

A Body and a Soul Entire

An inquiry into the condition of the individual in World War I poetry

by Michael Ravenscroft

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2008

*To my mother, my father, and my brother*

*Love is all you need*

*And to my Grandfather,*

*for teaching me that the greatest wonder in life*

*is the brightness behind the eyes.*

## Acknowledgements

There are many people who helped me get where I am in this project. In mentioning them all by name, I would undoubtedly exclude others, for which I am certain I would never be forgiven. However, I would briefly like to thank my friends, Mike Gadaletto and Lee Plaxco for their tireless support of my thesis-induced insomnia, and all the antics of which I am and will forever remain guilty. My thesis cohort, with whom I shared the burden of nine months of intellectual soothsaying, of course, my advisor Brenda Marshall. Without your tirelessly critical hand, I would never have come close to writing something of which I am now very proud.

### Abstract

First World War poetry written by English soldiers on the Western Front establishes the individual as its interpretive locus. Refraining from framing the war in allegorical terms, trench poets, as they are called in contemporary study, approach the war from the perspective of the individual soldier. It is from this aspect that the war is seen as a force capable of redefining individuals, both in terms of how they view themselves as well as their fellow soldiers.

This redefinition is initially for the better, and it is this affirmation that is first examined. The poetry written at the war's outset by Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell emphasizes the individual's role in the war and the redemptive potential of fighting, focusing on the strengthening of the individual body. This type of poetic response overwhelmingly changes soon after the realities of the war come into consideration. The war's blunt and brutal impact on the individual is manifest by the fundamental distortion of the individual's perception of both himself and his fellow man. The individual is constantly bombarded with the alien landscape of the war such that he feels physically inadequate to come to terms with the destruction around him. The body is then called into question. The knowledge that one's own body is physically inadequate in the arena of the war brings with it the understanding that the soul seems not to belong to the body. In particular, the poetry of Wilfred Owen conveys the idea of an individual soul that is seemingly capable of existing independently of the body. As a result, the individual becomes hyper-aware of his own soul, such that he is constantly in a fractured state of being.

This problem is exacerbated by the sheer level of destruction that made death all-too frequent, cutting short the opportunity for the formation of interpersonal connections between men. Thus individual is assured of his own soul, but uncertain of the souls of others. He remains aware that they have souls, but his perception is constrained to the point where the only person whom he is certain is himself.

Critical response to trench poetry often tackles the idea that men became unable to feel for one another in the trenches because of the prohibitive conditions of trench warfare. Soldiers died so quickly and brutally that any compassion that might be conceivably felt between men was unequivocally shattered. The breaking of ties between men in the trenches traces to a principal demarcation of emotional expression, caused by the individual's constrained perception of himself on the battlefield. Without being connected on a soulful level to other men, there is a very real threat of isolation always confronting the soldier.

This fear of isolation is resolved by the group of soldiers, a formative unit that gives figure and shape to the individual, who is himself absorbed into the group and given the physical and soulful substantiation that is absent on an individual level in the war. The group is sometimes seen as a challenge to one's perception of humanity in individuals; the incorporation of other individuals into a group in which the whole is perceived as greater than the parts threatens to dehumanize other soldiers, being seen as a means to an end instead of as human beings. This thesis argues that the overall change in human perception resolves in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Herbert Read with the realization of the group as it leads to an appreciation for humanity itself. The individuality of other men is erased on the battlefield in the minds of individual soldiers, though the result is far from damning. On the contrary, the realization is the means by which a group soul forms, which leads to an appreciation of humanity itself, wherein individuals perceive *all* soldiers as equal beings, adding to a group force that is greater than any one person.

## CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter I – The Relationship Between the Body and Soul.....	7
Chapter II – The Changing Perception of the Individual.....	22
Chapter III – The Formation of the Group.....	48
Conclusion – “In one of those moments when nothing dies”.....	70
Works Consulted.....	75
<i>Appendix of poems</i> .....	78

#### Short Titles

- A. "BB": Bergonzi, Bernard. Heroes' Twilight: a Study of the Literature of the Great War (Second Edition). London: Macmillan Press, 1980.
- B. "SC": Cole, Sarah. Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the First World War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- C. "ME": Eksteins, Modris. Rites of Spring. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.

### Introduction:

#### The Individual Body and Soul in First World War Poetry

"It was in the war that I learned about men...[One became] naked, that is to say mankind viewed from the point of view of nature and not from the point of view of social classification."

Andre Bridoux, Souvenirs<sup>1</sup>

In August 1914, the First World War was an event that could be sorted out in the mind, discussed, and even laughed at. At that time, it was not yet "the Great War," or "the First World War." The war was, more than anything, an opportunity for revival. The poet Rupert Brooke was among the many soldiers who wrote home in the war's initial stages declaring it "all great fun" (ME, 123.) It is often suggested that the war came as a welcome event to young British men because war was seen as the penultimate sport; Modris Eksteins uses the poem "Vitai Lampada," written by Sir Henry Newbolt in 1898, in which the cricket field is compared to the battlefield, as an example of the paradigm with which young Britain marched away to war:

The sand of the desert is sodden red –  
Red with the wreck of a square that broke;  
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,  
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke;  
The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
And England's far, and Honour a name;  
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:  
"Play up! Play up! and play the game!" (ME, 122)

---

<sup>1</sup> Modris Eksteins, Rites of Spring, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989) 230.

Even in the nightmare of the battlefield, the metaphor of organized sport instills a sense of supreme order. The schoolboy whose voice rings out across the blood-sodden landscape calls for the continuation of the game.

It is the sense of order that defined the war for the British at the time that Rupert Brooke and other trench poets first began to pen verse in response to the war. There is a sense of pride in upholding the principles of the game, and the English people believed that the game of war would inevitably restore natural order to the world. Eksteins explains that for English boys, "Sports, then, were to serve both a moral and a physical purpose; they would encourage self-reliance and team spirit; they would build up the individual and integrate him into the group" (ME, 121.) For England, the war would be a game, or as novelist Jerome K. Jerome called it, "The Greatest Game of All" (ME, 125.) The conception of the war as a replenishing game allowed for a theoretical disconnect between the physical exertion involved in a game as opposed to war. Early war poetry written by non-participants depicts the conflict as a chance for revival, rejuvenation and spiritual awakening. Thomas Hardy's *Men Who March Away* is brimming over with the "faith and fire within us," where soldiers see themselves as answering to the call of England, their duty as "England's need."<sup>2</sup>

It soon became clear that the order the war was supposed to restore was a hideous illusion. The trench landscape itself was almost beyond description.<sup>3</sup> In sharp contrast to the poetry written by non-combatants, the sentiment that the war is ripe with restorative charm is overwhelmingly dismissed in the poetry written by soldiers in the trenches. In the poetry, soldiers agree that the war experience, in terms of the war as they knew it, engendered intense

---

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Men Who March Away*, The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry, ed. George Walter (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) 41.

<sup>3</sup> Eksteins, 139-170: Eksteins does the best conceivable justice to the trench landscape without actually having been in the trenches himself.



feelings of isolation from the rest of society (ME, 230.) The poetry written by soldiers is often defined by the abrupt disconnect between the trenches and the world at home, focusing for the most part on how to adjust to life in the trenches.

Surfacing throughout much trench poetry are questions about how the individual soldier considers himself in relation to the conflict. The trench poet overwhelmingly defines the conflict in relation to his own experiences, choosing to approach the war in relation to his own experiences. Many contemporary critics derided trench poetry for having limited vision, and dealing, as the literary critic John Johnston puts it, “almost exclusively with the experiences of the ordinary soldier,” rarely escaping the pathos of the soldier’s immediate condition.<sup>4</sup> Though this may seem like a legitimate criticism, I will argue over the following chapters that the incomparable value of First World War poetry derives from the trench poet’s unique choice to frame the conflict in humanistic terms. In the words of the trench poet Charles Hamilton Sorley, the individual soldier does not claim “the conquest of your land,” but an army, led by a general, given orders by a Field Marshall. Though countries win wars, individuals fight them. It is the individual soldier who kills another, who watches another die, and who comes to terms with humanity as it catapults itself into mechanized warfare. Just as the trench poets frame the war in terms of an individual viewpoint, this study will focus on the war’s effect on the individual soldier.

I have chosen for consideration poetry that deals with the individual and his perception of the men around him. In certain trench poems there is a great deal of attention paid to the words “body” and “soul” as they relate to the self and others. The terms come to represent how the individual defines the world around him by way of his perception of himself, and of other

---

<sup>4</sup> John Johnston, English Poetry of the First World War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) 19.

soldiers, both friend and enemy. Though no two poets prescribe identical meanings to the term “soul,” the word functions as a means of differentiation between the self and others.

Early war poems written by Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell focus on the redemptive potential of the conflict, viewing the body’s wartime sacrifice as a means of improving the condition of one’s soul. The individual is seen in this poetry as subject to a war that has the power to cleanse the spirit through the taxation of the body. These two separate components of body and soul complement each other in the war, and ultimately give rise to an individual spiritual redemption. The individual soul is cleansed in war, thanks to the sacrifice of the body.

It soon becomes clear that the war does not deliver on what early poets felt it promised. There is a dramatic shift in the individual’s perception of himself, beginning with Brooke’s last poem, in which the individual comes to see himself as incapable of functioning in the vast machine of war. Wilfred Owen develops the notion that the individual experiences a kind of hyper-awareness of his own self. Surrounded by the mayhem of the war, the individual questions the condition of his soul within his body, turning his attention away from others and into himself.

The individual’s turn inward is associated with a loss in basic human connectivity, arising from an acute lack of perception of another person’s “soul.” From the point of view of the individual, one’s own self is abundantly clear on the battlefield. However, the trenches prohibit the formation of close personal bonds, and as such, relations between individuals become strained. The sense of isolation from one’s fellow man is one of the fundamentally dehumanizing aspects of the war and the subject of much consideration by the trench poets. As men lose sight of the world around them they start living in terms of their internal selves only, reducing all emotional connection to absurdity. This loss of “knowing” prevents the deeper consideration of the selves of others; in effect, the drawing back from empathy marks the erasure of the typical

perception of another man as a "person." In the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Herbert Read among others, the soul is no longer supremely representative of the other man, and the individual comes to know other soldiers by their bodies and little more. The knowledge of the personal self is a conscious recognition of the sentiment "I am an individual self within a body" and the unconscious acceptance that "Other men are bodies."

This perceived loss of humanity in other men does not mean that the trenches were entirely devoid of emotional expression. Though it is often argued that the destruction of interpersonal relations leads to an utter dehumanization within the trenches, what develops among the men is a relationship between the individual and the group that, founded on the physicality of the group body, serves not only to physically support the individual, but also to connect the individual soul to a group soul. This relationship is often the most intriguing to military scholars and historians. As John Keegan puts it:

Men whom the trenches cast into intimacy entered into bonds of mutual dependency and sacrifice of self stronger than any of the friendships made in peace and better times. That is the ultimate mystery of the First World War. If we could understand its loves, as well as its hates, we would be nearer understanding the mystery of human life.<sup>5</sup>

This project will conclude with an inquiry into the nature of the relationship that forms between the individual and the group. The sense of "mutual dependency" and "sacrifice of self" are easier said than understood. The implicit tensions of the group will be examined alongside their benefits. What if it is the case that the sacrifice of self, though reducing one's humanity, actually builds a respect for a *group* humanity? Is this reduction not a developed consideration of one man for his humanity instead of his individual person?

---

<sup>5</sup> John Keegan, The First World War (New York: Vintage Books, 1998) 427.

Although there is a vast body of poetry from French and German soldiers, this study will focus specifically on poetry written by English soldiers from the Western Front between the start of the war in 1914 to just after its finish in 1918. The intent is not to celebrate English poetry above that of other countries, but to trace an argument of the individual's changing perception over a body of soldiers who share a common background and nationality, with the hope of elucidating an overall change in poetic attitude. This is a wide-ranging study, though there will out of necessity be many poets excluded, if only for the sake of space. The goal of this project is to prove that in the selected poems, a specific change occurs in the individual's perception with regard to the self and others, and that over the course of the war, the terms change on which one man is defined in the eyes of another. The ultimate intent is to show that despite the obvious losses sustained in person-to-person interaction, a significant relationship develops between the individual soldier and the body of men around him that come to represent what it is that positively defines humanity.

Chapter I:  
The Relationship Between the Body and Soul

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.

- Rupert Brooke, 1914: *The Dead*

The poetry of Rupert Brooke is often described as “not of war, but of preparation for war.”<sup>6</sup> The war offered, for poets such as Brooke, a fresh response to a world that was, in Brooke’s words, “grown old and cold and weary.”<sup>7</sup> Brooke was 27 at the outbreak of war in 1914, and already a somewhat renowned poet in the Georgian literary circle.<sup>8</sup> Though Brooke is credited with giving voice to the prideful youth at the conscription office, he was not one of them. He was, for the most part, an established poet who bought in to the blistering nationalism of the early days, and went to war with a poetic, if unrealistic view of the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Brooke’s poetic reputation is due almost entirely to the five poems in a series called *War Sonnets*, published in *New Numbers* in 1915 (BB, 20.) Despite the fact that he died of septicemia in 1915 and not the war itself, Brooke became canonized as the first soldier-poet to fall victim to combat and a symbol of the sacrifice of English youth; his traditional good looks and Cambridge upbringing cemented his position as a figure worthy of national sacrifice (BB, 37.) Though England had her hero, Brooke was not a soldier poet in the strictest sense. Apart from a brief skirmish outside Antwerp in 1914, Brooke never saw action on the Western front.<sup>10</sup> Writing in

---

<sup>6</sup> George Parfitt, English Poetry of the First World War (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) 21.

<sup>7</sup> Rupert Brooke, 1914: *Peace*, see appendix

<sup>8</sup> Parfitt, 20

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes’ Twilight (London: Macmillan Press, 1980) 41.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Caesar, Taking It Like A Man (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) 55.

preparation for war, Brooke more than anything gave a poetic voice to the popular pre-war current of patriotism in a war that had yet to be fully realized.<sup>11</sup>

Brooke's "hero-as-victim" status bears semblance to the main issue at play in *War Sonnets*. The most famous poem of the series, *1914: The Soldier* deals specifically with the repercussions of a wartime death, which the speaker sees as a defining moment:

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever 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.<sup>12</sup> (ll. 1-8)

The poem describes a definitively "English" response to the war.<sup>13</sup> Death creates a symbolic union between the individual and his country: England is the mother and the soldier is her son. The body of the soldier is fixed in the soil in death as a sacrifice for the English way of life. The poem dwells on the life that was had, but only as it relates to death's unifying potential. Here, the soldier becomes the dust of an English body that is "for ever England," impressing the idea that death is a potentially unifying state. The death of the speaker encapsulates a sacrifice for a broad definition of the English way of life, and in death the body is no longer his, but rather that of England. As such, the soldier's sacrifice is his physical body:<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Caesar, 42

<sup>12</sup> Rupert Brooke, *1914: Soldier*, see appendix

<sup>13</sup> George Walter, introduction, *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) xiv.

<sup>14</sup> Caesar, 54

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,  
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;  
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,  
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven. (ll. 9-14)

Though the war is not explicitly called “play” or a game, death is presented in detached ethereal terms. The poem is often critically dismissed: Bergonzi notes that there is an “odd uncertainty” as to whether the poet is praising England, or merely himself. Bergonzi also cites that there is “unresolved conflict between a subjective lyric impulse, not at all sure of its language, and the assumed decorum of patriotic utterance” (BB, 44.) Bergonzi finds fault with the poem’s competing motivations that he believes are fueled by the speaker’s conflicting aspirations. Bergonzi also notes that the trench poet Charles Hamilton Sorley finds that the speaker in Brooke’s poem is “far too obsessed with his own sacrifice, regarding the going to war of himself (and others) as a highly intense, remarkable and sacrificial exploit...” (BB, 44.) Bergonzi and Sorley point out the poem’s problematic encounter of speaker and subject, indicating that the speaker is insincere (or undecided) about his intentions.

Though the speaker would have the reader believe that he wants to become another component of England, a “pulse in the eternal mind,” as it were, the tone of the poem contains a sense of self-magnification in the “richer dust” that betrays the intent of the speaker. The speaker, whose desire it is to cement his place in English minds by giving his body for his country, actually seeks the definition of his own soul through his wartime death.

The issue that remains is of the individual soldier as he exists in life. Death is seen as a welcome event in the sense that it purges the heart of evil. “And think, this heart, all evil shed

away,” excites the tone of the address, indicating an almost conscious desire to move into death because of its cleansing properties. The poem makes the troubling statement that in life the heart is necessarily burdened by evil and is purified in death. In his pre-war poetry, Brooke regularly expresses a longing for death, with images of dissolution found in close proximity to those of love.<sup>15</sup> For Brooke’s speaker, death offers an escape from the body, thus ensuring that the speaker’s soul is immortalized, maintained by the idea of England herself.

It is not only the memory of the soldier that seems crystallized, but rather the soldier’s self. The poem’s vision of death is as a force that washes away imperfections and replaces them with a truer essence and a more perfect soul. In *1914: Peace*, the physical slovenliness of life is purified by the war:

To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,  
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,  
Leave the sick hearts that honor could not move,  
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,  
And all the little emptiness of love!  
Oh! We, who have known shame, we have found  
Release there,  
Where there’s no ill, no grief, but sleep has  
Mending,  
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;  
Nothing to shake the laughing heart’s long peace there  
But only agony, and that has ending;  
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.<sup>16</sup> (ll. 4-16)

---

<sup>15</sup> Caesar, 17

<sup>16</sup> Rupert Brooke, *1914: Peace*, see appendix



The immediacy of the address admits a bursting youthful exuberance to be taken away from the wantonness of the old world. Life is cold, shameful, and grievous; war is not only welcome, but hailed as a force with the capacity for rejuvenation. Brooke's language intertwines the physical with the spiritual so that the "release" for the soul is at the expense of the body: "Naught broken save this body, lost but breath..." The agony that shakes the heart makes the ensuing peace seem more worthwhile to the speaker, as physical agony has an ending in death. What outlasts the body, and subsequently death, is the pacified soul that the soldier finds after the physical body endures the purging of the war.

On the level of the individual, the speaker implies that he has known shame and will find retribution in battle because of the war's cleansing power. The devaluation of the body is maintained on an individual level: "Naught broken save *this* body, lost but breath." In *Peace*, the body comes to represent various aspects of society that are distasteful. The "half-men" with "sick hearts" who enjoy the "little emptiness of love" are defined by their positions beyond the war, unmoved by honor and remaining outside the conflict. Brooke has no pity for these men because they are, by his account, not complete men. A complete man understands that the corporeal body is only a part of the person, which if destroyed, only bestows more credence to the individual soul's peace. Parfitt notes that for the speakers in *Peace* and *Soldier*, spiritual purity is a necessary result of the corporeal body's breakdown.<sup>17</sup> In more basic terms, subjecting the body to the war is an avenue toward spiritual gain that ultimately purifies the individual soul.

Brooke's poetry finds death a necessary step in a transformative process to define the individual in the spiritual sense. What the poem offers is death in the hypothetical and heroic sense, relying on an ethereal conception of the soul to solidify what does not exist for the speaker in life. In Brooke's *War Sonnets*, the individual is defined by his death, where his physical

---

<sup>17</sup> Parfitt, 22

sacrifice confirms the purity of his soul. The ethereal force that exists after death replaces the individual body with a more complete soul in every sense.

As Sorley points out, it is an affirmation from the soldier's own perspective. The *War Sonnets* strive for a post-mortem realization of the individual self. In death, one is transformed into something of which one is proud. The only way Brooke can reconcile this notion is to posit that he will know when he is dead. Though the speaker claims that it is others that he wishes to "think only this" of him, it is clear that the wish is self-aggrandizing. Brooke believes that in wartime death, the body must be broken for the soul to be cleansed. This "soul," however, is Brooke's own sense of self; the war allows him to look upon himself with pride, feeling his individual spirit chastened by the purging force of the war.

Brooke's poetry achieved national acclaim following the Dean of St. Paul's Easter Sunday sermon in 1916, in which he referenced Brooke's *1914: The Soldier*, saying, "the enthusiasm of a pure and elevated patriotism has never found a nobler expression."<sup>18</sup> At that time, the poem spoke to what England wanted to hear: a soldier who is proud of his death because he dies for a cause that is greater than himself.

The notion that the body is a component of man that is broken in the soul's search for peace is the hallmark of Brooke's war verse. Brooke's poetry shows an early configuration of the conflict in the mind of the soldier-poet who depicts the war as capable of providing rejuvenation and fulfillment for the individual's soul.

Brooke's attitude is similar to that of Julian Grenfell, who though younger than Brooke, saw combat on the Western Front and delighted in the challenge of war: "I adore war. It is like a big picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic."<sup>19</sup> Grenfell's poetic response to the war is more

---

<sup>18</sup> Walter, xiv

<sup>19</sup> Grenfell, Pages from a Family Journal: 1888-1915, 37

realistic owing to his combat experience. His poem *Into Battle* depicts the moment before action with an excitable intensity that somehow he will be transformed by the battle ahead:

The fighting man shall from the sun  
Take warmth, and life from the glowing earth;  
Speed with the light-foot winds to run,  
And with the trees to newer birth;  
And find, when fighting shall be done,  
Great rest, and fullness after dearth.<sup>20</sup> (ll. 9-14)

The moment of the fight is saturated with enthusiasm similar to Brooke's "swimmers into cleanness leaping." The "newer birth" imagines a body reborn out of combat. It is clear that Grenfell views battle as a tonic experience. The act of fighting is a physical purge that instills warmth and life, and allows the soldier to speed away from the "dearth" of his past. Grenfell's assumption is that the mind will be purged through physical activity in the act of making war. His idea of the transformative process is physical in a way that is similar, though not identical to Brooke's:

And when the burning moment breaks,  
And all things else are out of mind,  
And only Joy-of-Battle takes  
Him by the throat, and makes him blind (ll. 35-38)

And then, one stanza later:

The thundering line of battle stands,  
And in the air Death moans and sings:  
But Day shall clasp him with strong hands,  
And night shall fold him in soft wings. (ll. 43-46)

---

<sup>20</sup> Julian Grenfell, *Into Battle*, see appendix

In battle, the mind is essentially empty. What comes is the grip of a force on the physical body, taking the soldier by the throat and wrenching him into a heightened state of being. The poem describes life itself with renewed vigor, and in addition to the images of the first stanza, the speaker invokes words like "thundering" to an empowering effect. The experience is not physically corrosive so much as it restores a feeling of physical restoration to the individual. Death, given in abstract terms, only serves to intensify the thrill of the fight.

What is lost is the sense of individual control on the battlefield, when "Joy-of-Battle takes him by the throat and makes him blind." Additionally, it is the day that wrenches the soldier into battle, and the night that brings restorative comfort. The soldier is physically at the mercy of these outside forces, though instead of resisting their influence he allows the feeling to consume him, running with the "light foot winds," and taking warmth from the sun. The process by which the heightened state of being is received is by way of surrender to the physical requirements of the war, and giving forth in a physical surge so that the soldier may find a spiritually satisfied rest when the fighting ends. The soldier escapes the "dearth" that Brooke's speakers feared, though for Grenfell the cleansing is intoned as both mental and physical. Grenfell is content with losing an individual sense of physical control in battle because there is the greater force of the war guiding him, which in turn builds up the individual's sense of self.

What is called the "romantic view" of the war by Bernard Bergonzi—that the individual soul's betterment is possible through physical exertion—Brooke and Grenfell share. Physical change by the hands of war affects a change in both the body and soul of the soldier. The physical body undergoes a change that, through battle, modifies the individual's sense of self, forcing a change for the better. The soul that is weak in peacetime is made strong by the physically purgative processes of war.

There is concern then for what it means to consider the war as physically purgative and soulfully replenishing. Under Brooke and Grenfell's reasoning, the soul is dependent on the body insofar as the body is the means to the soul's improvement. It seems that this reasoning implicitly devalues the body in relation to the soul. Grenfell's idea of relinquishing control of the body in order to better the soul is founded on the notion that the soul will benefit from the body's exertion. This absence of control is a source of concern in most trench poetry, particularly that of Charles Hamilton Sorley, who proposes a somewhat different view toward the body-soul relationship in the sonnet *To Germany*. Sorley writes that the body and soul undergo complementary changes in the war:

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,  
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.  
But gropers both through fields of thought confined  
We stumble and we do not understand.  
You only saw your future bigly planned,  
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,  
And in each other's dearest ways we stand,  
And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.<sup>21</sup> (ll. 1-8)

Sorley depicts blindness as a condition under which the mind is influenced by the body and vice versa. The soldiers are confounded by what they perceive to be the goals of war, which cloud their judgment to the point when they engage in physical combat. "Blindness" in the metaphorical sense translates into physical blindness in that the soldiers come to "hiss and hate" the enemy without fully understanding that he too is blinded by a similar cause. Hatred becomes

---

<sup>21</sup> Charles Hamilton Sorley, *see appendix*

blindness when the other man's humanity is obscured by one's own perception. The speaker understands this fully when he considers the world after the war's end:

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. (ll. 9-14)

It is an inescapable fact that physical violence between bodies is the result of the changed perception of other soldiers, though the naturalistic metaphors imply that the war is a force that exerts itself on the men and is beyond their control. In a similar vein to Grenfell, Sorley depicts the war movement as a force that wrests control from the individual. For Sorley, however, the physical impositions of combat directly correlate to a perceptual reduction that adversely affects the individual's soul. Having to wait for the storm to end before viewing other men as people paints the war as a primarily reductive force, controlling of individuals and removing from them the basic recognition of each other's humanity.

There yet remains the potential for positive development of the body and soul, as peace allows men to view each other with "new-won eyes" and see the other's "truer form." The change that the soldiers undergo in war is described in physical terms that complement a shift in perception to a truer sense of the enemy's humanity. This "truer form" is physical in the sense that the speaker once again views the other man as a person, though this also indicates a shift in the perception of his soul. Though he views the war as a situation that exhibits control over man's body and soul with undesirable results, Sorley's ideas of peacetime correlate to those of Brooke and Grenfell in the sense that without physical conflict, there is no new-won vision on

either side. The physical body remains at the heart of Sorley's poem as a necessary counterpart to the mental awakening that comes in peacetime.

Julian Grenfell died of a wound he suffered at the Battle of Ypres in 1915, cutting short the development of his poetic response to the war. Brooke also died that year, never having the opportunity to react to the war as it unfolded. Though Brooke's poetry gained popularity on the Home Front, soldiers in the trenches did not share the general ethos of the *War Sonnets*. Brooke did not fully understand the protracted struggle in the trenches, and many soldiers faulted him for having a blindly patriotic vision of the war, as Bergonzi shows in an excerpt from Edmund Blunden:

That Brooke, if he had lived to march into the horrifying battlefield of the River Ancre with his surviving companions of the Hood Battalion in the deep winter of 1916, would have continued to write sonnets or other poems in the spirit of the 1914 Sonnets, is something that I cannot credit.

(BB, 45)

Grenfell knew the horrors of war and thrived in the trenches, initially enjoying the thrill of the fight; though in time, he too came to understand the weight the conflict presented. The Battle of the Somme made Grenfell's romantic view of the war, as Bergonzi puts it, "an obscene mockery" (BB, 51.) The realities of war reduce Brooke's and, to a lesser extent, Grenfell's ideas of wartime self-improvement to depressingly idealized sentiments.

The "obscene mockery" of which Bergonzi speaks refers to the problematic inference that the soul can benefit from the body's sacrifice. Despite propounding the glorious visions of a broken body with a purified soul, Brooke wrote one last unfinished poem, *Fragment*, on a troopship before his death in April 1915 that suggests his poetry was embarking on a different trajectory (BB, 51):

I strayed about the deck, an hour, tonight

Under a cloudy moonless sky; and peeped  
In at the windows, watched my friends at table,  
Or playing cards, or standing in the doorway,  
Or coming out into the darkness. Still  
No one could see me. (ll. 1-6)

Immediately noticeable is the restless, apprehensive tenor of the speaker's voice. The poem evokes the feeling that the speaker is sailing into uncertain waters, externally projecting his mental disquiet. Invisible to his friends, he stands in the darkness beyond the warmth of the men inside the ship. The speaker feels that he exists outside of something more substantial than his own body, and finds his thoughts drawn to the battlefield:

I would have thought of them  
- Heedless, within a week of battle – in pity,  
Pride in their strength and in the weight and firmness  
And link'd beauty of bodies, and pity that  
This gay machine of splendour'd soon be broken  
Thought little of, pashed, scattered...(ll. 7-11)

Death is no longer a purified state but a force capable of sharp division. There is a substantial turn in the mood of the poem when the group of living men is revealed in the speaker's thoughts. Not only are the soldiers an embodiment of "strength" and "weight" in the physical sense, but also the group itself is a thing of beauty. The speaker realizes that the physical strength that exists between linked bodies offers the form and figure that are absent in him.

The beauty of the group remains at the heart of the poem. The group comprises a unit, without which the speaker is devoid of any strength or form whatsoever. In his earlier poem *1914: Soldier*, the speaker is his own subject; it is in this way that *Fragment* stands apart,



redirecting importance to the group of men that offers the speaker physical and psychological substantiation. As men die in *Fragment*, they do not become part of the ethereal spirit of England as is the case in *1914: Soldier*: “Only, always/ I could but see them – against the lamplight – pass/ Like colored shadows, thinner than filmy glass.” The individual soul which was before so sturdy in the face of death is now a tenuous prospect following the body’s disintegration: “Perishing things and strange ghosts – soon to die/ To other ghosts – this one, or that, or I” (ll. 17-18.) The poem’s individuals, including the speaker, are not seen as whole people; their specters imply that the togetherness of the group *is* the togetherness of the men themselves, existing in full form only when linked. The group is the structure that brings the speaker in from the outside, and grants him warmth and beauty in connection.

Though there is still a force beyond Brooke’s individual, grounding him and giving him form, it is the positive force of life instead of death. The war is turned into an overtly antagonistic force that breaks the machine of men, and scatters them into isolation and formlessness. Brooke’s individual self is no longer defined on his own terms in relation to the war. In his earlier *1914: The Soldier*, the individual makes his divine sacrifice and sheds the corruption of the body; he becomes defined by his sacrifice, and left to exist eternally in the heart of England. *Fragment* is cast on a much darker landscape, with the body’s sacrifice no longer granting spiritual enlightenment. The individual body is still weak, yet the individual spirit is even weaker without the body, as shedding the physical body abnegates the soul altogether. Thus the body is indispensable to the speaker’s survival. What is absent in Brooke’s early poetry is realized in *Fragment*: Brooke views the body as an essential aspect of the individual, and its weakness brings into question the strength of the individual soul.

Brooke's last line of completed poetry is of an individual alone on a ship, heading into uncertain waters. Though he never had the chance to develop this new subjective direction, *Fragment* is an indication that Brooke was developing a firmer imaginative grasp of the reality of war at the time of his death (BB, 45.) Brooke's early poetry was often criticized by soldiers as sentimentalizing a genuinely inhuman conflict. Eksteins points out that the men in the trenches heartily debunked the notion that the war could be sentimentalized (ME, 144.)

Brooke seemed conscious of the developing uncertainty of what lay ahead. The proud "swimmers into cleanness leaping" that are the cornerstone of Brooke's early work are drowned out by Brooke's ghostly speaker in the final stanza of *Fragment*. What may be traced from the beginning of Brooke's wartime poetic career to the final fragment is the individual's developing uncertainty of himself in the war. What begins as a fully formed ethereal spirit confirmed by bodily sacrifice, ends as a lone body and soul, isolated and weak. This conscious shift marks what would likely have been the beginning of a new direction in Brooke's poetry. Shifting his attention away from the ethereal unity of death, *Fragment* focuses on the physical properties of life as they relate to the individual's survival.

*Fragment* is especially important in this sense because it shows a speaker confronting death on physical terms. As death threatens to break the body, the individual is placed in a tenuous position. The movement away from the traditional idealization of wartime death is tantamount to a paradigmatic shift in what the individual represents in Brooke's poetry. Without any ethereal notions of a patriotic death assuring the soul's continued survival, the individual must be considered in the most basic components, which to Brooke are the body and the soul. With the loss of purpose in death, the individual finds purpose in life, and the sheer necessity of

the survival of the body prompts the question of how one is to survive in war without an assured definition of one's self.

Brooke's conception of the individual is formed by contrast with what it is not; the group is strong, and prevents the individual from having to face the war alone. All grandiose theorizing is absent from Brooke's final poem; the dominant patriotic tones of heroism in death have all but vanished. The lone soldier straying about a ship in the night is a sadly fitting image for what followed Brooke's death, and what resounds in later war poetry. The question of how the individual comes to define himself and other individuals in the war was not explored by Brooke, but is the subject of much interest for other trench poets. Brooke seems to realize that there is a necessary change the individual must undergo in order to come to terms with oneself and others in the war, though exactly what this change requires of the individual has yet to be seen.

## Chapter II

### The Changing Perception of the Individual

Around me, when I wake or sleep,  
Men strange to me their vigils keep;  
And some were boys but yesterday,  
Upon the village green at play.  
Their faces I shall never know;  
Like sentinels they come and go.

- Edward Shillito, from *Nameless Men*

Modris Eksteins remarks on a turning inward of the soldier as the war progressed, as documented by Sandor Ferenczi, a medical officer who treated psychoneurotic soldiers: "...soldiers confronted by overwhelming material force and personal helplessness withdrew into themselves" (ME, 213.) Brooke's lone figure on a ship is one of the first notable instances of a trench poet framing the war in terms of its realistic relation to the ordinary soldier. The view of the poet is reoriented to the perspective that his experiences are the only way for the individual to comprehend the war. The conception of where one stands in relation to the conflict is central to the trench poet's method of inquiry, as it is from the point of view of the individual that the war comes under consideration.

Comprehending the war in its entirety required of soldiers a kind of perspective that was simply unavailable. As Douglas Jerrold claims in his novel, The Lie About the War, the war is simply too big to put into terms of an individual perspective:

To the individual personally, all operations of war are meaningless and futile. He has no sense of personal contention with his enemies, not because they are not his enemies, not because the issue

of the struggle is immaterial, but simply because the smallest fighting unit is, in modern national warfare, not the individual, the section or the company, not even the battalion, the regiment or the brigade, but the division...In relation to these movements, the agonies, the ardors, and the endurances of individuals assume a tragic and heroic dignity. Divorced from them, related not to the will of their Commanders, the moral, physical and economic resources of their nationals and the aims of their statesmen, but to the limited horizon of the individual soldier, the wanderings and sufferings of the squad, the platoon, or the company, not only appear to be, but are, utterly futile and without meaning.<sup>22</sup>

Jerrold touches on the problem of the individual's comprehension of the war machine. The feelings of futility relate to a loss of meaning in the individual's position within the conflict. The helplessness felt by soldiers was inherent in the nature of the combat; on the trench landscape, thousands of men would be slaughtered within moments of an attack, making individual efforts seem, from a single point of view, completely futile.

Samuel Hynes, in A War Imagined, credits soldiers' experiences fighting in the more horrific campaigns of the Somme, Loos, and Ypres for changing poetic attitudes toward the war such that experience in battle caused a redirection of attention to one's own place in the conflict.<sup>23</sup> In Wilfred Owen's poem *1914*, written early in the war, the conflict is viewed in abstract terms as a destructive force. Owen's early poetry invokes much of the same thematic tropes as Brooke and Grenfell, viewing the war in abstracted terms. *1914*, drafted in the same year as its title, echoes the gravitas of the *War Sonnets*, albeit from a different attitude:

War broke: and now the Winter of the world

With perishing great darkness closes in.

---

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Jerrold, The Lie About the War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930) 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 155-156 Samuel Hynes notes the change in the poetic diction of poets like Siegfried Sassoon, who began the war with much broader poetic ideals and ended up writing poetry that responded to the individual's condition within the war.

The foul tornado, centered at Berlin,  
Is over all the width of Europe whirled,  
Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled  
Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin  
Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin  
The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled. (ll. 1-8)

*1914* shares its title with Brooke's first sonnet in the *War Sonnets* series, and uses the war as an object to much the same effect as Brooke. The Classical glory that animates Brooke's heroic soldier sounds in Owen's verse as a way of showing the war's destructive capability. Despite the apocalyptic description of the war, the conflict is framed in purely allegorical terms. It has a definite beginning and can be viewed, from the speaker's detached perspective, as it moves across Europe; it almost seems as though the speaker is looking down on a map, watching the conflict unfold. Art itself is abstracted to the point where it is that which suffers most from the conflict. The speaker's concern for the "sails of progress" and famines of "thought and feeling" project the war as a destroyer of the Classical beauty of culture:

For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,  
And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,  
An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,  
A slow grand age, and right with all increase.  
But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need  
Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed. (ll. 9-14)

The "blood for seed" image comes almost as an afterthought, and one wonders where the people are that will be fighting this war. The speaker himself stands noticeably back from the conflict, describing the struggle in terms of a collective "us." The use of the pronoun "us" does not

personalize the poem so much as it sets the war apart from human experience. There is no mention of whether or not the *speaker's* blood will be spilled, leaving the image "blood for seed" a metaphorical abstraction. War is, at this point in Owen's career, given in symbolic terms as a natural event, both as winter and a tornado; it is something that may destroy, but it may also be weathered. The "wailing verse" and "famines of thought and feeling" are spoken by a poet that still views war and death as abstractions, and not yet specific to the men whose blood will be spilled.

The strain running through this poem is of the use of the war as a detached allegory. Owen does not address the individual soldier's reaction, but rather frames the conflict in detached metaphysical terms. Even in Owen's apocalyptic vision, death is a byproduct of the storm ahead, little thought on except in abstractions. It does not occur to the speaker that he might die in the war; this is not an issue because in the physical sense, the individual speaker is absent, and the use of the pronoun "us" is little more than an abstraction of the speaker. In this respect, *1914* may be read as the voice of a sentiment without specific regard to the effect of the war on individual persons.

Owen composed nearly his entire catalogue of war poetry on medical leave at Craiglockhart between July 1917 and September 1918. There he met Siegfried Sassoon, a renowned trench poet, and found in him an intellectual stimulus. It was Sassoon who encouraged Owen to frame the war as it genuinely impacts the soldier, away from abstraction and into the realm of gritty realism.<sup>24</sup> When the abstraction of war ends, the question arises as to the individual's place in the conflict. As was mentioned previously, Jerrold says in The Lie About

---

<sup>24</sup> Sassoon puts it this way: "My only claimable influence was that I stimulated him towards writing with compassionate and challenging realism...My encouragement was opportune, and can claim to have given him a lively incentive during his rapid advance to self-revelation." *From Siegfried's Journey*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1945) 89.

The War that the individual soldier has no personal contention with his enemies. In fact, it is often said that men in the trenches felt sympathy to the other side because they considered them as equals in a horrible situation (ME, 106.) However, Bertrand Russell notes that the phrase "I am going off to die for my country" is a morally ambiguous way of saying "I am going off to kill for my country."<sup>25</sup> Implicit in war is the fact that at some point, one man will inflict death on another. Owen argues in the poem *Strange Meeting* that the fixation of the term "enemy" changes the soldier's perception of another human being to the point where the "other" is stripped of his humanity. The poem examines the loss of identification as a direct consequence of the impact of the landscape of the war on one's perception of others:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.  
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.<sup>26</sup> (ll. 6-10)

The poem draws attention to the place of the meeting; the vision is characterized by a kind of murky ambiguity between life and death that does not exist on the battlefield. In this place, the speaker cannot tell whether he exists in the world of the living or the dead by surveying the bodies around him. The speaker's realization that he himself stands in hell takes place only after

---

<sup>25</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 81.

<sup>26</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Strange Meeting*, see appendix



the speaker sees the stranger smile. On a basic level, the speaker is oriented through recognition of another person. The poem infers that a kind of communication is reestablished between the two soldiers that is difficult to define in the realm of the war. The bodies that slumber around the two men are either "too fast in thought or death" to be disturbed; comparatively, these two states are entirely different, but the appearance of the bodies is such that the speaker cannot tell one state of being from the other. Whereas typically the body is the indicator of one's state of being, the body alone seems unable to give any such indication (as to whether he is alive or dead.)

Implicit in this idea is the boundary by which the world of the trenches is separated from the normal world. The two men confront each other beyond the sounds of war, and the world of the war exists in contradistinction to the world in which the speaker now finds himself:

With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained,

Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground

And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan. (ll. 11-13)

In this strange place the two men are extracted from the machinery of war and are able to view one another as human beings. The speaker opens a dialogue by establishing a sense of friendship: "Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn." The strange friend replies that the 'world of war' is all consuming, and he goes on to relate what he considers is worth mourning. What follows is a speech by the strange friend in which he reveals that he was an enemy soldier killed by speaker:

'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I knew you in this dark: for you so frowned

Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.

Let us sleep now...' (ll. 40-44)

The strange friend's address to the speaker effectively highlights the fact that the definitions "friend and enemy" separate the two men. The phrasing of "strange friend" verges on oxymoron; they become friends by virtue of the fact that they share a common space, and are strangers because they do not know each other on a personal level. Sara Cole remarks, in Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War, that though "'enemy' and 'friend' conventionally function as opposites, here they become near-relatives, as the axis of male relations shifts." Additionally, "Combatant men might be structurally opposed...but the possibilities for identification, friendship, and even love proliferate, as the men experience an ambiguous closeness that resists categorization."<sup>27</sup> It is not so much the closeness that allows the men to feel at peace with each other, as the situation itself is a redefinition of human contact in wartime. The stranger equates his own experiences with those of the speaker in an effort to break down the metaphysical distance between them that exists by virtue of their externally imposed labels. In saying, "Whatever hope is yours/ was my life also" he appeals for an understanding that is lost in combat. The stranger appeals for a level of human connection and emotional understanding that is lost in the war but can be regained in this new place.

Cole's point about the ambiguousness of their relationship resonates particularly in the closing lines of the poem. The connection between the two men in the dark tunnel is defined in contrast to the moment of inflicted death. The act of killing another person in war is depicted as the farthest point of separation between two men and the moment when all consideration of another person's humanity is absent. The stranger says, "for you so frowned/ Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed. / I parried, but my hands were loath and cold." In killing the stranger, the speaker looks *through* him. The implication is that killing is an act of physical

---

<sup>27</sup> Sara Cole, Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 162.

brutality and requires an absolute disconnect. The strange friend sees his murder as a denial of his humanity that exists without the body, that which he would call his soul. He impresses upon the speaker that he was (in life) not just a body that stands in the way, but a genuine person.

Whether one wants to call the strange friend's desire an appeal for the recognition of his "soul" may lead to confusion. In relation to previous poems that invoke the term, the speaker's "soul" is essentially what is in debate, though it is most likely a somewhat ambiguous name to give his "self." What the stranger wants is a recognition of the essence that makes him not just a body to be destroyed. The stranger's perception, thought and expression are lost in the eyes of the killer. The poem impresses the point that assigning the term "enemy" to another human being denies this fundamental aspect of his humanity. It is the place of the battle that sets the two men apart, dividing them where in life they would perceive each other on equal terms. The final lines evoke the senselessness of the terms of differentiation that come to define their perceptions of each other. Outside the sphere of battle they interact in the same space, and the emptiness of the differences between them is finally recognized. The unity between the two men is palpable in the final line; in this strange place their worldly differences are dissolved, and they exist as two men. The poem recognizes the problem of defining men with false nomenclature, as there is a deeper core to a person than a body can indicate.

*Strange Meeting* presents the abstraction of another man in the eyes of the individual. In war, he finds himself viewing another human being as a body on the battlefield. Individuals are redefined as enemies, such that the appearance of "enemy as body" causes the eradication of the recognition of another's humanity. Desmond Graham remarks that according to Owen, a basic level of perceived humanity that is lost in the war is lamented in poems like *Strange Meeting*:

The sureness with which Owen evokes the sounds and sights of the battlefield, his hold on physical perceptions, enforces a mockery of all feelings. Here is the pity of war. A world in which

emotion is ridiculed and made small; to which even our most deep-felt sensibilities cannot reach.

It is the gap between our tender compassion and the reality of war which reveals the nature of its assault upon humanity.<sup>28</sup>

Graham's point about the gap between compassion and the reality of war is underscored by the loss of feeling for others. *Strange Meeting* proves that ironically death is the place where men's souls achieve the kind of parity that they *should* be able to achieve in life. Men are pushed farther apart than they ever are in life because when the body of another is perceived as an "enemy," it becomes a thing that may be calculatedly destroyed. The killer loses sight of the individual self that he is destroying, as he is only destroying an enemy body. A similar instance may be found in Erich Maria Remarque *All Quiet on the Western Front*, when the soldier Paul Baumer says to a recently killed man, "It was that abstraction I stabbed."<sup>29</sup> The redefinition of the person as a body allows for the reduction of that man to a concept, devoid of humanity. Under the definition of another man as "enemy," his interior self is destroyed, and all that is presented to the perceiver is the enemy as a body.

The dehumanization of the "enemy as other" originates in a basic change in the individual's perception of another person. With regard to the enemy, the individual loses sight of another person's humanity while retaining his own. In other words, there is no change as of yet as far as the individual perceives himself. The individual maintains the same perception of his own humanity; the loss in humanity is restricted to the perception of the "other."

It is this reoriented perception of humanity that comes to find its way into other relations on the battlefield. Owen's vision in *Strange Meeting* speaks to the dehumanization that goes on

---

<sup>28</sup> Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984) 66-67.

<sup>29</sup> Erich Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1956) 223

against enemies, but the shift remarks on a threat to human empathy in general. If the individual is unable to perceive the humanity in the enemy, where does he stand in relation to his “friends”?

In some poems, the battlefield is shown to make sympathy at all a literal impossibility, for either friends or enemies. In Charles Hamilton Sorley’s *When you see millions of the mouthless dead*, a soldier confronts death with a frankness that speaks directly to the problem of mourning dead soldiers. To the extent that soldiers that are on the same “side,” so to speak, there is a notable divergence from what one may consider a typical emotional response:

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.<sup>30</sup> (ll. 1-5)

The speaker’s world-weary tone relates the problem that faces all soldiers; namely, how one should feel about the dead. The speaker suggests moving away from dwelling on the dead because the act of mourning is nothing more than a self-gratifying gesture:

For, dead, 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. (ll. 6-9)

The speaker is intent on showing not just the nature of death, but also the lack of interaction the dead have with the living. Weeping for the dead is a show of emotion that is never reciprocated. As such, mourning itself becomes an endeavor to satisfy one’s own feelings. The speaker sees this as a hollow demonstration, implying that the dead are not worthy of one’s feelings because

---

<sup>30</sup> Charles Hamilton Sorley, *When you see millions of the mouthless dead*, see appendix

they cannot feel them – they are, after all, beyond feeling. There is a decisive disconnect between the living and the dead as two opposing states; though arguably this exists outside the trenches, it is also the case that giving feeling for the dead is a detriment only to the living because they alone can feel pain:

Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,  
"Yet many a better one has died before."  
Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you  
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,  
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.  
Great death has made all his for evermore. (ll. 9-14)

The speaker's unabashed reluctance to empathize with the dead is striking. There is some indication in the first line of the sonnet that the problem with offering sympathy on the battlefield is that there are literally "millions" of dead. The images seen by soldiers of their fallen comrades inspire no empathy because they are only "spooks," that is, images, not people.

On the same level, the once-loved face is given no more sympathy than the other "millions," the fear being that the face of a friend makes it easier for death to enter into life of the individual perceiver. The instinctual response to a dead comrade is a feeling of sympathy, and since the dead feel no such emotions, the feelings are returned to the speaker unopened. Further, the face has decayed in death. What was known and loved in life has been taken and perverted. Death's presence enters into the mind of the speaker and reaches for the speaker's memory of that face. Effectively, death taints the memory that continues to live within the soldier's mind, and destroys the living man's idea of the face he once loved, thus retroactively threatening his conception of his fellow soldiers.

The speaker responds to the fear by assuring the addressee that the face is not a tainted form of life, but simply death. The face is different and no longer belongs to the man: "None wears the face you knew/ Great death has made all his for evermore." Once the soul behind the body is absent, the dead body is a source of torment for the living. Having to see the face and watch the body's post-mortem decay threatens the separateness of life and death for the perceiver. For Sorley, the dead must be passed by and forgotten for this separation to hold.

In *Exposure*, Owen develops a similar idea centered on the inevitable emotional reduction that occurs when soldiers view the dead. Using the refrain "But nothing happens," the poem evokes the physical sensations of the expectancy of physical destruction on the battlefield:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...

Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...

Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...

Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,

But nothing happens.<sup>31</sup> (ll. 1-5)

The men are in a state of tension as they endure the prospect of attack, and the closing line is an assertion of the external silence of the battlefield. In the final stanza, the refrain takes on an entirely different meaning:

To-night, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,

Shrivelling many hands and puckering foreheads crisp.

The burying-party, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp,

Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,

But nothing happens. (ll. 36-40)

---

<sup>31</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Exposure*, see appendix

The pathos of the final line is the repetition of the phrase with regard to the lack of emotional pause given to the fallen. The war reduces men to an emotional silence; the men's eyes are turned to ice by the conflict, and as a result "nothing happens" in the way of emotional response. Graham argues that the arena of war eliminates any semblance of emotions as experienced in life outside of battle:

We hear the echoes from a humane world, but they are echoes: if the men are held in an involuntary hesitation, it is a vestige of the feelings which have no place here, which war has trained from all purpose in their minds. The faces are half-known through disfigurement or through decay, and because the eyes of the burying party are cold.<sup>32</sup>

Graham's observation that these feelings have no place in the war is crucial to Owen's poetry. It seems that for Owen, one casualty of war is the emotional displacement toward the dead. The icy resign with which men pass over half-known faces recognizes that something that seems indelible to humanity is lost on the vast wasteland of the front. In effect, the war "enforces a mockery of all feelings" and becomes a world in which "emotion is ridiculed and made small; to which even our most deep-felt sensibilities cannot reach."<sup>33</sup>

Though Graham argues that all emotions are reduced, it is not yet clear that this occurs among living men. It does seem, that the perceptual separation between life and death must necessarily color relationships between soldiers in life, if only because the thought is ever present to the individual that he must forget this man the instant he dies. Passing over the sight of a former friend envisions a specific kind of emotional withdrawal, if only for the sake of maintaining the individual himself. In the war, remembering the dead *at all* is detrimental, as

---

<sup>32</sup> Graham, 63

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 66



remembrance forces the living person to slip backwards into a pointless search for meaning, when in reality, where there *was* life there is *now* death.

Whereas before the war one would mourn the death of a friend, there is not only an absence of sadness but also a frank denial of that person's existence in the individual's mind. Thus as the physical aspect of the person is forgotten, so is his soul. In order for the *person* to be forgotten, the *body* must first be forgotten. In other words, the physical body *is* the presentation of the man, and to the speaker, the physical boy *is* the man. Without one, the other cannot exist in the mind of the speaker. The parameters for relationships in life are necessarily altered by this view of men in death, and relationships between men are increasingly founded on the presence of the body and not the soul behind the body.

Ivor Gurney in *To his Love* confronts the issue of remembrance of a loved one; the poem speaks to the same dilemma of loving a body and soul but in a more affecting way than Sorley. The poem relates to Sorley's sonnet for its use of the post-mortem physical appearance as a means of interpreting the death of another, though there is more emphasis on the emotional dilemma involved in forgetting a man because his body has been destroyed:

He's gone, and all our plans  
Are useless indeed.  
We'll walk no more on Cotswold  
Where the sheep feed  
Quietly and take no heed.  
His body that was so quick  
Is not as you  
Knew it, on Severn river  
Under the blue

Driving our small boat through.<sup>34</sup> (ll. 1-10)

Though the love object has died, their shared past survives in the speaker's memory. This past brings no happiness to the speaker because there is irrevocable loss attached to the man's memory. In the poem, the body defines the man, with all memory tracing in some way back to his figure, which in death is altered beyond recognition. The plans that were made are useless because they are attached to a physical form in the speaker's memory that has been destroyed:

You would not know him now...

But still he died

Nobly, so cover him over

With violets of pride

Purple from Severn side.

Cover him, cover him soon!

And with thick-set

Masses of memoried flowers-

Hide that red wet

Thing I must somehow forget. (ll. 11-20)

The sentiment that strikes home is contained in the line, "You would not know him now..." Descriptions of the man are given in terms of physical attributes, and to think of the man in terms of life would be a lie because at present, the man he loved is now, "That red wet thing." The speaker is forced to come to terms with the fact that the man he loved is a dead corporeal mess. This is similar to Sorley's impression of death invading life; both speakers are unable or unwilling to come to terms with the fact that these disfigured bodies were once men that they loved. The speaker of Sorley's poem advises that the soldier forget the face he knew because in

---

<sup>34</sup> Ivor Gurney, *To his Love*, see appendix

death it is changed forever. In Gurney's poem, the speaker does the same, choosing to hide the body from view with "memoried flowers," in an attempt to cover over the form and memory of the man. The poem seems to regard remembrance as crucial to knowing a man as an actual person instead of just a physical body. What the speaker is forced to understand is that he would not know the man now *because* his body is destroyed. In these poems, the memory of a person is inextricably tied to the body such that the emotional connection that exists in life becomes coterminous with the physical body.

The concern at the heart of the poem is the nature of this relationship in life. The speaker remembers the man, their plans, and their love—yet the very idea and memory of the man must be extinguished when the body dies. What, then, is this man to the speaker? If he can become a "red wet thing," what is the essence that exists in life and is absent in death? The speaker laments the physical loss of the man because the physical body *is* the man he once knew. As in Sorley's sonnet, soul and body have become entwined, such that one *is* the other. Because the dead must be forgotten so quickly, what exists in life is a relationship founded on the body that must be perceived as the soul, if only for the individual's own survival.

One may recall Brooke's 1914: *Soldier*: "And think, this heart, all evil shed away/ A pulse in the eternal mind, no less." Brooke's sentiment feels as though it comes from another planet, and in a way it does. The separation that once existed between body and soul is, in Sorley and Gurney's poetry, utterly meaningless; the individual perceives other men, even those he loves, as bodies.

To lament the loss of a comrade, then, is to lament the destruction of the body. Owen is intent on presenting the loss of life in physical terms in *Futility*, in order to show that something beyond the physical body dies with death:

Move him into the sun -

Gently its touch awoke him once,  
At home, whispering of fields unsown.  
Always it woke him, even in France,  
Until this morning and this snow.  
If anything might rouse him now  
The kind old sun will know.<sup>35</sup> (ll. 1-7)

The tragedy of the poem is that the loss of life is, in the war, measured in terms of the physical body, whether in statistics transmitted back from the front, or between one soldier moving another's dead body. In the first stanza, moving the man into the sun brings the hope of revival; the warmth of the sun might instill warmth in the body and revitalize the man within. The speaker's hope is to physically reanimate the body, restoring the man to as he was before his body died. In effect, the speaker attempts to connect the physical with the metaphysical, though he cannot reconcile the implicit difference between a body moving and a body *awakening*, just as the body cannot account for what makes a certain patch of field *home*. Even if the flesh is roused, something has departed that defines the soul that once inhabited the body.

The breakdown of the man in the eyes of the speaker continues into the next stanza; what starts the poem as "him" is within a few lines merely clay, represented only by organic matter. Bergonzi infers from this that the poem uses a death "so futile in its finality" to point to "an ultimate futility in the whole order of things" (BB, 129.) There is more lost, though, than faith in the "order of things." The tragedy of the poem is the emergence of human life that once seemed so precious is reduced to nothing:

Think how it wakes the seeds, -  
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.

---

<sup>35</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Futility*. see appendix

Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,  
Full-nerved, - still warm, - too hard to stir?  
Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
To break earth's sleep at all? (ll. 8-14)

Like Gurney before him, Owen asks a question that the “order of things” cannot answer; like Gurney, heartless acceptance has settled a pall over the individual’s perception of others. The clay of a cold star that becomes a warm, living being, remains warm in death—but there is something indefinable missing. In coming to terms with the remarkable loss sustained, the comparison of the man with clay and seeds calls to attention the inexplicable nature of human sentience. Therein, a more distressing question arises: does this man deserve pity?

Owen’s answer is that of course this man deserves pity, though the poem struggles to justify why that is. Just moments before the speaker wonders if it is “for this the clay grew tall?” and describes human life as a mere breakage of earth’s slumber. The question the poem asks is what makes this man worthy of our pity, or is he just clay?

There is *something* about the man in life that is deserving of our pity; of this the speaker is certain. But in death, that something is gone, and what is mourned in *Futility* is the something’s absence. The speaker perhaps wants to view the man as more than clay, but the naturalistic metaphors propound otherwise. The recombination of the man with the soil marks the loss of the intangible “soul” that cannot be explained by Earth’s machinations. In the poetry of Gurney, Sorley and Owen, there is undeniably something lost in not dwelling on a person after he dies. The body in death disillusiones the individual’s view of men in life, making that which is lost all the more precious, as well as exponentially less explicable. Driving these poems is the sense of bewildering sadness one feels in feeling one’s idea of a person die with his body.

In these poems the loss of the body *is* the loss of the person, and in this respect, the body acts as the defining aspect of the man in the minds of others. Owen approaches this redefinition in *Disabled*, using the perspective of someone observing a wounded soldier in a wheelchair:

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,  
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,  
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park  
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,  
Voices of play and pleasure after day,  
'Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.<sup>36</sup> (ll. 1-6)

The first line of the poem states the man's disability in terms of his body, noting the frank reduction in physical capability. More pressing is the description of him "waiting for dark" that intonates the man's sense of shame at his debilitated state. The bodily restriction divides the man in the chair from the world outside. Looked upon from the world of healthy bodies, the soldier is a figure in a grey suit. Moreover, others come to define him by the limitations of his body:

And girls danced lovelier as the air grew dim, -  
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.  
Now he will never feel again how slim  
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands.  
All of them touch him like some queer disease. (ll. 9-13)

And again, in the next stanza:

Now, he is old; his back will never brace;  
He's lost his color very far from here,  
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,  
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race

---

<sup>36</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Disabled*, see appendix

And leap of purple spurted from his thigh. (ll. 16-20)

As the details of the man's life are increasingly known to the reader, it becomes clear that the man is defined—to the outside observer—by his body. The condition of his body imposes limitations that change not only his appearance, but also his very interaction with the outside world. He is separate from the girls that refuse to touch him; the very fact of his injuries precludes his involvement with their world. People of the *normal* world deny his internal condition, with one exception: "Only a solemn man brought him fruits/ *Thanked* him, and inquired about his soul." The man's inquiry may be genuine, though the disconnect that comes from the outside looking in ascribes limitations to what an observer can achieve.

In *Disabled*, the body is presented as the basis of how one *knows* another person. The body limits and isolates, confusing the appreciation of one's "soul" with the body. The injured body keeps the man isolated from the rest of the world. To the man in the wheelchair, he is not his body; he is, however, perceived as such. The question asked by the poem is who is in the position to define a person's soul other than the person himself? What the speaker of *Disabled* suggests is that by injury, the man is reduced to his body, perceived as such by others and unable to interact with the everyday world. *Disabled* does not discount the man's *soul*, but considers that the body imposes the limitation of ever knowing and coming to terms with the man's *soul*. The body is presented to the perceiver, and is effectively all that can define him in the eyes of others. Given on these terms, a deep level of inter-personal connection is lost. The body is the indicator that another human being is present, yet little is known of the man beyond his body, thus restricting the lines of communication between the man and the outside world.

It is the case that in both life and death, that the soul of another person is not just inexplicable: it is unknowable. Thus what saddens the speaker of *Futility* after death perplexes the speaker of *Disabled* in life, and in neither poem is another person appreciated beyond his

body. The view from the perspective of another is one of loss that confuses the speaker for its waste of something precious that cannot be known to the speaker in either life or death. One sees the speakers of the aforementioned poems struggling to humanize the travesty of the destruction of human life, while having to come to terms with the fact that when they watch soldiers dying, they know nothing of them other than their bodies. What this shows is an increasing sense of “unknowing” between soldiers, such that the body is that which defines another man in the eyes of the individual.

The issue, then, of what it means to perceive someone as a body has visible repercussions on the way one views one’s self, with the apparent concern: Am I nothing more than a body? The lack of understanding another person’s soul brings a heightened sense of awareness to the individual’s perception of himself and a certain refusal of personal redefinition. In *Futility* and *Strange Meeting*, as well as Gurney’s *To His Love*, and Sorley’s *When You See the Millions of the Mouthless Dead*, the “other man” is defined, in the speaker’s view, as a body because it is only on those terms that another man is known. Owen’s *A Terre*, a construction of a conversation between a soldier and civilian in a hospital, is an example of a conscious refusal of the personal “body as soul” notion. The speaker defines himself in contrast to his body, which from his own perspective is separate from his body. The speaker knows that, to the visitor at his hospital bed, he is viewed as his body, but that in a personal way he feels the very fact of his soul extends beyond his body. The body that is used to define other men seems incapable of providing that definition when the consideration is self-reflexive:

Sit on the bed. I’m blind, and three parts shell.

Be careful; can’t shake hands now; never shall.

Both arms have mutinied against me, – brutes.



My fingers fidget like ten idle brats.<sup>37</sup> (ll. 1-4)

Immediately, space is a tool of distinction between the body of the visitor and that of the speaker. The space exists beyond the speaker, whose physical limitations restrict him from a certain level of interaction with the visitor. It is the darkness of the speaker's world and the inability to control his own movements that make him aware of a separation between his soul and his body. In a sense, he is locked within a body that is his own and at the same time alien to him. He no longer controls his arms and fingers, aware that they have taken on a life of their own. In this way the body transgresses its form as it exists in times of health and becomes a distinct "other" to the speaker. Without control over his body the speaker exists in a world neither of his own making nor of the world outside.

The fact of the "visitor" in the poem automatically places the burden of distance between the speaker and the addressee. As Tadeusz Slawek puts it, the "visit" to the speaker's hospital bed implies an established line of contact between two distinct worlds:<sup>38</sup>

When we go and visit, we remain existentially anchored where we usually live, in the place to which we will be coming back. Our visit, necessarily a limited period of time, excludes the possibility of genuine contact with the person we are visiting, as we constantly remain aware of the temporal boundary which makes us life *in* time (as if we were contained in some temporal box) but it prevents us from *living time*.<sup>39</sup>

Slawek considers the visit to the sick person's bed a window into another world that can never be fully understood by virtue of the fundamental existential barrier separating the two men. The speaker is banished from the addressee's world by virtue of his condition in a way that is similar to the man in the wheelchair in *Disabled*. The poem contains several instances of implied

---

<sup>37</sup> Wilfred Owen, *A Terre*, see appendix

<sup>38</sup> Tadeusz Slawek, "Dark Pits of War" (journal 2, Vol. 14, 1986) 311

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 312

dialogue, wherein the voice of the visitor should be heard, indicating that even within the poem there is a disconnect between worlds that inhibits communication:

Well, that's what I learnt – that, and making money  
Your fifty years ahead seem too many?  
Tell me how long I've got? God! For one year  
To help myself to nothing more than air!" (ll. 19-21)

The speaker's informal tone converses occasionally with the voice of the addressee, who but for the speaker's indicators otherwise is absent from the poem.<sup>40</sup> Owen maintains the addressee's silence to exacerbate the isolation of the speaker; not only does the civilian exist in another existential world, but even on a different plane of communication. The silence of the addressee serves to demarcate the literal language barrier between these two worlds; though they may be talking, nothing is really understood, as a transfer across these worlds is ultimately impossible.

Moving away from defining himself by his body, the speaker compares his former state of wanting to be "puffy, bald,/ And patriotic," as a means of widening the schism between his body and his soul. The speaker recedes from physical definition into a world in which his own body is that which contains him: "One dies of war like any old disease/ This bandage feels like pennies on my eyes" (ll. 6-7.) The feeling of pennies on his eyes imports the actual experience of death; blindness and immobility reduce him to a state of being where the soul remains alive within a carcass. That which lives is the inexplicable essence that the speaker is certain he himself possesses and exists independently of his body.

---

<sup>40</sup> The poem bears stark contrast to the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, which tends to invoke the presence of another voice in order to provoke a dialogue between the world of the soldier and the world of the civilian. An example is found in *They*, wherein Sassoon's use of the dialogue between a pontificating Bishop and the 'boys' that have come back from war is used to demonstrate the ever-widening gap between the home front and the world of the trenches. The disparity is to do with the destruction of the men's bodies and the negotiation of pain and disfigurement for a 'just cause.'

This transgression removes the speaker from the world of the physical and brings into question the part of his body that remains:

Certainly flowers have the easiest time on earth.

'I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,'

Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:

The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.

'Pushing up daisies' is their creed, you know. (ll. 43-47)

Flowers exist in the natural world and are connected to the earth by virtue of their physical form. The physical form of a flower disguises no underlying essence; though a flower's form may be destroyed, the immutable aspect of the flower is its non-sentience. It is this lack of a soul that drives the speaker to wish himself a flower. It is desirable to exit the body and enter the world of flowers because it would grant an end to the suffering that affects beings with souls:

Friend, be very sure

I shall be better off with plants that share

More peaceably the meadow and the shower.

Soft rains will touch me, - as they could touch once

And nothing but the sun shall make me ware (ll. 52-55)

The plants evoke feelings of peace when contrasted to humanity because they exist outside the world of pain and war. By comparison, death is a state of ignorance:

Your guns may crash around me. I'll not hear;

Or if I wince, I shall not know I wince (ll. 56-57)

That physical pain might occur to the speaker, his not *knowing* is tantamount to a rejection of the soul in favor of an existence as a *body as soul*. The flower represents a desirable state of being because the flower is only itself. There is nothing behind the flower that exists independently of

its physical form. The flower *is* the flower. The human condition is such that the individual's body seems like it is separate from the soul, and when injured, he feels as though his very soul is imprisoned within a shell that is not his own. The state of the flower is desirable for its solution to the problem because nothing of the flower extends beyond its form.

In war poetry, the individual ultimately perceives himself as in possession of a unique self that, though attached to the body, can be comprehended without the body's presence. It bears consideration that this comprehension is amplified in relation to the individual's perception of other soldiers. Whereas other men are knowable by their bodies, the speaker's own body completely fails to account for a self-perceived definition. A fissure is created between the body and soul of the individual that leaves him at odds with himself, attempting to reconcile his place within his body while perceiving himself as a separate entity altogether.

The knowledge of the personal soul goes beyond what is felt in the pre and early war poetry of Brooke and Grenfell. In later war poetry there is a conscious recognition of the sentiment "I am separate from my body" and the unconscious acceptance, "I can only know other men by their bodies." The individual's perception of himself changes alongside his perception of other men, both of which complement the other's development. Men are no longer viewed as unique individuals because in the war, the only person that is known with abject certainty is his own soul. One sees the individual withdrawing into himself, helpless to feel reach a meaningful connection with other men. Owen and Gurney clearly exhibit sympathy and pity for other soldiers; they understand the loss and desire the reformation of the emotional connection. This poetry is not emotion withered; it is emotion stifled. The inability to create a connection between two men does not stop feelings, but changes the terms on which they are expressed. When the individual draws into himself, he takes his emotions with him. This is the

war at its most devastating. That which most defines mankind—the ability to empathize and sympathize with others—is twisted and defiled until man is abandoned by humanity and utterly alone in the darkness of war.

### Chapter III:

#### The Formation of the Group

You became

In many acts and quiet observances

A body and a soul, entire...

- Herbert Read, *My Company*

The fear of being alone is most threatening on the battlefield, where individual survival is immediately a physical proposition. In this way, the body defines the individual on the battlefield. In physical combat, the soul is charged with understanding the conflict and coming to terms with the place of one man in the midst of the surrounding destruction.

Owen's *The Show* makes the suggestion that the reduced perception of other men on the battlefield leads to an intense feeling of isolation. The poem begins with the speaker rising above the landscape and looking down on lines of soldiers marching beneath him:

My soul looked down from a vague height, with Death,  
As unremembering how I rose or why  
And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,  
Grey, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,  
And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues.

Across its bears, that horror of harsh wire,  
There moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled.  
It seemed they pushed themselves to be as plugs

Of ditches, where they writhed and shriveled, killed.<sup>41</sup> (ll. 1-9)

The poem begins with the separation of the speaker from his physical form, as his "soul" looks down without mention of the body. In addition, he sees the soldiers beneath him as "thin caterpillars," instead of human bodies. The isolation felt by the speaker is implicit in his view of other men as creatures of an entirely different species. The speaker's consideration of himself as a different being than the other men evokes the speaker's feeling of a fundamental separation from mankind. In his mind, the speaker is the only person on the battlefield and is effectively alone in the war. The realization otherwise comes when the speaker realizes that the figures he has watched curl and die are the bodies of men:

I saw their bitten backs curve, loop and straighten.

I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.

Whereat, in terror what that sight might mean,

I reeled and shivered earthward like a feather. (ll. 21-24)

The meaning of the sight before him is death, and the revelation is made all the more powerful by the speaker's sudden realization that the bodies belong to actual men. From the speaker's vantage point, the body is a vehicle for destruction. Men are reduced to creatures on the battlefield, surviving only as long as their bodies. In separating from his body, the speaker becomes a spectator to the scene without any actual physical investment. The soul's disconnect from the body relates to the speaker's perceived weakness when he considers the individual human body in the war. From the individual's perspective, the trench landscape evokes feelings of existing as a soul confined within a body; as was seen in Chapter II, Owen addresses this issue in *Disabled* and *A Terre*, illustrating the self-awareness of the individual. A man seems as though he should not be confined to his body, yet his condition is inescapable. Since the body is

---

<sup>41</sup> Wilfred Owen, *The Show*, see appendix

vulnerable to physical destruction, the speaker himself must withdraw from his ethereal stance and return to earth:

And death fell with me, like a deepening moan.  
And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid  
Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,  
Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,  
And the fresh-severed head of it, my head. (ll. 25-30)

Death falls beside the speaker, indicating that death effects the physical part of the speaker's being. The "fresh-severed head" is the speaker's own, whereat he realizes that his body is dead, though his soul is still alive. Their deaths effect the speaker in that he realizes their agony, however, the poem remains within the speaker's own field of vision, as it is only his own death that is fully comprehensible. Whereas other men become perceived as failing bodies, the speaker's response to death is the desire for an escape of the soul, that which does not seem to belong on the battlefield. Thus he perceives himself as a soul without a physical body, and consequently without the physically anchoring form of the body. The individual comes to regard his body as ultimately inadequate to fulfill the physical requirements of the battlefield, placing his soul at a tenuous juncture. The poem does not discount the importance of the body; in a palpable way, the soul's desire to escape the body divides the speaker's being, pointing toward the individual's existential weakness.

Poems that describe individual physical inadequacy and existential isolation in the war, such as Owen's *The Show*, are in part why critics like C.E. Montague and Sara Cole consider the war as a place where not merely emotional connection, but even closeness and intimacy between men are patently impossible. Cole argues that the war instilled feelings of distance between men, situating her argument around that of Montague:



Far from being a site of great intimacy, the war fostered distance and self-protectiveness. In his exegesis of the war's myriad disillusionments, C.E. Montague indicates that both the ceaseless scattering of friends and the sheer scale of the war thwarted intimacy: 'Two million men can never be a happy few; nor yet a band of brothers. You have to know a brother first' (SC, 148.)

Cole agrees with Montague, and their shared argument accounts for the lack of emotional connection in the trenches. As was shown in Sorley's *When you see millions of the mouthless dead* and Gurney's *To his Love*, relations in the trenches implicitly suffer from a reduced knowledge of another man on a personal level. Knowing another man in terms of his individual soul requires a level of understanding that is impossible in the trenches.

It is clear from Owen's *The Show* that the reduction in human interaction leads to intense existential loneliness. As was shown before in the speaker of *A Terre* and the addressee of *Disabled*, the individual's feelings of isolation are indicative of a turning inward that thwarts emotional receptivity. In *The Show*, the immediate consequences of this are a threat to one's very understanding of oneself. With human connection abandoned, the soldier is confronted with his own physically inadequate body and his own soul that is set adrift in a world unknown.

It is perhaps because of these feelings of isolation that military historians who served in the war, such as Liddell Hart, write that trench relationships existed regardless of the perceived "lack of intimacy" and "distance and self-protectiveness":

Now, the war, at any rate on the Western Front, was waged by Battalions, not by individuals, by bands of men who, if the spirit were right, lived in such intimacy that they became part of one another. The familiar phrase, "a happy Battalion," has a deep meaning, for it symbolizes that fellowship of the trenches which was such a unique and unforgettable experience for all who ever

shared in it, redeeming the sordidness and stupidity of war by a quickening of the sense of interdependence and sympathy.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the lack of interpersonal “knowing” among men, there remains a relationship between men in the trenches that is not easily explained away. Hart describes the relationship as founded on a sense of dependency among soldiers for both physical and spiritual support. In the “happy battalion,” the individual finds a place in a group of men, among whom is a sense of “intimacy” that composes the “fellowship of the trenches.”

The trench poet Herbert Read also makes the point that the presence of other men is essential to the individual in maintaining a feeling of stability under the pressure of the war:

It would be a nightmare to any individual. But we create among ourselves a wonderful comradeship which I think would overcome any horror or hardship. It is this comradeship which alone makes the army tolerable to me. To create a bond between yourself and a body of men and a bond that will hold at the critical moment, that is work worthy of any man and when done an achievement to be proud of.<sup>43</sup>

Both Hart and Read agree that the war is a place unfit for an individual, both physically and emotionally. In Cole’s opinion, the term “comradeship” glosses what is actually a dehumanizing relationship between men in the trenches; what is called intimacy is actually impossible by the fact of the war. She claims that what ensues is comradeship, a threadbare substitute for what is typically called friendship.

The problematic aspect of comradeship, as Cole sees it, is it is intimacy out of necessity, and lacks a fundamental connection that is found in friendship. Read’s explanation of comradeship and its importance at “the critical moment” shows that relations in the trenches are founded more than anything on mutual interdependence. Cole elaborates on this point in a

---

<sup>42</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, foreword, *Twelve Days*, by Sidney Rogerson (London: Barker, 1933) viii.

<sup>43</sup> Herbert Read, *Contrary*, Diary, (June 15, 1917, , 97

passage from Frederic Manning's novel about the war, Her Privates We, focusing on the use of the word "comradeship" in place of friendship:

I don't suppose I have anyone whom I can call a friend. I like the men, on the whole, and I think they like me...I have one or two particular chums, of course, and in some ways, you know, good comradeship takes the place of friendship. It is different: it has its own loyalties and affections; and I am not so sure that it does not on occasion rise to an intensity of feeling which friendship never touches. It may be less in itself, I don't know, but its opportunity is greater. Friendship implies rather more stable conditions, don't you think? You have time to choose. Here you can't choose...At one moment a particular man may be nothing at all to you, and the next minute you will go through hell for him. No, it is not friendship. The man doesn't matter so much; it's a kind of impersonal emotion, a kind of enthusiasm, in the old sense of the word.<sup>44</sup>

Cole references Manning's novel to expose the difference between personal and impersonal relationships. She notes that comradeship is "attached to the endless substitution of one man for another" (SC, 145.) Manning's statement that the "man doesn't matter so much" is indicative of an overall depersonalization of the recipient of one's emotion. Though the emotion is still expressed, it is ultimately directed at the idea of the man and not the man himself. In such an instance, a person becomes a placeholder for emotion as opposed to the recipient.

There is a certain amount of minutiae lost in such an interpretation. Cole notably attributes the feelings of supposed intimacy to the necessity of the trench landscape; the war was fought by groups of men who relied on one another for emotional support, and as such, formed bonds between each other. The question remains as to how these bonds formed. To say that proximity is at the core of trench relationships discounts the individual's clearly altered perception toward himself and others. In the trenches, humanity does not exist on the same terms

---

<sup>44</sup> Frederic Manning, Her Privates We (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1999) 143-144.

as in “normal life,” and as such, the relationships in the trenches are anything but definable within “normal” parameters.

In the excerpt from Manning’s novel, one sees that the relationship between men is much more complex than just an emotional bond. His remark that the “man doesn’t matter so much” revives the lingering issue from Chapter II of the problem of forming emotional bonds because of the individual’s certainty of himself and wariness of others. The inability to reach outward with emotions to another specific person necessarily makes any individual-to-individual emotional contact impossible on the same level as in the world beyond the trenches.

Though his poetry focuses overwhelmingly on the fractured condition of the individual, Owen too understood that within the trenches, men are capable of forming a connection. Like Brooke, Grenfell, and Sorley before him, Owen’s life and poetic development were cut short; he was killed at the crossing of the Sambre-Oise Canal in France on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1918, one week before the signing of the Armistice, ending to what would undoubtedly have been a rich poetic career. In one of the last poems he wrote, *Smile, Smile, Smile*, there is a sense of brotherhood between men in the trenches. The poem begins with a group of men, “Head to limp head, the sunk-eyed wounded,” scanning the newspaper and reading the Home Front’s interpretation of the trench experience (l 1.) The satiric voice of the poem carves out the separation between the polarized versions of life at home and at the front. Though by this point in the war the word “home” has become a novel idea, the men find themselves united by a common understanding:

The half-limbed readers did not chafe  
But smiled at one another curiously  
Like secret men who know their secret safe.  
(This is the thing they know and never speak,  
That England one by one had fled to France,

Not many elsewhere now, save under France.)

Pictures of these broad smiles appear each week,

And people in whose voice real feeling rings

Say: How they smile! They're happy now, poor things.<sup>45</sup> (ll. 18-26)

The artifice of the smile and its true meaning speak to the lie of the war, as well as the binary between the world of home and the world of the war. What the men share in *Smile, Smile, Smile* is not so much an emotional connection, but a common understanding that unites the men in contrast to the people at home. Owen describes the group in terms of a bond formed by the war, with an emphasis on physical intimacy; the image of "Head to limp head" evokes the idea that men physically support each other while sharing a common understanding that is substantiated without overt expressions of emotion.

In *Smile, Smile, Smile* there are echoes of Manning's conception of comradeship. The group of men provides a sense of comfort to the soldiers that would otherwise feel abandoned in the trenches. The quiet comfort found in the group is striking, as previously in *The Show*, *Futility*, and *À Terre*, the individual is alone on the battlefield. There should be inherent contradiction between being unable to commune with men on an individual level and forming a community in which the individual feels comforted. It was established earlier that Owen's individual feels isolated in the sense that he is abundantly aware of his own soul, but unable to feel the same about others. In other words, Owen's conception of relationships in the trenches is not founded on an emotional or spiritual connection that might ordinarily exist beyond the trench walls. In the trenches, the individual is presented with the physical bodies of other men, and any possible redemption must rely on a connection that accounts for this phenomenon.

---

<sup>45</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Smile, Smile, Smile*, see appendix

Owen considers the individual redeemed by the unity offered by the community of men in which the connection is largely physical. There is indication in the line, "Head to limp head, the sunk-eyed wounded," that the connection between men in the trenches is formed out of more than just the fact that the men are proximally together away from home. Owen begins the poem with physical contact to establish a relationship based on physical support offered to one man by another. The physical stability translates into a feeling of mutual sustenance. The physical anchor the individual so desperately needs in *The Show* is given in *Smile, Smile, Smile* in the physically interdependent community of men.

In other trench poetry, the physical company of other men is endowed with a spiritual power that gives comfort to the individual soul. Siegfried Sassoon makes comradeship the defining theme of much of his poetry. The poem *The Death Bed* is a subdued and moving description of a soldier who, at the moment of death, is given strength by another soldier beside him. There is an almost spiritual quality to the body of the man that surrounds the individual, which is seen as a force capable of sustaining life:

He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain  
Leapt like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore  
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.  
But someone was beside him; soon he lay  
Shuddering because that evil thing had passed.  
And death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and stared.

Light many lamps and gather round his bed.  
Lend him your eyes, warm blood, and will to live.  
Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.

He's young; he hated War; how should he die

When cruel old campaigners win safe through?<sup>46</sup> (ll. 28-38)

The man gathers around the dying man to stand in opposition to death. The individual's body is at risk and brings pain, and the man stands beside him in comforting contrast, quite literally giving his body for the dying man's survival: "Lend him your eyes, you warm blood, and will to live." The effect of donating his physical strength to preserve his fragile state brings the individual physically closer to the other man, sharing himself in order to restore his life.

The crux of the poem is that the company by the man's side gives death pause. Death is given the form of a creature, possibly human, which in crawling toward his claim, "paused and stared." Death is confused by the force of life gathering around the man, and wonders at the connection that is established therein. The relationship between men supports the individual soldier, as the man's body is a presentation of the vitality of life, giving the individual strength and comfort in a moment of weakness.

The true pathos of the moment is that nothing changes after the man's death, and the man's efforts ultimately fail:

But death replied: 'I choose him.' So he went,

And there was silence in the summer night;

Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.

Then, far away, the thudding of the guns. (ll. 39-42)

The noise of the guns in the distance brings to mind that the death of a single person is all but an inconsequential ripple on the tide of war. The individual soldier is, in essence, an interchangeable part in the conflict, nothing more in the grand scheme of things than a single body among millions. It is for this reason that the physical aspect of the relationship of the two

---

<sup>46</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, *The Death Bed*, see appendix

men is stressed. One recalls Manning's sentiment that, "The man doesn't matter so much; it's a kind of impersonal emotion..." Sassoon explores exactly this notion; the man himself is just another man, and there is no significant emotional connection between the two because none is necessary. What matters is that the connection between the men gives warmth and hope, emanating from their shared humanity. The real achievement of the man that stands with the individual is the sense of physical intimacy that is lost in the war. Though the men do not perhaps reach each other on an emotional level, the divine assurance of one man gives another causes even death to break his stride, if only for a moment.

What is appreciated in *The Death Bed* is the force of life, manifest by the physical connection between two men. The physicality of their relationship plays in to the decreased importance on the individual himself, and more the *fact* of another man. In Sassoon's poem *Banishment*, there is an emphasis on the relationship between men in the trenches as one of physical interdependence founded on the group as a single unit that comes to substantiate the individual. In *Banishment*, the speaker who stands beyond the battlefield, wishing to reconnect physically and spiritually with the men in the trenches:

I am banished from the patient men who fight.  
They smote my heart to pity, built my pride.  
Shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side.  
They trudged away from life's broad wealds of light.  
Their wrongs were mine; and ever in my sight  
They went arrayed in honour. But they died, -  
Not one by one; and mutinous I cried  
To those who sent them out into the night.<sup>47</sup> (ll. 1-8)

---

<sup>47</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, *Banishment*, see appendix



The "I" that begins the poem is the epicenter of the speaker's problem. Away from the battlefield he is outside of the group of men, and reduced once again to his individual self. The relationship of the individual to the group is contingent on physical togetherness, seen in the line where the men stand "shoulder to aching shoulder..." Again, the physicality begets a spiritually fulfilling relationship, wherein "They smote my heart to pity, built my pride," and "Their wrongs were mine..." Though physicality is at the group's origin, what develops among the soldiers is far greater than a relationship by physical proximity. The problem, as is explicated in the opening line of the poem and again in the second stanza, is that what develops beyond the physical cannot be sustained without the physical presence of the men's bodies:

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven  
To free them from the pit where they must dwell  
In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven  
By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel.  
Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;  
And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven. (ll. 9-14)

The love that drives the speaker is for the men as a whole, with whom he feels he is forgiven. The individual finds salvation in the presence of the group of bodies, with whom he shares hell in order to maintain the love between himself and the men.

The relationship that takes precedence is between the group individual and the group. The speaker feels a connection not with any particular man, but with the group of men that sustain him. He makes the point that the group collapses as a unit, not "one by one", implying that from the speaker's point of view, individual deaths are not so much a problem to him as the dissolution of the entire group.

In comparison with the individual, the group is a distinctly powerful entity that possesses a form the individual does not. As can be seen from *Banishment*, the group offers a connection that substantiates the individual, giving him form and presence where he otherwise has none. Whereas in *The Death Bed*, the connection between two men is a powerful representation of life, it may be inferred from *Banishment* that this same connection between an individual and a *group* of men is an ultimate manifestation of life, providing a force more powerful and resilient to destruction than any individual can offer. The group builds the individual's pride and sense of self, assuring him a place within its protective enclosure. In response to Manning, Sassoon considers that it is not "the man" that is the placeholder for emotion, but as they all share the same purpose, it is "all men" that serve this function.

It is in question, however, as to whether the individual has a place within the group itself, or, whether the group is viewed as a separate entity that is relied upon for support. Sassoon's poetry indicates a preference for the latter; though the individual shares experiences with other men, the group itself seems relied upon to substantiate the individual, making the connection less unified than it might at first seem. The difference concerns whether the individual views himself as part of a larger constituency, or as an individual who is beyond the group and substantiates himself by drawing strength from a group of other men.

Cole draws on this dichotomy, making the point that the limitations implicit in man-to-man connection in the trenches place on the individual the burden of coming to terms with what the group is *to him*, and what he is *in relation* to the group. Cole comments at one point that though the group offers relief from much of the war's horror, the individual himself is threatened by his reduced sense of self worth in relation to the schematic of the group:

The sheer fact of massed bodies moving in formation threatens to overwhelm the individual's capacity for singular thought and to reduce him to a mechanistic cog in a gigantic wheel. At the

same time, such group phenomena reduce the suffering and loneliness of army life, and hence offer sustenance – if at a cost (SC, 151.)

The “cost” to which Cole refers is whether the group effects the individual’s capacity for *singular* thought, the danger being that a group mentality might dehumanize the individual, reducing him to a part of a whole. It seems that though the group forms in response to the individual’s inability to find a suitable conception of himself in the war, he implicitly abjures whatever remaining sense of self he has by entering the group’s midst.

Trench poets are not blind to this problem. Though “comradeship” is often romanticized, many poets are aware that there are losses, as well as gains inherent in trench relationships. Perhaps most notable for approaching this issue is Herbert Read in the poem *My Company*. Read, who was quoted earlier declaring the undeniable strength and majesty of the connection between oneself and “a body of men,” recognizes the tensions implicit in a relationship between the individual and the group. Read frames the question of the relationship with regard to the position of the individual within the group. In the first stanza, the speaker contemplates how the group forms beyond the speaker, who stands in observance of the phenomenon while simultaneously being drawn in:

You became

In many acts and quiet observances

A body and a soul, entire...<sup>48</sup> (ll. 1-3)

The addressee is a single being, though not an individual person. The company of the title is the body of soldiers to which the poem is addressed, yet the first stanza intentionally conflates the singular and plural meanings of the pronoun “you” to evoke the presence of another complete being. The group that forms beyond the speaker is perceived as an entity that possesses its own

---

<sup>48</sup> Herbert Read, *My Company*, see appendix

aura of wholeness. The speaker goes on to say that this “body and a soul entire” became a part of his life at some time in the past, quietly subsuming him into its midst:

I cannot tell  
What time your life became mine  
Perhaps when one summer night  
We halted by the roadside  
In the starlight only  
And you sang your sad home-songs,  
Dirges which I standing outside your soul  
Coldly condemned.

Perhaps, one night, when descending cold  
When rum was mighty acceptable  
And my doling gave birth to sensual gratitude. (ll. 4-14)

The group has a life of its own which becomes that of the speaker. As such, the speaker merges with the group without his direct knowledge. The way the group is defined, then, is by the feeling of the group as a body and a soul entire that is his own. There is a connection between the group and the speaker that hides deeper than conscious thought, without any real indicator as to when or how it forms.

The group that was once an external entity is now inseparable from the speaker’s own life. For Read’s speaker, the soft language and quiet grace of the men makes the condition sublime. The men who make up the body and soul that is not his are still separate from him, however, the body and soul itself is linked to all of them. In this respect, when the men come together as a group body, the entire unit takes on its own spiritual value:

In many acts and quiet observances

you absorbed me:

Until one day I stood eminent

and I saw you gather'd round me

uplooking

and about you a radiance that seemed to beat

with variant glow and to give

grace to our unity. (ll. 17-25)

What concerns the speaker is the unity that absorbs him, until he feels as though he is part of a group that possesses its own radiance. The impression is given that the individual feels a certain eminence when he is a part of the group, or a lofty elevation of spirit that is made possible by the group itself. The newfound feelings of warmth, unity, and expression of life, give the group its own soul, in which all individual soldiers find personal nourishment among other soldiers.

The physical form of the group effectively substantiates this newly formed soul. In the first stanza the speaker describes himself as "standing outside your soul," indicating that a connection with the group soul is only substantiated by feelings of physical unity. The bodies give rise to the soul, though it is not merely proximity that causes the individual's transcendence into the group; there is an indefinable integration of the physical with the metaphysical that is the true value of the body and soul entire. As the bodies become a soul, the soul's continued reliance on the bodies for existence makes the soul's dissolution an implicit concern for the group, a fact that the speaker fully understands:

I know that I'll stand

Someday in the loneliest wilderness,

Someday my heart will cry

For the soul that has been, but that now

Is scattered with the winds

Deceased and devoid.

I know that I'll wander with a cry:

'O beautiful men, O men I loved,

O whither are you gone, my company?

This is a hell

Immortal while I live (ll. 26-36)

The implicit risk of a group relationship in a conflict where men are constantly dying makes the group itself a tenuous entity. The hell in which he lives is immortal because the hell is itself a component of the group. Though individual soldiers may die, the "company" is the object of the speaker's lament rather than any particular soldier. As such, the inherent tension of the group is the inevitability of its destruction, a scenario that constantly prompts the question of what will become of the individual once the group is destroyed.

When death is considered on the scale of the group, the entire group must be destroyed for the speaker to be isolated. This is similar to the sentiment expressed in Sassoon's *Banishment*; the reduced stress on the individual and heightened concern for the group questions how the death of one soldier will impact the speaker. This is arguably the point where critics like Cole find contention in the concept of the group, as it suggests that one soldier is irrelevant in the mind of another individual. To see the group as something unto its own allows for a seemingly endless interchangeability among soldiers, and for the most part this is granted by the speaker in *My Company*. There is only one description of a dead man in the poem and it is apparent that a single soldier does suffer from the kind of dehumanization to which Cole refers:

A man of mine

Lies on the wire.

It is death to fetch his soulless corpse.

A man of mine

Lies on the wire;

And he will rot

And first his lips

The worms will eat.

It is not thus I would have him kissed

But with the warm passionate lips

Of his comrade here. (ll. 49-59)

The dead man is described as hanging on the barbed wire that frames the trenches, an image that suggests there is a stark border around the world of the group, demarcated by life and death. As was shown in Sorley's *When you see millions of the mouthless dead* and Owen's *Futility*, the polarity between life and death is amplified in the trenches. Life becomes all the more important and valuable, whereas death represents the absence of value and is stricken from the mind. The same repercussions from this change in perception are found in *My Company*, though Read's speaker views the man's death in terms of his relation to the group. The man is not without the group entirely, but suspended between the world of life and death because his body has not yet rotted. His physical form represents a fallen piece of the group, ending up as only a body without the perceived group soul about him. Though the speaker is not cold-hearted about the loss, it is given in terms of his physical body. This undeniably implies that in life, the individual is important insofar as he is a component of the group, which begets an implicit devaluation. His

death is given in terms of its relation to a living comrade: "It is not thus I would have him kiss'd/  
but with the warm passionate lips of his comrade here." The force that sustains exists only  
among living bodies, further developing the idea that the group is the supreme expression of life.  
The individual is separate, weak, and subject to death, all of which the group is not.

The speaker realizes the dangers of the group's destruction as the poem progresses, and  
realizes that the only way to extricate himself from the group is to become something more than  
human. In scenes of battle, the destruction of the group weighs on the speaker's mind, as he  
mentions in an earlier stanza, he knows someday he will wander and cry for the "soul that has  
been..." If he shares their soul he will share in its destruction, and its death will become his  
death; regardless of whether his individual body dies, the group soul that is now his own will  
wither without its representative components, and he will be once again a soul within a tenuous  
physical figure. In the following stanzas, the group explicitly provides for the individual a  
substantiated soul that the speaker loses upon attempting to divide himself from the group:

I can assume  
A giant attitude and godlike mood,  
And then detachedly regard  
All riots, conflicts and collisions.

The men I've lived with  
Lurch suddenly into a far perspective;  
They distantly gather like a dark cloud of birds  
In the autumn sky.

Urged by some unanimous



Volition or fate,  
Clouds clash in opposition;  
The sky quivers, the dead descend;  
Earth yawns.

They are all of one species.

From my giant attitude,  
In godlike mood,  
I laugh til space is filled  
With hellish merriment. (ll. 86-103)

The detachment is possible when the speaker holds himself over the group as a separate entity, assuming the superior mood of a god. Leaving frail human sentiments behind, the speaker can passively watch the fighting from a distance, uninvolved in the fate of the group. In effect, the men from the group are no longer his own, but rather all one of the same "species" that acts beyond the speaker's empathy.

It is easier for the individual to deny the group and simply look upon them as figures in action than accept his fate with them. To do so, however, he must regard them as animals, though it remains that the speaker's own soul suffers from this reduction. As the group becomes a flock of birds, so does the speaker falsify himself into a God, living in abject denial of his own humanity. Once he accepts his humanity, he reconnects with the group and shares in their destruction:

Then again I assume  
My human docility  
Bow my head

And share their doom. (ll. 104-107)

There is a deep sense of humility in these last lines. The speaker knows that he is one and the same as the men in the group, and as a human, can do nothing more than accept the fate of the group as his own.

What the group comes to provide for individuals is a fundamental sense of restored personal humanity. The individual, in becoming one with his fellow man in the group, has restored to him a sense of place in the world, feeling at home once more in the physical world, and finding a fully-defined soul in which he can share. Read's response to critics like Cole is that to remain an individual in the war is to succumb to the loss of one's own humanity. The only way to restore the individual is to reconstitute with a group of men, in whom one can find a soul of which one can be a part as well as the whole.

This argument inevitably leads to an impasse, as the responses to whether the group is more valuable than the individual are inevitably circumstantially biased. There are, in fact, two distinct ways of looking at the problem. Critics of the group are not wrong in their insistence that the individual is devalued. There is, as was shown in Chapter II, a perceptual change toward other individual soldiers that reduces the individual's consideration for other men on an interpersonal level. There is no disputing the fact that men do not connect on the same level as they do outside the trenches for all the reasons mentioned in Chapter II, and that there is more emphasis on the body and less on the soul of an individual. It is also true that the group of men is given a place of higher priority in the mind of the individual than any one man and that the group could be interpreted as dehumanizing other men because it reduces what most defines them as individuals.

This line of argument has substantial merit, however, the other way to approach the group is to see it as a phenomenon of supremely egalitarian thinking. Individuals are not reduced so

much as they are completely equalized in the eyes of others, as they all come to represent the same thing. There is no differentiation among men, as each is as important as the last in maintaining the order, unity, and fellowship of the group soul. Human interaction, in this respect, achieves a level of physical and emotional connectivity that allows individuals to view themselves as united in a brotherhood of men that are at once more spiritually powerful than they are alone. A man is appreciated and loved not because of his personality or his character, but by the very fact that he is a man. The group restores to individuals the humanity that is otherwise destroyed by the war, and returns to mankind the most sublime aspect of his being: the ability to love.

Conclusion  
"In One Of Those Moments When Nothing Dies"

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride

'Their name liveth for ever,' the Gateway claims.

Was ever an immolation so belied

As these intolerably nameless names?

- Siegfried Sassoon, *On Passing the New Menin Gate*

It is often said that, standing in the fields of Flanders, one would never know that years before, countless battles were fought in which millions of men died. In the years since the sounding of the call "All quiet on the Western Front," the landscape has restored itself, covering the scars and craters of No Man's Land with a quiet, almost blissful dignity. This sublime display is enough to make one hope that perhaps in time, the men who ordered countless soldiers across those fields will realize that they too are capable of the same peace.

I originally became interested in this project after reading some poetry by Rupert Brooke in a dusty tome from deep within the library's reserves. It was shortly after my initial foray into the trench poets that I discovered that my Grandfather's favorite poem was in fact Brooke's *1914: Soldier*. Though the poem has acquired painful sentimental value in the time since my Grandfather's passing, the fact that the poem survives to this day in the minds of the English people convinced me to pursue this topic wherever it may lead.

The last poem that was written by a surviving First World War soldier is Edmund Blunden's *Ancre Sunshine*, published in 1966.<sup>49</sup> Blunden died in 1974 at the age of 77, and was the one of the last of the surviving trench poets. To this point I have not included any of

---

<sup>49</sup> Walter, xl

Blunden's poetry in this project; however, I would like to mention briefly my thoughts on the final poem written by a survivor of the war<sup>50</sup>:

In all his glory the sun was high and glowing  
Over the farm world where we found great peace,  
And clearest blue the winding river flowing  
Seemed to be celebrating a release  
From all but speed and music of its own  
Which but for some few cows we heard alone.

Here half a century before might I,  
Had something chanced, about this point have lain,  
Looking with failing sense on such blue sky,  
And then become a name with others slain.  
But that thought vanished. Claire was wandering free  
Miraumont way in the golden tasseled lea.

The railway trains went by, and dreamily  
I thought of them as planets in their course,  
Though bound perhaps for Arras, how would we  
Have wondered once if through the furious force  
Murdering our world one of these same had come,  
Friendly and sensible – 'the war's over, chum.'

---

<sup>50</sup> Blunden is most well regarded for his autobiographical prose-work interpretation of the war in his memoir, *Undertones of War*. The work is still in print and is considered a modern classic in autobiographical accounts of the war. I chose to exempt Blunden from the project out of topical concerns; Blunden's poetry tends to focus on the decay of the trench landscape caused by the war effort, and less on the perception of individuals and trench relationships.

And now it seemed Clair was afar, and I  
Alone, and where she went perhaps the mill  
That used to be had risen again, and by  
All that had fallen was in its old form still,  
For her to witness, with no cold surprise,  
In one of those moments when nothing dies. (ll. 1-24)

Blunden's final thoughts on the war are still haunted by echoes of a time that lives on in the minds of those that remember. All that was unmade by the war is built again by man and nature, and the world is restored to its natural course. What lives on, as the speaker stands alone, is a memory that stands beyond time. Though the surroundings have been replaced, resurrected, and made anew, there remains a man, standing alone in a field that was once the scene of one of the most destructive wars mankind has ever known. The landscape seems to be masking the truth of what happened. At the same time, it is revelatory for a man whose life is defined by the feeling that the world outside will never make sense in his mind. The speaker has not become a name, but lives on with the knowledge that hidden within him, and beneath the rejuvenated earth, are the men that became names on the battlefield so many years before.

Blunden is one of the many poets and authors I wished, but was ultimately unable to include in this project. I will probably return to this thesis years from now and find myself wondering how I managed to exclude any number of the many English poets, authors and playwrights that rightfully deserve critical attention, not to mention countless German and French poets and authors, whose work is just as deserving of attention.

Moreover, there is no possible way to do justice to the conflicting emotions, themes, and indefinable sensations of loss that pervade trench poetry. To say that the men were drawn closer

because of the public school system, or that the Victorian era's idealization of beautiful men led to feelings of homoeroticism in the trenches, are both valid points. There is much scholarship devoted to the intensity of trench relationships, that though are not explicitly homosexual, are defined on different terms than friendship. And as is true with all literature, there is an enormous historical backdrop necessary for a comprehensive examination of trench poetry. This seems especially true for trench poetry, as the art is so closely connected with the event, as well as soldiers' personal experiences, that to fully comprehend the magnitude of the work there are many external elements that warrant analysis. I have attempted to do this as best I can within the boundaries of the project, though the literature is much richer than any one study can convey.

To paraphrase Harold Bloom, the best trench poets transcend the pathos of their occasion, and touch the sublime through original vision.<sup>51</sup> It is just as tempting to idealize a wartime death as it was those many years ago when Rupert Brooke asked of us, "If I should die, think only this of me..." The agony that a person feels when he is disconnected from his fellow man is a sentiment that far outlasts the four years of the war. Just as the pity of Sorley and Owen exemplifies the profound loss that occurs when one loses sight of another person's humanity, Sassoon and Read distinguish the soulful rising that comes when men gather around each other and understand the true value of the human spirit, as well as the loss of that individuality by which one defines others as people. The loss of the basic view of humanity toward others, and the way in which men struggle to recover, speak to the potential of mankind that blossoms in even the darkest corners of life.

As Blunden's soldier stands uncertainly in the world after the war, Eksteins notes that the relationships that existed in the trenches failed to translate into home life: "The spiritual bond

---

<sup>51</sup> Harold Bloom, The Best Poems of the English Language (New York: Harper Collins, 2004) 802.

forged between men in the isolation of the trenches was, however, not all that resilient outside the battle zone when men were forced to confront the complexities of the 'real' world" (ME, 232.) In short, even that which was lauded as the only positive outcome of the war became nothing more than a memory in the minds of the men that served in the trenches. I'm reminded here of the lone and wandering speaker of Read's *My Company*, whose inevitable fate need not come at the hands of death, but at the separation from the group of men that have become his own. Sassoon also seemed aware of this, just as Gurney knew that a connection among the men was incapable of outlasting the presence of the physical body.

To the outside world, the war resulted in the loss of millions of young men, and crippled Europe with a decade of post-war artistic silence. For the men who fought and wrote of the experience, the very fabric of humanity was wrested at its core. The poetry that I have written on shows that more than bodies were broken in the conflict. The change that many of the poets saw occurring on the battlefield would be written on in the years following the end of the war, most notably in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Though his hope is tinged with a near crippling doubt, Herbert Read's *My Company* stands as the defining poem concerning relationships in the trenches. When the individual looks inward, losing sight of his fellow man, he also finds spirituality in the bond between himself and the group. The singularly redemptive factor of the war is the result of a dire change in human relations that to this day fascinates scholars of the war. The poetry that survives the conflict is proof that the individual became aware of himself in the trenches of the First World War. The costs of this realization were catastrophic, though at its best, trench poetry exemplifies mankind searching for a place, meaning, and hope in the all-consuming darkness of man's self-made abyss.



### Works Consulted

- A. Bergonzi, Bernard. Heroes' Twilight: a Study of the Literature of the Great War (Second Edition). London: Macmillan Press, 1980.
- B. Bloom, Harold. The Best Poems of the English Language. New York: Harper Collins, 2004.
- C. Caesar, Adrian. Taking it like a man: Suffering, sexuality, and the War Poets. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.
- D. Cole, Sarah. "Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War." ELH 68 (2001): 469-500. Project Muse. Hatcher Graduate Library, Ann Arbor. 10 Sept. 2007.
- E. Cole, Sarah. Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the First World War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- F. Eksteins, Modris. Rites of Spring. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.
- G. Graham, Desmond. The Truth of War. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984.
- H. Hynes, Samuel. A War Imagined. London: The Bodley Head, 1990.

- I. Johnston, John. English Poetry of the First World War. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964.
- J. Keegan, John. The First World War. New York: Random House, 1998.
- K. Parfitt, George. English Poetry of the First World War. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.
- L. Robb, George. British Culture and the First World War. Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002.
- M. Scarry, Elaine. The Body in Pain. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- N. Sherry, Vincent. "Literature and World War I." *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 152-172.
- O. Sherry, Vincent. The Great War and the Language of Modernism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- P. Showalter, Dennis. "The Circus Rider of Europe." The World War I Reader. New York: New York University Press, 2007. 50-70.
- Q. Slawek, Tadeusz. "Dark Pits of War." boundary 2 Volume 14 (1986): 309-331.
- R. Stallworthy, Jon. The Poems of Wilfred Owen. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986.

S. Taylor, Martin, ed. Lads: Love Poetry of the Trenches. London: Constable and Company, 1989.

T. Walter, George, ed. The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

## Appendix of Poems<sup>52</sup>

- Blunden, Edmund

### *Ancre Sunshine*

In all his glory the sun was high and glowing  
Over the farm world where we found great peace,  
And clearest blue the winding river flowing  
Seemed to be celebrating a release  
From all but speed and music of its own  
Which but for some few cows we heard alone.

Here half a century before might I,  
Had something chanced, about this point have lain,  
Looking with failing sense on such blue sky,  
And then become a name with others slain.  
But that thought vanished. Claire was wandering free  
Miraumont way in the golden tasseled lea.

The railway trains went by, and dreamily  
I thought of them as planets in their course,  
Though bound perhaps for Arras, how would we  
Have wondered once if through the furious force  
Murdering our world one of these same had come,  
Friendly and sensible – 'the war's over, chum.'

And now it seemed Clair was afar, and I  
Alone, and where she went perhaps the mill  
That used to be had risen again, and by  
All that had fallen was in its old form still,  
For her to witness, with no cold surprise,  
In one of those moments when nothing dies.

- Brooke, Rupert

### *1914: Soldier*

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

---

<sup>52</sup> All poems from taken from Penguin Book of First World War Poetry, (New York: Penguin Books) 2006, except poems of Wilfred Owen, taken from The Poems of Wilfred Owen, (New York: W.W. Norton) 1986.

Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,  
A body of England's, breathing English air,  
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

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

*1914: Safety*

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,  
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,  
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,  
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,  
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,  
Leave the sick hearts that honor could not move,  
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,  
And all the little emptiness of love!

Oh! We, who have known shame, we have found  
Release there,  
Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has  
Mending,  
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;  
Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there  
But only agony, and that has ending;  
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

*Fragment*

I strayed about the deck, an hour, tonight  
Under a cloudy moonless sky; and peeped  
In at the windows, watched my friends at table,  
Or playing cards, or standing in the doorway,  
Or coming out into the darkness. Still  
No one could see me.

I would have thought of them  
– Heedless, within a week of battle – in pity,  
Pride in their strength and in the weight and firmness  
And link'd beauty of bodies, and pity that  
This gay machine of splendour'd soon be broken,  
Thought little of, pushed, scattered...

Only, always,  
I could but see them – against the lamplight – pass  
Like coloured shadows, thinner than filmy glass,

Slight bubbles, fainter than the wave's faint light,  
That broke to phosphorous out in the night,  
Perishing things and strange ghosts – soon to die  
To other ghosts – this one, or that, or I.

- Grenfell, Julian

*Into Battle*

The naked earth is warm with Spring,  
And with green grass and bursting trees  
Leans to the sun's gaze glorying,  
And quivers in the sunny breeze;  
And Life is Colour and Warmth and Light,  
And a striving evermore for these;  
And he is dead who will not fight;  
And who dies fighting has increase.

The fighting man shall from the sun  
Take warmth, and life from the glowing earth;  
Speed with the light-foot winds to run,  
And with the trees to newer birth;  
And find, when fighting shall be done,  
Great rest, and fullness after dearth.

All the bright company of Heaven  
Hold him in their high comradeship,  
The Dog-Star, and the Sisters Seven,  
Orion's Belt and sworded hip.

The woodland trees that stand together,  
They stand to him each one a friend;  
They gently speak in the windy weather;  
They guide to valley and ridge's end.

- Gurney, Ivor

*To his Love*

He's gone, and all our plans  
Are useless indeed.  
We'll walk no more on Cotswold  
Where the sheep feed  
Quietly and take no heed.

His body that was so quick  
Is not as you  
Knew it, on Severn river  
Under the blue  
Driving our small boat through.

You would not know him now...  
But still he died  
Nobly, so cover him over  
With violets of pride  
Purple from Severn side.

Cover him, cover him soon!  
And with thick-set  
Masses of memoried flowers-  
Hide that red wet  
Thing I must somehow forget.

- Newbolt, Sir Henry

*Vitai Lampada*

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night -  
Ten to make and the match to win -  
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,  
An hour to play and the last man in.  
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,  
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,  
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote  
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

The sand of the desert is sodden red, -  
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; -  
The Gatling's jammed and the colonel dead,  
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.  
The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
And England's far, and Honour a name,  
But the voice of schoolboy rallies the ranks,  
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

This is the word that year by year  
While in her place the School is set  
Every one of her sons must hear,  
And none that hears it dare forget.  
This they all with a joyful mind  
Bear through life like a torch in flame,  
And falling fling to the host behind -  
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

- Owen, Wilfred

*À Terre*

Sit on the bed; I'm blind, and three parts shell,  
Be careful; can't shake hands now; never shall.

Both arms have mutinied against me - brutes.  
My fingers fidget like ten idle brats.

I tried to peg out soldierly - no use!  
One dies of war like any old disease.  
This bandage feels like pennies on my eyes.  
I have my medals? - Discs to make eyes close.  
My glorious ribbons? - Ripped from my own back  
In scarlet shreds. (That's for your poetry book.)

A short life and a merry one, my brick!  
We used to say we'd hate to live dead old, -  
Yet now...I'd willingly be puffy, bald,  
And patriotic. Buffers catch from boys  
At least the jokes hurled at them. I suppose  
Little I'd ever teach a son, but hitting,  
Shooting, war, hunting, all the arts of hurting.  
Well, that's what I learnt, - that, and making money.  
Your fifty years ahead seem none too many?  
Tell me how long I've got? God! For one year  
To help myself to nothing more than air!  
One Spring! Is one too good to spare, too long?  
Spring wind would work its own way to my lung,  
And grow me legs as quick as lilac-shoots.  
My servant's lamed, but listen how he shouts!  
When I'm lugged out, he'll still be good for that.  
Here in this mummy-case, you know, I've thought  
How well I might have swept his floors for ever,  
I'd ask no night off when the bustle's over,  
Enjoying so the dirt. Who's prejudiced  
Against a grimed hand when his own's quite dust,  
Less live than specks that in the sun-shafts turn,  
Less warm than dust that mixes with arms' tan?  
I'd love to be a sweep, now, black as Town,  
Yes, or a muckman. Must I be his load?

O Life, Life, let me breathe, - a dug-out rat!  
Not worse than ours the existences rats lead -  
Nosing along at night down some safe vat,  
They find a shell-proof home before they rot.  
Dead men may envy living mites in cheese,  
Or good germs even. Microbes have their joys,  
And subdivide, and never come to death,  
Certainly flowers have the easiest time on earth.  
"I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone."  
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned;  
The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.  
"Pushing up daisies," is their creed, you know.  
To grain, then, go my fat, to buds my sap,  
For all the usefulness there is in soap.  
D'you think the Boche will ever stew man-soup?



Some day, no doubt, if...

Friend, be very sure  
I shall be better off with plants that share  
More peaceably the meadow and the shower.  
Soft rains will touch me, - as they could touch once,  
And nothing but the sun shall make me ware.  
Your guns may crash around me. I'll not hear;  
Or, if I wince, I shall not know I wince.  
Don't take my soul's poor comfort for your jest.  
Soldiers may grow a soul when turned to fronds,  
But here the thing's best left at home with friends.

My soul's a little grief, grappling your chest,  
To climb your throat on sobs; easily chased  
On other sighs and wiped by fresher winds.

Carry my crying spirit till it's weaned  
To do without what blood remained these wounds.

### *Disabled*

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,  
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,  
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park  
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,  
Voices of play and pleasure after day,  
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

About this time Town used to swing so gay  
When glow-lamps budded in the light blue trees,  
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim, -  
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.  
Now he will never feel again how slim  
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands.  
All of them touch him like some queer disease.

There was an artist silly for his face,  
For it was younger than his youth, last year.  
Now, he is old; his back will never brace;  
He's lost his colour very far from here,  
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,  
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race  
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.

One time he liked a blood- smear down his leg,  
After the matches, carried shoulder-high.  
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,  
He thought he'd better join. - He wonders why.  
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts,  
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,

Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts  
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;  
Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.

Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilt,  
And Austria's, did not move him. And no fears  
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts  
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;  
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;  
Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.  
And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.

Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.  
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits  
Thanked him; and then enquired about his soul.

Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,  
And do what things the rules consider wise,  
And take whatever pity they may dole.  
Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes  
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.  
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come  
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

### *Exposure*

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...  
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...  
Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...  
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,  
    But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,  
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.  
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,  
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.  
    What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...  
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.  
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army  
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,  
    But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.  
Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow,  
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew;  
We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,  
    But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces -  
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,  
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,  
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses,  
- Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed  
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;  
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;  
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed, -  
We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;  
Nor ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.  
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;  
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,  
For love of God seems dying.

To-night, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,  
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.  
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,  
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,  
But nothing happens.

### *Futility*

Move him into the sun -  
Gently its touch awoke him once,  
At home, whispering of fields unsown.  
Always it woke him, even in France,  
Until this morning and this snow.  
If anything might rouse him now  
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds, -  
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.  
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,  
Full-nerved, - still warm, - too hard to stir?  
Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
To break earth's sleep at all?

### *Smile, Smile, Smile* ~

Head to limp head, the sunk-eyed wounded scanned  
Yesterday's Mail; the casualties (typed small)  
And (large) Vast Booty from our Latest Haul.  
Also, they read of Cheap Homes, not yet planned,  
'For', said the paper, 'when this war is done  
The men's first instincts will be making homes.

Meanwhile their foremost need is aerodromes,  
It being certain war has but begun.  
Peace would do wrong to our undying dead, –  
The sons we offered might regret they died  
If we got nothing lasting in their stead.  
We must be solidly indemnified.  
Though all be worthy Victory which all bought,  
We rulers sitting in this ancient spot  
Would wrong our very selves if we forgot  
The greatest glory will be theirs who fought,  
Who kept this nation in integrity.'  
Nation? – The half-limbed readers did not chafe  
But smiled at one another curiously  
Like secret men who know their secret safe.  
(This is the thing they know and never speak,  
That England one by one had fled to France,  
Not many elsewhere now, save under France.)  
Pictures of these broad smiles appear each week,  
And people in whose voice real feeling rings  
Say: How they smile! They're happy now, poor things.

### *Strange Meeting*

It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

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.

With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;  
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,  
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.  
'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'  
'None,' said that other, 'save the undone years,  
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,  
Was my life also; I went hunting wild  
After the wildest beauty in the world,  
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,  
But mocks the steady running of the hour,  
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.  
For by my glee might many men have laughed,  
And of my weeping something had been left,  
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

Now men will go content with what we spoiled,  
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.  
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.  
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.  
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,  
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:  
To miss the march of this retreating world  
Into vain citadels that are not walled.  
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,  
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,  
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.  
I would have poured my spirit without stint  
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.  
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

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...'

### *The Show*

My soul looked down from a vague height with Death,  
As unremembering how I rose or why,  
And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,  
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,  
And fitted with great pocks and scabs of plaques.

Across its beard, that horror of harsh wire,  
There moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled.  
It seemed they pushed themselves to be as plugs  
Of ditches, where they writhed and shrivelled, killed.

By them had slimy paths been traileed and scraped  
Round myriad warts that might be little hills.

From gloom's last dregs these long-strung creatures crept,  
And vanished out of dawn down hidden holes.

(And smell came up from those foul openings  
As out of mouths, or deep wounds deepening.)

On dithering feet upgathered, more and more,  
Brown strings towards strings of gray, with bristling spines,  
All migrants from green fields, intent on mire.

Those that were gray, of more abundant spawns,  
Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten.

I saw their bitten backs curve, loop, and straighten,

I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.

Whereat, in terror what that sight might mean,  
I reeled and shivered earthward like a feather.

And Death fell with me, like a deepening moan.  
And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid  
Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,  
Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,  
And the fresh-severed head of it, my head.

- Read, Herbert

*My Company*

You became  
In many acts and quiet observances  
A body and a soul, entire...

I cannot tell  
What time your life became mine  
Perhaps when one summer night  
We halted by the roadside  
In the starlight only  
And you sang your sad home-songs,  
Dirges which I standing outside your soul  
Coldly condemned.  
Perhaps, one night, when descending cold  
When rum was mighty acceptable  
And my doling gave birth to sensual gratitude.

And then our fights: we've fought together  
compact, unanimous  
and I have felt the pride of leadership.

In many acts and quiet observances  
you absorbed me:  
Until one day I stood eminent  
and I saw you gather'd round me  
uplooking  
and about you a radiance that seemed to beat  
with variant glow and to give  
grace to our unity.

But, God! I know that I'll stand  
Someday in the loneliest wilderness,  
Someday my heart will cry  
For the soul that has been, but that now  
Is scattered with the winds  
Deceased and devoid.

I know that I'll wander with a cry:  
'O beautiful men, O men I loved,  
O whither are you gone, my company?  
This is a hell  
Immortal while I live

## II

My men go wearily  
With their monstrous burdens.

They bear wooden planks  
And iron sheeting  
Into the area of death.

When flare curves through the sky  
They rest immobile.

Then on again,  
Sweating and blaspheming –  
'Oh, bloody Christ!'

My men, my modern Christs,  
Your bloody agony confronts the world.

## III

A man of mine  
Lies on the wire.  
It is death to fetch his soulless corpse.

A man of mine  
Lies on the wire;  
And he will rot  
And first his lips  
The worms will eat.

It is not thus I would have him kissed  
But with the warm passionate lips  
Of his comrade here.

## IV – I

Kenneth Farrar is typical of many:  
He smokes his pipe with a glad heart  
And makes his days serene;  
He fights hard,  
And in his speech he hates the Boche  
But he doesn't really give a damn.  
His sexual experience is wide and various

And his curses are rather original.

But I've seen him kiss a dying man;  
And if he comes thro' all right  
(So he says)  
He's settle down and marry.

IV – II

But Maylon says this:  
'Old Ken's a wandering fool;  
If we come thro'  
Our souls will never settle in suburban hearths;  
We'll linger our remaining days  
Unsettled, haunted by the wrong that's done us;  
The best among us will ferment  
A better world;  
The rest will gradually subside,  
Unknown,  
In unknown lands.'

And Ken will jeer:  
'The natives of Samoa  
Are suitably naive.'

V

I can assume  
A giant attitude and godlike mood,  
And then detachedly regard  
All riots, conflicts and collisions.

The men I've lived with  
Lurch suddenly into a far perspective;  
They distantly gather like a dark cloud of birds  
In the autumn sky.

Urged by some unanimous  
Volition or fate,  
Clouds clash in opposition;  
The sky quivers, the dead descend;  
Earth yawns.

They are all of one species.

From my giant attitude,  
In godlike mood,  
I laugh till space is filled  
With hellish merriment.

Then again I assume



My human docility  
Bow my head  
And share their doom.

- Sassoon, Siegfried

*Banishment*

I am banished from the patient men who fight.  
They smote my heart to pity, built my pride.  
Shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side,  
They trudged away from life's broad wealds of light.  
Their wrongs were mine; and ever in my sight  
They went arrayed in honour. But they died, -  
Not one by one; and mutinous I cried  
To those who sent them out into the night.

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven  
To free them from the pit where they must dwell  
In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven  
By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel.  
Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;  
And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.

*The Death-Bed*

He drowsed and was aware of silence heaped  
Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls;  
Aqueous like floating rays of amber light,  
Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep, -  
Silence and safety; and his mortal shore  
Lipped by the inward, moonless waves of death.

Someone was holding water to his mouth.  
He swallowed, unresisting; moaned and dropped  
Through crimson gloom to darkness; and forgot  
The opiate throb and ache that was his wound.  
Water – calm, sliding green above the weir;  
Water – a sky-lit alley for his boat,  
Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers  
And shaken hues of summer: drifting down,  
He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.

Night, with a gust of wind, was in the ward,  
Blowing the curtain to a glimmering curve.  
Night. He was blind; he could not see the stars  
Glinting among the wraiths of wandering cloud;  
Queer blots of colour, purple, scarlet, green,  
Flickered and faded in his drowning eyes.

Rain; he could hear it rustling through the dark;  
Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;  
Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers  
That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps  
Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace  
Gently and slowly washing life away.

He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain  
Leapt like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore  
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.  
But someone was beside him; soon he lay  
Shuddering because that evil thing had passed.  
And death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and stared.

Light many lamps and gather round his bed.  
Lend him your eyes, warm blood, and will to live.  
Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.  
He's young; he hated War; how should he die  
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

But death replied: 'I choose him.' So he went,  
And there was silence in the summer night;  
Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.  
Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.

### *They*

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back  
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
New right to breed an honourable race.  
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
And Bert's gone siphilitic; you'll not find  
A chap who's served that hasn't found *some* change.'  
And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

- Sorley, Charles Hamilton

### *To Germany*

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,  
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.  
But gropers both through fields of thought confined  
We stumble and we do not understand.  
You only saw your future bigly planned,  
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,

And in each other's dearest ways we stand,  
And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.

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.

*When you see millions of the mouthless dead*

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, dead, 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.

Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,  
"Yet many a better one has died before."  
Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you  
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,  
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.  
Great death has made all his for evermore.