

## Poetry of "Pity": A War of Words in Poetry of the Great War

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Ankita Gupta\*

In preparing for the publication of his collected poems, Wilfred Owen tried to explain, "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity." What made Owen reclaim that War evokes pity out of which his poetry germinated? What were the physical, social, economical and psychological implications of the Great War? Most importantly what was the emotion underneath the literature produced during the war years? These are few pertinent questions which need to be acknowledged before a comprehensive meaning can be derived of the myriad responses to the Great War of 1914.

There were two powerfully 'liberal forces' coinciding in England at the beginning of the Great War. The intersection of these two forces, the one 'aristocratic', and the other 'democratic', established an atmosphere of public respect for literature unique in modern time. Unimaginable to us in today's world, it was this 'respect for literature' that made it not only possible for soldiers of all ranks to be literate but vigorously literary. It was the literary earnestness of the readers of 1914-18 that acted as a stimulus for writers. According to Paul Fussell, regardless of the social class or rank, there were very few who did not hold the belief "that the greatest of modern literatures was the English. If not everyone went so far as to agree with Samuel Johnson that 'the chief glory of every people arises from it authors,' an astonishing number took literature seriously" (157).

When the war began, in 1914, there was virtually no cinema; there was no radio at all; and there was certainly no television. Except for sex and drinking, amusement was largely found in language formally arranged either in books and periodicals or at the theatre and music halls. Such a world is hard for us to visualize today, but we must if we are to understand the way literature dominated the war from the beginning

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\*Ph D Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Jammu

to the end. Ted Bogaz wrote in his article that The Great War or World War 1 “became an occasion for a crusade that saw the mobilization of an extraordinary language filled with abstract euphemistic spiritualized words and phrases under which were buried the realities of modern mechanized war” (643).

World War I more than any other war is associated with the so-called ‘War Poets’. The poems written by men such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke, among others, is as poignant today as it was during the war and immediately after it. Forbidden from writing home with any degree of accuracy or truth about the life they led, some put their thoughts into a diary that could be kept in secret. Other put their thoughts into poems. As many of these rely on interpretation as opposed to being clear facts, the poets bypassed any form of military censorship that certainly would have occurred if they had simply written out their thoughts as prose.

A war poet is a poet in time of and on the subject of war. The term is applied especially to those in military service during World War I. For the first time, a substantial number of important English poets were soldiers, writing about their experiences of war. A number of them died on the battlefield, most famously Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen and Charles Sorley. Others including Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon survived but were scarred by their experiences, and this was reflected in their poetry.

During World War One; propaganda was employed on a global scale. Unlike previous wars, this was the first total war in which whole nations and not just professional armies were locked in mortal combat. This and subsequent modern wars required propaganda to mobilize hatred against the enemy; to convince the population of the justness of the cause; to enlist the active support and cooperation of neutral countries; and to strengthen the support of allies. Propaganda related to patriotism and nationalism played an important role.

The armies of continental Europe were made up of conscripts, who really had little choice about going to war. In 1914 the British army, by contrast, was made up of professionals and then volunteers. The

British placed immense reliance, therefore, on propaganda to justify the war to the people, to help promote recruitment into the armed forces and to convince the population that their sacrifices would be rewarded. Stereotypes deeply embedded in national sentiment were invoked to justify Britain's entry into the war, and British propaganda posters often employed the religious symbolism of St George slaying the German dragon. The emotional blackmail of using children to shame their elders into fighting was employed. Women were also assigned the responsibility for ordering men into the war. The popular slogans which were circulated were 'Your Country Needs YOU', 'Women of Britain say-GO' and 'Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?'

Another propaganda which was employed by the belligerents was invoking atrocity against the enemy. For example the Germans referred to the British as 'perfidious Albion' and provided accounts of the Allied use of dum-dum bullets, mutilation, and brutality, as well as the use of 'savages' from Africa and Asia to fight civilized people. The stereotype of the German 'hun' that emerged in British propaganda was used to reinforce British values and to contrast such values against German aggression and barbarism.

During the Great War the most recognized and admired poets, including those who had served on the western front and knew first hand of the slaughter and horrors of trench warfare, not only supported the war effort but also encouraged its continuation. These admired war poets hid the horrible truth of modern mechanical warfare using archaic language and lofty phrases. But unknown to the public, an unknown number of these 'prevailing voices' were members of secret organization of eminent writers working with the War Propaganda Office at Wellington house. Poetry played a more significant role in the war effort than articles and pamphlets. Poetry was the sign of an educated man or woman, and it played a symbolic role in their lives before the war and after. The outbreak of the Great War was such an event; there was a massive increase of patriotic verse, the majority written in high diction. Expressions of poetic military feelings came first from the older established poets. Three of these recognized poets, who were also non-combatants, were Robert Bridges, Rudyard Kipling, and Thomas Hardy.

Robert Bridges (1844-1930), Britain's Poet Laureate since 1913, was the earliest of all poets to address England as a nation. Known as the silent laureate for frequent refusal of the government's request to write poetry, his response to the first days of the war exceeded all expectations. His poem "Wake Up, England" is a call to action. An appeal that:

Stand, England for honour,  
 And God guard the right!  
 Much suffering shall cleanse thee;  
 But thou through the flood  
 Shall win to Salvation,  
 To Beauty through blood. (31)

Using chivalric clichés and abstract diction, Bridges successfully integrated the crusading spirit to his "call to action." He is explicit in his appeal to lay mirth aside, to accept the seriousness of the challenge, and to continue an English tradition of upholding justice. The fervent archaic rhetoric, effectively removed the poem from the reality of war.

Like Bridges and all the early Great War poets, Hardy uses archaic expressions and language to present the war as a crusade. Hardy's focus in his poem "Men Who March Away" was on the soldiers' sense of conviction instead of the hazards of the War. He ends by affirming the soldiers' optimism: "Press we to the field ungrieving, / In our hearts believing / Victory crowns the just" (43). For Kipling, the issue is the very existence of England as a nation. While invoking every possible appeal to nationalism, his forty line call to action poem, "For All We Have and Are" constantly reiterate the passing of 'Comfort, content, delight' now that the war has begun, he argues the need for fortitude, and repeats his assertion that only the sacrifice of body, soul, and will can make England prevail." "For All We Have and Are" begins with the urgency of the struggle:

For all we have and are,  
 For all our children's fate,  
 Stand up and take the War.  
 The Hun is at the gate! (56)

One example of the importance of this kind of poetry in molding English attitudes and responses occurred on April 19, 1915, when a Times correspondent abruptly broke off in the middle of a report on the Neuve Chapelle assault in order to quote from "For All We Have and Are." Apparently in the reporter's mind, the poetic sentiments of Kipling's poem and the actual details of the attack carried equal weight. Not only the journalist but generals as well testified to the importance of poetry in the War. Bogaz reports that on October 20, 1916, General Sir Ian Hamilton of Gallipoli fame, attended a meeting of the Poetry Society and declared that "poetry was the highest expression of the moral [sic] of a nation." (560)

Like Kipling, Mackintosh detested the civilians who evaded military service. His poem "Recruiting" is based on a soldier's impatience with the slackers who allowed others to fight for them. Even though Mackintosh is encouraging men to enlist, "Lads, you're wanted—out you go" (28), he is questioning the motives of some civilians, who instead of enlisting themselves are encouraging others to enlist. Furthering the tradition of "call to action" poets; some poets even wrote to dissuade any attempts to negotiate peace. The most insidious of these and certainly the most widely known today, is "In Flanders Fields" which was written by John McCrae. The poem turns from pastoral after the first nine lines and becomes reminiscent of an obvious insistence on continuing the war:

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
 To you from failing hands we throw  
 The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
 If ye break faith with us who die  
 We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
 In Flanders fields. (37)

Similar to McCrae, Sir Henry Newbolt, believed that the military continuation of the war was essential and indisputable; that any suggestion of a negotiated peace before defeating the Germans was a trap. Newbolt, the author of "Vitai Lampada", which literally equated public-school playing fields with British battlefields, takes McCrae's argument against a negotiated peace a step further. According to Craford, Newbolt attempted

to bestow on the modern war the glory of antiquity by using “Latin in the title and the image of passing the sword to the next generation make the poem uncongenial to an age which believes that one builds for the future instead of expecting the future to validate the past.” (39)

One of the Great War poets, Rupert Brooke, regarded the challenge of the War as an opportunity for a purifying and ennobling experience. Immediately after his death he became a legend and was conscripted by Churchill “as a poet in service to a warring state” (40). Churchill’s eulogy helped to make Brooke an instrument of war propaganda.

There were soldier poets who lived longer and saw more than enough carnage to disillusion them about the heroic nature of the war and to change their optimistic views: they felt that it was necessary to describe the reality of trenches so that civilians would get a fair idea about the reality of the War. This was the group of anti-war poets who, disillusioned with the realities of the War, sought to write anti-war narratives. These poets included Sassoon, Graves, and Wilfred Owen who had emerged by 1917. Closely linked to the major group were other poets like Sorley and Sitwell. All of them served on the front lines and experienced trench warfare. Their “writings all reflect a first-hand vision of this holocaust, and it was this, and the nearness and constancy of death, the comradeship of the trenches, the revelation of a crucified humanity, that filled their minds.” (Pearson 104)

Sorley accepted neither Hardy’s nor Brooke’s superficial views on the nature of the war. Sorley was not joking when as early as November 1914 he wrote in a letter: “I should like so much to kill whoever was primarily responsible for the war” (Fussell 86). He rejected Brooke’s idealization of death in battle and called Hardy’s line ‘Victory crowns the just’ the worst line he ever wrote. Sorley wrote his last poem, “When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead” after he had had some combat experience. Written in response to the publication of Brooke’s “1914 and Other Poems,” his focus is on the war dead instead of descriptions of trench life. Slighting Brooke’s sonnets, he presents the opposite or a

contrary viewpoint. The poem arouses pity for the slain. Its impact lies upon this evocation of empathy.

In the words of Pearson, for Osbert Sitwell “the war meant something much more complex and involved than the straight forward horror of the battlefield. In his mind the German army was not the greatest enemy.” To him the enemy was “those attitudes of mind,” which had “produced the international calamity – the blindness and glib hypocrisy of the old, the games-playing optimism of the young, the herd instinct its patriotic call to duty, and all the Edwardian absurdities their parents represented. He could justifiably claim to have been the first of the soldier Great War poets to put this warfare into words.” (104-05)

Sitwell frequently singled out the older generation for abuse. He opens his poem “Arm-Chair” with lines recalling Sassoon’s “Base Details”. “If I were now of handsome middle-age, / I should not govern yet, but still should hope / To help the prosecution of the war” (Pearson 131). But Sitwell considered the real enemy to be “what he called the ‘platitudinous multitude’, the mass of insensitive and complacent public who were expecting the young men to fight for them.” Sitwell believed that “The unforgivable thing about this ‘platitudinous multitude’ was that they were led by safe old men trying to tell the young men who were facing death not to be morbid, not to be critical, above all not to think. Instead they should be happy with the simple life.” (Pearson 113)

Siegfried Sassoon at the beginning of the war was unthinkingly patriotic. Before Sassoon saw action and experienced what seemed unending trench warfare, there were no sarcastic poems or angry realistic war verse. In April 1917, during the battle of Arras, Sassoon was shot through the neck. When he was sent home to convalesce, he was suffering from his wound and a bad case of nerves, trench fever, and hallucinations. After this he began to write against the war. Like Sitwell, he also attacked the war profiteers, politicians, inept generals and unsympathetic civilians in his anti-war poems.

Wilfred Owen’s first experience in the trenches was in the middle of January 1917 and it was far worse than anything he could have imagined. From then on he was dominated by emotions of horror, outrage,

and pity: “horror at what he saw at the front; outrage at the inability of the civilian world—especially the church — to understand what was going on; good-looking boys victimized by it all” (Fussell 289). All of Owen’s major poems were written during the brief year of his convalescence. Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum est” is generally read as an attack upon the belligerent ignorance of the non-combatant civilians. The poem was at one point subtitled “To a Certain Poetess.” The poetess in question was Miss Jessie Pope, whose poems were published frequently in newspapers and journals. It was not only the men, but also women poets such as Jessie Pope, Katharine Tynan, and Mary Symon, who continued to support the war even after the heavy losses. Without the finesse and style, They wrote calls to action poetry in the same mode as Robert Bridges “Wake Up, England”, encouraging to continue the fight despite tragic losses.

According to Norgate, Owen wrote about “people who suffer and die, not the People who applaud and sanctify” (520). With persistent emphasis on its degrading, nightmarish setting, Owen’s ‘Dulce et Decorum est’ images a random and futile death, far removed from any meaningful action and whose memory offers no comfort or heroic reassurance. In the first stanza of the poem, he realistically describes the situation of the soldiers at the front, “Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-Kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge”. After illustrating accurately the “glory” of the trenches, Owen, directly addresses the reader stating that one who marched behind the wagon bearing the victim “would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori, (It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country)”. (Norgate 521)

Like Owen and Sassoon, Robert Graves also suffered shell shock. Graves’ had conflicting thoughts about the war. On the one hand he was proud of his battalion, publicly nonchalant in the face of death, but contemptuous of established English values, and outraged at the carnage of the war. He recognized his retreat from contradictions, which he persistently stated ironically, “We held two irreconcilable beliefs: that the war would never end and that we would win it.” (Craford 110)



Graves' anger toward those he considered responsible for the war was easy for him to sustain. According to Fussell, "England was strange to the returned soldier. He could not understand the war-madness that ran about everywhere looking for a pseudo-military outlet. Everyone talked a foreign language; it was newspaper language" (216). After being on the front and having experienced the horror of trench warfare, soldiers were confronted at home with propaganda pamphlets encouraging the continuation of the war. In Graves' words, it was "sentimental, bloodthirsty, complacent, cruel, fatuous, and self-congratulatory". (203)

Although hundreds of British poets fervently expressed a variety of viewpoints and experiences about the war through poetry, patriotic spontaneity was not the source of all these poems. The Wellington House writers and poets were actively writing poems and articles for the home front as well as neutral countries in support of England's right to be in the war while promoting anti-German feelings. These War poets from the early years used elaborate words and phrases to obscure the ugly reality of the war. On the other hand the anti Great War poets used colloquial expressions and plain language to speak the truth. According to them there was no glorious death in the trenches. They lashed out at civilian insensibility, war profiteers, their elders and inept Generals. They objected the validity of poetry written as a vehement vehicle in the early phase of propaganda. They were nonconformist who made a separate identity through their verses propagating anti-war emotions.

The irony of the Modern World is that although we have reached the centennial commemoration of the war, yet, these poems bring us no immediate hope or assurance or comfort, but in their combination of pity, anger, moral complexity and linguistic pleasure, remind us as readers what it is to be idealistic, thoughtful, mortal and guilty- and make us question what it is to be human. Not much has been attained of their verses which plead for a more congenial and a peaceful world. The World is still engulfed in the cloud of hatred, animosity and bestiality. Take for instance the recent frenzy created in the Gaza strip. The anti-war narratives were intended to apprise people of the horrors of war. To kindle in them emotions like peace, fraternity and compassion. But in

reality their efforts seem futile in the light of turbulence created all over the world. People are still blinded in the name of countries, regions, religion, language, caste, color and creed. This seems like a never ending vicious circle. The need of the hour instills a renewed importance to the poetry written during the Great War which can help the modern man rise above these frailties and be a citizen of the world in its true sense.

In commemoration of the centennial year I would like to read out the poem "Aftermath" by Sasson to remind the readers about the

Have you forgotten yet? . . .

For the worlds events have rumbled on since those gagged days,

Like traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways:

And the hunted gap in your mind have filled with thoughts that

Flow

Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you're a man reprieved  
to go,

Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.

But the past is just the same—and War's a bloody game . . .

Have you forgotten yet? . . .

Look down and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never  
forget.

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at  
Mametz——

The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags  
on parapets?

Do you remember the rats; and the stench

Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench——

And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?

Do you ever stop and ask, "Is it all going to happen again?"

Do you remember that hour of din before the attack——

And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you

As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men?

Do you remember the stretcher -cases lurching back

With dying eyes and lolling heads—— those ashen-grey  
 Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind and gay?  
 Have you forgotten yet? ... Masks of the lads who once were  
 keen and kind and gay  
 Look up, and swear by the green of the spring that you'll never  
 forget.

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