THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

BYRON FOUNDATION LECTURE for 1990

The Problem of War Poetry

by

Bernard Bergonzi

Professor of English
University of Warwick

This lecture was delivered on 3 May 1990, with Professor Malcolm Jones (Pro-Vice-Chancellor) in the Chair. The Lectureship was founded in 1912 by public subscription, and the first lecture was given in 1919.

Published in 2010 by
The Byron Centre for the Study of Literature and Social Change
School of English Studies, University of Nottingham,
University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD
http://byron.nottingham.ac.uk

This electronic edition digitized and edited by Nicola Bowring
Byron Foundation Lectures Online Series Editor, Matthew J.A. Green

This is a revised version of the Byron Foundation Lecture delivered by Professor Bernard Bergonzi in May 1990.

ISBN: 978-1-906808-04-4

The Problem of War Poetry

I have been greatly honoured by your invitation to deliver this year's Byron Foundation Lecture, and I feel there is a certain appropriateness in my talking about the problem of war poetry under such a heading, for Byron was one of the first English poets to write about war in a recognisably modern accent. There is a further connection between my subject and the present occasion. An earlier professor of English at Nottingham, Vivian de Sola Pinto, was one of the lesser poets of the war of 1914-18, and he occurs in its literary annals as the friend and second-in-command of Captain Siegfried Sassoon, appearing in Sassoon's *Sherston's Progress* under the name of 'Velmore'. Pinto left a vivid account of his own war experiences in his charming autobiography, *The City That Shone.* He had a hard but lucky war, for he was twice wounded but survived.

War poetry is easier to talk about than to define; if it has claims to be a literary genre, then it is a very loose one. This much is apparent from the *Oxford Book of War Poetry,* edited by Jon Stallworthy, which came out in 1984. It ranges very widely, beginning with the Book of Exodus and the death of Hector in the *Iliad,* and ending with Peter Porter's poem about the outbreak of nuclear war. The English poems written before the end of the eighteenth century have a decidedly marginal and miscellaneous aspect, as though the editor had been hard put to it to get a convincing number of them together. We have, among other things, an extract from Chaucer's Knight's Tale, Michael Drayton's 'Ballad of Agincourt', Lovelace's 'To Lucasta, Going to the Wars', Marvell's 'Horatian Ode', and a disappointingly brief extract from the war in heaven in *Paradise Lost.* The eighteenth century provides 'Rule, Britannia', and Johnson's powerful lines about Charles XII of Sweden from *The Vanity of Human Wishes.* But the next poem to Johnson's in the anthology is much closer to what we have come to think of as war poetry; providing not celebration or mere description, but the note of angry rejection;

> 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 widow's tears, and orphans' moans;
And all that Misery's hand bestows,
To fill the catalogue of human woes.

That is from 'Ode' by John Scott, published in 1782; Scott is nowadays known only for this one poem. Early in the next century Byron writes scathingly about the human propensity to make war, in *Don Juan:*

'Let there be light!' said God, and there was light!
'Let there be blood!' says man, and there''s a sea!
The fiat of this spoiled child of the Night
(For Day ne'er saw his merits) could decree
More evil in an hour, than thirty bright
Summers could renovate, though they should be
Lovely as those which ripened Eden's fruit;
For war cuts up not only branch, but root.

Nevertheless, at the end of his short life we find Byron preparing to fight in the just cause of Greek independence and ready to lay down his life:

If thou regret'st thy youth, *why live?*
The land of honourable death
Is here:— up to the Field, and give
Away thy breath!

Seek out — less often sought than found —
A soldier's grave, for thee the best;
Then look around, and choose thy ground,
And take thy rest.

In those concluding stanzas from 'On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year' we hear the expression of sentiments that nearly a century later were to reappear in the suspect rhetoric of Rupert Brooke's '1914' sonnets. Byron is divided in his attitudes to war, and this division is, I believe, characteristic of much subsequent poetry.

In some ways the history of war poetry is the history of wars. The first truly modern war was the American Civil War, large-

scale and mechanized, given mobility by the railway, and greatly increased fire-power by advances in weaponry. Melville and Whitman, then in their forties, wrote moving poems about the fraternal slaughter. Whitman's poetic sequence, *Drum-Taps,* arising from his grim experiences as a wound-dresser, unflinchingly conveys the horrors of mutilation and the waste of young lives, and seems directly to anticipate the poetry of the Great War. It was seen in this light by a poet of that war, Isaac Rosenberg, who wrote in a letter in 1917: ' "Drum Taps" stands unique as War Poetry in my mind. I have written a few war poems but when I think of "Drum Taps" mine are absurd'. [1] At the end of the nineteenth century Britain was involved in the Anglo-Boer war, to give it its proper title, which persists in folk memory as a combination of a colonial war and a rehearsal for the war which broke out in 1914. It was marked in English poetry by Kipling and Hardy and many lesser poets. Malvern Van Wyk Smith's book, *Drummer Hodge: the Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War,* gives a valuable account of the poetry — or the verse — written on both sides of the conflict, in English and Afrikaans, together with some curiosities, such as poems from the Boer side written in English. Stallworthy prints a harshly realistic poem from that war, called simply 'War', which describes a wounded soldier brought into a field hospital; it recalls *Drum-Taps,* and anticipates aspects of Sassoon or Wilfred Owen. Here is the final stanza:

The clink of a stopper and glass:
A sigh as the chloroform drips:
A trickle of — what? on the grass,
And bluer and bluer the lips.
The lashes have hidden the stare...
A rent, and the clothes fall away...
A touch, and the wound is laid bare...
A cut, and the face has turned grey...
And it's *War!* 'Orderly, take It out.
It's hard for his child, and it's rough on his wife,
There might have been — sooner — a chance for his life.
But It's *War!* And — Orderly, clean this knife!'

Like many of the poems of that war this seems to owe quite a lot to the popular recitations of the music halls, in its combination of jauntiness and sentimentality. But it may have a more literary model in W. E. Henley's sequence of poems called 'In Hospital'. The author may surprise you — it was Edgar Wallace, who is now remembered as a prolific thriller writer, but who served in South Africa as a war correspondent.

It is difficult to avoid the impression that all the poetry which takes up the first half of Stallworthy's anthology is no more than an extended prelude to the war poetry of 1914-18. Indeed, I believe that the loose but potent concept of 'war poetry' is itself a product of the Great War, so that we tend to interpret the earlier poetry in terms of the attitudes of that conflict. Indeed, when school-children or students are studying the 'war poets' we can have a pretty good idea of who they will be reading: Owen and Sassoon certainly, and possibly selected works by Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley, Robert Graves, Isaac Rosenberg, Richard Aldington, Ivor Gurney and Herbert Read. They are unlikely to be reading poems published before 1914, and not very likely to be reading the poets of the Second World War, such as Keith Douglas or Alun Lewis, or the Americans included in Stallworthy's anthology, such as Louis Simpson and Randall Jarrell.

After seventy-five years, the First World War, as it became known after the second one had broken out, continues to haunt British culture, and its images and language are inescapable. Paul Fussell has remarked on the way that current clichés, such as to be 'in No Man's Land', or 'to go over the top', once had precise meanings in the conditions of trench warfare, as did other phrases that form part of the worn terminology of the bureaucratic encounters of contemporary life, where we may be 'bombarded with forms' or 'face a barrage of complaints', and where disputing parties may adopt 'entrenched positions' but still hope for a 'breakthrough'. Vernon Scannell has captured the feeling of nostalgia turning into myth wonderfully well in his poem 'The Great War', which opens:

> Whenever war is spoken of
> I find
> The war that was called Great invades the mind…

and ends with these lines:

> And now
> Whenever the November sky
> Quivers with a bugle's hoarse, sweet cry,
> The reason darkens; in its evening gleam
> Crosses and flares, tormented wire, grey earth
> Splattered with crimson flowers,
> And I remember,
> Not the war I fought in
> But the one called Great
> Which ended in a sepia November
> Four years before my birth.

The literature of the Great War first began to look like a recognisable entity in the early 1930s, after a wave of prose writing, in memoirs or autobiographical fiction, by the survivors of the Western Front: Blunden, Sassoon, Graves, Aldington, Frederic Manning. In poetry, the appearance of Edmund Blunden's edition of Wilfred Owen in 1931 was a significant event. Owen became something of a cult figure to the young poets of the Auden generation, and he was rapidly incorporated into Auden's personal mythology. He wrote in a poem of 1933:

> 'The poetry is in the pity,' Wilfred said
> And Kathy in her journal, 'To be rooted in life,
> That's what I want'.

'Kathy' was Katherine Mansfield, another admired figure for the young Auden. The prominence of Owen provoked a notorious reaction from W. B. Yeats, who, perhaps without realizing it, was one of the first people to make a theoretical statement about the nature of war poetry. It occurs in his preface to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935*, that courageously eccentric compilation. Yeats writes 'I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war', and justifies his reasons for omitting them from his anthology. He says of the officer poets:

> 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. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced.[2]

Yeats's words imply not just critical disagreement, but a clash of what Wittgenstein called 'forms of life'. He regards tragedy in a religious or transcendental perspective, which was inaccessible to the trench poets, who were forced back on the basic emotions of horror and pity and anger. Yeats amplified his remarks in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, in which he described Owen as 'unworthy of the poets' corner of a country newspaper . . . He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick ... There is every excuse for him, but none for those who like him'. Yeats was wrong, of course, but with the kind of provoking wrongness that can illuminate its subject better than unthinking praise. What is particularly interesting is that similar sentiments to Yeats's were expressed at about the same time by a writer at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, the Communist critic, Christopher Caudwell. He wrote in *Illusion and Reality:* 'If the tragedy did not make the Athenians feel better, in spite of its tragedy, it was bad. The tragic poet who made them weep bitterly at the fate of their fellow Hellenes in Persia was fined. A similar imposition suggests itself for our own purely sentimental war literature'.[3] By the time *Illusion and Reality* appeared in 1937 Caudwell was dead, fighting for the Spanish Republic.

Keith Douglas, whom I take to be the finest English poet of the Second World War, served in the North African desert as a tank commander and was killed in Normandy in 1944. In his poem, 'Desert Flowers', he wrote, 'Rosenberg, I only repeat what you were saying', and in an essay, 'Poets in This War', he refers with admiration to the soldier-poets of the earlier war, Owen, Sassoon, Sorley, and Rosenberg. As far as Douglas is concerned a genuine 'war poet' is someone who, like them, had had experience of fighting:

> There is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, about this war except its mobile character. There are two reasons: hell cannot be let loose twice: it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. The hardships, pain and boredom; the behaviour of the living and the appearance of the dead, were so accurately described by the poets of the Great War that every day on the battlefields of the western desert - and no doubt on the Russian battlefields as well - their poems are illustrated. Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write would be tautological.[4]

Douglas thought that everything that could be said about war had already been said about the Great War. Nevertheless, he was already writing his own distinctive war poems, and I think he overestimated the continuity of experience. There is little of what Yeats denounced as 'passive suffering' in Douglas's poetry. There was, after all, a great difference between the active, mobile warfare of the desert and the waterlogged stasis of the trenches, where men were likely to be passive victims of artillery bombardment or gas attacks. A tank commander in the hot, empty spaces of the desert, like Douglas, was physically and perhaps morally a freer being than the young infantry officers in the Great War; and the difference shows in the poetry. Nevertheless, there is a line of succession suggested by the fact that Douglas invoked Rosenberg, and Rosenberg praised Whitman.

Douglas, as a soldier and a poet, established his own relationship with his predecessors. Yet whatever individual readers made of it, the poetry of the Great War does not fully emerge as a coherent literary and academic subject until about 1960. In that year Dennis Welland published a critical study of Wilfred Owen, which was to be followed over the next thirty years by a stream of works of criticism and biography, editions and anthologies, selected poems and case books. The 'war poets' have become an established subject for study in schools and universities, though likely to include fewer than a dozen of the more than 2,000 poets listed in Catherine Reilly's bibliography of Great War poetry. The subject has become academically respectable and institutionalized, in teaching and research. I see the culmination of the process in Stallworthy's splendid edition in two volumes of

Owen's complete poems and fragments, where Owen receives more devoted scholarly attention than any other twentieth-century poet except Yeats. Academic practices have, in fact, become fused with the national mythmaking that led, in 1985, to the unveiling of a monument to the poets of the First World War in Westminster Abbey. Dominic Hibberd has remarked, 'Imagine a monument there to the Metaphysical Poets or the Restoration Dramatists or the Victorian Industrial Novelists', adding that at least half of the sixteen poets commemorated are in his view distinctly second-rate.[5]

Critical studies and pedagogic discussions of war poetry are likely to fit it into a pattern of illusion being replaced by disillusion and anger, in which the naive patriotism of Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell was superseded, once the war became literally bogged down in the trenches and intermittent mass slaughter of the Western Front, by the pity of Owen and the protest of Sassoon. This, certainly, was the assumption underlying my own book, *Heroes' Twilight,* published twenty-five years ago, and of many other studies. I now think it needs to be approached with more reservations than I once showed. The movement from illusion to disillusion is certainly there, in a few poets, but one must beware of seeing it as representative of all literary responses to the war, and still less of the general attitudes of the soldiers.

There is a danger when students, and indeed their teachers, take a handful of war poems, perhaps backed up by the lively spectacle of *Oh, What a Lovely War,* and treat them as sufficient evidence of what the First World War was all about. Owen and Sassoon conveyed with memorable intensity the horror and the pity and the anger that the experience of war provoked in them; but they gave what could only be a close-up of a single aspect of its appalling complexity, which had so many dimensions, historical, military, diplomatic.

There is, in fact, an attractive mythic drama that underlines the study of these poets, which exists almost independently of their poetry. The protagonists are the three soldier-poets, Owen, Sassoon, and Robert Graves. Sassoon, who had been a courageous and exemplary officer, decides in 1917 that the war is being unjustifiably prolonged, and that he will take no further part in it.

He throws the ribbon of his Military Cross into the River Mersey; he attempts to make a public protest against war, hoping that he will be court-martialled, but the authorities decline. His younger but more worldly friend, Robert Graves, was no more enthusiastic about the war than Sassoon, but was convinced that the public protest would be ineffective and that he had to be protected against himself. Following Graves's representations, Sassoon was deemed to be suffering from shell-shock and was sent to Craiglockhart Hospital near Edinburgh to recover. It was there that he had a crucial encounter with a fellow-patient, Wilfred Owen; he recognized and encouraged Owen's genius as a poet, and later introduced him to London literary circles. In 1918 both Sassoon and Owen voluntarily went back to the front; Sassoon was wounded and came home, while Owen was killed, poignantly, just one week before Armistice. It is a moving story, and was turned into a play a few years ago, but it is liable to distort the reading of the poetry.

Several years ago, when I was a visiting lecturer in a Polish university, I gave a talk to students of English on the poetry of the Great War, emphasising, as one does, the element of protest in Owen and Sassoon. When it was over and questions were invited, a young man asked me in careful English, 'These poets you have been telling us about, were they patriots?' I did my best to explain that in their own terms the poets did regard themselves as patriots and lovers of their country, but they were not fighting on their own soil, and were protesting against a war which they did not believe to be justified. I could see that the Polish student was not satisfied with my reply, and this little encounter left me reflecting on a clash between attitudes and forms of life. The Poles, for much of their history, have had to fight for their independence and national identity against alien oppressors, and for them patriotism is an intense and positive value. Furthermore, the Poles, like other European nations, are accustomed to conscription, so that military service and citizenship go together. The English tradition is basically anti-military, as Kipling sardonically complained in his poems about army life, and the best-known poetry of the Great War was the work of civilians in uniform.

As critical and scholarly studies of the poetry of the war have multiplied two opposing views of it have emerged. The former continues to uphold the pattern of illusion turning to disillusion, affirming that the best poetry of the war - that is in the work of the poets who emerged after the patriotic hopes of 1914-15 were dashed - was poetry of outrage and protest, and that the principal value of 'war poetry' is that it is anti-war poetry. This broadly pacifist position has been argued for by Jon Silkin in his book *Out of Battle* and his influential Penguin anthology of First World War poetry, and by Desmond Graham in *The Truth of Poetry.* Silkin, in the introduction to his anthology, sees the development of the subject in four phrases: First, unreflective patriotism; second, anger; third, compassion; fourth, anger and compassion merging in a desire for a new order of things. These stages are represented by, respectively, Brooke, Sassoon, Owen and Rosenberg. There is something unconvincing about a set of categories each of which contains only one representative, and Silkin's argument is, I think, an attempt to justify his conviction that Rosenberg was the greatest of the war poets. The opposing position might be called sceptical or revisionist, and it has been advanced by Andrew Rutherford in *The Literature of War,* and by Dominic Hibberd in *Owen the Poet* and in the anthology, *Poetry of the Great War,* which he edited with John Onions. Silkin and Hibberd continued the argument in some civil but sharp exchanges at a conference, which I had the pleasure of attending, on the literature of the Great War, sponsored by the University of Picardy at Amiens, to mark the seventieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme in 1986. Insofar as my own views have developed, I have drawn closer to the second position. The interest of this debate, and perhaps its ultimate importance, is that it takes one beyond the particular problems of interpreting the poetry of the Great War and raises basic questions about the nature of literature and how we respond to it.

Dominic Hibberd, in the revisionist camp, yields to no-one in his admiration for Owen and Sassoon, about whom he has written very well, but, like Andrew Rutherford, he is at pains to stress their *unrepresentative* quality; unrepresentative, that is, of most of the poetry, or perhaps one should say verse, written by soldiers in

the Great War. Silkin's anthology is, as he explains in his introduction, indicative of his personal taste and conviction that good war poetry is, in some sense, protest or anti-war poetry. Even so, the need to be representative forces him to include a number of poems, whose attitudes or values he dissents from, but which are so well-known that they would have been difficult to exclude and which he marks with an asterisk to indicate his dissent. They include Grenfell's 'Into Battle', Alan Seegar's 'I Have a Rendezvous with Death' and John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields', which were all very popular during the war; but also, interestingly, Sorley's 'All the hills and vales along' and Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. The Hibberd-Onions anthology has a similar title to Silkin's, but is informed by very different principles. It aims, above all, to be broadly representative, of the kinds of poetry written by both fighting men and civilians, during and after the war. 'Poetry' in the title means what was regarded as poetry at the time, rather than what current critical opinion would necessarily regard as such; it is equivalent, in effect, to the descriptive and non-evaluative term, 'verse'. The interest of the material is as much historical as literary, assuming that one can continue confidently to make that traditional distinction. It continues to inform my own thinking, but the advent of the New Historicism, which treats literary texts as historical exhibits, may have somewhat blurred it for many readers. Hibberd and Onions do not claim poetic merit for much of their material, but it is enlightening in its own way, and provides a context for the canonical 'war poetry' that is now read and admired and studied. It is worth recalling that two of the major war poets, Rosenberg and Owen, who were both killed in 1918, were virtually unknown during the war and their reputations are entirely posthumous. One gets an idea of the poets who *were* famous from a piece of undistinguished verse that Hibberd and Onions include, called 'The Soldier-Poets', by the elderly Catholic journalist Wilfred Meynell, husband of Alice Meynell. It was published in 1918, and commemorates various poets who had been victims of the war. Two of them, Brooke, who died on his way to the Dardanelles campaign, and Grenfell, who was killed in France, are still familiar names. The others, E. A. Mackintosh, W. N. Hodgson, E. W.

Tennant, and Gerald Caldwell, are no longer so. Hibberd, in his note, describes them as 'some of the most well-known soldier-poets of the "officer and gentlemen" class'. All of them wrote patriotic poetry, of the kind that Silkin places in his first category.

'Into Battle' by the professional soldier, Julian Grenfell, written just before his death in 1915, is a full-throated expression of the traditional view of war as glorious, and is, I think, better poetry than Brooke's '1914' sonnets, if only because Grenfell seems more emotionally committed to what he is saying. Here is the opening stanza:

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

It is a common assumption that once people discovered what war is really like, no-one could write like that about it any more. The reality is otherwise, as we see from a poem called 'War, the Liberator', by E. A. Mackintosh, who was one of the most popular war poets. He had been awarded the Military Cross in 1916, and was wounded and gassed later in the same year. He returned to the front in 1917 and was killed in November; 'War, the Liberator' was written not long before. It is dedicated: 'To the Authoress of "Non-Combatants"'. This is the opening:

> Surely War is vile to you, you who can but know of it,
> Broken men and broken hearts, and boys too young to die,
> You that never knew its joy, never felt the glow of it,
> Valour and the pride of men, soaring to the sky.
> Death's a fearful thing to you, terrible in suddenness,
> Lips that will not laugh again, tongues that will not sing,
> You that have not ever seen their sudden life of happiness,
> The moment they looked down on death, a cowed and beaten
> thing.

Mackintosh's experience of the horror and suffering of the war was at least as great as that of Owen and Sassoon, and he was

writing at the same time, but his response was very different. The immediate counter-argument is to say that they were better poets than Mackintosh, or Grenfell, and one has to agree. But are they better poets because they are anti-war poets? To see this as self-evidently true, is to fall into a circular argument: good war poetry is anti-war poetry, and it is good because it is anti-war. Intelligent criticism has to do more than simply endorse attitudes.

The problem may be somewhat deconstructed by suggesting that not all of the war poetry that we continue to admire can be simply regarded as 'protest' poetry. Indeed, the concept of 'protest' poetry projected back on to the Great War from the 1960s and the emotions aroused by Vietnam may be inappropriate. If we are to apply it, then I believe that only Owen and Sassoon fall clearly into that category. Other poets of the Great War described the misery and the destruction and the waste of life; but such awareness is not, in itself, anti-war. Again, to write satirically about the top brass and the military high command may be a protest about the way the war is being fought rather than against the war as such. Rosenberg offers an interesting instance. Silkin has quoted a phrase from one of Rosenberg's letters, 'Nothing can justify war', which looks like an unambiguously pacifist statement. But it is immediately qualified by the next sentence, which is not quoted by Silkin: 'I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over'.[6] Rosenberg's celebrated and terrifying poem 'Dead Man's Dump' begins:

> The plunging limbers over the shattered track
> Racketed with their rusty freight,
> Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,
> And the rusty stakes like sceptres old
> To stay the flood of brutish men
> Upon our brothers dear.

Hibberd has raised the question, who are the 'brutish men' if not the German enemy? I think they were, though to accept this reading is not to suggest that Rosenberg was a jingoistic or triumphalist poet. He clearly was not; but on the evidence of his writing, I do not think he was a wholly pacifist poet either. He seems to have found the experience of war appalling, but in a strange way magnificent too. His 'Break of Day in the Trenches',

which, like Paul Fussell, I regard as the greatest poem to come out of the Great War, offers a serene and ironic balance between opposed forces; the English soldier and the German are divided by war and united by the casual manifestations of nature; the rat which runs freely between the front lines, and the poppies, nourished by the dead, which grow in No Man's Land. Whitman's *Drum- Taps,* which Rosenberg so much admired, may be relevant. Whitman writes with immense compassion of the sufferings of the soldiers he tended in hospital, and in 'Reconciliation' he beautifully expresses that sense of the enemy's common humanity that we find in poems such as 'Break of Day in the Trenches' and Owen's 'Strange Meeting':

> For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,
> I look where he lies white-faced and still in the
> coffin — I draw near,
> Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white
> face in the coffin.

Yet Whitman was a committed supporter of the Northern cause, and elsewhere he expressed his appreciation of the traditional trappings of martial glory:

> The drum-corps' rattle is ever to me sweet music, I
> love well the martial dirge,
> With slow wail and convulsive throb leading the
> officer's funeral.

Owen and Sassoon, we may agree, were 'anti-war' poets when they met in 1917, the year when Sassoon made his courageous but ineffectual protest. Yet they, like other young officer-poets, were caught up in a cruel conflict between protest and solidarity with their fellows, particularly the private soldiers for whom they felt such an agonizing sense of quasi-paternal responsibility. As Andrew Rutherford has put it, 'Their dilemma, basic, unresolvable, was that they subscribed to two conflicting ethics — one based on courage and comradeship and the other on compassion — so that the claims of duty co-existed for them with those of protest. The former predominated in their lives, the latter in their poetry'.[7] This division needs to be kept in mind, to offset the too simple equation, war poetry = protest poetry. The

divided consciousness of Owen and Sassoon runs like a thread through their writing and their lives, particularly after they returned to the Front in 1918. Hibberd believes that Sassoon was modifying his attitudes by the spring of that year, and he includes in his anthology a previously unpublished Sassoon poem from that time called 'Testament', which ends with the words 'O my heart/be still; you have cried your cry; you have played your part', suggesting that he felt his protest was over and done with. In Sassoon's war diary we see evidence of his divided state of mind; he was happy to be back in France and seemingly eager to go into action. In an entry for 14th June 1918 he writes, '"Damn it, I'm fed up with all this training!" I exclaimed in a loud voice, pushing back my chair on the brick floor and getting on my feet. "I want to go up to the Line and *fight!*" said I, with a reckless air'. In the next paragraph he adds, 'Thus had I boasted in a moment of folly, catching my mood from the lads who look to me as their leader'.[8] Vivian de Sola Pinto wrote of Sassoon, who had just published *Counter-Attack,* 'It seemed to me a strange paradox that the author of those poems full of burning indignation against war's hideous cruelty should also be a first-rate soldier and a most aggressive company commander'.[9]

Owen, too, was a divided man who found a curious serenity in division after his return to France in September 1918. On his previous period of service in 1917 he had described himself as a 'conscientious objector with a very seared conscience', and his fundamental convictions had not changed. Yet in the final weeks of the war, and of his life, Owen showed a new calm and maturity. After being in action in October 1918 he wrote to his mother, 'I lost all my earthly faculties, and fought like an angel. . . My nerves are in perfect order'.[10] That last phrase greatly appealed to the young Auden, who quoted it more than once. Owen may still have been a pacifist in uniform, but in those final weeks he fought with great courage and determination. Hibberd has suggested that he had become a figure rather like Conrad's Lord Jim, determined to live down what he felt was the disgrace of the previous year, when his nerves had collapsed, he was found unfit to command men and was invalided home. He was amply vindicated when he won the Military Cross; the citation read, 'He personally

manipulated a captured enemy machine gun in an isolated position and inflicted considerable losses on the enemy. Throughout he behaved most gallantly'.[11] Just over a month later he was killed, having performed in his life what in his poetry he most deplored.

Owen was a more complex and contradictory figure than superficial impressions of him suggest. Indeed, the well-known words of the draft preface to his poems can themselves be misleading: 'Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My sub-ject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the Pity'. They might suggest that Owen was dismissing poetry as a formal art in the interests of raw emphatic statement, as was indeed done by some forms of protest writing later in the twentieth century. Owen was always concerned with poetry, as we see from the care with which he composed his drafts, and he took immense pride in being a poet, and indeed a poet in the late-Romantic, aesthetic tradition. The one book of poems that Owen had with him on his last period of service in France was Swinburne's *Poems and Bal-lads*. This aspect of Owen has been illuminatingly discussed in Dominic Hibberd's excellent book, which dismisses the conven-tional picture of the sensitive young poet tormented into protest by the horrors of war, who believed simply that 'the poetry is in the pity'. Owen's poetic art was brought to its extraordinary forced maturity in the trenches, but its origin lay in the French and English Decadence of the late nineteenth century. In Hibberd's reading, Owen's imagination was pervaded by the Romantic Agony well before he encountered the literal agonies of war. His early poems and drafts combine images of ideal beauty or ambiguous eroticism with those of death and destruction and mutilation. At the Front Owen's imaginative obsessions took on a terrible reality, but in a sense he was already prepared for it. As Hibberd puts it, 'Owen's war poems are not simply protests or statements of pity. They constantly return to certain obsessive images and to guilt, desire, darkness and blood. He might have gone mad as many of his fellow soldiers did but instead he got his imagination under control and wrote with an increasingly serene self-discipline'.[12] Hibberd's discussion of Owen is a particular instance of Paul Fussell's general thesis about the British

literature of the Great War; that it was intensely literary, using the themes and topics and devices of earlier literature, English and Classical, in order to respond to an unprecedented reality.

Much present-day discussion of the subject assumes that there were only two possible attitudes to the war, militarist or pacifist, Grenfell's or Owen's; and that the war itself was unjustified, and was only kept going, as Owen and Sassoon believed, by the bloody-mindedness of politicians and generals. In fact, the most common attitude among soldiers, whether poets or not, seems to have been neither militarist nor pacifist; patriotic heroics were derided, and war was seen as terrible, but there was a stoical belief that, as Rosenberg put it, 'we must fight to get the trouble over'. This was the view of the philosopher and imagist poet, T. E. Hulme, who saw active service in France, was wounded in 1916 and killed in 1917. He soon lost what little sense he had of the glory of war; 'it's the most miserable existence you can conceive of', he wrote in his diary about life in the trenches. At the same time, Hulme was convinced that the war had to be fought. He wrote, 'These sacrifices are as negative, barren, and as *necessary* as the work of those who repair sea-walls. In this war, then, we are fighting for no great *liberation* of mankind, for no great jump upward, but are merely accomplishing a work, which, if the nature of things was ultimately "good," would be useless, but which in this "vale of tears" becomes from time to time necessary, merely in order that bad may not get worse'.[13] These sentiments reflect Hulme's pessimistic and conservative view of history and human nature, and his conviction that German hegemony would be a disaster for Europe and had to be resisted. Seen in the light of the Second World War, that does not look like a wholly absurd conviction.

The First World War, and British involvement in it in particular, was an enormous disaster. But it had the inescapability as well as the sense of loss of a great tragedy. Once the fragile international order collapsed in the summer of 1914, British involvement in the war would have been extremely difficult to avoid. And once the war started, the initial hopes of an early end were soon dashed, as developments in military technology gave a heavy advantage to the defence, resulting in the stalemate of

trench warfare and continued futile attempts at a breakthrough by both sides — and when a breakthrough finally came in the spring of 1918, it was the Germans who made it. The honourable hopes for a negotiated peace that were raised by the Pope and others in 1917, and were shared by Owen and Sassoon, seemed to have had little chance of success. The war machine was so vast and complex that there was no way of stopping it, apart from the collapse of one side or other. History suggests that Imperial Germany had no intention of abandoning its attempt at European hegemony whilst there was any chance of carrying it through; the brutally punitive and expansionist settlement that Germany imposed on Russia at the treaty of Brest-Litovsk is telling evidence. For the Western powers the fate of Belgium was a major sticking-point, even though that was derided in the inter-war years. Louis MacNeice wrote during the Munich Crisis of 1938:

> And we who have been brought up to think of 'Gallant Belgium'
> As so much blague
> Are now preparing again to essay good through evil
> For the sake of Prague;
> And must, we suppose, become uncritical, vindictive.
> And must, in order to beat
> The enemy, model ourselves upon the enemy,
> A howling radio for our Paraclete[14]

Myth resists history, and in the late twenties and early thirties, when the moving and vivid records of the survivors began to appear, and Owen's poems to be read, the Great War was widely mythologized as the great unjust war; Weimar Germany was admired, and there was a passionate conviction that there must be No More War. Within a few years this pattern of feeling was replaced by another, as fascism became an increasing menace, particularly after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, which was soon seen as a shining instance of that impossibility, a just war, and a different powerful myth emerged. In Spain, as Auden put it, 'Our fever's menacing shapes are precise and alive'. Erstwhile pacifists volunteered for the International Brigades, in the spirit that had sent Byron to fight for Greece, and young left-wing intellectuals who had treated the Officers' Training Corps at their public schools with derision and satire strove to remember

their military training. George Orwell mockingly wrote, in his essay 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', 'here were the very people who for twenty years had hooted and jeered at the "glory" of war, at atrocity stories, at patriotism, even at physical courage, coming out with stuff that with the alteration of a few names would have fitted into the *Daily Mail* of 1918'.[15] Orwell exaggerated a little, as he was inclined to when he got carried away, but he had earned the right to comment by having himself fought in Spain and been severely wounded. One can see what he means from the final stanza of 'Full Moon at Tierz', by the young poet John Cornford who was killed fighting in 1936 at the age of twenty-one:

> Freedom is an easily spoken word
> But facts are stubborn things. Here, too, in Spain
> Our fight's not won till the workers of the world
> Stand by our guard on Huesca's plain,
> Swear that our dead fought not in vain,
> Raise the red flag triumphantly
> For Communism and for liberty.

This clearly offers a transposed version of the patriotic rhetoric of 1914.

In the Second World War, Keith Douglas, who acknowledged his allegiance to the poets of the earlier war, went on from them to write a different kind of poetry, though it learnt from their example; it showed no taste for glory or patriotic fervour, but accepted the war as both horrible and inescapable, and in the end necessary, in T. E. Hulme's sense, given the need to resist Nazi Germany. Douglas's 'Vergissmeinnicht' is now a familiar anthology piece, a parallel to Owen's 'Futility'. The contrast between Owen's anguish at the sight of a young, dead English soldier and Douglas's seeming coolness at a dead and decaying German points beyond differences of temperament to a difference in ways of apprehending war. Reading Douglas, I think of Eliot's remark that we know more than the dead poets, and they are precisely what we know. In certain ways Douglas went further than his predecessors. It is one thing to write about a dead man, as Owen and Douglas did, and Graves did in 'Dead Boche'. It is something else again to write a poem about killing a man, as

Douglas does in 'How to Kill', of which these are the middle stanzas:

> Now in my dial of glass appears
> the soldier who is going to die.
> He smiles and moves about in ways
> his mother knows, habits of his.
> The wires touch his face: I cry
> NOW. Death, like a familiar hears
>
> and look, has made a man of dust
> of a man of flesh. Being damned, I am amused
> to see the centre of love diffused
> and the waves of love travel into vacancy.
> How easy it is to make a ghost.

In this discussion I have concentrated on the poetry of the Great War, seeing earlier instances as anticipations of it, and the poetry from later wars as footnotes to or developments of it. But I have not so far said much about the *problem* of war poetry, as indicated in my title, and some of you may indeed be wondering what the problem is supposed to be; or, with different intonation, 'So, what's the problem?' Ultimately the problem of war poetry is the eternal problem of war itself. Does one fight to defend what one believes to be good and to resist evil, even though fighting is itself an evil and the cause of further evil? Orwell wrote in his uncompromising way during the Spanish Civil War:

> the horror we feel of these things has led to the conclusion: if some one drops a bomb on your mother, go and drop two bombs on his mother. The only apparent alternatives are to smash dwelling houses to powder, blow out human entrails and burn holes in children with lumps of thermite, or to be enslaved by people who are more ready to do these things than you are yourself; as yet no one has suggested a practicable way out.[16]

It is this dilemma and the tensions it sets up that I believe inspire the best war poetry, from whatever war, rather than any straightforward element of 'protest'.

Turning to smaller and more tractable topics, I suggest that the particular problem concerning the poets of the Great War is that, however they approached their subject, they were traditionalists about poetic form. This was as true of Owen and Sassoon as it was of Brooke and Grenfell; indeed, Owen, as we have seen, has his poetic roots in late-Romantic aestheticism. One of the things Yeats objected to in Owen was his unreconstructed poetic diction, complaining, 'he calls poets "bards", a girl a "maid", and talks about "Titanic wars"'. In rather different terms, the war poets were at the heart of a major crisis in civilization, but had nothing to do with the literary and artistic transformations of modernism, though I would make a tentative exception for Rosenberg. The point was put succinctly by Michael Alexander in his book on Ezra Pound, where he remarks that what Pound saw as the essential insularity of English literary culture is 'evidenced by the current offering of the English poets of the Great War not as witnesses to a great national tragedy, but as modern poets of real stature'.[17] Professor Alexander's point is well taken, but I am not sure if he has the emphasis right. It might be truer to say that there is a significant dichotomy in the way twentieth-century poetry is taught and studied: Owen and Sassoon are read as witnesses to a great national tragedy, and poets of direct human impact, despite their traditional form; while Eliot and Pound are read as the modernist masters who remade twentieth-century poetry.

There is perhaps a further dimension to the question. The study of vernacular literature, in England and elsewhere, has always been inspired by the great myths of national identity; as Hopkins put it in a letter, a great work by an Englishman was like a great battle won by England. On the other hand, the study of the Classics, which the study of the vernacular partly replaced, was a European and international concern. And this concern was reintroduced into English, in a new accent, by Eliot and Pound, the poets of Franco-American modernism, both with strong Classical interests. In pragmatic terms, it is curiously difficult to consider war poetry and modernism in the same focus. If *The Waste Land* is a great poem, then how valuable are Owen and Sassoon? Alternatively, if after three-quarters of a century those poets can

speak to young readers today with such force and immediacy, then isn't *The Waste Land* what literary conservatives have always thought it was, an exercise in sterile cosmopolitan academicism?

For some concluding thoughts on the subject I will turn to a non-English source, the French poet and scholar, Jacques Darras, who teaches at the University of Picardy, and was a participant in the conference at Amiens in 1986. Last year he delivered the Reith Lectures for the BBC - he is a great anglophile and a fluent English speaker - and in the fourth of them he reflected on the Great War.[18] He pointed out that although the French suffered much greater loss of life, and huge devastation of their territory, they do not dwell on that war in the nostalgic, mythopoeic spirit of the English. For us the 'Somme' is the name of a battle, of terrible suggestive power, whereas for the French it is merely the name of an unimportant river in the north of their country. Nor were there any French equivalents to the English war poets, with the possible exception of Apollinaire, though Henri Barbusse's novel, *Under Fire,* was, as it happens, an inspiration to Sassoon and Owen. When the war started the French had already read Mallarme and Rimbaud and witnessed the explosion of aesthetic energy associated with the Paris avant-garde. M. Darras remarks, 'Thus to the French, the war, when it came in 1914, was, in aesthetic terms at least, an almost supernumary event breaking out anachronistically after the real upheaval had already taken place. It would certainly uproot lives, but it added no ideas'.

The French saw art and life on different planes, whereas the English, then and now, wanted to bring them together. Darras develops the argument thus: 'The French incline to analyse their artists in the context of the aesthetic movements of which they formed a part; the English, more emotionally, love to link an artist's life to his art (hence the great success of literary biographies in the English-speaking world). And what could be more emotion-laden than a group of talented poets who wrote, and in some cases, died on a foreign field of battle? But what about art?' In his view, the art was insufficient: 'I cannot help detecting in Owen and others a plea to the reader, not only for sympathy for their plight as warriors, but also for pity towards the inevitable inadequacies of the poetry itself'. He adds that to the French

even hell could be exciting, as long as it is a modern hell.

If there is an argument against Darras' position it has to be the relativistic one that there are many kinds of art, and some of them, like certain wines, do not travel well. Indeed, much of the interest of the speculations I have tried to raise is that they bring one up against fundamental questions about the nature of literature, and its relations to the cultures that produce and receive it; and, indeed, about the relation of literature to life. We may believe that the militaristic emotions that inspired so many writers in the opening phase of the Great War are now permanently a thing of the past, though remembering their brief but intense recrudescence in the Falklands War, I am not so sure. In other cultures they remain appallingly alive and well, as we have seen in the Lebanon, and in the war between Iran and Iraq. Hearing of such horrors, a degree of T. E. Hulme's sceptical pessimism about humanity seems in order. It is the privilege of the speaker on occasions such as this to raise questions without answering them, and to present problems without solving them. But I will end with a firm assertion that I think we can all agree with. War poetry is the one literary genre that one hopes will never be extended.

Notes

[1] *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Ian Parsons (London, 1797), p.267.

[2] W. B. Yeats, ed., *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1891-1935* (Oxford, 1936), p.xxxiv.

[3] Christopher Cauldwell, *Illusion and Reality* (London, 1977), p.63.

[4] Keith Douglas, *A Prose Miscellany* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 119-20.

[5] Dominic Hibberd, 'Who were the War Poets, Anyway?', *English Literature of the Great War Revisited,* ed. Michel Roucoux (University of Picardy, 1989), p.109.

[6] Jon Silkin, 'Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg', Roucoux, op. cit., p.107; Rosenberg, op. cit., p.227.

[7] Andrew Rutherford, *The Literature of War* (London, 1979), p.85.

[8] Siegfried Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918* ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London, 1983), p.269.
[9] Vivian de Sola Pinto, *The City That Shone* (London, 1969), p.226.
[10] Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography* (Oxford, 1977), p.278.
[11] Ibid., p.279.
[12] Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* (London, 1986), p.83.
[13] T. E. Hulme, *Further Speculations*, ed. Samuel Hynes (Minneapolis, 1955), pp.157, 184.
[14] Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, VII.
[15] George Orwell, *Collected Essays, Letters and Journalism* (Harmondsworth, 1970), Vol. 2, p.288.
[16] Ibid., Vol. 1, pp.329-30.
[17] Michael Alexander, *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* (London, 1979), p.84.
[18] Jacques Darras, 'Remembering the Somme', *The Listener,* 14 December 1989.