging companion.

On VJ Day 1945, he was demobbed. A few weeks earlier, Ramsbotham had suffered a nervous breakdown and went absent without leave, taking himself off to North Cornwall where, after a month or two, Reed joined him. Later both men were recalled to the Service. Reed, adopting Nelson's tactics, declined to see the signal, and the Navy let the matter drop. Ramsbotham was posted to the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, and during the following autumn and winter commuted, whenever he was off duty, from Portsmouth to Dorchester where Reed was living at the Antelope Hotel, continuing his research for the Hardy biography.

In April 1946, Ramsbotham was demobbed and they celebrated with a holiday in Ireland, the highlight of which was a happy fortnight as guests of Elizabeth Bowen at Bowen's Court. Returning to England in July, they briefly rented a house in Charlestown, but soon moved to another rented house, Lovells Farm, in Marnhull, Dorset – Hardy's Marlot – where Ramsbotham worked on a novel while Reed reviewed fiction and poetry for the *Listener* and the *New*

Statesman and worked on Hardy. His first and only collection of poems, *A Map of Verona*, dedicated to Ramsbotham, was published in London that year (1946) by Jonathan Cape, and in New York the following year by Reynal & Hitchcock. In January 1947, the two-hour radio adaptation of Melville's novel *Moby Dick* was produced by the BBC, and published the same year, again by Cape.

By February 1948, however, the atmosphere at Lovells Farm had become too emotionally claustrophobic for Ramsbotham and he walked out – leaving a note – but by April had returned, and the two set off for a long holiday in Cyprus. The following February, Reed rented Gable Court, a large sixteenth-century house with Victorian additions in the Dorset village of Yetminster, where he continued his research for the life of Hardy and wrote two fine verse plays about another poet whose work he was translating and with whom he identified strongly, Giacomo Leopardi: *The Unblest* (1949) and *The Monument* (1950). The year at Gable Court, for Reed the best of times, was followed by the worst of times. In February 1950 the couple split up, Reed leaving his Eden (as it would, increasingly, seem to him) for London, where he was to live for the rest of his life, apart from terms as a Visiting Professor of Poetry at the University of Washington, Seattle, in 1964, 1965–6, and 1967, and occasional trips to Europe.

Perhaps in search of an earlier happiness, Reed had returned to Italy in July 1951, heading for Verona, 'the small strange city' lovingly imagined in the title-poem of his first book:

> one day I shall go.
>
> The train will bring me perhaps in utter darkness
> And drop me where you are blooming, unaware

> That a stranger has entered your gates, and a new devotion
> Is about to attend and haunt you everywhere.[2]

A letter to his parents suggests that his prophecy had been fulfilled: 'It is a most lovely city,' he wrote, 'small enough for me to walk right across it in less than an hour; I had a letter of introduction to a friend of a friend & was in consequence well looked after & made much fuss of. My arrival was even announced on the radio, I learned with much delight later on.' It was a successful holiday and resulted in one of the best of Reed's radio plays on Italian themes, *The Streets of Pompeii*, awarded an Italia Prize in 1951. Much of his work for the BBC Features Department was commissioned and produced by Douglas Cleverdon, who wrote of him in his obituary (*Independent*, 11 December 1986):

> In these Italian pieces Henry Reed revealed his instinctive mastery of the art of radio. All his creative powers were brought into play. For he was not only a poet of great sensibility; he had also a lively sense of comedy and of the absurd, and a remarkable gift for dramatic invention. He could be extremely witty, both in his social life and in his radio writing; and the wit could overflow into satire and occasionally malice. Yet, though homosexual by nature, he had an extraordinary sympathy with women's most profound emotions, and could portray them with tenderness and understanding […]
>
> His scripts were rarely completed more than a day or two before rehearsals began, but he particularly relished the affectionate esteem in which he was held by the group of players who usually formed the nucleus of his cast. As he usually attended all rehearsals, this affection was enhanced during the later stages of his radio career, when the poetic content of his work was gradually overtaken by the hilariously satirical.

In the mid-1950s, Reed made a major liberating decision: he abandoned the biography of Hardy, which for years had burdened him with guilt like the Ancient Mariner's albatross. That failed quest – perhaps related to the failure of his earlier

quest for lasting love – played out a dominant theme of his radio plays:[3] from failure as a biographer, he turned to triumphant success in a radio play about a nervous young biographer, Herbert Reeve, engaged on just such quest as he had himself abandoned. Reed's hero (whose name owes something to that of Herbert Read, the poet and critic, with whom he was tired of being confused) assembles a mass of conflicting testimony about his author, the novelist Richard Shewin. His witnesses include a waspish brother, his wife, two spinsters of uncertain virtue, and (the finest comic role he was to create for radio) the 12-tone composeress Hilda Tablet. The success of *A Very Great Man Indeed* (1953) prompted six sequels, the best of them *The Private Life of Hilda Tablet* (1954), in which Reeve is browbeaten into switching the subject of his biography from the dumb dead to the exuberantly vocal living composeress.

The modest income that Reed's work for radio brought him he supplemented with the still more modest rewards of book-reviewing and translation. The reviewing was to result in a British Council booklet, *The Novel since 1939* (1946), and his published translations include Ugo Betti's *Three Plays* (1956) and *Crime on Goat Island* (1961), Balzac's *Père Goriot* (1962) and *Eugénie Grandet* (1964), and Natalia Ginzburg's *The Advertisement* (1969). Several of his translations found their way into the theatre, and in the autumn of 1955 there were London premières of no less than three. His own poems and translations of those by Leopardi continued for a time to appear, usually in the pages of the *Listener*. Douglas Cleverdon published a limited Clover Hill Edition of five *Lessons of the War* in 1970, and *The Streets of Pompeii and Other Plays for Radio* and *Hilda Tablet and Others: Four Pieces for Radio* were issued together by the BBC in 1971. In 1975, the BBC broadcast his anthology of Leopardi's

poems in his own translations; a last relinquishing of work long pondered over resulted in 1974–5 in the publication of a handful of his poems in the *Listener*, with the elegiac love poem *'Bocca di Magra'*, perhaps written in the 1950s, as a final word. Over the years he had worked on (and seemingly completed two acts of) a three-act verse play about the false Dimitry; a long poem called variously 'Matthew' and 'In Black and White', perhaps set during the American Civil War; a dramatic monologue, 'Clytemnestra', possibly as a pendant to his Sophoclean 'Triptych' in *A Map*; and a commissioned translation of the *Ajax* of Sophocles. He had drafted and all but finished polishing a translation of Montale's haunting *Motetti*. Reed's *Who's Who* entry for 1977 listed *The Auction Sale and Other Poems* among his publications, but no such collection ever appeared. Talk even at the end of the 1970s of a collected edition came to nothing. As a perfectionist, he could not bring himself to release what he must have recognized would be his last book until it was as good as he could make it, and it never was.

Reed greatly enjoyed his fifteen years with the BBC, his membership of the Savile Club, his London life and his frequent journeys to Italy (often on a BBC commission). But in his last decade, drink and self-neglect (his staple diet was Complan) increasingly undermined his always fragile health. His notebooks record a continuing and courageous struggle. At one point, he conducts an experiment:

> I wonder if the difficulty of writing
> could be solved by drink alone
>
> Now how much better am I writing?
>
> Now how much better am I writing? Not much, it seems. But oh, for freedom from these adventitious aids.

Again, on 10 March 1985 he notes:

> After the horrors and the reliefs of the last terrible weeks I have 'resumed' what seemed like a period of hopeful convalescence (though God knows it is very painful to move about & eyesight is at rock-bottom). The Income Tax, and my all but paralysed will about it, stand in the way. Yet prowling round the three or four poems from the 50s I still want to finish occasional jerks forward do occur.

He became increasingly incapacitated and reclusive, but devoted friends never ceased to visit him in the Upper Montagu Street flat he continued to occupy, thanks to the generosity of a long-suffering landlady, until, removed to hospital, he died on 8 December 1986.

Reed's poems of the 1930s – particularly the earlier sections of 'The Desert' – owe something of their use of the *paysage moralisé* to the landscapes of Eliot and Auden. In 'South', the traveller of 1938 hears an unexpected voice:

> 'But look more closely', the landscape suddenly told him,
> 'What do you see?'
> And he saw his life. He saw it, and turned away,
> And wept hot tears down the rock's hard cheek, and kissed
> Its wrinkled mouths with the kiss of passion, crying,
> 'Where is my love? […]

This landscape of desire is, in every sense, unsatisfactory – not least because the nature of that desire is obscured by symbolic fog.

Very different is the landscape of 1942:

> Japonica
> Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
> And today we have naming of parts.

The homely word 'neighbouring' disguises the fact that this is an extension of another symbolic landscape, the

archetypal landscape of desire, that garden in which Adam *named* the animals. The presence of desire is felt the more strongly here for being shown hovering at the edge of consciousness, as the speaker himself hovers at the edge of the weapon-training squad. A second difference between the two poems is that of tone – the humour that now disguises the gravity of the subject. Reed had 'studied' to good effect during his basic training in the RAOC, and would later entertain his friends with a comic imitation of a sergeant instructing his recruits. After a few performances, he noticed that the words of the weapon-training instructor, couched in the style of the military manual, fell into certain rhythmic patterns which fascinated him and eventually provided the structure of 'Naming of Parts'. In this and two subsequent 'Lessons of the War', the military voice is wittily counterpointed by the inner voice – more civilized and still civilian – of a listening recruit with his mind on other matters.

Countless poems of the First World War had carried titles and/or epigraphs in Latin. Reed followed Wilfred Owen, who in 'Dulce et Decorum Est' had challenged and subverted that tradition, when he chose – and emended – a Horatian epigraph for his sequence. Horace wrote (*Odes*, 3: 26.1-2):

> Vixi puellis nuper idoneus
> Et militavi non sine gloria

which can be roughly translated: 'Lately I've lived among girls, creditably enough, and have soldiered not without glory.' Slyly, Reed turns upside down the *p* of *puellis* (girls), to give *duellis* (battles). In this way exchanging *girls* for *battles*, he cunningly encapsulates in his epigraph the theme of the Lessons that follow.

A third difference between the two poems is the dramatic element that in 'Naming of Parts' counterpoints the two

voices. At approximately the same point in each of the first four stanzas, the recruit's attention wanders from the instructor's lesson in the unnatural art of handling a lethal weapon, back to the natural world: branches, blossom, life as opposed to death. Plucked by the Army from gardens where, at this season, he should have been enjoying the company of his Eve, he sees the bees 'assaulting and fumbling the flowers': the military and sexual associations of those verbs reflecting the confusion in his mind. The hint of corruption, Innocence yielding to Experience, is confirmed by the *double entendres*, the rueful ironies, of the final stanza.

The dialectical opposition of two voices, two views of a landscape, is a strategy refined in two remarkable poems of Reed's middle years. 'The Changeling' must have been written either shortly before or shortly after his expulsion from the Eden of Gable Court. A brilliantly condensed autobiography, it uses the changeling figure (from his mother's fairy stories) and the family legend of noble descent to articulate a troubling sense of doubleness: true self and false self. Bright landscapes darken until, as in all the best fairy stories,

> Love takes him by his hand,
> And the child to exile bred
> Comes to his native land.
>
> And comes, at last, to stand
> On his scented evening lawn
> Under his flowering limes,
> Where dim in the dusk and high,
> His mansion is proudly set,
> And the single light burns
> In the room where his sweet young wife
> Waits in his ancient bed.

The possessive pronoun, 'proudly set' to every item in this catalogue of Paradise Regained, begins to sound disturbingly

over-insistent when extended to 'his summer sky, […] his first pale stars'. He protests too much, masking a doubt that finally turns to desolate certainty:

> All this is false. And I
> Am an interloper here.

Reed's most ambitious exploration of the landscape of desire occurs in 'The Auction Sale'. A Forsterian or Hardyesque short story, set in the Hardy country he had recently left, it is told in a voice as flat as if the speaker were reading from a country newspaper:

> Within the great grey flapping tent
> The damp crowd stood or stamped about;
> And some came in, and some went out
> To drink the moist November air […]

After the auctioneer has rattled off the opening lots, he turns to something different, announcing '*There's a reserve upon this number*.' A shrouded object is unveiled, revealing

> The prospect of a great gold frame
> Which through the reluctant leaden air
> Flashed a mature unsullied grace
> Into the faces of the crowd.
> And there was silence in that place.

As the ordinary field of 'Judging Distances' had been succeeded by one where

> the sun and the shadows bestow
> Vestments of purple and gold [,]

in the grey tent and leaden air of the auction sale there blazes a scene as different as the language in which it is described:

Effulgent in the Paduan air,
Ardent to yield the Venus lay
Naked upon the sunwarmed earth.

The inner voice that, in the English silence, proceeds to detail so lovingly the Italian landscape of mythologized desire can be understood to be that of the young man who now bids against the London dealers. As the figures mount, the grey voice and the golden contrapuntally compete:

Ardent to yield the nods resumed
Venus upon the sunwarmed nods
Abandoned Cupids danced and nodded
His mouth towards her bid four thousand
Four thousand, any advance upon,
And still beyond four thousand fifty
Unrolled towards the nodding *sun*.

When, finally, the young man drops out of the bidding, he takes leave of his Paradise Lost with an unvoiced elegy, and is later seen – like Masaccio's Adam, but more tragic for being alone –

in the dusk,
Not walking on the road at all,
But striding beneath the sodden trees …
Crying. That was what she said.

Bitterly, she later added.

Crying bitterly, she said.

This fine poem was to prove prophetic. When in the 1970s the author of *A Map of Verona* again sought out his 'city of a long-held dream', it was too late. 'The Town Itself' is a love poem addressed to 'my darling', but Verona has other things on her mind, and the lover is unrequited:

I shall never be accepted as a citizen:
I am still, and shall always be, a stranger here.

Reed never abandoned his quest for the Great Good Place, and his late manuscript poems provide a poignant record of dreams and mirages encountered in the Waste Land. When he comes to 'The Château', echoes of the 23rd Psalm tell us he comes from the valley of the shadow of death. Standing outside 'the great grey mansion' ('in my father's house are many mansions'), he feels, not as the Changeling felt outside *his* mansion, that he was about to come into his own, but that his life has been going on elsewhere and otherwise:

> surely beyond that great façade my life is being lived?
> Lived, loved and filled with gaiety and ardour […]

To reach it and take his place at 'the starry feast', he has only to cross the last threshold, a step his imagination takes with an intensity of vision that will stand comparison with the close of *Little Gidding*:[4]

> Surely there will be a signal? Inconspicuously,
> One of the giant roses in the gardens around us
> Will perhaps explode on to the autumn grass:
> Something like that, perhaps. I know I shall know the moment.
>
> And surely (and almost now) it will happen, and tell me
> That now I must rise and with firm footsteps tread
> Across the enormous flagstones, reach, find and know
> My own and veritable door;
> I shall open it, enter and learn
> That in all this hungry time I have never wanted,
> But have, elsewhere, on honey and milk been fed,
> Have in green pastures somewhere lain, and in the mornings,
> Somewhere beside still waters have
> Mysteriously, ecstatically, been led.

Italy, the setting of most of the late manuscript poems was, after Gable Court, the closest he could come to the Great Good Place on earth, but to both he comes as a stranger or

'Intruder'. The poem of that title described his return (a charged word in Reed's lexicon) in a double capacity: an earlier self and his own 'noonday ghost', whose presence falls like a shadow between the speaker and the companion he has just embraced. The spectre is said to be seeking

> Something I dared not say,
> And bent in distress beside me
> Ashen and anguished and lonely.

What he is seeking and why a *noonday* ghost should have 'an *agèd* face' we can infer when the speaker

> saw he was visiting again this place
> A quarter-century hence
> And pausing and hoping and sighing,
> Recapturing a half or a third
> Of what we were saying there now,
> As though what we said had mattered,
> There by the base of the fountain
> Or at that pause on the hill-side
> Where we always said our goodbyes […]

Such goodbyes are clearly far from final, but this cunning interweaving of time past, time present, and time future ends – as a good ghost story should – with a leave-taking of another kind. After so many sunlit Italian landscapes, the wintry English cityscape of 'L'Envoi', the manuscript poem in which Reed takes leave of his reader, makes a contrast the more poignant for the genial tone of the fable's telling.

Randall Jarrell wrote that 'A good poet is someone who manages in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms to be struck by lightning five or six times: a dozen and he is great.' By this criterion, or any other, Henry Reed is a poet who can now, at overlong last, take his rightful place at 'the starry feast'.

CHAPTER 13

The fury and the mire

'My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.' That was Wilfred Owen in 1918.[1] *My* subject, many wars later, is War and the fury of War. The Poetry is in the fury.

Poetry is notoriously difficult to define. 'Of the many definitions', said W.H. Auden, 'the simplest is still the best: 'memorable speech.'[2] To be worth writing, and reading, it must be memorable – as so much so-called poetry is not. And what do we mean by War Poetry? Logically, this category – to my mind, this unsatisfactory category – should embrace any poem about any aspect of war: it should include Eliot's *Waste Land* and *Little Gidding*; it should include Yeats's 'The Second Coming'. Each has a World War at its centre, and in the field – the battlefield – of poetry it is hard to think of speech more memorable. But when we speak of War Poetry we normally mean battlefield poems, and my subject in this chapter is the controlled fury of battlefield poems. These, too, can be difficult to define, but we know them when we see – and hear – them: Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est',[3] for example. What does that poem do? First of all, it persuades us that it is true; secondly, that its truth is shocking; and thirdly, that we should do something about it. Owen offers us what a mediaeval rhetorician would call an *exemplum*, an example, an illustration of a man choking to death on poison-gas; that followed by a *moralitas*, a moral coda of passionate indignation.

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

The victim's fate is pitiful, but to my ear the Poetry is in the controlled fury of the final twelve-line sentence, rather than in the pity.

Almost twenty years later, a young Cambridge Communist, John Cornford, set off for the Spanish Civil War, carrying the pistol his father had carried through the Great War and, in his head, Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. We know that because his 'Letter from Aragon'[4] takes its structure from Owen's poem: first, the *exemplum* (or, to be exact, three *exempla*):

This is a quiet sector of a quiet front.

We buried Ruiz in a new pine coffin,
But the shroud was too small and his washed feet stuck out.
The stink of his corpse came through the clean pine boards
And some of the bearers wrapped handkerchiefs round their faces.
Death was not dignified.
We hacked a ragged grave in the unfriendly earth
And fired a ragged volley over the grave.
You could tell from our listlessness, no one much missed him.

This is a quiet sector of a quiet front.
There is no poison gas and no H.E.[5]

But when they shelled the other end of the village
And the streets were choked with dust
Women came screaming out of the crumbling houses,
Clutched under one arm the naked rump of an infant.
I thought: how ugly fear is.

This is a quiet sector of a quiet front.
Our nerves are steady; we all sleep soundly.

In the clean hospital bed, my eyes were so heavy
Sleep easily blotted out one ugly picture,
A wounded militiaman moaning on a stretcher,
Now out of danger, but still crying for water,
Strong against death, but unprepared for such pain.

This on a quiet front.

Cornford's 'Letter from Aragon', like Owen's memory of the Somme, persuades us that it is true, shocking, and a call for action. The soldier's fury builds in his refrain, the repeated echo of the Great War's most famous book-title, *All Quiet on the Western Front*,[6] and the reference to poison gas offers another link to Owen's poem. Cornford's coda, his *moralitas*, is again a direct address to his reader:

> But when I shook hands to leave, an Anarchist worker
> Said: 'Tell the workers of England
> This was a war not of our own making
> We did not seek it.
> But if ever the Fascists again rule Barcelona
> It will be as a heap of ruins with us workers beneath it.'

Cornford did not leave Spain. He was killed on his twenty-first birthday, or the day after, in the battle for Madrid.

As many people had forseen, the Spanish Civil War proved to be the curtain-raiser for a second World War. 'It is a truth universally acknowledged', as Jane Austen would say, that unlike the First World War, the Second produced

no poetry of importance. This truth is no more truth-ful than the one mocked by Austen or that attacked by Owen as 'the old Lie'. There are wonderful, terrible poems of the later war, too little known on this side of the Atlantic because half are American; too little known in America because half are British.

To illustrate this point, my third *exemplum* is an American poem as strong – as pity-ful, as furious – as any by Owen or Sassoon: Louis Simpson's 'The Heroes'.[7] Simpson served with a glider-infantry regiment of the 101st Airborne Division in France, Holland, Belgium, and Germany. In combat he was a runner. He carried messages. In Holland he was wounded by a shell, and at Bastogne his feet were frost-bitten; but he survived. After the war, however, he had a nervous breakdown and was taken into hospital suffering from amnesia. The war was blacked out in his mind, as were episodes in his life *before* the war. When he was discharged from hospital, he found he could hardly read or write. In a contributor's note to an anthology, Simpson says:

> Before the war I had written a few poems and some prose. Now I found that poetry was the only kind of writing in which I could express my thoughts. Through poems, I could release the irrational, grotesque images I had accumulated during the war; and imposing order on those images enabled me to recover my identity. In 1948, when I was living in Paris, one night I dreamed that I was lying on the bank of a canal, under machine-gun and mortar fire. The next morning I wrote it out in the poem 'Carentan O Carentan', and as I wrote I realized that it wasn't a dream, but the memory of my first time under fire.[8]

Simpson's experience bears a striking resemblance to Wilfred Owen's: both suffered from neurasthenia, or shell-shock. Owen never lost his memory, but only after he was forced to relive the horrors of battle in those dreams that are

a principal symptom of shell-shock was he able to write about the Western Front.

Simpson's first dream poem, 'Carentan O Carentan', appeared in his first book, *The Arrivists* (1949), and has a dreamlike distance from experience. The poems of his second book, *Good News of Death* (1955), show reality emerging from the dream:

The Heroes

I dreamed of war-heroes, of wounded war-heroes
With just enough of their charms shot away
To make them more handsome. The women moved nearer
To touch their brave wounds and their hair streaked with gray.

I saw them in long ranks ascending the gang-planks;
The girls with the doughnuts were cheerful and gay.
They minded their manners and muttered their thanks;
The Chaplain advised them to watch and to pray.

They shipped these rapscallions, these sea-sick battalions
To a patriotic and picturesque spot;
They gave them new bibles and marksmen's medallions,
Compasses, maps and committed the lot.

A fine dust has settled on all that scrap metal.
The heroes were packaged and sent home in parts
To pluck at a poppy and sew on a petal
And count the long night by the stroke of their hearts.

The title signals a line of descent from a poem of the previous war, Sassoon's 'The Hero',[9] which begins:

> 'Jack fell as he'd have wished,' the Mother said,
> And folded up the letter that she'd read.
> 'The Colonel writes so nicely.'

Simpson follows Sassoon in contrasting civilian illusion with military reality, as revealed in their two linguistic registers (the civilian's 'patriotic and picturesque spot'

unspoilt by the military, 'scrap metal'). The Heroes' 'brave wounds' echoes the Mother's consolation that her son had been 'so brave', and prepares for the chilling irony of the poems' concluding stanzas. Sassoon's Hero, 'cold-footed useless swine', had tried

> To get sent home, and […] died,
> Blown to small bits.

Simpson's Heroes are, arguably, more fortunate – 'packaged and sent home in parts', albeit not to a Heroes' Welcome but a workbench at which to assemble poppies, like the veterans of the previous war. The Sassoon template, like Simpson's savagely ironic choice of comic rhymes (*rapscallions/battalions*) in a tragic context, deepens the fury that gives his poem its propellant power.

No one, I think, would deny that these are powerful war poems, but of course most (like most poems) are less potent, and many are altogether impotent. To demonstrate the qualitative range of poems prompted by warfare – and to suggest why many fail – I propose to move on to a brief case-study of the poetry of the Vietnam War.[10] This falls, more starkly than the poems of any earlier conflict, into two principal categories: those written by so-called 'Stateside' poets, who never left America, and those of the 'Vets', the veterans, who did.

The Stateside poems can themselves be divided into two categories: first, the poetry of first-hand witness to the moral and other effects of the war on *America* – poems by Allen Ginsberg, for example; second, the poetry of second-hand witness to the war in *Vietnam* – too much of it like this:

Women, Children, Babies, Cows, Cats[11]

> 'It was at My Lai or Sonmy or something,
> it was this afternoon. … We had these orders,

> we had all night to think about it –
> we was to burn and kill, then there'd be nothing
> standing, women, children, babies, cows, cats. …
> As soon as we hopped the choppers, we started shooting.
> I remember … as we was coming up upon one area
> in Pinkville, a man with a gun … running – this lady …
> Lieutenant LaGuerre said, "Shoot her." I said,
> "You shoot her, I don't want to shoot no lady."
> She had one foot in the door. … When I turned her,
> there was this little one-month-year-old baby
> I thought was her gun. It kind of cracked me up.'

This was written by a great poet – Robert Lowell – but I cannot be alone in thinking it is not a great poem. In fact, I think it embarrassing in its blend of black demotic ("I don't want to shoot no lady") with the literary ('we hopped the choppers', and the coy 'Lieutenant LaGuerre'). The speaker does not persuade me he mistook the baby (so neatly foreshadowed in his orders) for a gun; or that 'It kind of cracked [him] up'. Certainly, the poem does not crack *me* up. It would tell us – even if we did not know that Lowell never served in Vietnam – that his testimony is second-hand. In this, it is strikingly unlike his poignant and powerful poem 'Fall 1961',[12] which bears first-hand witness to a father's fear in the midst of the Cuban missile crisis:

> All autumn, the chafe and jar
> of nuclear war;
> we have talked our extinction to death.
> I swim like a minnow
> behind my studio window.
>
> Our end drifts nearer,
> the moon lifts,
> radiant with terror.
> […]

A father's no shield
for his child. […]

If, like me, you feel more for the American father and his child than for the Vietnamese mother and baby, it might be that the poet felt more. Few parents can feel as much pity and terror for a mother and baby seen in a newspaper or a television screen as for a threatened child of their own.

It does not follow, however, that a poem of first-hand witness will necessarily be better – more moving because more focused – than one of second-hand witness. Tennyson did not see the Charge of the Light Brigade other than with his mind's eye, but his lifelong absorption in Arthurian legend and chivalry enabled him to take his place, imaginatively, with the 'Noble six hundred'. He feels – and enables us to feel – fury, and horror, and pity, and amazed admiration:

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
    Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came through the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
  Left of six hundred.[13]

Thomas Hardy did not see the Boer War burial party 'throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest / Uncoffined – just as found', but his lifelong absorption in the little world of Wessex enabled him to take his place, imaginatively, at the boy's graveside:

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.[14]

There is no fury in Hardy's poem, but only profound pity and sadness – as for the son he never had. These poems of second-hand witness have an immediacy and power equal to any of first-hand witness, being the work of great poets, each with a lifelong imaginative investment in his subject. But such poems are rare. The second-hand testimony of lesser poets, lacking such investment, is seldom impressive and sometimes embarrassing.

For demographic and social-historical reasons, the ratio of poets to other servicemen and women serving in Vietnam was less than in either World War. Most American intellectuals disapproved of the Vietnam War, and men of military age – particularly white men of military age – could avoid conscription by signing up for university education. And many did. The ratio of Stateside poets to battlefield poets was, therefore, greater than in either World War. There were hundreds of armchair poets pretending, like Lowell, to first-hand witness and/or degrees of moral commitment to which they were not entitled. Few were as good as Lowell, and collectively they deserved the savage rebuke offered by a front-line veteran of the Second World War, Anthony Hecht. He wrote of one such (fortunately unidentified) armchair poet:

Here lies fierce Strephon, whose poetic rage
Lashed out on Vietnam from page and stage;
Whereby from basements of Bohemia he
Rose to the lofts of sweet celebrity,

> Being, by Fortune, (our Eternal Whore)
> One of the few to profit by that war,
> A fate he shared – it bears much thinking on –
> With certain persons at the Pentagon.[15]

The knock-out punch of the last line should not blind us to the lightning jab of the first: 'Here *lies* fierce Strephon'. Is he lying in the grave or telling lies, or both? The fury driving this poem is directed, I assume, not at a Stateside poet bearing true witness to the impact of the war on America, but one pretending to first-hand witness of combat in Vietnam.

Hecht's rebuke comes with the moral authority of a poet burdened with the responsibility of bearing witness to the ultimate brutality of the Second World War. He served with the Infantry Division that discovered Flossenburg, an annex of Buchenwald.

> When we arrived [he writes], the SS personnel had, of course, fled. Prisoners were dying at the rate of 500 a day from typhus. Since I had the rudiments of French and German, I was appointed to speak, in the hope of securing evidence against those who ran the camp. Later, when some of these were captured, I presented them with the charges levelled against them, translating their denials or defences back into French for the sake of their accusers, in an attempt to get to the bottom of what was done and who was responsible. The place, the suffering, the prisoners' accounts were beyond comprehension. For years after I would wake shrieking. I must add an important point: after the war I read widely in Holocaust literature, and I can no longer separate my anger and revulsion at what I really saw from what I later came to learn.[16]

After the war, his Jewish imagination seared with what he had seen and read, Hecht discharged his responsibility to the dead, to history, in one of the war's most powerful poems, 'More Light! More Light!' (supposedly the last words of the poet Goethe as he lay dying in Weimar).[17] This opens with a graphic account of a sixteenth-century atrocity, committed

in the name of religion: a Christian martyr's burning at the stake. The smoke from his pyre mingles with that from a later and greater atrocity committed not in the name of religion, but against an entire religious community:

> We move now to outside a German wood.
> Three men are there commanded to dig a hole
> In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down
> And be buried alive by the third, who is a Pole.
>
> Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill
> Nor light from heaven appeared. But he did refuse.
> A Lüger settled back deeply in its glove.
> He was ordered to change places with the Jews.
>
> Much casual death had drained away their souls.
> The thick dirt mounted toward the quivering chin.
> When only the head was exposed the order came
> To dig him out again and to get back in.
>
> No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.
> When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.
> The Lüger hovered lightly in its glove.
> He was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death.
>
> No prayers or incense rose up in those hours
> Which grew to be years, and every day came mute
> Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,
> And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

There can be no immediate first-hand experience here, but what Hecht had seen and heard in Flossenburg galvanized his imagination with a shock of such high voltage that his poem passes it on to its readers. Obviously the voltage is reduced when it reaches us – as it must be in 'Dulce et Decorum Est' and any such poem – but 'More Light! More Light!' shocks an exposed nerve. This is its function and its value and, in this, it has something in common with the reporting of a first-class war-correspondent like Robert Fisk. The difference – a

crucial difference – is that we can hold 'Dulce et Decorum Est' and 'More Light! More Light!' in our memory, as we cannot retain the front-line journalism of a Fisk – or, for that matter, the front-line letters of an Owen.

The charge against a poem like Lowell's 'Women, Children, Babies, Cows, Cats' is that, far from shocking an exposed nerve, it has the numbing effect of second-hand journalism, thereby contributing to the insensitive apathy that enables us to turn, unmoved, from our newspaper's coverage of disaster to that of a football match. Hecht's rebuke to 'fierce Strephon' points up the further disturbing fact that many of those protesting against the war made money from appearances on 'page and stage'.

The situation and the poetry of the combatant 'Vets' could not have been more different. Their poems of first-hand experience often have a raw power, but I know of none that lives in the memory like 'More Light! More Light!' A problem for many American poets then aspiring to be War Poets was that, rightly perceiving it to be an unjust war, they could not participate as servicemen or women; and lacking first-hand experience, could not write convincingly of the war 'on the ground'.

Given some of their trumpeted expressions of moral commitment to the anti-war cause, it is perhaps surprising that none of them felt strongly enough to follow the example of W.H. Auden who, in January 1937, prompted a banner headline of the *Daily Worker*: 'FAMOUS POET TO DRIVE AMBULANCE IN SPAIN.' Explaining his decision to a friend, he wrote: 'I shall probably be a bloody bad soldier but how can I speak to/for them without becoming one?'[18]

One American poet *did* follow Auden's example. John Balaban went to Vietnam, but not as an ambulance-driver. He went as a Conscientious Objector to work in an

orphanage (for children orphaned by his country's war), learnt Vietnamese, and stayed after the war to teach in a Vietnamese university. His poems of those years have a fine grain, a specificity of detail, rare in the many poems bearing first-hand witness to an armchair reading of newspapers or the watching of television news. As with the war poems of earlier wars, many of Balaban's best were written after the guns had fallen silent, for example:

In Celebration of Spring[19]

Our Asian war is over; others have begun.
Our elders, who tried to mortgage lies,
are disgraced, or dead, and already
the brokers are picking their pockets
for the keys and the credit cards.

In delta swamp in a united Vietnam,
a Marine with a bullfrog for a face,
rots in equatorial heat. An eel
slides through the cage of his bared ribs.
At night, on the old battlefield, ghosts,
like patches of fog, lurk into villages
to maunder on doorsills of cratered homes,
while all across the U.S.A.
the wounded walk about and wonder where to go.

And today, in the simmer of lyric sunlight,
the chrysalis pulses in its mushy cocoon,
under the bark on a gnarled root of an elm.
In the brilliant creek, a minnow flashes
delirious with gnats. The turtle's heart
quickens its raps in the warm bank sludge.
As she chases a frisbee spinning in sunlight,
a girl's breasts bounce full and strong;
a boy's stomach, as he turns, is flat and strong.

Balaban's opening has disturbing vibrations for readers in 2008: 'Our Asian war is over; others have begun.' As for

Owen and Sassoon, the guilty men are the old men who sacrificed the young – 'Our elders who tried to mortgage lies'. Scavenging vermin in America – 'the brokers' – anticipate the somehow more attractive scavengers in Vietnam – the bullfrog and the eel. The controlled fury of the speaker's first stanza is followed by pity for the dead of both sides, and for the living dead. There is not much celebration 'on the old battlefield' or 'across the U.S.A.' but, with the third stanza, Spring returns and the natural cycle of generation begins again: the 'chrysalis *pulses*' … 'a minnow *flashes*' … ' the turtle's heart / *quickens*'. And not only the turtle's heart:

> a girl's breasts bounce full and strong;
> a boy's stomach, as he turns, is flat and strong.

Adam and Eve are in their garden again. Finally, as at the end of Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' and Cornford's 'Letter from Aragon', Balaban turns from his *exempla* to address his reader directly:

> Swear by the locust, by dragonflies on ferns,
> by the minnow's flash, the tremble of a breast,
> by the new earth spongy under our feet;
> that as we grow old, we will not grow evil,
> that although our garden seeps with sewage,
> and our elders think it's up for auction – swear
> by this dazzle that does not wish to leave us –
> that we will be keepers of a garden, nonetheless.

A garden not a battlefield.

Balaban spoke of 'Our Asian war' and, of course, it *was* an American war, but not all its poets were American. Britain had its 'Stateside' contingent of armchair witnesses, and one – so far as I am aware, only one – poet-witness to the war on the ground: James Fenton. In the 1970s, he was a freelance

reporter in Indo-China and a foreign correspondent in Germany for the *Guardian*. Like Hecht a poet of the School of Auden, his German experience fuelled one of the great English-language poems of the holocaust, *A German Requiem*.[20] This was published in 1981, the same year as one of the great English-language poems of the south-east Asian wars, his 'Dead Soldiers'.[21] The power and poignancy of each derives from Fenton's first-hand experience of human suffering, but the poignancy is sharpened by his deployment of grimly comic detail and a refusal to lapse into mawkish solemnity. The seeming solemnity of his poem's title is subverted by what follows:

Dead Soldiers

When His Excellency Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey
Invited me to lunch on the battlefield
I was glad of my white suit for the first time that day.
They lived well, the mad Norodoms, they had style.
The brandy and the soda arrived in crates.
Bricks of ice, tied around with raffia,
Dripped from the orderlies' handlebars.

And I remember the dazzling tablecloth
As the APCs fanned out along the road,[22]
The dishes piled high with frogs' legs,
Pregnant turtles, their eggs boiled in the carapace,
Marsh irises in fish sauce
And inflorescence of a banana salad.

On every bottle, Napoleon Bonaparte
Pleaded for the authenticity of the spirit.
They called the empties Dead Soldiers
And rejoiced to see them pile up at our feet.

Each diner was attended by one of the other ranks
Whirling a table-napkin to keep off the flies.
It was like eating between rows of morris dancers –
Only they didn't kick.

This most curious of war poems begins on a battlefield but, as in Greek tragedy, the violence takes place off-stage. Instead of bloodstained battledress, we see a white suit, a dazzling (presumably white) tablecloth, and whirling (presumably white) napkins. A poet who has seen a battlefield gives his poem a narrator who remembers the menu rather than the body-count.

> '[…] one eats well there', I remark.
> 'So one should,' says the Jockey Cap:
> 'The tiger always eats well,
> It eats the raw flesh of the deer,
> And Chantaraingsey was born in the year of the tiger.
> So, did they show you the things they do
> With the young refugee girls?'

The casual brutality of this passes with no more comment from the narrator than his earlier report on the only casualties he notices:

> They called the empties Dead Soldiers
> And rejoiced to see them pile up at our feet.

The insensitive speaker has none of Fenton's own knowledge of Cambodian politics, and depends for his information on a dubious source (one hesitates to call 'intelligence'). Pol Pot's brother

> tells me how he will one day give me the gen.
> He will tell me how the prince financed the casino
> And how the casino brought Lon Nol to power.
> He will tell me this.
> He will tell me all these things.
> All I must do is drink and listen.

He drank, listened, predicted, and was 'always wrong'. He is no wiser now:

I have been told that the prince is still fighting
Somewhere in the Cardamoms or the Elephant Mountains.
But I doubt that the Jockey Cap would have survived his good connections.
I think the lunches would have done for him –
Either the lunches or the dead soldiers.

And so the poem comes full-circle – back to its title. But at this (their third) appearance, the dead soldiers are no longer capitalized, metaphorical, but actual dead soldiers.

What do these and other war poems achieve? In that their subject is tragedy, they can – when made with passion and precision – move us (as Aristotle said) to pity and terror; also, I suggest, to a measure of fury. And just as we go to a performance of Shakespeare's *King Lear* or Britten's *War Requiem* for pleasure, we return (or at least I return) to 'Dulce et Decorum Est' or 'The Heroes' for the wonder and pleasurable satisfaction a masterpiece affords.

In the short term, I doubt whether the poems about Vietnam had any significant effect on the course of the war. Certainly the (much better) poems of 1914–18 and 1939–45 had no significant effect on the course of the two World Wars. In the longer term, however, war poems *have* through history had a significant effect in shaping their societies' attitudes to warfare. The epics of heroic ages – *The Iliad*, *Beowulf* – encouraged the pursuit of glory with their celebration of courage and skilful swordplay. Over the centuries, all that changed. More British poems of the First World War confirmed 'The Old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori' than challenged it; but, with few exceptions, they have been relegated to the dustbin of history. The poets whose work has survived sing a very different song: one that has played a significant part in introducing subsequent generations to the realities of modern warfare.

The poems of the Second World War have had less impact – not because they were less good, but because the reading public has become increasingly attuned to prose, and because the Word (prose as well as verse) has increasingly lost ground to the Image. Today, our knowledge of the war in Iraq probably derives as much from newspaper and television images as from the spoken or written word. I have yet to see a poem about 'our [latest] Asian War' that is worth the paper it is written on, but all the precedents suggest we should not expect to see one yet. As and when we do, I think it is more likely to come from the hand of a doctor or war-correspondent than from an armchair witness or a serving soldier. And while there may be poetry in the pity, I would bet there will be more in the fury.

Notes

1. THE DEATH OF THE HERO

1. See Jon Stallworthy (ed.), *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 9.
2. Seamus Heaney (trans.), *Beowulf* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 98.
3. *Ibid*., p. 99.
4. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 23–31.
5. Geoffrey Chaucer, General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, lines 43–5.
6. F. J. C. Hearnshaw, 'Chivalry and its Place in History', in Edgar Prestage (ed.), *Chivalry* (London: Kegan Paul, 1928), p. 22.
7. 'Norfolk sprang thee, Lambeth holds thee dead'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 44.
8. 'The Fruits of War'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 45–8.
9. 'A Burnt Ship'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 49.
10. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 50.
11. 'The Drum'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 68–9.
12. 'Ye Mariners of England'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 69–70.
13. Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV, lines 1262–7.
14. William St Clair, *That Greece Might Still Be Free* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 19.
15. 'Thermopylae'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 9.
16. Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, III, lines 725–30.
17. 'The Due of the Dead'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 119–20.

18. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 115–16.
19. 'The Wound-Dresser'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 125–7.
20. 'A Sight in Camp in the Day-Break Grey and Dim'.
21. 'He who lies far from this place [...] died before daybreak: but he was a soldier and he died for his country.'
22. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 146.
23. Rupert Wilkinson, *The Prefects* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 10.
24. *Drummer Hodge: The Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
25. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 147–51.
26. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 162.
27. *Ibid*., p. 163.
28. E.B. Osborn (ed.), *The Muse in Arms* (London: John Murray, 1917), pp. vi–vii.
29. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 163.
30. Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *The Letters of Rupert Brooke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 662–3.
31. Jean Moorcroft Wilson (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Charles Hamilton Sorley* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1985), pp. 130–1.
32. 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 188–9.
33. Ian Parsons (ed.), *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1979), p. 267.
34. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 236–9.
35. 'Gallantry'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 267.
36. 'Into Battle'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 164–5.
37. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 268–9.
38. 'War Poet'. Michael Meyer (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1945), p. 82.
39. 'Naming of Parts'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 254–5.
40. See p. 172 below.
41. 'The Battle'. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 282–3.

42. 'Fall In'. Lincoln Kirstein, *Rhymes of a PFC* (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 3–4.
43. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 267.
44. Ian Hamilton (ed.), *The Poetry of War, 1939–45* (London: Alan Ross, 1965), p. 172.
45. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 290.
46. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. 338–9.

2. SURVIVORS' SONGS

1. Joseph Clancy (trans.), *Y Gododdin*, quoted in Gwyn Jones (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse in English* (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 6.
2. The Book of Job, 1: 14–17. (This and subsequent quotations from the Bible are taken from the King James version.)
3. Kenneth Hurstone Jackson (trans.), *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh University Press, 1969), p. 106. Subsequent quotations from *The Gododdin* are from Jackson's translation, unless specified to the contrary.
4. David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p. xiii.
5. Clancy (trans.), *Y Gododdin*, quoted in Jones (ed.), *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, p. 3.
6. 'The Battle of Argoed Llwyfain', trans. Anthony Conran, quoted in Jones (ed.), *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, where will also be found translations of the poems by Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr and Llywelyn ab y Moel.
7. Jones (ed.), *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, p. 60.
8. Charles Scott Moncrieff (trans.), *Song of Roland* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1919).
9. English Faculty Library, Oxford. The Owen Collection, 409.
10. Wilfred Owen, 'Strange Meeting', lines 1–3.
11. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. ix.
12. *Ibid*., p. 163. Taillefer was a minstrel in the army of William the Conqueror, who at the Battle of Hastings reputedly encouraged the Normans by singing of the deeds of Roland. See p. 19.
13. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. 187.
14. 'A Malory of the Trenches', *London Mercury*, 36 (July 1937), 304–5.

15. John H. Johnston, 'The Heroic Vision: David Jones', *English Poetry of the First World War* (Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 284–340.
16. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 146–7.
17. *Ibid*., p. 144.
18. S. T. Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', lines 236–9.
19. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. xxi. Here, as in subsequent epigraphs from *The Gododdin*, Jones unites separate quotations from the translation by Professor Edward Anwyl that appeared in *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, Session 1909–10*, 1911, pp. 120–36.
20. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. 1.
21. *Ibid*., pp. 1–2.
22. David Jones, 'Fragment of an Autobiographical Writing', *Agenda*, 12, 4/13, 1 (Winter–Spring 1975), p. 98.
23. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. 107.
24. *Ibid*., p. 149.
25. *Ibid*., p. 13.
26. *Ibid*.
27. *Ibid*.
28. *Ibid*., p. 24.
29. *Ibid*., p. xiv.
30. *Ibid*., p. 73.
31. *Ibid*., p. 79.
32. *Ibid*., p. 151. Mischievously, Jones's note gives only the literal source of this quotation: Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*, Fit the 2nd, verse 15.
33. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. 151. Lines translated from *Y Gododdin*.
34. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. 155.
35. *Ibid*.
36. *Ibid*., p. 166.
37. *Ibid*., pp. 184–5.
38. *Ibid*., p. 185.
39. Fussell, *Great War*, p. 147.
40. Quoted in Ian Hamilton (ed.), *Alun Lewis*: *Selected Poetry and Prose* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 52.
41. *Ibid*., p. 122.

42. *Ibid*., p. 132.
43. 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', lines 22–3.
44. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. xii.

3. ENGLAND'S EPIC?

1. Heaney (trans.), *Beowulf* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).
2. Hope Muntz, *The Golden Warrior: The Story of Harold and William*, paperback edition (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), p. v.
3. *Ibid*., pp. 9–10.
4. *Ibid*., p. 10.
5. *Ibid*., p. 32.
6. *Ibid*., p. 37.
7. *Ibid*., p. 4.
8. *Ibid*., p. 261.
9. *Ibid*., pp. 326–7.
10. *Ibid*., p. 155.
11. *Ibid*., p. 147.
12. *Ibid*., p. 47.
13. *Ibid*., p. 59.
14. *Ibid*., p. 60.
15. *Ibid*., p. 61.
16. *Ibid*.
17. See Stendhal, *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), chapter 3, and Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1865–9), Book X.
18. Muntz, *Golden Warrior*, p. 387.
19. *Ibid*., pp. 225, 229, 234.
20. *Ibid*., pp. 399–400.
21. 'A Malory of the Trenches', *London Mercury*, 36 (July 1937), 304–5.
22. W.B. Yeats, 'The Nineteenth Century and After'.

4. WHO WAS RUPERT BROOKE?

1. Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *Letters of Rupert Brooke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 73.
2. *Ibid*., p. 18.
3. Frances Cornford and Virginia Woolf, *Rupert Brooke* (Burford: Cygnet Press, 1978), unnumbered pages.

4. Quoted in Christopher Hassall, *Rupert Brooke: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 190.
5. Quoted in Hassall, *Rupert Brooke*, p. 242.
6. Quoted in John Lehmann, *Rupert Brooke: His Life and His Legend* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), p. 18.
7. Keynes (ed.) *Letters of Rupert Brooke*, p. 539.
8. Quoted in Hassall, *Rupert Brooke*, p. 449.
9. Quoted in *ibid*., p. 81.
10. Quoted in *ibid*., p. 507.
11. *Poetry and Drama*, 1, 2 (June 1913), 187.
12. Hassall, *Rupert Brooke*, p. 94.
13. This and other of Brooke's poems cited or quoted in this chapter may be found in Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *Rupert Brooke: The Poetical Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).
14. Keynes (ed.), *Letters of Rupert Brooke*, p. 27.
15. Quoted in Hassall, *Rupert Brooke*, p. 65.
16. Keynes (ed.), *Letters of Rupert Brooke*, p. 491.
17. *Ibid*., p. 570.
18. Vivien Noakes (ed.), *The Poems and Plays of Isaac Rosenberg* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 84.
19. Jon Stallworthy (ed.), *Wilfred Owen: The War Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 16.

5. CHRIST AND THE SOLDIER

1. Letter quoted in Dennis Silk, *Siegfried Sassoon* (Tisbury: Compton Russell, 1975), p. 26.
2. Fussell, *Great War*, p. 92.
3. Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey, 1916–1920* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), p. 224.
4. Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *Siegfried Sassoon: Diaries, 1920–1922* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 15.
5. Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, new edition (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 9.
6. *Ibid*., p. 10.
7. Fussell, *Great War*, pp. 94–5.
8. Sassoon, *Complete Memoirs*, p. 282.

9. *Ibid*., p. 274.
10. *Ibid*., p. 449.
11. *Ibid*., p. 476.
12. *Ibid*., p. 517.
13. 'He [Rivers] is an absolute dear and has been a most delightful companion in our evening talks about literature etc.' Sassoon, letter of 10 August 1917 to Robert Graves, quoted in Max Egremont, *Siegfried Sassoon: A Biography* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 164.
14. Sassoon, *Complete Memoirs*, p. 656.
15. Siegfried Sassoon, *The Weald of Youth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 221.
16. Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.) *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 15.
17. *Ibid*., p. 18.
18. *Ibid*., pp. 16–17.
19. *Ibid*., pp. 45–7.
20. *Ibid*., p. 100.
21. *Ibid*., pp. 42–3.

6. OWEN'S AFTERLIFE

1. Harold Owen and John Bell (eds.), *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 521.
2. Jon Stallworthy (ed.), *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments, Volume I* (London: Chatto & Windus and Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 3–6.
3. Owen and Bell (eds.), *Wilfred Owen*, p. 106.
4. *Ibid*., p. 282.
5. *Ibid*., p. 285.
6. *Ibid*., p. 347.
7. *Ibid*., p. 300.
8. Edward Mendelson (ed.), *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927–1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 144.
9. Quoted in E.R. Dodds, *Missing Persons: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 133.
10. Owen and Bell (eds.), *Wilfred Owen*, p. 580.
11. Stallworthy (ed.), *Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 229.

12. *Ibid*., p. 267.
13. Donald Justice (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), p. 17.
14. Seamus Heaney, 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven', Lecture delivered in Wolfson College, Oxford, on 29 January 2002.
15. See below, pp. 86–7.
16. Stallworthy (ed.), *Wilfred Owen: Poems and Fragments*, *Volume I*, pp. 99–100, 140–1, *Volume II*, pp. 511–13.
17. Owen and Bell (eds.), *Wilfred Owen*, p. 531.

7. OWEN AND HIS EDITORS

1. Owen and Bell (eds.), *Wilfred Owen*, p. 521.
2. 'Mental Cases', 'Disabled', 'Parable of the Old Men [sic] and the Young', 'The Last Laugh', 'The Last Word', 'Soldiers Dreams' [sic], 'Arms and the Boy', and the untitled early poem beginning 'Long Ages Past'. '"The Last Laugh" and "The Last Word" are very similar versions of the same [...] poem.' Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences or Courteous Revelations* (London: Macmillan, 1950), p. 107.
3. Dennis Welland, 'Sassoon on Owen', *TLS*, 31 May 1974, p. 589.
4. Typeset facsimiles of the manuscripts of these and Owen's other poems can be found in Stallworthy (ed.) *Wilfred Owen: Poems and Fragments*, *Volume II*.
5. In a 1948 radio broadcast, Sassoon gave the total number of copies printed as 2,250, of which 750 went to the United States.
6. Sassoon to H.M. Tomlinson, 17 August 1953. (Humanities Research Center, University of Austin, Texas). See also Welland, 'Sassoon on Owen', *TLS*, 31 May 1974, p. 590.
7. Two of them, printed in full, appeared in his notes: 'Bold Horatius' (a mistitling of 'Schoolmistress') and the fragment 'Beauty'.
8. Memoir, in Edmund Blunden (ed.), *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p. 3.
9. See above, p. 75.
10. Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 404–5.
11. She sang the soprano part, written for Galina Vishnevskaya, wife of Mstislav Rostropovich, who had been prevented from accepting Britten's invitation. 'Ekaterina Furtseva, the [Russian]

minister of culture asked her: "How can you, a Soviet woman, stand next to a German and an Englishman and perform a political work?"' Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, p. 410.

12. *Ibid*.
13. *Ibid*., p. 411.
14. See above, p. 82.
15. C. Day-Lewis (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), pp. 28–9.
16. In A. Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross (eds.), *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute, W.B. Yeats 1865–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 171–92.
17. See above, p. 74.
18. Day-Lewis (ed.), *Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, p. 28.
19. On 1 November 1970, four days before the fifty-second anniversary of Owen's death.
20. Blunden (ed.), *Poems of Wilfred Owen*, p. 9.
21. Day-Lewis (ed.), *Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, pp. 25, 117.
22. D. S. R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p. 110.
23. Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002), pp. 257–8.
24. I am indebted to Christopher Ricks for calling my attention to this poem, published in 1879 and now to be found in Bernard Jones (ed.), *The Poems of William Barnes, Volume II* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 825.
25. This manuscript was first reproduced in typeset facsimile in Jon Stallworthy, 'A Slowly Evolving Elegy', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 November 1998.
26. 'Dulce et Decorum Est' and 'Cramped in that funnelled hole', for example.

8. THE LEGACY OF THE SOMME

1. See above, pp. 35–41.
2. Boldly delivered to the Royal Society of Literature (of which he is himself a Fellow) on 24 April 1969. Mary Stocks (ed.), *Essays by Divers Hands*, New series 36 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 1–18.

3. Quoted in Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), p. 2.
4. 'British "Anti-War" Writers and Their Critics', Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle (eds.), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (London: Leo Cooper, 1996), p. 819.
5. 'The Western Front Experience as Interpreted through Literature', *RUSI Journal*, December 2003, 53.
6. 'A Military Historian's View of the Great War', p. 8.
7. Todman, *Great War*, p. 15.
8. David Stephenson, *1914–1918: The History of the First World War* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 273.
9. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. ix.
10. Captain von Hentig of the Guard Reserve Division, quoted in Gary Sheffield, *The Somme* (London: Cassell, 2003), p. 155.
11. See Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory* (London: Hodder Headline, 2002).
12. R.C. Sherriff, *No Leading Lady: An Autobiography* (London: Gollancz, 1968), pp. 72–3.
13. Perhaps ironically echoed in Sellar and Yeatman, *1066 and All That*.
14. See above, pp. 19–34.
15. See also 'A Picture of Otto' in Hughes's *Birthday Letters* (1998), discussed on p. 76 above.
16. Michael Longley, 'Wounds', in *An Exploded View: Poems 1968–72* (London: Gollancz, 1973), p. 40.
17. Todman, *Great War*, p. 237, note 80.
18. As with so many second-generation writers about the Somme, Susan Hill had a familial connection with the battle. This she describes in the Introduction to the 1984 reprint of *Strange Meeting*. As a child she would visit her maternal grandmother and her sister. They were two of nine children, with one brother

> cherished and idolised by them all, of course. When he was eighteen, he went to war – the Great War, as they called it, the 1914–1918 War. On his nineteenth birthday, he was killed, like so many other thousands of young men, at the Battle of the Somme.
>
> I don't think the family was ever the same again.

> They had a photograph of him in his uniform, and I used to take it down and look at it. He had such a young face, even I could see that, as a child, he was not much more than a child himself. His ears stuck out, I remember, and his hair was cut very, very short under his cap. His Christian name was Sidney, and the family surname was Owen. It is coincidence of course, but the long arm of *that*, as they say, is a long one, and I am a believer in these small signs and symbols, as important parts of one's life.

19. *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), and *The Ghost Road* (1995). *The Regeneration Trilogy* was first published in 1996.
20. 'Everyone Sang'. Hart-Davis (ed.), *War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, p. 144.

9. THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE WASTE LAND

1. Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House*, 1919 (New York: Penguin, 1964), p. 12.
2. T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 39.
3. Owen and Bell (eds.), *Wilfred Owen*, p. 562.
4. Hart-Davis (ed.), *War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, pp. 15–17, 24, 28.
5. Sassoon, *Complete Memoirs*, p. 282.
6. Hart-Davis (ed.), *War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, pp. 45–7.
7. Harold F. Brooks (trans.), *The Dream of the Rood* (Dublin: The Sign of the Three Candles, 1942), [p. 4].
8. Helen Gardner (ed.), *John Donne: The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 50.
9. Valerie Eliot (ed.), *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 23.
10. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness, with the Congo Diary* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 94.
11. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 42.
12. *Ibid*., p. 47.
13. David Gascoyne, 'Answers to an Enquiry', *New Verse*, 11 (October 1934), 12.

14. Robin Skelton (ed.), *David Gascoyne: Collected Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 44–5.
15. Edward Mendelson (ed.), *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 454–5.
16. Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
    To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
    Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
    And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?

    John Barnard (ed.), *John Keats: The Complete Poems* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), p. 345.
17. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 11.
18. *Ibid*., p. 15.
19. *Ibid*., p. 47.
20. *Ibid*., p. 16.
21. *Ibid*., p. 166.
22. *Ibid*.
23. Source unidentified.
24. Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, p. 178; Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 97.
25. Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, p. 181.
26. *Ibid*., p. 187.
27. *Ibid*., p. 188.
28. Patrick White, *Voss* (Aylesbury: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1957), p. 17.
29. White, *Voss*, p. 94.
30. Carolyn Bliss, *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1986), p. 65.
31. White, *Voss*, p. 135.
32. *Ibid*., p. 255.
33. *Ibid*., p. 420.
34. *Ibid*., p. 415–16.
35. *Ibid*., p. 411.
36. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, 2nd edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 1.
37. Beckett, *Godot*, p. 6.
38. *Ibid*., p. 9.

39. *Ibid*., p. 4.
40. Bert O. States, *The Shape of Paradox: An Essay on 'Waiting for Godot'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 17–18.
41. Beckett, *Godot*, p. 46.
42. *Ibid*., p. 86.
43. Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, 2nd edition (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 107.
44. *Ibid*., p. 106.
45. 'Crow Alights' and 'Two Legends'. Ted Hughes, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 9, 17.
46. Hughes, *Crow*, p. 10.
47. 'Examination at the Womb-Door' and 'Crow Improvises'. Hughes, *Crow*, pp. 11, 53.
48. Hughes, *Crow*, p. 15.
49. *Ibid*., p. 66.
50. *Ibid*., p. 73.

10. WAR AND PEACE

1. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, new edition (London: Hogarth Press, 1947), pp. 6–7.
2. *Ibid*., p. 127.
3. *Ibid*., p. 103.
4. *Ibid*., p. 204.
5. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (eds.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume III* (London: Hogarth Press, 1980) pp. 33–4.
6. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, special edition (London: Hogarth Press, 1943), p. 16.
7. *Ibid*., p. 32.
8. *Ibid*., p. 207.
9. D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, Phoenix edition (London: Heinemann, 1954), p. 9.
10. *Ibid*., p. 20.
11. *Ibid*., p. 204.
12. *Ibid*., p. 213.
13. *Ibid*., p. 197.
14. W.H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939', lines 21–2.

15. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, p. 218.
16. *Ibid*., p. 214.
17. *Ibid*., p. 57.
18. Wilfred Owen, 'S.I.W.', line 19.
19. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, p. 56.
20. *Ibid*., p. 214.
21. *Ibid*., pp. 215–16.
22. *Ibid*., p. 219.
23. L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), pp. 5–7.
24. *Ibid*., pp. 136–41.
25. Wilfred Owen, 'The Sentry', lines 22–3.
26. Hartley, *Go-Between*, pp. 293–4.
27. Dan H. Lawrence and Daniel J. Leary (eds.), *Bernard Shaw: The Complete Prefaces* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 2, 319.
28. Ford Madox Ford, *Return to Yesterday* (London: Gollancz, 1931), p. 373.
29. Ford Madox Ford, *It was the Nightingale* (London: Heinemann, 1934), p. 202.
30. Ford Madox Ford, *Parade's End* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 365–6.
31. 'Critics have made much of the religious symbolism of the series – usually too much, rather than what the novels will support.' Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life, Volume II* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 223. At several points in his biography, Saunders judiciously explores the sources and implications of this symbolism, a central theme of the series. See pp. 208, 223, 243–6, 256, and 269–70.
32. Ford, *Parade's End*, p. 379.
33. *Ibid*., p. 380.
34. *Ibid*., p. 460.
35. St John, 15:13.
36. See above, pp. 62–4.
37. Ford, *Parade's End*, p. 3.
38. *Ibid*., p. 155.
39. *Ibid*., pp. 167–8.
40. Isaiah, 53: 5.
41. George Herbert, 'Virtue', lines 1–2.

42. Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford*, *Volume II*, p. 223.
43. Ford, *Parade's End*, p. 639.
44. *Ibid*., p. 674.
45. Siegfried Sassoon, 'Everyone Sang', lines 6–10. Hart-Davis (ed.), *War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, p. 144.
46. Robie Macauley, Introduction to Ford, *Parade's End*, p. xvii.
47. Ford, *Parade's End*, p. 835.
48. *Ibid*., pp. 306–7.

11. THE FIRE FROM HEAVEN

1. 'From Feathers to Iron', 29, C. Day Lewis, *Collected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape with the Hogarth Press, 1954), p. 75.
2. Day Lewis, *Collected Poems*, p. 142. 'D.H. nine': aeroplane made by the De Havilland Aircraft Company.
3. Richard J. Finneran (ed.), *W.B. Yeats: The Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), p. 294.
4. Richard Hillary, *The Last Enemy*, new edition (London: Macmillan, 1950), p. 4.
5. *Ibid*., p. 8.
6. *Ibid*., p. 10.
7. *Ibid*., p. 16.
8. *Ibid*., p. 21.
9. *Ibid*., p. 22.
10. *Ibid*., p. 29.
11. *Ibid*., pp. 121–2.
12. *Ibid*., p. 213.
13. Galassi (ed.), *Understand the Weapon, Understand the Wound*, p. 41.
14. Hillary, *Last Enemy*, p. 214.
15. *Ibid*., p. 214–16.
16. *Ibid*., p. 221.
17. Sebastian Faulks, *The Fatal Englishman* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 161.
18. Peter McDonald (ed.), *Louis MacNeice: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 253.
19. Randall Jarrell, *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 144.

20. Genesis, 2:21–2.
21. James Dickey, *Poems 1957–1967* (New York: Collier Books, 1968), pp. 181–8.
22. 'Think, how everyone will show that he had no hand in the great destruction.'
23. Job, 40:9.
24. See above, pp. 15–17, and below, pp. 181–3.
25. See above, pp. 15–17.
26. See above, pp. 33–4.
27. See above, pp. 19–34.
28. J.G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1984), pp. 207–8.

12. HENRY REED AND THE GREAT GOOD PLACE

1. I am indebted to the poet's niece, Jane Reed, and his friend, Michael Ramsbotham, for much of the biographical information in this Introduction to Reed's *Collected Poems* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
2. This and all other poems cited or quoted in this chapter can be found in the *Collected Poems*.
3. See Roger Savage's excellent article, 'The Radio Plays of Henry Reed', in John Drakakis, ed., *British Radio Drama* (1981).
4. The last of Eliot's *Four Quartets* may have been kindled in June 1941 by a spark from Reed's incendiary satire, 'Chard Whitlow', published on 10 May 1941.

13. THE FURY AND THE MIRE

1. Stallworthy (ed.), *Wilfred Owen*: *Complete Poems and Fragments*, *Volume II*, p. 535.
2. Edward Mendelson (ed.), *W.H. Auden: Prose, 1926–1938* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 105.
3. Stallworthy (ed.), *Wilfred Owen: Complete Poems and Fragments*, *Volume I*, p. 140.
4. Galassi (ed.), *Understand the Weapon, Understand the Wound*, p. 41.
5. H[igh] E[xplosive].

6. Erich Maria Remarque, *In Westen Nichts Neues*, trans. A.W. Wheen as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1929).
7. Louis Simpson, *Selected Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 20.
8. Louis Simpson in Ian Hamilton (ed.), *The Poetry of War: 1939–1945* (London: Alan Ross, 1965), pp. 171–2.
9. Hart-Davis (ed.), *War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, p. 49.
10. For a comprehensive critical and contextual study, see Subarno Chattarji, *Memories of a Lost War: American Poetic Responses to the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).
11. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (eds.) *Robert Lowell: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 596.
12. *Ibid*., p. 329.
13. Christopher Ricks (ed.), *The Poems of Tennyson*, *Volume II*, 2nd edition (London: Longmans, Green, 1987) pp. 510–13.
14. 'Drummer Hodge', James Gibson (ed.), *Thomas Hardy*: *The Complete Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 90–1.
15. Anthony Hecht, *Anthony Hecht in Conversation with Philip Hoy* (Oxford: Between the Lines, 1999), p. 77.
16. *Ibid*., p. 24.
17. Anthony Hecht, *Collected Earlier Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), pp. 64–5.
18. W.H. Auden, quoted in Dodds, *Missing Persons*, p. 133.
19. John Balaban, *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems* (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1997), pp. 108–9.
20. James Fenton, *The Memory of War* (Edinburgh: The Salamander Press, 1982), pp. 9–19.
21. *Ibid*., pp. 26–8.
22. A[rmoured] P[ersonnel] C[arriers].

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