
AESTHETIC TRUTH AND POPULAR APPEAL IN BRITISH POETRY FROM WORLD WAR ONE

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Resumen

En palabras de Paul Fussell, la Primera Guerra Mundial se ha convertido para los británicos en un todo que impregna a la condición esencial de la conciencia en el siglo XX". Una de las influencias más grandes y duraderas a la vista del público británico en torno a la guerra son los poemas de los poetas soldados como Rupert Brooke, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney y Rosenberg Isaac. Estos poetas buscaron validar la base de su experiencia directa. Sus poemas se convirtieron, y siguen siendo inmensamente populares dada su credibilidad y la experiencia que presentan en el ámbito de la verdad emocional. Los poemas confirman sus pensamientos y temores más íntimos, a la vez que trascienden su realidad personal, lo que facilita la comprensión y el dominio de los sentimientos. Muchos de los poemas descritos a continuación figurarán en las celebraciones del centenario tras el estallido de la guerra en 1914.

Palabras clave: Primera Guerra Mundial, estética, verdad, patriótico, antibélico, emoción.

Abstract

In the words of Paul Fussell, World War One has become for Britons an 'all-encompassing, all-pervading, both internal and external at once, the essential condition of consciousness in the twentieth century.' One of the greatest and most lasting influences on the British public's view of the war are the poems of the soldier poets, most notable Rupert Brooke, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Isaac Rosenberg. The poets sought validity on the basis of direct experience. Their poems became, and remain, immensely popular because they are believable and because the experience they present rings true emotionally. The poems confirmed people's innermost thoughts and fears while at the same time transcending them, facilitating understanding and mastery of feelings.

Many of the poems discussed here are certain to feature in the centenary celebrations of the outbreak of war to take place in 1914.

Keywords: World War One, aesthetic truth, patriotic, anti-war, emotion.

Artículo

Almost one hundred years after its outbreak, World War One continues to fascinate Britons and is an important part of the national collective memory¹. It has, as one critic has noted, become “all-encompassing, all-pervading, both internal and external at once, the essential condition of consciousness in the twentieth century” (Fussell, 1975: 321). One of the greatest and most lasting influences on the British public’s view of the war are the poems of the soldier poets, most notably Rupert Brooke, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Isaac Rosenberg. The poets sought validity on the basis of direct experience. Their combatant lyrics established an aesthetic of truth based on the idea that they provide a direct path between the realities of war and the innocence of the civilian reader². Their voices are thought to be “sincere, realistic and truthful”; they “operate as a conduit to the general meaning of the war, dispelling the patriotic cant of civilian ignorance” (Campbell, 2005: 266). The soldier poets are emblematic of the evolving attitude towards the war, as patriotic enthusiasm was gradually replaced by disillusionment³. As James Campbell demonstrates, the canonical war poets have traditionally been regarded “as the voices of protest against military and governmental competence culminating in pointless slaughter” (Campbell, 2005: 266). It is the anti-war poetry that has gained precedence and which is in focus here: the earlier patriotism was short-lived, and its idealised, romantic images were thought to have little to do with the reality of war. The influence of the soldier poets remains undiminished, as evidenced in the regular appearance of their poems in British examination syllabuses at both secondary and high-school level, and in the publication of new editions and collections⁴.

The poems owe their popularity to their ability to give a voice to the changing response to the war, the earlier ones expressing the initial desire to rally for one’s country and preserve its culture and beauty for posterity (1914 and 1915), and the

1 Collective memory is defined as “a set of signifying practices linking authorial encoding with audience decoding of messages about the past” (Winter, 2006: 197).

2 This is the argument, for example, of Lane (1972) (which, despite its title also focuses on war poets other than Owen and Sassoon); Lehman (1982); and Crawford (1988).

3 See Stallworthy (2002) for a more detailed discussion of the poets looked at here. Stallworthy also discusses the work of Julian Henry Francis Grenfell, Francis Edward Ledwidge, Philip Edward Thomas and David Jones.

4 For example, a Kindle edition of World War One poetry was published in 2011: Brooke et al. (2011). This edition includes the work of Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, Ivor Gurney and Wilfred Owen.

later ones, encapsulating the growing disgust at the horrors of war, particularly after the Battle of the Somme in 1916⁵. The early poems, “uncritical, jingoistic, and patriotic” (Robb, 2002: 160), were, like all popular culture at the time, designed to mobilise⁶. The later poems, which belonged primarily to the post-war decade, were seen as authentic. The poets of World War One struggled to force to new uses the Georgian language at their disposal, turning the Arcadian-pastoral modes used in the first two years of the war into bitter irony. As J.M. Winter argues, “By straining the Georgian modes to their utmost, and beyond, they created something that, however technically flawed, was a powerful testimony to the experience of those who fought in the war and a moving memorial to their dead comrades” (Winter, 1985: 291).

The poems discussed here present a form of truth based on emotion. The aesthetic truth of the poems does not refer to what is actually true, but what is “true to life” – namely, what is believable and could happen. As James Andersson Winn notes, over a million combatants had died by 1916. While the monuments described their deaths as “glorious”, they “were often muddy and anonymous” (Winn, 2008: 16). It is not my intention to enter into the debate about whether this picture is the truth or not in any objective or historical sense (this has been done by others⁷); instead, I wish to show how the changing content of the poems presents a truth that was believable. The poems confirmed people’s innermost thoughts and fears while at the same time transcending them, facilitating understanding and mastery of feelings⁸.

Of the four levels at which art seems to express truth, “our emotions, cultural values, sensory experience, and the elusive *significance* of our experience” (Dorter, 1990: 37), it is the first two that are most relevant here⁹. The experience presented by the poems rings true emotionally. To be aesthetically effective,

the feelings expressed in the poems must reflect more than the personal idiosyncrasies of the artist: what is expressed must be shared, the feelings must be held in common, the particular must reflect the universal. In this sense art is able to disclose truth about our shared life of feeling (Dorter, 1990: 38).

as it apprehends and expresses the nature of what gives significance to our experience. At the same time, the poems express truth in terms of a particular cultural style and set of cultural values. The experiences evoked in the reader “reveal something of these values and the possibilities inherent in them” (Dorter, 1990: 38).

⁵ One million subjects of the British Empire died and over 500,000 were lost or unidentifiable (Ward and Gibson, 1989: 281). In total, more than nine million soldiers, sailors and airmen were killed in the war and approximately five million civilians (Gilbert, 2008: xv).

⁶ See Robb (2002: 160–185) for an exemplification of the portrayal of war in popular culture.

⁷ See, for example, Vandiver (2010: 1–30). Vandiver refers to several studies conducted that have been conducted in the last twenty years.

⁸ This is the difference between popular art, which allows us to wallow in our emotions, and art, that gives us “understanding and thereby mastery of our feelings” (Kaplan, 1966: 358).

⁹ See Dorter (1990: 37–38) for a breakdown of the four levels at which art appears to express truth.

The poet, voluntarily or involuntarily, exemplifies the soul of his nation, shaping it at the same time.

The images of the poems evoke the extraordinary in both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. What is experienced in the poem is the truth that it reveals, forcing our thoughts beyond identifiable concepts to their significance. This process relies both on imagination and emotion: experience is cognised by imagination¹⁰. Emotion is the means by which we are affected by the experience produced by the imagination. As the World War One historian John Keegan observes, while the consequences of the war could not be foreseen, the emotions and experiences “can, by contrast, all too easily be projected into the future” (Keegan, 2000: 426). It is these emotions and experiences that the war poems, designed neither to entertain¹¹ nor please the reader¹², capture so effectively and are the reason why they continue to fascinate.

1. PATRIOTIC POETRY

Throughout the war, newspapers and magazines published verse, anthologies appeared in large numbers, and poetry (especially of the patriotic kind) was read in churches around the country (Robb, 2002: 129–159). War poems were read by millions. While Rupert Brooke symbolises the early idealism, Siegfried Sassoon, as I hope to show, encapsulates the bitter disillusionment that emerged after the first months of fighting.

Much of the early war poetry was patriotic doggerel that has long since been forgotten. The collection of verse called *Songs and Sonnets for England in War Time* (1914) is a case in point¹³. The most popular war poet was probably John Oxenham, whose poems were permeated by optimism and who expressed his enthusiasm for the war in terms of Christian idealism and faith in God’s divine love and purpose. His poem, “For the Men at the Front” (Oxenham, 1916: 13), for example, is reputed to have sold eight million copies. Each stanza appeals to the “Lord God of Hosts” to protect different groups: the dead, the weak and broken, those grieving at home, and ministers of the church. The final verse asks God to send peace until the end of the world.

Much of the early poetry followed the conventions of Georgian poetry (stressing chivalry, the virtue of sacrifice and the righteous cause), featured rural subjects and used pastoral imagery¹⁴. Not surprisingly, Georgian poets focused on England and

10 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht puts this a little differently as he argues that “feelings, impressions, and images [...] are produced by our consciousness and [...] are inaccessible to us in our historically specific everyday worlds” (Gumbrecht, 2006: 305).

11 A pre-requisite of popular literature (Gelder, 2004: 22).

12 A pre-requisite of popular literature as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1996: 218).

13 An example is the poem “Britannia” by H. De Vere Stacpoole, originally published in the *Daily Express*, 7 August 1914: Men deemed her changed, and lo! / At word of war unveiled, / She stands, as long ago, / She stood when Nelson sailed. / The sea wind in her hair, / The salt upon her lips, / Upon the Forelands fair / She guards the English ships.

14 For a discussion of the use of landscapes in Georgian World War I poetry, see Johnston (1964).

Englishness. One who was close to the Georgian poets but who was not actually published in Georgian poetry anthologies was Edward Thomas.

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors
 Many a frozen night, and merrily
 Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:
 "At Mrs Greenland's Hawthorn Bush," said he,
 "I slept." None knew which bush. Above the town,
 Beyond "The Drover", a hundred spot the down
 In Wiltshire. And where now at last he sleeps
 More sound in France – that, too, he secret keeps. (Thomas, 1978: 67).

This poem, called "A Private" and written in 1915 (Thomas was 37 at the time and volunteered for the Army, joining the Artists' Rifles), demonstrates Thomas's love of the countryside, as represented by the anonymous ploughman. Wiltshire is one of the most rural parts of England and quintessentially English. The long vowels in the final two lines, "sleeps" and "keeps", suggest serenity. The ploughman takes the secret of his calmness with him to the grave.

The World War One poets discussed here are among the best-known and most anthologised. The first literary celebrity of the war was the pro-war Rupert Brooke. Brooke's sonnet cycle *1914* (Brooke, 1916) epitomises the early idealism of the war and the sacrifice of the young men who died. The poem "The Dead" is a case in point: "Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead! / There's none of these so lonely and poor of old / But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold" (Brooke, 1916: 314). Brooke's poetry increased in popularity when the dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London quoted "The Soldier" in his Easter sermon in 1915. The poem, which is part of the *1914* sonnet cycle, is still one of the most frequently quoted on the war and regularly taught in English schools. Following is the best-known stanza.

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. (Brooke, 1916: 316).

Brooke's patriotic poetry, full of the love of England and celebrating Englishness, combined with his early death granted him the status of a national martyr. After his death, his poetry became even more popular, with no less than 300 000 copies of his *1914 and Other Poems* and *Collected Poems* being sold between 1915 and 1925.

Patriotic poetry in general, however, and Georgian in particular, soon lost appeal. As Andrew Barlow argues, as the optimism of the early war period was killed, “Georgian poetry came to see narrow and timid in scope” (Barlow, 2000: 17). It was time for the anti-war poets to take over.

2. ANTI-WAR POETRY

While there were a number of less talented soldier-poets who attempted to follow in Brooke’s footsteps, most poets adopted a less idealised view of the war, particularly in the decade after its conclusion. Among the best known is Charles Hamilton Sorley, who was deeply critical of anything that smacked of jingoism: “I am sick of the sound of the word. In training to fight for England, I am training to fight for that deliberate hypocrisy, that middle-class sloth of outlook and appalling “imaginative indolence” that has marked us out from generation to generation” (cited in Stallworthy, 2002: 35). He was particularly critical of the jingoism in Rupert Brooke’s poetry¹⁵. At the beginning of the war, Sorley believed in the possibility of reconciliation between nations, as the following lines indicate.

When it is peace, then we may view again
With new-won eyes each other’s truer form
And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm
We’ll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,
When it is peace. But until peace, the storm
The darkness and the thunder and the rain. (Stallworthy, 2002: 36)

At the same time, Sorley recognizes that peace will be preceded by darkness, thunder and rain.

Conventional patriotic rhetoric belonged to another world. The real world of war was unmitigated tragedy as expressed in the following poem, found in Sorley’s papers after his death.

When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you’ll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead. (Cross, 1988: 61).

Death, for Sorley, was “no triumph, no defeat: / Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clear, / a merciful putting away of what has been” (Cross, 1988: 61). He broods on immortality: “And your bright Promise, withered long and sped / [...] blossoms and is you, when you are dead”. “Two Sonnets” proved a powerful antidote to Rupert Brooke’s poems and influenced other famous war poets such as Siegfried

¹⁵ This is expressed clearly in a letter to his mother, reprinted in Stallworthy (2002: 35).

Sassoon¹⁶, who had been presented with Sorley's posthumous *Marlborough and Other Poems* by Robert Graves¹⁷.

Siegfried Sassoon was the most widely read of the anti-war poets, his work appearing in the *Cambridge Magazine*, and in two wartime collections, *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* (Sassoon, 1918b) and *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (Sassoon, 1918a). Sassoon's poems were written for civilians unaware of the realities of war. In the poem "They", for example, a bishop addresses some soldiers, explaining that those who return from the war "will not be the same" (Sassoon, 1918b: 35). The soldiers recognise this and cite concrete examples: George, who has lost both legs; Bill who has become "stone blind"; Jim, who has been shot in the lungs and is unlikely to survive; and Bert, who has contracted syphilis. The Bishop can only reply, "The ways of God are strange!" The "one-legged man" in the poem of the same name is grateful that his leg was amputated because now he can become "a citizen of life", namely "eat and sleep and choose a wife" (Sassoon, 1918b: 43). Only through loss, it seems, can life be retained and some form of normality regained.

The tone of Sassoon's poem "The Hero", describing a mother's reaction on the notification of the death of her son, is particularly bitter:

"Jack fell as he'd have wished," the Mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.
"The Colonel writes so nicely." Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. "We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers." Then her face was bowed. (Sassoon, 1918b: 48).

The reader learns that Jack had been a coward. His death is no loss except for the "lonely woman with white hair". The poem "Counter-Attack" in the collection with the same name also emphasises the futility of death, this time from the perspective of a soldier, "dizzy with galloping fear" as he waits for the counter-attack, and revolted by the "strangled horror / And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead" (Sassoon, 1918a: 12). "Galloping fear" recalls images of the cavalry, associated with victorious battles of an earlier age but no longer appropriate in the first modern war of machine guns, poison gas and tanks.

¹⁶ As Jon Stallworthy observes, Sorley "did not live long enough to acquire the technical skills of an Owen or a Sassoon, but he understood the truth about the war before they did, and found words for it before them. He stands as an attractive transitional figure between the first wave of poets and those of the second wave soon to follow them" (Stallworthy, 2002: 37).

¹⁷ Graves, unlike Sassoon, never achieved fame as a war poet when he put together his first *Collected Poems* in the late twenties. The volume was published in 1927. In this volume, he collected his best war poems in a section called "War: 1915–1919". Not a single war poem is included in any of his subsequent collections, with the exception of "Recalling War", which he composed in the early Thirties. Samuel Hynes indeed speculates that "the man who wrote those poems was the Captain Graves who had been declared dead on the Somme. The other man, the one who survived, had moved on, to be a different (and a better) poet" (Hynes, 1992: 430).

Sassoon resented the complacency of civilians who could never understand the horrors of war. In his poem “Blighters”, for example, he contrasts the corpses lying at Bapaume with the joys of the music hall.

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or “Home, sweet Home”,
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume. (Sassoon, 1918b: 31).

The capitalisation of “T” in tank emphasises that modern technology is more powerful than peacetime music. The corpses are “riddled” with bullets that belong to a new era of mass destruction. “Fight to a Finish”, in which the returning soldiers who had “refrained from dying”, marks a return to older technology, as the soldiers suddenly fix their bayonets and turn on the crowd who are cheering them (Sassoon, 1918a: 29). In the final verse, Sassoon imagines himself in the role of a commander of “trustworthy bombers” whom he decides to employ “To clear those Junkers out of Parliament” (Sassoon, 1918a: 29). The crowds in Sassoon’s poems are “smug-faced” as they “sneak home” after watching the returning troops “march by”. Sassoon is uncompromising in his bitter assertion that they should pray they will “never know / the hell where youth and laughter go” (Sassoon, 1918a: 31).

Like Sassoon, Edmund Blunden also focused on the “hell” of war, contrasting the nightmare of the battlefield with innocent civilian pursuits such as concert parties. In his poem “Concert Party: Busseboum”, for example, Blunden describes soldiers as they leave a concert at the front. They emerge at cold sunset to find another “show” in progress: the battle at St. Eloi, with its own form of music and dancing. The first and last stanzas are reproduced below.

The stage was set, the house was packed,
The famous troop began;
Our laughter thundered, act by act;
Time light as sunbeams ran.
To this new concert, white we stood;
Cold certainty held our breath;
While men in tunnels below Larch Wood
Were kicking men to death. (Blunden, 1989: 181).

The laughter at the concert echoes the thunder of the war outside the concert hall. It is relentless, just like battle. The alliteration of “cold” and “certainty” emphasises the inevitability of suffering and death. The entertainment at the concert is a mere pause in the agony of war: it can last only as long as you can hold your breath.

The brutality of war is frequently contrasted in Blunden’s poems with pastoral scenes but these are used differently than in the early patriotic poems. Almost one quarter of the poems collected at the end of Blunden’s memoir *Undertones of War* feature pastoral oases that act as a kind of “ironic gauge” (Fussell, 1975: 267) of the terror of the battlefield. “The Guard’s Mistake” is a case in point. Blunden’s

battalion has left the line and retired to a virtually unscathed village where not even nature has forgotten that she should be friendly to man.

The cherry-clusters beckoned every arm,
The brook ran wrinkling by with playful foam.
And when the guard was at the main gate set,

Surrounding pastoral urged them to forget (Blunden, 1989: 172).

A sentry, a former keeper of cows, forgets the war and replaces his rifle with a country cudgel, wearing a “philosophic smile upon his lip”. It is a “sin to soil the harmonious air / With the parade of weapons built to kill”. This cannot last, however. One minute later, the final stanza describes the following ominous scene.

But now a flagged car came ill-omened there.

The crimson-mottled monarch, shocked and shrill,

Sent out poor sentry scampering for his gun,

Made him once more “the terror of the Hun” (Blunden, 1989: 172).

No one is in control of his situation: officers scream orders in shrill voices, terrified soldiers “scamper” in panic, making a poor match for the, by implication, better-prepared “Hun”. There is no room for cherry trees in such a war except as a reminder through their colour of bloodshed.

Poetry was an important part of Blunden’s attempt to do what he regarded as the impossible, namely to enable those who had not seen the war to understand it. Even with the “benefit” of direct experience, he admits that war is unfathomable. The poems collected in *Undertones of War* are an integral part of the memoir and are thus also subject to the reservation made in the preliminary quoted below.

I know that the experience to be sketched in [this memoir] is very local, limited, incoherent; that it is almost useless, in the sense that no one will read it who is not already aware of all the intimations and discoveries in it, and many more, by reason of having gone the same journey. No one? Some, I am sure; but not many. *Neither will they understand* – that will not be all my fault (Blunden, 1989: unpaginated, Blunden’s italics).

Blunden was not quite correct, however, in his assumption that his memoir would not be read (the Penguin Modern Classics edition, for example was reprinted in 2000). Some of the most prominent features of the war for Blunden are concentrated in his poetry, making his poems an important complement to his memoir.

Unlike either Sassoon or Blunden, Wilfred Owen did not write his memoir, his fame resting on his poetry alone¹⁸. Before joining up, he entertained an idealised view of war, as witnessed in the following four lines from “The Women and the Slain”, written in 1914:

O meet it is and passing sweet

¹⁸ Owen did not in fact achieve canonical status until the 1960s, when Benjamin Britten incorporated nine of his poems into his War Requiem in 1961 (Strachan, 2006: xvi).

To live in peace with others,
But sweeter still and far more meet,
To die in war for brothers. (Stallworthy, 2002: 15).

Owen does not condone killing but exalts sacrifice for one's fellow man.

His short period of service at the front, however, soon altered his perception of the true nature of war. His changed attitude is seen clearly in his poem "Strange Meeting" (Susan Hill adopted the title for her novel published in 1971). The poem opens with a picture of escape from battle through "some profound dull tunnel", full of dead bodies.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, –
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell (Stallworthy, 1985: 125).

Owen's descent into hell is accompanied by a German soldier, a poet whom he has killed. The two poets briefly discuss the hopelessness of their situation, the loss of pleasures, the courage and wisdom thrown away to no avail. It seems that the German soldier has been ripped from life by the poet.

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now [...] (Stallworthy, 1985: 126).

The poem is replete with paradoxes: friend and enemy; recognition despite the darkness, and the frowning "through" the narrator soldier. There is a suggestion that the dead German soldier is better off than the narrator, who must live with his guilt and who does not know when it will be his turn to die. Sassoon presents a similar meeting in his "Enemies", which tells the story of a dead English soldier who confronts dead Germans, one of whom has been killed by the poet.

Like Sassoon and Blunden, Owen criticised the complacency of civilians. His best known attack is to be found in "Dulce et Decorum Est", where civilians who have not experienced gassing and its deadly consequences are warned that had they done so they would never repeat "The old Lie" that it is "sweet and fitting" to die for their country. The capitalisation of the first letter of "Lie" emphasizes the scale of the crime and of the population's ignorance.

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest, —
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori (Stallworthy, 1985: 117).

Paul Fussell argues that Wilfred Owen's poetic response to the war is "unique" (Fussell, 1975: 291), suggesting that Graves, Sassoon and Blunden favoured "structured general ideas" about the war, for example the contrast between the trenches and remembered pastoral scenes of England. Wilfred Owen, on the other hand, paid special attention to the physical details of the soldiers: eyes, hair, limbs, faces, teeth, fingers, tongues, etc. Owen expresses a profound pity for the soldiers, who are destined to retain a normal healthy body for a short period only (see, for example, "Arms and the Boy", "Asleep", "The Sentry", "Disabled", "The Dead-Beat" and "Inspection").

Owen's famous "Anthem for Doomed Youth", probably the most anthologised of all war poems, contrasts the general accessories of a funeral service – such as anthems, prayers, bells, candles and palls – with the "hands of boys" and "their eyes". Men die as cattle in a slaughterhouse, "What passing bells for those who die as cattle?" he asks. There is no time to give them a proper Christian funeral. The bugles that sound the Last Post are the very ones that had called the soldiers "from sad shires" to the colours: both Church and State are responsible for their deaths. Those who love the soldiers, however, will honour their deaths in a more heart-felt way.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
 Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds (Stallworthy, 1985: 117).

Their love stretches beyond the two weeks of formal mourning; it is forever.

Owen's mature poems move from grief to happiness, only to return once again to grief. A case in point is the poem "Miners".

The centuries will burn rich loads
 With which we groaned,
 Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,
 While songs are crooned;
 But they will not dream of us poor lads,
 Left in the ground (Stallworthy, 1985: 112).

This is the voice of the mature poet who wishes to tell the true story of the groaning masses who died for the cause and who are destined to be forgotten. Ivor Gurney expresses similar sentiments.

While Ivor Gurney's poetry is less famous than that of Owen's, it does include a number of well-known verses such as the elegy "To His Love". His war poems mingle people and things to produce a picture of unnecessary sacrifice. The first stanza of "The Silent One" is a case in point.

Who died on the wires, and hung there, one of two –
Who for his hours of life had chattered through
Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent:
Yet faced unbroken wires; stepped over, and went
A noble fool, faithful to his stripes, and ended (Kavanagh, 1983:
102).

The silence of the soldier hanging on the wires is contrasted with the “lovely chatter” of idyllic pre-war days in Buckinghamshire. The wires act as a boundary between life and death. They are not crossed reluctantly or inadvertently but with the determination, nobility and honour that befits an officer – and a fool.

The pastoral elegy “To his love” conceals the fact that the subject of the poem is dead (he is mistakenly believed to be dead but is, in fact, a prisoner of war). The pastoral forms hold the grief in check. The voice is elegiac but also controlled, only breaking in the final stanza with the hysterical “Cover him, cover him” (the body is under a mass of funeral flowers).

The presence of perennial flowers introduces the notion of immortality. Appropriately, the memorial flowers are red, relating to the redness of the blood which has been so nobly shed. There is a complex play on the idea of remembrance in the final stanza:

And with thick-set
Masses of memories flowers –
Hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget (Kavanagh, 1983: 41).

Gurney’s post-war poetry mixes past and present, life and death, peace and war, making them a single condition. “Riez Bailleul”, for example, begins with the speaker who is “Behind the line there mending reserve posts, looking / On the cabbage fields with other men carefully tending cooking; / Hearing the boiling; and being sick of body and heart” (Kavanagh, 1982: 85–85) as they dream of England. This is a scene “Forced from the past” and designed to hide the present-day “pain” experienced back in England. The full war context is then opened up, as it projects what might have taken place: “a farmer’s treasure perhaps soon a wilderness”. As Edna Longley concludes in her discussion of the poem, “The participial phrases, the octet’s lack of a main verb, the double-rhymed couplets all reinforce a sense of consciousness trapped in a circle of historical and psychological pain” (Longley, 2005: 64).

A similar circle is visible in Isaac Rosenberg’s “Dead Man’s Dump”, in which “wheels” reinforce the historical fact of the death of the dead as they roll over the dead bodies “huddled” together. The poet labours under the psychological pain of having to witness the crunching of the bones while shells continue to “cry” over the dead “From night till night and now” (Noakes, 2004: 139).

Although Rosenberg was later to express a dislike of Rupert Brooke’s patriotic idealism, one of his early poems, “The Dead Heroes”, written in 1914, expresses similar sentiments, albeit in a less personal way.

Flame out, you glorious skies,
 Welcome our brave,
 Kiss their exultant eyes;
 Give what they gave (Noakes, 2004: 86–87).

The final stanza reads:

England – Time gave them thee;
 They gave back this
 To win Eternity
 And claim God’s kiss (Noakes, 2004: 86–87).

The sacrifices of the soldiers are made gladly (“exultant eyes”) and as part of a pre-ordained order over which Time (with a capital “T”) and God preside. The soldiers’ sacrifices for their country are deliberate and promise “Eternity” in Heaven. Notably, nothing is said of the hell through which they must travel to achieve such a state.

By “Break of Day in the Trenches”, written in 1916, all such patriotic notions had, as already established, become unpopular. “Break of Day in the Trenches” is one of Rosenberg’s finest poems. The pastoral, symbolised by the poppy the soldier puts behind his ear at the beginning of the poem, and the demonic, represented by the appearance of the “queer sardonic rat”, vie for control, creating images of terror that have come to symbolise the story of the war. The “normal” pastoral mode of the beginning of the morning, as Noakes observes, is interrupted by the sudden appearance of the rat (Noakes, 2004: 128). The natural order of things is reversed as the rat confidently regards the fear in the soldiers’ faces as “shrieking iron and flame” hurl through the “still heavens”. In war, it is the rat that will outlive the soldier, and not vice versa. The poem returns to the pastoral world in the final four lines.

Poppies whose roots are in men’s veins
 Drop, and are ever dropping;
 But mine in my ear is safe,
 Just a little white with the dust (Noakes, 2004: 128).

The flowers, however, are nourished on the blood of the dead. The poppy behind the soldier’s ear is only safe as long as he keeps his head below the parapet. The rat, on the other hand, can run where he will. The white dust on the poppy is an omen: it is, as Paul Fussell observes, a reminder of the colour the poppy will be when it dies (Fussell, 1975: 253). The “safe” of the penultimate line is deeply ironical; there is no safety, as the poet himself was to experience just two years later (he was killed on 1 April 1918 at the Somme). One of the most astonishing features of the poem is its impersonality: it contains none of the bitterness and indignation found in Owen’s poems. Perhaps Rosenberg’s greatest achievement was what he called “the simplicity” of his poetry, where “combining an interesting complexity of thought is kept in tone and right value to the dominating idea so that it is understandable and still ungraspable” (Stallworthy, 2002: 169). The poem is equally powerful today.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The voices of the soldier poets continue to be regarded as sincere and truthful. Reflecting the changing perception of war from the early patriotism of 1914–1915 to the later disillusionment from 1916 onwards, they tell a story which was believable because the poems ring true emotionally and express truth in terms of a particular cultural style and set of cultural values that were understood by the British public at the time and that continue to strike a chord today. They exemplify the soul of the nation, shaping it at the same time. While the poets could not understand the course and consequences of the war, the emotions and experiences of war that their poems project are understood by readers today. They are an integral part of the earlier described “essential condition of consciousness” to which Paul Fussell refers in his assessment of the place of World War One in the collective memory of Britons. The poems confirmed people’s innermost thoughts and fears while at the same time transcending them, facilitating understanding and mastery of feelings. While popular, they are not popular art because they do not allow the reader to wallow in his or her emotions. They are part of the literary canon and enjoy a status comparable to that of the memoirs of the war because, like the latter, they make a claim to truth based on direct experience, but unlike the memoirs, they employ vivid images that continue to haunt the reader long after the poem is laid aside. They are not only a powerful testimony to the experience of those who fought in the war but a reminder that it must not be forgotten. It is certain that many of the poems discussed here will feature in the centenary celebrations of the outbreak of war to take place in 1914.

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