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Glorious and Execrable: The Dead and Their Bodies in World War I Poetry

“Unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth: In poetry, we call them the most glorious.”

– Wilfred Owen, February 4, 1917

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MANY critics of poetry written during World War I see a clear divide between poetry of the early and late years of the war, usually located after the Battle of the Somme in 1916. After this event, poetic trends seem to move away from odes to courageous sacrifice and protection of the homeland, toward bitter or grief-stricken verses on the horror and pointless suffering of the conflict. This is especially true of poetry written by soldier poets, many of whom were young, English men with a strong grounding in Classical literature and languages from their training in the British public schooling system. Although such divides are necessarily oversimplified, this characterization is, as Janis P. Stout argues in *Coming Out of War: Poetry, Grieving, and the Culture of the World Wars*, “a useful approximation, fitting the general outlines of the considerable body of memorable poetry that came out of the war.”¹ This poetic shift reflected and paralleled larger cultural and societal movements accompanying the war and the first decades of the twenty-first century: quickly developing new technologies; increasing industrialization; a general disillusionment with the supposed “progress” and “modernization” of that technology and industry; the weakening of rigid British class structures; changing gender roles; and the birth of Modernism, an artistic and literary movement that urged artists to, in the enduring words of Ezra Pound, “make it new,” to recognize and reject obsolete traditions and cultural trends of the past.

Although most of the soldier poets fighting in World War I would not be classified as Modernists by literary scholars, they also developed “a new kind of war poetry whose techniques, language, and willingness to confront unvarnished horrific facts constitute a turning against the romantic and genteel past,” reproducing the larger cultural shift of Modernism in

miniature within the confines of the trenches and hospital wards of World War I.² Many scholars have identified aspects of soldier poets' work that illustrate this shift, including the increase in fragmented phrasing, breakdown of regular rhyme scheme and meter, and precision and brevity of imagery that characterizes Modernist poetry more generally. In this paper, I examine poetry by Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and others, and argue for an additional, and, for these poets, highly significant marker of this shift—the epistemological power of the dead and their bodies. While World War I poets were naturally concerned with bodies throughout the war, the stories they told with those bodies and the way in which they spoke through them changed drastically as the war dragged on. Poetry of the early years of the war depicts bodies as stable, insulated objects on which poets can project messages of admiration for the sacrifice and nobility of soldiers, support for the war, or concepts of nationalism and empire; in later poetry of the war, bodies are unstable, exposed, and corrupted, no longer able to support old messages of courage and noble sacrifice, but reflecting the futility, senselessness, and destruction of the war.

Early English Poetry of the War: The Dead as Heroes

The war in Britain “was welcomed enthusiastically by most, if not all, sections of the society... initially conceived as a ‘liberator,’” and, to some, a cleansing force that would jolt awake a stagnating culture.³ To understand the British people’s enthusiasm for the war and the prevailing attitude toward soldiers and their deaths, especially in the first year or two of the war, requires a certain understanding of the British literary environment at the turn of the twentieth century. With no television, no radio, the extremely recent advent of film, and an unprecedented level of literacy, entertainment for the masses largely consisted of literature, and the literary canon at the beginning of the twentieth century determined that many British citizens were “a literary people who saw the war through the old texts.”⁴ Ben Townsend argues that “the poetry of the First World War provides a literary picture of the Empire at its height and before its fall, when a highly literate public saw a modern war through medieval eyes.”⁵ This included the soldiers who enthusiastically volunteered in masses at the beginning of the war, some of whom, including many of the soldier poets, were the product of the public schooling system that placed value on “the reading of classics that romanticized war and chivalry” and “sport, in which students learned to be committed and passionate, to play fair, and to accept pain without complaining.”⁶ These tendencies in public schooling reflected a “prevailing archetypal attitude of ‘hero-worship’” in the culture more generally.⁷

Herbert Asquith’s “The Volunteer,” actually written in 1912 before the start of the war, epitomizes these attitudes. Taking the form of an epitaph, the poem tells us that “Here lies a clerk who half his life had spent / Toiling at ledgers in a city grey,” but who dreamt of giving his life for his country in glorious battle, described in heavily romantic and chivalric terms: he fights “with no lance broken in life’s tournament,” and “The gleaming eagles of the legions came, / And horsemen, charging under phantom skies, / Went

thundering past beneath the oriflamme.”⁸ The clerk gets his wish—“those waiting dreams are satisfied”—and the poem ends on a distinctly romantic and heroic note: “Nor need he any hearse to bear him hence, / Who goes to join the men of Agincourt.”⁹ Dying for one’s country in a blaze of glory is the clerk’s ultimate wish, envisioned in the language of medieval romance and idealized chivalry.¹⁰

During the war, soldiers, perhaps especially dead soldiers, were afforded hero status reflecting these ideals: “Writing in the *Daily Mirror* on November 22, 1916, W. Beach Thomas managed to assert that the dead British soldier even lies on the battlefield in a special way bespeaking his moral superiority: ‘Even as he lies on the field he looks more quietly faithful, more simply steadfast than others.’”¹¹ It is not surprising, then, that much of the poetry produced in the early years of the war perpetuates that “hero-worship”; reflects the value placed on abstract concepts of sacrifice, courage, “fighting the good fight,” and protection of the homeland; and projects both of those concepts onto the dead and their bodies. Townsend describes this poetic work in “On the Front Lines of an Empire: The Rhetoric of Poetry of the First World War”: “Using language of the British literary canon, imbibed with feudal rhetoric, those soldiers produced poetry that stands in contrast to the reality of the war.”¹² The bodies of the dead in this poetry certainly contrast those of reality. Bodies are rarely depicted being killed or wounded, acting in the thick of fighting, or lying exposed, left unburied; instead, poets usually describe the dead and their bodies long after their deaths. They are portrayed as whole, not missing limbs or riddled with wounds, and are usually buried: stable, protected, and sealed away, not confronting the reader or speaker with the horrors of war.

By portraying the dead this way, poets like Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley, and others, including even Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon—perhaps the most famous voices of bitter, graphic, realistic World War I poetry in the war’s later years—project abstract messages of nationalism, heroic sacrifice, courage, remembrance, and the call to continue fighting onto the stable, insulated bodies in their poems. One of the most enduring poems of the time, Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier,” worth quoting here in its entirety, exemplifies the way in which physical bodies can carry embody nationalism and the Empire:

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

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
 A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
 Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
 Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
 And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
 In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.¹³

The body here *is* England, “bore, shaped, made aware” by England; everything the body is has been given or been affected by England (ln. 5). The body is, in fact, making the earth around it into England as it lies in its grave, expanding the Empire, a dutiful English soldier (ln. 2).

The speaker is, in fact, alive, speaking to us, but in the hypothetical situation he projects, he is already dead; readers do not see the shell or bullet or illness that kills him. There is also no sense of regret or grief from the speaker at the prospect of dying, only a nationalistic reassurance to the presumed friends and family whom the speaker is comforting. As Eric J. Leed argues, “Within the national ideologies that reigned in 1914, the civilian exchanged his private self and his individual self-interest for a public and communal identity represented in the uniform.”¹⁴ “The Soldier” is largely patriotic and supportive of the Empire, as it reflects this exchange of private self or interiority; the speaker is now a “pulse in the eternal mind” (ln. 10). The last line adds the common sentiment of soldiers protecting those at home: he died to protect “gentleness, / In hearts at peace, under an English heaven,” the heaven (particularly English, rather than universally Christian) from which he presumably will look down on those hearts (lns. 13-14).

The body in “The Soldier” is certainly productive, turning the earth around it into a “richer dust,” allowing the transmission of nationalistic and memorializing messages, but some buried bodies in early World War I poetry, such as those found in poems by John McCrae, John William Streets, Wilfred Owen, and Charles Sorley, are even more literally productive. A common conceit in poetry of this era is that of flowers growing out of soldiers’ graves, or even from their blood. One of the most famous and oft-quoted poems of the war, and perhaps one of the most influential in terms of the poem’s enduring image of the red poppy as the “Remembrance Poppy,” is Canadian John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields,” written in 1915. Those “poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row / That mark our place” where they “lie / in Flanders Fields.”¹⁵ Written after the death of McCrae’s friend Alexis Helmer in the Second Battle of Ypres, the poem is certainly a memorial, but it is also an exhortation to keep up the fight, to continue the work that the dead began, a patriotic call to arms: “Take up our quarrel with the foe, / To you from failing hands we throw / The torch; be yours to hold it high” (lns. 10-12). As Daniel Hipp remarks in *The Poetry of Shell Shock*, “According to Yeats, a poem such as this one demonstrates the proper treatment of war in poetry—to monumentalize the dead, to make their deaths symbolic and timeless, rather than to recreate the experience of such deaths in all their horror and immediacy.”¹⁶

Similarly patriotic and eager to make war sacrifices “timeless” are the poems of John William Streets, collected in the book *The Undying Splendour* after his death in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. The title of the collection alludes to the romantic and idealistic view of the war found in Streets’s poems; “Matthew Copse” and “A Soldier’s Cemetery,” for example, contain phrases such as “Man in triumph scorning death below” and “the flower of Youth, / the men who scorned / To live (so died) when languished liberty.”¹⁷ His long poem “The Dead: A Requiem,” written in June 1915, is full of Classical allusions, romantic language and conventions, and enthusiastic praise of heroes:

O Youth too great with Littleness to dwell!
 O soul of Youth triumphant over death!
 O envious manhood keeping sentinel
 O'er nobleness of life! O oracle which saith:
 'The soul of life is in the will to give
 The best to life in willing sacrifice.'¹⁸

"A Soldier's Cemetery" makes a connection between the burial of soldiers and future fertility: "And flowers will shine in this now barren plot" (ln. 11). "Matthew Copse" is even more explicit:

Nature flourishes amid decay...

Dreams of the day when rampant there will rise
 The flowers of Truth and Freedom from the blood
 Of noble youth who died: when there will bud
 The flower of Love from human sacrifice. (ln. 21, 25-28)

In this poem, the "flowers of Truth and Freedom" grow directly from the soldiers' blood and "the flower of Love from human sacrifice" (lns. 26, 28). In these poems, the sacrifices of soldiers are productive, ensuring future peace and fertility; the war is certainly not the senseless waste that dominates later World War I poetry.

In fact, even Wilfred Owen's very early poems and writing on the war share these productive and supportive sentiments. "1914"¹⁹ is a surprisingly conventional poem, reflecting the view at the time that the war would renew Western culture:

For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
 And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
 An Autumn slowly fell, a harvest home,
 A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
 But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
 Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.²⁰

Although the war will have the same killing effect as winter, "a new Spring" will follow, new growth made possible by the sacrifices of the war—indeed, growing out of their blood. Finding such an attitude in a poem of Owen's might come as a surprise, considering the harsh critique of the war found in his later poems (discussed below), but his initial ideas about the war were similar to most other Britons'. In a letter to his mother written in France in December 1916, he describes being injured: "'This morning I was hit! We were bombing and a fragment from somewhere hit my thumb knuckle. I coaxed out a drop of blood. Alas! No more!! There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France...but excitement is always necessary to my happiness."²¹ This "fine heroic feeling," however, is gone a few weeks later; in another letter, dated January 1, he writes, "I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell."²² While "1914"

reflects Owen's initial belief that a new peace would emerge, made possible by sacrifice during the war, the poem is not completely supportive of the war. The first stanza describes the war as "The foul tornado, centred at Berlin... over all the width of Europe whirled, / Rending the sails of progress."²³

Charles Sorley's "Two Sonnets" of June 1915 are similarly complicated in their view of the war itself, but hopeful about the possible productivity of the sacrifices of war and admiring of the soldiers who make them. The second sonnet describes death in distinctly unromantic, but carefully neutral and peculiarly anonymous terms: "Such, such is Death: no triumph: no defeat: / Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean, / A merciful putting away of what has been."²⁴ And, rather than demonize the enemy as so much war poetry does, the speaker says, "Victor and vanquished are a-one in death: / Coward and brave, friend, foe" (lms. 21-22). The last few lines, however, are unmistakably adulatory and again depict flowers, more metaphorical this time, growing from the sacrifice: "And your bright Promise, withered long and sped, / Is touched, stirs, rises, opens and grows sweet / And blossoms and is you, when you are dead" (lms. 26-28).

Some poets in the early years of the war, including Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, and Laurel Binyon, take the desire to insulate the reader from the dead's bodies even further—these dead are barely even embodied, but are instead an abstract collective, "The Dead," as abstract as the concepts of nobility, courage, and nationalism they support. Rupert Brooke in fact wrote two sonnets as part of his "1914" sonnet sequence, both entitled "The Dead," neither of which focuses on the bodies of the dead (the second of these, "IV. The Dead," mentions "these hearts" and "cheeks," but as memories of the dead when they were living.²⁵ Instead "the Dead" are an abstract concept who "brought us, for our dearth, / Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain," and through whom "we have come into our heritage."²⁶ The second sonnet gives us a portrait of those who died through their living experiences with nature, and leaves us with the "shining peace" the Dead have won for us. These are not dead, but immortal, and George Parfitt argues that "[IV.] The Dead' is a shimmer of words ('a white/Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance') which abolishes its title and thus serves the national cause, as defined by the national leaders."²⁷

Along with Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon is remembered as one of the fiercest anti-war soldier poets, whose verse is more caustic than Owen's typically melancholic and regretful critique of the war. But "To My Brother," an early poem of Sassoon's written in 1915 after the death of his younger brother, like Owen's "1914," shows an uncharacteristic praise of sacrifice and characterization of the dead as heroes—perhaps because it memorializes his brother, perhaps because it was written so early, perhaps for both reasons. Sassoon envisions himself victorious through his brother, who is immortalized in the poem:

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,
And I am in the field where men must fight.
But in the gloom I see your laurell'd head
And through your victory I shall win the light.²⁸

Sassoon also draws on Classical imagery, giving his brother laurels, ancient symbols of victory. Sassoon memorializes his brother and the other soldiers who have given their lives in the war, without focusing on their bodies or even their resting places, immortalizing them even more literally than the above poems have with soldiers who are buried.

Laurel Binyon pursues a similar goal in his 1914 poem “For the Fallen”:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.²⁹

Not only will they not grow old, but Binyon depicts them sleeping, employing, like the government and the soldiers themselves, a euphemism for the words “dead”: “They sleep beyond England’s foam” (ln. 20). Like Sassoon’s brother and many of the soldiers in the poems above, these soldiers are also immortalized and memorialized; they are also, like the speaker of “The Soldier” discussed earlier in this section, tools of Empire and nationalist sentiment. What little body the soldiers do possess in “For the Fallen” is England’s—“England mourns for her dead across the sea. / Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit, / Fallen in the cause of the free”—or is described as it was before their deaths, symbols of the hale, hearty English soldier who is the object of hero-worship—“Straight of limb, true of eye.”³⁰ The poem is still recited yearly around the English-speaking world on November 11, Remembrance Day.

These poems and their reluctance to discuss or portray the method of these soldiers’ deaths or the reality of the war—that huge numbers of men were being killed in brutally violent ways and were often left unburied because of practical problems with retrieving bodies from No Man’s Land or the difficulty of identifying remains left after heavy shelling—reflect society’s early attitudes about the war: mostly optimistic, enthusiastic, even excited. After all, most Britons thought the war would be over by Christmas 1914, and, as Fussell points out, the British had a “tendency toward heroic grandiosity about all their wars.”³¹ As the war dragged on, however, and as it became more and more destructive, some poets looked for ways to renew that optimism or at least to provide comfort to soldiers and their families in the face of almost inevitable death, composing poems like the ones discussed above. Parfitt sees in these poems a “drive...to establish, by way of the creation of unity, the idea that no sacrifice is too great for ‘the One Flag,’ and ‘the One Race.’”³² Townsend argues that “During World War I, people read what they wanted to hear, that their young men were dying gallantly, that the Empire would live on, that country still came first. The nation wanted to believe that old flames still burned brightly, not that men were dying like cattle or that Horace had lied.”³³ This disillusionment becomes the prevailing attitude of later World War I poetry, exemplified in the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, and Isaac Rosenberg, as they shared their frustrations and disillusionment with and their anger at the war and what they saw as needless, not productive, sacrifices.

The “Universal Pervasion of *Ugliness*”: The Dead as Waste

As the war continued into 1916 and on, poetry, especially by soldier poets, began to display the “swerve from heroic aspiration to the bitter disillusionment.”³⁴ This transition is just becoming visible in Siegfried Sassoon’s “To Victory.” In this poem, Sassoon idealizes not the war or those who died in it, but the pleasure in life and contentment that existed for him before the war:

Return to me, colours that were my joy,
Not in the *woeful crimson of men slain*,
But shining as a garden, come with the streaming
Banners of dawn and sundown after rain.

I want to fill my gaze with blue and silver,
Radiance through living roses, spires of green,
Rising in *young-limbed copse* and lovely wood,
Where the hueless wind passes and cries unseen.³⁵

Some of Sassoon’s later frustrations with the war surface here, although they are not nearly as bitter as they become; aside from the “woeful crimson” of line 2, Sassoon also writes, “Tired of the greys and browns and leafless ash / I would have hours that move like a glitter of dancers, / Far from the angry guns that boom and flash” (lms. 10-12). Although Sassoon does not directly reference bodies in “To Victory,” the “woeful crimson of men slain” and “young-limbed copse” unavoidably evoke blood and “corpse,” respectively. Sassoon’s growing frustration is just starting to manifest here, still couched in the romantic and pastoral imagery of nineteenth-century verse.

In contrast to the metaphorical allusion to bodies in “To Victory,” many poets focus heavily on bodies in graphic detail and brutal clarity in the later years of the war. In contrast to the poems discussed above, bodies in later World War I poetry are no longer stable and are not sealed tastefully away in graves. They are often left unburied, confronting the reader with the horrors of the war, especially because many of these exposed bodies are fragmented, blown apart, or compromised by visible and grisly wounds. In Edgell Rickword’s “Winter Warfare,” winter leaves soldiers’ “fingers stuck to burning steel, / toes to frozen boot” and “stalk[s] on into No Man’s Land...with glinting heel / stab[s] those who lingered there / torn by screaming steel.”³⁶ Max Plowman’s “Going into the Line” tells the story of a soldier who dies during an attack: “and there he lay, / Foully deformed in what was once a man.”³⁷ These are not whole bodies, safely buried under the earth.

The Battle of the Somme took place between July 1 and November 18, 1916, on both sides of the River Somme in France. It was intended to turn the tide of the war in the Allies’ favor, but it became the largest battle of World War I on the Western Front and one of the bloodiest battles in human history. Over a million soldiers were wounded or killed in gruesome deaths that refuted the ideals of war represented in the poems above. Almost twenty-thousand British soldiers died on the first day of the battle alone.

For many scholars, the Battle of the Somme represents a turning point in the reception of the war and its representation in poetry: war could no longer be seen as a glorious, heroic enterprise in which men stoically died for their country. Ernest Hemingway's Frederick Henry reflects on this change in *A Farewell to Arms*: "I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. . . . Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene."³⁸ It had become less and less clear for what cause English soldiers were actually dying; England itself had not been invaded, and there was very little advancement being made anywhere on the Western Front, with both sides dug into five hundred miles of trenches separated by the infamous waste of No Man's Land. In another letter from Owen to his mother, dated February 4, 1917, Owen writes about "the 'universal pervasion of *Ugliness*' (his own capitalization and underscoring) and the 'hideous landscapes. . . everything unnatural, broken, blasted' (*Collected Letters* 482)."³⁹ In a comment eerily appropriate for this discussion, Owen "noted the incongruity between this ugliness and traditional war poetry: 'unburial bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth: In poetry we call them the most glorious.'"⁴⁰ As Fussell observes, in an environment like the one the war had become, no longer "would the hearty idiom of boys' adventure stories in which the young hero never failed to stand up and play the game serve to transmit the facts about modern mass man in the attack."⁴¹

Instead, these poets created a new idiom and a new narrative, one that did not perpetuate, as Owen calls it in "Dulce et Decorum Est," "the old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori*."⁴² This new poetry bears witness to the horrors of the war; unlike many earlier poems, which attempt to immortalize the dead, exhort other soldiers to carry on the fight, or support England and the Empire, many later poems of the war criticize the war and the men who are leading it or those at home who support it through their bleak, brutally honest portrayal of the war. Al-Joulan describes this imperative as the poets' self-claimed "duty of translating the reality of trench warfare, when the soldiers themselves were not allowed to tell the truth, or perhaps dead or even crippled and therefore incapable of doing so."⁴³ Part of this duty is depicting grievously wounded or dead soldiers in brutal and realistic detail and letting these bodies speak new messages. Sychterz notes that "the soldier poets of World War I insist that the wounded body does indeed speak, and it speaks with surprising frequency throughout their poetry."⁴⁴ Sychterz's study of war poetry and the body sets up a dichotomy between scars and wounds, where "the wound disables an authoritative narrative identity, while the scar reassembles that narrative"; in this case, I argue that the narrative is the one of noble sacrifice that persisted throughout the early years of the war—and indeed for some, such as those at home, persisted throughout the war. Thus, buried bodies in early war poetry are like scars: stable, enclosed, and therefore able to support relatively tenuous, unstable messages, the "old Lies" of those who supported the war and who oversaw it. However, bodies in later war poetry are wounds. They

carr[y] the same semantic potential as the scar, but it emerges in a different way, through the strange language of the body: the screams and moans of pain, the crunch of bones, the sound of tissue tearing, the sight of blood and the charnel smell of rotting flesh. The wound differs from the scar in that the injured individual cannot yet harness those lesions into a coherent narrative, for her voice cannot yet close its meaning.⁴⁵

The bodies of later World War I poetry disable the “old Lies”; they still support messages, but those messages may be incoherent or not yet understood, reflective of the senselessness and futility of the war perceived by these poets, and they are unable to support the abstract and insubstantial concepts of noble sacrifice, courage, and productive violence supported by earlier poetry of the war.

The paradigmatic poem of this type is Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est.” Instead of the “feudal high-diction [that] defined early war poetry,” this poem uses realistic, common speech and drags the reader down into the mud, blood, and flooded trenches in which the poets themselves were immersed.⁴⁶ The reader accompanies soldiers “knock-kneed, coughing like hags... through sludge” as they “trudge” and are “drunk with fatigue.”⁴⁷ And when the unit is hit by a gas attack and one soldier cannot get his mask on in time, the description of his death is sustained in grim detail over fourteen lines:

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,— (lms. 11-24)

Although this body is not fragmented or blown apart by artillery, it is “corrupted” and “flung” on a wagon” rather than buried away, where the reader would be safely insulated from it. The soldier “plunges” at the “helpless” speaker, and therefore the reader, confronting both with his suffering and his truly horrible death. The body’s lungs are “froth-corrupted,” the “innocent tongues” afflicted with “vile, incurable sores,” and earlier in the poem, the soldiers as they walk are described as “asleep,” “lame,” “blind,” “drunk,”

and “deaf”—the poem cuts off any possibility of speech, perception, or understanding, any opportunity for making grandiose statements about the sacrifice of this soldier, the glory of war, or the strength of the Empire.

Poems by Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, and Isaac Rosenberg engage with messages about England, its Empire, and its soldiers in varying ways, but none of them support traditional messages of nationalism and the glory of war by supporting or spreading those messages. In Sassoon’s “The Rear-Guard,” the soldier in the poem and reader are confronted with a casualty of the war, this one already dead:

Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard ten days before,
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.⁴⁸

Again the possibility for communication is cut off; the soldier is an “unanswering heap” (ln. 14). There is also no sense of glory or sacrifice here, just mute, senseless death, “a blackening wound” (ln. 18). Additionally, the live soldier in the poem is not the brave, dignified Briton of early war poetry; he is depicted “groping along the tunnel,” “tripping,” and cursing at and kicking the dead soldier: “God blast your neck!...Get up and guide me through this stinking place” (lns. 1, 8, 12-13). As Townsend points out, “The old myths of gallant soldiers worked in their time, but not in this one. Here was a war where a man was a number, where the dead were considered ‘wastage.’”⁴⁹ This soldier is not the “gallant,” proud representative of the Empire; he is just a tired, lost man.

In contrast, the main character in Edmund Blunden’s “The Welcome” could potentially be a representative of the Empire; he is described as “scarcely come from leave and London” and “one who had scarcely shaken / The air of England out of his lungs.”⁵⁰ But the presence of the Empire is no help when a shell lands “right into the doorway” and the six men who had been standing there become a “muckheap” (lns. 17, 20). The “one who had scarcely shaken / The air of England out of his lungs / Was alive, and sane”—the Empire lives on, unaffected by the deaths of six men, blind to the suffering happening in its name (lns. 21-23). And the soldier recently returned from leave, supposedly “alive, and sane,” is “a tall, lean, pale-looking creature, / With nerves that seldom ceased to wince; / Past war had long preyed on his nature, / And war had doubled in horror since” (lns. 5-9). He is most likely returning from a leave spent convalescing from shell shock, caused by the trauma of fighting for the Empire, and now being dropped right back in the midst of more trauma in the name of England. Thus, although his body is whole, like those of early World War I poems, it cannot support the ideals of Empire and messages of glory; Blunden subverts the traditional image of the uncompromised, whole body.

If the Empire is callous and blind in “The Welcome,” it is missing entirely from Isaac Rosenberg’s “Dead Man’s Dump,” one of the most graphic and unsparingly bleak poems of the war. Other than a line in which “Some borne on stretchers dreamed of home,” there’s no reference to home, England,

families, or anything associated with the homeland—and even the “home” those on stretchers dream of has been “war-blotted from their hearts.”⁵¹ The three variations on the presence of Empire in “The Rear-Guard,” “The Welcome,” and “Dead Man’s Dump” suggest, as Townsend argues, that “England’s myths had crumbled with the empire. What could possibly grow out of that? World War I brought on the end of myth of the Empire, one that the modern world has yet to experience again.”⁵²

But where “Dead Man’s Dump” spends almost no time focused on those at home or on nationalism, it focuses obsessively on the dead and their bodies, and particularly on destroying them completely. The wagon that passes over the dead “pained them not, though their bones crunched,” and its “wheels grazed his [a dead soldier’s] face”; “a man’s brains [are] splattered on / A stretcher-bearer’s face,” and the dead are “Burnt black by strange decay” (lms. 7-8, 79, 48-49, 56). Rosenberg actively violates “the merit attached to the wholeness of the human body in Western civilisation” here, mercilessly breaking down bodies the way that the war itself does.⁵³ The poem reflects a sentiment in many of the war poets’ writing: “To speak of ‘suffering’ is not enough; one must see and feel the bloody head cradled dead on one’s own shoulder,” or, in this case, hear and feel the bones crunch under one’s feet.⁵⁴ These bodies are not buried with dignity or memorialized in poetry, but are left exposed, nameless, and subject to further degradation.

Unlike the buried bodies of earlier World War I poetry, those bodies left lying on the ground in the later poems of Blunden, Owen, and Rosenberg are not productive, fertilizing plants and flowers with their blood; indeed, they are distinctly unproductive. Blunden’s “The Welcome,” for example, turns six men, with the potential productivity of six lives, into a “muckheap,” pure “wastage” (line 20).⁵⁵ Owen’s “Futility” revises the agricultural language of his earlier poem “1914,” in which blood was seed:

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

Think how it [the sun] wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir? (lms. 1-3, 8-10)

The sun will not wake this dead soldier like it wakes seeds. “Futility” raises the question of continuing life for the soldier, leaving the reader to answer it from his or her reading of the poem—Owen’s “The End” answers that question for the reader, cutting off any possibility of production.

Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth
All death will he annul, all tears assuage?—
Or fill these void veins full again with youth,
And wash, with an immortal water, Age?
When I do ask white Age he saith not so:
'My head hangs weighed with snow.'⁵⁶

This soldier's veins are "void," and when the speaker asks directly, "Shall Life renew these bodies?" the answer is unambiguously negative (lms. 7, 5, 9).

Finally, Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" is far less graphic than "Dead Man's Dump," but still shuts down the possibility of production from the soldiers' bodies or from the ground that swallows them. The "droll rat" to whom the speaker talks passes by,

Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
 Less chanced than you for life
 Bonds to the whims of murder,
 Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
 The torn fields of France.⁵⁷

These living bodies are destined for death, and the ones who are already dead are not respectfully buried, but "sprawled in the bowels of the earth" (ln. 17). Rosenberg also recalls McCrae's poppies when his speaker "pull[s] the parapet's poppy / To stick behind [his] ear" (lms. 5-6). Just as flowers grow from the blood of soldiers who have died in Streets's "Matthew Cope" and "A Soldier's Cemetery," they grow here as well—but they do not thrive: "Poppies whose roots are in men's veins / Drop, and are ever dropping" (lms. 23-24). Susanne Christine Puissant explains that "during the high times of British romantic irony in the nineteenth century, the world was perceived as chaotic but the chaos itself as highly fertile. Now, at the beginning of the twentieth century, this fertility seemed to have turned into its opposite, namely ultimate destruction."⁵⁸ This shift from the perception of chaos being productive to that of chaos being senseless and destructive is deeply reflected in poetry of the time, including that by Rosenberg, Owen, Sassoon, and others, who subvert and reverse old metaphors and conceits.

Bodies in this "new kind of war poetry" are not productive, but wasted; not buried reverently, but left to rot in No Man's Land; no longer stable slates on which to write nationalistic messages of pride and hero-worship, but disintegrating pieces of meat incapable of communicating such simplistic ideals. This poetic revolution was necessary for poets who lived through the new and shocking experiences of World War I; as Townsend points out, "this was an unprecedented war and the experience of a war like this had never been described before."⁵⁹ Trudy Tate describes the historically unique situation that led to so many soldiers developing what was then called shell shock, now understood as post-traumatic stress:

The experience of the First World War trenches forced soldiers into extremes of passivity—in effect, waiting to be shelled—at the same time as the war demanded immense courage, resourcefulness, and action. Threatened constantly with death or mutilation, frequently witnessing the grotesque deaths of their friends and companions, men often felt at the mercy of immense machines that always seemed to be winning.⁶⁰

War was no longer something that a skilled, courageous soldier could survive due to his individual actions, fighting face-to-face with a recognizable

foe. World War I “fundamentally altered traditional sources of identity, age-old images of war and men of war,” and it “constituted, for the soldiery, a fundamental break with the past,” reflected in the break with past poetic language and concepts that many poets effected.⁶¹ The changing imagery and uses of the dead and their bodies in World War I poetry are markers of that break, as they undergo a transformation from fertile, productive signs of meaning that serve to perpetuate old-fashioned, archaic views of war as glorious, heroic, and productive to empty, fragmented, and corrupted meat, capable of conveying new understandings of war as futile, destructive, and wasteful, but not the abstract, flimsy messages of the early war period.

In 1918, while posted to the Northern Command Depot at Ripon, Yorkshire, after convalescing from a diagnosis of shell shock, Wilfred Owen wrote a draft “Preface” to a planned book of poetry that he never saw published. He was killed in action on November 4, 1918, one week before the signing of the Armistice that ended the war; his book was published the next year. His Preface contains some of the most famous lines about his poetry:

This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.⁶²

At the end of World War I, it seems that it was not possible, for many poets, for their poetry to be about anything else.



Notes

- 1 Stout, *Coming Out of War*, 29.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 3 Al-Joulan, “Incurable Sores on Innocent Tongues,” 110.
- 4 Townsend, “On the Front Lines of an Empire,” 5. Many studies of World War I poetry go into much greater detail about the literary climate of Britain at the turn of the twentieth century and review contemporary legal and social reasons for increased literacy in this period. Some of these include the extremely thorough Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*, particularly the chapter “Oh What a Literary War”; Ben Townsend’s article “On the Front Lines of an Empire: The Rhetoric of Poetry of the First World War” in *WLA* 26 (2014); and Jon Stallworthy’s *Survivor’s Songs: From Maldon to the Somme*, particularly the first chapter, “The Death of the Hero.”
- 5 Townsend, “On the Front Lines of an Empire,” 6.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 7 Al-Joulan, “Incurable Sores on Innocent Tongues,” 110.
- 8 Asquith, “The Volunteer,” lines 1-2, 4, 6-8.
- 9 *Ibid.*, lines 15-16.
- 10 Allen Frantzen, in *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), examines the proliferation of chivalric ideals in World War I poetry, shows how they actually affected soldiers’ behavior in combat, and traces those ideals back to their medieval origins.
- 11 Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 175.
- 12 Townsend, “On the Front Lines of an Empire,” 7.
- 13 Brooke, “The Soldier.”
- 14 Leed, *No Man’s Land*, 204.
- 15 McCrae, “In Flanders Fields,” lines 1-3.
- 16 Hipp, *The Poetry of Shell Shock*, 193.
- 17 Streets, “Matthew Copse,” line 23; “A Soldier’s Cemetery,” lines 5-6.
- 18 Streets, “The Dead: A Requiem,” lines 92-97.
- 19 Some scholars, including Dominic Hibberd, author of the 2003 *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, believe that “1914” was Owen’s first poem about the war.
- 20 Owen, “1914,” lines 9-14.
- 21 Townsend, “On the Front Lines of an Empire,” 17.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Owen, “1914,” lines 3-5.
- 24 Sorley, “Two Sonnets,” lines 15-17.
- 25 Brooke, “IV. The Dead,” lines 1, 8.
- 26 Brooke, “III. The Dead,” lines 9-10, 14.
- 27 Parfitt, *English Poetry of the First World War*, 23.
- 28 Sassoon, “To My Brother,” lines 5-8.
- 29 Binyon, “For the Fallen,” lines 13-16.
- 30 *Ibid.*, lines 2-4, 10.
- 31 Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 174-175.
- 32 Parfitt, *English Poetry of the First World War*, 9.
- 33 Townsend, “On the Front Lines of an Empire,” 19.
- 34 Stout, *Coming Out of War*, 30.

- 35 Sassoon, "To Victory," lines 1-9. Emphasis added.
- 36 Rickword, "Winter Warfare," lines 7-8, 9, 18-20.
- 37 Plowman, "Going Into the Line," lines 44-45.
- 38 Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 196.
- 39 Stout, *Coming Out of War*, 37.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 170.
- 42 "It is sweet and decorous to die for one's country," from Horace's Odes. Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est," lines 27-28.
- 43 Al-Joulan, "Incurable Sores on Innocent Tongues," 112.
- 44 Sychterz, "Scarred Narratives and Speaking Wounds: War Poetry and the Body," 143.
- 45 Ibid., 144.
- 46 Townsend, "On the Front Lines of an Empire," 20.
- 47 Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est," lines 2, 4, 7.
- 48 Sassoon, "The Rear-Guard," lines 14-18.
- 49 Townsend, "On the Front Lines of An Empire," 22.
- 50 Blunden, "The Welcome," lines 1, 21-22.
- 51 Rosenberg, "Dead Man's Dump," 46-47.
- 52 Townsend, "On the Front Lines of an Empire," 25.
- 53 Puissant, *Irony and the Poetry of the First World War*, 133.
- 54 Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 296.
- 55 Townsend, "On the Front Lines of an Empire," 22.
- 56 Owen, "The End," lines 5-10.
- 57 Rosenberg, "Break of Day in the Trenches," lines 14-18.
- 58 Puissant, *Irony and the Poetry of the First World War*, 128.
- 59 Townsend, "On the Front Lines of an Empire," 22.
- 60 Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*, 169.
- 61 Leed, *No Man's Land*, 193, 197.
- 62 Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 535.

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