

Writing war: Owen, Spender, poetic forms and concerns for a world in turmoil

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Abstract

There is a significant shift in the literary treatment of war between the trench poets and the subsequent generation of British poets, an understandable one given their very different experience and investment in the war itself. This paper discusses a selection of poems from Wilfred Owen's (1893–1918) and from Stephen Spender's (1909–1995) *oeuvres* as products of their different historical moments in order to reflect upon crucial transformations in poetic forms—especially the elegy—and concerns in the interwar period, a time open to the violent and chaotic experiences that a turbulent history was producing.

Key Words: War poetry, Wilfred Owen, Stephen Spender, Great War poets, 1930s generation, elegy

The relationship between poetry and its audience is directly implicated in what is one of the most important questions raised by the generation of the Great War poets: how might poetry provide an adequate response to the tremendous trauma of the war and the loss of so many lives? The responsibility to find a way to represent that experience was certainly one of their foremost concerns, dictating such formal considerations as diction, tone, imagery, and poetic form. More radically, many of them believed that this responsibility impacted, not only upon their own work, but upon the entire field of poetry in their contention that English poetry was not yet fit to speak of the war.¹ Up to the Great War, the primary function of war poetry was to record a self-authorizing history—that is, to narrate the events of battle so that they serve as their own historical justification. In such writing, war is represented as the guarantor of history and history as the fulfilment of war's promise.

¹ We can certainly identify a generation of war poets—usually called trench poets—who addressed the devastation and suffering of the war out of their own experience in which we should include Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Julian Grenfell (1888-1915), Herbert Read (1893-1968) and Robert Graves (1895-1985).

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Instead, the poetry of the 1930s and 1940s navigates a different relationship to history, making its way through a course that has permanently been ravaged by devastation and trauma. This poetry emphasizes an experiential understanding of history over a comprehensive one; rather than record the outcome of important battles, they present their experience of the war as overwhelming and difficult to comprehend cognitively, much less see it from an objective viewpoint situated somewhere outside of the unfolding of events. Poets like Wystan H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice saw their own writing as continuing to make English poetry respond in an ethically coherent way both to the soldier's and the civilian's experience. From early on in their careers, they recognized that the trauma of war would, through the writing of the war poets, leave its mark upon literature just as it had left its mark upon those who lived through it.

In this paper I would like to argue that writing can mourn, or at least perform a work of mourning in its capacity to represent social, cultural and political histories of traumatic loss. My focus will be on how the specific nature of the language of poetry devoted to war by poets Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and Stephen Spender's (1909-1995) poems—especially their elegies about the Great War and its aftermath respectively—, undergoes important transformations. Both Owen and Spender share a similar attempt at exploring the possibilities of an ethics of aesthetic representation, which takes into account the simultaneous necessity and seeming impossibility of artistic expression in relation to loss and disaster. Owen's poetry, much read by Spender, addresses both thematically and formally many of the aspects that Spender will take up in his first published volumes.² Spender, in his turn, will act as some sort of transitional figure between the poets of the 1930s and those of the 1940s. Whereas the latter responded against the political commitment of the 1930s, and further rejected strict adherence to all social and literary tenets, they used a variety of themes and motifs coincident with those of the previous generation to convey a belief that European civilization was destined to collapse.

² Spender's acclaimed long poem *Vienna* (1934) opens with a quotation from Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting" as epigraph; "They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress. None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress" (*Vienna* 7).

Tragedy, Elegy, War

No poetic description of the Apocalypse could compare with the war itself, which seemed the physical embodiment of every scene of annihilation. Many of the poets who were most aware of the situation on the frontline were clearly interested in arousing a similar emotional experience through their writing; feelings of pity, in particular, are associated with their poetry by both the poets and their critics. Owen's oft-quoted Preface to his *Collected Poems* states this most explicitly. Nor is the pity the only emotional response elicited by the poetry; it also evokes horror (which is closely related to the fear that Aristotle argues tragic poetry evokes), disgust, anger, pride and compassion. Thus the poetry fulfils the cathartic function of tragedy—it arouses and forces the reader to confront feelings of pity and horror. The term catharsis is usually understood to mean the “purgation” of strong emotions through their expression. Certainly a great deal of the war poetry fits this definition. A secondary, more archaic definition of catharsis is the “concentration”—as opposed to the purgation—of emotion. The cathartic effect of such a work of art would be to communicate and intensify a strong emotional response in the reader. We find this kind of cathartic effect in Owen's writing.

The first generation of war poets were able to convey powerfully a sense of the tragic dimensions of the Great War as well as a sense of their own suffering. Nevertheless their writing failed to fulfil one of the social functions of war poetry—to commemorate and memorialize the war dead. They refused to offer consolation in their poetry, because they rejected the traditional cultural narratives that were invoked in order to make the mass destruction of war meaningful or acceptable. Instead their writing insisted upon a deeply ambivalent attitude towards the war.

In his book on the war poets, *Taking it like a Man* (1993), Adrian Caesar discusses the importance placed upon war experience and personal suffering in the poetry of the World War I soldiers.³ Caesar points out the ambivalence of the trench poets towards the suffering that war entails, arguing that their work neither can be read as simply condemning war nor as celebrating it. I agree with Caesar that Owen and his contemporaries cannot be read as simply condemning the war, but I

³ Caesar's book provides readings of both the life and the writings of Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves.

would argue that for them, the destructiveness of modern warfare was too excessive, it rendered futile all attempts to make it appear meaningful. What the poems failed to do, therefore, was perform the didactic function of glorifying death in war as a heroic act of patriotism. And in doing so, they underlined a loss and a heroism far more tragic and far more fitting to the modern condition.

Not surprisingly, many readings of the war poets tend to hinge on the critic's own attitude towards the overtly political content of many of the poems. Those who believe that art should remain apolitical tend to dismiss the work of poets like Owen as propaganda. William Butler Yeats's disdain for the war poets is repeated throughout the early criticism of their work. Yeats dismissed their work—Owen's in particular—with his proclamation that “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies... If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering” (1937: xxiv-xxv).⁴ At issue in the midst of what came to be matter for debate is the question of what is required for poetry to be considered tragic. From Yeats onward, critiques of this poetic generation have centred on the issue of poetic form, arguing that they failed to represent the Great War adequately because their writing did not move beyond the lyric form, which was unable to contain or express the full experience of war. The precedence given to the personal suffering of the soldiers was seen as a direct effect of the lyric form. In effect, Yeats argued that these poets' theme of passive suffering was not proper to poetry because passive suffering was not tragic. But the Aristotelian notion of tragedy does not rest upon an active form of suffering—a heroic self-sacrifice—, rather the emphasis in classical drama is upon the representation of suffering itself, and the cathartic response it evokes in the audience. At this point, the question is not, “Why did their writing fail to attain the level of tragedy?” Their poetry discloses the newfound conviction that their prior belief in abstract concepts such as heroism and

⁴ In his Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats explains that he substitutes Herbert Read's *The End of a War* for the work that he finds more representative of the trench poets as a whole. He does, nevertheless, include a few poems written by other soldiers. They are Siegfried Sassoon's “On Passing the new Menin Gate” (written after the war), Julian Grenfell's “Into Battle” and Edmund Blunden's “Report on Experience”. The most notable exclusion from the Anthology is Wilfred Owen.

patriotism—concepts for which, up to the war, literature had been a major means of representation—was one of the irrecoverable losses of the war.

Later critics tend to privilege the political relevance of the poetry, arguing that the chief importance of their writing is its anti-war sentiment.⁵ Not surprisingly, the more sympathetic critics of the war poets tend to identify with their anti-war sentiments, and therefore tend to privilege the writing of Owen, Sassoon, and Rosenberg among others. In most readings, politics and aesthetics are seen as opposing forces in the poetry: the medium of poetry is somehow in conflict with the anti-war message the poets strive to articulate. Bernard Bergonzi evades addressing the issue of how war politics informs the poetics of the soldiers who wrote during the war by treating form and content as distinct critical issues (Bergonzi 1965: 53). Ultimately, however, the critical response to the war poets neither can nor should be reduced to a replication of the strict opposition Yeats draws between art and propaganda. Indeed, most of these readings complicate the distinctions drawn between the two categories. Jon Silkin, for example, sees the war poets as working within a long literary heritage of artists who saw their writing as a forum for invoking political change. Significantly, Silkin compares the political advocacy of the war poets to that of romantic writers such as Coleridge and Wordsworth (Silkin 1972: 1-17). There are also formal reasons for drawing such a comparison—both groups of writers privilege the lyric form in their poetry. Silkin suggests that these romantic writers offered the soldiers a literary tradition which validated both their attention to individual experience and their insistence on the political efficacy of poetry.

Far from being an unsuitable form for representing the experience of war, the lyrical elegy, insofar as it serves to commemorate and memorialize a loss, seems an entirely appropriate form to turn to in order to represent the tragic loss of life in war. The elegy traditionally deals with themes of loss and death, mourning and consolation. Thus it makes

⁵ Four critics who make their privileging of the anti-war poetry explicit are: Robert Giddings, *The War Poets* (1990); Arthur E. Lane, *An Adequate Response* (1972); George Parfitt, *English Poetry of the First World War* (1990), and Jon Silkin's *Out of Battle* (1972). Caesar shares these critics anti-war sentiment; however, he faults the war poets for what he sees as their inability to articulate a clear and unambiguous critique of war. See *Taking it like a Man* (1993).

sense to find that in elegiac war poetry more emphasis is placed upon coming to terms with one's pain and suffering than upon the heroic actions of the soldiers. This is not to say that the fighting was never represented in conventionally heroic terms. Many poems, such as John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" see the war dead as demanding that others take up their cause. Nevertheless, because the poems are elegiac, the rhetorical emphasis is placed upon the power of heroism and warfare to compensate for a tragic loss rather than upon the heroism of warfare itself. The poetry thus better serves as a way to mourn those who died in war and to help the soldiers to face their own deaths than it serves as a justification of war. In each of their comprehensive studies on the English elegy, Jahan Ramazani (1994), Peter M. Sacks (1985) and Eric Smith (1977) discuss the form as a work of mourning. Smith argues that the elegy's power to console after the loss of a loved one lies in the power of poetry to incorporate and immortalize the one who was lost (Smith 9-15).

Sacks claims that not only does the elegy address the concept of mourning thematically, but the poetry itself should be read as an attempt to work through the loss of a loved one: "Each elegy is regarded therefore, as a work, both in the commonly accepted meaning of a product and in the more dynamic sense of the working through of an impulse or experience—the sense that underlies Freud's phrase 'the work of mourning'". Thus, Sacks reads the elegy as performative; it is a symbolic action which enacts the rituals of mourning. In other words, the elegy is the restaging of a private grief in a public realm in order to heal it. The performative aspect of the elegy has important implications for the work of poets writing about the war and their critical reception because it helps to explain, in part, the difficulty which their writing imposes upon the reader. Sacks's model is based upon the process of "normal" or "proper" mourning, which Freud holds in opposition to "melancholic" mourning, in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1915: 239). Sacks argues that the process of mourning exhibited in the elegy parallels the Oedipal resolution; the elegiac mourner comes to accept the loss of his love insofar as he is able to transform his sexual desire for the lost love into his artistic creation of the poem itself: "The movement from loss to consolation thus requires a deflection of desire" from a sexual impulse to "the creation of a trope both for the lost object and for the original character of the desire itself" (7). Sacks's overt sexualisation of

desire comes from the fact that his analysis of the elegy follows a traditional model of sublimation: a thwarted sexual desire is transformed into the impulse to create an artwork in which the desire can be fulfilled. The war poets do not fit comfortably into this model. Sacks's model sexualizes the lost object to a greater degree than we find in the war poets. Moreover, in their writing the process of mourning remains incomplete and the consolation which poetry offers is rejected as inadequate. They refused to turn away from, because they were unable to, the traumatic experiences which spurred their writing, their work is best characterized by what Ramazani calls "melancholic" mourning; it is "unresolved, violent, and ambivalent" (4). Ramazani argues that modern elegists display all the signs of melancholia, not the "normative" stages of mourning which Sacks allies with a successful Oedipal resolution. He lists the signs of their melancholic ambivalence towards their loss: "their fierce resistance to solace, their intense criticism and selfcriticism...[T]hey attack the dead and themselves, their own work and tradition; and they refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself" (4). The war poets are criticized for precisely these issues in their writing.

What Ramazani says of Wilfred Owen's writing can be extended to other poets of his generation as well: "Critics often treat the elegy as a therapeutic device: working through grief, creating an aesthetic substitute for loss, the elegist masters or at least manages pain. Many of Owen's elegies do not fit this therapeutic model. Their task is to maintain a certain amount of suffering not to effect a cure, they produce not a yield of pleasure but an aggravation of pain" (86). Ramazani characterizes this insistence on suffering as the manifestation of Owen's masochism, overtly sexualizing what he has lost. I find it problematic to argue that his masochism was a tendency already present not something that developed out of their war experience. Ramazani writes, "Although we are accustomed to thinking of Owen as writing melancholic elegies entirely in response to the brute facts of war, we might also think of him as writing such elegies partly in response to his own masochism—a masochism in search of such painful facts as those provided by the war" (84-85). To argue that Owen's masochism was a sentiment in search of an appropriate experience seriously diminishes the political impact of his writing. By sexualizing Owen's desires, Ramazani disguises and distorts the impact which the trauma of the war had on him. We see the

masochism of Owen as deriving most directly from a reaction-formation against the brutalizing effects of war. In his writing he replicates the sadomasochistic structure of the war itself.

From the turning point of the Battle of the Somme onwards, the war poets refused to represent the tragedy of the war in the traditional language of heroic poetry. To a large extent the reason behind the dissatisfaction that Yeats and others felt with their work was their refusal to provide a sense of consolation for the losses they had suffered. As I argued before, because their writing insisted upon a deeply ambivalent attitude towards the war, it failed to fulfil one of the social functions of war poetry—to commemorate and memorialize the war dead. Moreover, this refusal constituted a demand upon the public that they too should not reconcile themselves to what had happened. Thus their work haunted the margins of modernism, like the bodies of soldiers that stubbornly refused to remain buried and the trenches that left deep scars upon the landscape, standing as a reminder that the traumatic wounds of World War I could not be healed by Armistice. Their writing eschews the memorializing function of war poetry in order to fulfil another, more radical, coming to terms with the losses of the war.

Owen, Mourning Loss

The work of the war poets was a sustained attempt to make sense of the experience of modern war by associating it with a long-standing poetic tradition—mainly the lyric and pastoral elegy—and it showed the inability of poetry to account for the shattering experience of modern warfare within a traditional framework.

For Wilfred Owen, the poetic effect of his writing hinged upon the emotional effect it produced in his reader. “The Poetry”, he says in his “Preface” to his *Poems*, “is in the pity” (1964: 31). “Pity” is a key term for Owen. He identified the power of his writing with its cathartic function, its ability to distil overwhelming emotions down to their essence. Owen sought out the point at which those feelings threaten to become unbearable in an attempt to confront a truth which is buried in that experience. Thus the cathartic effect of his poems is found in the reader’s response to the sight of massacred bodies, which hold his attention even as he wants to turn away in disgust. As Owen presents it, the sight both horrifies readers and demands their pity. Although the

soldiers who die in the poem are not presented as heroes, their death must strike the reader as tragic. These poems demand it. Bringing horror and pity together into one single image that takes hold of the reader's psyche with the same force that it possessed the speaker's, Owen's poems refigure traditional conceptions of tragedy.

For Owen, the profound knowledge of death that war had taught him took the form of pity. In his case, his emotional response to those traumatic events best articulated the knowledge he had gained from that experience. War is tragic because it creates in us feelings of pity and horror that become so intense they are unbearable. In his poetry, Owen tried to concentrate the affect, so that his writing could convey the emotional intensity of war. One of the strengths of Owen's writing is that, in concentrating the affect, he lost none of the complexity of its emotional resonances. As Jahan Ramazani has observed, in Owen's poetry, pity appears to be a reaction-formation against the writer's own guilt (1994: 81-82).

We can see these sorts of feelings in the poetry of his contemporaries (Sassoon, Brooke, Grenfell). As it was the case with many of them, whatever part of Owen's guilt one wants to attribute to "understandable" reasons—being unable to save somebody's life, accusations of cowardice, abandoning his men in battle, his nervous breakdown—such reasons cannot fully account for his guilt, nor are they necessary to explain the guilt. Owen is guilty because he has survived. To a certain extent, Owen projects his guilt on to the reader, although projection is not quite the right term, since it implies both that the reader is entirely innocent and that the writer is unaware that he himself is the source of guilt. The primary audience that Owen had in mind when he wrote, the civilians and soldiers of his own era, of historical necessity shared in, at least to some degree, Owen's sense of guilt about the war. As for his own guilt, Owen wrote about it too self-consciously to be unaware of his own feelings. Moreover, Owen's accusations of guilt do not arise out of a desire to charge the reader so much as they are meant to call on him, demanding that he take responsibility for recognizing his own complicity in the horrors the poet records.

Along this line, his poem "Mental Cases" clearly aims to inform people about the intensity of the anguish suffered by the victims of shell shock. The poem, engaging explicitly mental illness as otherness, elicits the reader's pity with its Dantesque depiction of mental illness and ends

with a pointed accusation of both the reader's and the speaker's unwitting complicity in the suffering of others.

These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them... (1964: 69)

His description of shell shock endows the insane with an oracular quality. Mute witnesses to their own traumas, they relive the war continuously. In Owen's highly mythical description of war neurosis, the dead torment the insane like Furies, punishing them for what they have witnessed. They are haunted by those they have killed and those they have seen killed alike. Unassuageable guilt lies deep in the heart of the madman, just as in the heart of the witness. What's more, this guilt is highly communicable, easily transmitted from the speechless insane to the speaker who witness their suffering, and to the reader who acts as witness to the witness. Hence, in the final lines, Owen employs the first person plural, explicitly including himself as well as the reader in his accusations. The insane are "Snatching after us who smote them, brother, / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness". Owen's survivor's guilt manifests itself in these lines. Having escaped sharing in their fate, Owen could not avoid, in his own mind, sharing the responsibility for their suffering.

Despite the fact that the speaker maintains a strict distance from the stricken figures he portrays, this description of shell shock is spoken not by an outside observer, it comes from inside the experience. Owen writes of shell-shock and insanity with all the sympathy and disgust that might be expected of one who, for a short time, found himself among their number. Consider again the lines above. There is no suggestion of cowardice in these lines. Moreover, Owen's highly aestheticized language confers a poetic dignity on their state that counters his earlier description of their looks: "Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish, / Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked". Significantly, Owen's depiction of the faces of the insane recalls the face of the man who haunts him in his well-known elegy "Dulce et Decorum Est". His "hanging face" becomes their "drooping tongues", and the blood that

came “gargling forth” from his mouth is echoed in their slobbery jaws. “Dulce et Decorum Est” tells us that Owen himself is the one who “Tread...[in] blood from lungs that had loved laughter” as he followed behind the dying soldier who spat up blood from his “froth-corrupted lungs” (1964: 55). In essence, Owen has reproduced his own nightmare in both the faces of the insane and the terrors that torment them—reminders that his own mind once was ravished by the dead. In his testimony to the suffering of others, Owen transforms his own trauma into art which could speak of his pain to others. In so doing, Owen is able, in Robert J. Lifton’s words to perform as so many trauma survivors and their witnesses and we should be aware that, “carrying through the witness is a way of transmuting pain and guilt into responsibility, and carrying through that responsibility has enormous therapeutic value” (Caruth 1995: 138).

But, as it has been pointed out, the responsibility for carrying through the witness has to be shared by both readers and writers (Caruth 1995). Unfortunately, Owen’s contemporaries had a great deal of difficulty hearing his call for responsibility. Owen himself seems to have recognized this difficulty, but, unlike others, he did not despair of ever being heard. His writing acknowledges the inability to witness the trauma of the war in his own time, and therefore invokes a future generation of readers who will be able to act as witness to his testimony.

The reasons behind the failure of his contemporary audience to respond to the soldiers’ testimonies are to be found in the traumatic nature of the events they witnessed. Furthermore, in his discussion of Holocaust testimonies, Dori Laub argues that the events of the Holocaust made it impossible to act as witness to what was happening as it historically occurred (Felman and Laub 1992: 73-92, esp. 80-84). The historical gap between the event and its witnessing lead to an inevitable gap between those attempts to testify to what was occurring and their reception. We find a similar phenomenon operating in the critical response to the war poets. Owen seemed to have understood this. He was aware that his contemporary readers would bring to their reading a desire for conciliation and healing that his elegies failed to provide. That is why, as we said above, in his “Preface” he warns, “Yet these elegies are

not to this generation, / This is in no sense consolatory”.⁶ In the following line, however, he reaches out hopefully, “They may be to the next”. He saw that his testimony would have to speak to later generations if it could not reach his own. That is why in these lines, Owen posits a future reader who will act as a witness to his suffering. Through the space of his poetry, Owen was able to call into being an imaginary reader who would act as his witness. This was not merely an imaginative act. Poetry has the capacity to open up a space for the reader, allowing the reader to become, belatedly the witness to the poet’s testimony.

In his “Preface”, Owen states, “This book is not about heroes” (1920: 3) not because the men who died in the war were not heroic, but because “English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them”. Given his devastating experiences, it is not surprising that Owen shrinks from calling the war heroic. The concept of heroism had become, for Owen, poisoned by the war, just as the concepts of patriotism, duty, honour had been emptied out of meaning. But the “hero” would have a particular sting for Owen. Everyone who died was called a hero, and every time that word was evoked, it was meant to recall not the specific actions of the individual soldier, but the heroism of the war itself. Death is ideologically inscribed in war—you do not just die, you die for the cause—and it is through such terms as “heroism”—and the gap between the terminology and the experiential reality—that the ideology of war becomes inscribed. In other words, it was the war which conferred the title of hero onto those who died. Owen’s poetry resists reproducing the kinds of heroic images which feed both into and upon the war, and instead tries to create another kind of heroism which could do justice to those who have died. So often death in war appeared as horrific, not heroic, as Owen shows us in “Dulce et Decorum Est”. In the poem, there is nothing heroic in the soldier’s actions that lead to his death, nor does his death bring any strategic gain to either side; and because of—not despite—these reasons, the soldier’s death is tragic. Just as the truth that the soldier’s death revealed provided, for Owen, the only possible consolation for his loss, the only heroism displayed in the poem is the speaker’s will to endure in the face of the unbearable truth that, if he dies in that war, he will die believing his death to be both gruesome and futile. In Owen’s testimonial

⁶ In the Blunden version, these lines read, “Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory” (Owen 1964: 31). The Blunden version is more direct and less threatening than Sassoon’s (Owen 1920: 3).

vision, the heroism of the fallen soldiers of World War I is the kind of heroism that befits the tragedy of war. Owen was himself killed, in fact, on November 4, 1918, a week before Armistice. His battalion was under fire while they were trying to build a bridge across the Sambre Canal. He had been encouraging his men and helping them to lay down duckboards when he was killed. His death did not serve any useful purpose. It was routine, not heroic, in any traditional sense. Like Julian Grenfell (1888-1915), whose poem "Into Battle" seemed to augur his own death as well as to serve as the poet's most fitting memorial, Owen's death seems both brutally ironic and uncannily in keeping with his own poetic vision of the tragic war hero.

Poems (1920), edited by Siegfried Sassoon, established Owen as a war poet before public interest in the war had diminished in the 1920s. One decade later, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1931), edited by Edmund Blunden, aroused much more critical attention, especially that of W.H. Auden and the poets in his circle, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, Christopher Isherwood, and Louis MacNeice. Blunden thought that Auden and his group were influenced primarily by three poets: Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, and Wilfred Owen. The Auden group saw in Owen's poetry the incisiveness of political protest against injustice, but their interest in Owen was less in the content of his poems than in his mastery of poetic forms and technique. Though they were moved by the experiences described in Owen's best poems and empathized with his abhorrence of war, they were struck with his untimely death in military action just as he had begun to realize fully his potential.

Spender and poetry in transition

Although much of the poetry of the thirties exhibits part of the same subject matter as that of its predecessors, it has been argued that "[I]t may throw more emphasis on the threat or the anxiety from which it is recoiling than on the subject matter in which it has found relief; and sympathies for victims are sometimes expressed more strongly in the efforts made to resist sinister memories of social and political outrages than they would have been in direct statements of responsibility" (Weatherhead 1975: 85). One mood that most frequently appears in the poetry as the decade grows darker comes in response to the anticipated or already experienced loss from war or any kind of violence. In a British

culture that packaged war as glorious in the aftermath of the Great War, Spender meditates upon the futility of war and the devastating effects it does have on the most vulnerable.

His poetry is defined by the events of that period in history Auden called in “September 1, 1939” a “low dishonest decade” (Auden 1940: 98). Politics in the thirties was dominated by Nazism and Marxism. Spender was born to an upper class English family yet his sympathy for the poor and his desire for a more just distribution of wealth caused him to lean towards socialist ideals. He longed for a fairer world, one that is classless and free of poverty. Like other poets of that era, the Spanish Civil War caught his imagination and so in February of 1937 he moved to Madrid to witness the war first hand as a journalist. The romantic beliefs he had about the socialists fighting against Franco were soon shattered as he saw the horrors of war for himself. He soon became disillusioned by the tremendous loss of innocent lives and he came to believe that nothing could justify the massacre of young men that was taking place all in the name of politics. In John Lehmann’s view, writing on “The Influence of Spain” in 1939, the value of Spender’s earlier Civil War poems was that “they struck an independent, anti-heroic note” in many ways representative of those “who felt that the adjustment of original enthusiasm to the realities of modern warfare and modern political struggle was a much more complex and painful process that was generally admitted, while their loyalty to the anti-fascist cause never wavered” (Lehmann 1939: 20).

“Thoughts during an Air Raid” is a key poem originally published in *The Still Centre* (1939) that opens and sets the pattern for most of the poems about the Spanish Civil war in Part III of his 1955 *Collected Poems*. In Tim Kellman’s view, the poem is “a kind of proleptic elegy for himself, [and] attempts to imagine his own death from the outside, as seen by others, as impersonally as he must view other people’s deaths” (2007: 254). Kellman points out that the poem’s depersonalizing of selfhood is reinforced in the 1955 version by the substitution for the repeated ‘I’ of the poem’s earlier version in *The Still Centre* (1939), of the impersonal pronoun “one.” “Of course,” the original poem opens, “the entire effort is to put myself/ Outside the ordinary range / Of what are called statistics. A hundred are killed / In the outer suburbs. Well,

well I carry on" (1939: 45).⁷ In this poem, the quiet voice of the civilian is wondering which of the planes droning towards his city contains the makings of his death. The poetic persona, lying in a hotel bed in a foreign city wonders if "a bomb should dive /its nose right through this bed" (1939: 45). Reasonably frightened, he tries to maintain sanity when confronted by the thought of imminent death. He generalizes his experiences into the terror most humans have at the thought of their own ending, but "horror is postponed/ For everyone until it settles on him" (1939: 45). Solipsism is, after all, a defence against the anonymity of death. In a world populated by self-absorbed, unsupportive individuals where "no one suffer[s]/ For his neighbour. The horror is postponed / For everyone until it settles on him." (1939: 45), reifying the human into a series of names on a list, the names of faceless casualties that will remain haunting our memory.

Spender's discussion of the role of bombs during the war is a sensitive subject for many because of the great devastation and the death of many civilians on the ground. In his work, he allows us to meditate upon the very different views of the bombing raids, ranging from atrocities pure and simple to one of the decisive elements in Allied victory. The poet does not shy away from discussing the morality and ethics of the bombers' missions, since bombing can be both a dreadful duty and the object of memorialization; both horror and glory.

Along this line, in an extended image of great beauty, "Air Raid across the Bay at Plymouth"—included in Spender's *Collected Poems* (1955)—shows the sky glimmering in careful watch for an upcoming attack: "Above the whispering sea/ And waiting rocks of black coast,/ Across the bay, the searchlight beams / Swing and swing black across the sky// Their ends fuse in a cone of light/ Held for a bright instant up/ Until they break away again/ Smashing that image like a cup" (1985: 122). Once again, as in previous occasions—as in "The war God," first poem in part II "Ironies of War" in *Ruins and Visions*—, Spender invokes the "god of war" reigning supreme over his dominions, the entire world being at the mercy of his will. As John Sutherland has written, "Spender was fascinated with the paradoxical beauty of the destruction of England (an England which, in his wild days of youth, he had wanted destroyed)"

⁷ The *Collected Poems* version reads, "Of course, the entire effort is to put oneself/ Outside the ordinary range/ Of what are called statistics. A hundred are killed/ In the outer suburbs. Well, well one carries on." (1985: 36).

(2004: 270). In many of his poems, especially those dealing with the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, he contrasts war and destruction to the beauty of untouched landscapes by using striking images to depict those landscapes as potential antidotes to war. “Air Raid...” must have been written between the time of the first air raid on Plymouth which was on Saturday, July 6th, 1940 and the period of heavy bombing known as the “Plymouth Blitz” which was in March and April 1941. Spender’s anti-war, anti-technology and patriotic feelings towards England are depicted using vivid imagery. The aeroplane, described as “Delicate aluminium girders” (stanza 2) built by man as testimony to man’s ingenuity drops bombs and destroys the God-made beauty of the landscape.

Among Spender’s remarkable poems, “War Photograph,” published in *The New Statesman* in June 1937, can be read as a dramatic monologue of a wounded soldier upon the moment of dying. The poem alludes to Robert Capa’s famous 1936 Spanish Civil War shot, “Death of a Loyalist Soldier, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936,” showing a Republican soldier at the moment of absorbing a bullet and falling. The instant that “lurks/ With its metal fang planned for my heart/ When the finger tugs and the clock strikes” (1939: 62) is both the trigger of the gun that kills him and the lens of the camera that “shoots” this death. The place “where inch and instant cross” is the exact time and place of death and also “the flat and severed second on which time looks” of the photograph itself which will remain unchanged throughout the coming years, “As faithful to the vanished moment’s violence / As love fixed to one day in vain.” (1939: 62). Publishing the shot, *Life* magazine justified it as a necessary witnessing, and in the text accompanying the image wrote that “Dead men have indeed died in vain if live men refuse to look at them” (in Morris 1946: 63). The poem witnesses not the atrocity itself but the act of witness, the vision of death mediated through the lens of the camera: “My corpse be covered with the snows’ December / And roots push through skin’s silent drum / When the years and fields forget, but the whitened bones remember” (1939: 63). The soldier’s only surviving “corpse [is] a photograph taken by fate” (1939: 62).

Most touching among Spender’s “Ironies of War” series in his next volume *Ruins and Visions* (1942) are the poems in which the poet grieves for the men he has known dying as airmen in defence of their country. In his notebook he composed many variant drafts of the elegy

“To Poets and Airmen”. The printed version of the poem is dedicated “To Michael Jones in his life, and now in his memory” (1942: 32). Spender explains this dedication in his autobiography *World within World*:

Michael Jones [was] killed in an accident while training with me during one of the worst nights of the Blitz. He went out into the East End of London during the heavy bombing and returning with shiny eyes described the streets full of glass like heaped-up ice, the fires making a great sunset beyond the silhouette of St Paul’s, the East End houses collapse like playing cards. If I tried to commemorate some of these men in poems, it was exactly because poetry was what I had in common with them and it was this that they came to me for. It is right to say that the service they required of my generation was that we should create. (2004: 293)

As John Sutherland, Spender’s biographer, has remarked, “Jones was one of the ‘few’—young warriors with Hermes’ ‘Iron wings tied’ to their ‘Greek heads’ (one of the many lines lost in the poem’s rewritings)” (2004: 293).

“To Poets and Airmen” is representative of the persistence of idealization, empathetic identification and mourning in the language of the elegy and in Spender’s own tribute to his friend and fellow poet. In the first stanza, the poet addresses the airmen who require “a bullet’s eye of courage / To fly through this age” (1942: 32) and in the hazardous battle of Britain. In Spender’s admonition to remember, and then to forget, this elegy commemorates those young men who served as soldiers but were first and foremost poets.

And yet, before you throw away your childhood,
With the lambs pasturing in flaxen hair,
To plunge into this iron war,
Remember for a flash the wild good
Drunkenness where
You abandoned future care,

And then forget. Become what
Things require. The expletive word.
The all-night-long screeching metal bird.
And all of time shut down in one shot
Of night, by a gun uttered. (32-33)

Spender performs a splendid metapoetic exercise when with staccato rhythm, urges poets and airmen to become “The expletive word./ (The

all-night-long screeching metal bird.)” (1942: 33). In this elegy, Spender sees war as inevitable and mourns the deceased pilots. Moving in the direction of the early Apocalyptic movement,⁸ Spender uses resources in myth (the above mentioned allusion to Hermes, the Greek messenger of the gods and guide to the underworld⁹) and innovative imagery—f.ex. in relation to the military, technology and the machines for war—which contribute in important ways to his compelling rhetoric and depurated style.

In the final poem in this section, “June 1940”, the desire for peace reaches a crescendo in the most despair-filled month of the war for the British, when the army was driven from Dunkirk and France fell. In the poem, two old men, perhaps veterans of World War I herald “Our minds must harden” (1942: 41). The poem parodies their patriotism and the attitude that in the end “of course, we shall win” (1942: 42). It was brave of Spender to have published “June 1940” in wartime, for its message is that “victory and defeat, both the same, / Hollow masks worn by shame.” (1942: 42-43). At this point, Spender had given up supporting any system or ideology with his poetry, because all systems resort to

⁸ Poet and critic Herbert Read (1893–1968) was the leader of the Apocalyptic movement. Henry Treece, in his 1946 book *How I See Apocalypse*, enumerated the qualities of Apocalyptic Movement writings: “In my definition, the writer who senses the chaos, the turbulence, the laughter and the tears, the order and the peace of the world in its entirety, is an Apocalyptic writer. His utterance will be prophetic, for he is observing things which less sensitive men may have not yet come to notice; and as his words are prophetic, they will tend to be incantatory, and so musical. At times, even, that music may take control, and lead the writer from recording his vision almost to creating another voice. So, momentarily, he will kiss the edge of God’s robe” (Treece 1946: 37). Some of the most common themes in the poetry of the Apocalyptic Movement—life vs. death, the individual vs. history, experience and fragmentation—were influenced by Surrealism and Romanticism, and their motifs were mostly mythological and prophetic.

⁹ Hermes was also the patron of boundaries and of the travellers who cross them, of shepherds and cowherds, of orators and wit, of literature and poets, and of commerce in general. His symbols include among others the winged sandals, the winged hat, and the caduceus. Spender acutely alludes to Hermes in many of his capacities: “The paper brows are winged and helmeted, / The blind ankles bound to a white road...” (Stanza 2: 32); and goes on to write about a foregone childhood, “with the lambs pasturing in flaxen hair” (Stanza 3: 32).

repression and barbarism and use their impassioned advocates to slay the innocent, making war on life itself.

The last section in *Ruins and Visions*, is entitled “Visions” and grows from the ruins that have preceded it, it seeks for reparation and sorts out the world’s aggressive responses. Along a more personal path, Spender embarks upon an individual quest for identity. He wrote subsequently of this part of the book that it reflected a tendency on the poetry of that period, shared by the works of other poets to turn inward and make an exercise in introspection. He argued that the poems in this last section were “in search of universal experience through subjective contemplation” (Spender 1946: 34).

Finally, in *Ruins and Visions*, there is the ruined world and the visionary. In Spender’s next book, *The Edge of Being* (1949),¹⁰ the last stanza of his last poem “Time in our Time” reads: “Oh save me in this day, when Now / Is a towering pillar of dust which sucks / The ruin of a world into its column” (56). Once again, with echoes of Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting”, his poem “Rejoice in the Abyss”, goes back to the oppressive atmosphere of violent confrontation and the poet is instructed after an air raid to rejoice in the abyss and accept emptiness: “Unless your minds accept the emptiness / As the centre of your building and your love, (...) / All human aims are stupefied denial...” (31). Here Spender records his response to the nightly bombing of London in nightmarish photographic terms. The poet shows the stress of war as an equivalent of the war, confusion and disarray of the original Apocalypse: the smashing of houses and buildings as an equivalent for the opening of tombs, living people crossing over into death and dead people crossing the other way and speaking the words of the poem. The scenery is one of dead people and ruins, the social order has collapsed and the individual feels under the pressure of History. This imagery of devastation in the midst of an empty world is new and it can be read as an epochal sign. It is certainly part of a wider *Zeitgeist* that seeks to make sense out of the chaos and uncertainty of a world in turmoil.

As it was the case with Wilfred Owen and with the early poems of Spender, there is neither simply mourning nor consolation. War is revisited as analogous to the fallen condition of man in the original

¹⁰ Spender published his seventh volume *Poems of Dedication* in 1947, a book where the personal takes over, and war on politics almost disappears.

Apocalypse, with a landscape of ruins as backdrop for the end of History. In the poetry of the following decade, one discovers a mood of personal resignation to the aggression and cruelty of modern life, and a note of scepticism undermining any metaphysical guarantee. The lesson of the two World Wars seems to have discouraged allegiance to large impersonal dogmas.

In my view, both Owen's poetry during the Great War and Spender's, long after the effects of the war were visible in British society, reproduce the overwhelming emotional undercurrents of anxiety and pain that the country attempted to hold at bay. Rage and pain do come surging to the surface in their poems suggesting that the emotional extremes suffered by both generations had a delayed impact upon society at large. While we might infer that cultural traumas do not affect all members of society equally, both poets seem to suggest that, while their consequences can be delayed and even transferred into other areas, their impact ultimately remains undiminished. In this sense, Owen and Spender's anxiety-driven poetry suggests that the process of substitution (from trauma to acceptance of object loss), supplanting fright with anxiety, has been played out but to no avail.

Owen and Spender, the war poets and the poets of the 1930s and 1940s, are engaged in mourning loss and working through its consequences as a continuous process without end. The implications this might have in the domain of the social, in the wider domain of poetry, and in the sphere of cultural production remain yet to be further explored.

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