Fields of Agony

British Poetry of the First World War

Stuart Sillars
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Fields of Agony: British Poetry of the First World War

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A Note on the Author

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Chapter 1

‘What did they expect?’: The nature of war poetry

What did they expect of our toil and extreme
Hunger – the perfect drawing of a heart’s dream?

—Ivor Gurney: ‘War Books’

1.1 The Invention of War Poetry

‘War poetry’ is commonly read, discussed and taught as a very specific genre. The term is used to refer almost exclusively to poetry from the First World War (1914–18), and within that to a very limited group of poets, among whom Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are the most prominent. But poetry about war has been in existence for a very long time. Homer’s *Iliad* has strong claims to be called a war poem, and literature in English frequently discusses the theme of war. Sir Philip Sidney’s love sonnets\(^1\) often use images of war to describe the strife of love; Wordsworth’s ‘Salisbury Plain’ poems discuss the after-effects of war in terms of injury and widowhood; Tennyson’s ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’ either celebrates or condemns the loss of life in one moment of the Crimean war; and several writers during the South African wars of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries address a complex of issues of patriotism, heroism and suffering. Why, then, has the poetry of the First World War come to assume its place in the academic tradition?

The answer to this question has a great deal to do with the larger processes in which the literary canon is created, and history written. Both involve a dialogue between the present and the past, in which each generation tries to explain and understand the decisions of its predecessors. If we return to the years of the war themselves and explore the kinds of poetry being published, we would find that hardly any of the poems now familiar were popular, or in many cases were even published. The best-selling anthology *The Muse in Arms*, edited by E. B. Osborn, appeared in 1917

\(^1\) The sonnet form is discussed online at [http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/sonnet.html](http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/sonnet.html).
and included nothing by Wilfred Owen and only two poems by Sassoon. Much of its content was of poetry that celebrated the war in styles from the openly jingoistic to the sadly accepting of death in battle as the price of a cause worth defending. A vast amount of other poetry was published during the war years, in national and local newspapers, magazines of every kind, presentation volumes sold in aid of war charities, and books published privately as memorials to the sons of wealthy families. The great majority of this, it must be said, represented what was the prevailing view of the war – that its destruction and waste of life was appalling, but that no individual action should be undertaken or voice raised in the effort to bring it to an end.

Although some poets, notably Siegfried Sassoon, used their poetry to convey outrage at the continued prosecution of a war they felt could never be won, it was not until the late 1920s that a flood of books revealing the horror of the war began to appear. In England, among the most influential were Edmund Blunden’s *Undertones of War*, a prose memoir which included a collection of poems; Richard Aldington’s searingly ironic novel *Death of a Hero*; Robert Graves’s *Goodbye to All That*, a memoir that moved from experiences in public school to the disillusionment of the trenches. These were matched in France by *Le Feu (Under Fire)* by Henri Barbusse and in Germany by *Im Westen nichts neues (All Quiet on the Western Front)* by Erich Maria Remarque. Within this setting, Edmund Blunden produced his edition of the poems of Wilfred Owen, published with a memoir in 1931.

Among those who were strongly influenced by it was the young W. H. Auden, whose early sonnets strongly resemble Owen’s writing, showing his work as a genuine contribution to the dialogue of poetic change. In a socio-political dimension, it contributed to the general mood of pacifism that facilitated the appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s, helping to build the overwhelming feeling in Britain that there must be ‘no more war’. The popular image of Owen the soldier-poet, sacrificing his life to defend his troops and his country, killed only a week before the Armistice in 1918 and, like thousands of others, betrayed by the idiocy of the military commanders, was a powerful symbol of everything that must never, ever, be repeated. Later historians have questioned this view, stressing the strategic value of the leadership of Haig and others, but it still has a large claim for many.

It was in the 1960s that ‘war poetry’ began to attain prominence in the educational system in Great Britain. The fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of war was marked in 1964 by the recently-created BBC2 television channel with a 26-part documentary history series called *The Great War* which combined original newsreel film from the war years with recollections spoken by men and women who had lived through
them. Its stress on the sufferings of war and its military blunders acquired increasing resonance with the mounting protest against American actions in Vietnam: in the face of this and the prevailing concerns of the 1960s with political and social freedom, and radical departures in schools and universities, the poetry of the war became a significant focus for contemporary values. Since then, concerns with the social and political functions of literary texts in theoretical movements such as Marxism, New Historicism and varieties of Feminism and Gender Studies have all sharpened and redirected the attention that the poetry of the First World War has attracted.

These features of its reception history do not in any way invalidate the poems of the First World War as entities in themselves; but they have led to the privileging of a specific kind of text within the larger outpouring of poetry during the war years. Popular poetry, poetry that actively or with regret advocates the continuance of the war, and poems by women have until very recently been largely overlooked. The result is a view of the poetry of the war years that is highly selective, limited in breadth and in the understanding it offers even of those poems on which it concentrates, by a rejection of the larger conventions and assumptions that they directly contested.

Within this book it is not possible to present a comprehensive survey of the poetry of the First World War. Its aim instead is to offer an introductory account of some of its main directions and concerns, to place the work of the major figures within the larger frame of popular writing and the concerns that it reveals, and thus strengthen awareness of the poems themselves and, at the same time, of the ‘fields of agony’ from which they were written.

1.2 The Place of Poetry in 1914

While the distinction between popular and élite cultural forms was distinctly present in 1914, it did not have quite the same form as that which it has come to adopt nearly a century later. Whereas many present-day critics and cultural institutions, for example broadcasting and university decision-makers, reject many artistic forms as elitist, in the early twentieth century there was demonstrably a genuine desire among people of all social backgrounds to acquire greater knowledge of what have since become minority, ‘high culture’ works of literature, music and visual art. This was a result largely of the Victorian ideal of self-improvement, which saw knowledge of the arts as a social and a moral imperative. The Education Act of 1870 made primary education available to all, making literacy almost universal; advances in printing and
publishing made cheap editions of books widely available; and popular journalism, producing newspapers including the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* – radically different from their current incarnations in content and style – offered advice in achieving these higher goals.

As a result, poetry was a genuinely popular cultural form. Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury of English Verse*, an anthology of English poetry from Shakespeare to the present, sold in hundreds of thousands, and the leading poets – Thomas Hardy, John Masefield, Henry Newbolt and others – were themselves figures of popular adulation, their volumes bestsellers. Rather than for its sophistication of form, poetry was read largely as a form of moral guidance, and often of consolation. When Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A. H. H.* appeared in 1851, it was subtitled ‘The Way of the Soul’; Queen Victoria reportedly kept it by her bedside and found reading it a source of comfort in her bereavement of Prince Albert. The writings of Matthew Arnold, himself both a poet and a social and educational theorist, enhanced the view of the poet as seer and social reformer, and in consequence, there was a large audience eager for poetry that offered an engagement with contemporary social, moral and ethical issues. Although poetry in the 1890s embraced the so-called ‘decadent’ writers influenced by French writing, there were others, such as W. E. Henley and John Davidson, who concentrated on exposing social ills. The group known as the ‘Georgians’ wrote with the intention of reinvigorating poetry in response to contemporary life. Including Gordon Bottomley, Walter de la Mare and James Elroy Flecker, their work appeared in a series of anthologies titled *Georgian Poetry*, the title drawn from the name of the new king in an effort to show their contemporary relevance. However, much, though by no means all of their work was concerned with rural idyll and escape, and the term ‘Georgian’ soon came to be used as one of condescension, if not abuse. Ironically, Edward Marsh, the volumes’ editor, was a patron of the visual arts who did much to encourage important modern painters.

One poet whose work could not easily be classified was A. E. Housman, whose collection *A Shropshire Lad* achieved very wide popularity when it appeared in 1896. It adopted a distanced perspective towards the young men of the countryside who strove to enjoy the pleasures of life while always, if unwittingly, under the weight of mortality, using regular structures that appealed to those favouring ballad forms yet with a meticulous metrical armature borrowed from the Latin poetry that was Housman’s concern as a professor of Classics. Housman’s homosexuality, then carefully concealed, sharpened the poems’ sense of loss and inflected them with a grief that would attain greater urgency in the work of many of the trench poets. Less widely
known, but similar in their sense of time and loss, were the poems of Thomas Hardy. In them, the irony is much darker, the sombre inevitability of fate both more insistent and more frequently ironic, while their formal qualities move closer towards a kind of Modernism in their reflection of thought and perplexity.

These writings provided, in different ways and for different poets, a fertile ground from which themes and forms would grow in poems from the war. They included a concern with mortality given direct force through the circumstance of war, sharpened in some cases by a homoerotic awareness of the beauty of the suffering young men; a rejection of prevailing systems of social order; and – most powerfully and widely present – an awareness of the beauty of the countryside, both in itself and as a symbolic value of many kinds. The variety of moral and social concerns thus generated, within a range of writers and consumed by a range of readers, meant that, when war was declared on 4 August 1914, it was to the poets as much as to politicians or divines that people turned.

The desire for aesthetic accomplishment both questioned and reinforced one of the dominant features of English society in 1914: its apparently rigid social stratification. The idea of self-improvement that was itself produced largely by literary texts, of which Dickens’s *Great Expectations* was an important example, paradoxically worked to reinforce rather than erode the hierarchy: those who had made the upward movement did all they could to maintain their superiority over those who had not. This class hierarchy was, however, counteracted by the importance of literature: it was available to all, and genuinely sought by many in all strata. During the war years, it became a form of solace that frequently broke through class divisions: it was only later, when the aggressively anti-war poems more recently regarded as the authentic voice of the war years appeared, that divisions of readership and response became obvious.

If reading war poetry was a source of consolation, the process of writing it was similarly therapeutic to its writers. It should be remembered that present-day psychotherapy in part derives from the so-called ‘talking cure’ developed by Dr W. H. H. Rivers at the Craiglockhart War Hospital, where his patients included Sassoon and Owen. Patients suffering from what was termed shell shock or neurasthenia were encouraged to talk and write about the horrific experiences that had caused their conditions: many less celebrated writers discovered the cure for themselves, and found eager readers.

One other reason for the popularity of poetry was its simply informative role. Especially in the early months of the war, news from the front was very heavily cen-
sored; throughout the war, a great barrier existed between those fighting and those at home. In different ways, all of the poets confronted this barrier: while Owen, Sassoon, Blunden and Graves sought to overcome it through shocking detail, others did so by offering reassurance in the rightness of the cause. This opposition is itself a reflection of a larger social uncertainty that grew to increasing importance as the war dragged on after the apparent certainties with which it was approached in August 1914.

1.3 Issues of Gender

1.3.1 Women and the war

The years immediately preceding the war saw an upsurge in campaigning for female suffrage, itself part of a larger movement towards the greater social, political and intellectual – and, not least, economic – freedom of women. This was, of course, applicable largely to the middle classes, since working class women had always been forced to work through economic need. Education was still limited in comparison with that offered to men, although universities had begun to admit them to classes, in some cases without allowing them to qualify for degrees. One result of these changes, aided by the rapid growth of popular publishing, was that women not only made up a large percentage of the reading public, with periodicals directed specifically at them, and some women had begun to build careers as periodical journalists. Jessie Pope, whose poetry is discussed later, was one of them, writing for The Daily Mail, The Daily Express and Punch. In 1913, for example, the articles by ‘Miss J. Pope’ included a comic piece on the problem of obtaining reliable servants, some mock-nature notes, and an article making fun of the post-Impressionist exhibitions of contemporary art.

At the outbreak of war, many women demanded the right to work in support of the military effort: after initially opposing this, the Government soon realised it was the only way to maintain essential services and production, so that in 1918 nearly 7 ½ million women – very nearly one in three of the total female population – were employed in transport, munitions (one million of the total), farming, the police, and administrative duties. This brought independence in both financial and many other aspects of their lives. Others worked as nurses, often close to the front line; and in 1917 the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was established, the work including driving heavy lorries or labouring as well as clerical or cleaning work.

In different ways, all women employed in such activities became directly involved in the war effort. While many others, mainly from the wealthier classes, had no such
duties, the overwhelming majority also suffered the anguish of separation from male relatives involved in the fighting. But, whatever the specific demands of these circumstances and relationships, responses to war were as complex and varied as those of men. In consequence, women’s writing of the war years offers a response of great variegation and complexity, and demands consideration, like that of the better known male writers, both as social and human documentation and for its aesthetic structures and identities.

1.3.2 Changing relationships between men

The period was also significant in its reassessment of relationships between men. Recent criticism of First World War poetry has emphasised its homoeroticism, with particular stress on the same-sex orientation of Sassoon and Owen. There is much truth in this, but it needs to be seen within a frame that is more inclusive both in terms of these individuals’ identities and in its awareness of a range of relationships extending from a higher male friendship to a general exploration of sexuality then current. It is also important to consider how these imperatives are evident in the poems, and here again the boundary between literary analysis and social anthropology requires careful exploration.

Two events are significant in the growth of homoeroticism and its influence on contemporary writing. The first is the development of ideas of sexuality in the work of Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter. This stressed desire between men as ‘sexual inversion’, spoke of the soul of a woman in the body of a man, and for the first time in English (1890) used the word ‘homosexual’ to describe a single, lifelong orientation. The novelist E. M. Forster was one of those among literary and artistic circles strongly influenced by Carpenter’s theories: his novel Maurice, written in 1913–14 but not published until 1971, and several short stories from the same time, explore male relationships.

The second was the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1896, which led to his imprisonment under the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861 that prohibited sexual acts between men. The result of this in literary terms was to aid the growth of a particular kind of writing that was carefully coded in its sexual direction. In particular, following the success of Wilde’s story ‘The Portrait of Mr. W.H.’, Shakespeare’s sonnets became an emblem of male love, especially those addressed to the ‘lovely boy’. The writing of sonnets in itself became a fashionable inscription of this code.

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2 Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, July 1889
These elements were strongly concentrated during the war, most powerfully among young soldiers who had come straight from the public school Officer Training Corps to the battle fronts. It had long been accepted that strong attachments between older men and younger, with various elements of sexual activity, were a major part of classical Greek education and military service. Coupled with the close living conditions of warfare, and the importance of companionship and reliance on one’s comrades that this fostered, the awareness of homoeroticism became strong, if unacknowledged. The publication of the anthology *Lads* in 1989\(^3\) made clear the degree to which this permeated the troops, revealing that it was not only those educated at public schools who produced such writing.

The significance of this should not be over emphasised, nor should it be seen as the primary concern of the poetry; but the presence of a range of feelings from human compassion to active sexual engagement is a factor that needs to be considered as a textual and sub-textual element in much of the poetry of the war years, as the discussion in Chapter 4 will make clear.

### 1.4 Thomas Hardy (1840–1928): ‘Men who March Away’

The issues discussed in the preceding sections help to constitute the intellectual and social frames that surround and help to construct the poems of the war. A more literal frame is provided by the material circumstances in which the poems themselves were published – the volumes, newspapers and magazines and the other material they contained which were read by the original audiences alongside the poems that have since become canonical. Examining the poems within this frame helps the present-day reader to experience something of their original resonance, as well as once more stressing the relation between the poetic and experiential that is constantly present, but by no means simply defined, in any discussion of these works.

When ‘Men who March Away’ appeared, Hardy was established as one of the nation’s major literary figures. The author of novels including *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), he had rejected fiction after the poor reception of his radical *Jude the Obscure* in 1895, and had since written only poetry. His poem was seen as a major literary and moral response to the war, a point of guidance at a time of national and personal displacement. It can be found at [http://pages.ripco.net/~mws/Poetry/107.html](http://pages.ripco.net/~mws/Poetry/107.html).

Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914. Hardy’s poem was published

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in *The Times* on 9 September 1914 and *The Times Literary Supplement* the day after, making it one of the very first poems published nationally in response to the war and endowing it with a dual identity through the different natures of the two publications. In *The Times*, the national newspaper of record and organ of establishment opinion, the poem could be said to be endorsed by those responsible for the nation’s government and the formulation of opinion. In the *Supplement [TLS]*, then as now consisting primarily of reviews of the latest books of fiction, poetry and subjects of academic research, as well as occasional theatre reviews or articles about important intellectual or artistic issues and original poems, Hardy’s stanzas became an aesthetic entity, a work of art in its own right. This dual character sums up the larger ambivalence of war poetry, as well as revealing the importance of the material circumstances in which poems of the war years appeared.

As a response to the war and the idea of war, in the first of its two published contexts, the poem is ultimately a statement of the right and justice of the cause. Although it begins with the question ‘What of the faith and fire within us/ Men who march away’, it moves from the second stanza’s questioning ‘Is it a purblind prank’ to the assertion that ‘We well see what we are doing’. The penultimate stanza’s ‘In our heart of hearts believing/ Victory crowns the just’ is a direct expression of faith; the final stanza, changing the first line’s ‘What of’ to ‘Hence’ and directly repeating the rest of the first stanza, alters the opening uncertainty to an unwavering confidence, supported by the logical progress that the poem has travelled through, offering the reassurance of an algebraic proof to buttress the emotion of leaving with an assurance of right.

Seen as a poetic entity, as it would more likely have been by the readers of the *TLS*, the text becomes rather less certain. Its structure is finely polished, its movement still logically secure; but the questioning of the opening may not be wholly cancelled by the assured closure, and some of the diction is troubling. Who exactly is the ‘you’ addressed in the second stanza, and what is the nature of the ‘purblind prank’? Any reader familiar with Hardy’s novels, and the sombre tone of the collection *Satires of Circumstance* that would appear later the same year, and which included in its second edition ‘Men who march away’, would be aware of the writer’s dark views of the destructive powers of fate. Those who read in that volume ‘The Convergence of the Twain’, a poem about the loss of the *Titanic* in 1912, would have recalled it as an iteration of the hubristic arrogance of man in challenging the destructive forces of destiny: it is hard to believe that this would not have coloured their reading of the war poem.

The readers of the *TLS* would not have heard these echoes, but even without them
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