War Poetry Review

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The Journal editor for 2010 is Dunstan Ward

Correspondence should be sent to the editor preferably by email:
editor@warpoets.org

Postal address: The Editor, War Poets Association, c/o Veale
Wasbrough Vizards (DBMW), Orchard Court, Orchard Lane,
Bristol, BS1 5WS, UK

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Editorial

The 120th anniversary of the birth of Isaac Rosenberg is commemorated in this issue of the *War Poetry Review*. Jean Liddiard, biographer and editor of Rosenberg, traces the course of his critical reputation from his marginal status, overshadowed first by Brooke and then by Owen and Sassoon, to his recognition as ‘the outsider whose achievement insistently challenged conventional judgements’. That Oxford University Press should have chosen Vivien Noakes’s edition of Rosenberg’s literary works to inaugurate their 21st-Century Oxford Authors is, as Jean Liddiard observes, ‘a measure of how far Rosenberg’s reputation has travelled in the ninety-two years since his death’.

Jean Liddiard also discusses an unpublished letter, reproduced and transcribed in her article, which Rosenberg wrote in 1915 to his fellow artist and former Slade student Paul Nash – the first evidence that they even knew each other.

Isaac Rosenberg features elsewhere in this *War Poetry Review*. The torn and mud-stained manuscript of his ‘Daughters of War’ is one of the illustrations with the account by Stuart Lee and Kate Lindsay of the creation of the First World War Poetry Digital Archive at Oxford. This major project brings together for the first time the manuscripts, letters, diaries, photographs, and war records of ten First World War poets from collections around the world, and makes them available online, free, for researchers, teachers, students and enthusiasts.

The archive’s Rosenberg collection gives an idea of the project’s richness and scope. It comprises all the manuscript drafts relating to thirty poems, drawn from the Imperial War Museum, the British Library, and the Berg Collection (New York Public Library); sixty-four letters by Rosenberg, and four by his sister Annie; two photographs of Rosenberg in uniform; two official documents relating to his war record; and, though the focus was on Rosenberg’s poetry and not his art
or drama, thirty-one drafts relating to *The Unicorn* and two sketched self-portraits.

Among its ‘wealth of teaching tools and resources’, one of the archive’s ‘Online Tutorials’ uses Rosenberg’s ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ to teach the close reading of a particular poem (this was in fact ‘the first web-based tutorial to teach English literature, [...] launched as far back as January 1994’), while ‘An Introduction to Manuscript Studies’ teaches editing skills through the manuscripts of ‘Dead Man’s Dump’.

That other poet-artist of the war, David Jones, is also present in the archive. Indeed, he was the first choice when it emerged that funds would allow further poets to be added to the original group selected for digitisation (Owen, Rosenberg, Graves, Edward Thomas, and Vera Brittain and Roland Leighton; Sassoon’s manuscripts were not then available). Poet-artist or artist-poet? As Derek Shiel states in this issue, ‘Until 1928 David Jones saw himself as an artist and engraver and only began to write almost by accident.’ The title of Derek Shiel’s outstanding film, *In Search of David Jones: Artist, Soldier, Poet*, reflects the phases of Jones’s development. Shiel recalls the question that came to his mind when he was making the film: ‘Would Jones ever have become a poet if he had not been a soldier in the First World War?’ While admitting that ‘there can be no real answer’, Shiel shows in his article how David Jones finally came to undergo ‘the process of becoming, or being turned into, a poet’.

The First World War Poetry Digital Archive demonstrates with an extraordinary new vividness and authenticity how, in Jean Liddiard’s words, ‘the narrative of the war poets offer[s] to young people in particular a relevant and gripping way in to the complexities of twentieth century history and culture’. Yet that narrative, as Vivien Whelpton recounts, has been challenged over some twenty-five years by ‘revisionist’ military historians and, more recently, by literary critics. The military historians blame the combatant poets for ‘the popular British myth of the war’ as ‘a futile, incompetently conducted, and ultimately cynical exercise in which thousands of British youths were
slaughtered in appalling conditions’. ‘The historians’ case against the combatant poets of the canon rests on a denial of the validity of their visions,’ Whelpton writes, and she cites examples of late twentieth century criticism endorsing that denial. The charges against the combatant poets are systematically and persuasively refuted in her essay.

The case for the combatant poets is argued – passionately – by Chris Yates, who is able to produce as evidence his own experience as an army officer in Iraq. Rather than the military historian, though, his adversary is the civilian, and specifically the civilian war poet. ‘Men such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon […] not only saw killing done but killed other men themselves. […] This homicidal background cannot be underestimated, and lies at the heart of combatant poetry.’ Whereas ‘when a civilian poet writes about war, it’s liable to strike us as immediately disingenuous’ – it ‘risks coming across like a love poem written by someone who has never been in love, but only heard other people talk about it’. Chris Yates unflinchingly ‘anatomises’ the ‘distinguishing features shared by almost all combatant poets’, so as to reveal and examine ‘the thesis that underpins the common narrative in combatant poetry’. This penetrating study, with its disconcerting insights – ‘combatants murder, but don’t excuse it; civilians don’t murder, but do excuse it’ – illuminates not only the subjects treated in this War Poetry Review, but the nature of war poetry itself.

The War Poetry Review aims to include work by contemporary poets. In this issue we are delighted to print in English translation a poem written during the Second World War by one of France’s most distinguished poets, Claude Vigée, specially translated for the journal by the writer, publisher and translator Anthony Rudolf. We are most grateful to Anthony Rudolf for his translation; and we wish to thank Anne Mounic, critic and editor of Claude Vigée, for help and advice.

Dunstan Ward
Isaac Rosenberg: A Personal View of his Reputation since 1918, with an Unpublished Letter to Paul Nash

JEAN LIDDIARD

‘You know how earnestly one must wait on ideas, (you cannot coax real ones to you) and let as it were, a skin grow naturally round and through them. If you are not free, you can only, when the ideas come hot, seize them with the skin in tatters raw, crude, in some parts beautiful in others monstrous. Why print it then? Because these rare parts must not be lost.’

By the time Rosenberg was killed near Arras in 1918 he himself had printed three pamphlets of his poems: Night and Day (1912), Youth (April 1915), and Moses (May 1916). An extract from his verse play Moses (printed in the eponymous third pamphlet), ‘Ah! Koelue!’, had been included in the third of Edward Marsh’s anthologies, Georgian Poetry 1916–1917. In five publications ranging from the Jewish Chronicle in 1912 to Poetry (Chicago) in 1916, a handful of essays and poems had also appeared. Ninety-one years later there are eight editions of his work including selections, a forthcoming comprehensive collection of his writings in OUP paperback, three exhibition catalogues, four biographies, and countless periodical reviews and critical essays about him. No anthology of twentieth century British poetry is complete without at least one of his poems. Yet the journey of Rosenberg’s growing reputation has been slow. Its progress has followed the contours of the changing social and literary landscape over the decades from peace to two wars and beyond, but it has not quite taken the same well-known path from Rupert Brooke’s corner of a foreign field to the muddy and bloody trenches of Graves, Sassoon, Owen and the others who now form the popular canon of the soldier poets. Their story has been so powerful partly because the images are so vivid and direct, endowing the Western Front with a peculiarly
evocative imaginative status; a theatre of war indeed and a towering backdrop to the struggle of the writers to make poetry out of what they all knew to be an exceptional experience for them and their fellow soldiers.

The war was a drama in which they were actors as well as observers, and its unfolding has been threefold. First, there was each poet’s coming to terms with his personal narrative, and working out his chosen means of expression, during the war and its immediate aftermath. Then, in the twenties and thirties, there followed the presentation of their work to the public; if they were survivors this normally took some years, and if they were dead it depended on their supporters – usually, to begin with at least, fellow poets. Thirdly, there came the relationship with readers – the engagement with the professional audience of critics, poets and academics, and then the awakening interest of the wider public. This relationship, like the readership, has had its own history over the decades, and, of course, it is not over.

I first encountered Rosenberg’s name at university in the early 1960s, at a time when the First World War and its poets were possibly at their most unfashionable. The tide of Modernism was at its height and had swept all before it; the First World War poets were considered locally and historically interesting, but a literary backwater. Yet supporters were to be found in unexpected places. My supervisor, Dr F. R. Leavis, formidable as a critic and generous as a teacher, told me that he, a former stretcher bearer in that war, had read all of its poets, but the only one he still looked at was Isaac Rosenberg. I went straight round to the university library to look up Rosenberg’s work – the only place to find it, as it had been long out of print. I found that Rosenberg’s two older mentors, the Georgian poets Laurence Binyon and Gordon Bottomley, had produced a selected edition, *Poems of Isaac Rosenberg* (London: Heinemann, 1922), including Binyon’s memoir and letter extracts, and in 1937, coinciding with the Memorial Exhibition of Rosenberg’s paintings and drawings at the Whitechapel Gallery, Bottomley and the critic Denys Harding had edited the *Collected Works: Poetry, Prose, Letters and Some Drawings* (London: Chatto and Windus), which had been greeted with some critical acclaim. However, with the usual
mischance that so often seemed to haunt Rosenberg and his affairs, the remaining book sheets were bombed during the Blitz in 1941.

Rosenberg has never had the impact of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon on the popular audience. He sometimes seems to be a ‘poet’s poet’; it was the poets of the Second World War who recalled him during that conflict, most notably Keith Douglas:

\[
\text{Living in a wide landscape are the flowers} – \\
\text{Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying} – \\
\text{the shell and the hawk every hour} \\
\text{are slaying men and jerboas, slaying} \\
\text{the mind [...].}^2
\]

In the 1930s the sonnets of Rupert Brooke had been displaced by the denunciations of Sassoon and the elegies of Wilfred Owen. Rosenberg, as we have seen, was not forgotten, but was never as immediately accessible or as quotable as the previous three. There would be a struggle for Rosenberg to emerge from those long shadows, and a social and cultural shift would be needed for him to do so. It was the gradual emergence in the postwar world of a wider and more cosmopolitan audience for modern English literature, partly shaped by the increasing influence of the USA in academic studies and the expansion of university education in the UK, which started the process.

In the 1950s the indefatigable efforts of Rosenberg’s sister Annie Wynick, assisted by his co-editor Denys Harding and his publisher Ian Parsons, resulted in a small collection of his manuscripts going to the British Museum, while the showing of three Rosenberg paintings at the Ben Uri Art Gallery’s Anglo-Jewish exhibition in 1951 revived interest in his art. Annie and the prewar supporters of Rosenberg engaged the help of younger critics such as the poet Jon Silkin and broadcaster and poet Patric Dickinson, who re-presented Rosenberg to the post-war generation. Jon Silkin was an example of the new kind of voice on the literary scene: the maverick son of a distinguished Jewish family, himself a poet and the publisher of young poets through his celebrated
magazine *Stand*, he lived a hand-to-mouth existence until the universities of the USA and the UK, starting with Leeds, gave him various visiting fellowships and a base to promote his interest in writers who were not always part of the academic canon of the day. Silkin had long had a personal interest in Rosenberg and, together with the Head of Fine Art at Leeds, Maurice de Saumarez, organised the landmark Rosenberg Memorial Exhibition at Leeds University in May 1959, bringing together for the first time a majority of his paintings, drawings and manuscripts, recorded in the *Catalogue with Letters 1959*. A young Jewish American academic, Joseph Cohen, later Rosenberg’s biographer, arrived for a year in England in time to catch a smaller version of the show in London at the Slade School of Fine Art in October 1959.

By the mid 1960s, in spite of the dominance of the Modernist approach to poetry, reappraisal was in the air, not only for individual poets like Rosenberg but also for the First World War poets as a group. Paradoxically, perhaps, the natural focus of the 1940s, 50s and early 60s on the Second World War had prompted readers, and not only critics, to seek further back in time for the roots of the conflict. ‘Where are the War Poets?’ had been a famous Press cry at the outbreak of the Second World War, and though poets had indeed emerged eventually from the later conflict it became clear that their poetry, and their war, had been very different. For a start, they could not be considered a ‘group’; the various experiences in all three services of a Keith Douglas, a Sidney Keyes, a Vernon Scannell, an Alun Lewis, a John Pudney or a Charles Causley could not usefully be linked, except in the broadest terms of their participation as combatants in warfare. But those poets of an earlier war, though also very different from one another, were perceived as having a kind of bond – ‘the soldier poets’. Again, it was the poets of the post-Second World War period, like Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes, who were drawn once more to the rich imagery of the Western Front, as in Vernon Scannell’s *The Great War*:

> 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.³

The lines capture the enduring sensuous and emotional appeal of the earlier poems for a modern audience. But it is surely not only the epic landscape but also the stories of the individual poets, actively involved in the dramas played out in their poems, which caught the attention of a wider readership – especially the young.

Few poets can match for readability the career of the brave and disillusioned Siegfried Sassoon, the friendship with Robert Graves, the casting of the Military Cross into the Mersey and the meeting with Wilfred Owen at Craiglockhart. It has become a twentieth century legend, originating in a conscious act by Sassoon, probably manipulated by his anti-war activist friends, publicly to disavow the war. It became stamped on the contemporary consciousness by the impact of the body of poetry produced by himself and Owen, with its apparently overt political aims, and its claims of truth-telling, anger and compassion, underwritten by Sassoon’s return to the Front and Owen’s death. As revulsion against the war and pacifist views increased during the twenties and thirties, so the reputation of Sassoon and Owen grew, supported rather than challenged by the memoirs (even more than the poems) of Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden, which could be co-opted into the same narrative of ardent patriotism darkening into disillusion and destruction. In fact it was the memoirs of the two latter, rather than their poems, which augmented the legend, to be further enriched by Sassoon’s own biographical writings. The legend survived the Second World War and proved enduring, but, interestingly, Owen overtook Sassoon as the representative poet of the first conflict, assisted by the publication of his *Collected Poems*, edited by the then Poet Laureate, Cecil Day-Lewis, with a Memoir by Edmund Blunden, in 1963. This was the edition I and other students of the 1960s
encountered. Harold Owen’s memoir of his brother Wilfred Journey from Obscurity was published by OUP in 1963, followed by his edition of Wilfred’s letters in 1964. These revitalised the legend, but possibly they would not have had the effect they did had it not been for an extra-literary event, the success of Benjamin Britten’s War Requiem in 1961, followed by an iconic recording (recently reissued) which made Owen’s poems available to an international audience. It is surely the narrative drive of this relationship between two poets, climaxing in the often-quoted arrival of the telegram reporting Owen’s death to his family on Armistice Day, which ensured its wider public appeal and transformed it into legend. Wars, as Rupert Brooke reminded us, seem to need heroes; his once-glamorous story was supplanted by the Sassoon-Owen legend as opinion turned against the war and the social conventions which, it was believed, supported it; but of course Sassoon and Owen then became heroes in their fashion too, much more acceptable to modern mid-twentieth century perceptions. As both Jean Moorcroft Wilson and Paul O’Prey have shown in the War Poetry Review, it has been difficult for the reputation of any of the combatant poets, including that of Sassoon himself in his latter years, to match up to the original legend. If it was problematic for Robert Graves, who had participated after all in the establishment of the legend, then how much more so for Rosenberg, an awkward fit among the soldier poets in every sense.4

The growing popular appreciation of these poets during the sixties was augmented by a further extra-literary event which helped to reclaim the First World War from the perception that it was largely a less important prelude to the bigger, more world-changing 1939–45 conflict which followed it. This was the theatrical production of Joan Littlewood’s Oh What a Lovely War, first performed in 1963 to great acclaim, and endowed with durable iconic status by Richard Attenborough’s feature film of 1969. Because it was recognised as an avant-garde production by a left-wing theatre group that was pioneering a new approach to conventional theatre, it also assisted in the transformation of the subject matter of the war itself, which now emerged as a rich – and modern – symbol of social and cultural upheaval. Established notions of what was historically and culturally important began to change. As further and higher education increased in the succeeding decades, twentieth century
history and literature became part of the curriculum, especially of secondary schools, in a way it had not previously. As we have seen, the narrative of the war poets offered to young people in particular a relevant and gripping way in to the complexities of twentieth century history and culture. Rosenberg, a figure who had seemed marginal when Brooke was the focus of attention, and who had moved in only to stand behind Sassoon and Owen as their reputation grew, became as time went on more fully representative of those outside the established canons, the outsider whose achievement insistently challenged conventional judgements.

When I started to work on Isaac Rosenberg at the end of the 1960s I found that received critical opinion about the war poets as a whole was out of step with their growing wider popularity. W. B. Yeats had originated the Modernist critique with his famous refusal to include them in his 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*: ‘passive suffering is not a theme for poetry’. Though that judgement itself looks oddly old-fashioned now, his dismissal of Owen’s work as ‘all blood, dirt & sucked sugar-stick’, and of Rosenberg’s as ‘all windy rhetoric’ reveals a core Modernist objection to the idiom and style of the poetry which dominated critical appraisal for years, and still resurfaces. This was that the war poets were struggling to write about their unprecedented tragic material with outworn conventions and techniques, and that paradoxically it was the older non-combatant poets, Pound, Eliot and Yeats, who ultimately succeeded in reinventing a poetry for the modern age. The pre-war literary landscape had emerged from the trenches transformed into a waste land. Even for the critics who now started to look again at the war poets it was their form and technique that was the sticking point. The American professor John H. Johnston who published *English Poetry of the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) subtitled it ‘A Study in the Evolution of Lyric and Narrative Form’, stating that the poets were too close to their material to rethink their approach, and consequently their work was too fragmentary and personal – limited to ‘the lyric mode’ without the ‘positive, assertive attitude with respect to the values upon which motivation and action are based’. Bernard Bergonzi’s *Heroes’ Twilight* (London: Constable, 1965) also perceived the poets as struggling with
formal structure: ‘The literary records of the Great War can be seen as a series of attempts to evolve a response that would have some degree of adequacy to the unparalleled situation in which the writers were involved.’ However, 1965 marked a turning point in the reassessment of the soldier poets, and Rosenberg in particular. Both Johnston and Bergonzi included Rosenberg as equal in importance to Sassoon and Owen, as did Frederick Grubb in his lively *Vision of Reality* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), while Ian Parsons in his influential anthology *Men Who March Away* (London: Heinemann, 1965) defended Rosenberg (as well as Owen) against the strictures of W. B. Yeats. Of the poems by Rosenberg that he included in his book, he stated: ‘Technically as remarkable as anything Owen wrote, they have an originality of approach, a richness, and a control of tone as exceptional as they are individual.’

It was these critics, together with Jon Silkin and Patric Dickinson, who were most available to me in the early 1970s, and what strikes me now is how Rosenberg’s claim to literary status was constantly being remade and re-argued. My own biography of 1975 now seems particularly concerned with defending Rosenberg’s formal techniques from Modernist detractors and advocating his work as worthy to stand with Sassoon’s and Owen’s, while showing that it offered an alternative complex experience: ‘Rosenberg’s style was more erratic, more ambitious and less acceptable. To the literary world, becoming interested in a poetry that was spare, intellectual and rigorous, his richness of language often seemed lush, old fashioned and therefore limited’.

To those of us writing on Rosenberg in the 1970s, what appeared most vital was that his poetry should be republished and read, and his paintings preserved and seen. This was emphasised by the personal urgency and perseverance of Rosenberg’s family members, unswerving in their dedication to his reputation. Sadly, Annie Wynick, Rosenberg’s
sister, was dead by the time I began working, though another biographer, Joseph Cohen, knew her well. But then her nephew Isaac Horvitch, the son of Rosenberg’s sister Minnie from South Africa, took on the literary executorship with passion and devotion for thirty years, and on his death in 2005 it has passed back to Annie’s son Bernard Wynick, who continues the remarkable family tradition. My first personal contact was with Rosenberg’s surviving brother, David Burton, who gave the Rosenberg self-portrait to the Tate Gallery; I was present when the then Director, Sir Norman Reid, came to visit David Burton and his wife in their St John’s Wood flat in 1972. I then met Isaac Horvitch and his wife, and Rosenberg’s surviving sister, Rachel Lyons. It was Rachel who gave the warmest and most vivid glimpses of her brother Isaac in his family setting in Whitechapel some seventy years before. I also met survivors from among Rosenberg’s old friends, such as fellow Slade student Maurice Goldstein and, from the Whitechapel Boys, Joseph Leftwich, then in his eighties and at that time a doyen of Anglo-Jewish literary life – his diaries are a key source for the Whitechapel scene of the period before 1914. It seemed to me then that it was most important to capture some of this material on paper, before memories of the pre-First World War world, still then quite widespread, finally disappeared.

Apart from these personal reminiscences, the other main sources of contemporary wartime material were the memoirs, letters and journals of the period. Nowadays when so much is available at the touch of a computer button it is hard to recall just how difficult it was to locate material. Access to libraries and archives was often restricted, especially if like myself one was not an official academic. How did one find out which contemporaries, apart from the obvious names, had written memoirs, or left collections of papers? Bibliographies of published books, like the critical works mentioned above, were a starting point, and one led to another, and, it was hoped, to unpublished material as well. Published subject indexes of the modern period were rare; there were compendia – but not, at that stage, of such relatively recent (and less well regarded) material, and searches largely had to be done publication by publication. But to track down material in libraries one normally had to make appointments and visit in person –
everything was catalogued and stored on paper, and much material was not fully catalogued or even indexed. As for archival material such as manuscripts, access to these even at the British Museum was not straightforward. I could not afford to travel to New York to visit the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library for example, but they did send me Rosenberg’s letters in the Marsh Collection on microfiche – then the cutting edge of library technology.

Much of the great collection of Rosenberg material now (thanks to the Rosenberg family) safely housed in the Imperial War Museum was then stored in a cupboard in the offices of Rosenberg’s publisher, Chatto & Windus; Ian Parsons had continued Annie Wynick’s search for an institution which would take both manuscripts and works of art. The British Museum had accepted Annie’s gift of manuscripts and some drawings, but not the paintings. Other material was scattered among members of the family, friends and supporters, or had disappeared from view. This was – and is – particularly true of paintings; the written word can at least be preserved in print, which is why Rosenberg printed his own pamphlets, but paintings get moved, damaged, sold, or forgotten. Hence the importance of catalogues such as Jon Silkin’s of the Leeds Exhibition in 1959 – the only substantial record of Rosenberg’s works of art until my own Word & Image exhibition, Isaac Rosenberg, at the National Book League in 1975, and (although there was no catalogue) the handlist of the 1990 centenary Rosenberg exhibition, The Half Used Life, which I organised at the Imperial War Museum – and finally the comprehensive catalogue of the 2008 exhibition at the Ben Uri Gallery, Whitechapel at War: Isaac Rosenberg and his Circle. The latter is particularly important as it was the first exhibition to be curated by art historians; Rachel Dickson and Sarah MacDougall concentrated on Rosenberg’s visual art and placed it in its art historical and social context.

The 1970s were a milestone in the fortunes of all the war poets. Jon Stallworthy published his biography of Wilfred Owen in 1974, and the three Rosenberg biographies, including my own, appeared in 1975, coinciding with the National Book League exhibition. Jon Silkin’s Out of Battle (Oxford: OUP, 1978) emphasised Rosenberg’s Jewish
Whitechapel background and presented him as an important and complex figure among the war poets. Paul O’Prey in the War Poetry Review has made the point that Silkin’s re-evaluation of Rosenberg, continued in his Penguin Book of First World War Poetry (London, 1979), tended to co-opt him as a complex political anti-war figure, therefore more acceptable to the late twentieth century reader than the more ‘accessible’ Owen and Sassoon. Paul Fussell’s The Great War and Modern Memory (Oxford: OUP) was published in 1975, opening out still further the study of Great War literature to encompass the wider cultural issues that have since become integral to any assessment of the poetry. Critical studies of Rosenberg, from graduate dissertations to articles in periodicals, increased year on year through the 1980s and 1990s; and a Rosenberg breakthrough into the consciousness of a wider reading public occurred with the presence of the major war poets, now including Rosenberg, in the GCSE curriculum in the 1980s.

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have brought discoveries of new material as welcome as they are unexpected. In 1995, when the British Library was preparing to move to its new home, came the discovery of Rosenberg’s largely unpublished correspondence with the poets Laurence Binyon and Gordon Bottomley (from which Binyon had published only brief extracts in his memoir in the 1922 Poems by Isaac Rosenberg). For me it was an astonishing and moving experience to look at the letters still tied up in the bundle as Binyon had left them, and a privilege to edit them for publication in 2007. Vivien Noakes published her authoritative variorum edition of the Poems and Plays of Isaac Rosenberg (Oxford: OUP, 2004), and in 2008 Jean Moorcroft Wilson’s biography revealed new material and in particular correspondence from and to Rosenberg in South Africa. The latter year also saw the publication of Dr Vivien Noakes’s comprehensive OUP edition of all Rosenberg’s surviving writings, poetry, plays and letters. It is a measure of how far Rosenberg’s reputation has travelled in the ninety-two years since his death that this volume inaugurates the OUP series ‘21st-Century Oxford Authors’.

After that one might think, as I did, that there really was no more to find. But I was wrong. In November 2008 the Tate Gallery Archive
unexpectedly put on display a letter from Rosenberg to Paul Nash, who would become one of the most important artists of the First World War. A year older than Rosenberg, Nash like him had first attended the LCC School of Art, Photo-engraving and Lithography at Bolt Court, where he had met Rosenberg’s Whitechapel friend Maurice Goldstein, but not Rosenberg. Nash had gone on to the Slade School from 1910–11; however, he had left after a year, feeling that the Slade’s approach was not for him; in his autobiography Outline he wrote that it was too like his former public school (St Paul’s) ‘at its chilliest’. Rosenberg did not arrive at the Slade until October 1911, so would not have been likely to encounter Nash there. Until the appearance of this letter there had been no evidence that the two even knew each other. And yet (as I noted in my 1975 biography) the two men from such different backgrounds had much in common. Nash, like Rosenberg, in his youth ‘fell under the disintegrating charm of Pre-Raphaelitism, or rather, of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’. While at the Slade he started to write visionary poetry, and began a correspondence and lifelong friendship with the Georgian poet Gordon Bottomley, who of course became one of Rosenberg’s most valued mentors.

Although they had several mutual friends and acquaintances, their paths did not seem to have crossed until May 1914, when they both exhibited in Twentieth Century Art: A Review of the Modern Movements at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. If they did meet then, it would have been a brief acquaintance, as Rosenberg set sail to join his sister Minnie in South Africa at the beginning of June 1914. As soon as war broke out in August 1914 Paul Nash enlisted in the Artists’ Rifles. In December of that year he married his fiancée Margaret, and it was to her flat in Judd Street that Rosenberg sent his undated letter. As Rosenberg did not return from South Africa until March 1915 it must have been after that date, and it is most likely that he renewed acquaintance with Nash that spring or summer, perhaps through Sir Edward Marsh, whom he had known since 1913, and whom Nash met in 1914. Throughout 1915 Nash was in the Home Service, and was undergoing officer training at Denham and Camberley. Rosenberg printed his pamphlet Youth in April 1915, which is almost certainly the ‘book’ referred to in the letter which he sent to Nash.
During April, May and June, Rosenberg was sending copies of *Youth* and other poems to regular correspondents such as Edward Marsh and the writer Sydney Schiff, and was trying to stimulate wider interest in his work by sending copies also to Ezra Pound (who recommended him to *Poetry* Chicago), and Arthur Clutton-Brock, an influential art and literary critic. It seems likely that he made contact with Nash also during these months, although, as so often with Rosenberg, it is impossible to date the letter exactly, and the postmark is illegible. In a letter to his schoolteacher friend Winifreda Seaton in spring 1915, Rosenberg mentions that he ‘met somebody yesterday who is a great friend of G. Bottomley. He also thinks he is the best modern poet’. It’s possible that this refers to Nash. Certainly during these spring and summer months Rosenberg was reading Bottomley’s *Chambers of Imagery*, and the poems of the latter’s friend and fellow Georgian, Lascelles Abercrombie. It is clear from the letter that Nash and Rosenberg hit it off, discovering a mutual interest in the Pre-Raphaelites, poetry and art. The letter is reproduced here with a transcript, and a list of enclosures is set out below. Layout and punctuation follow the original letter.

_Envelope addressed in Rosenberg’s hand to: ‘Paul Nash / 176 Queen Alexandra Mansions / Judd Street / St Pancras / WC’; postmark illegible._
Letter from Isaac Rosenberg to Paul Nash, [? spring or summer 1915]

87 Dempsey St
Stepney E.

Dear Nash

Here are my things[.]
Those not in the book I should
like back when you have read
them as I have no proper copies.
I like these more myself.<as I>
I think you will say about my
things that I don’t see a thing –
or rather feel a thing,
^ that I just have thoughts about it.
I am certainly not a sensuous poet,
& sensuous poetry is not the poetry
I prefer.–
I do wish you could lend me
anything by Bottomley. I always
feel about fine modern poetry that it
is directly spoken to myself; the writers
know the same things I know & I understand.
I have not read anything by Bottomley as
<grandly>grand & and fierce as Abercrombies ‘Hymn to Love’,
but his attitude to things is more
interesting to me; & his sense of artistry
is so delicate & sure.

Yours sincerely
Isaac Rosenberg
Dear Hash,

Here are my things. Those not in the book I should like back when you have read them as I have no proper copies. I like these more myself. I think you will say about my things that I don’t see a thing or that I just have thoughts about it. I am certainly not a sensitive poet, & sensitive poetry is not the poetry I prefer.

I do wish you could lend me anything by Bottomley. I always feel about fine modern poetry, that it is directly spoken to myself; the writers know the same things I know & I understand I have not read anything by Bottomley as grandly fine as Abercrombie, Hymn to Love.
but his attitude to things is more interesting to me; & his sense of artist is so delicate & sure.

Yours sincerely
Isaac Rosenberg
Enclosed with the letter are the following typescripts. The reference *PPIR* is to the final versions printed in *Plays and Poems of Isaac Rosenberg*, edited by Vivien Noakes (Oxford: OUP, 2004). There are a few variants, as indicated; most of these are already noted by Dr Noakes, and this letter, its enclosures and significant variants will be published by her in the forthcoming paperback edition of her recent OUP 21st-Century Oxford Authors edition of the collected poems and letters; see note 1 below.

1. ‘[Upon my lips, like a cloud]’

2. ‘SLEEP 2’
   Titled as above, typescript purple carbon, amended in pencil, IR’s hand; ‘Sleep [II]’, *PPIR*, p. 125 (with variant punctuation).

3. ‘GOD’
   Titled as above, typescript purple carbon, amended in pencil, IR’s hand; ‘God’, *PPIR*, p. 117 (with variants, published in pamphlet *Moses*, ending at line 15.)

4. ‘[A warm thought flickers]’
   Untitled, typescript purple carbon, amended in pencil, IR’s hand; ‘[A warm thought flickers]’, *PPIR*, p. 106 (with variant punctuation).

5. ‘SAVAGE SONG’

6. ‘AT NIGHT’
   Titled as above, typescript black carbon, amended in pencil, IR’s hand; ‘At Night’, *PPIR*, pp. 101–2 (with variant punctuation and erasures).

7. ‘Heart’s First Word’
Titled as above in pencil in IR’s hand, typescript in black, top copy; ‘Heart’s First Word [II]’, PPJR, pp. 112–3, (with variant second line). (Published in pamphlet Moses. This must be the only extant copy of ‘Heart’s First Word [II]’, either manuscript or typescript, apart from the published version in Moses.)

In the first few lines Rosenberg makes it clear he is moving on from Youth with his enclosures – ‘I like these more myself’ – most of which will appear in some form in his next pamphlet, Moses. His praise of Bottomley and Abercrombie is familiar from other correspondence. However, his comment about ‘sensuous poetry’ is perplexing:

‘I think you will say about my things that I don’t see a thing – or rather feel a thing, that I just have thoughts about it. I am certainly not a sensuous poet, & sensuous poetry is not the poetry I prefer.– ’

Today’s commentators do find the sensuous in his poems, especially the later ones, highlighted by his alert painter’s eye. The sentence seems to be a sort of shorthand, possibly referring back to a conversation he had had with Nash. To explore Rosenberg’s meaning it helps to look at what he was saying about poetry to his other correspondents in 1915. Early that year he writes to Winifreda Seaton about ‘a dancing of light in light’ in Emerson’s poetry, and goes on, ‘though they always have a solid texture of thought, they sometimes seem thin in colour or sensuousness’. His vocabulary of ‘light’, ‘texture’ and ‘colour’ is as much a painter’s as a poet’s; the notion of ‘solid texture’ is recalled in the emphasis on structure in his description of the poet and painter Rossetti: ‘technique is a very real thing, it corresponds to construction and command of form in painting. Rossetti was a supreme master of it in poetry and had no command of form whatever in painting’. He is bringing together his poems in Youth under a unified theme, and already looking ahead to developing a poetic idea over the longer term as a drama in Moses. He is also reading John Donne and under his influence is playing with religious conceits in ‘God Made Blind’ and ‘The One Lost’; in November 1915 he told Schiff he had Donne’s poems and Thomas Browne’s Religio Medici in his pocket in the Military Hospital.
Surely it was the fusion of the intellectual and the sensuous in the Metaphysical writers that attracted him. It was not that he dismissed the sensuous, for he criticised Emerson as ‘thin’, but that he wanted a more ambitious structure to strengthen his poems, like the ‘command of form’ he had been taught in his drawing at the Slade.

In addition to Rossetti, Nash admired the early Yeats and Rupert Brooke; Rosenberg referred to Yeats as ‘the established great man’, but does not express any opinion about his poetry, and it’s possible that the Irish poet’s early incantatory mode did not appeal to him, and this is also perhaps what he meant by ‘sensuous’ in his letter. As for Brooke’s work, Rosenberg wrote to Sydney Schiff that though his poem ‘Clouds’ was ‘marvellous’, ‘his style offends me; it is gaudy and reminiscent’, amplifying an earlier criticism to Schiff, ‘they remind me too much of flag days’. Nash seemed to have found Brooke’s Georgian pastoral imagery comforting, whereas Rosenberg’s crisp phrases reveal a reservation similar to the later Modernist position – for him Brooke’s ‘begloried’ and ‘commonplace’ sonnets were sometimes overwritten and too reliant on an outworn tradition. This also may be what he has in mind in his letter to Nash. Rosenberg tries to articulate his own struggle to refine his technique, while still keeping its richness of reference, in another letter (July 1916) to their joint mentor Gordon Bottomley: ‘Simple Poetry – that is where an interesting complexity of thought is kept in tone and right value to the dominating idea so that it is understandable and still ungraspable.’

In the later part of this letter (among those that came to light recently at the British Library, from which only the first paragraph with the extract above had been published by Binyon) he goes on to speak of his revision of the poppy image in ‘In the Trenches’, a very early version of ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’, and then memorably of the incident which led to ‘Louse Hunting’: ‘All stripped by candlelight, some Scots dancing over the candle burning the fleas, and the funniest, drollest and dirtiest songs and conversation ever imagined.’ The vividness of the language, like the eventual poem, is characteristic of this poet who was also an artist, and is surely what a reader today would perceive as sensuous; Rosenberg in this as in so much else is redefining such terms
to suit his own poetic purposes. As Paul Nash would move on from his youthful verse and rework the visual art conventions of the pre-war period to serve his later powerful war paintings, so Rosenberg would concentrate on rethinking his own poetry beyond the limits of Georgian taste to strengthen and enrich his own poetic vision. His letter to Laurence Binyon in the autumn of 1916, which I found in the mislaid bundle at the British Library, hastily scribbled in pencil on a scrap of paper, is imbued with his commitment to his poetry, and his indomitable spirit:

I am determined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poetry – that is if I am lucky enough to come through all right. I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life and it will all refine itself into poetry later on.21
NOTES

10 See note 1.
12 To Winifreda Seaton, spring 1915; Noakes, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 266.
14 To Winifreda Seaton, April/May 1915; Noakes, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 271.
15 To Sydney Schiff, 8 June 1915; Noakes, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 274.
16 To Mrs Herbert Cohen, summer 1916; Noakes, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 304.
17 To Sydney Schiff, August 1916; Noakes, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 310.
18 To Sydney Schiff, August 1916; Noakes, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 309.
19 See note 16.
Why and How David Jones Became a Poet

DEREK SHIEL

The composer Igor Stravinsky said of writing *Le Sacre du Printemps*, his most audacious composition, ‘I am the vessel through which *Le Sacre* passed’,¹ and in the film *In Search of David Jones: Artist, Soldier, Poet* the poet Gillian Clarke remarks of David Jones, ‘He has chosen writing – or writing has chosen him’, a fascinating statement worth pondering. The question that came to my mind while making the film – and to which there can be no real answer – was this: would Jones ever have become a poet if he had not been a soldier in the First World War?²

Until 1928 David Jones saw himself as an artist and engraver and only began to write almost by accident. So, from a few bare facts – and supposition – two questions arise: why and how did Jones become a poet and of such calibre?

Jones joined the army in January 1915 partly because, at the time war was declared, he had just left art school and was unsure what profession he should follow. Throughout the war he served as a Private, and on being demobilised or transferred to the Reserve (‘disembodied’ was the official designation³) he returned to an art school on an ex-serviceman’s grant from 1919–21, when in the space of one year, 1921, he met the sculptor and letter-designer Eric Gill, graduated, became a Roman Catholic, joined the lay community of artist-craftsmen where Gill was working, at Ditchling in Sussex, and hastily learned how to make wood-engravings so that he could illustrate for the community’s St Dominic’s Press.⁴ He stayed in Ditchling until soon after the Gill family departed during 1924 but by Christmas of that year Jones was able to join them at the disused monastery of Capel-y-ffin to which they had moved, in the Black Mountains on the Hereford-Breconshire border.

In 1928 Jones returned to France for the first time since the war, again joining members of the Gill family, for a visit to the village of Salies
de-Béarn near the foot of the Pyrenees and close to the Spanish border. He was there to paint for an exhibition he would have later in London but although outwardly Jones was observing and painting the landscape, internally something equally important was gestating, which would in the future alter his life to its roots.

On getting back to England he had the idea of making a series of war drawings with captions and it was while staying with his parents in a house built right on the beach near Brighton that he began to draft these captions. Here is how he describes what happened: ‘[I]n a house at Portslade […] I began to write down some sentences which turned out to be the initial passages of In Parenthesis published some [nine] years later. This was a beginning of another sort. I had no idea what I was letting myself in for.’ Almost immediately what were to be no more than captions began to grow into a text – ‘a writing’ as he would call it – and he found he had a new objective: ‘to make a shape in words’ or, as he put it more technically, ‘To see how this business of “form” & “content” worked in a writing, as compared with the same problems in […] the visual arts.’

But Jones had no experience of writing – or almost none. During the War he had written two essays – parts of letters actually – about being a soldier, one of which was published in the Christian Herald in 1917, and a third item, composed in 1917 for a New Year’s card of 1918, of an entirely different sort. Entitled ‘The Quest’, it concerns four imaginary characters. Jones called it a story, using a type of medieval language throughout. Their quest is for ‘the Castle called Heart’s Desire’.

In the film, considering the image which accompanies this story, Gillian Clarke hazards an intuitive guess as to why Jones resorted to a medieval world, while Dr Rowan Williams indicates the connection – curious for us perhaps – that there was in young men’s minds in 1914 between patriotic soldiering and the romance of the medieval knight who combats dark forces. Indeed, by the beginning of the century a whole mythology had been formulated around the soldier, whether as
chivalrous warrior, Christus Miles the follower of Christ, or looking back even earlier through classical myth to the soldier as hero, demonstrating his capabilities as a man of courage, endurance and daring in the heat of battle.\textsuperscript{11} The word ‘gallantry’ summed up the concept – is it any wonder men flocked to join up as soon as the war started?

However, by 1928 the war had been over for a decade and veterans found themselves needing to set down their testimony as soldiers to what had happened through recording events, or as writers, or as poets using prose, to express how they had responded to the experience, hoping thereby to be rid of the results of participation: physical symptoms such as breathlessness, trembling or tears, nightmares of scenes relived, guilt at still being alive, wanting to memorialise dead comrades – a host of individual reasons that civilian life could not obliterate, let alone contain or adequately repress.

Erich Maria Remarque’s book \textit{All Quiet on the Western Front}, an immediate success in German, was translated into many languages. It happened that Jones knew its English translator, A. W. Wheen, who lent him a copy in 1929. Having read it, Jones’s comment to himself was, ‘I can do better than that.’ He also read in translation Ernst Jünger’s \textit{Copse 25} and the books of the English poets writing prose: Robert Graves’s \textit{Goodbye to All That}, Siegfried Sassoon’s \textit{Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man} and Edmund Blunden’s \textit{Undertones of War}.\textsuperscript{12} (Wilfred Owen’s poems he was to read, and admire, much later in life).\textsuperscript{13} His comment on \textit{All Quiet on the Western Front} suggests that even in 1929, only a year after beginning to write, Jones knew what he wanted or did not want to do.

So Jones began to write seriously when others had already started to publish. This must be recognised since Jones could build on what had already been written and fill in omissions. If he were to make a contribution it had to be then, but why would a painter need to write? What could he not express in one medium that he could in another?
Here is the crucial question of ‘Why?’ And a subsidiary one follows from it: ‘What could Jones attempt, or achieve, that nobody else had?’

As an artist Jones was approaching the height of his powers. In 1927 he had produced his finest wood engravings for *The Chester Play of the Deluge* and in 1928 would make 150–200 drawings for his copper engravings of *The Ancient Mariner*, which he completed early in 1929. The impetus or compulsion to re-examine the war must have been considerable for, astonishingly, as well as making many paintings and engraving he found time to write and over the next four years, 1928–32, had constructed most of the long poem he would eventually call *In Parenthesis* and have published in 1937.

But to return to beginnings: Jones makes it clear that he just started to write and in the first of his drafts presumably would have had had the objective of getting the basic material down, having recalled as much as he could. To assist him he had his own war drawings, those he had not destroyed or that had not been lost, the three ‘essays’ mentioned already and very probably other letters written to his family. By good fortune, and visual training, he had a remarkable memory; books were being published to which he could refer, such as *Up to Mametz* (1931) by Wyn Griffith, an officer of his own battalion who had served in the same areas during the same period, and the regimental history of the Royal Welch Fusiliers; or he could consult maps. Gradually or suddenly, by fits and starts perhaps, he found that he had been given a magnificent opportunity. Here is what an earlier poet, Walt Whitman, says on the first page of *Leaves of Grass*, a book Jones may have had reason to look at:

> ‘Know’st thou not there is but one theme for ever-enduring bards?

> And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles,

> The making of perfect soldiers.’

Jones must have discovered this, if not by reading Whitman, then in his study of Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Malory,
Shakespeare or the Norse sagas. He had been given his theme – the theme, he had a story to tell, he had a language, or in fact two, having served in a battalion of Cockneys and Welshmen, Fifteenth (London Welsh) Battalion, Royal Welsh Fusiliers. He had been given everyday speech, army terminology, soldiers’ slang, swearing, songs, rhymes, hymns or psalms, even prayers uttered or yelled by men in extremes of anguish, and Jones adds: ‘I suppose at no time did one so much live with a consciousness of the past, the very remote, and the more immediate and trivial past, both superficially and more subtly.’ It is intriguing to surmise that perhaps Jones, in using what was to hand, first got the idea of juxtaposing medieval and present-day language when he noticed the contrast between his own medieval pastiche and his contemporary writing. In *In Parenthesis* he chose to substitute Malory for his own words – to potent and resonant effect.

Had Jones not other assets as well, individual assets? As the child of a printer’s overseer he was ‘brought up in a home that took the printed page and its illustration for granted’. He was by nature a listener, he had listened to his sister reading to him, he had heard his father sing at least one old Welsh song and listened while James Jones read Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* to the family on Sundays or Milton’s ‘Hymn on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ each Christmas Day. After the war, in Ditchling, he listened to the Gill girls singing folk songs or participated in the Little Office as a Dominican Tertiary. In Capel he listened while Gill read to his family. Through listening he also developed the gift of mimicry as can be seen in his letters, for instance, in recalling Herbert Cole, a teacher at Camberwell, or Laurie Cribb, the stone-cutter at Pigotts, where the Gills moved after Capel-y-ffin.

Whereas Jones had had to outgrow art school and Ditchling styles in order to find himself as painter and engraver, as a writer he had no earlier influences to free himself from. He had written no war poetry, nor had he been a Georgian poet. His background as he saw it was solely that of a trained artist, quite unlike, indeed wholly unlike, he wrote to his associate Harman Grisewood, that of Brooke, Sassoon, Graves, Owen or even T. S. Eliot. Nevertheless, Jones may well have
considered the Imagist agenda set out in 1912 by Ezra Pound, representing a small group of poets who wanted to move poetry beyond Victorian and subsequent Romanticism. Pound’s definition of the Image would have appealed to an artist: ‘that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time’, and other points from Pound’s statement are also relevant. Most notably, he advocates verse freed of metre – ‘[compose] in the sequence of the musical phrase’ – and he stresses a much more direct use of language and discusses the relation of verse to prose.

Jones had also the benefit of knowing Eric Gill, who had introduced him years earlier to Jacques Maritain’s Philosophy of Art and through that to St Thomas Aquinas and even Aristotle’s theories of art. Other writers spoken about by Gill included Ruskin, Morris and, particularly important for Jones, Maurice de la Taille. Through listening and discussion Jones already had a clear concept of what a work of art should be and, in addition, younger friends to talk about poetry with, such as Harman Grisewood, René Hague, Jim Ede and Tom Burns. In the film In Search of David Jones Gillian Clarke surmises that as he wrote he discovered the potency of words, what they can do, what they signify, how they can be transformative. And, I would add, through using quotation extensively Jones was enabled to develop a poetic style equal to that of his quotations, balancing his choice of vocabulary in tone, expression and power with much earlier writing in English such as Malory or translations from Welsh.

By 1931–32 Jones had almost totally laid aside engraving because it was endangering his eyesight, but as a watercolorist he was now being considered one of the most significant painters in Britain. There was a new freedom in how he handled his brush, in his fluid manipulation of the medium, and much less dependence, if any at all, on a use of the pencil when organising his compositions on the paper. And, as already mentioned, by 1932 he had almost completed his ‘writing’, an emerging epic, partly in prose, partly in poetry. Then, towards the end of that year, disaster befell him. He could neither sleep nor work; for months on end he was at a standstill. It was, in fact, his first breakdown.
It might be thought that he had exhausted himself and merely needed rest or that he was experiencing delayed ‘shellshock’. Probably both of these were true, but, with hindsight, I suggest more was troubling him. At the profoundest level something else, more momentous, was occurring, at the time not realised by Jones or anyone else. He was undergoing the process of becoming, or being turned into, a poet, accepting himself as the vessel ‘of something other’ as he might have described it, signified by the Word, implicit in contemplation of the war, but not confined to war. Put over-simply, the Word was being made Flesh. The Word was becoming his principal task. He had to make way for the warring factions within himself now, as artist and writer.  

But is this all that it meant for Jones to become a poet? Definitely not; for first of all, in his quest for who he is, he is able to discover more of himself because, as must be obvious from considering his work, Jones is concerned with expressing the wholeness of himself as an artist. Secondly, through using words he can construct large-scale works, he can layer past with present, secular with sacred, thought with action, individual with group or race.

Thirdly, through the use of words he can become more actively part of his society than as painter or engraver: books of poetry, essays, dramatic broadcasts, radio talks, letters to the press, all attest to this. And finally, he is able to become a friend of a world-renowned poet, T. S. Eliot, and gain the admiration of another, W. B. Yeats.

Jones read of earlier Welsh poets being called ‘rememberers’ and liked the definition, but remembrance surely has at least two contexts where warfare is concerned. While it falls upon civilians through remembrance to celebrate their soldiers, whether alive, disabled or dead, it is the soldier’s job ‘to forget’, to downplay the atrocities he is asked, or enabled, to commit or which he has to endure when fighting in a war. Jones could not claim one aspect without accepting the other,
and his grief has been, I would suggest, greatly underestimated, for Jones, much like his father, ‘was not given to voicing his deeper feelings’ – directly. Here, however, are lines he quotes in an essay on *The Song of Roland*: ‘Now you are dead and it is my grief that I live’, or a line from Malory: ‘Sirs, you are set for sorrow’, or from his own *In Parenthesis*: ‘He found him all gone to pieces […] who miserably wept for the pity of it all’, or ‘No one sings: Lully lully / for the mate whose blood runs down’.

Most painfully, Jones may already have had an inkling, during his nights of sleeplessness, that he would never be as great a painter or engraver as he would a poet. Words had become or were becoming his cross as well as his salvation.

And, to end, why did David Jones become a poet rather than a writer of prose? Two quotations answer this question better than I can, the first from a French critic, Jacques Darras, and the second from W. B. Yeats about ‘the Poet’. Darras writes: ‘The language of poetry runs fathoms deeper than ever will the language of politics or criticism. It is the most awesome of languages to handle, in so far as it is linked to prophecy, calling into existence what it wishes for with all its soul and body.’ And here is Yeats himself: ‘[The Poet is] more type than man, more passion than type.’

In summary: Jones first became a poet due to outer and inner pressures and then because in writing he discovered his own exceptional talent with words, exploring their sounds, rhythms, potency of meanings, derivations. Through using words poetically Jones was enabled to investigate the deposits he sought, could hear and listen, could be heard and listened to, could participate in mythic or sacramental ritual, in the imaginative and historic contexts of *now*, viewed as part of all recorded and unrecorded time.
NOTES

2 *In Search of David Jones: Artist, Soldier, Poet* (2008), commissioned by the David Jones Society, was written and directed by Derek Shiel and produced by Adam Alive. Images of Jones and his numerous war drawings and engravings are interwoven with footage of battle sites of the First World War as it covers his time in the trenches, his work with the artist Eric Gill, his spiritual development and the writing of *In Parenthesis*. First screened at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, and then at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, the film has since been shown at other institutions and events in the UK, including the Imperial War Museum, London, and in the US and Switzerland.
6 Ibid., pp. 210–11.
14 For the change in the spelling of Welsh, see Hyne, *A Fusilier at the Front*, p. viii.
15 Jones, *Dai Greatcoat*, p. 190.
16 Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. XI.
21 Ibid., p. 30.
22 Ibid., pp. 64, 227.
23 Ibid., p. 188.
26 Miles, *Backgrounds to David Jones*, pp. 5–22.
32 Blissett, *The Long Conversation*, p. 11. Jones may have met Eliot in 1937 when *In Parenthesis* was first published by Faber.
33 Dilworth, *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones*, p. 3.
34 Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 141.
36 Ibid., p. 96.
37 Ibid., p. 96.
“this association is excellent and necessary…”
Andrew Motion

In all cultures, the poetry of war and conflict provides some of our finest literature: the poets of each generation reflect the realities of war and the greatest depths of human expression. The War Poets Association exists to foster a knowledge and appreciation of this creative reflection of conflict.

www.warpoets.org

Robert Graves Keith Douglas David Jones
Siegfried Sassoon Rudyard Kipling
Louis Simpson Wilfred Owen Ivor Gurney
Mary Wedderburn Cannan Thomas Hardy
Alun Lewis John Pudney Wilfred Gibson
Federico García Lorca Edward Thomas
Sylvia Townsend Warner Isaac Rosenberg
Vernon Scannell Edmund Blunden
Julian Grenfell Randall Jarrell ............
Introduction
A recent major archive launched jointly by the Faculty of English and the Computing Services at Oxford University has opened up a major collection of primary source material to researchers working on the war poets. The First World War Poetry Digital Archive has released over 12,000 digital objects on the web to be freely used for worldwide educational purposes (www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit). The project has a particular focus on the major British poets of the Western Front, but also includes a wealth of historical material to provide context to the poetry, much of which was contributed by the general public.

Background
In 1996–98 Oxford University ran a pioneering digitisation project that photographed the manuscripts, letters, and war records of the poet Wilfred Owen. These were then released freely on to the web with additional online tutorials and tools for researchers. This was a very influential project and was cited regularly in print and online publications, and even boasted the first web-based tutorial to teach English literature, centred on the poet Isaac Rosenberg and his poem ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ (launched as far back as January 1994).

In 2007 Oxford received further funding (£400,000) from the UK’s Joint Information Systems Committee to expand this archive. In the intervening ten years it had attracted a community of researchers and teachers who were regularly requesting more material on other poets. This new project ran from 2007 to 2009 and set about digitising the poetical manuscripts, letters, diaries, photographs, and war records of some of the major British poets. The site was launched on 11 November 2008 to mark the 90th anniversary of the Armistice. A launch event was
held at the Imperial War Museum, London, and consisted of short presentations and a chance for invited guests to look at the wealth of the material on offer.

The project was based in Oxford’s English Faculty, but supported by the Computing Services, and although it was mainly focused on the poetry it also launched a spin-off project entitled the Great War Archive, which invited the general public to digitise and submit artifacts they held relating to the War in general (see below). Guiding the project was an academic steering group that brought together key experts in the field, plus technical and pedagogical experts.1 The project involved getting the support from the main literary estates and the holding institutions (libraries and archives) around the world who maintained the disparate collections, and would be asked to photograph them.2

**Digitisation: A Generic Lifecycle**

When considering any major digitisation3 project one can quickly discern a generic lifecycle that emerges. For the most part this involves:

- the identification and selection of the material to be captured
- the digitisation itself (which in turn will involve various sub-processes)
- the receiving of the digital objects and quality assurance (QA) testing
- post-processing and QA
- cataloguing and QA
- delivery
- archiving

This forms a handy step-by-step approach to describing this project.
Selection
The original project (1996–98) had set out some basic principles in terms of selection that were followed by the new project. First, selection would be based around an individual poet and his or her works, rather than a specific theme (e.g. romantic poetry of the war, pacifist poetry, etc.). There are issues with such an approach, namely that it tends to focus on the known writers and not the anonymous ones, thus perpetuating the concept of a canonical body of verse. Moreover, this is not in keeping with the thrust of modern anthologies (e.g. Hibberd and Onions, 2007, which goes for a chronological approach). However, as we note throughout, this reflected the feedback from users over the intervening years, which indicated a strong demand for collections based around the major poets.

Second, even though the poet may have been a prolific writer before the war, or afterwards, the limited resources of the project had to be devoted to the verse written during 1914–1918. This became especially difficult with the poets who survived the war (e.g. Graves, Gurney, Sassoon, Blunden) and continued to write verse for many years after 1918. Some of this clearly discussed the war or was influenced by it: how much, therefore, should be included? Similarly there were writers who contributed in other artistic fields: e.g. in prose we have the works by Graves, Sassoon, Brittain, and Blunden; in art, Jones and Rosenberg; in music, Gurney; in drama, Rosenberg again; and so on. The selection process was a difficult one and in each instance guidance was given by the subject expert on the steering group. They were set the task of prioritising the selection, based on the limited resources available to the project.

Perhaps the most difficult question, though, was the first one – who should we include in addition to Owen? Again we were guided by the continued user feedback over the years and repeated requests for particular poets. At the same time, because the collection was also aimed at schoolteachers we assessed the major writers that were being used in the UK school curricula across Key Stages, GCSE, and A Level. Some may quibble over the selection of individuals, most
notably the absence of Rupert Brooke. Moreover, there is a distinct bias towards male ‘soldier’ poets as opposed to female poets or non-combat writers; and the selection mainly focuses on British poets with particular reference to those who fought on the Western Front. The answer to these comments are that: a) this reflects demand, as certainly witnessed by the syllabi; and b) this was a UK project and thus to focus on British poets, and more importantly on the dominating cultural influence of Ypres, the Somme, etc., is understandable. With reference to women poets, or poets from other countries who fought under the flag of the Empire, further justification is needed. Although there have been excellent anthologies of verse by women writers (e.g. O’Relly, or Cardinald, Goldman, and Hattaway), it proved extremely difficult to identify one or two poets who stood out to rank alongside the demand for Rosenberg, Thomas, Graves, etc., and, more importantly, where a recognised collection of primary source material still existed and could be easily accessed. This was doubly so with the poets of other nationalities (Ireland being the exception).

That the project still contributes in some ways to perpetuating a canon cannot be denied, but given its limited time and funding this is defensible. More importantly, the digitisation of some trench verse in soldiers’ newspapers and journals, plus the contributions of poems in the Great War Archive from a variety of unknown writers (male and female), goes some way to addressing the balance. Furthermore, this is but the start. We sincerely hope to attract further funding or encourage others to launch similar projects that focus on the war poetry of other writers and nationalities.

It is worthwhile now considering each of the chosen writers in turn and describing the collections that are now available online for teachers and researchers.

**Wilfred Owen**

The Owen collection was part of the original project. It is, however, worth reminding readers of what this contains:
all of his poetry manuscripts held in the English Faculty, Oxford, and the British Library, with a few additional items (e.g. from the Benjamin Britten collection, and private collections);
- 36 letters by Owen (held in the Harry Ransom Centre, Texas);
- 4 letters to Owen (from Graves and Murray McClymont);
- 9 photographs of Owen;
- 29 official documents relating to Owen’s war service;
- the complete run of Owen’s personal collection of *The Hydra*;
- numerous modern photographs and film clips of key Owen locations (Craiglockhart, Serre, Ors, etc.).

**Isaac Rosenberg**

Using the selection criteria noted earlier, the focus here was on Rosenberg’s poetry, not his art or drama (although 31 drafts relating to *The Unicorn* are included and 2 sketched self-portraits). The collection therefore includes:

- all manuscript drafts related to 30 poems, drawn from the Imperial War Museum (London), the British Library, and the Berg Collection (New York Public Library);
- 64 letters by Rosenberg, and 4 letters by Annie Rosenberg;
- 2 photographs of Rosenberg in uniform;
- 2 official documents related to his war record (most of these were destroyed).
Isaac Rosenberg

Pencil draft of ‘Daughters of War’ (recto) by Isaac Rosenberg, on Salvation Army paper folded in eight and torn and stained with mud, illustrating the conditions under which he was forced to write (© Imperial War Museum/Isaac Rosenberg Literary Estate)
Isaac Rosenberg

Pencil draft of ‘Daughters of War’ (verso) (© Imperial War Museum/Isaac Rosenberg Literary Estate)
Robert Graves

With a writer as prolific as Graves, who is probably more famous for his work after the war, the focus here rested on the manuscript variants of Over the Brazier and Fairies and Fusiliers, and included a complete typescript of a collection of poems entitled ‘The Patchwork Flag’ (never published in its entirety after receiving criticism from Sassoon and Robert Ross). In addition, as advised by the steering group, also included were a selection of poems written after the war which showed how he continually returned to his experiences. The collection includes:

- manuscripts and typescripts held at the State University of New York at Buffalo and the Berg Collection (including all of ‘The Patchwork Flag’);
- 37 letters by Graves;
- 5 photographs;
- 18 official documents.
Robert Graves

Robert Graves’s ‘When I’m Killed’, given by Graves to Sassoon on 14 July 1916, a week before he was reported to have died of wounds; used as a teaching example (© Berg Collection, New York Public Library/Robert Graves Copyright Trust)
Edward Thomas
Some might question the inclusion of Thomas in a collection of War Poets, but it was clear that many of his poems (such as ‘As the Team’s Head Brass’) are taught and included in studies of First World War literature. Moreover, alongside Rosenberg, he was repeatedly the most requested poet to be added to the Owen collection. To this end then, the archive now holds:

- manuscripts and typescripts drawn from Cardiff University Library, the National Library of Wales, the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the British Library, and private collections;
- his complete war diary;
- 31 letters by Thomas, and 33 letters to him;
- 9 photographs;
- 10 official documents.

Vera Brittain and Roland Leighton
Although a minor collection, the Brittain material coupled with the small amount of verse by Leighton, is invaluable. Brittain’s experiences as a VAD and the loss she suffered of friends and family highlight some aspects of the role of, and impact on, women; especially when coupled with the material of Leighton, her fiancé:

- a small selection of Brittain and Leighton’s poetry manuscripts and typescripts drawn from McMaster University’s collection;
- 6 letters by Brittain, and 16 letters to her by Leighton;
- 20 photographs;
- 56 entries from Brittain’s war diary.

In the original expansion of the archive only the above writers were intended for inclusion. However, as it transpired the budget allowed us to look to other collections for digitisation, and the following writers were selected.
**David Jones**

The first additional writer to be identified was David Jones, and the focus was on *In Parenthesis*. The problem here lay with the amount of material available. It would have been impossible to digitise all the drafts, variants, and notes related to all of *In Parenthesis* and therefore the decision was to simply concentrate on one part. The choice was made to focus on Part VII, the attack on Mametz Wood. It was clear that this was the most widely anthologised piece, and most widely taught. The online collection subsequently includes:

- all manuscript variants, notes, maps, etc., relating to Part VII of *In Parenthesis* held at the National Library of Wales;
- 7 letters by Jones, and 1 to him, focusing on Part VII of *In Parenthesis*;
- 3 photographs;
- a selection of drawings from the Royal Welch Fusiliers museum;
- 10 official documents.

**Edmund Blunden**

Like Graves, Blunden demands consideration of postwar work that was inspired by his experiences during the War. *Undertones of War* is a key text referred to at both school level and more often at undergraduate level. Thus it was thought fit to concentrate on the poetry published within this work, and one much-studied chapter of *Undertones*, ‘The Crash of Pillars’. The Blunden collection thus consists of:

- all manuscripts relating to poetry included in *Undertones of War*, and the ‘The Crash of Pillars’, drawn from the Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas, Queens College, Oxford, and private collections;
- annotated pages of the poetry in *Undertones of War* and ‘The Crash of Pillars’ from Blunden’s own library;
- 9 letters by Blunden;
- 10 photographs;
• a rich selection of pages from Blunden’s own ‘Minute Book’, a scrapbook he compiled after the war of photographs, postcards and mementos.

Ivor Gurney

The Ivor Gurney collection, all contained at the Gloucestershire Archives, concentrates primarily on the poems in *Severn and Somme* and *War’s Embers*, but with a good selection of verse from after the war which reflects back on his experiences there. The Gurney collection is particularly problematic as many poems appear in a range of letters and typescripts, were reworked, or even renamed. We are indebted to the support, therefore, of Philip Lancaster, who is currently re-cataloguing
the collection in preparation for a much-anticipated new edition of Gurney’s work. The entire collection thus includes:

- All manuscripts relating to poetry in *Severn and Somme* and *War’s Embers*, plus a selection of retrospective verse;
- 80 letters;
- 4 photographs.

**Siegfried Sassoon**

Additional funding from the project sponsors (the Joint Information Systems Committee) meant that we had the resources and funding to look at including Sassoon’s manuscripts, once negotiations with the estate were concluded. With Sassoon the focus was placed on the variants for the war poems in *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems, Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, and *Picture-Show*. Although he was not included in the initial launch in 2008, his manuscripts were released in 2009. The collection includes:

- Manuscript variants of the war poems (as noted above) drawn from the Bodleian Library, CUL, the Fitzwilliam Museum, NYPL’s Berg collection, the Harry Ransom Center, and St John’s College, Cambridge;
- 7 photographs.
Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon and Dennis Silk listening to a test match on the radio at Heytesbury House, Wiltshire, in 1961 (© Edmund Blunden Literary Estate)

Contextual Material

It is hoped that this wealth of primary source material related to the poets will be of interest to many researchers, teachers, and the amateur enthusiast. Not only have we virtually reassembled documents so that they are now available together for the first time since creation (albeit online), all of this material is freely available worldwide, and due to the generosity of the literary estates is copyright cleared for educational (non-commercial) use.

In addition to the material listed above the archive also includes a wealth of contextual material for teachers and researchers to use. The archive includes nearly 400 photographs from the period drawn from
the collections at the Imperial War Museum detailing life on the front (battle and home), supplemented by over 350 photographs taken by the project team of key sites on the Western Front as they stand today. An audio collection contains over 150 short clips of interviews with veterans, again drawn from the collections at the IWM, and the video archive has over 80 extracts from films made during the war, supplemented by footage taken by the project team. A variety of publications, both official and unofficial, have been drawn from the John Johnson collection at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and digitised to provide an even greater context. Again, all this material is free to use for educational purposes.

Digitisation
As is evident from the above, the material presented in the archive is drawn from a variety of collections around the world. Once the items were identified, orders were placed and for the most part the digitisation was performed ‘in-house’ by the local reprographic studies. The project outlined its request format and quality, but sometimes local guidelines differed. The images were then dispatched to the project on CD or DVD. A hidden but clearly important benefit of the project, therefore, is that a separate high quality copy of the image also resides now with the holding institution (i.e. as well as those held at Oxford). All images received were quality assured by the project team in terms of completeness (e.g. any images or parts of images missing) and quality (colour, focus, lighting, etc.).

Post-processing
The files received were ‘master copies’, i.e. images at very high resolution, and thus file size. These were unsuitable for web distribution as they would take far too long to download, and also would be of sufficient high quality to use in printed publications. Therefore, as agreed with the estates, what is being distributed is ‘working quality’, i.e. an image of sufficient quality to allow a researcher see the smallest significant detail.
All master images were post-processed creating smaller working quality images and thumbnails, and we also inserted a digital watermark. Using the DigiMarc system, this allows an invisible watermark to be attached to the image that is impossible to remove. Moreover, these watermarks can be tracked for any misuse. Again, each derivative (i.e. image created from the master copy) went through a process of quality assurance. All of this was supported by a rigid workflow.

**Cataloguing**

Each individual item (e.g. a page of a manuscript, a photograph, etc.) has been catalogued by the project. The resulting metadata includes details on:

- Author (e.g. Leighton, Roland (1895–1915))
- Title (e.g. ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’)
- Item date (where known, this might be a specific date, or date range)
- Creation place (again where known, but this includes longitude/latitude references so that it can be linked to Google Maps)
- File type (e.g. image, audio, video)
- Item source (e.g. leaf)
- Item medium (e.g. paper)
- Writing medium (as applicable, e.g. pen/pencil)
- Content (e.g. poem, letter, letter containing a poem, etc.)
- Collection ID (e.g. the shelfmark number)
- Repository name and address
- Cataloguer’s name
- Copyright information
- Reference URL

The information recorded about each and every manuscript was checked thoroughly by a subject expert, to ensure academic quality. The metadata has been stored according to accepted industry standards that have allowed other online library databases, such as WorldCat, to harvest it and facilitate item discovery via alternative search engines.
Delivery

Whilst digitisation and metadata form the backbone to any online collection, the items themselves must be easily retrieved and displayed in a usable fashion to ensure that the final archive meets the requirements of its intended users. Thus the next step was actually to work out a way to deliver the content to the researcher or teacher. We had already decided that the route of choice now would be through the Web, and that it would be freely available. What we then needed to do was choose a ‘back engine’ that could store all the cataloguing information and the digital files, and allow the user to search or browse through the collection. For these purposes we settled on a commercial product called CONTENTdm. The technical details are not important for this article, but what is important is the functionality this gives the user. Seamlessly, it allows you to zoom in on images, download them, create a ‘favourites’ page (akin to a ‘shopping cart’ in online stores), and compare material side-by-side.

Once all the material had been ingested into CONTENTdm a lot of work went into designing and testing the interface by which users would access the collection. The result was that as well as a general search box (akin to the Google free search) users could go to a specific page on each poet or contextual collection. In the case of the former they would be presented with a brief biography, and they could then browse by title of poem, first line of poem, repository (e.g. McMaster University), or type (e.g. ‘Photographs of Wilfred Owen’).

Archiving

Finally, it is worth noting that all the high resolution images and derivatives have been digitally archived on servers at Oxford so that if, in the future, we wished to modify the images to adhere to a new way of web delivery we could do so.
The Great War Archive

What has been described above constituted the main focus of the project, but it is worth noting a sub-project undertaken, called the Great War Archive (or GWA). This has attracted widespread international interest as it possibly suggests a model for future digitisation projects. The GWA focused entirely on what the public owned and not what was in the major collections. We issued a call to arms (or rather to attics, garages, and bottom drawers) through the main media channels in the UK, asking members of the public to submit, via the web, digital copies of material they personally held to do with the First World War and to which they controlled the rights (family photographs, diaries, letters, artifacts owned or collected from the war). We also asked them to record the stories that had been passed down to them over the years about their family’s experiences. Over a period of 16 weeks we made available a website to collect these submissions. The site allowed anyone to upload objects following a set of simple steps that guided them through the provision of some basic metadata and necessitated agreeing to the license conditions. Everybody was asked to provide:

- Contact details (which they could keep anonymous when the site went live)
- Author (the person who ‘created’ the item)
- Creation place (if known)
- Creation date (if known)
- Content type (using a series of keywords)
- Further information through a large, open ‘notes’ field (family anecdotes, for example)

In conjunction with this the Project Team also ran a series of ‘submission roadshows’ around the country where we would base ourselves in a local museum or library and invite people to bring the objects along on a particular day. We would then talk to them about the item, get them to fill in a form with further information about themselves and what they had brought (the basic metadata again), and then we would photograph or scan the item or items. To get the word
out, we targeted local newspapers and radio shows and produced a series of small, simple cards that we left in pubs, libraries, trains, and other public places. We also provided a ‘Submission Day Pack’ for libraries we could not visit, which guided them through running their own submission days.

In the space of 16 weeks we ‘collected’ over 6,500 items. This included 42 unique unpublished diaries by soldiers from a range of battlefields; 63 memoirs; 255 unpublished letters; over 700 photographs; pamphlets, local recruiting posters, images of rare objects (such as the original designs for the tomb of the unknown soldier), and so on. It also included unpublished verse.

All the submissions were quality assured by two subject experts, and a technical imaging expert where appropriate, and only one submission was rejected – because it was from the Boer War. Submission days were packed, with people bringing in the items their families had treasured over the years. Most importantly, these were items that had never seen the light of day, up to now. For the most part, the items were catalogued by the public, scanned by the public, and the rights for distribution agreed to by the public. The submission website was available for a limited time, as the project was very much an experiment to see if the approach would work. Afterwards, though, people contacted us wishing to add yet more material. To assist with them, we opened a Flickr group, which now has a further 1,600 images.

Education
The original project in 1996–98 was actually entitled ‘Virtual Seminars’, and was primarily funded to explore how the (then) new technologies could assist in the teaching of English literature. Firmly placing the archival resources within an educational setting is still very much at the centre of the new archive, and the collection of primary source material is surrounded by a wealth of teaching tools and resources aimed at school level through to university (the site presents
the teaching material in an easy-to-browse format based on educational sectors).

Firstly, a section of online tutorials, i.e. web sites focusing on a particular topic or theme, have been developed. Each one requires some degree of interactivity from the student, either asking them to debate topics, engage in online activities or quizzes, or record their own thoughts. There are six online lessons, comprising:

- Introduction to War Poetry (general introduction to the genre)
- Isaac Rosenberg’s ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ (teaching close reading of a particular poem)
- An Introduction to Manuscript Studies (teaching editing skills using the manuscripts of ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ or Rosenberg’s ‘Dead Man’s Dump’)
- Comparative Literature (looking at non-English war poets)
- Remembrance (exploration of the topic)
- Analysing a Poem using a Computer (online text analysis)
- Three ‘mind maps’ – two presenting students with an exercise to look at the manuscripts behind Graves’ ‘When I’m Killed’ and Owen’s ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, and the third presenting a visualisation of the relationships between all the poets and other noted figures of the time

On top of this there are a set of curated pathways through the collections aimed at Key Stages and at higher education (English and History) – many created by teachers and lecturers in workshops run at Oxford. In essence these are annotated trails linking disparate objects in the collections to illustrate a particular theme or topic (e.g. a series of ‘real lives’ including a path on Hedd Wynn, a guide to Trench Life, an analysis of *Journey’s End* and the 1918 offensive, etc). Users can also create and make available their own paths by using the ‘path creation tool’ to link items in the archive and add notes to create an online slideshow, tutorial or presentation. Users’ finished paths appear on the website with their own unique URL which others can be directed to.
Following feedback from teachers the project has also created resource packs that can be downloaded and used in the classroom. These packs are tied specifically into Key Stage units covering topics such as: ‘What do we remember on Remembrance Day?’ and ‘Trusting Source Material’. Containing a pre-prepared Powerpoint set of slides, teacher’s notes, guides for activities, and the digital objects themselves (e.g. images, video, etc.), the packs can be used as they stand or adapted by teachers.

The project also created a set of podcasts that are freely available from the site. These include interviews with key commentators (Max Arthur, Ian Hislop, Gary Sheffield, Richard Holmes, Tim Kendall, Colin Highes), talks from conferences (the 2007 Siegfried Sassoon Conference, and a Teaching World War One Literature event), tours of the Imperial War Museum (to be listened to whilst walking around the exhibits, or displayed on a iPod), and several educational films – ‘Trench Warfare’, ‘War Cemeteries’, ‘Ernst Jünger at Langemarck’, ‘Trusting Historical Sources’, ‘Tolkien’s War’, ‘Tyne Cot Cemetery’, and ‘Ypres: Then and Now’. The site also draws in feeds from the UK’s Intute service, which provides a scholarly catalogue of key websites, and presents an online bookstore via Amazon. Backing all of this up are discussion groups on Google aimed at World War One literature, and Modern War Poetry.

Thanks to the extra funding received from JISC, other tools and technologies were also explored with the aim of visualising and utilising the archival resources in innovative and engaging ways. For example, using the dates collected in the cataloguing of objects, timelines can be generated by the end user that graphically display chronological sequences allowing you to, say, overlay the dates of the poems of Robert Graves on to a list of the major events of the war.

It must be remembered also that teachers are at liberty to use any of this material, download it, edit it, integrate it into their own teaching packs and resources, all for free and from anywhere in the world. The only
restriction placed on the items is that they cannot by used for commercial purposes.

Summary
The First World War Digital Archive was completed in September 2009 with the launch of the Sassoon material. The collection it has assembled will be of key interest to readers of this journal, researchers world-wide, teachers and lecturers, and also the general public. More importantly, with activities such as the Great War Archive and the online teaching tools it has broken new ground in the world of digitisation projects and online learning.

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NOTES


2 For a full list see: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/about/acknowledgments.html>.

3 Digitisation here means the conversion of analog material (such as a photograph, a manuscript page, an audio recording on tape, etc.) to a digital file that can be displayed and edited on a computer.

4 <https://www.digimarc.com/>
5 <http://www.worldcat.org/>
6 <http://www.contentdm.com/>
7 <http://www.youtube.com/user/ww1lit#p/a>
Poetic Justice? Revisionist History, Literary Criticism and the First World War Poets

VIVIEN WHELPTON

Introduction

The First World War was a futile, incompetently conducted, and ultimately cynical exercise in which thousands of British youths were slaughtered in appalling conditions on the Western Front.

… Or so the British myth of the war maintains. Military historians have spent more than a quarter of a century attempting to unseat this myth. For its continued hold on British popular imagination they blame the memoirs of the late twenties and early thirties (coloured, they argue, by disillusionment with the peace that had followed) and the poetry of the war, principally the work of Sassoon and Owen, which they see as having dominated popular understanding since the sixties.¹

Defining the poetry

Before we examine the charges made by the military historians, we need to establish what we mean by ‘the poetry of the war’. The historians are clear on this: on the one hand, they mean Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who distorted the ‘truth about the war’; on the other, the vast range of verse written during the war, particularly by combatants, which provides a ‘truer’ reflection of the experiences, feelings and attitudes of the country and the troops. Dan Todman, arguing that ‘If it were possible to take the vast quantity of writing produced by servicemen and civilians as a whole, published and unpublished, it would reflect [a] range and ambiguity of attitudes towards the war’, nevertheless touches on one problem of this approach when he continues:
The shock of war inspired or forced some writers to choose new means of expression, abandoning previous structures and beliefs. *Other reacted by falling back on what they knew well, producing texts in traditional form which emphasised familiar versions of war as an occasion of heroism, love of country and self-sacrifice.*

Indeed, much of such verse has less authenticity than letters and journals precisely because its writers were constrained by their conventional understandings of what constituted both verse (its purpose as well as its form, content and style) and war.

Literary critics have responded to the historians’ concerns, producing in the last twenty years a variety of anthologies which attempt to represent the range and diversity of wartime verse. Martin Stephen, in his introduction to his 1988 anthology *Never Such Innocence*, argued that the attitudes expressed in this writing represented ‘not what such people ought to have felt, but what they did feel’. I have argued above that the reverse may be the case, but Vivien Noakes says of her *Voices of Silence* collection, published in 2006, that ‘it is precisely because it does not have to answer to high literary demands’ that such verse ‘is often a more immediate, less poetically self-conscious, response to war’. If there is a clear verdict to be reached on this debate, then it can only be done by a thorough review of a collection such as hers.

Noakes does not reject the concept of a literary canon, nor does she suggest that there is a marked mismatch between the feelings and attitudes to be found in the two ‘categories’ of verse, having found expressions of suffering, anger and bitterness, as well as the ubiquitous humour, in the material she collected. Martin Stephen, however, subscribes to notions held by many of the historians: for example, that a middle-class education is likely to destroy authenticity and that middle-class volunteers, because of their privileged backgrounds, were more horrified by the war they encountered. He refers to ‘the voice of outraged middle-class protest’ and argues that ‘the essentially middle-class, academic and intellectual vision of the poetry of the Great War
sits ill at ease with the populist nature of much of its output’. Since this would be equally true of the poetry of most periods in British history, we might wonder why this point needs making, and the reason might simply be that no other period or event has produced such a groundswell of popular verse. (The totality of the war and the nature of early twentieth-century mass education and nationalism may account for the phenomenon.) In this case it is not the ‘professional’ poetry but the popular output that is unusual – as well as the surprise that in literary terms it has been ephemeral.

The narrowing of the canon to a handful of writers (or even two) has been unfortunate, but I propose that if war poetry has worthwhile insights to offer, it is in consequence of its quality. Of course, agreement on what constitutes ‘quality’ is not a simple issue and is subject to change over time. The objection that inclusion in a canon is often a matter of tradition or ideology is an important caveat. Literary canons (like historiographical ones) require constant contestation. In their introduction to the 1986 Poetry of the Great War, the first of the anthologies to attempt to represent the broad range of First World War verse, Dominic Hibberd and John Onions point out that from 1914 onwards, anthologies have always reflected – and, in turn, influenced – contemporary attitudes to the war, and that selection has rarely been made solely on the grounds of ‘excellence or imaginative power’. A further contentious issue is ‘experience’. The standing of the combatant poets of the literary canon may rest as much on the nature of their ‘message’ as on the ‘quality’ of their output, on ethics and politics as much as on aesthetics, but it is also based on the authority which their experience of the war is perceived to have given them. The role of witness in historical narratives is a controversial issue, but even in the realm of poetry the primacy of personal experience is a relatively modern notion, dating from the Romantic period. First-hand experience may be a major determinant of the immediacy, the imaginative power and the quality of thought of a poem, but is not in itself a criterion of value. Nevertheless, it could be argued that war poetry may be an exception in this regard (although the war poems of Wilfred Gibson are often cited to challenge this view), since the experience of warfare is
not a universal one. (Of course, the experience of war is not only the experience of combatants, a fact that has only been recognised comparatively recently in the extension of the First World War canon to include women’s writing.) Their first-hand experience was certainly seen by the combatant poets themselves as vital to their capacity to tell the truth about the war, in opposition to the civilians, who were ignorant of the truth, the journalists, who were lying, and the politicians, who were guilty on both counts. But it can be argued that an uncritical acceptance of the privileged status of the combatant poets has led to a reading of their work as mimetic representation rather than as a particular construction of the meaning of war.⁷

Ultimately, it is ‘quality’, however problematic the concept, which determines the longevity of a poet’s work, although there is a complex and often unexamined relationship between quality or longevity on the one hand and authenticity and ideology on the other, particularly in relation to the poetry of the First World War. Hibberd and Onions imply a positive connection when they state in their introduction to their 1986 anthology that ‘It is broadly true that the best poetry of the war was written after 1915 by men who had fought in France and Flanders’ and that ‘soldiers produced devoutly patriotic poems in 1917 and 1918, but we could find none that was not very feebly written’.⁸

This paper will explore some of the recent responses of military historians and literary critics to the combatant poets of the canon, not because of a denial of the value of other poetry, but because it is these poets who have been identified with, and even held responsible for, the popular British myth of the war. We need now to examine the response of revisionist history to both the myth and the poets.

Revising the myth

‘Good morning; good morning!’ the general said⁹
The main thrust of revisionist historiography, beginning with John Terraine’s *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier* in 1963, has been in the area of military command and control in the First World War, particularly on the Western Front. Along with a shift of focus from the commander-in-chief himself to leadership at army, corps, divisional and brigade levels, a more structural approach in recent years has led to investigations into the nature of the difficulties of military operations and the attempts made to develop and exploit new technologies and doctrine. The more sensitive of the historians neither deny the scale of the attrition nor the extent to which its occurrence can be attributed to the leadership’s excessive optimism and obsession with breakthrough. However, these considerations are balanced against awareness of the insurmountable problems that artillery and poor communications posed to attempts to mount offensive operations from entrenched positions, the constraints imposed by coalition warfare, and the ‘learning curve’ which took place, albeit with setbacks, from 1917 onwards, and which resulted in the Allied victory of November 1918.

*Was it for this the clay grew tall?*¹⁰

Combating popular perception of the war as having been unnecessary and purposeless has been a harder task. History has difficulty freeing itself from a retrospective vision: from as early as the twenties it was apparent that if the purpose of the First World War had been the restoration of the balance of power in Europe, then it had failed abysmally; and in the second half of the century there was the template of the ‘good’ war, the Second World War, by which to judge the First. Nevertheless, by 1998 John Keegan’s was almost a lone voice¹¹ amongst British historians when he asserted that ‘The First World War was a tragic and unnecessary conflict […] [that] damaged civilisation, the rational and liberal civilisation of the European enlightenment, permanently …’.¹² Perhaps a minimum on which consensus can be reached is that the war had popular (and generally sustained) support at the time, and that, whatever the errors of diplomacy in the years preceding it, by August 1914 British politicians had little room for choice.
What passing bells [...]?

That the front-line infantry soldier on the Western Front is the dominant image of the First World War seems to bear out the historians’ assertion that the myth of the war was created by the memoirists and poets, almost all of whom experienced the war in that role. However, we must acknowledge the iconic power of the war’s visual images, in art, film and still photography: the impact of archive footage in the BBC 1964 *The Great War* television series, for example, was such as to compromise severely the revisionist message of the script.

In attempting to temper this aspect of the war’s myth, namely the horror and the misery of life and death on the Western Front, the historians have had their hardest task. Dan Todman acknowledges ‘the unremitting nature of trench warfare’ and ‘the extremity and persistence of violence and the co-existence with death’. Added to this were the squalid conditions and the effects of the elements, particularly in a landscape destroyed by bombardments. To concede that being in the front line may have occupied only a few days per month, and that in some sectors ‘live and let live’ arrangements operated, only slightly modifies the picture. Few revisionists today go as far as Correlli Barnett in his 1972 assertion that ‘there was little to choose by way of amenity between a slum yard and a trench’.

However, issues of morale are important. It is unnecessary to engage in the debate about whether there was a trajectory of disillusionment and of disengagement from the home front, or to examine the statistics on psychological disorders, to understand the debilitating effects of the experience of the trenches, but military historians demand that we offset our awareness of the stresses with a recognition of the positive experiences of comradeship and discipline, and also, if not a continuing belief in the war, at least the generally held acceptance of the need to fight on.
Ultimately, differences of opinion about the experience of soldiering on the Western Front seem to be matters of emphasis. Dennis Winter, no revisionist, acknowledges that ‘an event which involved five million men can never achieve consensus’, given the impact of differences of class, education, intelligence and temperament, and the varying experiences of the war’s different phases. Nevertheless, for him, ‘the only surprise is that the microscopic approach of the individual produces such agreement on which things were thought to be worth writing down and remembering and on what men thought of the various facets of their common experience as each made an impact’.\(^{16}\)

**Rebuking the poets**

\begin{quote}
But we are poets,
And shall tell the truth.\(^{17}\)
\end{quote}

The historians’ case against the combatant poets of the canon rests on a denial of the validity of their visions. Since most of them undeniably had extensive front-line experience,\(^{18}\) it is their ‘representativeness’ that is questioned – firstly on the grounds that most of them were junior officers of upper-middle-class background, and volunteers rather than regular soldiers.\(^{19}\) However, since junior officers shared all that their troops experienced (although with certain privileges of rank, including leave allocation), since their average life expectancy was shorter, and since they had the added stresses of responsibility, we may find it hard to accept Gary Sheffield’s view that ‘the poems of Sassoon, Owen and the like provide at best a very limited and skewed view of […] the experience of the frontline infantryman’.\(^{20}\)

As for their privileged backgrounds, Correlli Barnett’s account of ‘an upbringing at home and at their public schools which had given them little knowledge or understanding of the real world of their time, but rather a set of unpractical, idealistic attitudes’\(^ {21}\) does not withstand a reading of the biographies, letters or memoirs of such public school
products as Blunden, Graves or Sorley. Indeed, John Keegan argues that the public school system ensured that ‘the amateur officers of the New Armies knew from the outset what was expected of them’.  

Then there is their volunteer status: Martin Stephen points out that ‘the poets who achieved lasting fame were poets first and soldiers a long way second’. This made them highly representative of an army that was, after the opening months, almost entirely made up of volunteers and, later, conscripts. Hibberd and Onions remark that ‘critics often say that this was a very literary war, a poets’ war, but it could as well be described as a mechanics’ or a bank clerks’ war’. The notion of the ‘civilian soldier’ also neglects the extent to which the 1914–1918 army was a highly trained body of men, certainly by the later stages of the war. The fact that the ‘recording and imagining class’ went to war for the first time means that war poets now knew what they were writing about.

The other accusation levelled against the combatant poets is their atypical ‘sensitivity’. At the extreme end is John Terraine’s statement (in the Introduction to the war letters of Graham Greenwell):

> If even a substantial number, let alone a majority of these men, had been permanently in the condition of nerves of Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon, it is quite clear that the daily round could not have gone on.

But Ian Beckett also insists that ‘it should certainly not be accepted that a handful of well-known, sensitive, intellectual or otherwise like-minded wartime officers […] were in any way representative of their armies as a whole’, and refers to ‘those of literary sensitivities’. There is a debate about the ‘literariness’ of the 1914–1918 army, but some evidence that sensitivity was a common, morale-boosting, and even life-saving quality in the front line. (And was intellect either uncommon or inappropriate in an officer?)
The charge loses substance if we substitute the word ‘sensibility’ for ‘sensitivity’. What is important is not whether some war poets were ‘ex-public school temporary officers who were much more sensitive and imaginative than the vast majority of their comrades’ but the value that their creative imaginations and mastery of language contributed to their capacity to witness. Dan Todman warns that ‘in using works of literature we have to be constantly aware that these are representations of an individual’s reaction to events’. This is true of all testimony, but the poets can be ‘representatives’, both because they had authentic experience and authoritative perspectives to offer and because their gifts made them peculiarly adapted to ‘representing’ human experience. In rejecting the testimony of the poets, military historians are not mounting a debate about the problematic nature of witness, evidence or experience; they are simply rejecting certain testimonies and accepting others – often on no more substantial a basis than that the latter chime with their preferred interpretations of the combatant experience of the First World War. The ubiquitous appearance in their work of passages from the memoirs of that middle-class temporary officer Charles Carrington (although not those that movingly describe his loss of morale in early 1917 and after the Battle of Passchendaele) is an instance of this selectivity.

When Martin Stephen regrets that ‘in poetic terms the true voice of the infantryman is hard to find’, we wonder why he is surprised. (The voices of such ‘rankers’ as Isaac Rosenberg and Ivor Gurney are disqualified on the grounds of their untypical education.) George Parfitt reminds us that ‘it is intrinsically likely that relatively few people involved in the war in any capacity had a developed ability to write about their experiences, at least in an orthodoxly sustained or creative way’.

For some historians, ‘sensitivity’ is a coded way of referring to the sexual orientation of Sassoon, Graves and Owen, as in Brian Bond’s contention that

a large element of their mental turmoil, frustration and anger was due to sexual problems deriving from their
education and repressive home environment. Their combat experience […] only exacerbated existing hang-ups.\textsuperscript{35}

and Dan Todman’s assertion that Owen’s sexuality was problematic. Here, and in Todman’s further comment on Owen that ‘he had already bound himself up in a rhetoric of redemption through suffering’,\textsuperscript{36} both writers are drawing on one controversial secondary source, Adrian Caesar’s \textit{Taking It Like a Man}. We shall return to this particular text, but it is worth pointing out here the irony that these historians have lighted upon a literary critic who wishes to discredit the combatant poets not because of their anti-war stance, but because, as a pacifist, he finds their messages disturbingly \textit{pro}-war: ‘Too many [of their poems] find consolation in the suffering, too many of them celebrate sacrifice, for them to be an entirely convincing expression of anti-war sentiment.’\textsuperscript{37}

The desire of historians to invalidate the testimony of the poets stems from abhorrence either of what they have to say or of the influence they have had on readers. Where the latter is concerned, the simplification, if not distortion, of popular understanding of the war, unfortunate though it is, may stem as much from popular histories, war memoirs and visual sources as from poetry. However, the historians’ rejection of the poetry itself is a more complex issue, in which representation and representativeness figure again.

Firstly, there is an insistence that the experiences and ideas in the poetry were not those of the majority of soldiers. Of course, we can confirm the accuracy of much of the poetry by examining the poets’ correspondence and journals, as well as battalion war diaries. (Ironically, Sassoon’s realism was the stumbling block for contemporary critics: the \textit{Times Literary Supplement} critic wrote of \textit{Counter-Attack}: ‘It is difficult to judge him dispassionately as a poet, because it is impossible to overlook the fact that he writes as a soldier’, while the \textit{London Mercury} reviewer sighed over the 1919 \textit{War Poems}, ‘much of it can only be described as journalism’.)\textsuperscript{38}
In fact, all aspects of soldiering on the Western Front are represented in the poetry, including those (such as mutilation and psychological damage) less apparent in other testimony. Gurney, Aldington, Rosenberg and Blunden constantly render ‘out-of-the-line’ experience. As for mood and outlook, humour is almost as common as pathos, although generally in the forms of irony and understatement – modes common amongst ordinary soldiers. The views expressed across the poetry are all to be found in the writings of soldiers of all ranks, whether in diaries and letters or in retrospective accounts. Certainly, there is plenty of evidence that by 1917 high idealism about the war had been rejected by the majority of those fighting it, who dissociated themselves from the attitudes expressed on the home front.

Nevertheless, Jay Winter, a prominent cultural historian of the First World War, reminds us, like the military historians, that ‘the vision of elite writers or artists cannot be taken as a sure and steady guide to the aspirations and attitudes of the masses.’ For a surer guide to the latter, we might turn to John Fuller’s *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914–1918*, which provides us with evidence that while soldiers knew all too well the bitterness of trench warfare, they employed ingenuity and resilience in maintaining their civilian culture as a means of resisting the corrosive effects of war. None of this, however, negates the work of the poets, the value of which ultimately rests not on ‘typicality’ but on what Jon Stallworthy, with reference to Owen, calls ‘breadth and depth of vision’. It is a vision that has both an imaginative aspect – as illuminating of the battlefield and its consequences as is the work of the war’s artists – and a moral one.

Secondly, historians abhor the wish of some of the poets to speak on behalf of others. As Hibberd and Onions point out, this has to be put into the historical context: in their desire to represent the war ‘as it really was’, these poets were fighting another battle – ‘against the false language, the incessant optimistic rhetoric of politicians, newspapers and armchair patriots’. The imaginative power of much of the poetry of the Western Front is an outcome of this mission. Gurney wrote in a letter to Marion Scott in December 1916:
After all, my friend, it is better to live a grey life in mud and
danger, so long as one uses it – as I trust I am now doing –
as a means to an end. Someday all this experience may be
crystallized and glorified in me; and men shall learn by
chance fragments in a string quartet or symphony, what
thoughts haunted the minds of men who watched the
darkness grimly in desolate places. Who learnt by the denial
how full and wide a thing Joy may be, forming dreams of
noble lives when nothing noble but their own nobility (and
that seemed tiny and of little worth) was seen to be. Who
kept ever the memory of their home and friends to
strengthen them, and walked in pleasant places in faithful
dreams. And how one man longed to be working to
celebrate them in music and verse worthy of the high theme,
but did not bargain with God, since it is best to accept one’s
Fate when that is clearly seen.44

And Owen to his mother in December 1917:

Last year, at this time, […] I lay awake in a windy tent in
the middle of a vast, dreadful encampment. […] I thought of
the very strange look on all faces in that camp […].
It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than
terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression,
like a dead rabbit’s.
It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it.
And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with
them.45

Nevertheless, it is arguable that the poets attained universality of vision
less when consciously mediating for others than when engaging directly
with their own experiences and feelings. Perhaps the most remarkable
aspect of Owen’s poetic development is the journey through which he
came to speak not of and for his men, but as one of them.
Lastly, and most importantly, the historians are critical of particular omissions and emphases in the poetry, which they perceive as distortions. Correlli Barnett speaks of writers ‘masking the fact that they were killers as well as victims’.\textsuperscript{46} We can challenge this with Read’s ‘The Happy Warrior’ or Sassoon’s ‘Enemies’ or ‘Remorse’, but particularly with Owen, who boldly explored the ‘seared conscience’ and the ambivalent emotions of the killer, notably in ‘The Show’, ‘Apologia Pro Poemata Meo’, ‘Strange Meeting’ and ‘Spring Offensive’.

Dan Todman asserts not only that Owen ignores the ‘moral ambiguities of fighting and killing’ but that he ‘discussed the experience of war in terms of suffering and victimhood’,\textsuperscript{47} and it is this representation of the soldier as victim that seems to concern the historians most. A view of the war as a just and necessary conflict, conducted seriously and, ultimately, competently (and ending in victory), is compromised by the persistence of a literary portrayal of the front-line infantryman as victim not agent, suffering under the unremitting onslaught of mutilating modern weapons. Unfortunately, the latter is an accurate picture of much of front-line experience, in which hand-to-hand combat was the exception rather than the rule. The importance for revisionist historians of restoring agency to the infantryman is illustrated by the questionable assertion by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson that Frederick Manning’s \textit{Her Privates We} demonstrates that ‘war and its continuation comes from within the combatants themselves and is not imposed on them’.\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, Manning’s is the only novel of the First World War approved by revisionist historians, whose reading of its values might have disturbed the writer himself.

Yeats’s insistence in his introduction to \textit{The Oxford Book of Modern Verse} that ‘passive suffering is not a theme for poetry’\textsuperscript{49} and his notorious dismissal of Owen as ‘all blood, dirt and sucked sugar stick’,\textsuperscript{50} chime with the historians’ rejection of the poetry of pity, for Yeats’s view of war, as Jon Stallworthy recently remarked in a lecture to the Wilfred Owen Association,\textsuperscript{51} was Homeric, rather than humanist. Hibberd suggests that for Sassoon, especially, but probably also for Gurney, Sorley and Owen, \textit{The Dynasts} was more of a literary model
than *The Iliad*. This was a model that spoke of heroism and fate but more of irony and pity. We might also contrast Yeats’s observation that ‘In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies’ with Housman’s:

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Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose;
But young men think it is, and we were young.
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**Placing the poets: the response of the literary critics**

*What did they expect of our toil and extreme Hunger?*

The last three decades have seen the gradual erosion of the liberal humanist ideology that underpinned the work of critics of the 1960s and 1970s such as Jon Silkin and Bernard Bergonzi and the compilers of the First World War anthologies of the period. In his 1996 edition of *Heroes’ Twilight* Bergonzi, concerned that academic practices had become fused with national myth-making, revised much of his earlier thinking in an appendix significantly entitled ‘The Problem of War Poetry’. Here he writes that ‘Owen and Sassoon gave what could only be a close-up of a single aspect of [the war’s] appalling complexity, which had so many dimensions, historical, military, diplomatic’. (We notice the absence of a term such as ‘ethical’ or ‘moral’ in this list, but the incongruous application of the epithet ‘appalling’, as though Bergonzi is reluctant to let go altogether of a moral view of the war.) He goes on to argue that other poets ‘described the misery and the destruction and the waste of life; but such awareness is not in itself anti-war’. Neither, of course, could it be said to be ‘pro-war’.

While the other combatant poets are now regularly referred to as ‘not (altogether/necessarily …) anti-war’, Owen and Sassoon resist such recategorisation. Other approaches have had to be adopted. The first has already been identified: an insistence that their feelings and attitudes were not typical of those of the mass of men serving on the Western Front. I have argued that the issue of typicality is an irrelevance – certainly for literary critics, if not for military historians, that what
matters is the imaginative and moral vision of the poets. Secondly, as in Bergonzi’s comment above, the narrowness of the two poets’ experience is identified. Indeed, their opposition to the war is often accounted for by seeing them as poets of the Somme rather than of the whole war. This is certainly untrue of Owen, who came to the mud of the Serre Road and the frozen slopes of Redan Ridge seven weeks after the closing down of the Battle of the Somme, and whose most extensive experiences of warfare were the brief mobile phase of early 1917 after the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line and his seven-week share of the war’s last hundred days. (‘Spring Offensive’ was based on the former and completed during the latter of these two phases.) It is not even entirely true of Sassoon, who reached France in November 1915 and whose experience of the Battle of the Somme was confined to its first three weeks. The poems of Counter-Attack are rooted in his experiences of the spring of 1917, as much as in the earlier period.

The alternative approach, which has come down from John Johnston to Adrian Caesar, is to emphasise the narrowness – or the contradictoriness – of the emotional range of the two poets. Johnston, disappointed not to find an heroic literature of the war, remarked, in an echo of Yeats, that

unless pity is generated and objectified within a large tragic context, it cannot of itself support a tragic vision; as a motive for lyric poetry, it tends to become sentimental or obsessive. […] Their experiences – so alien to anything dealt with by the Romantic tradition – required an intellectual and imaginative discipline far beyond that provided by the vision of pity, which was itself a product of a tortured sensibility.\(^{57}\)

For Caesar, the issue is even simpler: Brooke, Graves, Sassoon and Owen were sado-masochists and their work elevates the value of pain and ultimately endorses violence. This interpretation is justified by very partial biographical accounts of the four poets, which are then read into the work on the grounds that ‘the reading of the life […] has a crucial relation to the reading of the literature’,\(^{58}\) and by certain cultural
assumptions: ‘the way in which received ideologies, Christianity, Romanticism and imperialism worked together in their lives to foster certain attitudes to sexuality and to suffering which in turn affected the way in which they wrote about the war’. 59

The discourses on suffering and love in the poetry of Owen and Sassoon repay close examination, 60 but for Caesar to suggest that ‘what is troubling in Owen’s work is that the celebration of love between men takes place in a context of massive violence’ is to ignore the fact that the violence was a given. (The lure of violence is also an issue that both poets address.) Caesar pays little attention to the radical ways in which the poetry of Owen and Sassoon reconfigures the discourses he identifies. Fortunately, discourses of gender and sexuality, as well as of politics and religion, are now regularly explored in textual criticism. 61 Santanu Das notes the way that the war, ‘while ravaging the male body on an unique scale, restored tenderness and touch in male relations’, 62 and his attention to the insistent foregrounding of the body in Owen’s poetry helps us to see this as something far more radical than Caesar would allow: an insistence on the physical and material, on life as the ultimate value, as against the abstractness of war’s traditional values.

I want to argue, along with Simon Featherstone, first that ‘war poetry is political as well as experiential[,] […] inevitably engaging with public issues of nationalism, patriotism, class and history’, and that, consequently, ‘definitions and interpretations of war poetry are not just matters of literary taste but are affected by the volatile politics of nationalism and historical perceptions’. 63 That some of today’s literary critics should attempt to expose the ideological assumptions of their predecessors is commendable, 64 but they need also to be rigorous in disclosing their own. Just as the criticism of the sixties was the product of a liberal humanist – and often pacifist – ideology, its rejection has taken place in the context of a political shift to the right in the eighties. Revisionist history is also rooted in this political change. No text can be value-free.
George Walter, in the introduction to his new edition of *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, published in 2006, points to the ‘restricted and restrictive nature’ of the canon:

Modern anthologies tend to favour those poems which stress the horrors of war, which are compassionate about the suffering of those who endured it and (preferably) translate that compassion into anger towards war and those who perpetuate it.\(^6^5\)

The first of these charges, the stress on the horrors of war, is a common criticism made by the historians. I have argued that trench warfare did have its horrors (as does all war) and that it was public ignorance of these that poets like Sassoon and Owen were fighting; nevertheless, this is a rather narrow conception of the range of combatant poetry – and even of the range represented in modern anthologies. It is the second charge, however, that reads rather strangely. Should it surprise us that compassion is one of the chief responses of poets to the suffering caused by war? It is hard to envisage what uncompassionate poetry of the First World War might look like (other than the ‘verse’ of the propagandists) – or why one would want to include it in any anthology if one were to find it. The translation of some poets’ compassion into anger ‘towards war and those who perpetuate it’ has again to be understood in the political and social context of the First World War, but would also seem to be a common and legitimate response to war.

For what is notable here is that Walter refers not to *the* war, but to *war*. His criticisms are not simply a manifestation of ‘political correctness’, an apologetic sideways glance at the military historians; they are the expression of a view of war itself which places ‘anti-war’ on one side of a dialectic, as though the ‘positive’ values of war (not, in fact, neglected by the combatant poets of the canon) can be balanced equally against the negative. His assessment of the canon attempts to expose the ideology underlying it – the humanist, anti-war politics of the sixties – and he suggests that ‘a conservative canon encourages conservative ways of reading’,\(^6^6\) by which he means the application of the ‘Owenesque model [of] authenticity plus sensitivity’. That such
readings may be over-simplifications, both of the historical facts of the First World War and of the poetry to which they are applied, is an important charge, but implicit in this account of the ‘conservative canon’ is a criticism of anti-war readings of war itself.

What makes this particular trend in late twentieth century criticism of the poetry of the First World War more remarkable is that it was that conflict that overturned popular conceptions of war. One of the most prominent military historians of recent years, Sir Michael Howard, reminds us that the First World War dramatically changed the way that our society views war: ‘Before 1914 war was almost universally considered an acceptable, perhaps an inevitable and for many people a desirable way of settling international differences.’

We have only to consider some of the myths that underpinned popular support for the war in 1914 – war as adventure or chivalric crusade, as a male rite of passage; war as the purifier of national decadence, as a stiffener of national morale – to realise the divide between the thinking of that society and our own. Heroic and romantic visions of war did not survive the Great War. (Of course, ‘anti-war’ thinking is not something the twentieth century invented. The man who said that next to a battle lost, the greatest misery is a battle gained and that ‘if you had seen but one day of war, you would pray to Almighty God that you might never see such a thing again’ was the victor of the Battle of Waterloo.) In the twenty-first century, we may resort to war but we see it not as the continuation of policy, but as an admission of its failure.

Fortunately, in recent years the divide between military history and literary criticism has been more effectively bridged by the cultural historians. However, the first work in this field, Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), provoked severe criticism from several military historians, who condemned Fussell’s historical inaccuracies, his reinforcement of the popular myths of the war and his implication that the war’s permanent importance lay in its literary and imaginative impact. But Fussell was followed by Samuel Hynes and Modris Eksteins, with their more rigorously historical analyses of the
relationship between the war and society. Hynes stated his position in *The Auden Generation*:

> I assume that a close relation exists between literature and history. I think that the relation is particularly close in times of crisis where public and private lives, the world of action and the world of imagination, interpenetrate. I do not believe that literature can be separated from social and political and economic history.\(^6^9\)

War poetry cannot be depoliticised; nor should it be marginalised. First World War poetry has to be read both as poetry of that war and as poetry of war. It has a place in literature and in history. While the poetry of the combatants is not the whole picture (of the war or of its poetry), historians have to take cognisance of the circumstances which gave rise to it, its range and scope, and the role it has played in British political and cultural consciousness. The experience of these poets compelled them to be witnesses: we cannot estimate the relevance or importance of their witness through spurious measures of their typicality or by crude readings of their ‘messages’; we have to read them in all their complexity and with the sophistication of textual methods which prioritise text over both biography and notions of authorial intention.

This leaves the military historians with the problem of combating the popular myth of the war. However, discrediting the testimony of the poets is an approach that is both dubious and inadequate.

NOTES

1 Other works seen as crucial in the founding and sustaining of the myth include Remarque’s novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* in the thirties, Joan Littlewood’s play *Oh What a Lovely War* in the sixties and the Richard Curtis and Ben Elton television comedy series *Blackadder Goes Forth* in the
nineties, but it is the poetry of the war with which this paper will be concerned.


5 Ibid., pp. xiv–xvi.


10 Wilfred Owen, ‘Futility’, st. 2, l. 5.

11 Niall Ferguson’s in *The Pity of War*, also published in 1998 (London: Allen Lane), was another.


14 Todman, pp. 8–9.


17 Osbert Sitwell, ‘Rhapsode’, ll. 35–36.

18 For example (approximately): Sorley 4 ½ months; Owen 8; Aldington 11; Graves 13; Gurney 15; Sassoon 16; Read 18; Rosenberg 19; Jones and Blunden 22.

19 Rosenberg, Gurney, Jones and Aldington all served in the ranks, the latter as a conscript.


21 Barnett, p. 429. Barnett is criticising the memoir writers rather than the poets, but in most cases their identities are the same, viz. Sassoon, Blunden and Graves.


Barnett, p. 433 (my italics). We should note that Barnett has the grace to add the following observation: ‘This is a delicate topic for a historian who has never known a battlefield, for he is sitting in judgement on men who endured ordeals that he fears he himself could not support. The writer approaches these writers of the Great War in personal humility and in wonder at their courage and fortitude.’

Todman, p. 159.


See *A Subaltern’s War* (1929, under the pseudonym of Charles Edmonds) and *Soldier from the Wars Returning* (1965).


Todman, p. 162.


(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Of course, we have to set alongside this estimation of troop resilience the equally strong evidence of psychological casualties.


That the military historians do not have similar criticisms to make of the artists is interesting. Is it simply because they are not seen to have had the
same influence on popular understanding of the war? Or because painting is
not deemed to have a moral dimension?

also makes this point in *The Literature of War: Studies in Heroic Virtue*
(Basingstoke: Macmillan 1989), p. 77, and Jon Stallworthy and Dominic
Hibberd have demonstrated how many of Owen’s poems are explicit
responses to the texts of others.

44 Quoted in M. Hurd, *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney* (Oxford: Oxford University

45 *Wilfred Owen: Selected Letters*, ed. J. Bell (Oxford University Press, 1985),
letter no. 578.

46 Barnett, p. 433.

47 Todman, p. 171.

68.


50 Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley, 26 December 1936, *Letters on Poetry from W.
113.

51 Shrewsbury, 7 November 2008.


53 ‘XXXVI’ (‘Here dead lie we because we did not choose’), *More Poems*
(1936), ll. 3–4.

54 Ivor Gurney, ‘War Books’, ll. 1–2.


56 Ibid., p. 219.

158–59.

58 Caesar, p. 117.

59 Ibid., p. 172.

60 One of the most masterly of such discussions is to be found in Jon Silkin’s
introduction to his 1981 edition of *The Penguin Book of First World War
Poetry*.

61 See, for example, Sarah Cole’s *Modernism, Male Friendship and the First

62 S. Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge:

63 S. Featherstone, ed., *Poetry of the First World War: An Introductory Reader*
See, for example, James Campbell, ‘Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism’, *New Literary History*, 30, no. 1 (1999), 203–12.


66 Ibid., p. xxxiv.


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Claude Vigée

TRANSLATED BY ANTHONY RUDOLF

Jacob’s Lament

‘Jacob spent the night there’

‘Among all those who bear witness to my divided self
Go forth and render homage to my oneness.
Among all those who defy my weakness and my imperfection
Go forth and proclaim my strength and my perfection!’

Under the heaviest straitjacket a rejected world
Wove in hatred, my shoulders have given way.
The burning vision of misfortune which strikes at us
Removes from me the desire to live and struggle.

After the secret joy,
And the death agony imprinted on the shameful darkness of your loins,
The cry of fraternal suffering commences
And compassion in the morning holocaust
Of your entire and irreparable future.

Cast aside and banished by enemy hands,
Is it not enough while weeping for a home
For us to beg refuge from lands that are more blessed?
Each nation wants to stamp on us and crush us.

Seated against the walls the echo of fleeing roads pierces,
Mingled with the crunching of wheels which bear through the sky
small tribes of clouds,

We shall praise you, Lord,
For instituting the death we seek:
Fly us safely through the arteries of time
Where the ashen roses of our people grow towards the source!
Dragged towards the pyre amidst opprobrium and laughter,
My people I see you and in the flesh of my heart
The ancient burning of the martyrs quickens:
But when my mouth excites the ardent walls of the air,
The sorrow of my blood expires against their stone.

Among all those who bear witness to your divided self
I shall go forth and render homage to your oneness.
Among all those who defy your weakness and your imperfection
I shall go forth and proclaim your strength and your perfection!

Oh Lord, promise us the death we seek
Oh Lord, promise us the darkness we seek
Oh Lord, give us the land we seek
After the darkness of time the death we seek.

_Toulouse, 15 June 1941_

**NOTE**

One of France’s most distinguished contemporary poets, Claude Vigée was born in 1921 into a Jewish family long established in Alsace. He wrote ‘Jacob’s Lament’ (‘Lamentation de Jacob’) while he was actively involved in the Jewish Resistance for more than two years in Toulouse, before escaping at the end of 1942 to the United States. He has given a moving account of his wartime experiences in _La Lune d’hiver_ (Paris: Flammarion, 1970; Honoré Champion, 2002), and in interviews in _Mélancolie solaire_, edited by Anne Mounic (Paris: Orizons, 2008).


Dunstan Ward
The Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, presented last year a number of poems written by UK poets with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan as their subject. In a prefatory piece in the *Guardian*, she acknowledged that these were poems written at one remove, mainly informed by ‘emails or texts from friends or colleagues in war zones, through radio or newsprint or television, through blogs or tweets or interviews.’ However, she noted, given that combatants in the twenty-first century were not writing poetry, it presumably fell to civilians to take on the subject.

Shortly afterwards, Erica Wagner in *The Times* expressed gratitude to Duffy for bringing war poetry back to public attention, but reminded readers that contemporary war poetry was being written with direct experience of its subject – not by combatants, but civilians caught up in the fighting: Iraqi and Afghan and Palestinian poets, whose work the article then presented.

Both articles alluded to a debate about war poetry: how it should be written and by whom. This debate has been going on for the best part of a century and could even be said to have reached some solid conclusions. It has produced a kind of recipe for civilian writers on how to produce successful war poetry – while also warning that it might be best to avoid the subject altogether.

Before going any further, it’s worth making a clear distinction between the different varieties of war poetry. This essay assumes the existence of three basic forms. Firstly, poetry written by men (and almost universally, it is men) who have themselves been in an army, in battle, and been a legitimate target for an enemy: men such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who not only saw killing done but killed other men themselves. (I use the male third-person pronoun throughout: this is due to the fact that combatant poets are invariably drawn from the all-
male infantry and armour). This homicidal background cannot be underestimated, and lies at the heart of combatant poetry.

Secondly, there’s war poetry written by directly affected civilians, such as Erica Wagner’s poets.

Thirdly, there’s war poetry written by indirectly affected civilians, such as Carol Ann Duffy’s poets.

The varieties are very different, and in some cases, in opposition to one another. However, there remains a fourth, hybridised form. This is written by civilian poets with personal, non-combatant experience of war. They combine this with a close and sympathetic reading of combatant poetry, thus producing a subsequent variety that draws on the strengths and counteracts the weaknesses of the ‘basic’ forms. For outstanding examples of how it’s done, this essay will look to W. H. Auden and James Fenton.

War poetry by civilians rarely captures the imagination in the same way that poetry by a combatant does. On the face of it, the reason is obvious. The large part of civilian poetry works by investing the often-underestimated with fresh significance. Its common subjects – love, the natural world and social relations – are familiar to most readers, who appreciate the poet’s superior awareness of such things.

But war is a subject that is significant all by itself. Readers of poetry are unlikely to have underestimated it. They do not require a poet to call attention to its neglected impact. Instead, readers read poetry about it to learn things they could not know; to be presented with alien circumstances and unguessable emotions. The civilian poet has very little to offer in these circumstances.

War is also one of many possible subjects for civilian poets. They can take it or leave it. It is the only subject for the combatant poet, who often laments that they cannot escape it; they see the whole world through the memory of it. While the civilian poet applies a poetic
sensibility to the quotidian and refashions it, combatant poets are themselves remade by war, and when they write about it, it’s the subject matter sitting in the driving-seat, not the poeticising instinct.

War is also directly experienced by relatively few, and by still fewer as combatants. Even amongst deployed military personnel only a relative minority go near the front line and kill or see killing done. (Front-line soldiers, while comprising ‘about 10% of an army, provide 70% of the physical and psychological casualties’.³) Those that go on to write coherent poetry about it are a special case, and for better or worse they often write with this awareness. The combatant poet does not anticipate a dialogue with his readers. The transmission of information goes only one way; readers ought only to pin back their ears and listen. As the Hollywood Vietnam veteran stereotypically declares, ‘You don’t know, man, because you weren’t there.’

So when a civilian poet writes about war, it’s liable to strike us as immediately disingenuous. Any poem written on the basis of second-hand, mediated sources risks coming across like a love poem written by someone who has never been in love, but only heard other people talk about it. Of course, such a love poem might be interesting in its own right, coming as it would from a sort of alienated viewpoint. But the poem would have to recognise this limitation, and this is not always the case with civilian poetry about war. Like love, the subjective experience of war might, in fact, be the whole point, and any artistic statement thatfails to acknowledge this, fails completely. And as we’ll see, love and war turn out to be inextricably connected in combatant poetry.

The civilian poet might counter-claim to be more objective than the combatant. The combatant (one could argue), by allowing himself to become a combatant at all, has revealed himself to be morally and intellectually compromised, and therefore an unreliable poetic witness. Maybe. But this is precisely what combatants themselves use their poems to say. One of the hallmarks of combatant poetry is that the poetic speaker’s skewed perspective constitutes a kind of super-objectivity. And if what we were after was hard-nosed dispassionate
investigation – the demonstrable facts about love, the natural world, society, and even warfare – we ought to be reading a peer-reviewed scientific or academic publication, not a poem. Whereupon we would have made a second mistake, because a calm and logical treatment of the subject of war is to have misunderstood it, as Clausewitz says of the experience of battle:

The novice cannot pass through these layers of increasing intensity of danger without sensing that here ideas are governed by other factors, that the light of reason is refracted in a manner quite different to that which is normal in academic speculation.  

As Erica Wagner asks: what about civilians directly affected by war? They are innocent and yet experienced: surely, the ideal perspective from which to write a poem. Certainly, they are likely to be more convincing than a poet affected only on an intellectual level. But there’s still something missing from the direct-victim perspective. A civilian can suffer purely. He or she can unstintingly bemoan, or lambast his or her oppressors – even call for revenge. As Auden put it in ‘September 1, 1939’:

I and the public know  
What all schoolchildren learn,  
Those to whom evil is done  
Do evil in return.

The combatant, by comparison, writes from a profoundly conflicted position. He is both victim and aggressor. As Keith Douglas depicted in ‘Vergissmeinnicht’, the soldier is both the cause and effect of his own suffering – and others’.

For here the lover and killer are mingled  
who had one body and one heart.  
And death who had the soldier singled  
has done the lover mortal hurt.
This two-fold predicament puts the combatant in a position to see not only war’s tragedies in close-up, but also lets him in on why they occur in the first place. Because combatants perceive war to be (at the most basic level) their fault, their poetry is preoccupied with with human proneness to error. Rarely does combatant poetry try to justify itself. It is infused with issues of guilt and repentance, with the poet himself set up as the implicit or explicit negative exemplar. This makes it attractive and readable, tapping into a recognition of a more general fallibility; of the cognitive and moral failures familiar in the peacetime human condition.

In the course of blaming themselves, though, combatants do go on to blame others. While the experience of war might disabuse the combatant poet of the ideals that motivated him to participate in it, that is rarely the end of it. Because whenever combatants try to tell those back home what it’s like, invariably (so they tell us) they find their testimony ignored or dismissed. It all becomes evidence, as Sassoon declared, of

> the callous complacence with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies that they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise.\(^5\)

Again and again, combatant poetry discovers how determined civilians are to obviate their own complicity or apathy, to think well of themselves, and to dismiss any evidence to the contrary. No matter how many young men have to die, civilian societies insist on their fond myths of patriotism and ethnic identity. For many combatants, this stubborn refusal of civilians to listen becomes more significant than the war itself. It illustrates the terrible shallowness of human sympathy. In *Regeneration* (1991), Pat Barker characterises this toxic antipathy in the fictionalised conversations between W. H. Rivers and Sassoon:
Rivers laughed. ‘The point is you hate civilians, don’t you? [...] Or is “hate” too strong a word?’
‘No.’
‘So. What you felt for the Germans, rather briefly, in the spring of last year, you now feel for the overwhelming majority of your countrymen?’
‘Yes.’

One character that could have come straight out of one of Sassoon’s poems is encountered by Richard Hannay in John Buchan’s *Mr Standfast* (1919). Going undercover, the veteran Hannay is travelling by train through wartime England. He encounters an ‘old boy in the corner [...] asking me questions and audibly wondering why I wasn’t fighting.’

He was a tremendous fire-eater [...] . I knew his kind and didn’t give much for it. He was the sort who, if he had been under fifty, would have crawled on his belly to his tribunal to get exempted, but being over age was able to pose as a patriot.

Filled as it is with these types, the home country becomes a place of revulsion, and the battlefield itself weirdly cherished. For Robert Graves,

Great Britain was a quiet, easy place for getting back to out of the foreign misery, but as a nation it included not only the trench-soldiers themselves [...] but all civilians down to the detested grades of journalists, profiteers, ‘starred’ men exempted from enlistment [...] and members of the Government.

And later:

England looked strange to us returned soldiers. We could not understand the war-madness that ran wild everywhere,
looking for a pseudo-military outlet. The civilians talked a foreign language; and it was newspaper language.¹⁰

This scathing mention of journalists is typical of combatants. Journalists are the worst civilians of all, being in a position to inform the public correctly and shape its opinion more responsibly. But from what combatant poets tell us, the press can be relied upon only to do the opposite. Whether out of cowardice or chauvinism, this makes journalists the most culpable of all, and in Sassoon’s poem ‘Fight to a Finish’, he goes as far as fantasising about ordering his men to bayonet representatives of the Yellow Press, once the war in France is over.

As a rule, combatant poets can’t stress strongly enough that it’s the home front that sustains and prolongs wars. This is an issue almost never touched upon in civilian-produced war poetry. However, while Carol Ann Duffy’s poets show little suspicion of their own motives, or the basis for their righteous indignation, Erica Wagner’s are surprisingly sceptical about themselves and their fellow countrymen, and in their poems we find blame to be diffused and involving the poetic voice itself. The Iraqi poet Kajal Ahmad mixes intriguing images of consumption, knives, cutting and sourness in ‘The Fruit Seller’s Philosophy’, and the Israeli Tuvya Reubner, orphaned by the Nazis, asks


[...] what
is the mere life of man with his wicked heart
with his abject heart, with his
shifty eyes.¹¹

‘Man’, Tuvya writes pointedly, not ‘the enemy’ or ‘other men’. If any of the civilian war poets mentioned in this essay have a right to be angry and self-pitying, it would be these last two. Significantly, they are not: probably because they know better what it is they are writing about.
This liability of (inexperienced) civilians to pontificate, even with the best of intentions, also accounts for the fraught relationship combatant poets have with pacifists. While ostensibly on the same side of the argument, combatant poets tend to accord little credit to civilian pacifists, who are assumed to have adopted their position out of some whim or fashion. In *Mr Standfast*, the secret agent Mary describes to Hannay the pacifist circle he will have to infiltrate, in terms reminiscent of Robert Graves’s opinion of the Garsington set that encouraged Sassoon’s protest.

You have got to sink down deep into the life of the half-baked, the people whom this war hasn’t touched or has touched in the wrong way, the people who split hairs all day and are engrossed in what you or I would call selfish little fads. [...] You will hear everything you regard as sacred laughed at and condemned, and every kind of nauseous folly acclaimed [...].

Almost as if Buchan anticipated being written off as a chauvinist, he preceded this chapter with one in which Hannay goes to visit his shell-shocked friend, Blaikie. Hardly a card-carrying liberal, Hannay still credits post-traumatic stress as just as much an ‘honourable’ wound as a lost arm or leg:

[Blaikie] had been buried by a big crump just before we got to our second objective, and was dug out without a scratch, but daft as a hatter. [...] A bird flew out of a bush, and I could see him holding himself tight to keep him from screaming. The best I could do was put a hand on his shoulder and stroke him as one strokes a frightened horse. The sight of my old friend didn’t put me in love with pacifism.

To a modern reader, this last sentence seems a jarring non-sequitur. But it should not. Civilians do not ‘know’ war, and are unaware of what they are rejecting; they are, therefore, unqualified to reject it. Peaceniks
avow something intellectually which the combatant knows by experience. This puts a world of difference between them. In their melioristic, book-conned humanism, intellectuals almost parody the combatant’s ground-in gnosis. That said, even Hannay begins to accept that the pacifist civilians he meets might not be quite the ‘groping things’ and self-servers they first seem:

He had considerable brains, for the reasons he gave for differing from most of his countrymen were good so far as they went. [...] If you had told me about such a fellow a week before I should have been sick at the thought of him. But now I didn’t dislike him.¹⁴

Hannay goes as far as to admit that if it came to an argument (he’s undercover, remember), he’d probably lose to the pacifist. Typically, he doesn’t think that makes him a jot less correct, or the civilian remotely in the right. The combatant dismisses logic and rational argument and demands from the civilian entire, unqualified acceptance of his testimony. The only thing Hannay respects about the conscientious objectors is their determination. ‘These people were quite honest and in a perverted way quite courageous’, he concedes to himself,¹⁵ even paying one the mental compliment that ‘if he had been thirty and in my battalion I could have made a soldier out of him.’¹⁶ Revolting as these pacifists are, Buchan suggests, they’re still better than the fire-eating old boy in the railway carriage.

Civilian and even personal complicity is the single most important idea that civilian war poetry can extract from combatant poetry. We see it in the war-poems of Auden and Fenton, where civilians are hysterical gullible consumers of propaganda, brutal mobs, would-be users and approvers of violence themselves. The only one of Carol Ann Duffy’s line-up that comes close to reprising this theme is Gillian Clarke, whose poetic vision in ‘Listen’ moves from

    a chanting crowd fisting the foetid air;
    to a silent Wiltshire town at a last parade;¹⁷
It’s difficult to tell, but if Clarke is making an implicit link between these two assemblies of civilians – Middle-Eastern rioters and Wootton Bassett mourners – then she is writing within the best tradition of war poetry. It’s a ballsy call, but we have to remember how vigorously combatant poets themselves reject ceremony and solemnity, as ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ makes clear. The Harvard psychiatrist Dr Judith Herman explains it with reference to combat trauma:

Returning soldiers have always been exquisitely sensitive to the degree of support they encounter at home […]. [E]ven congratulatory public ceremonies, however, rarely satisfy the combat veteran’s longing for recognition, because of the sentimental distortion of the truth of combat.¹⁸

Meanwhile, when most civilian poets write about war, civilians are innocent victims or weeping mothers. In ‘It could have been’, Clare Shaw writes about the deaths of young Iraqi children:

It could have been you this morning,  
stood at the end of your bed,  
eyes still shut, arms held up for your mother,  
who makes sun and all things possible,  
who could, little Ali, be me.¹⁹

For me to make this comparison is not really fair, as the circumstances Shaw’s poem describes are genuinely different from ones that preoccupied Owen and Sassoon. The First World War was not a war conducted among civilians in the way the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have been, and the victims listed in Shaw’s poem are all genuine innocents. But Shaw’s speculative, subjunctive method is still somewhat forced, and worth juxtaposing with combatant poems such as Sassoon’s ‘Reconciliation’.

When you are standing at your hero’s grave,  
Or near some homeless village where he died,  
Remember, through your heart’s rekindling pride,
The German soldiers who were loyal and brave.

Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done;  
And you have nourished hatred, harsh and blind.  
But in that Golgotha perhaps you’ll find  
The mothers of the men who killed your son.

For Sassoon, merely being bereaved cuts no ice, nor, as we’ll see, does being a child make one innocent. Children are still liable to be gofers and petty tyrants, such as the nightmare figure of the ‘lethal boy’ in Fenton’s ‘Children in Exile’. At it’s most extreme formulation, a child is just another murderer that hasn’t grown to killing maturity. Light-heartedly but in a similar vein, Auden refers to children as ‘brave warriors out of a job’.

Taken all together it’s not surprising that some civilian poets decide to leave the subject of war well alone. These have included W. B. Yeats, C. Day Lewis, and T. S. Eliot. In these three cases, their reluctance to write war poetry demonstrated a shrewd understanding of their arena of competence. In foregoing the grandstanding opportunity, all three were able to preserve and even consolidate their poetic strengths.

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

(‘On Being Asked for a War-Poem’)

In ‘Where are the War Poets?’, Lewis goes further, reminding readers that the colossal moral crime of war is hardly excused by writing poetry after it.

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

Quoted in Erica Wagner’s article, the Palestinian poet Nasr Jamil Shah says something very similar in his poem ‘Justification’:

I told you repeatedly:
Shiny poetry cannot
Inject the war with a needle of
reconciliation ...

Owen and Sassoon probably didn’t think this either, though it’s often how their work gets treated (as Yeats anticipated). As we’ve seen, even Sasoon’s poem titled ‘Reconciliation’ is not really a reconciliation at all – unless it’s with a brutal fact. However, this is how some of Carol Ann Duffy’s poets seem to think of themselves, and in an interview in the Mirror, Carol Ann Duffy described her own poem ‘Last Post’ as ‘an attempt at healing and being at one with the world. The poem is a tribute and blessing, even an apology, on behalf of poetry and all poets.’

But in order to apologise for something, one must be responsible for it – and in the case of war, poets, for better or worse, are probably not responsible. For one to offer ‘an apology’ strikes me as an attempt at creating a back-door into an undeserved relevance. Duffy may have been tailoring her words for a tabloid readership, because her poem itself is less confident – ‘If poetry could truly write it backwards / then it would.’ Well, it can’t, its readers are likely to reply – and there it is.

So it is that the most successful war poets, whether combatant and civilian, often start by declaring the impotence or irrelevance of poetry next to the subject matter itself. In The Kingdom of God Is Within You (1894), Leo Tolstoy (an ex-combatant himself) quotes Guy de Maupassant (also an ex-combatant) quoting Victor Hugo (a civilian), calling for war to be ‘dishonoured’, and that this ought to be enshrined as an ‘absolute truth’.
‘Vain wrath,’ continues Maupassant, ‘a poet’s indignation. War is held in more veneration than ever.’

But not all poets are ready to accept that their wrath is in vain, and that what they do (as Auden puts it) ‘makes nothing happen’. Which is why of all the non-war poems, Yeats’s remains the most effective. He moves the focus to pleasant images of young girls and old men, both subjects with which he is much more at home.

Nor is it enough that war poetry and regular poetry agree to disagree. Civilian poets often display a lingering antipathy towards combatant poets, sniping at them from the established high ground. Part of it might be resentment of the special-case status given to poetry written by combatants. As we’ve seen, combatant poetry sets particular terms and conditions upon its readers. It brooks no dispute or comeback. It is allowed to hector in a way unthinkable to a civilian poet, and it is this privilege to go largely unchallenged that has led many critics and poets to treat it as a mutant off-shoot. Despite its popularity, combatant poetry remains on the fringes of the tradition, anthologised more for its historical than its literary value. Yeats, editing *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936, refused to do even this. In a letter to Dorothy Wellesley on 21 December 1936, he wrote:

> When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets’ corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board Man of the revolution & that some body has put his worst & most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum – however if I had known it I would have excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick (look at the selection in Faber’s Anthology – he calls poets ‘bards,’ a girl a ‘maid,’ & talks about ‘Titanic wars’). There is every excuse for him but none for those who like him.
Yeats acknowledged the omission in the preface, according respect for the active character of the First World War poets, but recommending that they stick to their day jobs.

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 [...] 28

In 1942, T. S. Eliot’s ‘A Note on War Poetry’ was similarly grudging, placing inverted commas around the word ‘poetry’, and following it with the acid faint praise of ‘verse’:

War is not a life; it is a situation,  
One which may neither be ignored nor accepted,  
A problem to be met with ambush or stratagem,  
Enveloped or scattered.

The enduring is not a substitute for the transient,  
Neither one for the other. But the abstract conception  
Of private experience at its greatest intensity  
Becoming universal, which we call ‘poetry’,  
May be affirmed in verse.

All this was reiterated a few years ago by Craig Raine. Writing in the Daily Telegraph, 29 Raine echoed many of Yeats’s sentiments, including Yeats’s qualification that Owen was ‘a bad poet but a good letter writer’. 30 Otherwise, noted Raine, Owen’s archaic and florid diction betrayed a somewhat middle-class surprise at how unpleasant war actually is: a fact that was hardly disguised prior to 1914.

In many ways, the anti-combatant poets have a strong case. They feel they understand a truth about art better than most readers, who fondly imagine that a difficult experience (what Yeats called ‘passive suffering’) will automatically generate worthwhile literature. Non-poets
cannot feel the loathing poets have for whatever is self-indulgent, what Raine calls ‘easy, posturing eloquence’ – for status accorded on what amounts to a sympathy vote.

One consequence of this is (as Yeats predicted) the combatant poet becoming a national treasure. Owen’s poems are not always strong or complex enough to resist their misuse. They can be defanged for public treatment, read in the midst of flags and parades. Reverent anniversary documentaries on television and radio draw spurious comparisons between the First World War and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Owen’s defence, it’s probably true that there is no piece of art that can resist being co-opted to the reverse of the creator’s intentions, though it’s worth noting how rarely Sassoon is profiled, Sassoon’s preoccupation with official mendacity and civilian complacency hitting a bit too close to home.

In short, we can say that there has always been a backlash against combatant poets, or rather their hallowed reputation: some of it justified and some even overdue. But there is a middle way. Some civilian poets (and novelists) have paid close attention to combatant literature, liked it, and found ways of combining the interior position of the combatant with the exterior position of the civilian. The result has been a vindication of combatant poetry, showing it to have had a significant effect upon the twentieth-century mainstream.

For Auden and Fenton, it undoubtedly helped that both had some ‘bridging’ experience of wars themselves, in peripheral roles or as journalists. As Auden put it in a letter to E. R. Dodds, ‘I shall probably be a bloody bad soldier, but how can I speak to/for them without becoming one.’ In the end, Auden was never a combatant, participating in the Republican effort in the Spanish Civil War as a propagandist. Upon his return to the UK, he continued this task in the poem ‘Spain, 1937’. Next year, he travelled to China with Christopher Isherwood to observe the Sino-Japanese War. This yielded his sonnet cycle ‘In Time of War’ and its verse Commentary. The year after that,
Auden wrote ‘September 1, 1939’ – what could be described as an example of ‘pre-war’ poetry.

Auden’s self-involvement with these wars was, in part, a consequence of reading Owen – the critic Tim Kendall notes how Auden described himself as ‘seduced’ by reading Owen, and was inspired to go to wars in order to write poetry about them. However, two of the resultant poems (‘Spain, 1937’ and ‘September 1, 1939’) Auden later disavowed, wishing them unpublished, or with the proviso that he thought them ‘trash’. ‘In Time of War’ and its Commentary share much with ‘Spain, 1937’ (a rather grandiose account of human history, up to the present day and the present war) and it’s interesting why Auden didn’t reject ‘In Time of War’ as well, only revising it and dropping some sonnets from subsequent editions.

James Fenton has worked as a war correspondent in South-East Asia, and had first-hand experience of conflict and political repression in the Middle East. Like Auden, he has held the post of Professor of Poetry at Oxford University. Fenton admires Auden, to the point of making the influence explicit in his poem ‘Children in Exile’:

Pretending to work, I retire to the study
And find a copy of The Dyer’s Hand
Where I read: ‘An emigrant never knows what he wants,
Only what he does not want.’ I understand [...].

By rhyming ‘I understand’ with the title of Auden’s collection of essays, Fenton signals a wish to be judged and endorsed by the former’s standard – which is what this essay intends to do. Owen’s influence on Fenton is less direct, and for our purposes Owen influences Auden, and through Auden, goes on to influence Fenton.

Before going any further into Auden’s and Fenton’s poems, there are still distinguishing features shared by almost all combatant poets that need to be anatomised. We’ve already seen how prone they are to blame or negatively characterise civilians. The flip-side is that combatant
poets are remarkably uninterested in their supposed enemy. ‘Germans he scarcely thought of’, Owen wrote in ‘Disabled’. Edward Thomas wrote that ‘Beside my hate for one fat patriot / My hatred of the Kaiser is love true’ (‘This is no case...’).

This becomes less surprising once we take into account that soldiers, professionally, are obliged to spend a lot of time thinking about what their counterparts are doing and thinking. Planning and taking part in battle requires the soldier to anticipate and outwit the enemy. This demands imaginative sympathy with him and the recognition of common humanity. Forced to exercise one’s theory of mind, it makes it quite difficult to hate one’s opposite number; often enough one is prompted to like and admire him – and if one is a poet, to enter into his thoughts and feelings – as in Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’:

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.  
I know you in the dark: for so you frowned  
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

When the combatant poet is not apostrophising or ventriloquising his enemies, they fade into the background and become an impersonal force. They become known by their numerical values, such as calibres of their ordnance – ‘five-nines’, in both Owen’s ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ and Sassoon’s ‘Counter-Attack’. In ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, even these shells receive the transferred epithets of ‘tired, outstripped.’ Often, the combatant poet sees himself fighting with a personified or abstracted Death, such as in Ivor Gurney’s ‘The Interview’ or Owen’s ‘The Next War’. Combatant poets also liken shells and poison gas and bullets to inimical forces of nature; to surf or wind or geography:

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

(‘Spring Offensive’)

Nor do combatants like to hear their enemy traduced. Robert Graves noted that ‘newspaper libels on Fritz’s courage and efficiency were resented by all trench-soldiers of experience.’ Again, it turns out to be civilians that create and sustain the propaganda that the experience of war radically undoes. It’s civilians that tend to describe the enemy in terms of deliberate evil, unreasoning brutality: something with which ‘we’ have nothing in common.

In the poems of Owen and Sassoon, the crippled and beleaguered soldier exists in opposition to the nauseatingly smug civilian. The human being in its unwounded and unendangered state is an unsympathetic and essentially loathsome creature. Only through mental and physical trauma can it become less deceived, and glimpse its own and others’ fallen condition – then, at last, becoming deserving of love and redemption. This is the thesis that underpins the common narrative in combatant poetry. A Great Mistake is followed by a terrible penance, after which comes rejection of civilian society’s worthless values (since civilian society refuses to recognise the mistake as a mistake). At last comes spiritual rebirth – often as not, based on the commandment to love and forgive.

In one form or another, this might be described as the prototypical artistic and narrative statement; one promulgated by the greatest of civilian war poets, Homer:

Priam had set Achilles thinking of his own father and brought him to the verge of tears. Taking the old man’s hand, he gently put him from him; and overcome by their memories they both broke down. Priam, crouching at Achilles’ feet, wept bitterly for man-slaying Hector, and Achilles wept for his father, and then again for Patroclus […]. ‘We men are wretched things, and the gods, who have no cares themselves, have woven sorrow into the very pattern of our lives.’
The scene from the *Iliad* is also unusual, because it’s a rare instance of reconciliation between civilian and combatant. Whoever’s fault war is, many combatants never achieve this reacceptance, and retain a sense of being pushed to the fringe, mired in derangement and suicidal misanthropy. Virginia Woolf depicted this in the character of Septimus, the traumatised veteran of her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Septimus says he does not wish to bring more children into the world, as ‘human beings have neither kindness, not faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment’; they ‘have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities’. With his wife, Lucretia,

[Septimus] would argue […] about killing themselves; and explain how wicked people were; how he could see them making up lies as they passed in the street. He knew all their thoughts, he said; he knew everything. He knew the meaning of their world, he said.\(^{35}\)

Great minds, adds Septimus, such as Dante and Aeschylus, said as much – Shakespeare too ‘loathed humanity’. Human nature, for Septimus, gets summed up in the person of his doctor, Holmes (Septimus puns on the homophone ‘homes’, which of course is where civilians live).

Once you fall, Septimus repeated to himself, human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw are on you. They scour the desert. They fly screaming into the wilderness […]. Human nature is remorseless.\(^{36}\)

All these characteristics – personal guilt, disgust at civilians and at human nature in general (with the exception of manly camaraderie, which is often extended to their enemy) – can be tracked in the use of the four words vital to any discussion of war poetry, civilian or combatant. The words are: lie, pride, murder and love.
The most famous lie in war poetry is, of course, the ‘old Lie’: ‘Dulce et Decorum Est / Pro Patria Mori’. Ezra Pound described First World War veterans who

  came home, home to a lie,
  home to many deceits,
  home to old lies and new infamy;
  usury age-old and age-thick
  and liars in public places.

  (‘E.P. Ode pour L’Election de son Sepulchre’)

As well as the political lie – that the war is/was worth it – there’s also the lie that war is somehow salutary on a personal level. Vietnam-veteran Tim O’Brien rejects this in *The Things They Carried* (1990):

  If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or it you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie.\(^{37}\)

As we’ll see, this isn’t the case with all combatant poets. Some – in fact, most – do try to offer a ‘small bit of rectitude’. But it’s the first variety of lie, the public, political one, that civilian-poets tend to seize upon. In ‘Descent’, one of Carol Ann Duffy’s poets, Alan Jenkins, has Blair and Bush excrementally tortured in a Dantean confinement.

  ‘To satisfy their vanity,’ my guide said,
  ‘A million, two million forsaken had to die.
  Now they must squabble in this place instead,
  But no lies they repeat will justify
  Their crimes, or earn forgiveness from the dead ...’\(^{38}\)

Following an unsuccessful war, this is a common civilian reaction: to blame the leaders. Combatants rarely do. For Tolstoy, leaders were the slaves of history and effectively irrelevant to the discussion. The combatant’s interest in lies has become metaphysical: for him, lying is
shown to be inherent in the human condition. This is why so many combatant poets are interested in original sin, why references to the Book of Genesis are so common in war poetry, and even crop up in Buchan’s novels:

I observed that the poor old War seemed to be getting blamed for a good deal that I was taught in my childhood was due to original sin.  

Septimus, as we have seen, is obsessed by civilians making up lies. Auden, too, depicts lying civilians in ‘September 1, 1939’.

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky.

Auden doesn’t dismiss the lie of Authority, but shows how the ‘man-in-the-street’ is complicit in his deception by being ‘romantic’ and ‘sensual.’ ‘Folded’ is a fascinating word, which ought to put us in mind of a propaganda pamphlet or newspaper. We remember that only two years before, Auden had been in Spain working as a propagandist, and that his own poem ‘Spain, 1937’ was published as a pamphlet. Latent in this stanza is Auden’s nagging awareness of having perpetrated lies in an earlier poem.

‘Folded’ is also a tactile description. Limited by the internal volume of the skull, the brain is literally folded to increase its surface area. Auden’s poetry often makes reference to neurobiology. ‘Certainly the growth of the fore-brain has been a success’,  

he drily observes in the Commentary to ‘In Time of War’. The brain as flawed biological machine: a neat materialist refiguration of original sin.
As with ‘romantic’, every time Auden uses the word ‘lie’, there’s another word loitering in the vicinity that modifies it in an intriguing manner. In Sonnet XI of ‘In Time of War’:

the will of the unjust
Has never lacked an engine; still all princes
Employ the fairly-noble unifying lie.

Rarely does the word ‘unifying’ carry a benign connotation in Auden, and it ought to raise the reader’s hackles, but it is the word ‘fairly’ to which we should be attentive. Its function is ambiguous. It forestalls ‘noble’ being glossed as purely ironic, setting up a kind of double-negative in the line. It introduces an air of urbanity and worldly-wisdom rare in war poetry, positioning the princes’ pronouncements in a limbo between politic necessity and plain manipulation. Maybe the two are inextricable (Machiavelli is referenced by name in the Commentary.) Auden certainly doesn’t approve of lies, but neither does he lose his cool over them.

On the other hand, for Owen or Sassoon it’s either a lie or it isn’t. And if it’s a lie, as most things are, it must be rejected, loudly and unequivocally. Auden isn’t so sure. Because if we are all liars, then logically, even in the midst of our anti-lie campaigns we might – indeed, we must – be inadvertent liars ourselves. By working ourselves up over princes’ lies, the lies of Authority, we risk losing sight of our personal responsibilities (largely Tolstoy’s point as well) – and fail to notice that, if anything, Truth is only ‘every human weakness’ (Sonnet VI). We are ‘articled to error [...] / And never will be faultless’ (Sonnet XVIII); now, as in the beginning, Man ‘looked for truth but always was mistaken’ (Sonnet I). Here, Auden’s epistemological caution is extraordinarily subtle; it’s self-effacing and nuanced and realistic in a way a combatant poet is rarely capable of being. The self-satisfaction of ‘September 1, 1939’ was a retrograde step.
In comparison, Fenton’s treatment of lies is more like a combatant poet’s: in ‘Out of the East’, ‘the liar spoke of victory / before the year was done.’

The next word is ‘murder’. There are alternatives: in ‘Gunga Din’, Rudyard Kipling (another half-civilian, half-military war poet) uses the word ‘slaughter’ of the ‘work’ that soldiers do. Like murder, slaughter (dying ‘as cattle’\(^{41}\)) stresses the extinction of life without any reason other than grim necessity. But ‘slaughter’, like killing, can be used of a dehumanised enemy, while the word ‘murder’ stresses the humanity of one’s victims. Murder is only ever used of criminal homicide. It is an act for which there is, by definition, no excuse, and those given to combatants by civilians do not absolve the combatant. In their poetry, murderers/combatants insist that it constitutes a second crime to describe it in any other way. Judith Herman quotes a Vietnam veteran:

> Family and friends wondered why we were so angry. What are you crying about? [...] Our fathers and grandfathers went off to war, done their duty, come home and got on with it. What made our generation so different? As it turns out, nothing. [...] When old soldiers from ‘good’ wars are dragged from behind the curtain of myth and sentiment and brought into the light, they too seem to smoulder with choler and alienation. [...] So we were angry. Our anger was old, atavistic. We were angry as all civilised men who have been sent to make murder in the name of virtue were angry.\(^{42}\)

What is more shocking about the word ‘murder’ is when combatant poets use it casually, or even enthusiastically – another under-recognised element of combatant poetry. Neither Owen nor Sassoon were shrinking violets on the battlefield: both won MCs. Sassoon was nicknamed ‘Mad Jack’, and was famous for his ferocity. Even in the midst of the most dreadful carnage, many combatants will have had a moment where they have taken the life of an enemy and felt thoroughly pleased about it. The experience of combat can be incredibly exciting,
oddly free from fear, and (in the short term, at least) profoundly satisfying. If the combatant poet is being truthful, then this too must be included. In this respect there’s not much difference between the bloodthirsty Julian Grenfell, and Owen and Sassoon, except in their choice of vocabulary. ‘Pro-war’ versions dislike the word ‘murder’; boastful combatants prefer euphemisms such as ‘taking down’, ‘taking out’, ‘neutralising’, or slang such as the modern British ‘slotting’. In Grenfell’s ‘Into Battle’, the only dead people mentioned are dull-as-ditchwater non-combatants – ‘he is dead who will not fight’. But what it is they’re all talking about is the same thing: the permission to murder and the thrilling pleasure it gives when exercised, and it’s to this heady release from inhibitions that Owen refers in ‘Apologia Pro Poemate Meo’:

For power was on us as we slashed bones bare  
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.

I, too, have dropped off Fear –  
Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon,  
And sailed my spirit surging light and clear  
Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn;

And witnessed exultation –

Owen and Sassoon are just less inclined to take this pleasure as an end in itself. Indeed, their own relish for murder just adds the evidence of their hateful nature, and that of all human beings; for the combatant poet, it’s liable to cement his Calvinist sense of being a massa peccata. A modern iteration comes from the only significant modern combatant poet, US Army sergeant Brian Turner, in his poem ‘Sadiq’:

It should make you shake and sweat,  
nightmare you, strand you in a desert [...]  
[...] no matter  
what crackling pain and anger  
you carry in your fists, my friend,
It should break your heart to kill.\textsuperscript{43}

Although Turner uses ‘kill’, not ‘murder’, it’s his use of the word ‘should’ in the first and last lines that’s at the core of the poem. Turner knows that killing is by no means certain to ‘break your heart’. He says only that it should, knowing that in the end, maybe that’s all that can be said.

For the combatant, the only murdering that is permissible and even deserved (no surprise by now) is to be done against civilians, and only civilians on the combatant’s own side. In Owen’s ‘The Dead-Beat’, the exhausted soldier’s threats are ascribed by ‘a low voice’ to ‘Blighty, p’raps’; ‘the valiant, that aren’t dead’, ‘uncles’ and a ‘wife’, given the sarcastic epithets ‘bold’ and ‘brave’ respectively.

‘I’ll do ’em in,’ he whined. ‘If this hand’s spared, I’ll murder them, I will.’

In ‘Blighters’, Sassoon wishes upon the Music Hall’s grinning and cackling civilians the experience of being on the receiving end of their beloved tanks. The last line refers to ‘riddled corpses around Bapaume’ that the civilians ‘mock’. (Tanks, being at that time a weapon fielded only by the British, would have ‘riddled’ Germans; the corpses that Sassoon feels called to defend are those of the enemy.) Owen uses ‘mockeries’ in ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, in which the trappings of a conventional funeral are part and parcel of the panoply of inadequate, traditional, civilian ritual. In combatant poetry, murdering is what soldiers do to each other; mocking is what is done to them by civilians.

This homicidal hatred is bound to strike the reader as disturbingly excessive. No civilian war poet is going to wish violent death upon his or her own readership. But nor do civilian war poets always condemn murder outright. As long as it’s being done in a good cause, and to others, some even see murder as appropriate. One instance leaps out: Auden’s use of the word in ‘Spain, 1937’. 
Today the deliberate increase in the chances of death,
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;
Today the expending of powers
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

The stanza marks the culminating point in Auden’s struggle to reconcile his political ideals with the human truths he has taken from Owen and Sassoon. At the end of the second line, the only word Auden can use and retain any integrity is ‘murder’, and the preceding ninety-two lines of the poem exist mainly to convince the reader – and the poet himself – of the justification for the one that precedes it: ‘necessary’. Even then, Auden is forced to take yet another step back, with ‘the conscious acceptance of guilt’: Republican, anti-fascist troops (Auden suggests) are noble enough not blame anyone but themselves for any necessary murdering that they are called upon to do. Indeed, they will become almost martyrs to their conscience. But the thought is already unravelling, and once again, we have encountered the old disjunction: combatants murder, but don’t excuse it; civilians don’t murder, but do excuse it.

Shortly after the poem’s publication, Auden amended ‘necessary’ to ‘the fact of’. But the damage was done. In Inside the Whale (1940) Auden’s fellow-brigadista George Orwell (and actual front-line combatant) jumped all over this stanza, declaring:

> It could only have been written by a man to whom murder is at most a word. [...] Personally I would not speak so lightly of murder. [...] Mr Auden’s brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled.\(^44\)

Orwell rightly denoted the word ‘necessary’ as the ubiquitous lie employed by tyrants and police states and demagogues. It is a word we would expect to be used in ‘ephemeral pamphlets’ and ‘boring meetings’, not in a poem. Like Owen and Sassoon, Orwell might have
committed and even enjoyed murder, but would not allow it to be described as ‘necessary’.

These lines have some personal resonance for me. In April 2004, I was a lieutenant in the British Army. My sub-unit had just arrived in Southern Iraq and was about to be sent up to the town of Al-Amarah, a place of daily battles with local Shi’a militias. As we waited in the logistics base near Basra to be moved forward, it seemed very likely that most of us would, sooner or later, be in direct combat with an enemy. Although I didn’t consciously recall ‘Spain, 1937’ at the time, I have a clear memory of proleptically excusing my own ‘necessary murders’ in very similar terms. I told myself that I would hold no-one responsible except myself: not George Bush, nor Tony Blair, nor the British Army, nor any extenuating or mitigating circumstances – even the instinct of self-preservation. Any necessary murdering I did would be done consciously, and any subsequent guilt I would accept within myself. Probably, I even congratulated myself on my selflessness.

By the time our tour of duty was over, it had already begun to dawn on me how wholly wrong and inadequate these thoughts had been. The guilt of murder goes beyond conscious acceptance. The fact is too massive to be contained. Months later, it was becoming clear that the only way it can be lived with is through gross personal dishonesty or stupidity, along with a whole society ignorantly patting one on the back. Even then (assuming my own experience and of those around me to be representative) the cover-up job is imperfect and privately tormenting.

But Auden was not dishonest or stupid, or not normally. I think he regretted this line almost as soon as he wrote it. It sounds wrong. It is an egregiously false note in a poem already full of false notes. But nor could he have avoided writing it, nor any of the others in ‘Spain, 1937’. The position in which he found himself – a Marxist, or at least a sincere, concerned, pragmatic anti-fascist – demanded he write them. Unnecessary murders are part and parcel of the spurious historicism upon which the poem is structured: the yesterday-today-tomorrow format common to most political formulations. If ‘Spain, 1937’ is a
failure, it is less because of the poet’s shortcomings, but rather because he articulates too fully the ramifications of the ideology he intended to promote. The poem’s weaselly avoidance of differentiating between description and diagnosis, its refusal to reveal who is speaking and on what authority, its disconnected and critic-befuddling pronouns – all laid bare to Auden the bankruptcy of the affair, the lies it required, and his own readiness to gild them and pass them on.

In this respect, the poem is paradoxically authentic and successful, and maybe a better commentary on the Spanish Civil War than Orwell’s. Of the poem, Auden wrote: ‘It would have been bad enough if I had ever held this wicked doctrine, but that I should have stated it simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective is quite inexcusable.’

But I think that Auden did believe in it – or the necessity of it – at least at first. And much of politics, left or right, could well be described as being merely that which sounds ‘rhetorically effective’. As could poetry, and the memory of ‘Spain, 1937’ (along with the ‘All I have is a voice’ hubris of ‘September 1, 1939’) remained like an albatross round the author’s neck. The potential succour he had given to warmongers stayed with him and became a kind of stand-in for the guilt of being a combatant. It schooled Auden in a new humility that would become the cornerstone of his later, brilliant successes – the love poems that have as their conceit the tender frailty of human beings, and their tragic propensity to error. ‘Spain, 1937’ and ‘September 1, 1939’ are the direct antecedents of poems like ‘Law like Love’. In this poem, just as in Fenton’s ‘The Mistake’ and ‘Out of Danger’, love is inseparable from weakness and fault, fragility and temporality.

‘Spain, 1937’ is also important because it’s a good illustration of the polarised way in which many civilians (and many combatants) see wars. They choose the lesser of two evils and declare that good, and the unchosen, bad. This was enough for Orwell, but not for Auden. If truth is eternal and not exigent then the honest man must treat both choices presented as evil, and reject both. He must find some other way in which to parse the world around him and act within it. As Auden exited
the ‘low dishonest decade’ – a dishonesty in which he had himself a small part – in 1940, he returned to the Anglican Church.

James Fenton, as far as I know, has never murdered anyone, or written that such a thing might be desirable or necessary. For Owen, Sassoon and Auden, the terrible knowledge that they had compromised themselves was part of what infused their work with such urgency and passion concerning lies, murder and pride – pride being the next word.

Theologians say that pride is chief among the sins. The assumption of moral or intellectual superiority, the refusal to admit fault, the desire to be thought well of, the avoidance of responsibility for the consequences of our thoughts and words and deeds was, according to Pascal (Pensées, 139–143), the defining characteristic of the human being. Pascal didn’t believe it was possible to be entirely rid of pride – but combatant poets do. According to Sassoon, pride, while being the cause of war, is also ‘shatter’d’ by the experience of it – and something that civilians heartlessly retain. It also seems that to be without pride – or as psychologists term it, ‘ego resources’ – makes life intolerable. In ‘Survivors’, the hated ‘you’ in the last line is undoubtedly a civilian. Sassoon ventriloquises the civilian voice, imbuing it with ironic or bathetic glosses on words such as ‘glorious’(and, in lines not quoted here, ‘no doubt’):

They’ll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they’ll be proud
Of glorious war that shatter’d all their pride. [...] 
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

We can link the use of the word ‘pride’ here with Owen’s use of the ‘Ram of Pride’ in ‘The Parable of the Old Man and the Young’. In Sonnet II of ‘In Time of War’, man and woman ‘hid their pride’, and in the Commentary Auden puts pride in a global, imperialist perspective,
referring to a place ‘where Europe first became a term of pride.’ Later, adopting a triumphant, fascistic voice, he declares:

Barrack and bivouac shall be your friendly refuge,
And racial pride shall tower like a column
And confiscate for safety every private sorrow.\(^{47}\)

This was another notorious characteristic of pride: it made the other sins not appear as sinful, and anaesthetised the soul against harsh but benign spiritual instruction. However, left untreated, pride was liable to cause far worse suffering in the long term, and this relationship between pride and pain is succinctly dealt with in James Fenton’s ‘Jerusalem’. The poem is written in a jabber of overlapping first-person statements, like furiously competitive tour guides. The voices argue among themselves to convince the reader/tourist of a definitive version of events.

It is superb in the air.
Suffering is everywhere
And each man wears his suffering like a skin.
My history is proud
Mine is not allowed.
This is the cistern where all wars begin

‘Superb’ has its etymology in the Latin *superbus*, meaning pride and arrogance. The stanza’s initial, apparent oxymoron (how can it be superb in the air, if suffering is everywhere?) is revealed as making perfect sense. Fenton alerts the reader to the incorrect semantic associations often made with ‘superb’, and indirectly, to the modern gloss upon the word ‘pride’, which is as an empowering virtue. Even now, speeches by politicians encourage civilians and combatants to feel ‘proud’ of their ‘achievements’; an evocation of pride has always been the tactic of choice, whenever a morality-cancelling and thought-terminating argument is required.

Fenton’s use of a Latin word is doubly appropriate. What the Romans did in 70 AD is largely the cause of Jerusalem’s condition in 1988 AD,
when Fenton wrote the poem. Auden, too, liked to reference the Roman Empire. In the ‘Commentary’, he cites ‘the collapse of that slave-owning empire / Whose yawning magistrate asked, “What is truth?”’ Romans are not a civilising influence, but a proud, fascist, thuggish, militaristic attempt at unification – and in Jerusalem, permitted the mob to crucify Jesus.

Likewise, in ‘Jerusalem’, Fenton refuses to let civilians off the hook. If these civilians haven’t killed or cheered killing yet, it’s probably because they haven’t had the opportunity. His rhyming of ‘proud / not allowed’ is particularly deft. It encapsulates the sense that a concomitant of national or personal pride is an adversarial relationship with everyone else’s. There is a masochistic pleasure to be taken in oppression, which is why suffering is like a ‘skin’. One can also be proud of one’s history precisely because it is not allowed (therefore, the voices in the subsequent lines might be from the same mouth – as might all of those within the poem, in a way).

Lies, murder and pride: all fairly grim so far. What is their alternative, if any, the reader of war poetry may ask? Both combatants and combatant-influenced civilians tell us it is love, in both its physical and spiritual aspects. For Owen, Sassoon and their peers, the intensity of love experienced by men for one another, and between officer and his platoon, was a redemptive paradigm. It existed in opposition to the selfishness and lovelessness of civilian society. T. E. Lawrence also said as much in The Mint (1955):

Yet a man’s enlisting is his acknowledgement of defeat by life. Among a hundred serving men you will not find one whole or happy. Each has a lesion, a hurt open or concealed, in his late history. [...] Others have been tangled with women or rejected by women and are revenging the ill-usage of society upon their smarting selves. 48

In combatant poems, women tend to get bracketed with civilians, and soldierly homoeroticism can be seen as a reaction to the encouragement
women were supposed to give their menfolk, as the 1915 poster blared: ‘Women of Britain say – “Go!”’. Sassoon and Owen’s poems are often interested in the male body, as are Isaac Rosenberg’s: ‘Nudes – stark and glistening, / Yelling in lurid glee.’ (‘Louse Hunting’). Lawrence dedicated Seven Pillars of Wisdom (1926/35) ‘To S. A.’:

I loved you, so I drew these tides of men into my hands and wrote my will across the sky in stars [...].

Septimus, too, seems to have loved Evans, his officer; ‘They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other’. It is this special, platonic, brotherly love that is the serum yielded by the experience of war, which civilians cannot and will never understand. Septimus takes it further, into a kind of pantheism:

The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first, that trees are alive; next, that there is no crime; next, love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was changed by them for ever.

But Septimus can’t make his ideas sound sensible. He doesn’t moderate or qualify them, and makes himself ridiculous thereby.

Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down).

His papers turn out to consist of

Diagrams, designs, little men and women brandishing sticks for arms, with wings – were they? – on their backs; circles around shillings and sixpences – the suns and stars [...] sea
pieces with little faces laughing out of what might perhaps be waves: the map of the world.\textsuperscript{53}

At least in part, what Septimus thinks and does is absurd, and Woolf endorses this interpretation. But we ought to remember that Woolf based some of Septimus’s insanity on her own symptoms, the result of which was \textit{Mrs Dalloway}: an enduring and brilliant piece of literature. Again, it’s also notable that it’s mainly women that mock or fail to understand Septimus: ‘once they found the girl who did the room reading one of these papers in fits of laughter.’\textsuperscript{54} While best left to another essay, there might be a specifically homosexual rather than merely homoerotic element to war poetry. Sexual desire by men for men can only exacerbate the sense that for them to kill each other is a crime, and it’s probably not a coincidence that Fenton is gay, as was Auden, as was Sassoon, and as was (possibly) Owen.

There are also flagrantly incorrect uses of the word love in war poetry. Once again, we find it in ‘Spain, 1937’:

\begin{quote}
Tomorrow the rediscovery of romantic love, 
The photographing of ravens; all the fun under 
Liberty’s masterful shadow;

[... but today the struggle.]
\end{quote}

The juvenile, politicised Auden dismisses ‘romantic’ love (listen to the sneer) as little more than a hobby, like photographing ravens. It has to be put aside until the struggle is done. This is something the later Auden would never condone. Nor would Owen or Sassoon. For the combatant poet, love must always be made in preference to war. A year after the Spain episode, Auden showed he might be moving towards this latter position in Sonnet XIV of ‘In the Time of War’:

\begin{quote}
Even a scratch we can’t recall when cured, 
But are boisterous in a minute and believe 
Reality is never injured, cannot
\end{quote}
Imagine isolation: joy can be shared,
And anger, and the idea of love.

The scene is in a field hospital, filled with sufferers who are incomprehensibly moaning. At last, Auden has noticed that it’s only in the absence of physical pain and fear that humans can begin to communicate, sympathise, and thereby attach meaning to their own existence.

Septimus, when he’s not furiously miserable, takes a synaesthetic pleasure in the sights and sounds of the street. To his damaged mind all is evidence of a kind of holy immanence which the rest of humanity ignores. Random events are taken as objective support for his epiphanies.

A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion –

For other combatants, the religion is not new. Contrary to what one might expect, combatant poets often find their faith renewed and strengthened. The experience of war comes as a kind of proof or reinforcement of the truth or relevance of the New Testament – for Tolstoy, for Evelyn Waugh, and even for humanists like Kurt Vonnegut. It might take time for the combatant to reach this position. Robert Graves tells us:

Hardly one soldier in a hundred was inspired by religious feeling of even the crudest kind. It would have been difficult to remain religious in the trenches even if one survived the irreligion of the training battalion at home.

Maybe it’s that ‘one soldier in a hundred’ that goes on to write good poetry. Whenever Jesus is mentioned in Owen’s and Sassoon’s poems, it is in a conventional intercessionary role. Despite the civilian Bishop in ‘They’, Sassoon still begs ‘O Jesus, make it stop!’ (‘Attack’). In ‘The Redeemer’, he declares of a soldier 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’ – even if, in the last lines, he challenges his own conceit in a bathetic dénouement - ‘O Christ Almighty, now I’m stuck!’

Owen is equally ready with New (and Old) Testament references. The poem ‘At a Calvary near the Ancre’ reprises the words ‘love’ and ‘pride’ in the contexts which we’ve come to expect. Like Sassoon, Owen separates Christ from ‘priests’ and the civilian press (‘scribes’, who ‘on all the people shove / And bawl allegiance to the state’). In ‘The Soldier’s Dream’, Jesus is a rebellious saboteur of this weaponry – weaponry which ‘The Father’ successfully orders the archangel Michael to repair. This anti-Trinitarian generational conflict is reminiscent of Milton, who also had the Father as the Old Testament destroyer and punisher, and the Son as humanity’s champion. Auden, too, depicted a character that ‘Boomed at his children about Law and Order, / And hated life with heart and soul’ (Sonnet V). For Auden, the word ‘law’ (especially with a capital L) is another word that ought to put his readers on edge, unless it pertains to the great commandment: to love.

Fenton, too, offers a qualified approval of Christianity in ‘Children in Exile’, which ends with the assertion:

Better a new god with bleeding hands and feet
Better the painted tortures of the blest
Than the sharp leaf at the throat, the raised mattock
And all the rest.

For the children in exile, the ‘new god with bleeding hands and feet’ (a wounded, vulnerable god) might not be demonstrably, scientifically true as such, but it is immeasurably better than the alternative. While far from a full endorsement, Fenton sets religious faith in opposition to the Year Zero hell of the Khmer Rouge – itself the *ad absurdum* extrapolation of an atheistic, rationalist, utilitarian world-view, which is (we can assume) what he means by ‘all the rest’. It accords with
Auden’s take on the modern man: as a kind of an educated monster, who

[...] gathered in crowds but was alone
And lived expensively but did without,
No more could touch the earth which he had paid for,
Nor feel the love which he knew all about.

(Sonnet VIII)

The religious, meanwhile, are ‘united by a common sense of human failure’ (Commentary), a rare instance of Auden using the word ‘unite’ positively. While in Spain, Auden was appalled by Republican atrocities against Catholic clergy; even in his Marxist incarnation, he couldn’t help noticing that the abandonment of the supernatural had not made man noticeably better, but often worse. Now, in the place of God, the

Self was the one city,
The cell where each must find his comfort and his pain,
The body nothing but a favourite useful machine

(Commentary)

The use of ‘machine’ recalls the technology of weapons, and the principal weapon associated with the First World War, the gun that was also a machine. Conceiving of the human being as mechanistic, as corporatists, capitalists and communists are wont to do, is the first step towards the ‘necessary’ destruction of components deemed unsuitable or inefficient. We can conflate Auden and Fenton and generalise that any attempt to unify (other than in admissions of failure) will sooner or later result in the mattock being raised.

This metaphysical allowance is pretty much non-existent in recent war poetry. Religion is sneered at or belittled. Believers are fools and fanatics. This is the manner in which Carole Satyamurti ends her poem ‘Battle Lines’:
It’s no use praying for some clean ending,
the God of the cross, of the star, of the crescent
is deaf and blind.
The fall-back, an echo of voices from childhood:
Don’t cry big boys. Never mind.57

The poem’s tone of sarcastic, rationalist, gendered superiority is one entirely alien to the poems of Owen, Sassoon, Auden or Fenton. Serious treatment of religion amongst Carol Ann Duffy’s poets is reserved to Ian Duhig. His poem ‘The Grassington Mandala’ adheres rigidly to material familiar to the poet and makes a virtue out of this limitation. It consists of an efficient and non-committal series of statements: simple observations that grow in resonance through their formalised, sequential presentation.

This Mitrupka Mandala’s power,
to these who travel with belief,
absolves the karma of who kill
or are involved in taking life.

The RAF train overhead –
Jihadists also, up the Dale;
a homeless monk with steady hands:
another serpent bites its tail.58

In the final line the decision about whether the mandala is transcendentally true or utterly specious – or somehow both – is left to the reader. In the best sense of the description, Ian Duhig becomes, like Eliot and Yeats and Lewis, almost a non-war poet. In his poem’s judicious balance (both metrical and conceptual), its strictly maintained distance, its quiet juxtaposition and refusal to advocate a corrective (at least, overtly), ‘The Grassington Mandala’ is a quiet triumph. It has much in common with what I consider to be the most successful of Auden’s ‘In Time of War’ sonnets, Number XII:

Here war is harmless like a monument:
A telephone is talking to a man;
Flags on a map declare that troops were sent;
A boy brings milk in bowls. There is a plan
For living men in terror of their lives,
Who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon,
Who can be lost and are, who miss their wives
And, unlike an idea, can die too soon.

Yet ideas can be true, although men die;
For we have seen a myriad faces
Ecstatic from one lie,
And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now.
Nanking. Dachau.

Both ‘The Grassington Mandala’ and Sonnet XII demonstrate something the civilian war poet can do that the combatant poet cannot: leave the subject open-ended, opaque, impenetrable. If crudely paraphrased, what these last poems say, if anything, sounds trite: some things are definitely bad, but doing anything beyond their denotation is maybe impossible and probably undesirable. But to arrive at this eminently sensible endpoint in a fresh and convincing manner (and without sounding callous) is a major hurdle, and it’s one impressively cleared by Auden and Duhig in these examples.

Ultimately, war poetry can either be angry or consolatory. Anger is easy and common, and coming from a poet is (as Maupassant tells us) more than ever in vain. Coming from a poet who has no direct cause to be angry, a comfortable civilian, it is also liable to be hand-wringing at best, pharisaical at worst. Even the understandable blasting rage of Sassoon leaves the reader exhausted and punch-drunk, feeling like the cat that gets kicked at the end of a hard day.
Consolation is much more difficult to achieve, especially if the poet himself is still torn up by the subject, and remains very much unconsolable on a personal level. However, he is also the only one who can do it. Fairly or unfairly, the unaffected bystander’s advice is likely to come across as trivial and conceited. It’s up to the poet to sort himself out, which is why real, lasting, worthwhile war poetry strives to surpass itself. While thoroughly cognisant of what it records, it bears witness in order to finish away from the battlefield; at peace. ‘They can never forget the past,’ writes Fenton, in ‘Children in Exile’: ‘Let them remember, but let them not fear.’ War poets should accept the futility of trying to debrief an ignorant public, and offer only a quiet, private, mystical alternative to those who already know its truth. For my money, ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ still comes closest to this ideal.

NOTES

9 Graves, Goodbye to All That, p. 157.
10 Ibid., p. 188.
13 Ibid., p. 356.
14 Ibid., p. 365.
15 Ibid., p. 376.
16 Ibid., p. 375.
22 Wagner, ‘The real war poets’, p. 2.
24 Ibid.
26 ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats*.
29 Craig Raine, ‘We don’t all love the war poets’, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 November 2006.
30 Yeats, *Letters to Dorothy Wellesley*, p.129.
33 Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p. 157.
41 Wilfred Owen, ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’.
47 *Journey to a War*, p. 266.
50 Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 96.
51 Ibid., pp. 75–76.
52 Ibid., p. 28.
53 Ibid., p. 163.
54 Ibid., p. 155.
56 Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p. 157.
58 Ibid., p. 2.

Elizabeth Vandiver states in her introduction that ‘This book’s emphasis is on cultural history and the reception history of classics rather than on literary criticism of the poems I discuss. I therefore consider classical reception in poems of extremely varied quality.’ I am relieved to have persevered in spite of that unpromising claim. Vandiver belongs among the most discriminating of critics, and although, as threatened, she offers a thorough account of the extent of classical learning among very ordinary poets, she dwells on the greats. ‘Rosenberg, Owen, Graves, Sorley and the like do not need my praise’, Vandiver asserts; but, despite herself, she gives it anyway. And like any good critic, she reserves her best writing for the best poems.

Vandiver has little truck with the familiar myth that the recruits of 1914–15 were patriotic innocents, and that the war (and especially the Somme) forced them into bitterness and disillusionment. Tracing classical references through the poetry of the war, she is able to show the extent to which Homeric ideals (in particular) sustained soldiers and helped them to make sense of their experiences. Those ideals were sometimes renounced, but the most immediate strength of Vandiver’s book lies in its counterblast to those readers who believe that there is only one acceptable response to Horace’s famous line: *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.

One of her exemplary poets, Patrick Shaw Stewart, was the greatest Classicist of his generation. A line from his lyric, ‘I saw a man this morning’, lends Vandiver’s book its title. Shaw Stewart sailed on the *Grantully Castle* to the Dardanelles with Rupert Brooke, and served in Brooke’s burial party. Like many public-school-educated men of his
generation, he welcomed the idea of fighting at Gallipoli: ‘It is the luckiest thing and the most romantic. Think of fighting in the Chersonese... or alternatively, if it’s the Asiatic side they want us on, on the plains of Troy itself! I am going to take my Herodotus as a guide-book.’ Vandiver makes the point about his Classical learning enjoyably and in revealingly excessive detail when she quotes at length a letter which Shaw Stewart wrote to the most celebrated beauty of her age, Lady Diana Manners. Explaining how Lady Diana might enjoy sexual relations with him while preserving her virginity, Shaw Stewart has recourse to the Classics, quoting liberally (in what Vandiver calls ‘ascending order of erotic satisfaction’) various sexual practices as described in Aristophanes, Theocritus and Ovid. Vandiver is rightly impressed with such accurate recollections, although as any quondam schoolboy knows, the naughtiest passages tend to stay in the memory. It seems that much of Shaw Stewart’s brilliance may have been lost on Lady Diana, who did not have the Greek or Latin to be able to translate, and would have needed to ask her parents.

One of Shaw Stewart’s closest friends was Julian Grenfell, whose ‘Into Battle’ receives its definitive reading from Vandiver because she is able to point out why the poem’s ‘Homeric conception of war’ made it so popular at the time and so widely derided now. ‘Had he lived’, writes one critic, ‘Grenfell’s outlook and his poetry may have changed as disillusion and anger were engendered by protracted trench warfare and needless mass slaughter.’ The same is often said about Brooke (for whom Vandiver also makes a convincing case), but these critical orthodoxies are exposed by Vandiver as patronising and wrong-headed. Grenfell’s crime is not to think what Owen and Sassoon think. Yet no one ever stops to wonder whether Owen’s attitude to the war would have become more positive had he lived to see its successful conclusion.

Occasionally, I don’t quite follow Vandiver’s argument, as when she overrules her initial reaction to H. W. Garrod’s Simonidean ‘Neuve Chapelle’ in the light of other poems by Garrod. And her wonderful reading of Shaw Stewart’s ‘I saw a man this morning’ seems finally to
go awry in its claim that Shaw Stewart ‘stresses the separation between the poem’s speaker and Achilles [...] [and] recognises the unbridgeable gap between them.’ However, it would be odd if I could find nothing to disagree with in 400 pages of densely argued prose. Vandiver’s close readings are superb, and not merely when her extraordinary acoustic memory enables her to tease some classical allusion out of the most unlikely places.

The book is abrim with research about the classical education of public schoolboys. That may sound dryasdust, but it is enthrallingly written and on the sly it provides a fascinating socio-historical account of the making of the officer classes, many of whom ‘found in Latin and Greek a lasting source of imaginative inspiration’. Thanks to Owen and Sassoon, it is too easy now to think of that inheritance as foolish, equipping the men badly for the new technological horrors of which Achilles and Hector had no knowledge. Yet Vandiver shows that, for many, Homeric codes survived the shock of the war, and inspired them (as Shaw-Stewart and Grenfell were inspired) under the most terrible conditions. Those codes inspired great poetry, too, and Vandiver’s book allows us to hear it clearly above the babble of the disapprovers.

TIM KENDALL

This review appeared in a different form on Tim Kendall’s war poetry blog: http://war-poets.blogspot.com

War Poets Association members may purchase this or any Oxford University Press publication at 20% discount via http://www.oup.com/uk/sale/WEBWAR06
Anthologie des poètes anglais de la Grande Guerre, textes présentés et traduits par Roland Bouyssou (Editions Universitaires du Sud, 533 pp., €30)

This very complete anthology of the war poets is the result of an important body of research carried out by a specialist: in 1974, Roland Bouyssou published Les Poètes combattants de la Grande Guerre. In 2001, he translated Wilfred Owen, and he has also written on David Jones’s In Parenthesis (2008). Quoting Isaiah 2. 4, ‘and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks’ as an epigraph to his Introduction, Roland Bouyssou describes ‘The Great Pity of the War’, showing how the chivalric ideal of some young soldiers and officers was defeated by the dreary reality of the trenches – the mud, the rats, the lice, and Death. ‘To dehumanise Man, this is the aim of Evil.’

In terms of poetic technique, Roland Bouyssou speaks of a ‘lyrical, militant realism’. The epic tone does not suit the expression of sheer suffering and despair. Yet, although their poems are a testimony of what they had to endure, the war poets’ work is artistic, but not aesthetic. The beauty of their verse is ‘harsh and sober’.

The poems are gathered under four heads: ‘Songs of Departure’, ‘The Trenches as Hell’, ‘In the Air and on the Seas’, ‘The Cannon’s Reverberation’. Maps of the battlefields can be found at the end of the book. Roland Bouyssou’s selection is thorough – not only the most famous war poets, but also airmen and seamen, doctors, ambulance men and nurses as well as civilians, among them Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, and W. B. Yeats. However, the most extensive chapter is the second, ‘The Trenches as Hell’. Each poet is introduced by the editor and translator.

As far as the translations themselves are concerned, they are faithful renderings of the original poems but the reader may sometimes feel that the rhythm is missing and the choice of words does not really convey an immediate poetic meaning. This is what I particularly felt when reading
a poem which I have translated myself – Robert Graves’s ‘Escape’. The French title ‘Réchappé’ does not convey what is suggested by the English title: an escape from hell. We need a noun in French, not a past participle. The poem starts with: ‘... But I was dead, an hour or more’ – which rules out the use of the French imparfait (imperfect). We need a passé simple, or definite past, which makes the incipit all the more striking since the phrase is impossible to utter – in the normal conditions of everyday life: ‘Mais je fus mort, durant une heure ou plus’. The rendering of rhythm is more successful in the translation of Rosenberg’s ‘Louse Hunting’. Yet the translation of the first line is surprising: ‘Des nus, – nus comme la main, miroitants’ for: ‘Nudes – stark aglisten’. ‘Nus comme la main’ blurs the artistic reference. Rosenberg was a painter and his poem is a painting – Rembrandt-like with its effects of chiaroscuro – in words. The translation of David Jones’s In Parenthesis is not an easy task.

In his Introduction, Roland Bouyssou says that war poetry was ephemeral. I should say ‘Fortunately!’ although there were new war poets during the Second World War. It is true that war poetry seems to have been a parenthesis – to use David Jones’s word – but the war itself had consequences on post-war poetry. I think that Isaac Rosenberg, had he lived, would have opened new ways for poetry. The work of Ivor Gurney has not received all the attention it deserves, and Robert Graves’s attempt to highlight the existential ground of poetry scares off most critics, who prefer T. S. Eliot’s pessimistic outlook or Ezra Pound’s aesthetic research. Considering war poetry, we may say that there is still some unexplored ground as to its import regarding the question of the meaning of poetry in our modern world.

ANNE MOUNIC
Notes on Contributors

Tim Kendall is Head of English at the University of Exeter and author of several books on poetry and war, including *Modern English War Poetry* (2006). Professor Kendall is at present finishing a book on Robert Frost, and co-editing (with Philip Lancaster) Ivor Gurney’s poetry. Also under contract are an anthology of First World War poetry and a Very Short Introduction to war poetry.

Stuart D. Lee is a member of the English Faculty at Oxford, Director of Oxford University Computing Services, and Reader in E-learning and Digital Libraries. Dr Lee managed the original JTAP ‘Virtual Seminars’ Project (1996–98) which digitised the manuscripts of Wilfred Owen, and was Project Director on the First World War Poetry Digital Archive project.


Kate Lindsay has run several e-learning development and evaluation projects for Oxford, as part of the Learning Technologies Group, and has also worked on a number of projects for the JISC. She is an English graduate and holds a Masters in Information Systems (Sheffield) and a Masters in Educational Research Methodology (Oxford). She was the Project Manager on the First World War Poetry Digital Archive and on
the second phase of the project, Enriching the First World War Poetry Digital Archive.

Anne Mounic, poet, critic and translator, is a Maître de Conférences at the Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle. Among her numerous critical works is *La Poésie de Claude Vigée* (2005). Her book on Robert Graves, *Counting the Beats*, is due to be published shortly, and she is at present working on a book on war poetry.

Derek Shiel, painter, sculptor and writer, is the co-author and editor of a number of books on David Jones. His documentary film *In Search of David Jones: Artist, Soldier, Poet* (2008) is to be followed by *David Jones: Between the Wars – The Years of Achievement*, which is now in development.

Vivien Whelpton is a retired secondary Head of English and Media Studies. She has an MA in War Studies from King’s College London. She has contributed monographs to Cecil Woolf’s War Poets series and is currently working on a new biography of Richard Aldington.

Chris Yates was educated at Oundle School, Oxford University and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, where he won the Queen’s Medal. He was commissioned into the Queen’s Royal Lancers in 2001 and resigned in 2006. He now lives in Athens, Greece.
Many literary societies concentrate on a single writer's life and work; the WPA aims to support these groups and also offers a voice for 'war poets' who do not have this individual focus. The poets of the First World War are well represented within the WPA but poets from other 20th century conflicts also figure increasingly in the Association's range of interest.

The WPA encourages and promotes interest in war poetry through activities, a newsletter, annual journal, its own programme of events and support for the work of other groups. Based in the UK but with an international focus, the WPA makes its material available to members throughout the world through its journal, newsletters and website at www.warpoets.org.

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E-mail:
Send to: The Treasurer, WPA, c/o Veale Wasbrough Vizards (DBMW), Orchard Court, Orchard Lane, Bristol BS1 5WS, UK