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**WILFRED OWEN: THE DISMANTLING OF EXPERIENCE
AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF POETRY**

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DOCTORADO EN TRADUCCIÓN E INTERPRETACIÓN

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Wilfred Owen: The Dismantling of Experience
and the Construction of Poetry

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To my family

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INTRODUCTION

Considering his importance as a First World War poet, not a great deal of research has been done into the poetry of Wilfred Owen. Perhaps the best known pieces of work on Owen have been written by D. S. R. Welland, Dominic Hibberd and Jon Stallworthy, although interesting contributions have also been made by critics such as Bernard Bergonzi, Jon Silkin, Paul Fussell and Jennifer Breen, amongst others.

Wilfred Owen did not live to enjoy fame as a poet. He only saw four of his poems in print: "Song of Songs", in *The Hydra / Journal of the Craiglockhart War Hospital* and *The Bookman* and "Miners", "Futility" and "Hospital Barge" in *The Nation*. After his death, seven of his poems were published in 1919 in an anthology called *Wheels* (fourth cycle), which was edited by Edith Sitwell. In *The Athenaeum* (5 December 1919), John Middleton Murry reviewed *Wheels* as well as *Georgian Poetry: 1918-19*, which was edited by Harold Monro. In doing so, Middleton Murry became the first critic to comment in print on Owen's work.

The first selection of Owen's poetry, published in 1920, was edited and introduced by Siegfried Sassoon. It contained twenty three poems and fragments. Reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement* appeared on 16 December 1920 and 6 January 1921. A twenty-fourth poem was added for the 1921 edition. Middleton Murry wrote another article, "The Poet of the War", which was published in *The Nation and The Athenaeum* (19 February 1921) in which he described Owen as a great poet and commented on his use of rhyme.

A more complete edition of Owen's poetry was edited by Edmund Blunden in 1931. Using letters written by Owen to his mother, Susan Owen, that had been made available to him by her, Blunden's edition included a "Memoir" in which he gave a brief account of Owen's life and artistic development. Blunden included thirty five more poems and

fragments as well as some of Owen's juvenilia in this edition. Many years later, Blunden discussed Owen's work and his human qualities in greater depth in "War Poets 1914-18" in the series *Writers and their Work* (1958).

Almost as if to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the First World War, the sixties saw a considerable increase in interest in Wilfred Owen and his poetry. More concerned with Owen's work than with biographical details, D. S. R. Welland wrote *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, which was first published in 1960. In his book, Welland examined some of Owen's earlier poetry, and discussed themes such as the impact of the First World War on Owen's verse, the spiritual conflicts Owen experienced during the war as a result of his religious background and some of the poetic techniques he used, particularly half-rhyme. Welland's book was closely followed by *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, which was edited and introduced by C. Day Lewis (1963). This edition of Owen's poetry included more of his earlier pieces as well as some of his later, more mature work. In total, nineteen previously unpublished pieces of work were included.

In *English Poetry of the First World War* (1964), John H. Johnston based his criticism of Owen on the opinion that the lyric was not an adequate form for writing war poetry. *Up the Line to Death* (1964), edited by Brian Gardner and *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (1965) by Bernard Bergonzi are two studies which contemplate Owen along with other First World War poets.

The appearance of Harold Owen's trilogy *Journey From Obscurity* (1963-65) permitted greater insight into Owen's life and therefore led to the possibility of a deeper understanding of his poetry. Although an invaluable source of information, not everything Harold Owen has written can be taken as the complete truth, particularly if one takes into account what he has written in the author's note in his book *Aftermath*. Published in 1970,

Harold Owen explains that although *Aftermath* does not form part of his trilogy, it is related to it and is intended to complete the story of the Owen family. Owen acknowledges that he has recorded incidents that are "factual and true in *atmosphere*" but admits that owing to a series of illnesses and problems, "I did even in those early years become confused in my own mind over the various moves I had to make . . ." (xi). The confusion Owen experienced during the writing of *Aftermath* could also have been present several years earlier, during the writing of *Journey From Obscurity*. In her unpublished PhD thesis, "The Development of the Poetry of Wilfred Owen", Jennifer Breen has pointed out that there are several inaccuracies in Harold Owen's trilogy since he decided against doing research for it and relied a great deal on memory (15).

Harold Owen and John Bell edited Wilfred Owen's letters and published them in a volume entitled *Collected Letters* (1967). The collection includes 673 letters and post cards, most of which were addressed to Owen's mother. In the introduction to *Collected Letters*, the editors explain that they have deliberately omitted certain comments made by Owen which they considered unimportant and which they felt might offend some readers. Although some errors in dating and the assigning of addresses have been made in this volume, the letters provide a wealth of material that can be read as if they formed part of a diary which holds the key to Owen's perception of his reality.

Using Harold Owen's trilogy as a major source of information, Gertrude M. White included fresh biographical details of Wilfred Owen in her work *Wilfred Owen*, which was published in the *Twayne English Author Series* in 1969.

Arthur Lane has argued that the existing poetic tradition at the time of the First World War did not provide an adequate mode of expression for those who wished to reflect the apocalyptic nature of the war. Earlier poetic influences had to be reconsidered and

adapted so that the war experience could be conveyed in poetic terms. In his book *An Adequate Response* (1972), Lane has contemplated the realities of the war, the traditional modes that had always been used in war poetry and how writers of the First World War had begun to move away from this tradition. Lane's book considers the writings of several poets of the First World War but concentrates more on the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Lane sees Owen as a poet of great importance because he used poetry as a means of expressing his war experiences; he used experience to add a new dimension to language rather than using language to emphasise experience. Owen succeeded in reflecting the true horrors of war; he did not succumb to the temptation of embellishing the facts. He always remained faithful to them and therefore to all the soldiers who died in the war.

In his 1973 selection *Wilfred Owen / War Poems and Others* Dominic Hibberd departed considerably from all previous collections of Owen's poems. In his book, Hibberd has questioned previous editors' work on Owen's poetry and the dates that have been attributed to many of his poems.

Jon Stallworthy's highly acclaimed biography of Wilfred Owen was first published in 1974. Stallworthy gathered much of the information for his book from Harold Owen's trilogy and from *Collected Letters*. Stallworthy's main intention was to provide a picture of Owen as a poet, thus complementing the portrait presented of Owen as elder brother in *Journey From Obscurity* and the autobiographical portrait provided in his letters.

Owen's close relationship with his mother, his religious beliefs and how these determined his behaviour, his academic and literary background and his experiences of war and his written response to it are the principal areas discussed by Kenneth Simcox in *Anthem for a Doomed Youth* (1978).

In his work *Tradition Transformed: Studies In The Poetry of Wilfred Owen* (1979),

Sven Bäckman first examines the Romantic-Victorian poetic tradition and its influences on Owen and then considers the methods and devices used by Owen which permitted him to write some of the most moving poetry of the First World War. Concentrating principally on the rhyming schemes Owen used, Bäckman proceeds to examine the techniques used by Owen which indicated a definite swing away from what had previously been the poetic tradition.

Basing his work on the third printing of the amended edition of the *Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* edited by C. Day Lewis (1963), Donald Heneghan wrote *A Concordance to the Poems and Fragments of Wilfred Owen* (1979). The work itself is interesting in so far as it facilitates linguistic studies of Owen's work. However, Stallworthy's later research into the complete works of Owen has rendered Heneghan's study incomplete.

Relying on the work of Harold Owen and John Bell as well as on his own biography of Owen, Stallworthy presented the most complete edition of Owen's poetry in 1982. *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments* was published in two volumes. Stallworthy's work involved the arduous task of gathering together all the known poems and fragments written by Owen. In the first volume, Stallworthy's main intention was to tackle the problem of the chronology of Owen's poems. He acknowledged that his work had been made easier by the research carried out by his predecessors and by the fact that he had access to all the verse manuscripts and letters. In the second volume, Stallworthy examined the original manuscripts and presented first drafts of poems with subsequent ones, thus showing the changes that Owen made on revising his work.

Dominic Hibberd's book *Owen the Poet* (1986) presents a study of the origins and growth of Owen as a poet. Hibberd has argued that although Owen's juvenilia was not particularly promising, more attention should be paid to it since it provided a stepping-stone

towards his later, more mature work.

A one-volume text of what Jennifer Breen believes to be the best of Owen's writings was published in 1988 under the title *Wilfred Owen / Selected Poetry and Prose*. She first considers some of Owen's early poetry, goes on to examine some of his later work and then presents some of the letters he wrote. In the critical commentary accompanying the selection, Breen has outlined various aspects of Owen's personal life, his poetic development and his war experiences. The final part of her book consists of notes that provide extra information pertaining to the poetry and prose that is presented in this selection.

A further contribution to research done on Wilfred Owen and his poetry has been made by Dominic Hibberd in his book *Wilfred Owen- The Last Year* (1992). As the title suggests, the book concentrates on the last year of Owen's life and the poetry he wrote during that time. Hibberd begins his book with Owen's return to England and his subsequent hospitalisation in Edinburgh's Craiglockhart War Hospital. It was here that Owen met Siegfried Sassoon and partly as a result of this man's influence, Owen's poetic style changed and he came to write some of his best poetry. However, Hibberd feels that not all the credit was due to Sassoon: Dr. Arthur Brock, Owen's therapist, encouraged Owen to write poetry as part of his treatment for shellshock. Hibberd's book then goes on to consider Owen's return to military life. He was engaged in light duties at Scarborough, transferred to a training camp at Ripon and then sent once again to Scarborough before finally returning to France. Throughout his book, Hibberd relates the events of Owen's last year to the poetry he wrote and, in an appendix, an approximate chronology of the poems Owen wrote during this time is offered.¹

¹In his introduction to *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*, Stallworthy explains that "since the text in each case reflects the poet's latest intentions, it would have been misleading to place the poems and fragments in a chronology determined by his earliest intentions" (xxiii). However, in *Wilfred Owen - The Last*

Douglas Kerr's book *Wilfred Owen's Voices* (1993) examines the language of Owen's writing in relation to the different social contexts in which he moved. Kerr has argued that Owen's family, his religious experiences and the time he spent in the army, together with his interest in poetry influenced him at different stages and gave birth and direction to his writing. Kerr has proposed that the different social institutions that marked Owen's life were the sources of his language; Owen learnt his language within the framework of these institutions and so therefore automatically became part of them. He used the language he learnt from them to form his own views and this sometimes led to a conflict which gave rise, in many cases, to his most powerful poetry. Dividing his book into four sections which deal with the different language communities that influenced Owen, Kerr has provided an interesting investigation into the social determinators of Owen's poetic creativity.

In his book *Taking it Like a Man* (1993), Adrian Caesar has considered the war poetry of Brooke, Sassoon and Graves as well as that of Owen. He has suggested that by coming to a greater understanding of the war poets' attitude to suffering, the reader can come to a deeper comprehension of their poetry. Caesar feels that because the poetry of these men has usually been taught within a specific ideological framework, many psychological and cultural aspects of their work have not been considered. To counter-balance this, he has looked at various biographical features of these poets that have not previously been considered in depth. Amongst others, Caesar has addressed issues such as

Year, Hibberd has arranged Owen's work in possible order of first composition. He feels that many of the dates suggested by Stallworthy are sometimes too precise, arguing that not wholly reliable evidence (watermarks on writing paper used by Owen) has been used.

Despite their different approaches in establishing the chronology of Owen's work, Stallworthy and Hibberd have agreed on the dates of composition of most pieces. For the purposes of this study, Stallworthy's dating has been followed and where Hibberd's dating differs considerably from Stallworthy's, the discrepancy is mentioned.

the sado-masochistic response to suffering which formed part of the Victorian-Edwardian era, Christianity and the social and sexual behaviour of the time, the notion of manhood, which seemed to exclude any type of male sensitivity, and the concept of Romanticism in relation to suffering. He has also taken into consideration the background of the four poets and drawn parallels between physical and mental suffering and its relationship to their sexuality.

Chapter four of Caesar's book deals specifically with Wilfred Owen. Concentrating on much of the work already done on the poet, Caesar attempts to extract various aspects of his life and personality which hitherto have been ignored because of the ideological framework in which they have been written and read. It is his intention to provide new readings of Owen's work and consequently to demythologise the position Owen holds as the most famous of the First World War Poets.

It is unfortunate that when considering Wilfred Owen's sexuality, Caesar omits to refer to Joseph Cohen's lengthy article "Owen Agonistes" (1965), which presents the hypothesis that the key to Owen's poetry can be found on examining his life, personality and emotional make-up. Cohen places specific emphasis on Owen's possible latent homosexuality, which can be neither proved nor disproved.²

Other pieces of work on Owen contemplate various aspects of his war poetry but they form minor parts of larger studies which consider other war poets as well as Owen. Unfortunately, no Spanish writers have written about Owen's poetry in depth.

The period and the accompanying social, political and moral climate in which writers produce their work is important because it can, and often does, influence the content of their

²For further reading, see Gertrude M. White's "Critic's Key: Poem or Personality", which discusses Cohen's views on Owen's possible homosexuality.

work and their readers' reaction to it to such an extent that some writers will appear to 'fit in' with the trends of the time whilst others might be described as non-conformist, reactionary or extremist or merely uninteresting and poor. As times change, so do attitudes and this may influence the 'acceptability' of a writer. Perhaps because we are approaching a new millennium - and in looking forward to a new era, people are also looking back on the mistakes of the past - or it maybe because of today's concern for international peace and solidarity that a general interest in the history and politics of wars seems to be reviving. This may partly explain the recent resurgence of interest in Wilfred Owen and his work: a new edition of his poetry, *Disabled and Other Poems*, was published at the end of 1995, and the number of reprints of earlier editions has increased. Poetry and fact have even been fused into fiction in Pat Barker's "Regeneration" trilogy in which Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are two of the many characters that emerge from the pages. The trilogy focusses principally on the victims of shellshock and their doctors and makes entertaining reading for anyone interested in a less scientific approach to the effects of war neuroses.

In collaboration with a team of international experts in the field of military history, the B B C has produced a television series called *1914-1918*, which is based on a book of the same name. The fifth episode of the series which was broadcast in Autumn 1996 is called "Mutiny" and the first part deals with certain aspects of the lives and works of both Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. In this episode, the military historian John Keegan emphasises the importance of Wilfred Owen's letters because he was "a literary genius and because they reveal the mind of the British officer."³ Critics have spoken highly of the series and thanks to its production, both Owen and Sassoon have been introduced to a wider audience.

³This quotation has been taken directly from a video reproduction of the programme.

Many of the books written about Owen and his work were published over ten years ago and are now out of print, and due to the appearance of more recent works, they have not been re-printed. This has made the acquisition of some of the material on Owen rather difficult. However, several visits to the British Library in London, the University of London Library and Manchester University Library, together with the network of communication existing among them and other universities in Britain and other countries, allowed me to carry out a more extensive gathering of material than was originally expected. Some articles referred to in this dissertation were not easily available through European sources but were obtained through contacts at universities in the U. S. A. Manuscripts of Owen's work can be found on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and permission to view those manuscripts housed in the archives of the British Library was granted.

As well as intending to arouse further interest in Owen, this piece of work attempts to trace his poetic development along the same lines as his personal development so that it shows that the poetic and personal ran along parallel lines, with distinct points of convergence. Thus, the principal objective is to draw the biographical and artistic threads together in such a way, that on analysing his personal and professional life, a more profound understanding of Owen's poetry can be reached. The three main editions of Owen's poetry that have been used are *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, edited with a Memoir by Edmund Blunden (1931), *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by C. Day Lewis (1963) and Jon Stallworthy's *The Complete Poems and Fragments* (1982), which has proved invaluable. In the second volume of *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, the manuscripts of Owen's poems and fragments are described and, in some cases, transcribed. The sequence in which Stallworthy presents the manuscripts facilitates

an examination of the changes Owen made to his work. When the impossibility of handling some of Owen's original manuscripts arose, Stallworthy's work proved to be an excellent substitute.

If, as Geoffrey Leech concludes in *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* "Comprehension of practically any poem can be influenced by biographical information or by experience of other poems by the same writer" (226), then in order to be able to reach a deeper understanding of Owen's poetry, some knowledge of his personal life within the social, political and moral context of the time is helpful. Chapter one of this dissertation draws principally upon information provided by Wilfred Owen's younger brother, Harold, in his trilogy *Journey From Obscurity*, on letters written by Wilfred Owen which have been published in *Collected Letters* and on Jon Stallworthy's biographical account of the poet. Although mention of his adult life is occasionally made, this chapter deals mainly with Owen's childhood and adolescence and examines the birth and infancy of his poetry.

Since Jon Stallworthy's biography of Owen provides the reader with a chronological account of the poet's life, it is not necessary to present a detailed picture here. Instead, by referring to specific events and situations, the aim of this chapter is to offer greater insight into certain aspects of the poet's life and personality which might have directly or indirectly contributed to his artistic development. Thus, rather than being taken from start to finish of Owen's life, the reader is taken on a "circular tour". In other words, once one particular aspect of Owen's personality is considered, its development is traced through to adulthood and a return to childhood is often made. Sometimes, one episode in Owen's life may have given rise to several simultaneous responses and so a constant return to the same event often occurs.

Without laying claim to any expert knowledge in the field of psychology, chapter one

opens with a brief psychological portrait of Owen and considers certain dominant features of his character and personality that first became manifest during his childhood and adolescence and then underwent changes to form part of the more mature young soldier-poet. This is followed by a discussion on Owen's relationships with his parents and the relationship between his parents themselves and how these relationships might have influenced him as he was growing up. The presence of mother and father figures in Owen's poetry is then dealt with.

At the age of 18, Owen became lay assistant to Rev. Herbert Wigan at Dunsden vicarage in Reading. The time he spent there was crucial to his views on religion and to his personal development and, consequently, of vital importance to his later poetic progress, so a brief description of the time he spent there is offered. In the final part of the first chapter, the time Owen spent teaching English in France, his continuing process of self-discovery, his thirst for writing, his meeting with the French poet and pacifist Laurent Tailhade and the influence this man exerted on him, the outbreak of the war and Owen's response to it and the poetry he wrote during this "French period" are all discussed.

The first part of chapter two begins by contemplating what might have motivated Owen to join the British Army and then presents a picture of his life as both officer and poet in the armed forces. On providing an account of Owen's life as an officer, particular emphasis is placed firstly upon Owen's integration into army life and then on the relationship he established with the soldiers under his supervision and the role he created for himself as a poet who represented these soldiers. Owen identified with the suffering of the infantrymen and felt tremendous pity for them, yet at the same time, as an officer he was aware of the responsibility he had to bear in sending the soldiers he cared so much about into battle. This resulted in an inner conflict which gave rise to feelings of guilt

because at times the roles of officer and poet Owen had assumed were incompatible. Owen's attempts to understand and come to terms with this sense of culpability is reflected in many of his war poems.

After a first brief period at the front, Owen was sent back to Britain suffering from shellshock. He hoped to remain in England after his recovery but was posted back to France for a further tour of duty. Owen's hopes for a home posting are considered and then signs of changes in his war poetry that reflect his understanding of his role as officer, poet, participator and protestor are discussed.

Owen felt strongly about the attitude of the non-combatants who seemed to so carelessly disregard the masses of soldiers who were sent to the front. He used his poetry as a means of communicating his disgust at and rejection of the behaviour of those who were not directly involved in combat. In order to present an outline of how Owen's attitude is portrayed in his letters and poetry, the second part of chapter two contains two sub-sections and each one considers a different aspect of the complacency of those who did not fight. First, attention is drawn to the political and poetic climate of the time and the enormous gulf that existed between the home and war fronts and then Owen's opinions on the ignorance, idealism and inactivity of women during the First World War is dealt with.

It was Owen's opinion that the war was prolonged by stirring the fires of patriotism through the use of propaganda and his feelings about patriotism and propaganda appear constantly in many of his later poems. The last part of chapter two with its corresponding sub-sections, attempts to show how Owen as an officer and poet drew his personal feelings and artistic capabilities together in order to make a personal statement about the mismanagement of the war. In the first two sub-sections of this part of chapter two, an outline of the history of propaganda, the various forms it took during the First World War and

Owen's response to it are presented. Politicians and their role in promoting patriotism and the use of organised religion are the major points considered in the remaining sub-sections. Since it was a combination of these factors that indirectly caused Owen's participation in a war which he condemned, it is hardly surprising that he expressed his contempt and disdain for them in his poetry. Several examples of poems that reflect Owen's attitude to propaganda, patriotism and organised religion are presented throughout the final part of this chapter and the similarities that Owen found between Christ and the soldiers and how these similarities emerge in some of his pieces is also discussed.

After being diagnosed as suffering from neurasthenia Wilfred Owen was hospitalised in Scotland. Whilst receiving treatment for his condition, he was under the care of Dr. Arthur Brock, a psychiatrist who helped him to come to terms with many of the personal doubts that had assailed him throughout his adolescence but which had only become manifest during his experience in the combat area. It was during this period of hospitalisation in Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh that Owen met Siegfried Sassoon, the well-known anti-war poet who was also a decorated soldier. Coming to a greater self-understanding, combined with the expertise help of Brock in the medical field and Sassoon in the artistic field, allowed Owen's creative talents to develop to such an extent that the style and content of his poetry underwent dramatic changes. The aim of the third chapter of this dissertation is to demonstrate how Owen's gradual return to psychological and emotional stability can be linked to changes in poetic content and an advance in poetic technique and production.

In this chapter, the reader's task may seem tedious at times because of a heavy reliance on other critics' work and the great number of quotations used. However, in order to present as complete a picture as possible, it has been deemed necessary to review and

discuss others' points of view in considerable detail.

The first part of chapter three provides an outline of what the experts of the time believed to be the causes and effects of shellshock and then Owen's particular case is discussed. Mention of the contemporary attitudes in military and social circles to the condition is also made. The time Owen spent at Craiglockhart is considered and a table of the poems and fragments he worked on as a patient there, as well as a brief discussion on some of his Craiglockhart work prior to the moment Siegfried Sassoon's influence started to emerge, is then presented.

The first meeting between the two men and their opinions about each other have been outlined and then, given that Siegfried Sassoon's influence on Owen was important to Owen on both a personal and artistic level, the second part of chapter three is devoted to this influence. Since critics' opinions on the importance of Sassoon's influence on Owen vary, a summary of their views is presented before some of Owen's poems that echo Sassoon's style are discussed.

It was inevitable that Owen would eventually discover his own poetic direction. Once he left Craiglockhart and was sent on light duties before returning to the front, Owen realised his own potential as a poet and so embarked upon a period of intense poetic productivity. The remainder of chapter three contemplates some of Owen's post-Craiglockhart work, presents a brief outline of how seriously he took his desire to be a poet and finally offers an analysis of the unfinished preface to a volume of poetry he hoped to have published. Given that several critics' views on Owen's preface differ, a brief description of some of them is given.

Chapter four is divided into two parts, each with its corresponding sub-sections. Since familiarity with the literary traditions and background of a writer can lead to a clearer

and more profound interpretation of his work, this chapter opens with details of Owen's artistic background, beginning with his early interest in poetry and continuing with a discussion on the various literary figures that influenced his poetic style and development. Although Owen's early years and the importance of the time he spent at Dunsden are dealt with in chapter one, they are re-considered here in terms of how his experiences provided him with themes in his earlier verse that would re-emerge in his later work.

Owen's interest in the themes he wrote about in his juvenilia was kindled in part by his love of the Romantics and so his allegiance to the Romantic tradition is touched upon before the question of whether or not Owen rejected this tradition in his war poetry is dealt with. Then, a more detailed discussion of Keats's influence on the younger poet is entered into. Many of Owen's early poems which directly mirror Keats's work are mentioned before his later, more mature poetry which confirms his ability to transform his Keatsian background into a more personal style. However, since Keats was not the only important literary influence in Owen's life, several pages are dedicated to the influence of other Romantic writers and both early and late ones are considered. Reference is also made to the importance Laurent Tailhade held for Owen and traces of Decadent writers and their effect on Owen are also mentioned. To complete the picture of Owen's poetic background, a definition of who the Georgians were is followed by a summary of the Georgian influence in Owen's poetry and then an outline of his own Georgian style is presented.

Once Owen's poetic background has been examined, one or two aspects of his poetic style are dealt with. The second part of chapter four commences with a brief discussion on poetic form and some of the elements required to make up a poem. When considering the themes explored by a poet in his work, the imagery he uses has to be taken into account and on doing this, the poet's use of language cannot be ignored. Difficulties arise when

deciding whether each area should be considered separately or not because the three exist independently yet combine to form a sort of poetic circle which has no definite beginning or end. Since it is difficult to establish boundaries between themes, imagery and language, a criss-crossing between them inevitably exists. As Winifred Nowotny states in *The Language Poets Use*, "the various elements of poetic language interpenetrate one another with an intimacy which is of first importance in any consideration of how poetry works" (2).

Since Nature was a predominant theme in Owen's poetry, the bulk of the remainder of chapter four is dedicated to his exploitation of it through the imagery and language he used in both his juvenilia and later pieces. Nature is in terms of the four seasons is examined and as a natural follow up to the seasons, Nature is then considered in terms of the elements. This leads on to an examination of Owen's use of darkness and light and time sequences in his poetry as a means of creating mood and atmosphere.

Given that most of Owen's mature poetry was written whilst he was a member of the British Armed Forces, it is understandable that he had a heightened awareness of war's destruction of Nature in terms of a ravaged landscape. The way in which Owen used imagery and diction associated with the landscape is first examined in his early work where his Romantic inclinations are reflected. In his later work, Owen came to view the landscape in terms of war and explored man's violation of it; he contemplated the ideas that man's alienation from his natural habitat was self-imposed and, perhaps subconsciously influenced by his religious background, he considered that man and his physical environment eventually merge to become one.

Owen's critical approach to his work combined with his diligence and application. This, together with a tendency to be a perfectionist often resulted in the writing of several

drafts of a poem before, in his opinion, a suitable final version was obtained. The last part of this chapter briefly examines several poems whose creation from first to final draft spanned a considerable length of time. On considering one or two aspects of each of these pieces, an idea of the way Owen's poetry gradually changed is given. Some of these poems are significant in the sense that they helped provide the foundation upon which Owen was to build some of his later work. Greater consideration is given to the sonnet "1914" as it was the first poem Owen wrote that reflected his changing attitude towards the war. A detailed comparison of the sonnet's original rough draft and its final version is made.

Certain critical works that have been frequently cited are indicated by an abbreviation and, where necessary, a page reference. A table of abbreviations follows this Introduction. Brief details of other works that have been referred to and / or quoted from are given either in the text or in footnotes whilst more complete bibliographic information can be found in the bibliography at the end of this dissertation together with a list of Owen's poems that have been referred to throughout this piece of work. For the benefit of the reader who is unfamiliar with the details of Owen's life, a biographical summary based on the information provided in Jon Stallworthy's *Complete Poems and Fragments* follows the table of abbreviations.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CL *Collected Letters*

CPF *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*

JFO *Journey From Obscurity*

OTP *Owen The Poet*

WOV *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community*

BIOGRAPHICAL TABLE: Wilfred Owen 1893-1918

1893 18 March: Wilfred Edward Salter Owen born.

1900 11 June: Starts school at Birkenhead Institute.

1903 or 1904 Summer: Holiday in Broxton.

1906-7 Winter: Starts at Shrewsbury Technical School.

1908 June: Visits Brittany with father.

1909 July: Further visit to Brittany with father.

1910 January: Owen family moves to Shrewsbury.

1911 Summer: Works as pupil-teacher at the Wyle Cop School, Shrewsbury.

28 September: Offered unpaid post as lay assistant to the Revd. Herbert Wigan in Dunsden parish, near Reading.

20 October: Arrives at Dunsden.

1912 June: Meets Miss Edith Morley, head of English at Reading University.

20-25 July: Attends Keswick Convention.

1913 Early January: Decides to leave Dunsden and to break with traditional religious background.

7 February: Returns to Shrewsbury.

c. 6 July: Hears of failure to win scholarship for Reading University.

c. 15 September: Takes up teaching post at Berlitz School of Languages, Bordeaux.

Mid-October: Visited by father in Bordeaux.

1914 25 July: Gives up job at the Berlitz School.

31 July: Goes to Bagnères-de-Bigorre to tutor Mme Léger.

4 August: Britain declares war on Germany.

- c. 21 August:* Meets Laurent Tailhade.
- 17 September:* Returns to Bordeaux and takes up free-lance teaching.
- 19 December:* Moves to Mérignac, near Bordeaux to tutor Johnny and Bobby de la Touche.
- 1915** *May:* Visits London and Shrewsbury.
- 13 June:* Returns to Bordeaux.
- Mid-September:* Accompanies the de la Touche boys to London and goes home to Shrewsbury.
- 21 October:* Joins the British Army (the Artists' Rifles), lodging in London.
- 27 October:* Meets Harold Monro at the Poetry Bookshop, London.
- 15 November:* Sent to Hare Hall Camp, Essex, as Cadet Owen, Artists' Rifles.
- 1916** *c. 1 January:* Week's leave at home.
- 27 February - 5 March:* Course in London. Lodges over the Poetry Bookshop.
- 4 June:* Commissioned into the Manchester Regiment.
- 18 June:* Reports to 5th (Reserve) Battalion, Manchester.
- 14 September:* Visited by Harold Owen whilst training.
- 24 September:* 5th Manchesters move to Oswestry, under canvas.
- 19-20 October:* 5th Manchesters to Southport, Lancashire.
- Christmas:* Embarkation leave.
- 29 December:* To France and Base Camp, Étapes.
- 1917** *1-2 January:* Joins 2nd Manchesters on the Somme near Beaumont Hamel. Assumes command of 3 Platoon, A Coy.
- 6 January:* 2nd Manchesters on move towards front.
- 9-16 January:* Holds dug-out in no man's land; sentry blinded.

- 20 January:** Into line again; platoon exposed in severe frost.
- 4 February:** Arrives at Abbeville for a course on transport duties.
- 25 February:** Leaves Abbeville.
- 1 March:** rejoins batallion; posted to B Coy.
- 14/15 March:** Suffers concussion following a fall.
- 15 March:** Evacuated to Military Hospital at Nesle.
- 17 March:** Moved to 13th Casualty Clearing Station at Gailly.
- 4 April:** Rejoins battalion at Selency.
- 8 April:** Battalion is relieved and pulls back.
- 12 April:** Into the line again at Savy Wood for 12 days.
- 2 May:** Evacuated to 13th Casualty Clearing Station with shellshock.
- 11 June:** Sent to N^o1 General Hospital, Etretat.
- 16 June:** Sent to Welsh Hospital, Netley, Hampshire.
- 26 June:** Arrives at Craiglockhart War Hospital, near Edinburgh.
- 17 July:** Writes first contribution to *The Hydra*; becomes editor.
- Late July:** Siegfried Sassoon (SS) arrives at Craiglockhart.
- c. 17 August:** Introduces himself to SS.
- 1 September:** "Song of Songs" published in *The Hydra*.
- 25 September:** Appears before Medical Board.
- 13 October:** Introduced by SS to Robert Graves, who is shown draft of "Disabled".
- 28 October:** Appears before Medical Board; 3 weeks' leave pending return to unit.
- 3 November:** To London.
- 4 November:** To Shrewsbury.
- 9-10 November:** Meets Robert Ross, Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells.

24 November: Joins 5th Manchesters at Scarborough for light duties.

4 December: Promoted to Lieutenant.

19-23 December: On leave.

Christmas: SS posted back to France.

1918 23 January: Attends Robert Graves's wedding. Meets Charles Scott Moncrieff.

26 January: "Miners" published in *The Nation*.

12 March: Sent to Northern Command Depot, Ripon.

c. 23 March: Finds lodgings at Borrage Lane, Ripon.

9-11 April: Weekend leave in Shrewsbury. Last meeting with Harold Owen.

Mid-May: "Song of Songs" published in *The Bookman*.

16-19 May: In London. Sees Robert Ross and meets Osbert Sitwell.

4 June: Graded fit for general service.

5 June: Rejoins 5th Manchesters at Scarborough.

15 June: "Hospital Barge" and "Futility" published in *The Nation*.

13 July: SS wounded and invalided home.

12-18 August: Embarkation leave; sees SS in hospital in London; spends evening with SS and Osbert Sitwell.

31 August: Reports to Base Camp, Étapes.

15 September: At Amiens. 2nd Manchesters arrive.

29 September - 3 October: Successful assault on Beurevoir-Fonsomme line.

Awarded M. C.

29 October: Into line for the last time.

30-31 October: Battalion takes over the line west of the Oise-Sambre Canal near Ors.

4 November: Killed in action.

I

WILFRED OWEN: THE EARLY YEARS

1.1 Family Relationships

Wilfred Owen was the eldest of the four Owen children. He was just two years old when his sister, Mary, was born and four and a half years of age when his brother, Harold was born. The youngest Owen child, Colin, was born when Wilfred was seven years and four months old. Although each of the relationships Owen had with the different members of his family was important, the most significant and consequential were the ones he had with his parents since their influence on him was crucial as far as his personal and artistic development was concerned.

1.1.1 Wilfred Owen: A Brief Psychological Portrait

When the poet John Donne wrote "No man is an island intire of itselfe", he was referring to the inevitable contact that exists amongst men. As a result of this contact, it is impossible for any one individual not to be influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by many of those with whom he comes into contact. It is evident that what each one of us today is a result of a combination of our past experiences, our hopes and fears for the future and our responses to our past, present and possible future.

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen, born in Shropshire on 18 March 1893 and killed on the banks of the Oise Sambre Canal near Ors in France on 4 November 1918 whilst on active service, became the man and the poet he was because of his experiences. His personality, his problems, his sense of responsibility, his respect for human life, his concept of right and wrong, his religious beliefs, his sensitivity and creative ability all developed as they did due to the experiences life had given to him and because of his response to these experiences.

As a child, Wilfred Owen seemed less interested in childhood things than others of

his age, and by nature, he appeared to be a solitary individual who found more pleasure in his own company than in the company of his peers, whom he often found tiresome, irritating and immature. Owen's aloofness may well have made him seem a rather haughty and distant individual, but it was more likely to have been a reflection of the isolation and insecurity he felt at being different from the rest. This sense of being different from everybody else, which extended into Owen's adolescence and adult life, led him to do a great deal of soul-searching and was most probably one of the factors that helped him to attain his cherished goal of being a poet.

If one considers Harold Owen's account of life with his brother Wilfred as well as the letters Wilfred wrote, a picture of the transition he underwent from childhood through adolescence to adulthood can be drawn. Perhaps it should be pointed out here that Harold Owen, the main provider of biographical details about Wilfred Owen, was often resentful of Wilfred's position within the family and thus the evidence supplied by Harold may not always be totally reliable since the possibility of fabrication of events exists.

It would seem that Wilfred Owen was destined to be different. He was clearly his mother's favourite and given that she was the dominant member of the household, Wilfred Owen's position within the family was undisputed. In the beginning, this quite possibly contributed to Wilfred's apparent arrogance and air of superiority, but a gradual maturing that came with age and experience, together with a geographical distancing from his mother, eventually brought about a change which made him more sensitive to others. Owen's sensitivity and awareness of others became the springboard to his more mature poetry.

It would be puerile to believe that not everybody's personality is complex, as each individual is made up of an intricate web of internal and external actions and reactions which add up to make the complete person. However, some personalities are naturally

more complex and more complicated than others. Judging from Harold Owen's observations of his family, he obviously considered Wilfred to be, in terms of personality, the most complicated member of the Owen household.

In the first volume of *JFO*, Harold Owen makes it quite clear that Wilfred was different from his brothers and sisters and consequently was treated differently. Harold explains that when the usual childish mishaps occurred within the family, they made Wilfred "quiet and moody and sometimes depressed, and for release he would rely very much more upon invective and the sardonic reply than upon a normal exhibition of boyish temper" (24). The upshot of this type of reaction from Wilfred was that he rarely received a scolding whilst his siblings, particularly Harold, were reprimanded more regularly. The family as a whole, except for Mr. Owen, who was less tolerant of his eldest son's idiosyncrasies, came to accept Wilfred's deviations its norms and often, allowances were made for Wilfred that would not have been permitted under other circumstances.

In the second volume of *JFO*, Harold Owen reflects upon his elder brother's self-imposed isolation from other boys and his all-consuming desire to read books. Wilfred's conduct may have been due more to an almost insurmountable shyness rather than to a feeling of superiority. No doubt, Wilfred's introverted behaviour resulted in a rather restricted field of personal experience which would have affected his assessment of other people's behaviour and feelings. For a long time, his experience was subconsciously confined to himself and his own progress. His only mentor was his mother, who never seemed to do anything in particular to stimulate a broadening of his experiences.

Wilfred's often disdainful intolerance of others certainly did not help endear him to those around him. Harold Owen describes his brother as preferring "to use criticism rather than seek understanding with others He was intolerant of others to an extent which

. . . would have given an impression of didactic precision of manner to anyone outside the family . . . True sympathy had not yet emerged in him and, without it, deep understanding was as yet denied to him" (*JFO* II, 60).

Excessive shyness is often a clear indication of feelings of insecurity. Although Owen was relatively successful in masking his feelings of insecurity, some of his teachers realised his lack of self-confidence and gave him the guidance and encouragement which helped him to develop his interest in literature and which was of vital importance to his later development as a poet.

Harold Owen feels that his brother's English teacher at the Shrewsbury Technical School was the first person to help Wilfred combat his lack of confidence in his academic abilities and in his biography of Owen, Jon Stallworthy not only mentions the same English teacher but also refers to Miss Edith Morley who was head of the English Department at Reading University College, where Owen had arranged to attend Botany classes. As well as advising Owen on the technicalities of poetry, Miss Morley also gave him the reassurance and approval that he needed so badly. Stallworthy quotes from a letter written by Miss Morley in which she described Owen as "an 'unhappy adolescent, suffering badly from lack of understanding . . . and in need of encouragement and praise' " (*WO* 75).

Owen's lack of self-confidence and need for security manifested themselves in many of the things he said and did and, according to Harold Owen, it was characteristic of his elder brother to constantly try to prove himself because of the nagging doubts he had about his own capabilities. In Harold's opinion, an early example of Wilfred's desire to prove "the actuality of his knowledge" to himself was when four Indian seamen went to the Owen household in Birkenhead for dinner. Prior to the guests' arrival, Wilfred had learnt one or two Hindustani phrases from his father and he practised them on the sailors during the

course of the evening, thus demonstrating to himself that recently acquired knowledge could be of immediate use (*JFO* I, 46-8).¹

A further example of Owen's lack of self-confidence has amusingly been told by both Harold Owen and Jon Stallworthy when they describe Mr. Owen's visit to his son in Bordeaux where Wilfred was working as an English Language teacher in the Berlitz School of Languages. Presumably ashamed of his family's social standing and possibly aware of the advantages of having a titled father, Wilfred had led his acquaintances to believe that his father was a knight.

The child-like need Owen had to impress his mother with his knowledge could be interpreted as a further reflection of his lack of self-esteem: if he could impress people with what he knew, then perhaps he would earn their respect. His letters home to his mother from France show Wilfred using French words and phrases such as "grippe", "A bas les tyrans", "belle", "Je les déteste", "tant pis" and "villégiature" (*CL* 207, 250, 271-2) but one questions the usefulness of this as Susan Owen's academic education was rather limited and it is not known whether she spoke French or not.

The sense of satisfaction Owen so clearly experienced at feeling useful to others could also be considered as evidence of the unrecognised need he had to feel important, respected and loved. However, once he had left home and begun to develop his own personality, without the shadow of his mother's influence hovering over him, Owen's craving for the approval of others and his childhood egocentricity gradually disappeared and

¹From the page headings in his book, it is clear that Jon Stallworthy considers that this dinner took place in 1899, when Owen was six years old (see *WO* 17-18), thus making Harold Owen a two-year-old with a remarkable capacity to remember minor details. Whilst relating this event in *JFO* I, Harold Owen makes no mention of either his brother's age or his own, but he does state that the dinner took place around the time his father employed a woman to help Mrs. Owen with household affairs. This housekeeper was known to the Owen family as Mrs. Moore. In *WO*, Stallworthy's page-heading indicates that Mrs. Moore was employed by Mr. Owen in 1906, when Wilfred Owen was thirteen years old (35). This would make Harold eleven: an age when a memory for minutiae is not so surprising.

he became more genuinely concerned about those around him.

Owen's developing awareness and sensitivity towards others is reflected in some of the verse he wrote whilst at Dunsden parish where he worked as lay assistant for a time. The poem, "Deep under turfy grass and heavy clay", for instance, reflects Owen's reaction to the deaths of a mother and her four year old daughter. The tragedy stimulated a poetic response that bore a social awareness that up until now, had not been evident in other pieces that he had penned at Dunsden.

Owen's concern for fellow human beings is also seen later on as a soldier on active service in France and as a patient at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, where he was treated for shellshock - or neurasthenia - from June to November, 1917. As part of his therapy at Craiglockhart, Owen assumed certain social responsibilities: he helped Mrs. Mary Gray in her social work in and around Edinburgh and he taught English Literature to a class of boys at Tynecastle School in Edinburgh. After his first lesson on 25 September 1917, he wrote to his mother and told her that he felt that teaching at the school was "one of the most humanly useful things" he was doing at the time (*CL* 496). This reflects the pleasure Owen got from helping others and in turn may be an indicator of the subconscious need he had to do things for others in order to boost his low self-esteem. Owen's slowly developing consideration for other people was eventually channelled into the care and concern he felt for the soldiers of the First World War and it was finally and eternally reflected in his war poetry.

If Harold Owen's accounts of his brother Wilfred are to be believed, then it appears that although he was forced to assume responsibility at a very early age, Wilfred was not a particularly altruistic child. To a certain degree, premature responsibility obliged him to at least be aware of the needs of those around him, irrespective of whether or not he

responded to those needs. Much of the care of Harold and Mary Owen fell into Wilfred's hands because Colin, the youngest of the Owen children, was a sickly child and the constant care and attention he needed sapped a considerable amount of Mrs. Owen's time and energy. It is feasible that this early sense of responsibility led to the awakening of Wilfred's social conscience whilst he was at Dunsden and eventually contributed to his perception and awareness of the conditions that the soldiers fighting at the front during the First World War had to endure.

As a child, Owen's seriousness and his concern for his siblings was often healthily counteracted by behaviour which was not particularly thoughtful. The delight he took in frightening Harold and Mary with his stories whilst they were living in Birkenhead is understandable in a child of his age. What is less acceptable and reflects Wilfred's selfishness was his behaviour towards Harold when, at the age of fourteen, the two of them shared an attic bedroom in their new house in Shrewsbury. In describing Wilfred's single-minded dedication to his work, Harold also, perhaps unwittingly, shows what little respect Wilfred had for him. Wilfred would work long into the night without showing any consideration towards Harold and he was often the cause of his brother's disturbed nights: being a dominant and sometimes inconsiderate boy, he was determined to achieve what he wanted, whatever the cost might have been to his younger brother.

Up until the time he left home, Wilfred seemed to be more concerned with the acquisition of knowledge than with anything else. Harold Owen feels that this perhaps made Wilfred impervious to many of the hardships that assailed the family during their childhood and adolescence. Wilfred's selfishness and apparent refusal or inability to acknowledge reality was excused by Harold: "His road lay clearly before him - the pursuit of knowledge and the determination that literature and the other arts should take precedence over all else

in his life. In this way he acquired an immunity, almost an invulnerability, to the difficulties which beset the rest of us. . . ." (*JFO I*, 122).

Owen's self-centredness during his early years possibly prevented him from developing sympathy and empathy towards others sooner than he did. In adolescence, he was moody and difficult and particularly sensitive about things that concerned himself. Mary and Colin, the two other Owen children, rarely suffered the consequences of Wilfred's insensitive behaviour and Mrs. Owen was never victim of her son's tirades. However, his father and Harold often had to bear the brunt of his moodiness. Harold Owen describes Wilfred's imbalance between sensitivity and insensitivity:

I often think that Wilfred's petulant and frequently disparaging demeanour . . . was very largely deliberate, so that consciously he antagonized in order to bring about combat and bring argument into conversation. . . . if any of us occasionally procured some undeniable and unexpected advantage over him, instead of his magnificent flow of blistering eloquence, he would somehow become diffident, young and altogether defenceless. His eyes, which could, on occasion, glitter so dangerously and with such challenge, would, at these times fill over with a gentle despair which robbed him of his superior age and made him intolerably vulnerable. . . . we were never able to tease or bait him. We much preferred his blistering tongue to his silent and obvious susceptibility to wounding (*JFO II*, 37-8).

As he grew older, Wilfred never lost his ability to fire scathing remarks. He was always ready to reprimand and correct Harold, yet at the same time, he was never able to

see the same faults in himself. A clear example of this occurred shortly after Harold's return from his first sea voyage. Despite having been quite ill whilst away, Harold was still interested in pursuing a career at sea. He had been offered the possibility of working on the railway with his father but was reluctant to take the job. Without reflecting upon his own behaviour, Wilfred advised Harold to take the job and reproached him for causing anxiety to his parents about his future. As if to add insult to injury, Wilfred then lectured Harold on the importance of accepting what destiny had to offer him. Harold certainly did not fail to see the irony of the situation, as it was Wilfred who was so intent on pursuing what seemed to be the unattainable (*JFO II*, 200).

Much later on, the verbal attacks that Wilfred Owen was so wont to bombard his family with were re-moulded and re-channelled into words of protest against the injustices of the first modern war that tore Western Europe apart.

Tom Owen, Wilfred Owen's father, provided the turning point for Wilfred insofar as his perception of people was concerned. Although Mrs. Owen appeared to be the most influential and dominant person in Wilfred's life, it was Tom's gentle humanness that eventually opened Wilfred's eyes to a broader view of mankind. During Tom's visit to Bordeaux to see his son they became closer to each other. Harold Owen explains that:

It was during that time that Wilfred's deep humanity and perceptive sympathy was sprung into life; the surprise of finding my father so different from what he had expected galvanized him into taking stock of himself and into the self-revealing knowledge that from now on he would have to rearrange much of his thinking. So much that he had until now taken for granted as applying to my father, very often with adverse bias, he found was no longer tenable

and because of this all his preconceived conceptions about people would have to undergo searching reevaluation. It was those happy and companionable days that my father and he spent together in France which were directly responsible for this volcanic disturbance taking place in Wilfred, making him vitally conscious of his own need for reassessment of many of his - so far - somewhat docketed and too-swiftly tagged ideas of men and women (*JFO* III, 57).

Had it not been for the drive and ambition that Wilfred Owen possessed, he might never have become a poet. Against heavy odds, which included a relatively limited formal education and a family of no standing within academic and literary circles, Wilfred Owen was determined to make his mark.

Bernard Bergonzi describes Owen as being "provincial both in origins and attitudes".² That he was provincial in origins there is no doubt, but to describe him as provincial in attitudes - at least in his adult life - is somewhat harsh. Moreover, when Owen died at the age of twenty-five, clear signs of greater maturity at both personal and artistic levels were becoming more evident in his letters and poems. The process of maturity that Owen was experiencing would probably have continued had it not been for his untimely death and had Owen been as provincial in his attitudes as Bergonzi proposes, he would quite possibly have changed with the acquisition of further experience. Certain situations which Owen brought about do lay him open to the criticism of being a snob and this is perhaps why Bergonzi has labelled him provincial in attitude. In *Anthem For a Doomed Youth*, Kenneth Simcox has supported Bergonzi's view by suggesting that Owen was both an

²Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight*, 121.

intellectual and social snob and he feels that this is evident in Owen's letters right up to the time of his death.

That Owen was dissatisfied with and attempted to improve his social and intellectual status is not surprising: he was a determined young man, always willing to make sacrifices in order to achieve his goals and he succeeded in changing his social position by joining the army after spending time in France and being accepted as a noncommissioned officer. Owen's association with Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart War Hospital provided the intellectual advancement he so earnestly sought.

In *Wilfred Owen, The Last Year*, Dominic Hibberd's references to Lieutenant H. R. Bate, one of Owen's fellow officers, lend support to Simcox's suggestion that Owen was a snob. Bate was with Owen in camp in 1915 and 1918 and remembered Owen as being quiet and reserved. Whilst in Scarborough in 1918, Owen had to work with Lieutenant Priestley who had been appointed mess president and Hibberd explained that Bate saw Owen, who never seemed to speak to or smile at anyone else, as "Priestley's shadow". Bate, unable to determine whether Owen was "painfully shy or insufferably arrogant", was willing to attribute Owen's behaviour to his timidity until he came to read *CL*. Then, suggests Hibberd, Bate came to the conclusion that "snobbery had been the reason for Owen's aloofness" and that was why he considered other officers to be nothing more than " 'temporary' gentlemen" (85-6).

Although Owen always claimed to feel closer to the common soldier than to fellow officers, he quite plainly considered himself different. When he was sent to a training camp at Ripon in March 1918, Owen was assigned to living quarters that were to be shared with thirteen other fellow officers. He was not pleased with the arrangements and spoke disparagingly of the other officers, describing the majority of them as "privates and

sergeants in masquerade", adding that he would "prefer to be among honest privates than these snobs" (CL 539). But one only has to look back at the early letters Owen sent to his mother when he first went to France on active service in January 1917 to see that although he did not identify with his fellow officers, neither did he integrate with the common soldiers, whom he described as "the roughest set of knaves I have ever been herded with expressionless lumps" (CL 422). In his last letter home on 31 October 1918, Owen described the damp, cramped conditions of the cellar in which he was temporarily housed. When writing of the men he was in such close contact with, it is interesting to note that his descriptions are detached and impersonal, as if he were a distant observer. One wonders at his sincerity when he wrote "It is a great life. . . . Of this I am certain you could not be visited by a band of friends half so fine as surround me here" (CL 591).

Although Harold Owen makes several references to financial difficulties within the family, the Owens were never near to destitution. Owen's origins were not so lowly that they merited being ashamed of them yet he tried to hide his lower middle-class background on several occasions. It was mentioned earlier that whilst working as an English Language teacher in Bordeaux, Owen had led his acquaintances to believe that his father was a knight. This would have automatically opened up a wide range of social possibilities which, as the son of the Assistant Superintendent of the Joint Railways, would otherwise have been unattainable. Fortunately, Owen's father went along with the ruse and Owen's deception was not discovered by those who knew him.

Although the accounts of this incident are entertaining, one cannot help but feel sorry that Owen had to resort to such snobbery and childish deceit in order to feel socially accepted by his new acquaintances. His lack of maturity is clearly demonstrated in this episode. Owen's sin did not lie in aspiring to move up the social scale but rather in his

foolish and naïve attempts to disown his background, which he considered a hindrance insofar as his own social progress was concerned. Perhaps he felt it more fitting for an aspiring young poet to come from a titled family.

After Owen's tale about his father's knighthood, one wonders whether or not he concocted other stories about his social status for the sake of those he came into contact with at a later date. In the summer of 1914, he spent a month in the Pyrenees in the company of Mme. Léger, a wealthy Parisian pupil and her family and later on he spent time in Mérignac where he was employed by Miss de la Touche, to tutor two of her four nephews. In a note to chapter three of his book *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd intimates that Owen probably did fabricate stories about his social position (211). Would the Légers, who lived in an expensive part of town, or Miss de la Touche, who had been governess to royalty and whose sister was a baroness, have considered employing a young man whose father was not a knight but an employee of a railway company? Owen could have learnt his lesson from the "knighthood experience" of Bordeaux, but from notes provided by Harold Owen and John Bell in *CL*, it appears that he did not: he clearly lied to Miss de la Touche about his academic future. In a footnote in *CL*, the editors quoted a letter that Miss de la Touche had written to the headmaster of the school that her nephews attended in which she stated that she had arranged for her nephews to be tutored by a young man who was "preparing for Oxford" (305).

Hints of snobbery are seen in some of the letters that Owen sent to his mother from Mérignac. His description of the surroundings and the manner in which the household was run would lead an uninformed reader to believe that Owen was accustomed to living in a house that had servants. Descriptions of this nature probably pleased Mrs. Owen as they would have reminded her of her more comfortable youth when she had lived in Oswestry

during the time that her father had had a flourishing business and had enjoyed the status of alderman.

In the memoir that Edmund Blunden wrote for the 1931 edition of Wilfred Owen's poems, he quoted Mrs. Mary Gray, who when writing of Owen as an adult, said that "He suffered deeply from diffidence, and self-distrust. . . . He set himself immensely high standards, and in moments of despondency grieved deeply over what he regarded, quite unjustifiably, as his failure to live up to them" (170-71). Kenneth Simcox has suggested that Wilfred Owen was a "born self-educator"³: it was his constant thirst for knowledge that took him far beyond the limits that his basic education had left him. Harold Owen himself maintained that his brother was not exceptionally clever, but rather it was his motivation and discipline that spurred him on to overcome his scholastic difficulties and develop his artistic talent. Wilfred Owen was a perfectionist and the constant striving to better himself often caused considerable personal dissatisfaction but it was this that helped him to become the poet that he so earnestly sought to become.

Owen's tendency to be a perfectionist was evident from a very early age and he was possessed by a sense of urgency and a constant desire to improve himself. Harold Owen feels that much of the bantering and scolding that Wilfred inflicted upon his brothers and sister was an indirect form of scourging himself for what he considered to be his deficiencies. Harold has mentioned that even on his way to and from school, Wilfred never dallied. It was as if he did not want to waste time on any activity which he considered unproductive. Harold considers that "The fears which were to haunt him so desperately in later years had their beginnings here: the dread that lack of time or death itself would prevent him from doing all he must do was starting to ride him" (*JFO* I, 91).

³Kenneth Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, 93.

The virtually non-existent farewell that Wilfred bade to Harold from his sick-bed when Harold was about to embark upon his first sea-voyage was more likely due to Wilfred's unrecognised resentment of Harold having found some kind of future for himself and frustration about his own uncertain future rather than to his illness. Wilfred felt that he still had to carve out a path for himself, whilst Harold, whom Wilfred seemed to consider somewhat uncouth and ignorant, had the world and all the cultural delights it had to offer at his disposition.

The self-imposed discipline that was so typical of Owen as a boy was carried on into his life in the army. That Owen considered being anything but a good soldier inconceivable and that he imposed a rigid discipline upon himself are reminiscent of the desire that Owen always appeared to have of giving his best; he was never content with merely completing the task at hand. Harold Owen quotes his brother: "You know, Harold, if I have got to be a soldier, I must be a good one, anything else is unthinkable" (*JFO* III, 155). This comment not only reflects Owen's desire to fulfil his role as an officer, but also his struggle to be a perfectionist in whatever he did. As a poet, the constant corrections that Owen carried out on his work also bear witness to this struggle.

The process of personal change in Wilfred Owen was very slow and frequently painful because of his often over-acute sensitivity and perception. As early as April 1912, dissatisfaction, indecision and non-conformity can be detected. Reflecting upon revolution and reconstruction in English Literature, Owen wrote in a letter from Dunsden ". . . I am increasingly liberalising and liberating my thought . . ." Then, considering the idea of peasant uprisings, he went on to ask, "Am I for or against upheaval? I know not; I am not happy in these thoughts; yet they press upon me" (*CL* 131). Owen's mind was constantly active and he continually questioned the state of things around him. He applied this type

of questioning both to life in general and to his personal life. Consequently, he experienced difficult periods which caused considerable psychological and emotional upheaval. Irrespective of whether or not he was against upheaval, Owen had no choice but to address the personal doubts that assailed him.

1.1.2 A Mother's Presence

Despite the many long-term personal difficulties the relationship he had with his mother caused Owen, it was the longest-lasting and possibly the closest one he ever had. She was a very absorbing mother and subconsciously demanded a great deal of emotional support from her eldest child.

Unfortunately, correspondence from Mrs. Owen to her son has not survived but, at his request, she kept most of the letters he wrote to her. These letters, published in *CL*, offer insight into the relationship that existed between mother and son, from the son's point of view. Harold Owen's *JFO* provides some indication of the mother-son relationship as witnessed by a third party. The reader is again reminded that since Harold was jealous of Wilfred in childhood, feelings of resentment could have coloured his interpretation of events. Harold Owen's relationship with his mother, in contrast to the relationship Wilfred had with her, may have affected his later representation of both of them in his memoirs.

Despite her rather puritanical beliefs and inflexible ideas about many things, Susan Owen was held in high regard by her husband and children. Tom Owen's love for his wife and the affection she received from her offspring reflect the standing she held within the family but, if Harold Owen's accounts are to be believed, Susan Owen was not impartial in her affections. She doted much more on her eldest son than she did on her other offspring and always had great hopes for him. She was never overly-concerned about her

other children's education, but she urged Wilfred to read and develop his interest in the arts. Although she was not very well-educated herself, Mrs. Owen did all she could to promote her son's academic progress, yet she did very little to discourage his emotional dependence on her.

In describing Wilfred's behaviour towards his mother whilst on a family holiday in Ireland, Harold Owen shows the powerful influence Susan Owen had over Wilfred. Tom Owen spent a great deal of time following outdoor pursuits with Harold and Colin whilst Wilfred, who was less inclined to lead an active life, stayed indoors with his mother. Harold feels that it was during this holiday that Wilfred "began to seek means of expression for his admiration and devotion which was tending towards adoration." Harold goes on to describe this family holiday as being "in many ways momentous for Wilfred for he was now just old enough to be permanently influenced. It was probably during this time that he became conscious of his allegiance to my mother and of his reluctance to confide in my father" (*JFO I, 77*). Owen's tendency towards excessive adoration of his mother existed and persisted solely because Susan Owen permitted it to do so.

Susan Owen was so possessive of her son that she frequently behaved in a way that would permit her to keep him emotionally close and physically near to her, although this was to his detriment. A clear example of this occurred on the promotion of Mr. Owen to Assistant Superintendent of the Joint Railways in late 1906 and the family had to move from Birkenhead to Shrewsbury. The very idea of the move saddened and worried Wilfred as he knew he would have to leave the Birkenhead Institute, where he was studying. Alec Paton was Wilfred's closest friend at the Institute so Mr. Owen spoke to the Paton family and arranged for Wilfred to stay with them during term-time. The arrangement seemed ideal but on not even entertaining the thought of being separated from her eldest son, Mrs.

Owen prevented him from pursuing his education in a place where he was happy.

The previously mentioned sense of responsibility that Wilfred had assumed at a very early age could be interpreted as another form of Mrs. Owen controlling or "possessing" her son. In thrusting responsibility for his younger brothers and sister onto Wilfred's shoulders, Mrs. Owen was ensuring that Wilfred would be accountable to her.

Susan Owen's increasingly delicate health and Tom Owen's lengthy working day were also factors which forced Wilfred to become prematurely responsible and Harold Owen felt this accounted "in great measure for his early gravity, and made him mature far beyond his years. . . . I always think Wilfred was denied if not his boyhood, at least his boyishness" (*JFO* I, 23). These circumstances resulted in an even closer bond between mother and eldest son, which seemed to further separate Wilfred from his father and other family members.

Owen clearly identified much more with the maternal side of the family than the paternal side. Whenever he was away from home, he always maintained contact with his mother and most of his letters were addressed to her. When it came to considering possibilities for his future, rather than consulting his father directly or even asking his mother about his father's opinion on the teaching profession, Wilfred chose to ask what his mother's brother, Uncle John, would think about it.⁴ In a letter written in December 1914, Owen told his mother that he wanted to "talk over my Future, first with You; and then with a Professor or a Recruiting Sergeant" (*CL* 305). By excluding his father, Owen showed how much he relied on and revered his mother and this helped perpetuate the feeling of the family being divided.

The letters Owen sent to his mother frequently reflect the intensity of the feelings

⁴Wilfred Owen, *CL* 70.

he had for her and the intimate tone he used when addressing her was consistent. His style of greeting ranged from the usual "Dear Mother" to more emotional forms like "My dear darling Mother" (*CL 527*), or "My own sweet Mother" (*CL 572*). He never failed in his attentions to her. In one of his early letters, he told her that he would have given ten years of his life to have been born a hundred years earlier and thus be nearer in time to his poetic hero, Keats, "always providing that I have the same dear mother" (*CL 69*).

A letter written from Dunsden Vicarage on 20 May 1912 came very close to blasphemy: basing his salutations on the Christian prayer, "The Hail Mary", Owen addressed his mother in the following manner:

O most sweet among Mothers,
 Blessed is thy hand which writes to me so often! Blessed
 is thy heart which perceives the Sorrows of mine!! O Blessed art thou
 among women! (*CL 136*).

This same letter shows how the love Owen felt for his mother almost amounted to infatuation, as can also be seen from the following extract: "O how do I stand (yes and sit, lie, kneel and walk, too,) in need of some tangible caress from you. . . . my affections are physical as well as abstract - intensely so - and confound 'em for that, it shouldn't be so!" (*CL 137*).

The deep affection that Owen always showed for his mother is evident in the last letter he wrote to her from Scarborough before returning to active service in 1918 when he told her how much he missed her:

. . . I am quite wretched tonight, missing you so much. Oh so much!

Taking the world as it really is, not everybody of my years can boast (or as many would say, confess) that their Mother is absolute in their affections.

But I believe it will always be so with me, always.

There is nothing in heaven or earth like you. . . (CL 569)

Mrs. Owen tended to be a hypochondriac and encouraged Wilfred in his belief that he had delicate health. This gave both of them a further reason to be more attentive towards each other.

Shortly after hearing that he had failed to gain access to University, Owen suffered a bronchial attack. His mother nursed him and despite the doctor's diagnosis of Wilfred's condition and his assurances that her son would make a complete recovery, Susan Owen was convinced that her son was either suffering from, or on the point of contracting, tuberculosis. The doctor recommended a period of time in a warmer climate and Owen eventually decided to take up a part-time English-teaching post in Bordeaux.

Whilst in Bordeaux, Owen did not appear to be blessed with particularly good health, although his condition was probably never as serious as he suggested it was in his letters home. Almost as if by way of excuse for the dissatisfaction he felt with life in general, Owen seemed to become more of a hypochondriac than before and his lamentations about being plagued by poor health were fuelled rather than curtailed by his mother. His letters contained details of what he considered to be his deteriorating health and he seemed to revel in self-pity. He was in constant need of attention from his mother, who was only too willing to pander to him.

As a strict Calvinist, Susan Owen was a woman who firmly believed in destiny and

God's will. As regards her other children, she seemed quite willing to let both destiny and God's will determine their future. However, as far as Wilfred was concerned, Susan Owen was not against assisting the Almighty in His plans.

The Owen children were brought up to follow their mother's religious beliefs. Quite early on, Wilfred seemed to realise that by adopting suitably religious behaviour, it was more likely that he would always be in his mother's favour and since earning his mother's approval was far more important to him than anything else, he unquestioningly accepted the religion she passed on to her offspring. Harold Owen's more independent spirit and less rigid religious attitudes provided a contrast between the two brothers and highlighted the lesser need Harold had to court his mother's attentions. In *JFO I*, Harold Owen tells the tale of how, shortly after the family had moved to Shrewsbury, he was clearly troubled by the lewd behaviour of some of the boys at his new school. He confided in Wilfred, who in turn spoke to his mother about the matter. Susan Owen's way of tackling the problem was to discuss it in terms of God's will. Harold, who was less easily influenced by his mother than Wilfred, was not at all willing to accept this notion and was inclined not to trust in the God his mother set so much store by. This irreligious response displeased his mother who found comfort in the very different attitude of her first-born who appeared to be showing considerable interest in religion, or, as Jon Stallworthy has so astutely observed, "an increasing interest in pleasing his mother."⁵

As a Child, Wilfred's interest in religion and the mutual desire mother and son had to please each other resulted in the dominical transformation of the family's Shrewsbury sitting-room into what became known as "Wilfred's Church". Mrs. Owen made all the regalia that was necessary for Wilfred to make his imaginary church as realistic as possible.

⁵Jon Stallworthy, *WO* 39.

Throughout his life, Owen depended very much on the psychological support of his mother, and although religion was one of the links that bound them so closely together in the earlier years, it later became one of the factors that helped create a greater distance between them, thus providing Owen with the opportunity to develop his own personality in the absence of maternal control.

Owen first started questioning religion and his religious beliefs whilst he was working as a lay assistant in a parish in Dunsden, near Reading. However, rather than openly criticising Christianity and religion and therefore going against his mother, Owen channelled his criticism into developing a more highly-refined social conscience and many of his religious doubts were transformed into commentaries against the social injustices he bore witness to. Nevertheless, the development of greater social awareness was not sufficient to keep Owen at Dunsden and his dissatisfaction with the course his life was taking there was considerable enough for him to go against his mother's wishes and even run the risk of offending her staunch religious views by leaving.

The remainder of Owen's life was marked by periods of religious doubts and questioning. His war experiences, both before and after the time he spent as a patient at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh as well as the time he spent at the hospital itself, forced him to angrily question many of the religious beliefs he had been brought up with and since it was his mother who had inculcated these beliefs, Owen's gradual growth towards religious independence could be interpreted as a subtle move away from maternal influence. Mrs. Owen's hold over her son in the sphere of religion became weaker and weaker until it virtually became non-existent.

Mrs. Owen and Wilfred seemed to satisfy each other's needs for attention and the monopolising and controlling of emotions appeared to be a two-way affair that often led to

the exclusion of all other family members.

Owen liked to draw parallels between Keats and himself, to the extent that he sought to encounter points of comparison between Keats's mother and his own. Owen knew that his mother was aware of his adoration of the poet and he used this as a means of manipulating her feelings towards him. Quoting from *CL*, Jon Stallworthy draws attention to the control Owen exercised over his mother: "Wilfred. . . was delighted to read that Keats, too, had a mother who was devoted to him, and he underlined the statement that she 'humoured him in *every whim of which he had not a few*'. . ." (*WO* 57). By telling his mother this, Owen was hinting that she too, should humour every caprice that he might have.

Owen used Mrs. Owen's desire to observe social conventionality and respectability as a further means of remaining in her favour. He was aware of his mother's social snobbery and quite possibly recalled the manner in which, when he was a child, she had rejected his father's lowly seafaring contacts. In his letters home, Owen spoke highly of the social contacts he had made whilst in France. Any worries Mrs. Owen might have had about her son being seduced by Mme. Léger, his married Parisian pupil, were quashed and little importance was attached to the connections the Légers had with the theatre. Mrs. Owen was only provided with the information her son knew she would like to have.

Owen's next teaching appointment took him to Mérignac where he tutored Bobbie and Johnny de la Touche. His correspondence home was full of details that were indicative of the high social standing of his employers and the descriptions he gave undoubtedly satisfied Susan Owen. Even though Owen described the chalet he was staying in as ". . . not very spacious. Just a well-built bungalow" (*CL* 309), he was quick to explain the presence of four servants. In the same letter, he told his mother that ". . . all the good

traditions of an English country-house are observed." A reader unfamiliar with Owen's family background would perhaps be tempted to believe that Owen was more than accustomed to having his daily bath run by a man-servant and being waited upon by maid-servants at meal times.

In most of the letters prior to his war experiences, Owen did all he could to give his mother the assurance she needed. Letters from Dunsden and France contained a mixture of attempts to impress and to pander her. In *Anthem For a Doomed Youth*, however, Kenneth Simcox recalls that C. Day Lewis has suggested that in his war letters, Owen purposely did quite the opposite; assurance was less forthcoming and he seemed to deliberately describe his war experiences in detail in order to gain her sympathy (13).

In his adult life, Owen was able to control his mother in increasingly more subtle ways: he encouraged her to reject the more traditional idea of men going heroically off to war and to develop anti-war feelings. A few weeks before he was killed, he wrote to her in a manner that reflected an adult's control over a child: "I am very glad you are finding courage to speak. In a previous letter you said you kept quiet. I was not proud of that" (CL 584-5). This last brief sentence must have cut very deeply into a mother who so fervently wished to please her son.

Wilfred's relationship with his mother influenced the relationships he had with other members of his family. Her treatment of her other offspring, though loving, was not as intense as it was towards her eldest child. This contrast in devotion serves to highlight the favouritism Wilfred enjoyed.

Harold Owen sorely felt and resented the distinction made between Wilfred and the other children in the family and in *JFO I*, he describes the family division which occurred:

. . . my father and mother and Wilfred on the parental side, and me, Mary and Colin on the small children side. . . this very often threw undue responsibility . . . upon Wilfred. . . . This established an early bond between herself [Mrs. Owen] and Wilfred, and had the tendency to separate Wilfred further from us three (*JFO* I, 23).

The quality of the relationship Wilfred Owen had with his father was determined, to a great extent, by the relationship he had with his mother. Perhaps in order to secure Wilfred's attention for herself, Mrs. Owen seemed to do nothing to encourage any kind of closeness between father and son. Different parental ambitions for Wilfred began to have an unsettling effect on the way the family functioned. Father and son became more and more remote from each other and the mutual lack of understanding between Wilfred and Harold increased. At the same time, this undoubtedly affected the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Owen and an all-round atmosphere of antagonism set in.

On Sunday mornings, Mr. Owen did voluntary work for a Seamen's Mission and he often took Harold with him as he distributed tracts around the docks. Mrs. Owen never accompanied her husband on these visits and she openly objected to Wilfred going. Her exaggerated concern for her eldest son aggravated a rift that was already developing between Wilfred and his father and it was also causing the family to become even more divided. Wilfred himself did nothing to alleviate matters and, according to Jon Stallworthy, ". . . sensing the conflict between his parents, was happy to side with his mother" (*WO* 16). Harold Owen reflects upon the family rift: "My mother from the beginning was jealous that my father should exert any strong influence over us children and most especially over Wilfred and she undoubtedly gained supremacy over Wilfred and to a less extent over the

rest of us" (*JFO I*, 39-40). Later on, Harold goes into more detail, suggesting that Mrs. Owen was greatly responsible for the conflict that existed between Wilfred and his father:

The family as it grew up tended towards some curious divisions of loyalty. My father's love for his first-born was extremely real and a lovely thing, but the passionate determination of my mother that all of Wilfred should be hers alone embittered my father's love for him and explained the cold and antagonistic attitude he took, not so much towards Wilfred, but more towards his future ambitions and endeavours. I think my mother was, without realizing it, unscrupulous here and it was only an inbred dignity of conduct in my father which prevented open strife between my parents" (*JFO I*, 53-4).

In the knowledge that he was possibly the catalyst in the deterioration of the quality of the communication between his parents, Owen did nothing to help ease the tension. Instead of diplomatically addressing his letters from Dunsden to both his parents, or writing to each of them alternately, he sent most of his letters to his mother. Harold Owen recalls that this exclusion hurt and confused his father (*JFO II*, 14). On his return from Dunsden, Wilfred continued to exacerbate the worsening situation between his parents: with his lingering poor health, Wilfred's irritability had to be borne by the whole family and he showed increasing intolerance towards his father - to such an extent that Mrs. Owen had to intervene between the two:

Consequently the atmosphere often became charged with feeling and the relation between my father and mother temporarily strained. At such times

the cohesion between Wilfred and my mother became more apparent than ever, so that they seemed aligned together to oppose my father, and her constant championing of Wilfred caused not only unnecessary friction but widened the needless gulf between him and Wilfred (*JFO* II, 14).

This constant belittling and exclusion that Tom Owen was made to feel by his wife and Wilfred encouraged the other children in the family to treat him likewise. Harold Owen feels that this probably accounted for Mr. Owen's withdrawal into himself.

If any informal sex education took place within families at the beginning of the twentieth century, it probably occurred more by accident than by design. Bearing in mind the puritanical background of his mother and the distance that existed between his father and himself, Wilfred Owen probably had no source of information on sexual matters from within the family. Jon Stallworthy has suggested that the influence of a dominant and puritanical mother who instilled very high moral principles in her children may have been the cause of a lack of sexual identity in Owen and on discussing some of Owen's early poetry, he has pointed out that the young poet seemed preoccupied with the male body.⁶ Stallworthy attributes this to the excessive influence Susan Owen had over her son and he suggests that Owen's admiration of "clean male beauty" is more than understandable given that his sexuality had been suppressed through her influence. Furthermore, Owen's relationship with his mother more than likely formed the basis of the relationships he was to have with other females. During his childhood, Mrs. Owen made sure she was the central figure in his life and, in his adolescence and adulthood, she did her best to maintain that position. A clear-cut example of Susan Owen's invisible hold on her son is seen when, in April 1913,

⁶Jon Stallworthy, *WO* 70.

after visiting one of Keats's old homes, Owen wrote to her. In the rough draft of the letter, Owen explained that he had visited Keats's ex-residence and in the process of talking about his love for the dead poet, he added, "I fear domestic criticism when I am in love with a real live woman".⁷ This suggests that Owen was aware that his mother would most probably have opposed or found objection to any female her son might have chosen as an acquaintance, friend or companion.

Dominic Hibberd has pointed out that once Owen had gone to France, he ". . . could no longer avoid mature relationships. In his letters home, he gently rebuked his mother for having kept him ignorant of sex; nevertheless, he assured her that all women, 'without exception, *annoy* me, and the mercenaries. . . I utterly detest'."⁸

Owen acknowledged the influence his mother had over him when he described her as the "FORCE" behind his poetry and his life (CL 234). Basing his comments on Hibberd's observations, Adrian Caesar considers that there is ". . . also a recognition that her attitude to his [Owen's] love life is damaging. He is also dimly aware that his attitude to women is not entirely laudable."⁹

Mrs. Owen clearly felt that her position of importance in her son's life was threatened when he spent the summer of 1914 in Bagnères-de-Bigorre with the Léger family and Mme. Léger showed signs of interest in him. Owen first attempted to subdue his mother's fears by asking his sister, Mary, to calm their mother's anxiety about the attentions Mme. Léger seemed to be paying him: "The suspicions about her attitude to me, and her *Coquetterie* are more or less correct. But I don't care two pins, so let her be tranquillised,

⁷Wilfred Owen, CL 186.

⁸Dominic Hibberd, OTP 34. (Hibberd's quotation is from Wilfred Owen's CL 234).

⁹Adrian Caesar, *Taking It Like a Man*, 133.

I prithee" (*CL* 278). Further reassurance was evident in his next letter to his mother when Owen stated that in spite of the apparent attraction Mme. Léger felt for him, it was by no means reciprocated (*CL* 279).

Accepting employment in Bordeaux was an important step in Owen's gradual move towards greater personal freedom. At last, he was able to begin to throw off the fetters that were preventing him from developing as an individual in his own right. Maternal influence, though still very strong, had been put on a less important level by virtue of the distance that separated mother and son. However, despite the geographical distance between them, it was obviously going to be difficult for Owen's sexual and social development to follow its natural course without attempts at interference from home. Douglas Kerr has summed up the relationship between Wilfred Owen and his mother: ". . . for better or worse, she was all women to him, and the love of women would continue to mean, for him, the love of his mother" (*WOV* 53).

It has already been implied that Mrs. Owen's influence over her son was not absolute. It was long before the religious doubts at Dunsden Vicarage set in that Owen first began to question her views. In *JFO* I, Harold Owen explains that life in Shrewsbury in the early days was not easy for his older brother in the sense that he was plagued with doubts about his future and ". . . perhaps a troubled doubt did arise now and again as to whether he and my mother were actually thinking along the same lines or looking towards the same object" (185).

Like most boys, both Wilfred and Harold Owen were eager to enjoy life but their natural desire to follow their own urges was often contained by their mother. In the summer of 1911, a fair had been organised by a religious charity and precisely because of its religious nature, neither Wilfred nor Harold was keen on going but were persuaded to

do so by their mother. Once the religious element of the fair had retreated with the setting sun, more of a fair-ground atmosphere invaded the place and, according to Harold Owen, this was when the two brothers really began to enjoy themselves.

A certain degree of rejection of an over-attentive mother by an adolescent in search of his own identity and independence is considered normal and healthy. Religious "rebellion" aside, Owen showed other signs of gradually attempting to break away from his mother's over-protectiveness whilst at Dunsden. Towards the end of 1912, it was becoming apparent that he was showing signs of being under considerable stress and in letters home on 12 and 19 December, Owen admitted to being in a poor state of nerves. His mother had wanted to contact the Vicar and when she communicated her intention to do so to her son, Owen, quite clearly against the idea, asked her if she wanted to run his life for him and suggested that by contacting the Vicar, she would do much more harm than good (*CL* 173).

In attempting to shape his own future, it was inevitable that Owen would have to stop complying to his mother's wishes. He knew that staying at Dunsden was not going to be beneficial to him and so he had no choice but to act for himself. Relying on God's will - which he considered synonymous to doing nothing - was not sufficient. On writing ". . . what I do find so hard to distinguish between is so aimlessly drifting and waiting upon God" (*CL* 70), Owen ran the risk of upsetting his mother's unyielding religious beliefs and creating a rift between them but he knew that he had to confront his lack of vocation and his growing doubts about the validity of orthodox Christianity.

During the periods of time that he lived away from home, Owen let his mother know that he did as he wished but, at the same time, he always made sure she was aware that he kept within the bounds of what he felt she would consider correct. In a letter written from Bordeaux on 29 April 1914, Owen let his mother know that he had smoked, drunk wine and

even danced on a Sunday. At the same time, he said all he could to appease the anxiety she might have been feeling: "I am not subject to the least temptation to excess from within or without" (*CL* 246). On reading such a phrase, one cannot help but wonder how true this was and one is forced to ask whether this non-surrendering to temptation was due to lack of self-knowledge or excessive self-control - or both.

Mrs. Owen's aversion to alcohol was understandable because her brother, Edward, was an alcoholic. Much to her delight, Wilfred and his school friend, Alec Paton, joined the Young Abstiners' Union. However, Wilfred did not remain abstinent; apart from succumbing to ten-franc bottles of wine whilst in Bordeaux, he and his brother Harold would drink together on the few occasions that they saw each other whilst in the services. Harold Owen has described how, for the first time in their lives, the two brothers drank beer together. He feels this was "a violent rebellion against family tradition", but it could also be interpreted as being a long-overdue but healthy sign of a further weakening of the maternal bond, which, according to Harold "marked the moment when Wilfred and I became individuals to each other and were able to see one another . . . as entities disconnected from the family" (*JFO* III, 142-3).

It was on this occasion that Wilfred recalled a time when the two brothers had discussed their parents' ancestry. At the time, Wilfred thought that Harold had unduly criticised their mother and over-estimated their father but then Wilfred came to recognise his mistake. This episode demonstrates, firstly, that Harold had always been much more emotionally independent of his mother than Wilfred and secondly, that Wilfred, who had always been harsh with his father, was obviously coming to recognise his father's importance and loosen the bond between his mother and himself.

Although he had gradually started growing away from his mother, Owen never fully

succeeded in breaking the strong emotional ties that bound them together. The desire or need to please her was always present. In a letter from the Somme dated 25 Feb 1917, Owen made reference to his sonnet "Happiness". He wrote, "You must not conclude I have misbehaved in any way from the tone of the poem . . . On the contrary I have been a very good boy" (CL 437). At the age of twenty three, Owen felt that he still had to account to his mother for his actions.

When Owen was first admitted to Craiglockhart War Hospital, he wrote a letter to Mrs. Nellie Bulman, an old friend of his mother's, in which he expressed a fervent wish to see his mother, thus showing the dependence he had on her: "I am not able to settle down here without seeing Mother", he wrote (CL 473). Approximately six months later, after having broadened his social contacts through his acquaintance with Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart, a definite lessening of this dependence became evident. For example, whilst carrying out light duties at Scarborough, Owen received an invitation to Robert Graves' wedding in London and with the intention of attending, he asked his mother, "Suppose I got leave for this, would you be very sad?" (CL 527), thus implying that he would be prepared to request leave to attend the wedding without requesting permission to go home. Two days later, he obviously felt remorseful about taking leave for something other than a visit to his mother and so he informed her that he intended to call in at home on the way to London. Although at this stage he was beginning to become more independent, he was still not able to abandon his mother for the sake of pursuing his own interests. It could be added here that Mrs. Owen would probably have succeeded in controlling the relationship that was developing between her son and Siegfried Sassoon if Owen had permitted it. However, the enormous value Owen placed on his friendship with Sassoon prevented attempts at interference by his mother from being successful.

At Craiglockhart, not only did Owen begin to write much of his more moving poetry, but he also underwent a process of personal development which permitted him to question and speak out about many things which he had previously accepted without doubt. For example, in a letter addressed to his mother on Friday 13 August 1917, Owen bitterly condemned the non-practising of the Christian doctrines by the Christian Church. This letter ended up being a truly vehement protest against the war and against those Church leaders whose encouragement of the war defied all that, as Christian leaders, they were supposed to advocate (*CL* 483-4). Such strong feelings also reflect a further move away from maternal influences: irrespective of the danger of deeply offending his mother's religious sensitivity, Owen felt able to make clear comments about the Church's attitude and behaviour during the war. This rejection of formal religion ran parallel to greater independence from his mother. A letter from Scarborough in February 1918 shows Owen attempting to make his mother understand that religion and true religious beliefs go beyond the outward signs of religious practice. He wrote, "If I do not read hymns and Harold no Bible, or Colin sees no life-guide in his prayer-book, it is no bad sign" (*CL* 534).

It was once Owen had experienced the harsh realities of the Western Front that the tone of his letters to his mother changed. The affection and sentiment still remained but the immature self-centredness started to disappear. Although he always found time to ask his mother about her various ailments, he gradually lost the hypochondriacal tendencies that were evident in his letters from Dunsden and Bordeaux. Moreover, if Owen felt it were necessary to reproach his mother for whatever reason, he no longer hesitated to do so. A letter written towards the end of February 1918 is an example of the newly-found courage Owen had acquired when it came to gently but firmly rebuking his mother:

The immensity of our devotion to Childe Colin has yet to be achieved. A fever more scarlet is already inculcating in his veins; and you must take him apart to yourself, wash him with pure words of truth, feed him with the best, and that according to his desires. In the strangeness of his fever he will push you from him; and all your thought will not be able to quench his thirst. Deny him not the things he craves, as I was denied; for I was denied, and the appeal which, if you watched, you must have seen in my eyes, you ignored. And because I knew you resisted, I stretched no hand to take the Doll that would have made my contentment. And my nights were terrible to be borne. For I was a child, and you laughed at my Toys, so that I loved them beyond measure; but never looked at them (*CL 536*).

On advising his mother on how to help his younger brother, Colin, through the difficult stages of early manhood, Owen was criticising her for not having provided him with the guidance and understanding he felt he had needed but was denied during his adolescence. He did not want Colin to suffer the pain and anxiety that he had endured as a result of innocence and naïvety in such matters.

At the beginning of this chapter, it was suggested that an individual's personal development is affected by the relationships he or she has with other people. The greater the influence of other people, the more-lasting will be the effect they are likely to have on the individual. As regards his feelings for his mother, Owen seemed to be constantly pulled in opposite directions. He so desperately wanted to be physically and emotionally close to her but, at the same time, he craved freedom and independence. This opposition between two simultaneous but incompatible desires probably led Owen to a state of emotional

tension. The early influence Mrs. Owen had over her son was so great that it became manifest in his poetry to such an extent that 'mother' images are frequently found in much of his work.

On examining "Supposed Confessions of a Secondrate Sensitive Mind in Dejection" and "The Dread of Falling Into Naught", Adrian Caesar has detected personal conflicts in Owen which could have had their roots in the relationship he had with his mother.¹⁰ Caesar felt that in the first poem, Despondency represented Owen's mother. The poet was unable to escape from the clutches of Despondency and so felt like ". . . a lost man, who, sinking, feebly fights / Alone. . ." (57-58). In the second poem, the poet witnesses the gradual decline of summer and the approach of winter and consequently feels his energy wane: "Night darkens round; my day shall know no afternoon" (20). If summer represents Owen's mother, then the poet's response to its departure is indicative of his dependence on her.

In "Science has looked, and sees no life but this", the poet beseeches Poesy to enlighten him but on receiving no response, he turns to ". . . Mother Earth, / Nestle thou there, child; suck thy fill of joys. / And strive no more to look beyond thy Mother's arms.'" (25-27). Safe in his mother's arms, Owen had no need to seek beyond her comforting presence.

The little-known sonnet "Whereas most women live out this difficult life" reflects how Owen thinks most women might see their role in life. The majority, he says, simply accept their tiresome lot without question and consequently ". . . nothing greatly love, and

¹⁰ Adrian Caesar, *Taking It Like a Man*, 129. As regards the chronology of Owen's poems, Caesar relied on Jon Stallworthy's *CPF*. It appears from his comments that when discussing "The Dread of Falling Into Naught" (*CPF* 34), Caesar may have believed the poem "Science has looked, and sees no life but this" (*CPF* 35) to be a continuation of "The Dread of Falling Into Naught."

nothing loathe -" (5). However, he explains, there are other women who seemingly unaware of reality, ". . . embellish every act with grace" (9) and so seem to add a certain charm to an otherwise mundane existence. Although the second group of women is perhaps more appealing to the romantic concept Owen has of his mother, he tells the reader "Now which you hold as higher than the other / Depends, in fine, on whether you regard / The poetess as nobler than the Mother" (12-14).¹¹

Both Welland¹² and Hibberd¹³ suggest that the lightning metaphor in "Storm" represents the inspiration of Owen, giving rise to a poetry which is powerful because of its truth and beauty. It is also suggested that the lightning symbolises the awakening of love in the poet.¹⁴ In the first stanza the threatening storm or the possibility of love stirring is frightening, to the extent that Owen ". . . shook, and was uneasy as a tree" (3). Yet he knows he must allow the storm to break as he shall benefit: "The land shall freshen that was under gloom" (11). If the 'gloom' disappears, there will be total relief and so the poet says it does not matter if people react negatively to his liberation: "What matter if all men cry out and start, / And women hide their faces in their shawl, / At those hilarious thunders of my fall?" (12-14). Stallworthy suggests that these last few lines might be referring to Mr. and Mrs. Owen (WO 39). If this is the case, then it seems that Owen was possibly coming to terms with the idea of falling in love and also with the possible rejection of this love by

¹¹Jon Stallworthy published this sonnet in *CPF* 81, explaining that it was probably written in 1915 but exists "only in a transcript from an MS since lost." The fair-copy transcript was made by Owen's cousin, Leslie Gunston, in the 1920's. This transcript is now housed at the English Faculty Library, Oxford.

¹²D. S. R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen - A Critical Study*, 41.

¹³Dominic Hibberd, *OTP* 49.

¹⁴Using the dated manuscript as evidence, Stallworthy has suggested that October 1916 was the date in which "Storm" was written (*CPF*, 83). Jennifer Breen disagrees: "Although Wilfred Owen dated this poem 'October 1916', the sole extant fair copy was written at Craiglockhart between August and October 1917." (Jennifer Breen, *Wilfred Owen, Selected Poetry and Prose*, 206). Even if the only existing fair copy was written when Breen suggested, this does not exclude the possibility of the poem having been composed earlier.

his mother and father.

Douglas Kerr has suggested that Owen first learnt to give and receive pity from his mother and since his war poetry was concerned with "War, and the pity of War" (quoted from Owen's Preface to the volume of poems he hoped to publish), then it was virtually inevitable that a mother figure should emerge in his war poetry. It is interesting to note, however, that in his poetry, Owen's references to mothers and other females in general were not complimentary in nature.

The presence of a mother figure is evident in "S.I.W." and in "The Last Laugh" and the general references made to women in poems like "Disabled", "The Dead-Beat" and "The Send-Off" could signify an unrecognised hostility that Owen harboured towards women as a sub-conscious reaction to his over-possessive and dominant mother. Owen most certainly did not see women as worthy of comprehension. His view of their fickleness is hinted at in "The Dead-Beat" when he writes of ". . . his brave young wife, getting her fun / In some new home" (12-13) or in "Disabled" when the injured soldier remembers how, before he went to war, he was very popular with the girls but now, "All of them touch him like some queer disease" (13). Later, ". . . he noticed how the women's eyes / Passed from him to the strong men that were whole" (43-44).

Owen was convinced that he grew to maturity around the time of the severe fighting that took place in and around Beaumont Hamel in late 1916, early 1917. On August 8 1917, he wrote to his mother:

Tennyson, it seems, was always a great child.

So should I have been, but for Beaumont Hamel.

(Not before January 1917 did I write the only lines of mine that carry

the stamp of maturity: these:

But the old happiness is unreturning.

Boys have no grief so grievous as youth's yearning;

Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope) (CL 73)

The above lines were later adapted to become the last three lines of the sonnet "Happiness" which was begun at Abbeville in February 1917 and later revised between late June and August of the same year whilst Owen was at Craiglockhart. In the sonnet, Owen seems to recognise that there is no going back: childhood, home, former happiness and perhaps even the old relationship between his mother and himself now form part of a past that cannot be recuperated. Similar feelings were expressed in "Exposure", where the soldiers, in an attempt to temporarily forget the conditions they had to undergo, dreamt of home only to find "Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,-" (29).

War had made Owen grow up and move away from his mother and his poetry provided a means through which he could express the repressed feelings of anger, reproach and bitterness he may have felt towards her and women in general, without having to acknowledge them.

1.1.3 A Father's Shadow

The reader should bear in mind that the relationship Harold Owen had with his father was closer than the relationship he had with his mother and therefore his accounts of family life regarding his father tend to be more sympathetic than accounts of family life as far as his mother was concerned. However, not all opinions about Mr. Owen are favourable. In

WOV, Douglas Kerr refers to him as:

. . . the conventionally patriotic civilian of an older generation, blusteringly uncaring for his children's sensibilities (or so it seemed. . .), and far too ready to make terrible demands on his sons as the price of his own failures and romantic fantasies. Tom Owen is the prototype of all those patriarchs in the poems. . . (321)

This evaluation of Mr. Owen is rather harsh but serves to counter-balance Harold Owen's less objective accounts of him.

Wilfred Owen's parents met whilst his father was working as a railway clerk in Oswestry. Given that on marrying Susan Shaw, Tom Owen would have to attend to the severe financial difficulties left unresolved on her father's death, it was clear from the beginning that Susan Owen would not be able to continue living in the manner to which she had become accustomed. She did not adapt well and the demands she made on her husband, whose jobs were never highly paid, were often unfair. Indeed, it was the persistent financial difficulties the Owens found themselves in plus the different social and educational aspirations they had for their children that aggravated a frequently tense situation between them. Despite financial and social restrictions, however, Mr. Owen was always willing to do what he could to improve the family situation. Unfortunately, though, Susan Owen never seemed to fully appreciate the efforts and sacrifices her husband made and because she appeared to show more affection towards her eldest child than towards him, he came to resent the bond that existed between his wife and their first child. This did nothing to enhance the relationship Tom Owen had with Wilfred.

Jon Stallworthy describes Tom Owen as a "short but sturdy" man in possession of ". . . a brisk vitality that gave him a presence, an air of physical strength out of all proportion to his small stature" (*WO* 10). By nature, he was not a very communicative man and on occasions this must have strained the sometimes difficult relationships he had with the various members of his family. Harold Owen explained that his father's shyness was ". . . so great a handicap that when he had the occasion to talk seriously, it was only by previously rehearsing what he wished to say over and over again that he was able to express anything at all, and then, of course, it came out with the pre-thought-out effect of a speech" (*JFO* I, 31).

It was suggested earlier that despite the problems that existed between Wilfred Owen and his father, Mr. Owen was an important figure in his son's growth towards maturity and towards his development of a greater understanding and tolerance of others. In comparison to the influence Susan Owen had on her son, Tom Owen certainly did not seem to count as a person of particular importance in Wilfred's life. However, despite the constant friction that existed between them, the overall influence Mr. Owen had on his son was positive.

Tom Owen did his best to be a good father although, quite often, the attention he paid to his children was never highly valued either by Mrs. Owen or by Wilfred. As well as fulfilling the traditional obligations as head of the household, Tom Owen also attempted to execute his fatherly role as well as he could by organising family activities that were within his financial possibilities. For example, regular excursions to the local swimming baths were often organised and in order to encourage the children, it was established that they had to be able to swim a breadth of the pool at six years of age and a length before reaching the age of eight. The idea was not met with much enthusiasm by Susan Owen, particularly as far as Wilfred was concerned, although he eventually proved to be quite an

adept swimmer. The occasional treat of Mr. Owen reading aloud to the children at night delighted them all but Wilfred soon tired of this and either read on his own or preferred his mother to read to him. It was also arranged that, despite financial restrictions, all the children, except Harold, should have music lessons. Wilfred's musical tastes greatly differed from those of his father and consequently Wilfred's monopolising of the piano together with the manner and time in which he played often created friction between them.

In the summer of 1917, after the family had moved to Shrewsbury, Mr. Owen took to the occasional very early rising so that he could enjoy the matinal pleasures of the countryside. At the time, Mary Owen was too delicate, Colin Owen too young and Wilfred too lazy, disinterested and over-protected by his mother to participate, so Harold was the only one who accompanied his father on these excursions. These early morning trips, no doubt, served to strengthen the bond between Mr. Owen and Harold but did nothing to soothe the irritation Mr. Owen often felt towards Wilfred.

Susan Owen's over-protectiveness of Wilfred was having a negative effect on Mr. Owen by this time. As Harold Owen has commented:

. . . my father, feeling that he had been thwarted of his share of Wilfred's affection, was striving to gain what he had lost in him through me. He had, I know, most scrupulously avoided favouritism as long as he was possibly able to do so, but my mother's stubborn and unbreakable determination to exclude from him all that mattered in Wilfred forced him into it (*JFO I*, 54).

Despite the constant discord that existed between father and eldest son, Tom Owen was always desirous to overcome his feelings of irritation or anger and was forever willing

to do all he could for Wilfred. His concern for his son was genuine. If he ever felt that Wilfred was in need of money, which he seemed to be whilst at Dunsden, it was Tom Owen ". . . who often denied himself his own simple pleasures . . . and with gruff embarrassment pressed what he had saved on my mother with inarticulate mutterings to send it from herself to Wilfred to help him buy some books" (*JFO* II, 16). The fact that Mr. Owen told his wife to send the money from herself suggests that he felt that this way, Wilfred would have been more likely to accept it gracefully than if he had known that his father had sent it to him. Tom Owen's embarrassment could have been an indication of the difficulties he had in showing his feelings, particularly towards his eldest son as well as his possible feelings of paternal inadequacy with regard to him. (Another occasion when Mr. Owen was willing to help Wilfred out financially was when he was working part-time as an English teacher at the Berlitz School in Bordeaux between late 1913 and early 1914. Mr. Owen promised to supplement his son's poor salary with a small allowance). The following comments from Harold Owen around the time his brother was to go to Bordeaux serve to highlight Tom Owen's kind-hearted nature and his eagerness to help:

My father forced himself to put aside thoughts of the past collusions which had existed - so much to his own exclusion - between Wilfred and my mother. In the purity of his heart and sensibilities he was able to ignore the confidences and collaborations which still went on between them over the proposed venture to the Continent. His natural kindness won for him a great battle over his habitual touchiness and, instead of recriminations, he offered help and co-operation (*JFO* I, 265).

Once again, the difficulties Tom Owen had in expressing his feelings are shown: Wilfred was surprised and touched by his father's offers and his " . . . gently humble and profoundly genuine attempts to show his pleasure and gratitude embarrassed my father into incoherent 'chuf-chuffings'" (266).

When it became evident from his letters from Bordeaux that Wilfred was not altogether well and happy, Tom Owen became concerned about his son. It was decided that there would be no family holiday that year so that he could go and see him. This time, the financial sacrifice Tom Owen was willing to make for his son was to affect the whole family more directly.

Tom Owen's financial support of his son extended into Wilfred's adult life. In his biography on Owen, Jon Stallworthy describes the occasion when Harold went to visit his brother at Hare Hall Training Camp in Essex. At dinner, one of the topics under conversation was Harold's life at sea and the necessity for him to save money. Wilfred's brief lecture on financial frugality must have irked Harold somewhat as Wilfred received an allowance from home whereas he did not.

Being aware of the family's delicate economic situation, Tom Owen tended to be more down-to-earth than his wife in his aspirations for his children. He was keen for Wilfred to undertake a practical career and Wilfred's determination to pursue an academic one exacerbated their incompatibility. Harold Owen explains that neither Mrs. Owen nor Wilfred really understood Mr. Owen's anxieties about the future and were mistakenly inclined to think that he "despised Wilfred's application to reading and study" (*JFO* I, 150). However, Mr. Owen's concern and interest in his son always led him to succumb to Wilfred's resolution to follow his scholastic interests.

With his assessment of the family's socio-economic position, and in comparison to

his wife's ignorance in - or deliberate disregard for - such matters, it was inevitable that Mr. Owen would become the figure of refusal and restriction within the family. Douglas Kerr writes, "It was Tom Owen's function and certainly his misfortune to be the voice of caution, the disappointment of hopes, the assertion of bleak necessity. . ." (*WOV* 30). This most certainly would not have helped improve the relationship between Wilfred and his father, particularly if one contrasts Mr. Owen's more serious attitude to Mrs. Owen's much more lenient one.

It was suggested in the previous section of this chapter that Mrs. Owen was greatly responsible for the poor quality of the relationship that existed between her husband and Wilfred. Douglas Kerr is of the opinion that the principal cause of Tom Owen's feelings of hostility towards his son's ambitions and endeavours was Susan Owen's "passionate possessiveness" (30). In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd points out that Mrs. Owen certainly did not encourage closeness between her husband and first born. He goes on to suggest that Wilfred Owen's tendency to regard other men as substitute fathers may well have been because he had considered his own inadequate. Whatever the reason, an uncomfortable relationship existed between the two and caused a sensation of distance that persisted throughout Wilfred Owen's lifetime.

As a soldier on home-leave after spending a period of time at Craiglockhart War Hospital, Owen commented to Siegfried Sassoon on his inability to relate to his father: "I am spending happy enough days with my Mother, but I can't get sociable with my Father without going back on myself over ten years of thought" (*CL* 506).

The antagonism Mr. Owen felt towards his son caused him to be increasingly critical of everything he did. This in turn caused Wilfred to reject his father even more, so that they became so remote from each other that all spontaneity was lost from their relationship.

Mr. Owen's attempts to try and draw confidence and understanding out of Wilfred met with constant rebuffs. Harold Owen suggests that it was the ". . . drag of different loyalties which prevented complete understanding between them" (*JFO I*, 53). He adds that Wilfred's almost studied indifference towards his father was emphasised by the enthusiasm he always showed for his mother. Harold Owen writes that at the age of seventeen, Wilfred:

. . . had exaggerated in his own mind the conviction that my father was opposed to him . . . he felt father persistently discredited his desire for learning, and how much he despised all mental ability and was concerned only with physical prowess . . . this mistaken, self-wished feeling, so sponsored and shared by my mother . . . Wilfred was unhappy and hurt by my father's seeming disinterest in him . . . also bitter (*JFO I*, 196).

As a result of Mrs. Owen's negative influence on Wilfred with respect to his father, Wilfred tended not to confide in him. In his trilogy, Harold Owen provides many instances of Owen's lack of confidence in his father. It was mentioned previously that Harold had encountered difficulties as regards the wanton behaviour of the boys at his new school in Shrewsbury and he had confided in Wilfred who had spoken to their mother about the matter. The fact that Mr. Owen was not consulted makes one wonder what was lacking in the relationship between father and sons to cause such a lack of communication. Perhaps it was because Tom Owen had already distanced himself from the more personal side of family life, as he had already experienced a sense of isolation brought about by the closeness between Susan Owen and Wilfred. The lack of confidence and communication

between father and son can also be seen on the occasions that Wilfred manifested anxiety about his future. References have already been made to the time when Owen was considering the teaching profession as a possible career, but he did not ask for his father's opinion on the matter when he wrote to his mother about it in April 1911 (CL 86). This type of behaviour was repeated in December 1914 when Owen stated his desire to talk over his future first with his mother and then with a professor or recruiting sergeant (CL 305). By omitting to name him as a possible source of advice, Owen was obviously not interested in seeking his father's views on the subject.

On one occasion whilst in Bordeaux in February 1914, Owen did write to his father about his thoughts for the future. This letter reflects Owen's aspirations and indicates the typical desire of a twenty-one year old youth not to get himself into a rut. By writing that he was fully aware that literature was no means to secure a living, Owen also demonstrated that he did have a grasp on reality insofar as his future was concerned. However, if the "another" mentioned in the letter refers to his father, Wilfred's sharp comments could be interpreted as indirect criticism of Mr. Owen and what he did - or did not do - with his own life: "If I have shirked the idea of shop, or office, or Elementary School, it is only because I am more clear-sighted than another; and see that once fixed in a low-level Rut one is ever-after straightened there; - straightened intellectually and socially as surely as financially" (CL 232).

Wilfred did pen a few letters to his father in response to his mother's pleadings to do so but it might have been better if he had not written them. Harold Owen explains that the few letters Owen sent to his father ". . . were formal and stilted and altogether alien to himself, so that their banality was more unconsciously cruel than sheer neglect" (JFO II, 16). A letter Owen sent to his father together with a copy of Siegfried Sassoon's *The Old*

Huntsman on 26 August 1917 has caused different responses from different critics. In the letter, Owen asked for his father's response to Sassoon's poems (CL 488). In an unpublished piece of work, Jennifer Breen has suggested that this letter is indicative of the fact that Owen acknowledged his father's liking for poetry and was therefore interested in his reaction to Sassoon's work.¹⁵ Douglas Kerr has suggested that in asking for his father's criticism of Sassoon's poems, Owen was deliberately looking for a confrontation with his father: ". . . it is the reader and not the writer who is being put to the test here. . . . He is setting up a dialogue in which his father must either endorse Sassoon's view on the war, or reveal himself to be a war-mongering, out-of-date philistine" (WOV 313). Despite further enquiries about his father's opinion of Sassoon's work, Mr. Owen did not respond.

After Harold's first sea-trip, Wilfred advised him to take a job on the railways if his father could secure him one. Wilfred's condescending attitude and rather disparaging behaviour towards his father becomes apparent when he remarks upon and doubts his father's competence and ability to procure Harold a job. Harold resented this bitter and disdainful attitude which was magnified even more when Wilfred patronisingly told Harold that, as usual, he was mistaken in defending his father. He said, "In Nature, it is the parents who defend the young, not the young the parents", thus implying that Tom Owen was incapable of looking after his offspring properly and possibly even needed to be protected by them (JFO II, 200).

Wilfred Owen never managed to rid himself of his over-critical response to his father. In spite of this, however, Tom Owen always remained loyal to his son. For example, when Wilfred was bitterly disappointed about the results of his matriculation

¹⁵Jennifer Breen, *The Development of the Poetry of Wilfred Owen*, 132.

examination, Tom Owen, ". . . in his generous way, threw off all past rebuffs and misunderstandings, unreservedly withdrew all active opposition. . ." (*JFO* I, 253).

Mr. Owen saw to it that his son always received excellent treatment on his train journeys. On one of his return trips to Dunsden, Wilfred was ushered into a first-class carriage by the ticket collector. Pleased by this treatment, Wilfred was, according to Harold, very surprised that everything was due to his father's position and the respect he commanded within the railway company for which he worked. Wilfred sorely underestimated his father's capacity and importance, both at a family and professional level.

Tom Owen's feelings of concern and interest towards Wilfred were constant right up until his son's death. In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd referred to Mr. Owen's war scrapbook which contained reports of Wilfred Owen's regiment. A disinterested father surely would not have taken the trouble to follow the actions of his son's regiment and in a letter written to his mother during his first tour of duty, Owen referred to his father's "spirited approbation" (*CL* 431). No type of approbation would have been forthcoming if Mr. Owen had not had his son's interests at heart.

In 1918, Mr. Owen wrote a poem which was dedicated to his family. The first verse could be interpreted as an indication of the concern and respect Mr. Owen had for his son and his war poems:

There was a young man in the Army,
 Who on poetry went slightly "barmy",
 His odes on the war
 Were more telling by far

Than all the proud boasts of the Army.¹⁶

Once Owen was pronounced fit for duty after his stay at Craiglockhart War Hospital and after his period of re-training, he received a letter from his father in which Mr. Owen expressed his pleasure on hearing that his son was "normal" again. Douglas Kerr writes that, "'Normal' meant fit to kill and be killed, a status on which it was certainly bizarre for a father to congratulate his son" (*WOV* 34). However, it is questionable whether or not Tom Owen would have been capable of interpreting the word 'normal' as Kerr has done. It is more likely that Tom Owen expressed his pleasure at Wilfred being passed for general service simply because this meant the shadow of doubt about him possibly being a malingerer or coward could be lifted.

Occasionally, Owen indirectly showed that despite the gulf that separated him from his father, he was desirous to please him. An example of this was when Harold, who was about to go to sea for the first time, took his leave of Wilfred who was ill in bed. Wilfred is quoted as having said, "If I can't please Father and I never seem to be able to - at least I should think you must be doing so now" (*JFO* II, 61-62). One cannot help but wonder if there is a note of sadness in this, of regret that the relationship between father and eldest son was not as it could have been.

When he was training at the Y.M.C.A. barracks in Romford, in 1916, Owen wrote a letter to his mother in which he described his usual army day. He claimed to be "happy sometimes as when I think it is a life pleasing to you and Father and the Fatherland" (*CL* 387). This indicates that Owen not only wanted to please his mother, but also his father. Owen was pleased to receive correspondence from him, as can be seen when, on writing

¹⁶The complete poem is published in Harold Owen's *JFO* III, 139.

to his mother on 8 August 1917 from Craiglockhart, he said, "So pleased to have Father's letter & your note this morning" (*CL* 480). On 11 February 1918, he wrote to his mother from Scarborough, ". . . and now here is Father's handwriting to scare me. I plucked the letter off the rack in a manner that startled beholders. But I was glad to read it . . ." (*CL* 531). This combination of tense nervousness and pleasure seemed to typify the relationship that Owen had with his father.

It is sometimes said that the friction and irritation that exists between two individuals is often attributable to the degree of similarity that there is between them. Although Wilfred Owen probably would have disliked parallels being drawn between his father and himself, there is evidence that similarities existed. In *JFO* II, when Harold Owen describes how the family revelled in game playing and charades, he comments that both his father and elder brother were exceptionally good at the game. This could be interpreted as a sign of their sociability, and the fact that they were able to draw on their knowledge of literature to portray different characters suggests they were both intelligent and good mimics.

Wilfred Owen was very similar to his father in the way in which he viewed possibilities for the future as far as his brothers were concerned. In fact, his practical hard-line approach to Harold's future was almost a mirror-image of his father's approach to his own future. Viewing the family's socio-economic condition, Wilfred considered Harold's aspirations to continue studying Art as foolish: "He vetoed it as economically impossible, and dismissed the idea as rather stupidly silly" (*JFO* II, 199). Surprisingly, the encouragement and understanding that Owen would have liked to receive from his father was not forthcoming from him as regards Harold's interest in painting. Harold Owen continues:

. . . he went on to stress his opinion of my entire unsuitability for a career in any of the branches of learning; and . . . dwelt on the necessity for more humble ambition and more readiness to be grateful for any occupation which might come along. It is curious how he refused to encourage any aesthetic tendencies which might show in any of us . . . what influence he had with me he used to discourage and divert me from such contemplations (*JFO II*, 191-92).

On reading Harold Owen's accounts of family life in the Owen household, it becomes evident that the uncomfortable relationship that existed between Mr. Owen and Wilfred caused a distancing between the two which, encouraged by Mrs. Owen, persisted throughout Wilfred's lifetime. This negative influence that Mrs. Owen had on the relationship between her husband and first child becomes more noticeable when one examines the closeness that existed between father and son in her absence. For example, in June 1908 and again the following summer, Tom Owen took Wilfred away on his own for a holiday in Brest in Northern France. Both holidays were successful and seemed to help improve the relationship between them. Jon Stallworthy observes that Wilfred:

. . . must have enjoyed impressing his father, who must have enjoyed being impressed, for Tom was a generous parent with all too few opportunities for indulging his proper pride in his scholarly son. On this and their few subsequent holidays together, Tom's boyish exuberance reasserted itself, narrowing the gap between father and son (*WO 46*).

It has already been mentioned that when Wilfred was in Bordeaux in 1913, his parents became anxious about his state of health and it was decided that Mr. Owen would visit his son there. Although his visit was most likely prompted and encouraged by Susan Owen, the fact that Mr. Owen went to see his son is an indication of his concern for him, despite the strained relationship that often existed between the two.

Wilfred was overjoyed at seeing his father in Bordeaux and Tom Owen, "pleased and deeply touched by this rare showing of warm affection, responded immediately. . ." (*JFO* III, 51). The happiness that both of them felt was nearly destroyed by a misunderstanding that almost arose between them as a result of Wilfred being unable to explain that he had allowed all his new-found acquaintances in Bordeaux to believe that his father was a knight. Wilfred was acutely embarrassed about the whole business and Tom Owen took this embarrassment as a sign that his son was having an affair with a French girl who had been hidden away somewhere in the room. During the few moments that the misunderstanding lasted, Mr. Owen behaved in a most discreet manner, thus showing the respect he had for his son and his son's privacy. After an uncomfortable few minutes however, explanations about Mr. Owen's knighthood were offered and eventually accepted and father and son were able to enjoy each other's company. Harold Owen remarks : "There was in both of them a strong streak of naughtiness, especially if there was an element of risk and fun involved - something which my mother with her rather over-solemn outlook could never share or understand" (*JFO* III, 153).¹⁷

Summing up the effect that Mr. Owen's visit to Bordeaux had on Wilfred, Harold

¹⁷Mr. Owen, like his son, enjoyed the status afforded by a high social position. With his "acceptance" of a knighthood, this was the second time in his life that Tom Owen had allowed people to believe and continue to believe he was something other than a railway employee. Years earlier, Mr. Owen and Harold often used to spend the day at the docks in Birkenhead. On his very first visit to the ships' officers' eating-house, Mr. Owen had been mistaken for a ship's captain yet he had "somehow failed to rectify the initial misunderstanding and the conviction and the illusion remained sustained." (*JFO* I, 116).

Owen explains that the surprise at seeing his father there shocked Wilfred out of ". . . his usual self-conscious awareness of the strain that usually came between them . . . his reaction was spontaneous and full of boyish gaiety" and once the "Sir Thomas" situation had been explained, this "small triviality did more than anything had yet done to establish between them a sworn and affectionate alliance and to plunge them at last into warm and gay accord" (*JFO* III, 50).

It was suggested earlier that Tom Owen's understanding, gentleness and consideration prompted Wilfred into re-assessing his attitude and feelings towards his father and people in general. Harold Owen feels that it was Tom's visit to Bordeaux that released Wilfred "from the threat of becoming both too self-absorbed and too ready to condemn frivolity without discrimination" (*JFO* III, 60). According to Harold, Wilfred felt that he had gained greater freedom of thought as a result of the time he and his father had spent together in France. It was a long time after this Bordeaux episode that Wilfred told Harold that his father's visit had affected him to such an extent that he found it "most disturbing and a severe jolt to his own previous, rather satisfied, careless thinking" (*JFO* II, 52).

Wilfred came to recognise the negative effect home - or rather, his mother - had had on his relationship with his father and he regretted that the few weeks he and his father had spent together in France could never fully be recaptured:

. . . except for fleeting minutes on railway stations or in hotel lounges, the only times left for them when they could be with one another had to be spent at home in Shrewsbury; and this meant a return by them both to the old ground of petty feuds . . . of economic difficulties . . . [and Wilfred's] own natural intolerance which he seemed unable to throw off when at home (*JFO*

III, 60).

For Wilfred, saying goodbye to his father in Bordeaux was like saying goodbye to his real father for ever. Even though Owen was gradually beginning to instinctively reject his mother's veiled control over him and also possibly becoming aware of its potentially dangerous consequences, with the subconscious competing for Susan Owen's attention at home, the old misunderstandings returned.

On marrying Susan, Tom Owen's ambitions to enjoy a seafaring life were thwarted. He had to resign himself to a land-bound existence which entailed many personal sacrifices. As head of a family that could not boast a comfortable financial situation, Tom Owen came to represent control, denial, discipline and frugality. He was disappointed with the way in which his adult life had evolved and so vainly attempted to realise his ambitions through his sons. This almost unavoidably gave rise to discord, particularly between Mr. Owen and Wilfred, and this was often manifest in fits of controlled anger or withdrawal from family life by Mr. Owen. However, despite the emotional distance that existed between Tom Owen and his son, it was inevitable that some of Tom's feelings of frustration, anger, disappointment, repression and resentment would affect Wilfred and it would seem that his father's feelings were sometimes echoed in Owen's poetry. On occasion, Owen used these feelings to echo his own whilst at other times, he violently protested against them. Dominic Hibberd writes that "It may be that an unconscious personal resentment is expressed in the harsh treatment of fathers, including God the Father, in such poems as "Parable" , "S.I.W. ", "Soldier's Dream" and "Apologia" (OTP 154). Thus, the presence of a father figure in Owen's poetry and the role this figure played could be interpreted as a reflection of Owen's view of the type of relationship he felt existed between his father and himself.

The father figure in Owen's poetry is always portrayed as an authoritarian, uncomprehending, cruelly powerful and callous man who is responsible for the war and its horrific aftermath. "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", which, except for its twisted ending, closely follows the wording in Chapter 22 vv.1-19 of the Book of Genesis, reflects what Owen interpreted as the cool indifference, inflexible arrogance and disdainful conceit of the older generation - represented here by Abram - who willingly sent their sons to a cruel and untimely death. In Owen's poem, so great was the older generation's thirst for power and blood that no heed was taken when the alternative sacrifice of pride was offered. Consequently, ". . . half the seed of Europe, one by one" (16) was slaughtered.

Although "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" is similar to Osbert Sitwell's "The Modern Abraham" which was published in *Nation*, 2 February 1918, the principal source of inspiration for this poem was possibly the news that one of Owen's former pupils was to join the army. In March 1918, Owen wrote:

Johnny de la Touche leaves school this term, I hear, and goes to prepare for
the Indian Army.

He must be a creature of killable age by now. God so hated the world
that He gave several millions of English-begotten sons that whosoever
believeth in them should not perish, but have a comfortable life (CL 544).

Here, Owen was expressing his anger and condemning those who allowed the war to go on at the cost of so many innocent young lives but, as Douglas Kerr explains, the hidden irony of the poem lies in the fact that Owen formed part of that very group he so vehemently condemned. As an officer, he figured among the patriarchs and crucifiers and

so therefore was also partly responsible for sending soldiers to their deaths (*WOV* 222).

Despite the strong anti-patriarchal tone of the poem, it is quite feasible that Owen's relationship with his father may not have had any influence at all on the composition of it although for Douglas Kerr, Tom Owen was ". . . the prototype of all those patriarchs in the poems 'whom no cannon stuns', who cannot see or do not care about what the war is doing to young men, but remain tucked up cosily in the narrow limits of their imaginations" (321). Another possible source of inspiration for the poem could have been Owen's religious background and his knowledge of the Scriptures.

In "Soldier's Dream", the poet dreams that Jesus put an end to war by rendering all weapons useless but this angered God the Father and so He bestowed sufficient power upon the Archangel Michael to repair all the damaged armoury. Here, a sense of a lack of loyalty and support between father and son is felt when God the Father paid no heed to the sensitivity of His son. God's belligerent attitude was more forceful and effective than Christ's actions of healing and peace. This paternal-filial conflict between God the Father and God the Son could be taken as a reflection of the conflict that existed between Tom and Wilfred Owen.

God the Father's apparent indifference to the fate of His sons is also seen in "Greater Love", "Where God seems not to care" (10) and in "Exposure", where ". . . love of God seems dying" (35). In "S.I.W.", Owen is contemptuous of the attitude of the non-combatant fathers who happily wave their sons off to war: "Father would sooner see him dead than in disgrace,- / Was proud to see him going, aye, and glad" (3-4). The unbridgeable gap between fathers and their soldier sons is made to seem even greater with the words of encouragement offered: "Death sooner than dishonour, that's the style!' / So Father said" (23-24).

Despite the apparent willingness and ease with which these fathers sent them to war, their sons hid the real truths of war from them: they wrote home, allowing the readers of their letters to imagine them ". . . sheltered in some Y. M. Hut, / Because he [they] said so . . ." (10-11). And this is perhaps where part of the irony of this poem lies: the fathers, who needed no protection, were protected from the truth by their sons, who, in real need of protection, were left to the mercy of war. In their ignorance, the fathers collectively and proudly preached honour and lived a relatively comfortable existence, whilst in the case of the soldier in this poem, he in his knowledge of war, died alone and in disgrace. The final irony of the poem is that in order to protect the family's notion of their warring son, a lie is truthfully told, "Tim died smiling" (37). However, one should also consider the responsibility of the soldier here: he chose not to tell the truth in his letters home and consequently facilitated and encouraged belief in the on-going lies of war. To a certain extent, Tim was the perpetrator of his own death; if he had told the truth or communicated his fears to those closest to him instead of being falsely brave about the awful situation he found himself in, then perhaps he would not have felt the need to commit suicide.

It comes as no surprise that the "love of God seems dying" (35) in "Exposure" if, as the soldiers expect, "Tonight His frost will fasten on this mud and us"(36). Here, God the Father is not prepared to alleviate the suffering of His sons. Not only does He make them suffer through war but also through the effects of a cruel winter. Nature is God the Father's creation and it is through Nature's actions that the soldiers are denied any kind of comfort. In this poem, Nature itself is a reflection of the harshness of war, whilst at the same time, war reflects the harshness of Nature. The soldiers wait in grim despair, "But nothing happens" (5), dawn approaches, heralding more misery, suffering and death and God and Nature continue to collude against the soldiers. One is led to ask that if Nature

is seen as a gift from God the Almighty and if it reflects the cruelty of war, then does this mean that for Owen, the desolate landscape and the war itself reflect his thoughts about God the Father and His lack of compassion?

In "Smile, Smile, Smile", the fathers who sacrificed their sons are determined to demand extensive war damages: "The sons we offered might regret they died / If we got nothing lasting in their stead / We must be solidly indemnified" (10-12). The irony here is that it is the sons who suffer and die and get nothing in return whereas the war-mongering fathers who do nothing receive substantial payment for the loss of their sons. Kerr feels that the "voice" heard in this poem is the voice of the "patriarch with the knife" (*WOV* 33). In discussing "Smile, Smile, Smile" in greater depth later on, Kerr writes that "The voice of England is a conspiracy of fathers, a patriarchal sermon delivered from a high place and laying down the law about wrongs and rights, in the panoply of institutional authority" (180-81). It seems that for Wilfred Owen, his father may have formed part of what Kerr describes as this "conspiracy of fathers".

1.2 Dunsden and Religion

Owen's mother underwent a rigidly Calvinistic upbringing which she instilled into her children to the extent that they were brought up in a household where religion was of prime importance. So intense was Susan Owen's religious fervour and so great was her influence on her son that he erroneously came to believe that he actually had a religious vocation and as a result, he spent sixteen unhappy months at Dunsden Vicarage in Reading as lay assistant to the Reverend Herbert Wigan.

Work in the parish provided the young and idealistic Owen with a great deal of worthwhile experiences, some of which became the subject matter of his poetry. Although

many of Owen's poems from the Dunsden period are often described as being of little merit, they bear witness to the numerous conflicts he underwent.

Harold Owen writes that his brother's existence at the vicarage curbed "his natural inclination to reach out and so expand and develop for himself the richness of experience and knowledge" (*JFO* II, 201). However, several other critics, including C. Day Lewis, Dominic Hibberd, Jennifer Breen and Douglas Kerr disagree. They feel that Owen's time at Dunsden helped him to become more receptive and perceptive; the experience and knowledge he acquired there made him much more aware of the sufferings of others and this helped prepare him for his later war experiences and laid the foundations for his war poetry. In the Introduction to his edition of Owen's poems, C. Day Lewis writes that "The tremendous force of indignant compassion which sweeps through his war poems did not have its origin in the Western Front: we feel it in certain letters from Dunsden" (16).

At first, one of the attractions of becoming Wigan's assistant was the promise of tuition in preparation for the university entrance examination he was hoping to sit. Owen's first impression of the vicar was pleasing and he felt encouraged at the thought of being tutored by him. With time, however, it became apparent that the very much hoped-for tuition would never materialise. Wilfred found the protocol at the vicarage excessive, the lack of intellectual stimulus depressing and his religious development stunted and by the time he was ready to leave Dunsden, Owen's opinion of the vicar had changed drastically. Jon Stallworthy quotes from the notes for a letter which was intended for the vicar: "I was only a boy when I first came to you, and held you in the doubtful esteem that a boy has for his Headmaster. It is also true that I was an Old man when I left. . . ." (*WO* 85). Owen was fully aware that he had undergone a period of considerable change whilst at Dunsden.

Owen's previous cocoon-like family existence had done nothing to prepare him for

the experience of coming into close contact and working with people whose lives were a sordid mixture of destitution, squalor and infirmity. He took his duties as lay assistant seriously and given the social conditions in which he had to work, Owen found it extremely difficult to come to terms with Mr. Wigan's passionate interest in Theology and theological matters. They were too far removed from reality for him to assume an interest that matched that of Wigan's. Owen was concerned about communicating with the Dunsden parishioners at a level that was understandable to them. In a letter to his sister Mary in November 1911, Owen shows that he is aware of the necessity of adapting to the intellectual level of his audience when he writes, "I use no high falutin' words, but try to express myself in simple straight-forward English" (CL 94). This awareness was reflected much later on when Owen, as an officer and poet, hoped to become the voice of the fighting soldiers. On the one hand, he wanted to be able to communicate with the soldiers at their level whilst on the other hand, he wanted to express in poetry what the ordinary soldiers, with their limitations, were unable to express.

Dunsden seems to have initiated the stirring of Owen's social conscience and instead of his religious vocation becoming stronger, everything that he experienced there appeared to act as a catalyst which catapulted him towards a rejection of orthodox Christianity. He gradually began to grow towards greater independence; "I am increasingly liberalising and liberating my thought . . .", wrote Owen to his mother on 23 April, 1912 (CL 131).

In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd has suggested that Owen's religious crisis at Dunsden was not so much caused by his own doubts and worries but rather by external factors such as the social conditions he encountered there, the contrast between life inside the vicarage and life outside its walls and his desire to write poetry and advance intellectually, neither of which he felt he was doing satisfactorily (9-28).

Owen was greatly impressed by a young Northumberland miner who was present at an Evangelical convention in the summer of 1912 at Keswick. He was moved by the way in which the miner bore witness to his religious beliefs in his everyday activities and thus provided a sharp contrast to those whom Owen felt did not put into practice what they preached. Owen considered the miner to be an excellent example of a true Christian because, ". . . though pricked with piercing pain and surrounded by the grossest human mud that ever sank to a pit's bottom," his conduct and bearing could not be criticised (*CL* 151). Here, as later on in the same letter, when he referred to some well-known Evangelical preachers as "double-barrelled guns whose double-barrelled names I refuse to write", Owen was lashing out against conventional religion. From his own experience, he had come to learn that anyone can preach religion, but it is those who actually bear witness to religion in their everyday lives that are the truly religious people. In the case of the miner, Owen was adhering to the idea that actions speak louder than words but as Douglas Kerr has pointed out, the actions of the young miner were in fact "inactions" in the sense that he never doubted, questioned or complained but rather passively accepted what life dealt out to him: "The lad is commended as a model of Christian submission. . . . Owen falls awkwardly between the two sides of the debate on the social question. He is indignant about the Church's complacency and blindness to remediable suffering and inequity, but all he finds to recommend is a model of stoical passivity" (*WOV* 129).

The figure of the Northumberland miner was possibly attractive to Owen because he represented the idea of noble self-sacrifice as well as Owen's generally placid and submissive response to most of what went on in his early life: Owen always passively accepted his mother's influence and, initially, he accepted what he saw at Dunsden in the sense that he did not react to it immediately. Also, it could be argued that Owen's attitude

and reaction to the war bore some similarity to the miner's "inactions": in his poetry, Owen doubted, questioned, criticised and complained about the war, yet he continued to be a soldier (as did many other anti-war soldier poets). Despite his protests about the evilness of the conflict and the physical and psychological damage it caused, he did not have the courage to refuse to go to war. In fact, it could be said that Owen was hypocritical in his approach to the whole affair: by being an officer in the army, he certainly went against much of what he preached in his poetry. It is perhaps for this reason that the soldiers in Owen's poems are always free from blame and responsibility. For him, they are the innocent victims, when, in fact, many, like Owen, were models of soldierly submission. By the same token that Owen meekly followed what was dealt out to him in terms of religion when he was younger, as an officer, he was a model of "stoical passivity", doing what was expected of him.

The Evangelical summer convention at Keswick contributed to Owen's growing conviction that what went on at the vicarage in Dunsden was empty of true meaning. The insincerity and hypocrisy he found there were cloaked in correctness because they hid behind the mask of religion. Owen realised that he could no longer accept traditional Christian practices and he saw the necessity to leave Dunsden, which he described as a "hotbed of religion" (*CL* 175) in order to search for what Sven Bäckman describes as a "non-denominational humanist creed"¹⁸. "Murder will out, and I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it. If not, adieu to the still falser creeds that hold the hearts of nearly all my fellow men," wrote Owen (*CL* 175). With his rejection of orthodox religion, Owen was by no means rejecting religion and religious practices; he was desirous to find a religion that would satisfy the dictates of his social conscience. In a letter

¹⁸Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed*, 68.

penned on 29 January 1913, Owen wrote to his mother about "real" religion: "It exists none the less, you say. Only I haven't met it - to know it - yet" (*CL* 179).

Whilst at Dunsden, Owen seemed happier working with children than with adults and he mentioned several in letters home. Perhaps he felt a greater affinity with children because he could show more spontaneous sympathy and compassion for those whom he considered to be helpless and innocent. At the same time, the idea that Owen subconsciously preferred the company of children to that of adults because he had more power and influence over them should also be considered. In his role as an officer in the army, Owen appeared to feel more at ease with the ordinary soldiers than he did with fellow-officers. Was this because he felt he could show more spontaneous sympathy and compassion for those whom he considered to be helpless and innocent and unable to defend themselves? Or was it because he knew that his scope of influence would be greater over the common soldiers than over the better- educated officers?

In the second volume of *JFO*, Harold Owen writes that it was during the difficult times at Dunsden that his brother often found his only comfort in the children of the parish (62). The closest friendship Owen had at Dunsden was with a thirteen year old boy called Vivian Rampton, who later figured in many of Owen's poems. Dominic Hibberd suggests that Rampton formed a crucial stepping-stone in Owen's growth as a poet: "The memory of Rampton persisted, becoming an idealised figure with deep, sad eyes, a hand that could sometimes be touched and a beauty that was forever unattainable" (*OTP* 22). It should also be added here that Rampton was most probably a key figure in Owen's emotional development. Whether or not a homosexual relationship existed between the two has never been established but what is clear is that Owen was emotionally attached to Rampton.

Whilst at Dunsden, Owen experienced the constant pull of different interests and

commitments. Religion and responsibilities as lay assistant deprived him of the time he felt he needed to fulfil the self-imposed obligation of writing poetry. This conflict of duties made Owen become aware of the incompatibility, in his situation, that existed between poetry and religion. It should be remembered, however, that Owen never fully committed himself to being a clergyman. As early as August 1910, he wrote of his wish to gain entrance into St. Aidan's Theological College in Birkenhead. He added, "As to whether I mean [to] be a clergyman is a different matter" (CL 65). His religious interests always came second to his intellectual and poetic pursuits.

After spending three months at Dunsden, it became apparent to Owen that Mr. Wigan was not going to tutor him and in a letter to his mother, Owen complained that he wanted ". . . to be reading. The time I am at Book and Pen seems to be growing smaller and smaller" (CL 108). Owen's principal calling was obviously writing poetry and two weeks later, he wrote to his mother again, this time regretting the lack of contact with people who had interests similar to his own.

Seven months before he finally left Dunsden, Owen openly stated that he was much more interested in academic progress than in religious matters. He wrote, "I definitely abandon the thought of Divinity Training till at least an Arts Degree is won" (CL 141). Although by resolving to leave Dunsden, Owen knew that he was closing the doors on any opportunities he might have had to go to university, he realised, and eventually came to terms with the fact, that he could not use religion as a means to satisfy other more pressing interests.

Owen was aware of the personal changes he had undergone whilst at Dunsden and his earnest desire to leave the place in February 1913 contrasted sharply with the enthusiasm he had felt when he first arrived. His respect for Mr. Wigan ceased once he realised that

the Christ he had learnt to believe in as a young and impressionable child was absent from Dunsden Vicarage. Owen had grown up in many respects; as he said himself, he had arrived at Dunsden as a boy and left it as an old man. The time spent at Dunsden undermined rather than consolidated Owen's faith but he learnt that he wanted and needed to feel free in order to fulfil what he considered to be his own mission in life. If becoming a clergyman meant foresaking poetry, Owen had no intention of submitting himself to God's will and so he took the decision to leave Dunsden behind.

On leaving, Owen took with him the scaffolding that was to provide the basic structure for many of his later poems. He had found subject matter for his poetry, he had found religious freedom and greater independence of spirit. He took with him all the feelings of sympathy, pity, concern, resentment and fury that he had experienced on witnessing the lives of the sick and needy at Dunsden and these feelings later came to the fore in his war poetry. As lay assistant to Mr. Wigan, Owen had learned to preach and to plead, to comfort and to comprehend, to protect the innocent and to try and make wrongdoers aware of their faults. Equipped with this baggage of experience, Owen as a war poet, attempted to do the same thing: he endeavoured to shield and protect the innocent soldiers and lay bare and condemn what he considered to be the irresponsible actions of the politicians and warmongers.

1.3 France

Dissatisfied with the course his life was taking in England, Owen decided to start afresh in France and going to Bordeaux marked the beginning of a very important phase in his life. He left behind the invisible web of control that his mother had spun around him; the small-mindedness and limited intellectual field that he had encountered at home ceased

to irritate him; religious crises and possible opportunities for further education were put aside. Owen was prepared and eager to go forward and discover new things for himself and within himself. Bordeaux provided Owen with an opportunity for self-discovery and since he felt that he had no direction in his life when he first arrived there, he became determined to find a way to develop his artistic inclinations. Owen had decided to take his education into his own hands and France, with her different literary trends and tastes, was to become the country where this education would take place.

Although Owen had done a great deal of soul-searching and growing up during the period of time he was at Dunsden, he was still quite immature when he set sail for France. His letters from Bordeaux reflect the feelings of a young man who was still more engrossed in himself than in other people. Like many young people with high ideals and dreams of doing something important and "worthwhile" with their lives, Owen was understandably more intent on discovering a means of developing what he believed to be his true vocation in life than on anything else that was going on around him.

At first, Owen's letters home from Bordeaux were mere reports of poor and worsening health although his physical and mental condition was never as bad as he made it out to be. In fact, Owen's letters home were more likely to have been a subconscious cry of loneliness rather than a deliberate chronicling of minor illnesses.

Once the initial period of adaptation was over and routine had set in, dissatisfaction with his situation in Bordeaux gradually began to creep in when Owen found that his French was not improving as he had expected, that he did not have enough time to pursue his own studies and that he was writing nothing. In January 1914, he complained, "I am getting quite stultified by the nature of my employment" (CL 226). French lessons for the teachers of the Berlitz School had not been started and he was teaching between seven and ten hours

a day.

Between January and the following Easter, Owen did not write any poetry. Then, on Easter Monday night, after having spent two days in the company of friends and after having met a young French girl called Mlle. Henriette Poitou, Owen was so inspired that he claimed he wrote fifty lines of poetry in about as many minutes. Judging by a letter he wrote to his sister, Owen was quite taken with Henriette and it seems likely that his poetic productivity was a direct result of the enthusiasm he felt because of his acquaintance with her (*CL* 245).

Approximately six weeks later and despite a further non-productive phase, Owen wrote to his mother explaining that he felt that he had a calling in the Arts. Addressing the world as if it were a human being, Owen begged for time to prove his artistic talents: "Yet wait, wait, O impatient world give me two years, give me two free months, before it be said that I have Nothing to Show for my temperament. Let me now, seriously and shamelessly, work out a Poem. Then shall be seen whether the Executive Power, needful for at least one Fine Art, be present in me, or be missing" (*CL* 255).

Owen was invited by a Parisian pupil of his, Mme. Léger, to spend the summer in Bagnères-de-Bigorre in the Pyrenees with her and her family. He eagerly accepted the invitation and left for the Pyrenees on July 31. From his letters, it is clear that Owen was aware that Mme. Léger found him both physically and intellectually attractive but he claimed that the feelings were not reciprocated in the same measure. Questioning the degree of involvement that existed between Mme. Léger and Owen, Jennifer Breen has suggested that Owen ". . . must have become emotionally involved with her, because he defensively reiterated to his mother how wisely he had behaved despite the position in which Mme.

Léger had placed him."¹⁹ Breen has gone on to suggest that it was probably Owen's moral scruples and his religious upbringing that prevented him from becoming seriously entangled with Mme. Léger.

It was through Mme. Léger that Owen met the French poet and pacifist Laurent Tailhade who was well-known in Parisian artistic circles. Tailhade was one of the leading Decadents and had known both Verlaine and Oscar Wilde. He introduced Owen to French Literature, giving him copies of Renan's "Souvenirs d'Enfance et de Jeunesse" and encouraging him to read Flaubert's "Salammbô". With an increasing knowledge of French Literature that contained ideals and models so different from those seen in English Literature and with Tailhade as a guide, Owen felt free to experiment and explore further afield in his own writing.

That Tailhade was a living poet was possibly something that attracted Owen to the older Frenchman and it was more likely Tailhade's warm personality and friendly conversation that captured Owen's interest before his poetry did. Owen described the second meeting that took place between them: ". . . He received me like a lover . . . he quite slobbered over me. I know not how many times he squeezed my hand; and sitting me down on a sofa, pressed my head against his shoulder [*two lines illegible*] It was not intellectual; but I felt the living verve of the poet . . ." (CL 282).

Apart from their love of literature and poetry, Owen and Tailhade were also similar in that both of them had originally believed that they had a religious vocation, yet both had come to reject orthodox Christianity. With his humanistic view of life, it is quite possible that Tailhade helped Owen to find a substitute for his old religious beliefs: love and respect for fellow man would make more sense than adherence to a creed that seemed never to be

¹⁹Jennifer Breen, *The Development of the Poetry of Wilfred Owen*, 78.

practised by those who preached it.

In *Wilfred Owen - A Critical Study*, Dennis Welland has suggested that Tailhade influenced Owen more as a pacifist than a poet and he feels that Tailhade's definition of poetry in "Pour la Paix" found echoes in Owen's draft Preface to the volume of poetry he hoped to publish. Welland has detected distinct reflections of Tailhade in Owen's "Mental Cases" and "The Show" (90-91).

On naming "Strange Meeting", "Spring Offensive" and "The Kind Ghosts" in *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd also suggests that Tailhade influenced Owen in some of his later poetry. At the same time, however, Hibberd has warned against placing too much importance on Tailhade's influence as a pacifist over Owen and has pointed out that Tailhade was an experienced duellist and despite his age, he eventually enlisted in the French army. In "Wilfred Owen", Hibberd sums up Tailhade and his life-style and his influence on Owen:

. . . it was his poetry, not his prose that he gave to Owen, and his poetry is not about pacifism. Tailhade had lived through several literary generations. . . he was also a veteran duellist and a regular spectator at the Spanish bullrings; he had translated Latin pornography and written about Parisian perverts; he had been involved in occult societies and was acquainted with some fairly shady people; and he was a great talker. . . Far from turning him against war, Tailhade may have been partly responsible for his eventual decision to enlist. . . (13-14)

Douglas Kerr has summed up the artistic influence Tailhade had on Owen:

Tailhade . . . certainly helped purge some of the besetting vagueness from Owen's work and showed him the uses of realism and sharp observation. Tailhade . . . emphasized the importance of prosody and music, as well as putting on display the fashionable Decadent properties - beautiful wounded bodies, apocalyptic sunsets, fatal women, gloomy landscapes, erotic langour, ghosts, and so on - which were often to furnish Owen's war poetry (*WOV* 268).

Kerr concludes that Tailhade's writing and the affection he showed towards Owen helped give direction to Owen's poetry. The French poet helped Owen to feel comfortable and satisfied with the fact that although his work was different from the general trend, it was still acceptable, and so, "The male body becomes established as a central theme of his work, a focus for his curiosity, desire, and pity. And for him the question of writing modern poetry was henceforth never quite to be separated from the question of sexuality. The homoerotic and the poetic were a mark of difference, hence of identity" (271).

Vivian de Sola Pinto, who describes Tailhade as the "veteran symbolist . . . a daring experimenter in poetic technique and subject matter, and an original and powerful thinker with strong pacifist views" feels that Tailhade saved Owen from falling into the trap of imitating the weaker aspects of English Romantic poetry.²⁰

On 1 August 1914, Germany declared war on Russia. On 3 August, Belgium was invaded and war was declared on France. In response to Germany's aggression, Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August. All of this occurred while Owen was in Bagnères-de-Bigorre and within a short time the small sleepy village was emptied of most of its adult

²⁰Vivian de Sola Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry 1890-1940*, 128.

male population. Owen seemed unperturbed by war reports and he carried on his life, blissfully and willfully ignorant of most war matters. However, a month into the war saw wounded soldiers being brought to Bagnères-de-Bigorre, where they were tended to in the local boys' school, which had been converted into a makeshift hospital. One day, Owen accompanied his friend, Dr. Sauvaître to the hospital and on witnessing the suffering there, he realised he was no longer able to ignore the war. The feelings of compassion that he had experienced for the suffering of the Dunsden parishioners were beginning to stir but even though he was fully aware of the fact that thousands of young men were enlisting in the services, Owen never felt under any obligation to do so and for him life in France ran its smooth course. Basically, Owen saw the war as nothing more than an inconvenience as far as his desire to write poetry was concerned. Harold Owen sums up his brother's attitude to the war. He saw it as a:

. . . monstrous threat of interruption to his vocational work and this developed into a furious grievance that he should in any way be expected to be caught up in it. It went even further than this and produced a personal anger in him that this war should have broken out at the time when it could do most harm to his poetry.

Although at this time he refused to apply to himself any of the consequences of war, he perceived with bitter clarity the danger that the very presence of war constituted to his work. He could see in it only another insurmountable barrier between himself and achievement (*JFO* III, 119).

At the beginning of October, Mme. Léger departed for Canada on a business trip and

Owen once more started looking for employment. By the beginning of December, he had started teaching Johnny and Bobbie de la Touche, the sons of an official in the Chinese Maritime Customs Service. Along with their younger twin brothers, the two boys were holidaying with their aunt in France when war broke out and they were unable to get a safe passage back to England in order to resume their studies. It was eventually decided that Owen was to instal himself in the de la Touche household in Mérignac until the time came for him to accompany the boys to England.

By this time, it was clear that Owen was beginning to consider enlisting in the army as one of the possibilities open to him. He had told his mother he wanted to "talk over my Future, first with You, and then with a Professor or a Recruiting Sergeant" (CL 305), but at this stage, Owen's desire to return to England really had nothing to do with wanting to join the forces, defend his country and fight for the freedom of Europe. Rather, it was based on a need for time to spend writing. He eventually left France on 18 May 1915, spent almost a week in London and then returned home to Shrewsbury for a brief period, where most of his time was taken up with writing poetry.

By mid-June, Owen was back in France but the time he had spent in London had made him begin to seriously consider enlisting. Recruiting propaganda and newspaper reports had hit his sense of civil duty and he also found the idea of receiving a commission attractive. Suddenly, the idea of becoming an officer in the army and fighting in the war was not so appalling after all. He wrote to his mother:

I noticed in the Hotel in London an announcement that any gentleman (fit etc.) returning to England from abroad will be given a Commission in the 'Artists' Rifles'. Such officers will be sent to the front in 3 months. . . . I

don't want the bore of training, I don't want to wear khaki; nor yet to save my honour before inquisitive grand-children fifty years hence. But I now do most intensely want to fight (*CL* 341).

According to Harold Owen, his brother was riddled by doubts as to whether to join up or not but he had it quite clear in his mind that he had to make his own decision. Harold vaguely remembered Wilfred saying something like ". . . I am determined to think for myself and act only when I know which road I must take" (*JFO* III, 121). It was only after a long period of mental turmoil, self-doubt and self-examination that Owen eventually took the decision to sign up voluntarily. His decision to do so came, not as a result of social pressure, but rather as a result of reflecting on what the best thing for him to do would be.

Harold describes one of the few meetings the two brothers had when they were both in the Services. He recalls that his brother had been ". . . savagely depressed over the fearful waste and futility of which he was part" and he remembers Wilfred saying that he was thankful that he had freely made his own painstaking decision to join up. Harold quotes him:

I alone must be responsible for myself. . . But I would rather have it so. . .
 I can think more clearly . . . and later . . . if there is time . . . time to do
 it . . . speak more clearly . . . I must always remember it is my war . . .
 perhaps I can speak for them . . . can my poetry do this? . . . I do not know
 . . . I must do this . . . but shall I have time or will my poetry - not yet born
 - be killed with me? (*JFO* III, 122).

Apart from a short break in England in May / June 1915 and also just before enlisting in the British Army, Owen had been in France for two years, from September 1913 to September 1915. During this period, he had written two poems that were started and completed in France ("Nocturne" and "Impromptu"), two poems that were started but not completed in France ("The Sleeping Beauty" and "1914"), four poems that were started before France, revised there and completed elsewhere ("The Swift", "Long Ages Past", "O World of many worlds", and "The time was aeon"), one poem that was written during the break in England ("Maundy Thursday") and sixteen different fragments ("All children", "The Imbecile", "Tom Tit", "Completion of "Tonight I have my friar" ", "Instead of dew, descended on the moors", "Ballad of the Morose Afternoon", "We two had known each other", "Nights with the Wind. A Rhapsody", "Nous ne nous fions pas à la multitude d'une armée", "A Contemplation", "On seeing a lock of Keats's Hair" [started Autumn, 1912], "About the winter forest loomed", "The sun, far fallen in the afternoon", "I am to thee a Sunflower to the Sun", "Perseus" and "The Ballad of Peace and War" (also known in its various versions as "The Ballad of Purchase-Moneys", "The Ballad of Purchase-Money" "The Ballad of Kings and Christs", and "The Women & the Slain").

"Nocturne" is a poem in which Owen, before he drifts into peaceful slumber, asks God to grant rest to all those souls ". . . in toil and turbulence / All men a-weary seeking bread" (3-4). The poem bears the stamp of Dunsden and reflects the compassion Owen felt for those who continually had to endure hardship. Despite its conventional rhyming scheme, the poem arouses interest because of the use of alliteration, which shows that thoughts about technicalities were being considered at this stage.

Owen sent a copy of "Impromptu" to his cousin Leslie Gunston. The person addressed in this poem seems to be a male child. Owen, enthralled by the child, goes into

raptures about one of his hands, his eyes and the look in those eyes. Although written towards the end of Owen's stay in France, this poem also contains shadows of Dunsden and one wonders whether the child referred to in the poem was Vivian Rampton, Owen's young friend. The homosexual undertones in the poem are unmistakable and Kenneth Simcox's comments on this subject are worthy of mention: "We have to be careful not to confuse homosexual tendencies with homosexual conduct . . . the fact that in June 1915 he sent a blatantly homosexual poem . . . to Leslie Gunston is unlikely to have anything other than poetic significance, for the tone of the letter which encloses it is entirely matter of fact."²¹ At the same time, though, Owen's possible homosexual tendencies should not be ignored as his sexual identity and his acceptance or repression of it could have influenced the way in which he wrote.

The theme of the sonnet "The Sleeping Beauty" is the stirrings of love and Dennis Welland writes of the "moving shyness and immaturity" of the poem.²² When Owen wrote:

For, when I kissed, her eyelids knew no stir.
 So back I drew from that Princess,
 Because it was too soon, and not my part,
 To start voluptuous pulses in her heart
 And kiss her to the world of Consciousness.

he reasoned that the princess was too young to be awoken to love and so he withdrew. This

²¹Kenneth Simcox, *Anthem For a Doomed Youth*, 22.

²²Dennis Welland, *Wilfred Owen - A Critical Study*, 38.

was the excuse the poet provided so that he would not have to undergo the pangs of love himself; if the princess were not old enough to experience love, then he would not have to experience it either and therefore he would not suffer. Instead of recognising and accepting emotional difficulties at a personal level, the poet put the blame on external factors. In this sense, the difficulties Owen had in facing up to the truth of his situation at Dunsden are reflected in this piece. (Jon Stallworthy has suggested that the sleeping princess was in fact Nénette Léger, the eleven year old daughter of Mme. Léger (*WO* 106).)

The first poem to be started once war was declared was "The Ballad of Peace and War". It was revised on several occasions, spanning a period of four years and bore several titles until it finally it became "The Women & the Slain". The poem is striking in its naïvety, particularly where Owen suggested that it was honourable to die for one's country. However, with war experience behind him, Owen later contradicted this attitude in the poem "Dulce et Decorum Est".

Written shortly after "The Ballad of Peace and War", the sonnet "1914" heralded a change in Owen's poetry insofar as it was the first piece he wrote that contemplated the seriousness of the war. The sonnet, of which there are four drafts, was later revised either at Craiglockhart or at Scarborough.

No other fragment written during Owen's "French period" makes references to war. However, "About the winter forest loomed" is worth mentioning since phrases like "terrifying dark", "sharp scourging rain", "The obscurity was heavy like a guilt" and "horrors of an obscene mind / Sick of obscenity: afraid of self" show that even before his war experiences, Owen was quite capable of using language effectively in order to create sensations of tension and fear. The eerie atmosphere the poet conjures up in this fragment is later seen in many of the war poems such as "Exposure", "Dulce et Decorum Est", and

"The Show".

Reference to the fragment "Ballad of the Morose Afternoon" should also be made as it is a draft translation of part of Laurent Tailhade's "Ballade élégique pour le morose après-midi". Tailhade's influence over Owen must have been fairly strong for Owen to have wanted to translate the older man's work. Owen's interest in translating this piece could also be indicative of the eagerness he had to learn from his French master. He showed equal interest and enthusiasm when he met Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh a few years later. As a developing poet, Owen was willing to glean knowledge from sources which he knew would be beneficial to him.

"Perseus" was a lengthy fragment that saw its beginnings in France. The earliest draft seems to date from 1914 and in 1918, six drafts later, Owen was still working on it. The "Perseus" drafts are considered important because they provided some of the inspiration for many of Owen's war poems such as "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Strange Meeting", "Futility", "Greater Love", "Mental Cases", "The Sentry" and "Spring Offensive". Dominic Hibberd describes the "Perseus" drafts: "While few of them are work of real distinction, they were at least a useful discipline which was to bear fruit later . . ." (*OTP* 41). For Hibberd, "Perseus" was "the connecting link between his Dunsden torments, his exploration of life and literature in France, his trench experiences and his 1917-18 war poems" (53).

It was mentioned earlier that whilst in France, Owen was not satisfied with the progress he made as far as his poetic creativity was concerned. However, it is quite clear from the numerous attempts he made at writing that, just as the time he spent in Dunsden was exceedingly important, so was the time he spent in France. Ideas were born, considered and reconsidered and many later formed the groundwork for much of his war

poetry. Harold Owen is of the opinion that "It was France which provided the right atmosphere for him and broke him out of stultifying mental imprisonment, setting him free to think . . ." (*JFO* III, 60).

II

WAR ON WAR

2.1 Owen as an Officer

Wilfred Owen was not swept up by the initial flood of heroic young men who wanted to defend their country. At the beginning of the war, he had no intention of signing up to fight and opinions as to why he eventually decided to join up vary. Dominic Hibberd has suggested that Owen enlisted because British losses at Gallipoli were extremely heavy and if Germany were to be defeated, more manpower was necessary (*OTP* 58), but Owen's reasons for joining the army were not so simple. At first, he virtually ignored the fact that a war was going on. Later, he suggested that since the regular British soldiers were not much more than dullards, there was little to regret when they died in their hundreds and full of a sense of his own worth, Owen wrote in a letter home: ". . . my life is worth more than my death to Englishmen" (*CL* 300). He was reluctant to take up a life that he felt would take him further away from the possibility of writing poetry. Quoting from *CL*, Adrian Caesar has mentioned that as a further excuse, Owen chose not to join the army because he felt he had already suffered sufficiently in life without having to suffer anymore.¹ However, by June 1915, Owen's attitude had changed. His conscience was stirring him into action, his future was uncertain and he realised that joining the army was an alternative to be contemplated. In a letter to his mother on 30 June 1915, Owen provided what he considered to be an acceptable reason for enlisting in the army. Referring to this letter, Adrian Caesar informs us that partly as a result of Owen's reading of Hilaire Belloc's writing, Owen:

. . .explicitly expresses the hope that warfare will make him into a poet. . .

¹Adrian Caesar, *Taking it Like a Man*, 137-41.

Despite some little vacillation, Owen's enthusiasm to participate in the war rapidly developed. And in July we find him conceiving of war in connection with literature. . . . From his role as 'Poet' initially being used as a reason to keep from the war, it has now become . . . a major reason for his going.²

On Tuesday 21 October 1915, Wilfred Owen was sworn in, given the number 4756 and so became one more volunteer in the British Forces who was to meet his death in France. The army provided Owen with a community to which he felt he could belong and the sense of comradeship Owen experienced in the army was a great source of pleasure to him. C. Day Lewis explains that:

By temperament and force of circumstances, Owen had led a solitary life, cut off from any close fraternity with other men, out of touch with the cultural movements of pre-war England. Shy and diffident as he was, this previous isolation must have heightened the sense of comradeship he felt when, in the army, he found himself accepted by his fellows and able to contribute to the life of a working unit. The old solitude was fertilized by the new fraternity, to enlarge his emotional and imaginative scope.³

Despite this new-found camaraderie, however, Owen always maintained a certain distance from his fellow-soldiers. His not quite complete integration into army life together with his natural aloofness enabled him to successfully identify with his double role as an

²Adrian Caesar, *Taking It Like A Man*, 141.

³C. Day Lewis, in his introduction to Wilfred Owen's *Collected Poems*, 26.

officer and as a war poet. He was close enough to both the soldiers and other officers to be a part of their tight-knit community, yet separate enough to pen his war reports in poetry. In the fifth and sixth stanzas of "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo", Owen speaks of the comradeship amongst soldiers:

I have made fellowships -
 Untold of happy lovers in old song.
 For love is not the binding of fair lips
 With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

 By Joy, whose ribbon slips,
 But wound with war's hard wire those stakes are strong;
 Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
 Knit in the webbing of the rifle-throng.

At the same time, certain aspects of army life and discipline must have been difficult for Owen to accept. The corrosive mentality which permitted a soldier to function in a machine-like fashion, irrespective of the circumstances he found himself in must have been repulsive to Owen's sensitive nature. Qualities one would attribute to anybody who was in any way concerned about the war from a humane point of view were sneered upon, casualties and the dead were never alluded to with respect or feeling, the enemy was never to be considered as anything but an evil and monstrous shadow that had to be eliminated at all costs. To be sensitive to any degree would have been considered a sign of weakness which did nothing to help the just cause of the war.

It was suggested in the previous chapter that Owen's aloofness may not have been born of timidity, but rather of a snobbery which led him to believe that he was superior to the soldiers and to many of the officers. Whatever the reason for his remoteness, what is clear is that Owen did see himself as different from others. After reading *CL*, fellow-officer Lieutenant H. R. Bate came to consider Owen a snob yet Lieutenant John Foulkes never changed his high opinion of Owen. Dominic Hibberd writes:

Foulkes thought him a 'thorough gentleman . . . courteous to all ranks - willing and eager to help anybody. I always suspected him of having an extra soft spot for Tommy, although he never allowed it to interfere with discipline. Whilst seeming to thoroughly understand the soldiers' attitude to most things he himself seemed to me to have a curious lack of growl.'⁴

Later on, Hibberd quotes Lieutenant Foulkes as saying ". . . 'I was content to follow him with the utmost confidence in his leadership'" (172). Kenneth Simcox feels that what made Owen appear somewhat conceited at first was his receiving a commission in the army: "It was extraordinary to compare his attitudes at this date with his later style as an officer, and it is to Wilfred's credit that he grew out of his early superiority to become a genuine shepherd of sheep . . . he thoroughly enjoyed his newly-found authority. . . ." ⁵

In Douglas Kerr's opinion, it was Owen's insecurity as far as scales within the different social classes were concerned that made him appear distant and stand-offish and even jealous of the status being an officer provided. Kerr has suggested that:

⁴Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen, The Last Year*, 159.

⁵Kenneth Simcox, *Anthem For a Doomed Youth*, 124-25.

. . . anxious touchiness is responsible for the apparently contradictory presence, in the letters, of indignation at the snobbery of officers . . . alongside a selective snobbery of his own. Arriving at camp in Ripon in March 1918, he found most of the officers to be 'privates and sergeants in masquerade', and said he would prefer to be among 'honest privates' (CL 539). At Scarborough, in July, most of the officers were 'glorified N.C.O's' but there was 'an element of gentleman left' (CL 563). Returning to France, he was pleased to have 'an intellectual gentleman for Captain'; the Colonel too was 'a mild, honourable gentleman', but at least two of the officers in his company were 'quite temporary gentlemen.' (CL 579)" (WOV 208).

On analysing the above-mentioned opinions of Hibberd, Simcox and Kerr more closely, it can be seen that one of the main causes of Owen's apparent snobbery was his immaturity and lack of experience; Owen had a serious job to do and perhaps he found some aspects of his new situation overwhelming and so he attempted to mask his feelings of insecurity by hiding behind a façade of airs of superiority and false calmness.

Also, it must be conceded that a difference existed and had to exist among the ranks; otherwise the army as an institution created to defend its country would have failed to function. As Paul Fussell has pointed out, "Staff officers were separated from line officers the same way officers in general were separated from Other Ranks, by uniform."⁶ Before enlisting, Owen described the British soldiers as "all Tommy Atkins, poor fellows" (CL 282). Later, in June 1916, before seeing action, he wrote, "I am marooned on a Crag of Superiority in an ocean of Soldiers" (CL 395). In the same letter, he described the soldiers

⁶Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 83.

as being "hard-handed, hard-headed miners, dogged, loutish, ugly," but in parenthesis added, "But I would trust them to advance under fire and to hold their trench." Owen, in the privileged position of line officer, gradually became aware of the responsibility he had to bear. On seeing active service and speaking of the officers, Owen - as a man conscious of his military rank - wrote: "We are never dry and never 'off duty'. . . . On all the officers' faces there is a harassed look that I have never seen before ... The men are . . . all expressionless lumps. . . . We feel the weight of them hanging on us" (CL 422). Owen and all other officers really were men set apart from the ordinary fighting soldier.

Field Officers could perhaps understand and sympathise with the common soldiers' predicament much more than Staff Officers but they could never really belong to the "lads". Respecting the inevitable distance between officer and soldier, Owen seemed to gradually become rather fond of the little army of soldiers that came under his command. In his last letter home before his death Owen wrote, ". . . You could not be visited by a band of friends half so fine as surround me here" (CL 591), although Owen's sincerity in describing the men he was housed with as a "band of friends" is questionable.

Hints of a patronising attitude towards the uneducated infantryman are evident in poems like "Insensibility" where Owen first describes the soldiers collectively as "Men, gaps for filling" (9) and later on says of the individual soldier that "Alive, he is not vital overmuch; / Dying not mortal overmuch" (44-45). This attitude is reminiscent of the tone of a letter he wrote to his mother from France at the end of August 1914 in which he commented on the "deflowering of Europe" but suggested that "the guns will effect a little useful weeding" (CL 282). With time, Owen came to change his prejudices against soldiers from working-class backgrounds and greater respect for them is seen in poems like "The Sentry". Here, Owen's personal concern for the ordinary soldier is more evident and

provides a stark contrast to the feelings of guilt of the officer who has forgotten a soldier blinded by a shell.

Harold Owen provides a detailed account of how he saw his brother in his role as an officer. On his second visit to Wilfred at a training camp, Harold felt:

I was not so much accompanying Wilfred as a brother but rather was I accompanying an officer of quiet but superb quality . . . this quality of bearing was nothing whatsoever to do with training, it was something innate and also indescribable, but fairly recognizable. As he moved amongst the men I could sense how keenly they recognized this quality and responded to it. I was immeasurably impressed by how obviously he was not only liked by them but admired as well. . . . I became acutely aware that he was possessed of a profound confidence in his dealings with N. C. O's and men (*JFO* III, 153).

To Owen, the idea of leading soldiers was appealing. He told his younger brother Colin, "It is rather strange to feel that these heroes feel me as their boss!" (*CL* 451). He found proof of his popularity with the men when, in October 1918, he had to censor letters. In one or two of them, he came across references to himself and judging by the comments he made to his mother, he felt flattered as they made him feel that he was fulfilling his duty as an officer towards his men without behaving towards them in the cold and distant manner that was typical of so many army officers.

As an officer, Owen was aware of the importance of giving good example to the soldiers under his command and this was one of the reasons why he was so careful about

his appearance and behaviour in front of them. Harold Owen quotes his brother: "You know, Harold, if I have got to be a soldier, I must be a good one, anything else is unthinkable" (*JFO* III, 155).

When Owen returned to France for his second tour of duty, he was first sent to the base camp at Etaples. As an officer, he saw himself as the man responsible for the guidance of others and he likened himself to a herdsman watching over his cattle or a shepherd guarding his flock. He wrote to Sassoon: "And now I am among the herds again, a Herdsman; and a Shepherd of sheep that do not know my voice" (*CL* 571).

Although Owen was proud to be an officer in the army, the role he saw himself in as officer conflicted sharply with the role he saw himself in as poet. Perhaps one of the greatest paradoxes in Owen's life as a soldier and poet was that he participated in the war yet at the same time protested against it; he could find no justification for war, yet he functioned successfully as an officer. He even felt that his reputation as a soldier had to be earned before his voice of protest could be heard and heeded. Realising the efforts his brother made, Harold Owen quotes him as having said: "...outwardly I will conform. . . my inward force will be the greater for it. . . I must watch my self-imposed discipline for details" (*JFO* III, 155-56). It was this combination of participation and protest that led Owen to write the type of war poetry he wrote.

Added to the soldier-poet, participation-protest conflict was the tension Owen experienced on being and wanting to be an officer who was set apart from the ordinary soldier whilst at the same time wanting to identify and be with him. Poems like "Inspection" and "The Sentry" best show Owen's dilemma. In "Inspection", Owen appears as the uncompromising officer who bluntly refuses to accept the situation of the soldier who went on parade with a blood-stain on his uniform. However, Owen the poet, understands

and sympathises with the unfortunate soldier who was "confined to camp" (5) for being "dirty on parade" (6). "The Sentry" portrays the officer as the man in charge, the man who posts soldiers for sentry duty and the man who - because of more pressing duties - subsequently forgets the sentry once he is unable to function as such because of injury. But at the same time, Owen the poet allows the officer to feel a certain degree of compassion for the sentry's suffering. In these two poems, Owen presents the army officer (or himself) - and therefore the army as the institution the officer represents - as unthinking, unfeeling and uncaring.

Referring to "The Sentry", Desmond Graham has addressed the question of complicity as an officer in the war and of the "officerly concern without real contact" but he feels that the reader might be, "in sympathy with the officer's frankness and we do not condemn him: but within his desire to purge his memory, we also see an attempt to cover and deny his own awareness of responsibility."⁷ At the same time, this attempt to avoid painful memories could be an indication of the officer's true sensitivity; his role as an officer did not permit him to outwardly manifest any kind of feeling that he might have experienced towards his men and so these hidden emotions often only surfaced in nightmares. Like Owen, all officers had to outwardly conform and exercise self-imposed discipline.

In "The Dead-Beat", the callous words of the doctor, who represents high military authority, echo the same type of brutality seen in "Inspection" and "The Sentry". However, perhaps an understanding thought should be spared for the doctor and for some of those he represents. In the poem, Owen wrote of ". . . the Doc's well-whiskied laugh" (18), implying that the doctor was very drunk when he reported, in derogatory terms, that his

⁷Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War*, 56.

patient had died. Is the reader of the poem meant to despise the doctor for his drunkenness? Or was it Owen's intention to make the reader ponder the possibility that the doctor had to ply himself with whisky in order to be able to cope with the awfulness of the situation he found himself in? Owen understood the plight of the soldiers, but as an officer, he also understood the difficulties commissioned men had to face. The war was not pleasant for anyone who had first-hand experience of it and on exploring the range of responses to the soldier's condition in this poem, Owen demonstrated his understanding of the situation from different points of view. The desire of the dying soldier to kill the enemy, the low voice that explained why the soldier had gone mad, the mistrusting attitude of the stretcher-bearers and the comment of the inebriated doctor all combine to show Owens' ability to sympathise and empathise with the men who found themselves in such situations. On discussing "The Dead-Beat", Dominic Hibberd writes of an implied tension, which was to be developed "much further in later poems, between Owen-as-officer, using his revolver to enforce discipline, and Owen-as-poet, diagnosing the man's collapse with a sympathy beyond the reach of the war-hardened medical men" (*OTP* 101).

On quoting the last lines of "The Dead-Beat" in his book, *English Poetry 1900-1950*, Charles Hubert Sisson has suggested that Owen escapes from the Romantic "into the trivial and the conventionally not quite nice . . . It is unpleasant and tasteless. It is the voice of protest, but protest against an attitude no adequate mind would defend. This is the worst element in Owen's work, and certainly below the level of it" (84). Presumably, Sisson has a clear notion of what is "the trivial and the conventionally not quite nice" when it comes to war and criticising Owen's war poetry. One is forced to wonder if he considers war (and the poetry that was born alongside it) to be trivial and conventionally not nice because it does not fit into his concept of war and war poetry? He describes Owen's poem as

"unpleasant and tasteless", but is there anything about war that is pleasant and tasteful? Does Sisson feel that a pleasant and tasteful poem can be written about a soldier's dementia and death? War is not trivial, neither is it conventional. It is extremely unpleasant and tasteless. Owen had every right to protest - and there were many "adequate" minds who agreed with him. How Owen's words are "below the level of literature" would probably be incomprehensible to most sensitive readers, even though Sisson appears to understand why they are.

In Owen's situation as participator and protester, complete detachment as an officer was impossible and isolation as a poet was neither possible nor advisable and so it was inevitable that along with the tension Owen must have felt, came feelings of guilt. And Owen's feelings of guilt were inextricably linked with his feelings about religion. In May 1917, he described himself as "a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience" (*CL* 461), and the following August he wrote, "While I wear my star and eat my rations, I continue to take care of My Other Cheek; and thinking of the eyes I have made sightless, and the bleeding lad's cheeks I have wiped, I say: Vengeance is mine, I, Owen, will repay" (*CL* 483). On 14 July 1918, he wrote to Osbert Sitwell:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work - teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst until after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were not any complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him everyday, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha (*CL* 562).

Here, Owen likened the soldiers he was training to Christ being prepared for His final suffering and death. The feeling of guilt behind Owen's words is obvious: he, as the officer, was preparing the soldiers for their final sacrifice. Owen knew he was sending the vast majority of them to a certain death, but the soldiers, unlike Christ, were not aware that they were being sent to the slaughter. The phrase "With a piece of silver I buy him everyday" was, for Owen, the sign of ultimate betrayal. Here, Owen was drawing a parallel between Judas Iscariot and himself. Just as Judas betrayed the innocent Christ, whom he professed to love, Owen betrayed the innocent soldiers, whom he professed to love.

In "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", Abram represents all those "in charge" of war, including all officers, and Isaac, the innocent child-victim, represents the ordinary soldier. If Abram, on not heeding the Angel's warning and on not taking his advice, became guilty of slaughter, then Owen, as an officer, was also guilty of bloodshed and butchery. Douglas Kerr has suggested that "Owen himself was cast as Abram, the patriarch commissioned to execute an order by a higher command whose word he could not question. . . . Owen's rank put him among the patriarchs and crucifiers. For him the obverse or dark side of an officer's responsibility was guilt" (*WOV* 222).

Referring to both Owen and Sassoon, Arthur Lane discusses the burden of being an officer. He feels that both poets "demonstrate the anguish of that burden of deploying men they represented and loved in accordance with impersonal orders which were frequently mass death-warrants."⁸ Douglas Kerr is of the opinion that "As a junior officer in command of front-line troops, Owen was both the agent and the victim of the orders under which that suffering took place" (*WOV* 127). Owen was deeply implicated in the suffering

⁸Arthur Lane, *An Adequate Response*, 31.

and death he dealt out, saw and experienced in France. Kerr continues: "As a soldier he [Owen] described himself ruefully as 'a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience' (CL 461) but as an officer he was more than that - he was the voice and instrument of an authority whose words could have terrible meanings for the people in his charge" (221-22). Adrian Caesar has put forward another possible reason for Owen's guilt feelings. He has suggested that Owen probably found some satisfaction in knowing that his poems could speak for the silent soldiers but, like Sassoon, "There were aspects of the war that both of them [Owen and Sassoon] found exciting and stimulating and emotionally fulfilling, but this gave rise to massive guilt feelings."⁹

It is surprising that on discussing Owen's feelings of culpability as an officer, no writer has yet attempted to connect these feelings in adulthood with Owen's childhood and his early religious experiences. Both were steeped in the traditional notions of doing good for everybody, in total self-sacrifice and in overwhelming feelings of guilt if a life of self-sacrifice was not followed. As a result, Owen acquired a highly refined sense of responsibility and a guilt complex that would manifest itself whenever he thought he was not fulfilling or could not fulfil what he considered to be his obligations. Since it is impossible for the average human being to be totally self-sacrificing, Owen would probably never have been completely satisfied with what he did in life. Perhaps unwittingly, he was striving for a perfection he could never attain, for a perfection that would always leave him with a sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness. Owen carried these feelings with him into army life and once in the fray, these feelings rose from the depths of his subconscious and became sufficiently distorted to create difficulties for him. Owen the officer was a mirror-image of Owen the child.

⁹Adrian Caesar, *Taking It Like a Man*, 151.

After the period of time he spent at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Owen was sent to Scarborough and Ripon for re-training. Owen's attitude to his return to active service is discussed positively by most authors. Sven Bäckman feels that: "Owen's decision to return to the front later in 1918 did not have much to do with patriotism or heroism as with his sense of solidarity with his men and his deeply felt creative urge to express, in poetry, the inconceivable effects of this war on human beings, especially the effect that has been defined by psychiatrists as "psychic numbing"."¹⁰

Dominic Hibberd writes that Sassoon returned to the front as an officer whilst remaining opposed to the war as a poet and he adds: "Owen felt much the same conflict in himself; in the end he made the same decision as Sassoon, directly influenced by his example" (*OTP* 16). For Hibberd, the poets' consciences would not permit them to remain free of the front line. On quoting from Harold Owen's trilogy, it is clear that Arthur Lane also views Owen's return to the front as a positive decision. Lane writes: "To Harold Owen's question, 'You have made up your mind to get back to the front line as soon as possible, haven't you?' Wilfred replied, 'Yes I have, Harold, and I know I shall be killed.'¹¹

Despite what Bäckman, Hibberd, Lane and Harold Owen believe, Owen was actually in no position to decide whether or not he wanted to return to the front. He had no choice whatsoever in the matter. In fact, it is patently obvious that had he been able to obtain a post at home, Owen would have been delighted to foresake his silent soldiers on French soil. As early as September 1917, thoughts of a home-posting were milling around his

¹⁰Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed*, 16.

¹¹Arthur Lane, *An Adequate Response*, 45. Lane quotes from Harold Owen's *JFO* III, 162.

mind: "Sassoon wants me to get a green-tab job in England. I think he could" (CL 493).¹² In February 1918, he wrote to his mother from Scarborough telling her, "It all depends what manner of opening I, or my friends, can wedge open for me in England, that is, London" (CL 530). If the translator Charles Scott Moncrieff, who owing to injury, was put on administrative duties at the War Office and who had several connections with people in authority at the War Office, had been able to secure an administrative post for Owen, the latter would have had no compunction in remaining in England. In May, Owen had sent his mother a postcard from London, "Spent all aft. at War Office, Scott Moncrieff is trying to get me a job in England . . ." (CL 552). A few days later, Owen's enthusiasm was still evident: "I have every chance of becoming Instructing Staff Officer to a Cadet Battalion. I would rather work in the W. O. [War Office] itself and that seems not impossible either" (CL 552-53). However, the impression that Owen's fate might have been sealed before his friends could do anything for him is given in the last line of the letter: "I am now in Div. 2 awaiting Board, before W. O. friends can do anything."

On 4 June 1918, Owen was pronounced fit by the Medical Board and was sent for further training at Scarborough. A letter to his mother on 6 June shows he was still confident about staying in England: "I have informed the War Office of my Category & address" (CL 556). In a postcard dated 11 June he wrote, "Letter from W. O. says I'll probably be sent to Artists" (CL 558), which suggests that Owen's hopes for a home-posting should have been dwindling, yet his following letter contained glimmers of hope: ". . . it should not be many days before I am called to the W. O. and Berkhamstead for a month's preparatory course with the Inns of Court O. T. C." (CL 559), which would at least have meant a delay in his return to the front. By 24 June, Owen reported to his mother that his

¹²A green-tab job was a job in military intelligence.

war dreams had begun again and even though he attributed the cause to the flapping of a tent canvas in the wind, he was probably subconsciously resigned to going back to France, though he did not acknowledge the fact: "As no call has come from the W. O. has reached me (sic), I shall likely be here another month - unless drafted out, which is not probable" (CL 560). Even once he was back in France, Owen understandably, still harboured the hope of avoiding the combat zone: "I may stay here indefinitely" (CL 574).

From the evidence available, Jon Stallworthy has deduced that the poem "The Calls" was revised in May 1918 whilst Owen was re-training at Scarborough, although it was never finished. Stallworthy has connected the poem to a letter Owen sent to his mother on 10 August 1918, when he learnt that he would be going back to the front. He wrote: "I am glad. That is I am much gladder to be going out again than afraid" (CL 568). This did not mean Owen was happy at the prospect of returning to France. Rather, it meant that his reaction to going back was stronger than any feeling of fear he might have had. "The Calls" includes the following lines: "I heard the sighs of men who have no skill / To speak of their distress, no, nor the will! / A voice I know. And this time I must go" (25-27). Owen accepted his destiny. He knew he had to return to France and although he was afraid, he went with a clear objective in mind: to speak the unspeakable for the silent soldiery, to share in their misery, which was his misery also. Consequently, he became "a pleader and a spokesman for the silent victims of the war, against men and institutions responsible for their degradation and destruction."¹³

On 22 September 1918, after having seen action once again, Owen wrote to Sassoon, implying that he regretted his return to the front: "You said it would be a good thing for my poetry if I went back. That is my consolation for feeling a fool. This is what the shells

¹³Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed* 37.

scream at me every time; Haven't you got the wits to keep out of this?" (CL 578). And from a letter he wrote to his mother on either 4 or 5 October 1918, Owen made it quite clear that he found it difficult to find words that could suitably express his experiences at the front. The fact that he could not go into details of combat for fear of disturbing the censor is indication enough of what was going on. Owen assured his mother that his nerves were standing up to the strain. He felt that as an officer he was fulfilling his duty, although perhaps as a spokesman for the common soldier, he felt that he was not doing enough: "I came out in order to help these boys - directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first" (CL 580). One wonders whether this feeling of not having pleaded enough on behalf of the men is a reflection of Owen's tendency to be a perfectionist, which was mentioned earlier. No doubt he was doing a good job and provided his men with all the physical and psychological support that was possible given the circumstances, but Owen would probably never have been satisfied with what he did.

Owen the officer wanted to write his poetry on behalf of the inarticulate soldiers and he wanted people to become aware of the physical and emotional burdens these men were subject to. Despite his participation in it, Owen was opposed to the war, and he felt that it was his duty to the ordinary "voiceless" soldier to make known the effects war had on the soldiers and on the environment. Owen wanted to describe the truth of war as he had seen it. He no longer wanted to be a mute witness to the daily atrocities that occurred on the battlefield.

Diane de Bell's comments on Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* can most certainly be applied to the situation Owen found himself in. She wrote of:

. . . the difficulty of finding an adequately honest voice for the war experience during the war itself. . . . the rapidly changing perceptions of the men at the front as their responses to the reality of trench warfare recorded its waste and uselessness. The only psychological posture that seemed to suffice effectively was one which depended on the strength of personal pride, and the desire to support one's comrades. Only the immediate task at hand could be accommodated emotionally.¹⁴

Despite modern man's pride in the comforts of the modern world, the war contributed to his depersonalisation and in his letters and poetry Owen sometimes equated the soldiers to dumb, docile and defenceless animals. He wanted to speak on their behalf, to defend them, to write in a language that was comprehensible to them. He had told Sassoon that he did not want "to write anything to which a soldier would say No Compris!"¹⁵ He always claimed he wanted his language to be understandable to his audience. (This desire went back to his early years at Dunsden Vicarage when, in a letter to his sister Mary, he once wrote, "I use no high-falutin' words, but try to express myself in simple, straightforward English" (CL 94), so that the people with whom he came into contact could understand what he was saying). In part, the ordinary soldiers were held together by a language that was peculiar only to the lower ranks of the army but Owen tried to bridge the distance between himself (as an officer and a poet) and the ordinary infantryman by using a variety of language and register that would draw the men and their

¹⁴Diane de Bell, "Strategies of Survival: David Jones *In Parenthesis* and Robert Graves *Goodbye to All That*", published in Holger Klein's book *The First World War in Fiction*, 165.

¹⁵See note CPF 193.

experiences closer to his poetry. For example, in "The Chances", where Owen included himself in the group of five soldiers who were talking about the possible fate that could befall a man in battle, vernacular speech and military slang combine to create a "oneness" between Owen and the soldiers. For a moment, the poet succeeds in demolishing the barrier that existed between the middle-class intellectual officer and the lower-class, less-educated private.

When he knew he was to return to France for his second tour of duty, Owen realised that he had to be the voice of the silent soldier on the battlefield. To plead and speak on behalf of the thousands of soldiers who were to march to their deaths without being able to publicly express their own thoughts about war became his principal objective as a poet of the war. Owen was not prepared to allow the fate of the unimportant, passive footsoldier to go unnoticed. If the infantryman's life was to be mutilated or discontinued by war, then Lieutenant Owen wanted the peace and tranquility of those who read his poetry to be mutilated and discontinued as well. If the words spoken by an officer were words powerful enough to send a man to his death, then Owen wanted his words to be strong enough to make people aware of the foul truths of war.

In his role as officer, part of Owen's job was to transmit orders from a higher authority to the soldiers, and as a poet, he felt that part of his duty was to transmit the soldiers' experiences to those who were not actively involved in the war, even if they were incapable of understanding. In other words, as a poet, Owen was continuing the officer's function as go-between. This is seen in "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo", where Owen identified with the soldiers' suffering but made it quite clear that no outsider could ever understand the horrors of war unless he or she had been directly involved:

Nevertheless, except you share
 With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,
 Whose world is but the trembling of a flare
 And heaven but as the highway for a shell,

You shall not hear their mirth:

You shall not come to think them well content
 By any jest of mine. These men are worth
 Your tears. You are not worth their merriment.

In J. Loiseau's opinion, Owen's objective in writing this poem, as well as in many others, was to inform the public of the martyrdom of the soldiers. That was "All the public needed (and deserved) to be told."¹⁶ The fulfillment of this objective is seen in other poems such as "Mental Cases", "Disabled" and "A Terre" where the soldiers have become victims who have lived through the inferno of one war only to have to live through the hell of an incomplete existence during peace time.

As an officer, Owen was painfully aware not only of the physical hardships the soldiers had to endure but also of the inner suffering that the men were subject to. As a censor of letters, Lieutenant Owen was probably more than familiar with the lies that the soldiers told their folks at home so that they would not worry about them, lies like those referred to in "S.I.W.". In this poem, Owen highlights the hidden torments of the ordinary soldier who, sheltering in some Y.M. Hut, has to endure unbelievable psychological and emotional pain:

¹⁶J. Loiseau, *"A Reading of Wilfred Owen's Poems"*, 101.

Where once an hour a bullet missed its aim.
 And misses teased the hunger of his brain.
 His eyes grew old with wincing, and his hand
 Reckless with ague. Courage leaked, as sand
 From the best sandbags after years of rain.

Small wonder the young soldier killed himself. As the poet explained:

It was the reasoned crisis of his soul,
 Against more days of inescapable thrall,
 Against infrangibly wired and blind trench wall
 Curtained with fire, that would not burn him whole
 But kept him for death's promises and scoff,
 And life's half-promising, and both their riling.

In an epic poem, the prologue is usually brief and leads into a much longer drama. In "S.I.W.", the structure of the epic is parodied. "The Prologue" is the longest part of the poem and given that it deals with the attitude of those at home in comparison to the mental anguish of the soldier, it is reasonable to assume that one of Owen's major concerns in writing this poem was to create a stark and shocking contrast between the attitude of those at home and the unknown suffering that went on at the front. "The Action" provides a brief statement of what happened to the soldier and "The Poem" gives a succinct account of why the soldier committed suicide. For Owen, there was no need to be lengthy here because the soldier's behaviour was understandable. The brevity of the poem's epilogue adds to the

dramatic effect of the poem: the soldier killed himself, he was buried and that was it. There was no more to be said.

Owen's use of the first person plural in "The Next War" draws the soldiers and Owen, as officer and poet, closer together. The personification of death shows how familiar the men were with it; for them, death was nothing to be feared since they realised it was inevitable: "No soldier's paid to kick against His powers" (11). The power and inevitability of death is stressed even more by the use of a capital letter in the word "His"; just as pronouns referring to God and Christ are nearly always begun with capital letters as a form of respect or recognition of a superior power, so is death referred to in capital letters. It is recognised as something unavoidable which is beyond the sphere of control and total comprehension of man. At the same time, the soldiers' almost cheerful acceptance of death as if it were just another comrade-in-arms may make the poem seem somewhat trite and almost smack of the type of poem that was written specifically to boost the morale of the troops, although the possibility that it might have been Owen's intention to parody this type of poetry exists:

Out there, we walked quite friendly up to Death, -
 Sat down and ate beside him, cool and bland, -
 Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
 We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath, -
 Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
 He's spat at us with bullets, and he's coughed
 Shrapnel. We chorused if he sang aloft,
 We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Every man who joined the British army was given an identification number. Amongst the battalions of soldiers, names were of little importance and the individuality of the men was not recognised as they only formed minor parts of a vast mass of metal and uniforms. Normal human values were rejected and often scorned. The troops became components of a machine that would constantly change; they were drafted into obsolescence. As suggested in "Insensibility", they were reduced to nothing more than "gaps for filling" (10), tiny pinpoints in an immense strategic plan. By naming soldiers in some of his poems, Owen emphasised the depersonalisation that they were subject to once they had become part of the military institution. In "S.I.W", Tim's death seems all the more tragic, as does the madness Jim suffers from in "The Chances" because we know the sufferers' names. References to Bill and Jim in "The Letter" bring the situation the soldiers found themselves in closer to the reader.

Owen's use of military jargon and his knowledge of military life is reflected in many of his poems. The one-word title "Inspection" prepares the reader for just that: a cold, abrupt inspection of the troops by a superior officer. This poem is a satire on the inhuman aspects of military discipline. Jon Stallworthy has explained the meaning behind the title "With an Identity Disc": "A British soldier was issued with three identity discs bearing his name and number. They were worn on a cord round his neck and, if he was killed, one was sent to his next of kin" (*CPF* 95). In the first line of "The Letter", Owen referred to the British Expeditionary Force using the acronym B.E.F. The expressions "in the pink" (line 3) and "stand to" (line 18) were both common amongst soldiers, the first meaning to be in good health and the second is a shortened form of the order "Stand to arms". The "Blighty" referred to in "The Dead-Beat" (line 9) was soldiers' slang for Britain and "strafe", which comes from the German "strafen" and means to bombard from the air or

to punish harshly, here means an artillery bombardment. The "shilling" in "Insensibility" (line 17) is an allusion to the "King's shilling" which, according to army tradition, was given to every new recruit. The word "show" was soldiers' slang for battle and it appears as the title in "The Show" and forms part of the conversation held by a group of soldiers in "The Chances". There are several "military-bound" references in "S.I.W.", starting with the title itself, which is an acronym for self-inflicted-wound. During the war, the Y.M. Huts mentioned (line 10) were hostels run by the Young Men's Christian Association for troops. Stallworthy has explained that a "blind trench" (line 31) was one that had no outlet whilst "creeping fire" (line 17) was "a creeping barrage [which] advanced at a predetermined distance - usually in front of advancing infantry - at a predetermined time" (*CPF* 161) and "Trail" (line 22) in "Greater Love" is used "in the military sense of 'trail arms', carry a rifle with butt end near the ground and muzzle pointing forward" (*CPF* 167). The use of colloquialisms and military jargon is seen in "The Chances" where soldiers' slang abounds: "'There ain't no more than five things as can happen, / You get knocked out; else wounded, bad or cushy; / Scuppered, or nowt except you're feeling mushy" (4-6). "Cushy" meant slightly, "scuppered" meant killed, "props" (line 8) referred to legs, "Fritz" (line 10) was slang for the Germans whilst "a blighty" (line 12) referred to a wound that was sufficiently serious for a soldier to be evacuated to England for medical attention. In "Disabled", the word "pegs" (line 23), which was slang for a drink (usually brandy and soda water) appears. "Pushing up the daisies" was another slang expression often used in military circles. In "A Terre" (line 47) it means to be dead and buried. "Tommy" (line 46) was a slang word for the ordinary British infantryman whilst "Boche" (line 50) was derogatory slang for German soldiers. In "Exposure", the "salient" (line 3) was an area where the army had pushed its front line forward into enemy territory. The "whizz-bangs"

in "The Sentry" (line 8) were high-speed shells that made a piercing sound as they hurtled through the air. "Crumps" (line 33) were also shells. Owen took part in the allied spring offensive of April 1917 and he used this experience to pen a poem of the same name.

On praising Lieutenant Owen's attempts to lessen the many differences that existed between the officers and the ordinary Tommies, most critics seem to consider that he succeeded in providing what Arthur Lane has described as "convincing poetic testimony" to the strength of the mutual loyalty that existed between infantry officers and the men in ranks.¹⁷ Loyalty did exist, but Owen knew that he formed part of an institution that, by nature, fostered differences among the ranks and although he wanted to close the gap, Owen was proud and willing to accept these differences. Despite his claims to the contrary, it could be argued that Owen saw himself firstly as an officer and a gentleman and secondly as a man or poet who could represent - but not belong to - the ordinary ranks. Adrian Caesar offers a sobering thought when he writes that Owen ". . . aspired to the aristocracy of art, and wrote of his men as inferiors who were different in kind to himself."¹⁸

Edmund Blunden, a poet and war veteran, wrote in more gentle terms and described Owen as a man who had written as a soldier, as an intellectual and as a poet:

". . . as a soldier, with perfect and certain knowledge of a war at grips with the soldier; as a mind, surveying the whole process of wasted spirit, art and blood in all its instant and deeper evils; as a poet, giving his readers picture and tone that whenever they [the poems] are reconsidered afford a fresh

¹⁷Arthur Lane, *An Adequate Response*, 118.

¹⁸Adrian Caesar, *Taking It Like a Man*, 167.

profundity, for they are combinations of profound recognitions.¹⁹

2.2 The Great Divide

The First World War not only caused divisions among nations but it also caused splits to occur within the nations themselves. For Owen, the greatest rift was between those who fought at the front and those who did not. In his opinion, non-combatants in favour of war were responsible for the maiming and slaughter of thousands of men who were sacrificed for the good of their countries.

2.2.1 Those at Home

Owen identified with the fighting soldiers and established a distance between them and those at home because he resented the wilfully ignorant who deliberately chose to disregard the realities of war and allowed servicemen like those in "The Send-Off" or "S.I.W." to march to their deaths. Owen manifested his animosity towards the people at home by focussing his comments on those who would not fight, on women, on contemporary propaganda, politicians and patriotism, on military officialdom and on organised religion. He considered it his duty as a poet to express his feelings against warmongering patriots and uncompromising figures of authority and their misconceptions about war.

In order to reach a greater understanding of Owen's poetry, it is essential to comprehend the enormous chasm that separated the fighting soldiers from the civilians. It is also vital to grasp the importance of the often unacknowledged bond that existed among the infantrymen, irrespective of what side they fought on. All soldiers were linked by the

¹⁹Wilfred Owen, *Collected Poems*, 179.

mental and physical anguish they had to endure. They were, after all, the victims of a war that was caused and prolonged by others who were too distant from the realities of the trenches to ever be able to appreciate the atrocities that occurred there.

Owen's personal battle against the ignorance of war matters as far as the public was concerned must be considered within the context of the political and poetic climate of the time since, at the turn of the twentieth century, lack of political change was reflected in the formal acceptance of patriotic poets. C. K. Stead feels that the poetry established at the time was one of "political entrenchment, committed to conserve political and social ideas and institutions doomed to collapse"²⁰ and so from the beginning, it was clear that Owen's mission as a poet speaking out against the war was not going to be easy. On discussing the political bias in Rudyard Kipling's poetry, Stead implies that for Kipling, ". . . poetry was only another vehicle on which opinion and prejudice could be trundled into the drawing-room"(76). Owen also eventually managed to "trundle" his way into the drawing-rooms and parlours of many British readers, but his message was not one that encouraged patriotism or celebrated the glories of dying for one's country. Instead, Owen used his poetry as a vehicle to awaken people to the monstrous inhumanities of war. He neither simplified nor exaggerated the atrocities the men were subject to. He just simply bore witness to the truth, as he and many other soldiers saw it, with a precision that is reflected in his controlled use of emotion and language. "Thus poetry had again entered the world of public affairs," writes Stead, ". . . in recording the protest of individual men against the demands put upon them by public sentiment. . . it was. . . honest, personal, direct, and its values were humane"(89). Commenting on the narrowing of the gap between art and the realities of life, Desmond Graham explains that it was Owen's ". . . awareness of lies to answer,

²⁰C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic*, 68.

misunderstandings to correct, ignorance to supply with knowledge" that encouraged him to write his war poetry: "In the trenches, what he wrote about was common knowledge: at home it was ignored or unreachable."²¹ It is Bernard Bergonzi's opinion that:

By insisting on a fight to the finish the older generation were, in effect, prolonging the mass destruction of young men, no matter how keenly they were aware of the personal tragedy involved. The sense of alienation between Home Front and Army was most painfully felt when it divided the generations; when young soldiers were faced with the blank incomprehension of their fathers, secure in civilian ignorance, brain-washed by official propaganda and filled with Hun-hating hysteria. . . . And from this feeling there stemmed the conviction that the young men at the Front were being offered as blood sacrifice by the older civilians at home . . . which was given passionate expression by Owen in "The Parable of The Old Man and The Young".²²

In fact, so great was the enthusiasm of the misinformed civilians at home that they favoured a fight to the bitter end and were against peace negotiations.

Owen took his time in responding to the lack of civilian conscience and only began to write poetry criticising the absence of home-support once he had returned to England after his first tour of duty. The poet's attitude towards the public is seen in the closing lines of "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" when he wrote: "These men are worth / Your tears. You

²¹Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War*, 32.

²²Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight*, 122.

are not worth their merriment" (35-36). Dominic Hibberd explains that for Owen, in his writing, "The first stage was to shatter civilian complacency, so that priority went to writing poems that would be, like Sassoon's, 'perfectly truthfully descriptive of war'. . . . it was through the realism of poems . . . that Owen intended to assault the civilian conscience" (*OTP* 128-29).

The great abyss that existed between the soldiers at war and those at home was marked by the Channel separating England and France and for Owen, so great was this chasm that he felt that nothing worthwhile remained in Britain. In "Smile, Smile, Smile", he implied that most decent men capable of fighting had gone to France and died there: "... England one by one had fled to France / Not many elsewhere now, save under France" (22-23). In her unpublished PhD thesis, Jennifer Breen described "Smile, Smile, Smile" as a poem that bitterly criticised the hypocritical attitudes of all those politicians, journalists and the general public who were willing to allow the soldiers to sacrifice their lives for them (293).

If one considers the geographical distance between the home and war fronts, then the mutual incomprehension between the two was far out of proportion to the distance between them. Paul Fussell has pointed out that the physical distance between England and France was not so great and that whilst the troops were constantly reminded of how:

. . . ironically close England was, those at home were kept equally mindful of how near the trenches were . . . They could literally hear the war, at least if they lived in Surrey, Sussex or Kent, where the artillery was not only audible, but with the wind in the right direction, quite plainly audible. When the mines went off at Messines, not merely was the blast heard in Kent: The

light flashes were visible too. The guns were heard especially during preparation for a major assault, when they would fire unremittingly for a week or ten days, day and night.²³

With this in mind, Owen's feelings of contempt for those who remained deliberately ignorant of the war and for those who profitted from it were understandable. In a letter to his mother the day before he was due for a medical inspection and expected to be declared fit for draft, Owen launched a scathing attack:

. . . this morning at 8.20 we heard a boat torpedoed in the bay, about a mile out, they say who saw it. I think only 10 lives were saved. I wish the Bosche would have the pluck to come right in and make a clean sweep of the pleasure boats, and the promenaders on the Spa, and all the stinking Leeds & Bradford War-Profiteers now reading *John Bull* on Scarborough sands (*CL* 568).²⁴

These sentiments are reflected in the final part of "Insensibility":

But cursed are the dullards whom no cannon stuns,
That they should be as stones.
Wretched are they, and mean

²³Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 68.

²⁴"John Bull", "a viciously anti-German newspaper", was edited by Horatio Bottomley (Dominic Hibberd, *The First World War*, 65.)

With paucity that never was simplicity.
 By choice they made themselves immune
 To pity and to whatever moans in man

Writing about Owen, Douglas Kerr suggests that ". . . the very circumstances that alienated him from England bound him into another community, a new nation" (*WOV* 177). Vivian de Sola Pinto sees the split between the nation at home and the nation overseas in general terms and writes of:

. . . a new vertical division between the nation at home, which, except for a few air raids, had not suffered at all from the war, and the nation overseas, the new community of vast armies on the Continent, living in the filth and discomfort of the trenches under continuous shell fire and subjected to gas attacks, trench mortar bombardments and the other amenities of mechanized warfare.²⁵

On his way back to the front in early September 1918, Owen wrote to his mother from Amiens, giving the impression that he felt happier being back with the fighting men in France than being safely back in England amongst the ignorant masses. He instructed his mother to tell his brothers "how peculiarly unreluctant I am to be back here with the

²⁵Vivian de Sola Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry, 1890-1940*, 125.

Nation, & to have the Channel between me and all that the . . . typify.²⁶

Kerr describes poems like "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo", "Dulce Et Decorum Est" and "Insensibility" as poems which "measure a scornful distance from conventional views and ordinary (civilian) experience" (WOV 265). "Dulce Et Decorum Est" shows quite clearly that Owen did not consider it glorious to die for one's country in war. Similar to the soldier in "The Dead-Beat", the soldier in "Dulce Et Decorum Est" died for his country, but to no avail. How could a soldier's death be of any importance if, as a living being he was of little value, at least to the army? "Alive he is not vital over much; / Dying not mortal over much." ("Insensibility", (44-45)). However, death offered something positive because it brought relief to the soldiers. In "S.I.W.", the young soldier who committed suicide found peace in death. In "Asleep", Owen acknowledged the respite from suffering: "He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous than cold / Than we who wake and waking say Alas!" (20-21).

The writing of "Dulce Et Decorum Est" may have been prompted by Owen's experience of being affected by tear-gas. Douglas Kerr has suggested that the poem's origins go back to Owen's early days. By quoting a childhood incident described in volume one of Harold Owen's trilogy, *JFO*, Kerr's intention was to show Wilfred Owen's sense of responsibility towards others. Kerr writes: "Here, fifteen years before the Somme, we can see Owen unwittingly in training for the shepherding function of the infantry officer; and indeed the incident of "Dulce Et Decorum Est" with its feelings of anguished responsibility" (WOV 41).²⁷

²⁶Wilfred Owen, *CL* 574. The dotted line indicates where names mentioned in the letter have been omitted by the editors.

²⁷William Quinn has suggested that this poem ". . . owes both its title and all but three words of its concluding two lines to the second of Horace's "Roman Odes" (III.ii.12). (See "Multiple Metrics in Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est'", 38). It is interesting to note that in the poem "The Schoolmistress", which

With the innocence and ignorance of a soldier who had not yet experienced war at the front, Owen wrote of his knowledge of gas warfare in a letter home in early August 1916. "I am now as well up in Gas warfare as can be. It is some satisfaction to feel knowing in these matters, because I am sure it will be used more and more" (CL 402). But Owen's training did not prepare him for the real thing. In "Dulce Et Decorum Est", the lines "In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning" (15-16) show that long after the event the poet vividly remembered the soldier dying in a most undignified and wretched manner. It is almost as if Owen, safe behind the protective barrier of a gas mask, somehow felt responsible for the death of the man who had been led into danger and killed and Owen wanted the reader of the poem to also feel part of that burden of guilt:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

was written at the same time as "Dulce et Decorum Est", Owen also relied loosely on the use of the traditional notions of Roman heroism.

Pro patria mori.

Owen's reluctant recalling of the suffering of soldiers and his desire not to remember are also reflected in "The Sentry" where he wrote:

. . . Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids',
 Watch my dreams still, . . .

 Those other wretches, how they bled and spewed,
 And one who would have drowned himself for good, -
 I try not to remember these things now.

Of "Dulce Et Decorum Est" and "The Sentry", D. S. R. Welland writes that "Both are poems of dramatic description that seek to make more vivid to the reader the physical and psychological suffering of war in terms of an eye-witness account of how one man became a casualty."²⁸ In describing the suffering and / or deaths of individual soldiers in poems like "Dulce Et Decorum Est", "The Sentry" and "The Dead-Beat", Owen was in fact describing the deaths of thousands whose suffering was common only to those who made up the nation overseas. The nation at home would never understand, but Owen wanted to at least expose the horrors of war to them, to disturb their comfort and complacency, to make them realise that the:

Comforted years will sit soft-chaired,

²⁸Dennis Welland, *Wilfred Owen - A Critical Study*, 58.

In rooms of amber;
 The years will stretch their hands, well-cheered
 By our life's ember ("Miners", 25-28).

Even years after the war had finished, the nation at home was still unable to understand what the soldiers had gone through. Welland summed up the attitude of many readers by quoting the reviewer in an article published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1921: "The suggestion is that a nation is divided into two parts, one of which talks of war and ordains it, while the other acts and suffers. We can understand how such a thought might arise, but not how it can persist and find sustenance" (135).

It was suggested in the previous section of this chapter that a difference between the ordinary soldier and the officer existed. Paul Fussell has extended this feeling of difference and distance: "It was not just from their staffs that the troops felt estranged: it was from everyone back in England." Such was the gap that: "The visiting of violent and if possible painful death upon the complacent, patriotic, uncomprehending, fatuous civilians at home was a favourite fantasy indulged in by the troops. . ."²⁹ It is not known whether or not Wilfred Owen indulged in this kind of fantasy but it is obvious that he did not feel much sympathy for those at home who suffered misfortune. An example of this is seen in one of his letters shortly before his death in which he commented: "It is amusing to think of anyone being upset by a friend's arm amputation in hospital" (CL 583). The amputee was Owen's father's superior at work. Owen's lack of sympathy is understandable considering that cases far more serious than amputations were constantly attended to at the front where only rudimentary Field Hospitals existed. Owen's comment is a reflection of the scorn he

²⁹Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 86.

felt towards those at home who appeared nonplussed by the suffering that went on at the front.

At the same time, however, the soldiers at the front fuelled civilian ignorance because they were reluctant to tell the truth and so consequently deprived civilians of a more profound understanding of the war situation. Admittedly, all letters home were censored but even so, many soldiers could have been, and perhaps should have been, less concerned about upsetting people at home. This was the case of Tim, the young soldier who committed suicide in "S.I.W.". If he had been able to share the psychological burden of suffering with those close to him, then perhaps he would not have felt the desolation that created the need to take his own life. Likewise, the soldier in "The Letter" seemed quite content to write in vague terms about the war. Even after he was badly injured, his major preoccupation was that somebody wrote to his wife.

Owen had no compunction about informing his family of what he had experienced in France. When he was at Beaumont Hamel he wrote that he was at one of the worst parts of the line and described it as "Gehenna" which, in the Old Testament, is the valley below Jerusalem where children were sacrificed and, in the New Testament, it is the place where the wicked were punished after death. For Owen, the front was a place of pain, torment and death. In another letter, he wrote: "I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell. I have not been at the front. I have been in front of it" (*CL* 427). Through his letters and poems, Owen wanted to educate his readers and make people aware of what was going on. He despaired of their lack of interest and wanted to stir the conscience of England: "The people of England . . . must agitate. But they are not yet agitated even" (*CL* 429).

The soldiers' knowledge of the front became a knowledge secret to them because

they believed that no one outside could ever come to understand what they had experienced.

Desmond Graham explains why:

When he first arrived at the Front, despite the hints or suggestions given to him through others who had been there, the soldier found misery and suffering more extensive and more extreme than he could possibly have imagined: the horror of what he saw there was simply inconceivable to him. The lies he read in the papers and heard in speeches, the misunderstanding, complacency, wilful lies or innocence he encountered if he was fortunate enough to have leave, gave him something on which he could focus his anger and bewilderment and bitterness; but it was the gap between what, with the best intentions and most sympathetic imagination, could be conceived from outside and the facts of what he saw, that convinced the soldier no one could understand. He himself would not have understood, if he had not seen for himself.³⁰

Several of Owen's poems hint at the secret knowledge possessed by the soldiers at the front and so emphasise even more the lack of civilian understanding. The idea of two different "nations", of an "us and them" situation is seen in poems like "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo", "Dulce Et Decorum Est", "Greater Love", "Exposure", "Smile, Smile, Smile" and "Spring Offensive" where the soldiers' experience and their assessment of it and the civilians' lack of experience is, implicitly or explicitly, sharply contrasted. In his poetry, Owen deliberately excluded the ordinary public and refused to confer any kind of

³⁰Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War*, 34.

capacity for empathy or sympathy on them. In "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo", Owen purposefully offended the public by saying that the soldiers were worth their compassion and understanding although the public did not deserve anything from the soldiers in return. Owen, in fact, does not give his readers the opportunity to comprehend the world of the soldier. Arthur Lane writes: "There is no way for the reader, even a sympathetic one, to share, and thereby comprehend, the nightmare world of the soldier... the war had created a gulf between soldiers and civilians that no verbal communication could properly bridge. "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" is Owen's most overt statement of this separation between the two worlds of the war."³¹

With reference to "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo", Sven Bäckman also mentions the incapacity of those at home to comprehend the emotions that the soldiers experienced whilst at the front and he adds that in this poem, Owen "exploits the technique of paradox, or stark contrast, to make his points."³²

In "Greater Love", Owen permits the reader to experience an emotional response but at the same time, forbids any further comprehension: "Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not" (29).

Owen's use of the pronoun "we" and the possessive pronoun "our" in "Exposure" shows that he considered himself as belonging to the nation overseas. In this poem, he wrote of a communal experience that was peculiar only to the soldiers. Again, the secret knowledge of the soldiers was sacred only to them and Owen clearly distinguished between what was known by the soldiers and what was known by the public. And people had to

³¹Arthur Lane, *An Adequate Response*, 158.

³²Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed*, 82.

understand and respect this distinction since it was the people who had abandoned the soldiers to their fate: "Shutters and doors, all closed: doors are closed, - / We turn back to our dying" (29-30).

The very title of the poem can conjure up a variety of images in the mind of an imaginative reader since the soldiers were exposed in several ways. Firstly, in military terms, they were exposed to danger, as is seen from the line: "Sudden successive bullets streak the silence" (16). (Here, Owen's use of alliteration is effective in creating an atmosphere of tension). Secondly, they were exposed to a cruel and hostile winter: "Our brains ache in the merciless iced east winds that knife us . . ." (1), and later, once again relying on the technique of alliteration to make a point, Owen talks of the "sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause and renew" (18), pale flakes that "with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces"(21). Many men were expected to die from exposure: "Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us / Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp" (36). Thirdly, the soldiers were exposed to time, a time in which nothing happened. They had to survive the night only to greet the dawn, but "Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army / Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey, / But nothing happens" (13-15). The danger of dawn was twofold as she brought for them suffering and another day which had to be endured and also she represented the German army, which like her, was cloaked in grey and attacked from the east. And because nothing happened, the soldiers were exposed to other dangers: to false expectations and disconsolation, to a sense of timelessness, to snow-dazzling hallucinations, to a disturbing unreality within the barbed wires of their reality: "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" (22-24). Is it any wonder that the soldiers ask if they

are dying? And finally, the soldiers were exposed because those at home had shut them out and deserted them. Exposure to the dangers of war, to the elements and to a sense of suspension of time arose because of the people at home. For Owen, they were the ones responsible for the soldiers' "exposure", the ones who made home inaccessible to them.

A sense of expectancy also runs through "Spring Offensive". Here, the soldiers were waiting to attack and once the assault started, these men were also exposed: "So soon they topped the hill, and raced together / Over an open stretch of herb and heather / Exposed . . ." (27-29). The men went into battle together and those who survived remained silent, together; they refused to talk of their dead comrades. The closeness of the soldiers makes the reader feel that they have closed ranks against him. The feeling is that the outsider, the man who has never experienced war, is unable to understand.

The closing of ranks, the notion of secret knowledge and the refusal to share this knowledge is also seen in "Smile, Smile, Smile", where the wounded veterans

. . . . 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.)

In many of his poems, Owen showed a distinct feeling of bitterness towards those civilians who were cocooned in ignorance and insulated from reality. After a period of twelve days at the Front in April 1917, during which time he was thrown into the air as a result of heavy shelling, Owen complained bitterly about the lack of support from those who refused to lend it: "I think that the terribly long time we stayed unrelieved was unavoidable,

yet it makes me feel bitterly towards those in England who might relieve us, and will not" (CL 452). Owen's feelings of resentment towards the fit men at home who would do anything to avoid military service are understandable because of what he had experienced at the front, but at the same time, it should be remembered that before he took the decision to join up, Owen himself had formed part of that group of able men who did not want to enlist.

Owen's cousins, Leslie and Gordon Gunston, were both excused from doing military service. Although a very strong friendship existed between Owen and Leslie, Owen manifested his disapproval in letters home. It was mentioned earlier that on one occasion Owen wrote to his mother and instructed her to tell his brothers "How peculiarly unreluctant I am to be back here with the Nation, & to have the Channel between me and all that the.... typify" (CL 574). In his book, *Wilfred Owen - The Last Year*, Dominic Hibberd has inserted "the Gunstons" where name(s) have been omitted. Later on in his book, Hibberd quotes a sentence which refers to Leslie Gunston's military inactivity: "I am paralysed when I try to write to Leslie: so many of these boys are so *much less* fit than He!" (157). (According to Hibberd, this sentence was omitted from CL, 586). In another letter, Owen expressed his feelings directly to his cousin Leslie: "You and I have always been open with each other: and therefore I must say that I feel sorry that you are neither in the flesh with us nor in the spirit against War" (CL 589).

Owen's attitude towards the ignorance of those at home was reflected very soon after his first real war experience. In an early letter he wrote:

They want to call No Man's Land 'England' because we keep supremacy there.

It is like the eternal place of gnashing of teeth; the Slough of Despond could be contained in one of its crater-holes; the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah could not light a candle to it - to find a way to Babylon the fallen.

It is pock-marked like the foulest disease and its odour is the breath of cancer. I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air, I have perceived it, and in the darkness, felt. Those 'Somme Pictures' are the laughing stock of the army - like the trenches on exhibition in Kensington. No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode for madness. To call it England! (CL 429).

Owen's vivid description of the hell-like battlefield provokes a feeling of revulsion in the reader. He described the land as if it had been invaded by an insidious cancer that would have made Sodom and Gomorrah seem almost like paradise in comparison. Even hidden under a blanket of virgin-white snow, No Man's Land was foul, and repulsive and to call this place 'England' was offensive to Owen. He knew that 'they' wanted to call No Man's Land 'England' because 'they' knew no better and to make his point even clearer, Owen ridiculed the public's attempts to depict the realities of war in paintings and exhibitions that were open for general viewing.

When directed towards public opinion, Owen's sarcasm knew no bounds. Whilst at the 13th Casualty Clearing Station awaiting evacuation to England for further medical attention after being subject to heavy shelling, Owen went for a trip down the Somme Canal with another patient. He wrote to his mother, recommending her to read *A Knight On Wheels* by Ian Hay. He added: "I suppose in the million eyes of the Empire I have already

done a thing greater than this merry book; but, then, more fools the million eyes. . ." (CL 457). Owen's trip down the Somme was a refreshing change from the battle front and it appealed to his sense of romanticism. As a result of the trip, he wrote "Hospital Barge at C erisy".

Owen was sent from the 13th Casualty Clearing Station to Craiglockhart War Hospital. After being diagnosed as suffering from neurasthenia and spending approximately four and a half months as a patient at the hospital, he was sent for a period of re-training, after which he knew he would once again be declared fit for active service. It was mentioned earlier that Owen would have been delighted to remain in England, but knowing that he had no choice and although he was not overjoyed at the idea of returning to the front, neither was he desperately unhappy at the thought, as he felt that it was from there that he could most clearly and effectively say what he had to say. He told his mother: "I am glad. That is I am much gladder to be going out again than afraid. I shall be better able to cry my outcry, playing my part" (CL 568). He certainly did not regret leaving the war profiteers and warmongers behind as can be seen by a letter he sent to Siegfried Sassoon who was in hospital in London. Owen wrote that he knew he was doing the right thing: ". . . everything is clear now; and I'm in hasty retreat towards the Front. Battle is easier here; and therefore you will stay and endure old men & women to the End, and wage the bitterer war and more hopeless" (CL 571). The fact that Owen was in "hasty retreat" *towards* the fighting zone and that he considered the battle he had to fight easier than the one Sassoon had to fight at home convinces the reader, if any doubt remained, of the extent of Owen's feelings towards complacent non-combatants. Other war poets were of the same opinion. Ill feeling towards those at home had become common quite early on in the war. In *The First World War*, Dominic Hibberd quotes Herbert Read's comments on the attitude

of those at home: "Life has never seemed quite so cheap nor nature so mutilated . . . I was thoroughly 'fed up' with the attitude of most of the people I met on leave. . . . They have no concept whatever of what war is really like and don't seem concerned about it at all . . ."(172).³³

After the return of a senior officer from leave in October 1918, Owen went back to being second-in-command of his battalion. Of the returning officer, Owen wrote: "He has returned from his visit to London utterly disgusted with England's indifference to the real meaning of war as we understand it" (CL 585). These words reiterate what Read had said a year earlier and probably reflect the feelings of many soldiers at the front, showing what the fighting man's attitude to the complacency in England was.

Shortly after this letter, Owen sent another one to his mother in which he made reference to French civilians who had been killed by English shells: "The people in England and France who thwarted a peaceable retirement of the enemy from these areas are therefore now sacrificing aged French peasants and charming French children to our guns. Shells made by women in Birmingham are at this moment burying little children alive not very far from here" (CL 590). Owen clearly felt that responsibility for the prolongation of war lay solely in the hands of the British and the French; Germany was exonerated from blame: "I have found in all these villages no evidence of German atrocities," he wrote to Leslie Gunston (CL 589).

A sense of solidarity and close collaboration among those at home in order to betray and send soldiers off to war is seen in "The Send-Off" where the young soldiers sing and walk "Down the close darkening lanes" (1). It seems that everybody, from a tramp to the local women, has come to see them off. But there is a feeling of conspiracy and treachery

³³Herbert Read, *The Contrary Experience*, 89-90.

about the farewell: "Then, unmoved, signals nodded, and a lamp / Winked to the guard. / So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went . . ." (9-11). The word "unmoved" implies a callousness and lack of feeling for the lads who were going away. It is as if those who came to see the soldiers off knew exactly what was going to happen to them but they said nothing and the air of secrecy, which is the sign of betrayal, is expected to continue if the soldiers return as they: "May creep back, silent, to village wells, / Up half-known roads" (19-20). Kerr explains that "These soldiers who march singing to the railway in the evening are their own funeral procession. They are as good as dead already." He adds:

There is another story going on here, of course, already hinted at in the sly collusion of signals, lamp, and guard. It is a story about betrayal, of which the soldiers are both the victims and the evidence At the same time it dramatises with a brutal economy an urgent social and political issue, the gap felt to have opened up between an exploited and alienated nation under arms and an indifferent and selfish nation at home (*WOV* 292-93).

For Sven Bäckman, the aim of "The Kind Ghosts" was ". . . to bring out the indifference and ignorance of the nation at home - represented by the mistress of the palace - concerning the sufferings of her sons who have died in the trenches to preserve her pleasant and peaceful way of life." The mistress of the palace was identified as Britannia and Bäckman praises how Owen was able to ". . . expose the collective repression mechanisms that made it possible for people at home to go on living as if nothing had happened. . ." ³⁴

³⁴Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed*, 76.

Kenneth Simcox has identified hypocrisy and self-righteousness as other traits common to Owen's armchair heroes and refers to the "bold uncles smiling ministerially" (11) of "The Dead-Beat" and the uncaring shallow and flirtatious attitude of women in general in "Disabled" to make his point.³⁵ The callous indifference of those who did not have to suffer like Owen's soldiers suffered is keenly felt and contrasts sharply to the innocence and vulnerability of the easily impressionable soldiers who were persuaded to defend and either die or undergo a hellish existence for their country. Because he listened to idle girls' silly chatter about looking good in a uniform and because he lied about his age, the young man in "Disabled" is old before his time and "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" (40-42). But whatever pity may be doled out, it will be inadequate for the soldier who has sacrificed everything for the people who now reject him.

"Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" is an unusual poem in that it highlights the beauty of war but at the same time, bitterly attacks and scorns the attitudes and ignorance of those who stay at home. Civilians cannot share the soldiers' inferno and so they are totally alienated from them. The poem blatantly implies that it is only through the experience of the nightmare of war that one can fully appreciate the full significance of it and what it entails. In "Insensibility", Owen found the insensibility of the soldiers understandable and justifiable if they were to survive the situation they found themselves in:

And some cease feeling
Even themselves or for themselves.
Dullness best solves

³⁵Kenneth Simcox, *Anthem For a Doomed Youth*, 138.

The tease and doubt of shelling,

.....

They keep no check on armies' decimation.

3

Happy are these who lose imagination:

They have enough to carry with ammunition.

Their spirits drag no pack.

Their old wounds, save with cold, can not more ache.

Having seen all things red,

Their eyes are rid

Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever.

And terror's first constriction over,

Their hearts remain small-drawn.

Their senses in some scorching cautery of battle

Now long since ironed,

Can laugh among the dying, unconcerned.

However, Owen could find no justification for the insensibility of the people at home whose experience went no further than news reports and the idle talk of those ignorant of war matters. Douglas Kerr explains that:

Experienced soldiers, only too aware of the blood on their hands and of what may await them in the next battle, can only go on with their task if they

cultivate insensibility, deliberately becoming casual, unthinking, uncaring, as the most placid lad seems to be. Efficiency is automatic: too much feeling is inefficient. 'Insensibility' confesses to the consequences of the disciplines of the wars. The good soldier has to be economical with his humanity, even if this reduces him to the level of a simpleton, an animal, an automaton. Placid, unconscious, his vitality inhibited, his sensibility killed with his nerves, he has disciplined himself to a kind of willed death. He is properly in the end an object of horror. But at least he is not as inhuman, nor as dead, as the civilian whose hardness of heart is voluntary (*WOV* 167).

Quoting the final part of the poem, Sasi Bhusan Das has described "Insensibility" as an "overt attack on the insensibility or callousness of the civilian population at home, which he [Owen] curses for its apathy and stupidity."³⁶ With his poetry, it was Owen's desire to shock those at home out of their insensibility.

Arthur Lane figures amongst those authors who consider that the nation-at-home's lack of concern for those fighting in the war was related to the physical and emotional distance from the combat: "It is quite evident that attitudes adopted toward the fact of war undergo a radical conceptual change in direct proportion to the distance - the experiential distance - from which it is viewed."³⁷ Although the apparent disinterest and the degree of insensibility shown towards the soldiers fighting at the front was inexcusable, an attempt should perhaps be made to at least try and understand the attitude of some of those at home.

³⁶Sasi Bhusan Das, *Aspects of Wilfred Owen's Poetry*, 94.

³⁷Arthur Lane, *An Adequate Response*, 24.

Paul Fussell, without attempting to excuse the attitude and behaviour of those at home, has offered several reasons for the causes of civilian incomprehension:

Few soldiers wrote the truth in letters home for fear of causing needless uneasiness. If they ever did write the truth, it was excised by company officers, who censored all outgoing mail. The press was under rigid censorship throughout the war. Only correspondents willing to file wholesome, optimistic copy were permitted to visit France, and even these were seldom allowed near the line."³⁸

Bernard Bergonzi in *Heroes' Twilight* (121) and John Press in *A Map of Modern English Verse* (139), have quoted Sir Henry Newbolt who, many years after the war, attempted to make people understand that those at home also suffered, albeit in a completely different manner:

. . . there are more than two sides to this business of war, and a man is hardly normal any longer if he comes down to one. S.S. [Siegfried Sassoon] says that Owen pitied others but never himself: I'm afraid that isn't quite true - or at any rate not quite fair. To be a man one must be willing that others as well as yourself should bear the burden that must be borne. . . . Owen and the rest of the broken men rail at the old men who sent their young to die: they have suffered cruelly, but in the nerves and not the heart - they haven't the experience or the imagination to know the extreme human agony

- 'Who giveth me to die for thee, Absalom my son, my son.' Paternity apart, what Englishman of fifty wouldn't far rather stop the shot himself than see the boys do it for him?³⁹

Naturally, one of the strongest arguments against Newbolt's defence would be that if the men of fifty felt so strongly about sending younger men off to war, then why was nothing done to encourage or make men of fifty and over to go to war whilst the youngsters were made to stay at home to have families, smoke pipes and perhaps live to fifty years of age or more? Although he feels that Newbolt's honesty and sincerity are unquestionable, Bernard Bergonzi finds his arguments unacceptable:

Newbolt expresses the pain and bafflement of those older civilians who were a regular target for the wrath of the soldier poets. Undoubtedly, many older men would have taken part in the fight if they could; and the death of a son can hardly be anything other than a personal tragedy. Yet underlying Newbolt's remarks is the implicit and unexamined premise that the civilians accepted without question, and which the spokesman of the Nation Overseas came increasingly to reject: namely that the military continuation of the struggle was absolutely necessary and unavoidable; the war had to be fought to a finish and any suggestion of a negotiated peace was a 'trap'. . . By insisting on a fight to the finish the older generation were, in effect, prolonging the mass destruction of young men, no matter how keenly they

³⁹Sir Henry Newbolt was quoted from a letter he wrote to Lady Hylton on 2 August 1924. The letter was first published in *The Late Life and Letters of Sir Henry Newbolt*, edited by Margaret Newbolt, 314-15.

were aware of the personal tragedy involved. The sense of alienation between Home Front and Army was most painfully felt when it divided the generations; when young soldiers were faced with the blank incomprehension of their fathers, secure in civilian ignorance, brain-washed by official propaganda and filled with Hun-hating hysteria. . . . And from this feeling there stemmed the conviction that the young men at the Front were being offered as blood sacrifice by the older civilians at home. . .(122)

Like Newbolt, David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister from 1916-22 also felt that undue blame for the prolongation of the war was given to the older generation, but particularly to older politicians. In *The First World War* (33), Dominic Hibberd quotes from Lloyd George's *War Memories*:

The theory which is propagated today by pacifist orators of the more cantankerous and less convincing type that the Great War was engineered by elder and middle-aged statesmen who sent younger men to face its horrors, is an invention. The elder statesmen did their best to prevent war, whilst the youth of rival countries were howling impatiently at their doors for immediate war (29-40).

In summary, the general feeling among the soldiers and many writers of the First World War seems to have been that understanding by the civilian population of the realities of war would have been impossible because they had not had first hand experience of it. The horror and suffering was unimaginable and had to be witnessed to be believed.

Siegfried Sassoon wrote: "The man who really endured the War at its worst was everlastingly differentiated from everyone except his fellow soldiers."⁴⁰

2.2.2 War against Women

Owen felt that responsibility for the war lay in the hands of civilian political authority and in the hands of anyone who encouraged fighting in any way. Women were not allowed to escape from their share of the blame by hiding behind pretty bonnets and white petticoats. He openly accused them of participating in the wholesale slaughter of French civilians: "Shells made by women in Birmingham are at this moment burying little children alive not very far from here" (*CL* 590). In several of his poems, Owen made it quite clear that he considered women guilty of the mutilation or deaths of the young British soldiers who went to France to defend their country and their womenfolk.

"Disabled" tells the tragic story of an underage boy who, enticed by the romantic notion of fighting for his country, encouraged by his frivolous girlfriend and allowed to sign up by immoral people in authority, becomes a mutilated war victim who is rejected by the society - and particularly by the women - he so fervently wanted to defend.

The poem opens with the amputee sitting in his wheelchair in the park but he feels a sense of separateness from life in the park because for him life is not seen and enjoyed; it is only heard in the distance:

. Through the park
 Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
 Voices of play and pleasure after day,

⁴⁰Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 280.

Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

Douglas Kerr has made some interesting comments about the association Owen made between sleep and the mother figure who here represents women in general:

Sleep like a mother is what is desired here (and at the poem's end), promising shelter, peace, relief; she gathers her children to herself, forming the nucleus of a community, a family. Yet the ambiguities of the figure have to be noted too. She it is who puts a stop to the play and pleasure of boys, for her gathering of charges is also a segregation, taking them from the common ground and company of others, and a silencing - temporary, but death-counterfeiting - of their voices. And to the wounded man himself she has nothing to offer but unappeased exclusion. The grammatical oddity of the phrase 'sleep . . . mothered them from him' turns mothering into a kind of deprivation, like stealing or (transitive) alienation. This gentle maternal sleep is also, then, the first of the poems' female traitors (*WOV* 299).

If this maternal sleep is the first of the poem's female traitors, then the second of the poem's female traitors is seen in the following stanza when the limbless soldier recalls the days when he used to go dancing. He remembers the increasingly seductive looks in girls' eyes: ". . . girls' glanced lovelier as the air grew dim" (9) but he bitterly recognises that "Now he will never feel again how slim / Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands" (10-11). Indeed, all the female subtlety, seductiveness and sensibility has gone and now "All of them touch him like some queer disease" (12). The maimed youth has become

less of a man than he was before and consequently he will always be denied whatever delights the female sex might have had to offer him. He has been betrayed by womankind and is therefore banished from enjoying life as a "complete" man.

It is in the fourth stanza of the poem that the disabled soldier wonders what possessed him to join the army in the first place:

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. . . .

Here, blame for the soldier's loss of manhood is placed directly on his dizzy girlfriend who represents all other lighthearted females who encouraged their menfolk to go to war.

Owen's verbal attacks on women are understandable particularly when viewed within the social context that abounded at the time. Women were campaigning for greater social and sexual equality and demanding more rights: yet when war broke out, they were automatically exempt from doing national service. It is small wonder that the nation overseas tended to treat females with suspicion, contempt and sometimes hostility. At the same time, not all blame should be placed on female shoulders. The young man himself was, to a point, master of his own destiny and he succumbed to the suggestion of signing up because it appealed to his sense of vanity. The idea of looking godlike in a kilt was

attractive and:

. . . . 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.

Apart from the last stanza, "Disabled" is written in the past tense. There is no need to write of the future because the soldier has no future that is really worth considering. The first few lines of the final stanza provide a hint of what the future holds for the broken hero. Like his present, his future is empty, helpless and hopeless, void of all illusion, lonely and unbearable:

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 to bed? Why don't they come?

Gone is the colourful life of jewelled hilts, plaid socks and swaying kilts. The only thing left to the half-soldier is a colourless half-life in his ". . . ghastly suit of grey, / Legless, sewn short at elbow" (2-3). Unfortunately for him, his mind is complete; his

insensibility is physical and not mental. He was saved from dying in the war only to be damned to exist in a wheelchair for the remainder of his days.

In "S.I.W.", a suicide in the trenches took place because the young soldier, Tim, could find no respite from the hell he was going through. In this poem, Owen was again pointing an accusing finger at those at home who sent young men away to fight. The father figure is portrayed as a man full of no-nonsense-clichés whilst the mother is seen as someone far too weak to be able to accept the truth. In their ignorance, they were happy to let their son go and once at the front, Tim allowed them to remain blissfully unaware of the facts of war. But one night, he could stand no more of the mental anguish he had to endure and so he took his own life. He was buried and his mother was informed of the fact that her son had "died smiling". What she was not told was why Tim had died smiling, or what had caused that fatal smile. Tim's mother, like many other mothers, was protected from the truth. The message implicit here is that Owen disagreed with the unwritten and possibly unspoken policy that women were not to be told the truth but protected from it and consoled when they became aware of it.

The morality of war and of those who sent men to fight it is questioned in "The Send-Off" where the soldiers were sent away "secretly, like wrongs hushed-up." The poet informs the reader that no one heard where the soldiers were sent to. Neither did anyone hear if, when once at the front, these soldiers mocked the women who had given them flowers. These flowers signified a farewell for ever since none of the soldiers was really expected to return from war, which meant that these women were knowingly sending them to their deaths. No one appears to have heard anything, no one seems to know anything but no one really cares since no one has bothered to ask.

"The Women & the Slain" attacks the ignorance of women and the idealism born of

it. Here, women see soldiers as modern King Arthurs or Christs who have come to save them. The unfinished poem reflects Owen's feelings about those women who insisted on romanticising something that should never have been romanticised in the first place. The dead soldiers in the poem bluntly contradict anything the women say since they are the ones who are qualified by experience to comment on the war.

In "The Kind Ghosts", Owen yet again rails women. Dominic Hibberd has suggested that the sleeping figure in the poem is Britannia and she represents the lack of awareness of the nation at home, but especially the ignorance of women: "The nation's love for her young men is here the unseeing but consuming love of a *femme fatale*" (OTP 161). As in "S.I.W", the impression given is that Britannia i.e. women must not be distressed by or made aware of the horrors of war. In "The Kind Ghosts", the walls and tapestries of Britannia's castle are made up of dead soldiers, the red roses of her garden are the bleeding mouths of innocent young men and these men have become the kind, invisible ghosts that inhabit her world yet do not disrupt her peace and tranquility: "They move not from her tapestries, their pall, / Nor pace her terraces, their hetacombs, / Lest aught she be disturbed, or grieved at all" (10-12). The fact that Britannia does not acknowledge the sacrifice of these young men is disturbing in the sense that if she represents females at home, then this means that many women, lamentably, did not recognise the sacrifice the soldiers were making for them. As Jennifer Breen has suggested, Britannia symbolises, "the escapist world of a woman whose security is ensured by the deaths of countless young men."⁴¹

"Maundy Thursday" is a poem that, according to Jon Stallworthy, was probably drafted at Shrewsbury in May or June 1915 and then revised either at Craiglockhart in

⁴¹Jennifer Breen, *The Development of the Poetry of Wilfred Owen*, 283.

October - November 1917, or at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918 (*CPF* 109). Inspiration for it seems to have stemmed from Owen's experience of Roman Catholic Easter services when he was staying with the de la Touche family in Mérignac, France, in 1915. During the revision of this poem, Owen's attitude towards the behaviour of the women during the religious ceremony in the poem may have been partially influenced by his feelings about women's disinterest as far as the war was concerned. It is significant that from amongst all those who attended the religious service, it was only the women who were the true believers. Not even the young children were taken in by the gleaming crucifix. Consequently, one is forced to ask if this was Owen's way of criticising the lack of inquisitiveness and docile obedience and simplicity of women in religious matters and therefore a way of reflecting how he felt about the manner in which so many women, in apparently wilful ignorance, unquestioningly accepted the war.

Although amusing, the pungent irony in "Schoolmistress" cannot be ignored. In the poem, the female teacher, in comically dramatic style, has just finished reading Macauley's poem about the legendary Roman hero, Horatio Cocles:

Having with bold Horatius, stamped her feet
 And waved a final swashbuckling arabesque
 O'er the brave days of old, she ceased to bleat,
 Slapped her Macauley back upon her desk,
 Resumed her calm gaze and lofty seat.⁴²

⁴² According to Jon Stallworthy, Owen most probably read Macauley's "Horatius" in May 1917, whilst at school in Shrewsbury (*WO* 40).

During the course of her reading, she was clearly fired by enthusiasm for the mythical hero, yet the teacher's excitement soon waned when she was greeted from outside by three soldiers, one of whom, ironically, was called "'Orace" and whom she refused to acknowledge. The schoolmistress's double-standards are evident and reflect the wavering principles Owen seemed to consider most women held during the First World War; many were prepared to pay nothing more than lip-service to the men who defended their country. It was fine to sing the praises of ancient soldier heroes in literature, but to come into personal contact with modern-day common soldier heroes (like 'Orace) did not fit in with the tidy ideas of women who were cradled in comfort, ignorance and romanticised stories of war.

Owen's thoughts about his mother's reaction to the war were indicative of his feelings about the inactivity of women in general. As far back as January 1917, Owen had commented on the lack of interest shown by those at home and had suggested that people, ". . . must agitate. But they are not yet agitated even" (*CL* 429). However, in October 1918, Owen was able to praise his mother: "I am glad you are finding courage to speak. In a previous letter you said you kept quiet. I was not proud of that" (*CL* 585). He only wished that like his mother, other women would gradually become capable of developing a less biased and more critical understanding of the war and what it meant.

Contemplating Owen's work, Kenneth Simcox asks, "Did Owen's pity for the suffering of his comrades spring from an inherent sympathy towards the male sex and perhaps a submerged hostility towards women? Is this the ultimate effect of over-possessive motherhood that it inspires such fear and distrust?" Quoting several poems, Simcox continues:

. . . the compassion which Owen claimed to be synonymous with the poetry did not extend to mothers, wives and sweethearts; they had no share in the common lot of men, neither in the suffering nor the recompense. 'The Dead-Beat' speaks savagely of 'his brave new wife, getting her fun, in some new home.' 'The Send-Off' is more obliquely critical. In 'Smile, Smile, Smile' the devastating 'How they smile! They're happy now, poor things' is undoubtedly a feminine voice, while 'S.I.W.' is also openly contemptuous True pity implies comradeship and comradeship implies equality, and despite or because of the feminine element in his own make-up, despite or because of the dominance of his mother within her family, equality was not a status that Owen was prepared to accord to women.⁴³

According to Douglas Kerr, women in Owen's poetry ". . . stand accused of desertion, a dereliction of duty which is a failure of love" (*WOV* 58).

2.3 Propaganda and Patriotism

The subtle manipulation of public opinion through the use of propaganda during the 1914-1918 conflict fuelled the embers of patriotism to such an extent that the vast majority of people came to believe that military victory over Germany was the major objective and that aggression would have to continue until triumph for the allies could be guaranteed.

2.3.1 Contemporary Propaganda

During the First World War, censorship became essential to control the flow of

⁴³Kenneth Simcox, *Anthem For a Doomed Youth*, 26.

positive and negative information to the civilian population and to soldiers fighting abroad. It was also necessary as a means of controlling the transmission of information by enemy agents operating within British territory. Propaganda was born of censorship.

Prior to the First World War, propaganda as a weapon in war was unheard of but by the end of the conflict, the British government had developed a most highly effective war propaganda organisation. The government had learnt that public opinion could not be ignored but politicians had also come to realise that it could be manipulated and controlled. Referring to the introduction of conscription, the recruitment of a female work-force into factories, the bombing of east coast towns, Zeppelin raids, the attempts of German submarines to starve Britain and other "traumatic experiences for a nation learning the rules of modern warfare", Sanders and Taylor explain how propaganda came to be so important: "In such a struggle, morale came to be recognised as a significant military factor and propaganda began to emerge as the principal instrument of control over public opinion and an essential weapon in the national armoury."⁴⁴

There were only 160,000 men in the British Army when war broke out in August 1914, but approximately one month later, 30,000 men a day were volunteering to serve their country. According to Sanders and Taylor, the early attempts to raise a volunteer force in Britain represented the first systematic propaganda campaign directed at the civilian population by the government. In their opinion, "the successful partnership of propaganda and recruitment had demonstrated the value of more positive forms of action at a time when the military authorities badly needed volunteers" (51). Lord Kitchener, the War Secretary, had been successful in his appeal for men to defend their King and Country. However, this success was short-lived. There were no signs of the conflict ending, the numbers of

⁴⁴Michael Sanders and Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 3.

wounded and dead soared by the minute and the initial enthusiasm felt by many people rapidly began to wane. By mid-1915, there was such a severe shortage of volunteers that conscription was introduced in January 1916. With conscription, the role of propaganda became even more important because if patriotism had not been enough to make new recruits enlist freely, then propaganda had to be powerful and convincing enough to make these men feel that it was worth fighting for their country.

As far back as December 1904, The Committee of Imperial Defence proposed a bill that would restrict the freedom of the press during periods of national emergency and with this control, the press clearly became the most obvious means to use in spreading propaganda and influencing domestic opinion during the 1914-18 war. Politicians wanted newspaper publicity to be exploited to the maximum.

At first, Fleet Street and the political press bureau were at constant loggerheads as the journalists on Fleet St. felt that the laws governing censorship were unsatisfactory and that quite often, censorship was being mis-used in order to withhold or filter information. An example given by Sanders and Taylor shows Fleet St. discontent since many reporters felt that those who were acting as censors also came to act as propagandists: "By the end of 1914, Colonel Repington, the controversial military correspondent of *The Times*, was arguing that the censorship was being used 'as a cloak to cover all political, naval and military mistakes'."⁴⁵

Censorship was seen as just as valuable a source in aiding the shaping of public opinion as were publicity and propaganda. By December 1915, censorship of much of the "sensitive" material relating to foreign affairs was lifted, as Lord Robert Cecil, the

⁴⁵Michael Sanders and Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 24. (They quote from P. Towle's, "The Debate on Wartime Censorship in Britain, 1902-14", in *War and Society*, 113).

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs at the time, saw the untapped propaganda potential of the press. Consequently, journalism became part of the official propaganda machinery of the war, and during the course of the war different committees and sub-committees were established and the Ministry of Information came into being in order to ensure that the liaison between the government and press became and remained politically solid, efficient and effective.

Those journalists who were allowed to become war correspondents underwent careful selection so that their reports would contain only "politically correct" information. The press was used as a vehicle to report only what was considered convenient, to promote recruiting and to control the responses of the general public to the war. Unfortunately, the public was content to accept the war fiction doled out by the popular press. Kenneth Simcox writes that the press':

. . . message seemed to alternate between the sickeningly sentimental and the shrilly martial. . . complex issues were reduced to simple slogans and the victims of this policy were honesty and truth. Without knowing it the average person viewed the war . . . as if he or she were standing in a hall of mirrors. Distorted images proceeded out of manipulated minds.⁴⁶

The lack of truth or the telling of only half-truths was sorely felt by war poets like Owen and Sassoon, who, being equipped with experience, had decided to tell the complete truth from their point of view. In Dominic Hibberd's opinion, "The sorrows of the nations needed better interpreters than the newspapers would provide" (*OTP* 109).

⁴⁶Kenneth Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, 60.

Owen's poem "Smile, Smile, Smile" is a bitter criticism of the hypocritical attitudes found in the press during the First World War. Here Owen recognises the power of the press and politicians in shaping public opinion. The title of the poem was probably taken from a popular wartime song and possibly also reflects the type of "smiling" photographs that were published in the newspapers during the war but which did nothing to reflect what was going on at the front. In the poem, Owen referred to the *Mail* which was a popular newspaper at the time and noted how names of war casualties were printed in small type whilst reports of victory were printed in large type. The press achieved its aim as "the public continued to be swayed by the false political rhetoric and to be deceived by smiling pictures", writes Jennifer Breen.⁴⁷

John Bull was a blatantly anti-German newspaper that was edited by the unprincipled and vociferous Horatio Bottomley who was described as "a rabble-rousing former M.P. whose recruiting speeches had helped to fill Kitchener's army and had made him famous, and his paper was what he was - jingoistic, loud, inflammatory, and very popular. . . ."48 Bottomley did nothing to help educate the general public and therefore serve the soldier. Rather, with his bellicose pronouncements he promoted feelings of hate against the Germans whom he portrayed as barbaric beasts worthy only of bloody slaughter. Under no circumstances would the belligerent Bottomley have tolerated Owen's anti-war poems, particularly ones like "Strange Meeting", where a sense of comradeship between a British and a German soldier is found:

'I am the enemy you killed my friend.

⁴⁷Jennifer Breen, *The Development of the War Poetry Of Wilfred Owen*, 295.

⁴⁸Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 213.

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. . . .'

There is no feeling of enmity or resentment shown between the two men. An attitude of total forgiveness and therefore of peace reigns, although there is regret for what has been lost. In removing all hostility from between the dead soldiers, both British and Germans alike are placed on an equal footing. In this way, Owen is condemning the war that has divided or created differences between two groups of people who are fundamentally the same.

2.3.2 Propaganda and Art Forms

Many established literary figures supported the war, particularly in its early stages and newspapers were constantly used as a means of encouraging patriotism. Dominic Hibberd writes that, "Clearly, literature could contribute to the nation's morale and to the recruiting campaign. Writers agreed that the response to Germany had to be moral and cultural, not just military . . ." ⁴⁹ The truth of the matter was that large public meetings were held and well-known writers were often invited to speak at them. In fact, on 2 December 1914, approximately twenty distinguished writers met at the new propaganda department in London for a secret conference, "to discuss how they could use their talents in the service of the nation" (55). As a result of this conference, Thomas Hardy wrote his recruiting poem "The Song of the Soldiers" or "Men Who March Away" and fifty two

⁴⁹Dominic Hibberd, *The First World War*, 52.

authors issued a lengthy public statement under the title "Britain's Destiny and Duty / Declaration by authors" in which they showed their support for the Allied Cause. From amongst the fifty two signatories, Hibberd has mentioned J. M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, Laurence Binyon, Bridges, G. K. Chesterton, Conan Doyle, Galsworthy, Rider Haggard, Hardy, Kipling, Masefield, Newbolt, and Wells. Several well-known literary figures were sent to the United States to give lectures whilst others were allowed to visit France and then encouraged to write in positive terms about what little they had been allowed to witness in the war zone.

"Other forms of written propaganda consisted of official publications such as the Bryce Report on German atrocities in Belgium, official white papers, ministerial speeches, messages from the king and various documentary publications relating to the origins of war produced by most of the belligerent governments," write Sanders and Taylor.⁵⁰

Wilfred Owen was possibly not aware of the great "literary weight" that was added to much of Britain's war propaganda but he knew he had to fight against the swirling tides of emotion that swayed the public towards feelings of hate-bathed ignorance and so, along with Siegfried Sassoon and a few other writers, he assumed the public role of defender of soldiers and teller of the truth. He had no option but to resort to shock tactics as he knew that truth veiled in gentleness would be ineffective against the influence of many authors and civilian poets like Jessie Pope or Laurence Binyon who continued to write poems that were aimed at encouraging men to be brave and willing to die for their country. Samuel Hynes informs us that the great mass of war poetry was not written by soldiers or by those who had had experience at the front: "A recent bibliography of English poetry of the First World War lists over 3,000 works by 2,225 poets; of these poets, less than a quarter were in

⁵⁰Michael Sanders and Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 108.

uniform. Another quarter were women. So more than half must have been male civilians . . ."⁵¹ For Desmond Graham, far from being a politically inappropriate medium, "poetry as it was popularly understood and applauded at that time, was steeped in the political cant and illusions which helped to make and sustain war."⁵²

It must be acknowledged that poetry, particularly with its recruiting verses and slogans, was an extremely useful propaganda weapon. However, discerning soldiers and poets recognised propagandist poetry for what it was. C. K. Stead tells us that it was "interesting to note that as this public form of poetry began to be used for the 'writing up' of campaigns, intelligent soldiers rebelled at its dishonesty - not on artistic grounds - but simply because (as poetry of this sort had done for years) it distorted the truth for the sake of an optimistic picture."⁵³

Wilfred Owen was not prepared to tolerate further distortions of the truth and one of his most vehement attacks against propaganda is seen in "Dulce et Decorum Est" where he passionately claims that it is neither a sweet nor a decorous thing to die for one's country. In fact, in the poem, Owen describes in chilling and repulsive terms what it really is like to die for one's country in war. First, there is the suffering before the attack when the young soldiers are "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags . . ." (1-2). Then, since all their senses have been numbed, they are described as "lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue; deaf . . ." (6-7) and once the gas breaks out and seeps into the soldiers' crumbling humanity, this suffering becomes absolutely vile. The soldier affected by gas is described as having "white eyes writhing in his face, / His

⁵¹Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 29.

⁵²Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War*, 32.

⁵³C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic*, 91.

hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin" (19-20) as his innocent blood comes "gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs" (22). And so Owen asks how could anyone tell "To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro Patria Mori." (26-28). Since it was Owen's intention to foil Pope's patriotic poetry with his poetry of protest as well as to criticise the public's misconceived notions of heroism in wartime, the first two drafts of the poem bore the epigraph, "To Certain Poetess" and a third was addressed, "To Jessie Pope."⁵⁴

The less savage "Arms and the Boy" could also be interpreted as a deterrent against war propaganda. According to Jon Stallworthy, "this poem was classified by WO in his draft list of contents . . . under 'Protest - the unnaturalness of weapons'." (*CPF* 154). Douglas Kerr has suggested that this poem, "can be seen as another kind of answer to Jessie Pope, an alternative version of what ought to be taught to innocent youngsters on the brink of war" (*WOV* 322). In "Arms and the Boy", the poet suggests that inexperienced and blameless adolescents should be allowed to handle the weapons of war so that they can come to understand the dangers of them:

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
 How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
 Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
 And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads,

⁵⁴For further reading, see W. G. Bebbington's "Jessie Pope and Wilfred Owen", where Bebbington considers the possibility of ambiguity and hidden irony in Pope's work, which would make her less of the patriotic poetess she appeared to be, 82-93.

Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
 Or give him cartridges whose fine zinc teeth
 Are sharp with sharpness of grief and death.

In Owen's opinion, young boys were not born to fight; in their purity, they should be left to enjoy life. It is as if Owen feels that youngsters should not be tempted to taste the fruits of war that would damn them for ever, just as Adam was damned after eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Of the innocence of the boy in the poem, Owen writes:

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
 There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
 And God will grow no talons at his heels,
 Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

Pictorial propaganda, which often took the form of films, magazines, photographs, lantern slides, picture postcards and posters, also played an important persuasive role during the First World War. Undoubtedly, illustrations were an effective means of propaganda particularly if the people the propaganda was aimed at were illiterate or had poor reading skills.

Until the end of July 1915, the poster was the most popular and perhaps one of the most effective ways of promoting war propaganda. Moral blackmail seemed to be the order of the day and on every street corner and in every public place, the bulk of posters was aimed at persuading, cajoling and even shaming the male population into enlisting.

Comparatively few posters considered the civilian war effort.

One of the most popular wartime posters which read "Your King and Country Need YOU" showed Lord Kitchener pointing his finger directly at the reader, calling for volunteers willing to do their duty. As time passed, the number of new recruits began to decrease, the style of the posters began to change and they "began to assume a more pressing tone by depicting those who were already fighting and, by implication, suggesting that there were those who were not doing their fair share. Hence the message: 'Who's absent - Is it You?' with John Bull pointing an accusing finger."⁵⁵ Other posters contained simple but succinct messages:

There are three kinds of men;
 Those who hear the call and obey;
 Those who delay,
 And - the others.

Wilfred Owen was fully aware of the existence of these propaganda posters and to a certain point, he fell victim to them. From mid-May to mid-June 1915, Owen was in England and then returned to France where he took a room in Bordeaux. From there, he wrote to his mother, "I noticed in the Hotel in London an announcement that any gentleman (fit etc.) returning to England from abroad will be given a Commission - in the 'Artists' Rifles'" (CL 341). This type of announcement most probably appealed to Owen's sense of vanity and social and intellectual snobbery. The idea of being considered a gentleman would probably have been attractive to him and the possibility of receiving a commission

⁵⁵Michael Sanders and Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 138.

in the Artists' Rifles and thus becoming an officer amongst creative men of letters would have been most tempting. He continued, "Such officers will be sent to the front in 3 months. . . . I don't want the bore of training, I don't want to wear khaki; nor yet to save my honour before inquisitive grand-children fifty years hence. But I now do most intensely want to fight."

Owen's comments on saving his honour "before inquisitive grand-children 50 years hence" possibly stemmed from the type of propaganda poster that appealed to a man's sense of male strength and family pride. Posters containing slogans like "Women of Britain Say Go" and "What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?" were not uncommon.

Owen's poem "The Calls" contains references to British propaganda during the First World War and, to a point, could be considered autobiographical in the sense that the title itself could be taken as an indirect reference to calls for volunteers at the outbreak and during the preliminary stages of the war. At first, Owen ignored these calls, only deciding to join up when he felt that the time was right for him. In the early stages of the poem, the poet did not respond to the different calls from sirens, bells and bugles. It was only the suffering implied in the last two stanzas that caused him to react. Likewise, Owen the civilian ignored all bellicose activity until he became aware of the personal advantages joining up offered. The silent appeal for help from the unprotesting soldiers who were fighting at the front in the early stages of the war was of little or no importance to him. According to Owen, his return to the front in 1918 was made easier because of the sympathy he experienced with respect to the soldiers' suffering. It was their misery and anguish rather than his sense of patriotism or his desire to defend King and country that made him act. It was the calls of these men that Owen took as his call to duty:

For leaning out last midnight on my sill,
 I heard the sighs of men, that have no skill
 To speak of their distress, no, nor the will!
 A voice I must know. And this time I must go.

More direct references to propaganda and war profiteering are seen in the lines "I see a food-hog whet his gold-filled tusk / To eat less bread and more luxurious rusk" (18-19). Jon Stallworthy has suggested that the "food-hog" was "perhaps a reference to 'the stinking Leeds & Bradford War-profiteers mentioned to Susan Owen in a letter on 10 August 1918" (*CPF* 163).⁵⁶ Dominic Hibberd has pointed out that the reference to eating less bread came from a Food Economy Poster of 1917. The poster itself contained the slogan "Save the Wheat / and / Help the Fleet / Eat / Less Bread." Hibberd explains that the Food Controller had sent a circular to all householders in May 1917 telling them, 'We must all eat less food, especially we must all eat less bread'.⁵⁷

The use of photographs and motion pictures was also recognised as a valuable medium of official propaganda. In their book *British Propaganda*, Sanders and Taylor have explained that the use of films and photographs:

provided an 'illusion of reality' at a time when it was generally believed that the camera could not lie. . . . but film, whether still or motion, could only depict what the cameraman wanted it to depict. The images presented were, in fact, carefully staged. While there were often several apparently quite

⁵⁶This letter can be found in *CL*, 568.

⁵⁷Dominic Hibberd, "Some Contemporary Allusions in Poems by Rosenberg, Owen and Sassoon", 333-4.

realistic camera shots of wounded soldiers at the front, they were usually stage-managed in order to show fatigue being accompanied by cheerfulness. Wounds were always freshly dressed and there were rarely pictures of Allied dead, although dead Germans did feature more often" (155).

Owen was aware of the tactics used by the propagandists in their war films as can be seen from a letter he wrote in March 1917 to his mother: "From letter of last night I hear you have seen the illusory War Films." He expressed the hope that they might contain some element of truth: ". . . they must hint at the truth, and if done anywhere on this Front, would not be quite devoid of realism." Owen then suggested that the best way to get a fair idea of what was going on at the front would be by taking "a tour round Purgatorio" (*CL* 440). Popular films like "Our Navy" and "With the Royal Flying Corps in France" were screened all around the country as the Department of Information allowed five cinema vans that were fully equipped with screens and projectors to tour the country and thus capture the public's attention.

Artists were also called upon to do their patriotic duty. Muirhead Bone was the first "official war artist" to go to the front and paint his impressions on canvas and naturally, his talents were used to support the Allied Cause. C. R. W. Nevison was another artist who recorded on canvas what the war was all about, only his impressions revealed the truth somewhat more starkly. So realistic was his painting "The Paths of Glory" that he was forced by the authorities to withdraw it from exhibition in 1918. The propagandists were not in favour of paintings that depicted dead soldiers caught up in tangles of barbed wire. Paul Nash, who served in the infantry at Ypres, was perhaps the most shocking of all war artists and as such he did his best to re-create the horrors of war in his work. D. S. R.

Welland quotes a letter Nash wrote to his wife in November 1917:

I have seen the most frightful nightmare of a country more conceived by Dante or Poe than by nature, unspeakable, utterly indescribable. In the fifteen drawings I have made I may give you some idea of its horror. . . . Sunrise and sunset are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen clouds all through the bitter black of night is a fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes more evilly yellow, the shell-holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black, dying trees ooze and sweat and the guns never cease. They alone plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave and cast upon it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and curious. I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate will be my message, but it will have a better truth and may it burn in their lousy souls.⁵⁸

Nash was a man who drew and painted his message. Owen was a man who transmitted his message in words, but through their work both of them hoped to create an awareness in others of war. Welland has compared Nash's work to Owen's, suggesting that Nash's work is the pictorial equivalent to poems like "The Show", "Dulce et Decorum Est"

⁵⁸D. S.R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen - A Critical Study*, 30. Nash's letter is published in his book *Outline*, 210-11.

and "Strange Meeting". Welland considers that what John Rothenstein wrote of Nash is also applicable to Owen:

'It is no injustice to the others to say that none of them interpreted the landscape of the Western Front so incisively, with such poetic intensity or with such severe economy as Paul Nash. Out of the chaos and the squalor he made an ordered poetry of form, which, even at those moments when it seemed to be most arbitrary, in fact never relaxed its hold upon objective reality. This innately gentle artist may be said to have discovered the full poetic potentialities of modern warfare' (31).

Like Nash, Owen reproduced his experience on the front with such poetic intensity that he was able to transpose it into a beauty that was so horrific that even the most detached of readers could not fail to be moved. Owen also created order from disorder without losing touch with reality. He too had discovered the full poetic potentialities of modern warfare. Art in all its forms did not necessarily have to be propaganda in favour of the war.

2.3.3 Politicians, Patriots and Patriotism

Despite all their propaganda campaigns and attempts to fire civilians with patriotic enthusiasm, a great many politicians had very little to do with the actualities of war, and safely sheltered by their political obligations, these men successfully mis-managed it. In "The Dead-Beat", the dying soldier's condition was not caused by fear of the Germans or by seeing mutilated dead bodies. Rather, it was the people at home, his wife, his relatives

and the politicians who were responsible for his madness and eventual death:

. A low voice said,
 'It's blighty, p'rhaps, he sees; his pluck's all gone,
 Dreaming of all the valiant, that *aren't* dead:
 Bold uncles, smiling ministerially;
 Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun
 In some new home, improved materially.
 It's not those stiff have crazed him; nor the Hun.'

Political corruption was rampant during the war and the soldiers felt disgust at the deception and dishonesty practised by those in public life. In *The First World War* (161) Dominic Hibberd quoted H. G. Wells: "'When we look for the wisdom of statesmen we find the cunning of politicians; when open speech and plain reason might save the world, courts, bureaucrats, financiers and profiteers conspire.'"⁵⁹ Instead of calming the population, politicians encouraged anti-German feelings. Hibberd explains that after the first ships were torpedoed and coastal towns bombed or shelled, the public was outraged. This rage soon turned to fury when London suffered its first Zeppelin raid and the civilian liner the "Lusitania" was sunk as it was crossing the Atlantic Ocean. The desire for revenge began to grow and it was fanned by the flames of battle-thirsty politicians and propagandists.

Even though the power and effect of propaganda probably was not fully understood by many of those who used it, politicians saw it as a necessary evil of war that had to be

⁵⁹Hibberd quoted Wells' "The War Aims of the Western Allies" from *In the Fourth Year*, 84.

exploited to the full but the moral responsibility attached to the use of propaganda was heavy. In their book *British Propaganda* (250), Sanders and Taylor quote from Arthur Ponsoby's *A Falsehood in Wartime* where he explains that "the injection of the poison of hatred into men's minds by means of falsehood is a greater evil in wartime than is the actual loss of life. The defilement of the human soul is worse than the destruction of the human body" (18).

Whether the propaganda used was based on truth or not seemed, at times, to be immaterial. One story that was spread around told of Germans setting up a corpse factory where the bodies of allied soldiers were used to manufacture such things as soap. Wilfred Owen indirectly referred to this atrocity story in "A Terre":

To grain, then, go my fat, to buds my sap,
 For all the usefulness there is in soap.
 D'you think the Boch will ever stew man-soup?
 Some day, no doubt, if . . .

The aftermath of such stories was horrendous as they did not just cause psychological damage during the First World War. Their effect was more far-reaching and mortal than anyone could have imagined, as Sanders and Taylor have explained: "The effect of British atrocity propaganda during the First World War and the failure to substantiate the stories in the years that followed led to a general disinclination in the 1930's and 1940's to believe atrocity stories about the Nazi treatment of the Jews. The distortions of the First World War therefore served to obscure the realities of the Second" (163).

Sasi Bhusan Das has described "A Terre" as an attack on cheap patriotism and the

glory of war. The use of satire "exposes the hollowness and mockery of the laurels in the battlefield."⁶⁰ Owen wrote: "I have my medals? - Discs to make my eyes close. / My glorious ribbons? - Ripped from my own back / In scarlet shreds" On reading these words, any romantic views held about war are shattered by a harrowing reality. Those at home are disparagingly called "buffers" and referred to as "puffy, bald and patriotic" (13-14). The dying soldier knows that once he dies, he will soon be forgotten, "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" (61-63).

In "Disabled" the soldier-boy was seduced by the romantic notions of heroism that had been doled out to him by people at home. Owen places the weight of responsibility for the boy's tragic condition on those who encouraged him to sign up. Although it was suggested earlier that much of the blame lay in the laps of ignorant women, those in authority, those officials and politicians who allowed under-age lads to march to their deaths were also guilty: "He asked to join. He didn't have to beg; / Smiling they wrote his lie; aged nineteen years" (28-29).

Owen felt that for the common soldiers, betrayal occurred at every cornerstone that formed society and the structures that held it together. For them, it seemed that people at home, statesmen and men of the cloth had colluded with each other to engineer the deaths of thousands of innocent men. Even the army, the institution to which the soldiers belonged, had betrayed them. In "Disabled", it was those representing the army who finally made the lad's drafting possible when they allowed him to lie about his age. One of the ironies of the poem is that because the young lad was so eager to join the institution of the army, he became part of the very institution that rejected him once he could no longer serve

⁶⁰Sasi Bhusan Das, *Aspects of Wilfred Owen's Poetry*, 98.

a useful military purpose. On becoming militarily useless, he was condemned to live another type of existence in a very different kind of institution and society's responsibility for him was reduced to the mere formalities that constitute institutionalised concern. The poor youngster had become a victim of the patriotism of others.

Although Owen's main intention was to criticise the attitude and behaviour of the Church in "At a Calvary Near The Ancre", he also condemned the attempts at political brainwashing and the feelings of hatred against the Germans that politicians tried to instil in the British civilian population: "The scribes on all the people shove / and bawl allegiance to the state" (9-10). The word "scribes" in this context probably refers to the politicians who took care of the administrative side of the war and merely carried out the paperwork without giving a thought to the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for others. It could also refer to the journalists of the time who just wrote what the politicians bade them to write so that the population would be in favour of the government's war policies.

When Owen referred to the soldiers as being nothing more than "gaps for filling: / Losses, who might have fought longer" (9-10) in "Insensibility", he was showing his awareness of how the government viewed the soldiers. They were not thought of as individuals and so really neither their lives nor their deaths were of importance.

Veiled political statements are made in several other poems. In "Strange Meeting", Owen felt that:

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.

It seemed to Owen that for many, political and territorial gain was far more important than spiritual enhancement and so therefore, with feline cunning and speed, warring nations will continue to fight, irrespective of the possible consequences.

Owen wrote that leave, minor injuries and even death were withheld from the boy-soldier "At the pleasure of this world's Powers who'd run amok" (20) in "S.I.W." Here, Owen's views on the immorality of politicians in wartime are obvious. For him, European rulers had behaved in a violent, uncontrolled and unpardonable manner. But even worse was the fact that they had permitted unnecessary suffering to continue indefinitely - and this suffering would last for as long as they deemed necessary because the world's Powers did not want the war to end; it would go on at their pleasure. The use of the word "pleasure" hints at the almost masochistic delight that Owen felt those in power might have derived on allowing others to suffer. By beginning the word "Power" with a capital letter, Owen draws the attention of the reader to the strength and scope of influence that lay behind the political powers of the time.

Infantrymen at the front were aware of the constant dangers they were exposed to in the war zone. In "The Chances", Jimmy talked about what could happen to a soldier in battle: "There ain't no more than five things as can happen, - / You get knocked out; else wounded, bad or cushy; / Scuppered; or nowt except you're feeling mushy" (4-6). But Jimmy was not altogether correct in his assessment of the physical and mental effects battle could have on soldiers. One of his companions explained what had eventually happened to poor old Jim:

But poor old Jim, he's livin' and he's not;

He reckoned he'd five chances, and he had:

He's wounded, killed, and pris'ner, all the lot,
 The flamin' lot all rolled in one. Jim's mad.

Jimmy had defended his country, he had done what the politicians and statesmen had wanted him to do, and the only reward he had received was total isolation in complete and utter madness and so, like the child-soldier in "Disabled", he will probably "spend a few sick years in institutes" until he dies. But unlike the soldiers in "Disabled" and "A Terre", Jimmy is not aware of his suffering.

The patients in "Mental Cases" who, as "purgatorial shadows" rock themselves fearfully between dawn and dusk, between night and day, live a twilight existence. Their uncontrolled and pitiful madness has condemned them to a living inferno. The poet asks who these hellish men are and he receives an answer:

- These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished,
 Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
 Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
 Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
 Treading blood from lungs that have loved laughter.
 Always they must see these things and hear them,
 Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
 Carnage incomparable, and human squander,
 Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

Because of what these men have had to endure, they are now unable to be free of

the pain and torment of war. They are condemned to absolute madness and although, thankfully, in their madness perhaps they are allowed to be unaware of their present tragic circumstances, there is no way they can escape from their brutal past. However, the readers of the poem - those responsible for sending these men into the dead-end gulf of lunacy - are not permitted to remain unaware of the suffering and anguish. The patients' hands may unconsciously pluck at each other but really, they are: "Snatching after us who smote them, brother / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness" (27-28). There is absolutely no doubt in Owen's mind as to who is responsible for the suffering of the front line soldiers.

In "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", Owen shows his disgust at the European statesmen who are represented here by Abram. Instead of heeding what true Christianity preached and rather than swallowing their bellicose pride, these men sent their young soldiers off to war and consequently caused the death of "half the seed of Europe, one by one" (16).

2.3.4 Organised Religion

Throughout the history of mankind, wars have been fought and thousands have been slain because men have believed in fighting for what they have believed to be a just cause. If soldiers are encouraged to believe that they are fighting a Holy War in order to defend the honour, traditions and beliefs of the society in which they live, then almost any kind of mental and emotional persuasion is feasible and self-deception possible. During the First World War, the Church supported the home-cause and joined with the British political and military powers to encourage all the sacrifice, slaughter and violence necessary to ensure victory against Germany. Organised religion was an extremely effective tool in creating,

directing and controlling public opinion. Truth was immaterial: it became distorted and eventually lost, victory being the ultimate aim.

Religion and the appeal to a religious sense of duty was effective in recruiting campaigns at the beginning of the First World War but the impact of religion on soldiers in the trenches was much less. The Churches allowed themselves to be used by the politicians and the clergy attempted to show that God was on Britain's side by praying for victory, not peace. On the whole, the established Church fully accepted participation in the war and instead of urging her followers to pray for peace, she encouraged fighting for victory and the crushing of a wicked enemy, whatever the means. The Church's argument was that justice and righteousness had to prevail even if it meant the loss of thousands of lives. The Church was, in fact, a great provider of man-power. John Mc. Nerney quotes Brigadier General F. P. Crozier: "'The Christian Churches are the finest blood-lust creators which we have and of them we have made free use.'"⁶¹ The irony here is that whilst enthusiastically condoning the war, all members of the clergy were exempt from military service. They could safely preach patriotism from the pulpit in the full knowledge that they would never have to face the enemy at the front.

Owen was uncompromisingly critical of the attitude of the Church during the war. He felt that by not openly condemning it, the Church had abandoned the true concept of Christianity. Several of his letters from the trenches reflect anger at the attitude of many men of the cloth, as do several of his poems. When discussing the role of the Church during the First World War, however, it should not just be the Church of England and the stance she took that should be considered, since Churches of both Christian and non-

⁶¹John Mc. Nerney, *Religious Attitudes in the Poetry of the First World War*, 3. Mc. Nerney quoted from F. P. Crozier, *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land*, 43.

Christian denominations also played a part. It should also be remembered that exploitation of religion as part of the British propaganda campaign was an extremely delicate area and a sensitive and flexible approach to religion was essential because of the unrest that was stirring in Ireland at the time.

Neither should it be assumed that all clergymen agreed with and followed the Church's views on war matters. Amongst those who actively encouraged the war were Bishop Kempthorne of Lichfield and Bishop Winnington-Ingram of London. But men like Bishop Cosmo Gordon Lang, Bishop Talbot of Winchester and Bishop Grove of Oxford spoke out strongly against various aspects of the war and so helped counter-balance the bellicose preachings of the others. No doubt, there were many parishes around the country whose priests or ministers were of similar opinions to either the pro-war faction or those who spoke out against it.

Owen did not fail to see the irony of some of the clergy's behaviour since these men who were supposed to be defenders of peace had become the vociferous promoters and disseminators of propaganda in support of aggression and violence. He was angered by the attitude of the Church and felt that the Christian Church had betrayed her own principles:

Already I have comprehended a light which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace; but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. It may be a chimerical and an ignominious principle, but there it is. It can only be ignored: and I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skilfully indeed (CL 461).

When, in the same letter, Owen declared that Christ was literally in No Man's Land, he meant that Christ's love of man went above and beyond national and international differences. By suggesting that Christ was in No Man's Land, Owen was creating a distance between Christ Himself and the men who were supposed to represent Him. Who was to be found in or near No Man's Land? Only the common infantrymen and their field officers. Most members of the clergy not only appeared to be insensitive to the men's spiritual needs but they were also conspicuous by their absence at the front. It was in the absence of those who were meant to teach and preach Christianity through example that Owen felt "more and more Christian as I walk the unchristian ways of Christendom" (CL 461). For Owen, Christianity should know no boundaries and so for him, pure Christianity could not fit in with pure patriotism. Owen accused the Church of practising "selective ignorance" and claimed that this attitude was "one cause of the War. Christians have deliberately cut some of the main teachings of their code" (CL 462).

After Owen was evacuated to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, he continued to protest about the attitude of the Church. In one letter to his mother, he commented on what he considered to be the barbarism of the civilised world and went on to bitterly condemn the non-practising of Christian doctrines by the Christian Church. The letter ended up being a truly vehement tirade against war and against those Church leaders whose encouragement of the war defied all that they, as Christian leaders, were supposed to advocate:

Leave Black Sambo ignorant of Heaven. White men are in Hell. Aye, leave him ignorant of the civilization that sends us there, and the religious men that say it is good to be in that Hell. . . . there are no more Christians at the

present moment than there were at the end of the first century. . . . Let my lords turn to the people when they say 'I believe in . . . Jesus Christ', and we shall see as dishonest a face as ever turned to the East, bowing, over the Block at Tyburn (*CL* 483).

"Le Christianisme" is a short but powerful piece that condemns organised religion and shows Owen's bitter attitude towards the Church. The implication is that church authorities were guilty of ignoring the atrocities that occurred during the war. In the poem, religious statues were neatly packed away and protected in cellars "Well out of hearing of our trouble" (4). That Owen felt that the faithful followers of the Church had been abandoned by the Church and her cowardly preachers in times of danger and greatest need is reflected in the fact that one undamaged statue of the Virgin Mary remained intact. She was out of the danger zone and "Smiles on for war to flatter her" (6). This could be taken as an indication that Owen felt that the Church actually encouraged war for her own gain.

Criticism of the warmongering politicians and the established Church and their official sanctioning of the "crucifixion" or sacrifice of the soldiers at the front is also seen in "At a Calvary Near the Ancre."⁶² Here Owen creates such a strong link between his soldiers and the crucified Christ that the soldiers, who remain faithful to Christ in the sense that they remain faithful to their duty, take the place of Christ's disciples. But then, those disciples who deserted Christ in His hour of greatest need become the clergymen and politicians, and just as the disciples abandoned Christ, so the priests and the scribes have

⁶²In his notes on the poem, Jon Stallworthy has explained that a "Calvary is a model of the crucified Christ, such as is found at many crossroads in France" (*CPF* 134). In early 1917, Owen was stationed at Beaumont Hamel, near the River Ancre where a calvary could be found. In the poem, Owen's calvary not only represents Christ's crucifixion but also the sacrifice of the soldiers at the front.

abandoned the true Church and her teachings - in the same way that the politicians have left the soldiers to their fate at the front. The parallel between the betrayed Christ and the forsaken soldiers is emphasised by Owen's use of capital letters when referring to both.

In this poem, as in "Le Christianisme", war was encouraged as long as the Church did not have to become directly involved; token suffering by the clergy was acceptable, provided total participation was avoided. In his edition of Owen's *War Poems and Others*, Dominic Hibberd has suggested that this poem sums up the cowardly attitude and behaviour Owen felt the Church showed as regards the war:

The Church sends priests to the trenches, where they watch the common soldier being, as it were, crucified, and they take pride in minor wounds (*flesh-marked*, 1.7) as a sign of their opposition to Germany (*the beast*). *Flesh-marked*, however, carries a further meaning: the Devil used to be believed to leave his finger-marks on the flesh of his followers (cf. *Revelation*, xiv, 9-10). Thus the Church's hatred of Germany (1.12) puts it in the Devil's following; and the priests' wounds are signs not so much of opposition to the Devil Germany as of allegiance to the Devil War. Christ said 'Love one another' and 'Love your enemies'; despite the exhortations of Church and State, WO perceives that 'pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism' (Letter 512, p.68) (116).

Patriotism, religion and militarism formed a powerful combination against those who attempted to decry the war. All pacifists and conscientious objectors were treated with contempt or suspicion and no consideration was given to those who rejected the liaison

established between religion and the military. This liaison is evident in "Inspection", where Owen attacks the military and the patriotically religious. Here, an officer, who represents the military, political and religious hierarchies, refuses to reason with a soldier who has been reprimanded and punished for being dirty on parade. The dirt on the soldier's uniform happens to be blood from a wound sustained on the battle-field which was serious enough to have almost killed him. The fact that the soldier's life had been in danger is of no consequence: what is important is that the blood-stained uniform detracts from the whiteness of the military installations that will have been whitewashed in preparation for an official inspection. After attempting to explain why his uniform is soiled, the infantryman realises the futility of arguing against authority. He comes to understand, as did the poet in "Insensibility", that loss of life is of little or no importance to the men who participate in war from the passageways of political, religious or military power. Understandably, the soldier resents the idea that he and other soldiers have become the sacrificial victims of these men:

'Blood's dirt,' he laughed, looking away,
 Far off to where his wound had bled
 And almost merged for ever into clay.
 'The world is washing out its stains,' he said.
 'It doesn't like our cheeks so red:
 Young blood's its great objection.
 But when we're duly white-washed, being dead,
 The race will bear Field Marshal God's inspection.

When speaking to an officer, army regulations required a soldier to maintain his eyes up-front. Here, the soldier's looking away could signify a small act of defiance against authority, even though the parade had finished. The line "The world is washing out its stains" (12) is connected to the previous stanza where a literary allusion to Lady Macbeth attempting to wash the guilt of murder from her hands is made.⁶³ The line could also be a reference to the attempts made by Pontious Pilate to avoid accepting responsibility for sending Christ to His death. Only here, the responsibility belongs to the heads of state, Church and army, and instead of Christ going to His Father after the crucifixion, the soldiers here are to stand before the uncomprehending and uncompromising figure of a Field Marshal, who seemingly will only be satisfied if the sacrifice has been complete and the soldiers have been killed.

Jennifer Breen has provided an interesting interpretation of Owen's phrase "white-washed": it is "an ironic reference to the pallor associated with the loss of blood from a fatal wound, as well as both to an army method of cleaning up by white-washing in order to prepare for an official inspection, and to high officials' covering up the truth about the causes and effects of the war."⁶⁴ But it was not only political and military figures that covered up the truth. The Church was equally guilty and as John Mc. Nerney explains, she "had to come to terms with death on a steadily increasing scale. At home the clergy attempted to offer solace to the bereaved while fuelling the emotions of the civilian population in order to encourage enlistment and further the war effort."⁶⁵

A willingness to sacrifice oneself and suffer for the sake of others has always been

⁶³See Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, v.,1,35.

⁶⁴Jennifer Breen, *Wilfred Owen: Selected Poetry and Prose*, 210-211.

⁶⁵John Mc. Nerney, *Religious Attitudes in the Poetry of the First World War*, 10.

part of the Christian tradition. Christ suffered and allowed Himself to be sacrificed so that mankind could be redeemed and the soldiers of the British army were expected to do the same in order to save their country. The idea of suffering and sacrificial death appealed to the romanticism of many young soldiers, who, before seeing action, were willing to become heroes. Once the truth dawned and romantic notions disappeared, the soldiers became Christ-like victims who had no choice as to whether or not they wanted to die for their homeland. In "Anthem for Doomed Youth", the soldiers were sent off to slaughter and to "die as cattle" (1). They were isolated from the people who allowed them to go to war, from the people who would not mourn them when they died. The soldiers in "The Send-Off" were also seen as the victims who were silently sent to their deaths. Train loads of young men were dispatched to become sacrificial victims, to become twentieth-century Christ-like figures.

Owen was deeply disturbed by the attitude of the clergy, the politicians and those at home who seemed so easily disposed to sacrifice others. Making ironic use of biblical language in March 1918, he showed his disgust in a letter: "God so hated the world that he gave several millions of English-begotten sons that whosoever believeth in them should not perish but have a comfortable life" (*CL* 544). These sentiments are given poetic form in "The Parable of the Old Man and The Young", where Owen wanted to impress upon his readers the notion that the older generation, the politicians and the Church itself were using youth as a sacrificial offering upon the altar of their own pride. J. Loiseau wrote that "Soldiers were no longer the proud defenders of their country, but the pitiful victims of evil forces. Boys, most of them, 'innocent of enmity', they had been drawn out there because they had listened to the sonorous lies of stay-at-homes, patriotic 'buffers'. Abrahams ever-

ready to sacrifice their Isaacs and afterwards forget."⁶⁶

The "Sonnet - on Seeing a Piece of Our Heavy Artillery Brought into Action" is written as if it were a prayer being offered to a "Great Gun towering towards Heaven" (2). By worshipping this god of modern warfare, Owen the soldier-poet was emphasising how debased religion had become during the war. At first, the huge piece of artillery had usurped God's position, but Owen prayed that once it had fulfilled its role, it would be destroyed: "But when thy spell be cast complete and whole, / May God curse thee, and cut thee from our soul!" (13-14). (Owen knew that this was not going to happen. (In "Strange Meeting", which he was working on around the same time that he was putting the final touches to "Sonnet", he foretold that man would not learn from other wars and mistakes: "Now men will go content with what we spoiled, / Or discontent, boil bloody and be spilled. / . . . / None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress" (25-28)). In her notes to *Selected Poetry and Prose*, Jennifer Breen has suggested that the parody of prayer in "Sonnet" "is directed partly at clerics and laymen who prayed for victory over Germany, but more specifically at ecclesiastics who blessed new guns before they went into action against the enemy" (227).

Owen accused the Church of betraying her own doctrines and therefore of betraying her own followers. Those people who could have helped prevent the continuation of war chose not to do so and consequently earth had to "set sudden cups / In thousands for their blood." ("Spring Offensive", 30-31).

Owen was bitterly disappointed and angry. He was infuriated by those who were not at the front but who insisted on believing in the patriotic myths of heroism and gallantry on the battlefield and he had no intention of allowing the public - or at least, his readers -

⁶⁶J. Loiseau, "A Reading of Wilfred Owen's Poems", 101.

to carry on dreaming. He decided to tell the truth even though it was a truth very few were willing to hear. Of Owen and other soldier poets, Lawrence Durrell feels:

They began to tell the truth about the war in no uncertain terms; far from being an honourable and glorious enterprise, they found it a stupid and meaningless butchery carried on by politicians and the militarists to advance their own ends. Brooke and the others had sung the glories of war. The poetry-publics were staggered when Sassoon and Graves, Read and Owen, Robert Nichols and Osbert Sitwell began to send their cruel impressionistic pictures of the truth behind these poetic abstractions.⁶⁷

Owen's editorial for the September 1917 edition of the Craiglockhart War Hospital's magazine, *The Hydra* summed up his attitude - and the attitude of many more war veterans - towards some commanding officers and towards those at home who persisted in ignoring the realities of war:

MANY of us who came to the Hydro still slightly ill are now getting dangerously well.

Already we begin to see ourselves crouching before T.N.T., N.G., and other High and mighty Explosives, of which the one known as C.O. is not the least formidable.

In this excellent Concentration Camp we are fast recovering from the shock of coming to England. For some of us were not a little wounded by

⁶⁷Laurence Durrell, *A Key to Modern British Poetry*, 131.

the apparent indifference of the public and the press, not indeed to our precious selves, but to the unimagined durances of the fit fellow in the line.

We were a little *too* piqued by the piquancy of smart women, and as for the dainty newspaper jokes concerning the men in the mud, we could not see them at all.⁶⁸

Desmond Graham feels that it was Owen's awareness of what he believed to be lies to answer, misunderstandings to correct and ignorance to supply with knowledge that gave fuel to his creative flair:

In support of his activities he had one further and inestimable encouragement: the conviction that what he wrote about was not the invention of his own imagination but communal and verifiable experience. To convey exactly one response of terror or confusion or betrayal would not be to convey an imaginative vision of his own making, but truths he knew to be shared truths. In the trenches, what he wrote about was common knowledge: at home, it was ignored or unreachable. From this, the extraordinary, confident, public directness of his work arose; from his knowledge that he could assume nothing in his audience except, at best, goodwill . . .⁶⁹

Although Owen has done his best to transmit the truth of war in his poetry, the boundaries of language within art cannot permit a complete picture. Through imaginative

⁶⁸Quoted from Dominic Hibberd's *Wilfred Owen - The Last Year*, 34.

⁶⁹Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War*, 32.

understanding, some readers may get closer to the truth than others, but as Owen so often tried to impress on his readers, no one can share with the soldiers the sorrowful dark of hell, which was the hell on the battlefield.

III

TWILIGHT AND SUNSET

3.1 Shellshock and the Aftermath

As a result of shellshock, Wilfred Owen's military career at the front line was temporarily halted shortly after it had begun. His condition was serious enough for him to be sent back to Britain for specialised treatment. Once hospitalised and on the way back to mental and physical recovery, Owen was able to turn his attention to the reproduction of his war experiences in poetry.

3.1.1 Cause and Effect

Since the outbreak of the First World War, which gave birth to modern warfare, neurasthenic disorders in serving soldiers has become a field in which scientific research has advanced considerably.¹ The actual term "shellshock" arose during the First World War because of the use of previously unheard of weaponry and the effects it caused. The Government's War Office Committee of Enquiry (henceforth referred to as the Committee) set up to investigate shellshock made known its findings in an HMSO publication: *Report on the War Office Committee of Enquiry into "Shellshock"* (henceforth referred to as the *Report into "Shellshock"*). The Committee explained: "That we have no evidence of "shellshock" in previous campaigns is not extraordinary, when it is borne in mind that the use of high explosives, of the violence and intensity developed in the recent War, was wholly unknown in the conflicts of the past" (8).

In the 1914-1918 war, numerous soldiers were court-martialled and severely punished (often with execution) for behaviour considered cowardly, unmanly or unsuitable for members of the British armed forces. It later became evident that much of this

¹According to the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, neurasthenia is "an obsolete technical term for a neurosis characterised by extreme lassitude and inability to cope with any but the most trivial tasks", 1049.

unacceptable behaviour was caused by certain neurasthenic disorders which were often triggered by and became manifest under combat conditions. The term eventually became an umbrella concept which included disorders such as hysteria, anxiety and neurosis. Often, cases of shellshock went unnoticed or untreated and consequently no reliable statistics of the condition during the First World War exist.

It was decided by the Committee that the war itself did not actually produce any new nervous disorders and those which occurred during the conflict had already been previously recognised in civil medical practice. It was only because of the extreme conditions of the war that there were very high numbers of soldiers who suffered from neurasthenia or shellshock. According to experts, the disposition of a man to suffer from nervous conditions already existed: the war merely "revealed, excited or accelerated" the disease.

Freud believed that all war neuroses were rendered possible or promoted through an ego-conflict:

The conflict takes place between the old ego of peace-time and the new war-ego of the soldier; and it becomes acute as soon as the peace-ego is faced with the danger of being killed through the risky undertakings of his newlyfound parasitical double . . . the new ego, which it recognizes as threatening its life.²

Freud also pointed out that war neuroses would not become manifest in either professional soldiers or mercenaries, but were much more likely to appear in the unwilling conscript. During the First World War, when conscription became obligatory, the army came to

²Sigmund Freud, Intro. to *Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses*, 2.

consist of men who, had they been totally free to choose, would quite possibly not have joined the army. Consequently, the national army provided the perfect breeding ground for war neuroses.

Nowadays, "combat fatigue" is the term applied to soldiers who have succumbed to the physical and emotional strain of battle without necessarily suffering from any visible external signs of injury. Owing to an increased understanding of the condition by experts in both medical and military circles, modern-day soldiers suffering from it are treated with greater comprehension and compassion than the soldiers of the Great War. For the purpose of this study, it is useful to be aware of what the general trend of opinion about soldiers with neurasthenic disorders was during the First World War. For this reason, documents containing information relating to the condition during the First World War are considered. More recent studies, although extremely enlightening, are not referred to since the majority of them does not reflect the kind of research carried out into cases pertaining to the 1914-1918 conflict.

Members of the Committee established to enquire into shellshock recognised that the term was misleading and stated that it "has been a gross and costly misnomer, and that the term should be eliminated from our nomenclature"³ and they divided cases of shellshock into three main classes:

(1) Genuine concussion without visible wound as a result of shell explosion.

All witnesses were agreed that the cases in this class were relatively few.

2) Emotional shock, either acute in men with a neuropathic predisposition, or developing slowly as a result of prolonged strain and terrifying

³HMSO, *Report into "Shellshock"*, 92.

experience, the final breakdown being sometimes brought about by some relatively trivial cause.

(3) Nervous and mental exhaustion, the result of prolonged strain and hardship. In many cases the three factors of commotional and emotional shock and exhaustion were combined in varying proportions (112).

Dr. W. H. R. Rivers, a pioneer in the field of treatment and rehabilitation of shellshocked soldiers, worked at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, where Owen was eventually sent for treatment and where Siegfried Sassoon was also a patient. From the category of neurosis, Rivers excluded cases of simple exhaustion or concussion, circulatory and digestive disorders due to infection and definite psychoses, and like the Committee, also reached the conclusion that cases of war neurosis fall into three main groups, although mixed examples often occurred. Wilfred Owen appears to have belonged to the second group, which Rivers described as:

. . . cases in which the disorder shows itself especially in lack of physical and mental energy, in disorders of sleep and of the circulatory, digestive, and urogenital systems. On the mental side there is usually depression, restlessness, irritability and enfeeblement of memory, and on the physical side tremors, tics, or disorders of speech.⁴

The Committee reached the conclusion that no human being could resist the direct effect of high-explosive shelling. It was also established that the most severe cases of

⁴W. H. R. Rivers, *Instinct and the Unconscious*, 206-7.

shellshock arose when there were no external signs of injury. On the presence of external wounds or severe bleeding, it was found that the symptoms of shellshock were either slight or absent, which led many experts to believe that the cause of the condition was mental in origin. It was decided that shellshock symptoms were determined by a previous mental injury such as "a fright in childhood, a reproach concerning a misdemeanor in youth or an anxiety in adult life. . . ."⁵ If one accepts that these can be classed as "mental injury", then it could be argued that with his background and psychological make-up, Wilfred Owen was a prime candidate for shellshock.

It appears that one of the most important contributory factors in the manifestation of shellshock is severe and prolonged stress. Then, even those who seem to be mentally and emotionally stable can easily surrender to the effects of modern warfare and suffer a nervous collapse.

The Committee found that the form in which a nervous collapse became manifest depended on the personality and temperament of the individual. The degree to which officers suffered from shellshock was often directly related to the sense of responsibility they felt towards others. It was stated that:

Some by nature, education, character, and status are better qualified to hold responsibility, to be leaders of men, than others. With regard to officers during the war it greatly depended on such qualifications as to how responsibility was borne. To those suited to exercise it, responsibility, according to some, gave additional stimulus to the preservation of self-control, but to those ill-adapted, to men elevated to a rank beyond their

⁵W. H. R. Rivers, *Instinct and the Unconscious*, 96.

capacity, it acted as a cause of mental unrest and contributed in no small degree to nervous breakdown.⁶

In the case of Wilfred Owen, his suitability to bear responsibility should be considered in the light of the Committee's findings. A great deal of responsibility was thrust upon him as a child, when he was perhaps not mature enough to be able to cope with it adequately. The stress of excess responsibility at an early age possibly only became manifest in Owen when the war forced him, once again, to assume responsibility that overstretched his capacity. (Even after being treated for shellshock and on his return to France in mid-September 1918, Owen was once again laden with a responsibility that could not be avoided. He was assigned to 'D' Company of the Second Manchesters and appointed Bombing Officer of his Battalion, despite the fact that he had no specialised knowledge of bombs. By the beginning of October, Second Lieutenant Owen found himself as Acting Captain, commanding the entire Company for a brief period as his superior, Captain Somerville, had been wounded.)

The Committee stated that during military training, the ordinary soldier is encouraged to forget his individuality and to function solely as part of a group. He is taught to repress fear and the expression of it. The capacity of the soldier to act, without hesitation or reflection, on behalf of the section, platoon, company, battalion or even larger groups depended partly on his educational background and moral standards. (This suggests that social conditions and differences experienced by members of the armed forces before the war were important when it came to considering factors that possibly influenced a man's susceptibility to shellshock.) The less educated the man, the easier it was to train him not

⁶HMSO, *Report into "Shellshock"*, 97.

to behave on an individual basis. For the officers, however, it was more difficult. The officer was more liable to suffer from shellshock "because the nature of his duties especially puts him into positions of responsibility which produce or accentuate mental conflicts set up by repression, thus producing states of anxiety."⁷ Dr. Rivers explained why the officer was more susceptible to shellshock than the ordinary soldier:

In the case of the officer . . . the relation towards his men brings with it responsibilities which are perhaps more potent than any other element of his experience in determining the form taken by his nervous disorder, if he should break down. It is these responsibilities and other conditions associated with them which lead to his being so especially prone to suffer from the state of anxiety-neurosis. . . . The officer is driven by his position to repress the expression of emotion far more persistently than the private soldier. It is the special duty of the junior officer to set an example in this respect to his men, to encourage those who show signs of giving way. In the proper performance of this duty, it is essential that the officer shall appear calm and unconcerned in the midst of danger. The difficulty of keeping up this appearance after long-continued strain or after some shock of warfare has lessened the power of control, produces a state of persistent anxiety which is the most frequent and potent factor in the production of neurosis, and is especially important in determining the special form it takes. The private soldier . . . has not to bear with him continually the thought that the lives of forty or fifty men are immediately, and of many more remotely, dependent

⁷HMSO, *Report into "Shellshock"*, 221.

on his success in controlling any expression of fear or apprehension.⁸

Rivers's theory was that the manifestation of war neuroses depended on an inner conflict between the soldier's "instinct of self-preservation and certain social standards of thought and conduct, according to which fear and its expression are regarded as reprehensible" (208). These social standards had been taught by parents and teachers and acquired in infancy and so, from an early age, a child learnt to repress fear. This repression of fear caused no serious personal conflict in peace-time since modern-day life did not usually create any struggle between the instinct of self-preservation and acquired social standards. However, explains Rivers, in times of war, the balance between the two was much more precarious:

. . . the controlling social factors having been weakened by exhaustion, illness, strain or shock, so that the motives arising out of the instinct of self-preservation have gained in power, while in many cases the social factors have produced new conflicts and causes of anxiety which may be as potent as the primary conflict with the instinct of self-preservation (202).

Rivers recognised that the thrusting aside of painful memories was a perfectly natural thing to do and that repression itself was not necessarily harmful. His view was that repression was harmful when it prevented the individual from adapting to the environment in which he found himself. Rivers was not alone in his belief: several psychiatrists working in the field of psychoanalysis and war neuroses had attended a Psychoanalytical Congress

⁸W. H. R. Rivers, *Instinct and the Unconscious*, 218-19.

in Budapest in September 1918 and reached similar conclusions which were later published by S. Ferenczi.⁹ Ferenczi quoted Dr. Schmidt who recognised that the symptoms of shellshock only became manifest after the trauma and after the men who had suffered shock re-experienced the horrific and dangerous situations in their memory. Other specialists were also quoted. Hauptmann, explained Ferenczi:

. . . looks upon the traumatic neuroses as mental illnesses psycho-genetically elaborated and caused through emotional factors, and their symptoms as 'unconscious further elaboration of the emotional factors along paths of least resistance'. . . . Gaupp accepts . . . a Freudian postulation in that he describes the war neuroses as a flight from psychic conflicts into illness. . . Vogt. . . acknowledges that 'the compulsion which originates from this is more often unconscious than conscious'. . .(10-12).

Physical exhaustion combined with nervous exhaustion frequently gave rise to manifestations of shellshock and it was often the tired troops who would suffer from it if they were sent into action without sufficient rest. In April 1917, Owen's Battalion was congratulated for fighting under heavy fire but the soldiers had to continue fighting at the front for a further twelve days. During this time, Owen was blown into the air by a shell that had landed a short distance from him. This is most probably what caused his subsequent shellshock.

Owen insisted that the cause of his shellshock was more to do with lying near the dismembered body of a fellow-officer rather than anything else, as he explained to his sister,

⁹Ferenczi et al., *Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses*.

Mary: "You know it was not the Bosche that worked me up, nor the explosives, but it was living so long by poor old Cock Robin (as we used to call 2/Lieutenant Gaukroger), who lay not only nearby, but in various places round and about" (*CL* 456). Jon Stallworthy informs us that official records state that second Lieutenant H. Gaukroger was killed prior to Owen's experience. The very fact that Owen had perhaps confused Gaukroger's earlier death with the death of another man (the one whose scattered remains Owen lay by) is indicative of his mental state after having been blown into the air by a shell.

Adrian Caesar feels that Owen's 1917 and early 1918 verse is an embodiment of the conflicts which contributed to the manifestation of his shellshock. Like other writers, Caesar has suggested that Owen's neurasthenia was not caused solely by the pressures and effects of combat. He offers the opinion that it was partly caused by the long-suppressed feelings of fear brought about because of a lack of sexual identity. Caesar agrees with Martin Seymour Smith's observation that Robert Graves's neurosis was "not caused by war experience but relentlessly uncovered by it" and he feels that this can also be applied to Owen and Sassoon. Caesar explains that the subjects of his study (including Owen):

brought to the war complex problems of self-identity which were rendered even more problematic in the maelstrom of the trenches. Fear certainly played a part in the development of their war neuroses, but this was not simply (or even primarily) fear of death or injury, but rather, I believe, fear of the intensity of the love they felt for other men, and the fear of the ferocity of the sado-masochistic impulses they experienced, exaggerated to

an intolerable degree by their war experience.¹⁰

The Committee discovered that shellshock was more common in soldiers who had only spent a short time at the front: frequently it occurred within a week or month of the soldier arriving at the fighting zone and Second Lieutenant Owen's case was no different. Owen finished his training on 30 December 1916, was sent to the Base Camp at Etaples and went into the line near Beaumont Hamel. At the end of January 1917, he was sent to Abbeville, which was well behind the lines, for a Course of Instruction in Transport Duties. (One wonders if Owen was sent on this course because he was already showing signs of strain after his first month of active service). The course of instruction lasted from 2 February until 25 February, during which time Owen began to feel both physically and mentally better and he settled down to some poetry writing, composing "Golden Hair" and "Happiness", two very un-warlike pieces. On 1 March, Owen rejoined his Battalion and on 9 March, he was sent up nearer the line and put in charge of a party of diggers. On the night of 13 March, he fell into a shell hole and suffered concussion and as a result, he was sent to a Field Hospital known as the 13th Casualty Clearing Station, at Gailly on the Somme Canal. After being discharged from hospital at the end of March, Owen met up with the 2nd Manchesters Regiment near San Quentin and a few days later, he was transferred to 'A' Company. Owen was immediately sent into action. Not far from Savy Wood, and after several days of heavy fighting, he was blown into the air by a shell. On May 1, Lieutenant-Colonel Luxmoore, Owen's Commanding Officer, ordered Owen to report to the Battalion's Medical Officer who sent Owen back to the 13th Casualty Clearing

¹⁰Adrian Caesar, *Taking Like a Man*, 228. Caesar quotes from Martin Seymour Smith's *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, 76.

Station. Owen was diagnosed as suffering from neurasthenia and his name was placed on the evacuation list since it was felt that he needed specialised treatment. On 11 June, Owen reached N°1 General Hospital at Etretat, five miles north of Le Havre. From there, he was sent to Southampton and attended to at the Royal Victoria Hospital (then known as the Welsh Hospital, Netley). On 25 June, a Medical Board deemed Owen unfit for general service for a period of six months and he was sent immediately to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, where he would be given the treatment his condition required. In total, Owen had spent the first half of 1917 on active service, but the time he had spent at the front line had not amounted to more than a few weeks. It was quite plain that Owen was unable to accommodate the brutality of what he had experienced, and under the strain, his sensitivity gave way and he suffered a weakening of the nerves.

Comments made later by war veterans and writers supported the Committee's findings in the relationship between time served at the front and the appearance of shellshock symptoms. Arthur Lane informs us that:

Robert Graves points out that an infantry officer's period of usefulness in the trenches coincided with his third or fourth week of duty ('unless he happened to have any particular bad shock or sequence of shocks'); and if he had not had recuperative periods away from the front, 'after a year or fifteen months he was often worse than useless'.¹¹

Medical Boards were established to assess the condition of the neurasthenic cases that were recommended for extensive care. After treatment and observation, it was always a

¹¹Arthur Lane, *An Adequate Response*, 153. Lane quotes from Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 143.

panel of medical experts that determined whether a patient was fit to return to duty or not. At the end of October 1917, Owen was considered fit for light duties by a Medical Board and after a three-week period of leave on his departure from Craiglockhart, Owen was ordered to rejoin the 5th (Reserve) Battalion of the Manchester Regiment in Scarborough. He remained in Scarborough until 12 March 1918, when he had to report to a training camp at Ripon. On 4 June, Owen was once more called before a Medical Board and graded fit for general service and on 31 August 1918, he returned to France, on his way back to the front.

Contemporary attitudes towards neurasthenia were generally appalling and those suffering from it received very little support and understanding from social, military or medical circles. The fifth episode of the B B C production *1914-1918* shows shocking footage from films described as "training films" used by doctors to show the effects of mechanised warfare. The narrator explains that these films "have been buried in hospital archives for almost eighty years". It was easy for those who lived at a comfortable distance from the war to criticise and condemn soldiers for cowardice. Despite this, many soldiers hoping to avoid front line duty feigned shellshock symptoms, so much so that in its *Report into "Shellshock"*, the Committee stated that shellshock, "became recognized as a handy excuse, and indeed a suggestion also to many who were ready to avail themselves of any subterfuge to escape from the terrors of the front" (141). Shellshock became a contagious malady and for Medical Officers at the front, it was often difficult to distinguish between genuine and phoney cases. Thus, it was recommended that all cases of supposed shellshock should at first be viewed with suspicion. Cases presenting a mild degree of symptoms were dealt with at the regimental aid posts where they were kept for twenty four or forty eight hours. After this brief rest period, many men were able to return directly to duty. In more

severe cases, where slight concussion and fatigue or exhaustion were evident, the soldier was sent to the transport lines or to the divisional rest station, where a longer period of rest was recommended. In the severest of cases, patients were transferred to war hospitals for treatment. Many cases of shellshock, however, went unrecognised because the symptoms were not understood. In *An Adequate Response*, Arthur Lane quoted Leon Woolf, a military historian who described the unrecognised casualties:

There were hundreds of cases referred to, often contemptuously, as shellshocks Such men, trampling stolidly back from No Man's Land along the ankle-deep duckboards, could not always be recognized as mental casualties unless they were crying uncontrollably, or giggling, or muttering under their breaths, or falling prone at every explosion or sharp command. Some men were, in fact, outwardly quite normal. If you asked one his name, he knew it, and if you told him rations were down he might very well wander off to meet them, and if you asked him his outfit he might tell you plainly. He would know where he was and did not seem to be distressed. But he would be vaguely confused under more pointed questioning, and perhaps a little too anxious to leave; and as for further fighting he would be plainly far beyond that - perhaps even beyond defending himself (153).¹²

It was suggested earlier that Owen might have been sent on a Course of Instruction in Transport Duties in February 1917 because he was already showing signs of stress after spending almost a month at the front line. After the 23-day long course, Owen spent a

¹²Leon Woolf, *In Flanders Fields*, 228.

further two weeks at the front, suffered concussion and was sent to the 13th Casualty Clearing Station. The letter Owen wrote to his mother from this field hospital reflects a mixture of the types of behaviour of many shellshock victims as described by Woolf. Owen wrote: "I felt nothing more than a headache for 3 days; and I went up to the front in the usual way - or nearly the usual way, for I felt too weak to wrestle with the mud, and sneaked along the top, snapping my fingers at a clumsy sniper" (CL 443). No soldier in full possession of his senses would have deliberately exposed himself to a sniper and his fire and merely snapped his fingers at him.

Unfortunately, the majority of people did not view shellshock casualties as sympathetically as Woolf did and quite often the least compassionate of critics were those who were theoretically closest to the fighting soldiers. Charles S. Myers served as temporary Lieutenant-Colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps and was consulting psychologist to the British Armies in France. He considered shellshock to be a breakdown of morale and in his opinion, it was indicative of a lack of discipline and loyalty.¹³ As Douglas Kerr explains, "Breakdown was a failure of that sense of duty . . . equated with morale, and with the essence of being a soldier and being British" (WOV 192-3). Breakdown and failure in the line of duty was considered synonymous with cowardice and cowardice was officially classed as a military crime which could be punishable by death.

The business of Owen's shellshock was a subject for debate long after the war had ended and when more of his poetry had started to appear in print. Charles Scott Moncrieff, who seemed to have been very fond of Owen when he was alive, let it be known that official registers stated that Owen had been recorded as having suffered a loss of morale under shellfire. Siegfried Sassoon objected to Moncrieff's remarks, but as Dominic Hibberd

¹³See Charles S. Myers, *Shell Shock in France, 1914-1918*.

has pointed out:

Scott Moncrieff is unlikely to have been lying, since he worked in the War Office in 1918 and almost certainly saw Owen's file. . . . His evidence seems to be reinforced by the less reliable testimony of Robert Graves, who met Owen in 1917 and said in the first (1929) edition of *Goodbye to All That* that Owen 'had had a bad time . . . in France; and further it had preyed on his mind that he had been accused of cowardice by his commanding officer' (*OTP* 76).

What being a neurasthenic casualty really meant in the eyes of the authorities should be borne in mind. With respect to Owen, Kerr writes:

If morale meant courage, loyalty, manliness, integration, there could be no doubt of the judgement the army passed on the apparently unwounded Lieutenant Owen when he was told that he was not fit to go into battle with his men. . . . He was being judged a failure as a soldier and as an officer. Everyone recognized the extra stresses that afflicted an officer at the front . . . But officers were supposed to be made of finer stuff than their men; by that right they were officers (*WOV* 193).

Even when he was diagnosed as suffering from neurasthenia, Owen did not want to admit that he had suffered a breakdown. On 2 May 1917, he wrote to his mother from the 13th Casualty Clearing Station explaining that "The Doctor . . . forbid me to go into

action . . . he is nervous about my nerves . . . Do not for a moment suppose I have had a 'breakdown'. I am simply *avoiding one*" (CL 453). At all costs, Owen wanted to avoid being classed as a victim of neurasthenia because he could not abide the thought of being labelled a coward; he even asked his mother not to tell people that he was a shellshock casualty. The stigma attached to being one clearly lurked in Owen's subconscious during his time as a patient at Craiglockhart War Hospital and it affected the Owen family to such a degree that, much later on, considerable efforts were made to cover up and ignore the details.

In January 1918, before returning to active service, Owen was invited to attend the wedding of Robert Graves and Nancy Nicholson. He gave Graves and his bride a gift of eleven apostle spoons, explaining that the twelfth one was missing because it had been accused of and court-martialled for cowardice and was awaiting execution. One cannot help but interpret this as a subconscious manifestation of Owen's feelings of guilt: he had been accused of cowardice, and being sent to Craiglockhart was a confirmation of this cowardice and therefore a type of execution. Neither can the religious implications be ignored; eleven of Christ's twelve apostles remained faithful to him. The missing spoon represented Judas and Owen considered himself a Judas with regard to his soldiers. The soldiers, like Christ, had been abandoned and Owen, like Judas, had betrayed them in their hour of need.

A letter Owen wrote to Osbert Sitwell in July 1918 from Scarborough just after he had heard that he had been pronounced fit for general service contains a comment on Owen's father's response to his son's pending return to active service, "...my Father's message on hearing I was G.S.: 'gratified to know you are normal again'" (CL 562). This remark not only suggests the possible relief Mr. Owen felt on his son's returning to the front but the word 'normal' is indicative of the connotations attached to Owen's medical

condition. If Owen had suffered a bullet or shell wound, his return to health probably would not have been described as 'normal'. On being 'normal' again, Owen could rectify any accusations against him for cowardice and his family could once again be proud of the fact that he was 'doing his duty'.

Once back in the fray, Owen's fear did not impede his functioning as an officer and as a result of brave leadership whilst in action, he was recommended for the Military Cross. He was delighted with the idea because "of the confidence it may give me at home" (*CL* 582). Perhaps subconsciously, Owen felt that on receiving the award, he would be 'redeemed' and therefore be able to rid himself of the shadow of guilt that he sometimes seemed to feel about having been sent to Craiglockhart. He knew that neurasthenia was not a manifestation of cowardice, but the vast majority did not. He felt that receiving the award qualified him to speak as a soldier on behalf of other soldiers. As Dominic Hibberd has written, "His courage, and his authority as a poet, were now beyond question, and like Sassoon, he had made the welfare of his men his first concern."¹⁴ Stallworthy sees the bravery award as a provider of a certain peace of mind for Owen because "the imputation that he was 'unfit to command troops', which had haunted him since April 1917, was answered with two words and a white and purple ribbon" (*WO* 279). With his Military Cross, Owen could forget the accusation of cowardice and concentrate on being a soldier and poet.

3.1.2 Craiglockhart and Creativity

Owen first received therapy for shellshock from Dr. William Brown at the 13th

¹⁴Dominic Hibberd, *The Last Year*, 173.

Casualty Clearing Station.¹⁵ Jennifer Breen has pointed out that the methods used by Brown, which evolved from his clinical experience, were based on psychiatry rather than neurology. She has described Brown as "an eminent British exponent of Freudian and related psychoanalytic theories [who] postulated that a patient's symptoms of neurosis often resulted from repression of emotional reactions to traumatic experiences."¹⁶

Once he was transferred to Britain, Owen received further treatment from Dr. Arthur Brock at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland. Breen clearly thinks highly of both Brown and Brock who, she explains, were amongst the pioneers of modern methods of therapy for mental illness. She feels they contributed indirectly to the writing of Owen's most significant poetry in that they helped him to come to terms with and overcome the personal crisis which resulted in him being sent to Craiglockhart.

It is clear from his article "A Sociological Cure for Shellshock: Dr. Brock and Wilfred Owen" that Dominic Hibberd also thinks a great deal of Brock but regrets that, ". . . the nature and importance of Brock's work has been overlooked by Owen's editors." His opinion is that "Owen was Brock's man for the rest of his short life. . . [With Brock] Owen worked as he had never worked before, both as a soldier and as a poet, and gained distinctions in both fields" (382). In *OTP*, Hibberd has explained that in shellshock cases, the victim ". . . had become violently detached from its environment and could no longer relate to it by means of its usual functions" (84) and returning to his article, he adds that ". . . the victim's mind became out of step with his body. . . . His memory of the past, responsibility for the present and capacity to plan were all damaged and his will to work

¹⁵Brown gave evidence that was included in the *Report into "Shellshock"* and later published a book, *Psychology and Psychotherapy*.

¹⁶Jennifer Breen, "Wilfred Owen (1893-1918): His Recovery from 'shell-shock'", 302. See also, William Brown, "The Treatment of Cases of Shell-Shock", 197-200.

was enfeebled" (378). Brock considered that one of his functions as Medical Officer at Craiglockhart was to help shellshock victims relate their past experiences to both their present predicament and their possible future so that they could make sense of, and therefore function within, the environment in which they found themselves. In "Mutiny", episode five of the B B C series *1914-1918*, the psychotherapy that Owen, Sassoon and other officers received is described as an attempt at the "emotional repair of British officers" and the officers themselves often referred to it as "the talking cure".

Unlike Dr. Rivers, who was more in favour of conversational therapy, Dr. Brock was a man of action. He believed in attempting to connect the different strands of his patient's life together so that the patient could return to a "normal" life as quickly as possible. He was a firm believer in the therapeutic value of creativity and after discovering Owen's artistic streak, he took advantage of it and encouraged him to write both poetry and prose whilst he was in his care. Several writers have quoted from Brock's book in which he stated that "Every work of imagination is a projection into sensory form of the artist's deepest personal experiences."¹⁷ Brock felt that in his poetry Owen revealed his deepest personal experiences and successfully came to terms with them: "In the powerful war poems of Wilfred Owen we read the heroic testimony of one who having in the most literal sense 'faced the phantoms of the mind' had *all but* laid them ere the last call came; they still appear in his poetry but he fears them no longer" (172).

One can assume that when Adrian Caesar claims that the respective therapies used by Rivers and Brock at Craiglockhart were corrupted by "conservative ideologies"¹⁸, he is intimating that Owen's problems as regards his sexual identity and his possible sado-

¹⁷Arthur Brock, *Health and Conduct*, 171-72.

¹⁸Adrian Caesar, *Taking it Like a Man*, 229.

masochistic tendencies were not addressed during the time he spent in Edinburgh. Unfortunately, Owen's medical history can never be disclosed. If his records were revealed, then any queries relating to his neurasthenia and the treatment he received for it could be resolved.

Douglas Kerr considers that for Owen, the pressure of being a junior infantry officer and having, ". . . to carry the double burden of victim and self-accused, and to seek and fail to find oblivion from memories that were both torment and confession", were what took him to Craiglockhart (*WOV 227*). Whether the reasons were many or few, Owen found himself entering Craiglockhart on 26 June feeling lost, confused and weary and shouldering the emotional burden of his experiences on the Somme.

Owen's stay at Craiglockhart acted as a catalyst in terms of an increase in poetic production. On analysing the research carried out by Jon Stallworthy, it can be seen that ten fragments and twenty three poems were almost definitely worked upon to a greater or lesser extent whilst Owen was at Craiglockhart. The poems and fragments bearing the mark of Craiglockhart can be grouped in the following manner:¹⁹

Fragments written before Craiglockhart and revised there:

F 82 Perseus

F 125 Golden Hair

Poems written before Craiglockhart and revised there:

P 85 Happiness

¹⁹In the table, the letter F signifies fragment, whilst P stands for poem. The number accompanying each letter indicates the numerical order in which Jon Stallworthy has placed the fragments and poems in *CPF*.

- P 89 The Swift
 P 91 With an Identity Disc
 P 95 Music

Fragments written at Craiglockhart:

- F 81 O piteous mistake: o wrong, wrong word
 F 84 Ballad of Lady Yolande²⁰
 F 87 Lines to a Beauty in Limehouse
 F 92 I know the music²¹
 F 93 But I was looking at the permanent stars²²
 F 97 Beauty

Poems written and completed at Craiglockhart:

- P 83 The Fates
 P 86 Song of Songs
 P 88 Has your soul sipped
 P 90 Inspection²³

²⁰Stallworthy dates this ballad as late June-July 1917, partly because of a letter Owen wrote to his cousin, Leslie Gunston on 1 July 1917, in which he stated, "My ballad is going strong" (*CL* 473). Hibberd agrees that the ballad was worked on at Craiglockhart but suggests that Owen started it whilst he was still in France since one of the manuscripts is dated 8 June.

²¹Hibberd suggests that this fragment was written between mid-August and late October whilst Stallworthy offers the date of composition as late August or early September 1917.

²²With this fragment, there is a marginal difference in the dating of it: Hibberd suggests it was written between mid-August and late October 1917, whilst Stallworthy gives the more exact date of late August 1917.

²³Stallworthy has suggested that this poem was drafted at Craiglockhart in August 1917 and completed in the September. Hibberd feels that Stallworthy's precision, "seems unjustified" but offers no explanation for his comment. Nor does he suggest any other date of composition. (See Dominic Hibberd, *The Last Year*, 197).

- P 94 The Promisers
- P 96 Anthem for Doomed Youth
- P 98 Winter Song
- P 99 Six O'clock in Princes Street
- P 130 Sweet is your antique body, not yet young²⁴

Fragment drafted at Craiglockhart and revised there:

- F 138 The Wrestlers

Fragment drafted at Craiglockhart and revised there or Scarborough:

- F 132 Reunion²⁵

Poems drafted at Craiglockhart, revised at Scarborough:

- P 136 My Shy Hand

²⁴Owen revisited Craiglockhart between 19-23 December 1917 and Stallworthy suggests that this sonnet was probably written in December 1917 because it bears similarities with 'Miners' which was written at Scarborough on 13 or 14 January 1918. Stallworthy writes, "The child addressed in this sonnet is Arthur Newbould, the seven-year-old son of Edinburgh friends." (See *CPF*, 129). Hibberd proposes between late June to mid-August 1917 as the date of composition. He describes the sonnet as "a summer poem to Arthur Newbould, perhaps written soon after Owen met him in July. (*CPF*'s 'Craiglockhart, probably. . . December' must be a mistake)" (See Hibberd's *The Last Year*, 196). Indeed, Hibberd may be correct in describing the piece as a summer poem, but summer poems do not necessarily have to be written in the summer. Owen could well have written a poem based on a summer meeting several months after the event, just as several of his war poems that were based on early combat experience were composed, in many cases, more than a year after the experience e.g. "The Sentry", "The Show", "Exposure", "Spring Offensive". Stallworthy's reason for dating the poem December 1917 is more acceptable than Hibberd's date of June to mid-August 1917.

²⁵According to Stallworthy, this fragment was drafted at Craiglockhart in June-July 1917 and then revised either there that October or November, or at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918. Hibberd points out that there are "two surviving drafts, one impossible to date, the other on *Ivy* paper (other *Ivy* Mss are November-March)". On the basis of this, argues Hibberd, Stallworthy's June-July 1917 date is unfounded and he suggests that the poem was written between January and early March 1918. (See Hibberd's *The Last Year*, 198). Unfortunately, Hibberd has not specified what kind of paper was used for the draft that is impossible to date. If he could assure the reader that it, too, was written on *Ivy* paper, then his argument could not be refuted. As it stands, the undatable draft could be the June-July draft that Stallworthy refers to.

P 160 The Next War

P 164 The Chances

P 167 Disabled

P 170 Soldier's Dream

Poem possibly drafted at Craiglockhart, revised at Scarborough:

P 149 Sonnet / On Seeing a Piece of Our Heavy Artillery Brought into Action²⁶

Poem drafted at Craiglockhart, probably revised at Scarborough, but possibly

Ripon:

P 144 Dulce et Decorum Est

Poems drafted at Craiglockhart, revised at Ripon:

P 146 The Dead-Beat

P 155 S.I.W.

Poem started at Craiglockhart, continued at Scarborough, completed in France:

P 175 The Sentry

²⁶Stallworthy suggests that this sonnet may have been started as early as July 1917, when Owen was at Craiglockhart and that it underwent revision at Scarborough in May 1918. Hibberd explains that the sonnet survives as a questionable Ripon draft and argues that "Sassoon would not have allowed that 'Our' in the title, nor the poem's anti-German implications." For this reason, he suggests that the first draft of the sonnet could have been written in France at the beginning of 1917. In other words, Hibberd feels that what Sassoon would have rejected only remains in the sonnet simply because it was written before Owen met Sassoon. However, the possibility that Owen wrote the poem in July 1917, in the knowledge that Sassoon would not have "allowed" certain references, also exists. After all, despite hero-worshipping Sassoon as man and poet, Owen was free to make his own decisions.

A further two fragments and twenty two poems can be added to this list as possibly having been worked on whilst Owen was at Craiglockhart:

Fragment revised either at Craiglockhart or Scarborough but drafted earlier:

F 126 The Women & the Slain

Poems revised either at Craiglockhart or Scarborough but drafted earlier:

P 100 The One Remains

P 101 The Sleeping Beauty

P 102 The city lights along the waterside

P 103 Autumnal

P 104 The Unreturning

P 105 Perversity

P 106 Maundy Thursday

P 107 The Peril of Love

P 108 The Poet in Pain

P 109 Whither is passed the softly-vanished day?

P 110 On My Songs

P 111 To -

P 112 To Eros

P 113 1914

P 114 Purple

P 115 On a Dream

P 116 Stunned by their life's explosion into love

P 154 The End

Poems written or revised at Craiglockhart or Scarborough:

P 117 From My Diary, July 1914

P 118 The Ballad of Many Thorns

Fragment drafted or revised at Craiglockhart or Scarborough:

F 119 The End²⁷

Poem drafted either at Craiglockhart or Scarborough and revised at Scarborough:

P 161 Greater Love²⁸

Poem drafted either at Craiglockhart or Scarborough, possibly revised at Ripon:

P 147 Insensibility²⁹

Of all the Craiglockhart fragments, "Perseus" is perhaps the most important in the sense that it provided a poetic passageway to much of Owen's later war poetry. Dominic

²⁷The contents of the poem "The End" and this fragment bear no resemblance to each other.

²⁸Stallworthy claims that the poem saw its beginnings either at Craiglockhart in October-November 1917 or at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918 and was revised at Scarborough the following July. Hibberd believes that the poem was first drafted on the backs of old sonnets and, without giving any reason, suggests that the date of its first composition was between 12 March and 5 June 1918, when Owen was at Ripon.

²⁹This poem, according to Stallworthy, was drafted either at Craiglockhart in October-November 1917 or at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918 and was possibly later revised at Ripon in April 1918. Hibberd argues that the style of the poem seems to belong to a later period and suggests that it was penned at Ripon sometime between 12 March and 5 June 1918. To support his argument, Hibberd discusses the evidence of watermarks on the different types of paper used by Owen at that period of time.

Hibberd describes the poem as:

a central expression of his [Owen's] poethood . . . understandably ignored by critics as incoherent 'juvenilia'. . . hopelessly devoid of literary merit despite some odd parallels with the famous poems of 1917-1918. But through all this chaotic material Owen seems to be feeling his way towards a myth of his own life and identity, giving it shape in a pattern that is strangely close to his war poetry, so that the 'Perseus' manuscripts . . . are a key to his eventual achievement (*OTP* 42-43).

Almost as if he had been trying to block the war out of his mind, Owen made very little reference to it in his early Craiglockhart work - possibly because the therapy he was receiving from Dr. Brock had not yet begun to influence him. If anything, he was attempting to flee from any kind of reality, as in "The Ballad of Lady Yolande", where the reader is taken back to the romantic tales of olden days.

However, other Craiglockhart pieces prepare the way for later poems. "Lines to a Beauty seen in Limehouse" seems to be a rehearsal for the later poem "Who is the god of Canongate", and "I know the music" contains the line "Bugles have saddened all the evening air", which is reflected in the line "And bugles calling them from sad shires" (8) in "Anthem for Doomed Youth", written a short time afterwards.

The fragment "But I was looking at the permanent stars" also contains a reference to bugles: "Bugles sang, saddening the evening air / And bugles answered, sorrowful to hear." A reference to the sorrow of bugles is found in the much later poem "The Calls".

A connection can be made between "But I was looking at the permanent stars" and

"Disabled" insofar as in the fragment we read, "The voices of boys had vanished from the riverside / For sleep had mothered them away from me" whilst in "Disabled", we come across the lines:

. Through the park
 Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
 Voices of play and pleasure after day,
 Til gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

At the same time, the fragment's ". . . wailing of the high travelling shells" is reflected in "The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells" (7) of "Anthem for Doomed Youth". The atmosphere of the fragment is captured in the sonnet "Sonnet - On Seeing a Piece of Our Heavy Artillery Brought into Action". In the fragment, Owen writes of "the deep cursing" of the awful "iron anger" and the "deliberate fury of a monstrous gun", whilst in the sonnet the poet addresses a massive, monstrous gun that wreaks havoc upon mankind.

One fragment, "I know the music", has its origins in an earlier poem. The two lines "Pacific lamentations of slow bells" and "Bridges, sonorous under carriage wheels" were taken virtually word for word from the poem "A Palinode", which was either composed or fair copied in October 1915, almost two years earlier.

It was mentioned earlier that whilst Dr. Brock was treating Owen, he became aware of his patient's literary interests and encouraged him to write both poetry and prose. One of the creative tasks he set Owen was the writing of a poem on the subject of Antaeus.

According to Greek legend, Antaeus was an African giant whose incredible strength and power only lasted as long as part of him was in contact with his Mother Earth. Once

contact was lost, Antaeus would be sapped of all energy and vitality, only to regain it on re-establishing contact. Hercules, entering into combat with Antaeus, was aware of the source of the giant's energy. He managed to raise Antaeus into the air and as the giant lost his strength, Hercules crushed him to death and so won the fight. For Brock, his patients were Antaeus-like in the sense that just as the giant had literally lost touch with his Mother Earth, so had the soldiers lost touch with reality.

Contact with reality had to be re-established if Brock's patients were to return to normality. In Brock's mind, if Antaeus represented the soldiers who could recover from a loss of contact with reality, then Hercules represented the war that often severed the soldiers' contact with it. Brock suggested that Owen wrote a poem based on the Greek legend but, in his unfinished piece, Owen ignores the parallel between Antaeus and soldiers; he is more interested in Hercules and his powerful performance whilst locked in combat with the giant.

Dominic Hibberd informs the reader that the fragment, which Owen titled "The Wrestlers", "is a conventional exercise but it shows an energy which had been lacking from Owen's poetry since the battle which had led to his shellshock in April."³⁰ In a note to his article, Hibberd points out that traces of "Exposure" and "Spring Offensive" are evident in the fragment. He also suggests that "The Wrestlers" is important in the sense that it contains references to earlier works: an unfinished sonnet from 1917 which begins "when on the kindling wood the coals are piled" and the 1916 poem "Storm". Therefore, "The Wrestlers" is a bridge that connects Owen's earlier and later poetry, an unfinished poem that helps Owen to re-connect his past with his present so that he can face his future.

The fragment "Beauty" was written in September 1917, after Owen had been at

³⁰Dominic Hibberd, *A Sociological Cure for Shellshock*, 381.

Craiglockhart for over two months. It is clear from the fragment that by this time, Owen was able to begin to face up to the horrors of war that he had experienced and in this piece, he attempts to deal with the philosophic and poetic meaning of beauty vis à vis the ugliness of war. Owen's cynicism is revealed when he describes what the different concepts of beauty might be, according to the individual. His comments range from a reference to the philosophical attitude of Kant to the shallowness of women who contemplate what they consider beauty to be - a reflection (presumably their own) in a mirror. For soldiers, the only valid meaning of beauty is an injury sufficiently serious to warrant a transfer from the war zone back to England. Referring to this fragment, Dennis Welland wrote that "War did not destroy Owen's idea of beauty but widened it immeasurably."³¹

"Beauty" is an interesting fragment because it is not only a reflection of Owen's changing attitude to the concept of beauty, but it could also be taken as an indication that his attitude to what poetry should be about was changing. His earlier romantic notions of poetry took a step further back into oblivion; poetry was becoming, in one sense, less beautiful because it was leaving the green pastures of innocence behind, but at the same time, it acquired a greater beauty as it moved closer to reflecting the truth of war.

It was suggested earlier that Owen's stay at Craiglockhart War Hospital acted as a catalyst in terms of his poetic production. The two most important people in his life at that time who helped make this period of creativity possible were Dr. Brock and Siegfried Sassoon. The influence of Dr. Brock has already been mentioned. Sassoon's influence on Owen and his poetry will be dealt with in the next section of this chapter. What follows now is a discussion on some of the pieces Owen worked on whilst at Craiglockhart that do not show particular signs of Sassoon's influence.

³¹Dennis Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, 45.

"The Fates", Owen's first complete Craiglockhart piece was written before the fragment "Beauty" and shows no sign of any interest in touching upon the realities of war. Here, Owen addresses beauty as the one thing that can protect him from the passing of time and the process of ageing. The sonnet has little to recommend it but it is interesting to note that the last line, "And miss the march of lifetime, stage by stage" (16), is echoed in the later poem "Strange Meeting", where in a completely different context, Owen writes, "To miss the march of this retreating world" (32).

Reflecting upon the sonnet "Happiness", which was begun at Abbeville in February 1917 and revised between late June and August at Craiglockhart, Owen recalled a few lines he had written a year earlier which were later incorporated into the sonnet:

Not before January 1917 did I write the only lines of mine that carry the stamp of maturity: these:

But the old happiness is unreturning .

Boys have no grief so grievous as youth's yearning;

Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope (CL 482).

Presumably referring to the technicalities of his work, Owen described the sonnet as "credible" and dedicated it to his mother although he did not think much of its content: "Between you and me the sentiment is all bilge. Or nearly all" (CL 437). Whether Owen actually thought the sentiment was really nonsense or not is questionable when one considers the very close relationship he had with his mother. The first draft of the sonnet talks about the breaking of the maternal bond and the unhappiness one experiences on doing so. The last draft of the sonnet is much more disciplined in terms of sentiment as all references to

a mother figure have been removed and the pronoun "I" has been replaced by "we", thus making the sonnet less personal.

For Jon Stallworthy, the importance of "Has your soul sipped" lies in the fact that it appears to be "one of Wilfred Owen's first experiments with pararhyme" (*CPF* 91). The unmistakable homosexual tone of the poem is also worth noting. Despite Adrian Caesar's opinion to the contrary, whilst at Craiglockhart, Owen quite possibly had to address the problems he appeared to have had as regards his sexual identity. Stallworthy feels that "Has your soul sipped" contains elements of "latent or suppressed homosexuality" with its "sexual undertones", "orgasmic movement" and "distinctly disturbing, not to say shocking . . . luxuriant context" (*WO* 141-42). If, as Kenneth Simcox suggests, "poetry is the expression of a man's deepest preoccupations", then this poem could indeed "provide a disturbing glimpse of sadism."³² Sven Bäckman's view of the poet and poem was similar. He writes that Owen tried "to achieve a shock effect of a most morbid kind, which may raise disturbing questions as regards the personal situation out of which such a poem has grown."³³ Dominic Hibberd has described the poem as "grotesque" but warns the reader against over-reacting: "One's response to it should be tempered by the probability that Owen was reading Swinburne at the time. Its unpleasantness may have been a consciously Decadent attempt to be shocking . . ." (*OTP* 83). Several lines later, Hibberd comments that only a few weeks after composing this poem, Owen was capable of converting some of the pretentious, clichéd language into powerful and serious imagery, which is seen in poems like "Disabled", the untitled piece "I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell", "Greater Love" and "The Kind Ghosts".

³²Kenneth Simcox, *Anthem For a Doomed Youth*, 22.

³³Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed*, 54.

Shaded glimpses of Owen's war and his suffering soldiers can also be seen beneath the decadence that cloaks "Has your soul sipped". The "murdered mouth" in the poem is reflected in "I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell". Although neither poem refers directly to war, both could be alluding to the blood seeping out of the mouth of a dying soldier. References to a "proud wound", "sweet murder" and martyrdom make up what was later to become the passive infantrymen of the trenches, who were frequently the subjects of Owen's war poems. The teeth and innocent laughter of "Arms and the Boy" and Tim's "smiling" suicide in "S.I.W." can be traced back to "Has your soul sipped":

To me was that smile,
 Faint as a wan, worn myth,
 Faint and exceeding small,
 On a boy's murdered mouth.

Though from his throat
 The life-tide leaps
 There was no threat
 On his lips.

But with the bitter blood
 And the death smell
 All his life's sweetness bled
 Into a smile.

It was explained in chapter two that for purposes of identification, all British soldiers had to wear three discs which bore their name and number and one of these discs was sent to the soldier's next of kin if he was killed. One might assume that since Owen was a soldier, his sonnet "With an Identity Disc" would be about soldiers or the war. However, the sonnet is, as Hibberd explains, just "a piece that has some wit and charm but little substance" (*OTP* 75). At the same time, though, it does provide evidence of the mingling of Owen's knowledge on war matters with poetry. Owen dedicated the sonnet to his youngest brother Colin, telling him that if he was killed, he would be remembered by Colin wearing the identity disc: "Wear it, sweet friend. Inscribe no date nor deed. / But let thy heart-beat kiss it night and day, / Until the name grow vague and fade away" (12-14).

The sonnet is Shakespearean in style and reminiscent of Keats; and several authors, including Stallworthy and Bäckman, have commented on the influence of Shakespeare's Sonnet N^o104, "To me, fair friend, you never can be old", and Keats's sonnet, "When I have fears that I may cease to be."

In a letter to his sister Mary on 29 May 1918, Owen wrote from Ripon, "I can now write so much better than a year ago that for every poem I add to my list I subtract one from the beginning of it" (*CL* 554). At this time, Owen was drawing up lists of poems for possible publication. "With an Identity Disc" appeared on an earlier list but did not form part of a later list, thus suggesting that in the short time that Owen had been at Craiglockhart, his style of poetry had changed: without completely abandoning them, he had come to discard the "poetic support" of his earlier literary heroes and began to assume his own poetic identity.

Jon Stallworthy has suggested that during the summer of 1917, Owen was introduced to, or became much more familiar with, the poetry of W. B. Yeats, to such an extent that

Yeats, who later so harshly criticised Owen's poetry, actually influenced Owen's work. Stallworthy informs us that on 18 October, Owen was "under the spell of His Master's Voice, as he wrote "Winter Song". . . the title, "Winter Song" suggests a debt to Yeats's "The Falling of the Leaves", a suggestion reinforced by the similarity of subject matter, tone, and a specific verbal echo."³⁴ However, the rather conventional style of the poem may also be due to the advice that Robert Graves had offered to Owen in a letter he wrote in October 1917, after he had read "Disabled": "You're a poet; but you're a very careless one at present. One can't put in too many syllables into a line. . . . One has to follow the rules of the metre one adopts. Make new metres by all means, but one must observe the rules where they are laid down by custom of centuries."³⁵

Stallworthy is convinced that there is absolutely no doubt that "Six O'clock in Princes Street" was influenced by Yeats's free translation of Ronsard's sonnet "The sorrows of your changing face" (*WO* 214). Sven Bäckman mentions the influence of Keats in "Six O'clock in Princes Street" and explains that even though the Keatsian touch is obvious, the poem shows signs of rejection of the romantic idealism that had previously formed such an important part of Owen's poetry:

There are clear signs that in 1917, under the pressure of his war experiences, Wilfred Owen went through a deep conflict between his more extravagant Romantic aspirations as a poet and his urge to write the kind of "poetry of experience" that involves passionate empathy with suffering or victimized human beings. The conflict becomes apparent in "Six O'clock in Princes

³⁴Jon Stallworthy, *W. B. Yeats and Wilfred Owen*, 201-2.

³⁵Robert Graves. Letter reproduced in Wilfred Owen's, *CL* 595.

Street", where he speaks in negative terms of his earlier Romantic ambition to turn away from the world. . .³⁶

Owen responded rapidly and favourably to Dr. Brock's treatment and he soon became a fully integrated and active member of the community at Craiglockhart War Hospital. The hospital published a fortnightly journal called *The Hydra* and by mid-July, Owen had become the editor. He participated in meetings and outings of the hospital's Field Club and delivered a lecture titled "Do Plants Think?". Apart from taking part in activities with fellow-patients, Owen also had some kind of life beyond the hospital walls: he helped to teach English at Tynecastle School, took German lessons and occasionally accompanied a group of ladies who dedicated much of their time to visiting and helping people in the slum areas of Edinburgh. At the same time, Owen was well aware that the freedom he enjoyed was relative, as a letter to his father shows: "Realizing how impossible it is for me to be there has spoilt my holiday here. I was make-believing that I was a free creature here, but it is only that my chain has been let out a little. I should only hurt myself with tugging at it" (CL 488).

3.2 Owen and Sassoon

Wilfred Owen was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital because of his reaction to his trench experiences. Even before meeting Siegfried Sassoon, the impact of war was becoming apparent in his poetry. Sassoon was no miracle worker who had arrived to transform the young poet's work into the masterpieces that were to make him posthumously famous. He merely gave him the example and encouragement that he needed to be able to

³⁶Sven Bäckman, *Transition Transformed*, 36.

continue along the poetic pathway that he was already discovering for himself. Sassoon, whom Vivian de Sola Pinto had described as the "pioneer of the new kind of war poetry,"³⁷ helped Owen to realise that his role as poet was to write of war and that he had to use his art as a means of conveying the truth of war as he had experienced it. "How he achieved this was the result, not of the influence of Sassoon or of any other, but of his own art: his own turn of mind, his own view of war and the skills he had built up in the preceding years of writing. . . ." writes Desmond Graham.³⁸

3.2.1 A Fortunate Meeting

Wilfred Owen had written nothing of great significance prior to his stay at Craiglockhart, partly because he was not quite sure what he wanted to write. After his first war experiences and having been admitted to hospital, however, he realized he wanted to tell the world how the soldiers at the front suffered, he wanted to expose the complacent attitude of civilians, to condemn the cowardice of those who did not fight, to denounce the hypocrisy of politicians and church-leaders. Owen had all the raw materials before him but he needed assistance in assembling the separate parts in order to make a coherent and solid whole. Perhaps he was lacking the intellectual stimulus and poetic encouragement and confidence that a man like Siegfried Sassoon could supply and Sassoon, with his atypical, anti-hero war poetry, indeed provided the key which was to help Owen finally set his talent free. As Fred Crawford informs us, "Sassoon provided a timely impetus more than he changed Owen's political theory or method."³⁹ Other writers agree with Crawford:

³⁷Vivian de Sola Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry*, 126.

³⁸Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War*, 17.

³⁹Fred Crawford, *British Poets of the Great War*, 176.

Michael Thorpe has suggested that Owen would have gradually taught himself what Sassoon had taught him, but meeting the man enabled Owen to sharpen and clarify his ideas sooner.⁴⁰ In *Poetry of the First World War*, Gregson echoes the same opinion (45) whilst in *Required Writing*, Philip Larkin writes that "it is hard to imagine that Owen would have written "Smile, Smile, Smile" or "The Dead- Beat" without this coincidental and fortunate contact" (160). Sassoon himself agrees that his appearance in Owen's life was timely: "The truth of the matter was that I arrived just when he needed my stimulation and advice. It was my privilege to be in close contact with him while he was attaining a clear view of what he wanted to say and deploying his technical resources to a matured utterance."⁴¹

Sassoon took Owen seriously. Both had had similar war experiences (although they very rarely talked about them), both were deeply shocked and disturbed by what they had seen and both felt strongly about wanting to present and represent the fighting soldiers' reality. They wanted to tell the truth about war and they needed to use a mode of expression that was adequate for their subject. For this reason, Sassoon was important in helping Owen to re-route his poetic style so that he could write a poetry of experience rather than the usual traditional war poetry that was, in his opinion, steeped in false heroism and patriotic lies. But it was going to be difficult to change the current trends and tastes in war poetry. Even as late as 1964 - fifty years after the outbreak of the First World War - some critics rejected this "poetry of experience". John. J. Johnston acknowledged that, "a savage realism seemed the only effective mode for depicting the disaster being enacted in France", but at the same time, he felt that "Having become brutal in its exposure of the lies and its

⁴⁰Michael Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon*, 252.

⁴¹Quoted from a radio broadcast given by Sassoon in 1948 called *Wilfred Owen: A Personal Appreciation*, part of which was later published in T. J. Walsh's *A Tribute to Wilfred Owen*, 34-42.

revelations of the truths, poetry became all too human in its function as the voice of pain."⁴²

Siegfried Sassoon was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital on 23 July 1917. The main reason for sending him to Craiglockhart was because he had become an embarrassment to the authorities since, as a distinguished poet and soldier, he had chosen to publicly protest against the British government's lack of clarity as regards its war aims. He was officially admitted to Craiglockhart because it was conveniently decided that he wrote his protest whilst tottering on the edge of a nervous breakdown. A man of Sassoon's social and intellectual standing had to be discreetly silenced.⁴³

Sassoon was not against the war in itself but he objected to the way in which the ordinary servicemen were being deceived and he considered it his duty to speak on their behalf against the politics and ignorance which were causing the conflict to continue. Arthur Lane feels that Owen and Sassoon were similar in that they both appreciated the burden of being officers who, on the one hand, had to expose their men to danger, whilst on the other, had to do all they could to protect them:

⁴²John J. Johnston, *English Poetry of The First World War*, 13-15.

⁴³Sassoon's protest has been fully reproduced in Jon Stallworthy's *WO 206*:

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow-soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

Owen and Sassoon demonstrate the anguish of that burden - of deploying men they respected and loved in accordance with impersonal orders which were frequently mass death-warrants. Neither took lightly his responsibilities as an officer. Both were appalled by their enforced complicity in Haig's grand schemes of slaughter. . . ."⁴⁴

Despite his timidity and reticence in approaching a well-known literary figure, Owen finally plucked up the courage to introduce himself to Sassoon. On 22 August 1917, he wrote to his cousin, Leslie Gunston, informing him that "I have beknown myself to Siegfried Sassoon. Went in to him last night (my second call). The first was one morning last week" (*CL* 485). Years later, Siegfried Sassoon also wrote of Owen's first visit:

A favourable first impression was made by the fact that he had under his arm several copies of *The Old Huntsman*. . . . He had a charming honest smile, and his manners . . . were modest and ingratiating . . . I had taken an instinctive liking to him. . . . During the next half hour or more I must have spoken mainly about my book and its interpretations of the War. He listened eagerly, questioning me with reticent intelligence. . . . He had seemed an interesting little chap but had not struck me as remarkable. In fact my first view of him was as a rather ordinary young man, perceptibly provincial, though unobtrusively ardent in his responses to my lordly dictums about poetry. Owing to my habit of avoiding people's faces while talking, I had

⁴⁴Arthur Lane *An Adequate Response*, 31.

not observed him closely.⁴⁵

Sassoon admitted that he was rather slow in recognising the poetic gift that Owen possessed. Later, he commented on his criticisms of the young poet:

I was sometimes a little severe on what he showed me, censuring the over-luscious writing in his immature pieces. . . . But it was the emotional element even more than its verbal expression, which seemed to need refinement. There was an almost embarrassing sweetness in the sentiment of some of his work, though it showed skill in rich and melodious combinations of words (59).

It was perhaps thanks to Sassoon's tutelage that Owen gradually eliminated the "embarrassing sweetness" in his work. However, Sassoon is careful not to accept too much praise for Owen's poetic development:

It has been loosely assumed and stated that Wilfred modelled his war poetry on mine. My only claimable influence was that I stimulated him towards writing with compassionate and challenging realism. His printed letters are evidence that the impulse was already strong in him before he had met me... Up to a point, my admonitions were helpful. My encouragement was opportune, and I can claim to have given him a lively incentive during his rapid advance to self-revelation (60).

⁴⁵Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey*, 58.

In a way, Sassoon was a trail-blazer for Owen. As he said in his 1948 radio broadcast, "My trench sketches were like rockets, sent up to illuminate the darkness. They were the first thing of their kind, and could claim to be opportune. It was Owen who revealed how, out of realistic horror and scorn, pity could be made."

Sassoon's slowness in recognising Owen's talent is excusable on at least two counts. First of all, Sassoon was at Craiglockhart because he had his own problems which needed to be addressed and secondly, during his third week there, he was deeply affected by the news that a very close pre-war friend of his had been killed. In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that he was not particularly enthusiastic about the creative efforts of an aspiring young poet.

According to Sassoon, the two men discussed contemporary poetry and the poetic techniques that they themselves were devising. He also recalls suggestions that arose from what he described as his own "unsophisticated method" and recognised that he probably influenced Owen's use of colloquialisms since Owen first started using them after they had got to know each other. Like many of Owen's later critics, Sassoon feels that it was as if fate had drawn the two men together at Craiglockhart, so that, to use a well-worn cliché, they just happened to be in the right place at the right time. In *Siegfried's Journey*, Sassoon admits that "It was indeed one of those situations where imperceptible effects are obtained by people mingling their minds at a favourable moment" (60). Despite attributing their meeting to destiny, Sassoon is satisfied with the part he played in Owen's development towards greater poetic maturity: "I am glad to think that there may have been occasions when some previously improvised remark of mine sent him away with a fruitful idea. And my humanized reportings of front line episodes may have contributed something to his controlled vision of what he had seen for himself" (60).

Dennis Welland's acquaintance with Siegfried Sassoon arose around 1949/50 when Welland was researching into Owen's poetry. Despite having met some important literary figures who knew Sassoon (Vivian de Sola Pinto, Edith and Osbert Sitwell, Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden), it seemed impossible to meet the man himself until quite suddenly and inexplicably, Sassoon invited Welland to discuss his work with him. (An account of the meeting between the two men can be read in Welland's article, "Sassoon on Owen", in the *Times Literary Supplement*, May 31 1974, 589-90.) According to Welland, Sassoon launched into a lengthy monologue on the war and its significance to him and his contemporaries. Then he spoke about Owen and his work. Welland's interview with Sassoon terminated with a request from Sassoon to be allowed to read the draft copy of his PhD thesis. On the draft copy he received, Sassoon wrote many comments which centred mainly on the friendship between the two poets:

I thought of him as "little Wilf", because he was so humble. But his humility did not prevent him being humorous towards me. We were never solemn with one another. It was natural, unimpeded friendship and artistic collaboration . . . I cannot insist too strongly that our relationship was ideal - there was never a false vibration - we were brother poets, and our differences in character were complementary aids, one to the other (589).

Owen's death came as a heavy blow to Sassoon, ". . . the whole business was utterly painful to me. W's death was an unhealed wound & the ache of it has been with me ever since. I wanted *him* back - not his poems" (589).

A certain degree of vanity, and possibly a subconscious plea for further recognition

as Owen's "sponsor" is detected in Sassoon's comment, "Has it struck you that if I hadn't introduced W. to R. R. [Robert Ross] he would never have got to know anyone worthwhile?" (589-90). This is probably true as it was only through Sassoon's introduction of Owen to Ross that Owen became acquainted with Charles Scott Moncrieff, Osbert Sitwell, Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells.

Owen showed a strong tendency to idolise people he considered outstanding or special in any way and, according to C. Day Lewis, "Sassoon brought out in a way almost embarrassing to him, all the younger poet's capacity for hero-worship."⁴⁶ Judging from Owen's letters, it would appear at first glance that the relationship between Sassoon and himself tended to be rather one-sided, with Sassoon taking a passive role. Dominic Hibberd has pointed out that "In contrast to the many fervent passages about 'the Greatest friend I have' in Owen's 1917 letters, Sassoon's letters of the same period contain very few references to 'little Owen'" (*OTP* 98). Praise for Sassoon was unstinting from the very beginning of their acquaintance. Owen was encouraged by Sassoon's comment, "Sweat your guts out writing poetry!" (*CL* 486) and in a letter to his sister, Owen made the effect Sassoon had on his morale quite clear: "But a word from Sassoon, though he is not a dreary dog himself, makes me cut capers of pleasure" (*CL* 489).

In response to his mother's enquiries about Sassoon, Owen showed the high esteem he held him in:

Sassoon I like equally in all the ways you mention, as a man, as a friend, as
a poet.

The man is tall and noble-looking.

⁴⁶C. Day Lewis, in his introduction to Owen's *Collected Poems*, 26.

The Friend is intensely sympathetic with me about every vital question on the planet and off it (*CL* 494).

In the same letter, Owen described Sassoon as "eminently English" because "he keeps all effusiveness strictly within his pages"; as a gentleman, Sassoon may well have considered inappropriate any public display of feeling or emotion. However, Owen's observation is important and perhaps should be applied to the relationship between the two men: as regards his contact with Owen, Sassoon was reserved because he had chosen to be so. Despite Owen's effusiveness for him, Sassoon maintained a certain emotional distance, perhaps because he was not interested in establishing a closer relationship.

Once he had left Craiglockhart, Owen, whilst on leave, wrote to Sassoon from his home in Shrewsbury, telling him how wonderful he thought he was:

Know that since mid-September, when you still regarded me as a tiresome little knocker on your door, I held you as Keats + Christ + Elijah + my Colonel + my father-confessor + Amenophis IV in profile.

What's that mathematically?

In effect it is this: that I love you, dispassionately, so much, so very much, dear Fellow, that the blasting little smile you wear on reading this can't hurt me in the least.

If you consider what the above Names have severally done for me, you will know what you are doing. And you have fixed my Life - however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet: but you have fixed me. I spun round you like a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon,

a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze . . . I wish you were less undemonstrative, for I have many adjectives with which to qualify myself.

As it is I can only say I am

Your proud friend Wilfred Owen (*CL* 505).

Owen's next letter to Sassoon opens with words that clearly demonstrate his high regard for him: "I sit alone at last, and therefore with you, my dear Siegfried. For which name . . . I give thanks and rejoice" (*CL* 510-11). In this letter, Owen recalls a morning in which Sassoon and himself had spent some time together: "We have had some very strong sunshine; and when it strikes anything blue I see you sitting by the bedside in That Morning in September" (*CL* 512). The use of capital letters in the last part of this sentence is indicative of the importance Owen placed on this meeting.

It is rather touching to note that in his last letters written on English soil, Owen makes very similar comments to the two people who meant most to him. To his mother he wrote, "I . . . must go to my tent, without saying the things which you will better understand unsaid" (*CL* 570). His closing sentence to Sassoon was "What more is there to say that you will not better understand unsaid" (*CL* 571).

The importance of Susan Owen in the life of her son has been discussed in detail in chapter one. At this point, however, it is perhaps worth mentioning that prior to meeting Sassoon, the bulk of Owen's poetry was written directly for her. "Happiness" was the last poem dedicated to her (See *CL* 437). Kerr points out that "the next phase of his writing is primarily for the more critical inspection of Siegfried Sassoon" (*WOV* 58). Several pages later, Kerr adds:

Sassoon unwittingly took over from Susan Owen the important function of being the ideal audience and judge of Owen's work. Anyone who compares Owen's poetry written before and after August 1917 can see just how decisive and liberating for his creativity was this breaking of the magnetic field (64).

Susan Owen was aware of her son's shift in search of critical adviser and this, coupled with her possessive nature, possibly made her subconsciously envious of Sassoon. She obviously questioned her son about the nature of his relationship with Sassoon and Owen provided the information she wanted (See *CL* 494). In this letter, Owen's defence of Sassoon's language in his poetry and his need to let his mother know how he is behaving himself is amusing in its childlike tone, yet at the same time, it is very telling in that it shows his urgent desire for maternal approval - both for himself and for his friend.

In his 1948 radio broadcast, Sassoon recalled that his judgement of Owen was affected by Owen's attitude of devoted disciple and at first, he saw himself as an unwilling critic who was required to read not only Owen's work but Leslie Gunston's as well. Owen published "Song of Songs" anonymously in *The Hydra* of 1 September 1917. Sassoon's poem "Dreamers" was published in the same edition. Sassoon sent copies of the journal to friends, presumably because his work had been printed in it. Dominic Hibberd quotes a note Sassoon had made in the copy he had given to Lady Ottoline Morrell; under "Song of Songs", he had written, "The man who wrote this brings me quantities & I have to say kind things. He will improve I think!"⁴⁷

However, a certain symbiosis existed within the relationship between the two men.

⁴⁷Dominic Hibberd, *The Last Year*, 43.

It was towards the end of the time that Sassoon and Owen were together at Craiglockhart that Sassoon realised the value of Owen: "It is indeed sadly certain that only in those last few weeks I received his fullest confidences and realized that he could give me as much as I gave to him."⁴⁸ It was then that Sassoon was working on a series of poems that were later published under the title *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, and he explains in *Siegfried's Journey* that "Wilfred's praises heartened and helped me" (64). Sassoon reveals that it was around this time that he was trying to reach a decision about his "stop the war attitude" and about the possibility of returning abroad on active service. During this difficult period, Sassoon not only had the help and support of his doctor, W. H. R. Rivers, but he also had Owen by his side and it was then that "Wilfred's wisdom and graciousness of spirit became fully evident. His hero being in sore need, he could bring him gentle and intuitive support, tiding over the inevitable moods of bitterness and depression" (64).

In a letter to his mother on 7 September 1917, Owen told her that he had been speaking to Sassoon:

having condemned some of my poems, amended others, and rejoiced over a few, he read me his very last works, which are superb beyond anything in his Book. Last night he wrote a piece which is the most exquisitely painful war poem of any language or time. I don't tell him so, or that I am not worthy to light his pipe. I simply sit tight and tell him where I think he goes wrong. He is going to alter one passage for me (CL 491-91).⁴⁹

⁴⁸Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey*, 64.

⁴⁹The "last works" referred to were the poems that were later published in Sassoon's *Counter-Attack* (1918). The 'Book' Owen refers to is *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* (May 1917), which Owen had read in mid-August.

From this letter, it is clear that Owen, without hiding his pleasure, was highly delighted that he had been asked to comment on Sassoon's work. Much to Owen's credit, it is obvious that Sassoon did take heed of what his new-found companion and critic had to say, as Owen explained in another letter: "Sassoon has written two or three pieces 'around' chance things I have mentioned or related!" (CL 493-94).

Despite gradually growing closer and sharing an avid interest in poetry and poetry writing, neither Owen nor Sassoon communicated with each other on a personal level as regards their own war experiences. In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd has quoted a letter from Sassoon to Blunden, written in response to the latter's memoir of Owen that had been written in 1930: "The passages from Wilfred's war letters are a revelation to me. . . . At Craiglockhart, he and I talked very little about our experiences of the disgusting and the terrible, as seen in France" (104). In *Siegfried's Journey*, Sassoon confirms this: "Of his own period of action he seldom spoke. . . . Fourteen years later . . . I discovered that Wilfred had endured worse things than I had realized from the little he had told me" (60). It seems that despite Brock's work with Owen and Rivers's work with Sassoon, the men could only face up to the horrors of their war experiences with their respective therapists or within the structure of their war poetry.

Wilfred Owen was graded fit for light duties by a Medical Board on 30 October 1917, was discharged from Craiglockhart War Hospital and on 3 November, he and Sassoon met for dinner. In *Siegfried's Journey*, Sassoon describes the amusing evening they spent together at a quiet club in Edinburgh. It was the last occasion that the two men would have to be alone together. Owen left Edinburgh and arrived in London in the early hours of 4 November. He had exactly twelve months to live.

Whilst Owen was retraining in Scarborough, Sassoon had already returned to France.

On 13 July 1918, Sassoon had chosen to go on an early dawn patrol, taking a corporal with him. The two men destroyed a German machine gun post and fled for cover. Once out of danger of enemy lines, Sassoon removed his helmet, and on standing up, became a prime target for sniper fire. He was shot in the head by one of his own sergeants, who, in the grey light of dawn, had mistaken him for a German soldier. As a casualty, Sassoon was first taken to the base hospital and then transferred to the American Women's Hospital at Lancaster Gate in London. Osbert Sitwell describes the Saturday afternoon in July when, in the company of Siegfried Sassoon, they last saw Wilfred Owen. Owen had gone to London and Sitwell had arranged for him to visit Sassoon in hospital.⁵⁰

Owen heard from Sassoon towards the end of July. Whatever Sassoon wrote in the letter, Owen found encouraging to the point that it acted as further motivation for him to go back to France: "Now I must throw my little candle on his torch, and go out again" (*CL* 567). His comparison between himself as a "little candle" and Sassoon as a "torch" shows how much Owen still revered Sassoon, particularly in terms of poetic strength, and is reminiscent of the letter Owen wrote to Sassoon in which he said that he was like a satellite or a small star spinning around the stronger light of Sassoon (see *CL*, 505). Douglas Kerr comments that Owen's:

. . . admiration for Sassoon - which cannot be exaggerated - was as much for the older poet's conduct as for his poems. Owen's return to the front line in 1918 was a most fatal tribute to Sassoon's example, as well as recognition

⁵⁰Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences*, 108-09. In *WO*, Jon Stallworthy implies that the meeting took place towards the end of August (267), whilst in *CPF*, he suggests that it occurred between 12-18 August (xix). In *The Last Year*, Dominic Hibberd gives the impression that the meeting took place near the end of August (145).

that sometimes the authority (and so the meaning) of a poet's writing could not be independent of the circumstances - in this case the military circumstances - of his life" (*WOV* 247).

But once back in France, Owen regretted - at least momentarily - that he had allowed Sassoon to influence him so much. In a letter to him on 22 September 1918, he wrote, "You said it would be a good thing for my poetry if I went back. That is my consolation for feeling a fool. This is what the shells scream at me every time: Haven't you got the wits to keep out of this?. . . O Siegfried, make them Stop!" (*CL* 578)⁵¹

Critics' opinions differ as to the degree of influence Sassoon had on Owen's poetry. In the introduction to his edition of Owen's poems, C. Day Lewis writes:

It was a sign of Owen's integrity and growing independence as a poet that his work was not radically affected by his admiration for this new friend. In a few satirical or colloquial poems, such as "The Letter", "The Chances" or "Dead Beat", we may perceive Sassoon's influence; but Owen must have known that Sassoon's ironic and robust satire was not for him. . . . What Sassoon gave him was technical criticism, encouragement, and above all the sense of being recognized as an equal by one whose work he respected: it meant the end of his isolation as an artist (26).

Edmund Blunden feels that meeting Sassoon as a fellow-poet provided Owen with

⁵¹It is interesting to note that the last words of Sassoon's *Counter-Attack* are: 'O Jesus, make it stop!'"

"greater confidence and scope than he might otherwise have had."⁵² Dominic Hibberd recognises Sassoon's influence too, but on discussing "The Dead-Beat", he suggests that Owen "soon outgrew mere imitation and by September [1917] he was writing the first of his mature work."⁵³ Jon Silkin also agrees that Sassoon influenced Owen:

What Sassoon did for him perhaps was to give him the confidence to draw into his work a greater realism, a more stringent anger and satire, which in their turn may have helped him more fully to realize his compassion. The colloquial element present in Sassoon's work would also have constituted a learning point for Owen.⁵⁴

Silkin is of the opinion that Owen's intelligence and imagination were richer than Sassoon's because to the latter's anger, "Owen added compassion, and advances a further term into the perspective on war. . . . Nevertheless, Owen often kept his compassion and anger in separate poems" (209). Silkin considers this to be Owen's major weakness though he felt that despite this, Owen had a "more flexible understanding of war" than Sassoon.

Dominic Hibberd and Jon Silkin have entered into a slight disagreement as regards the 'Sassoonish' element in Owen's work. Nevertheless, it appears that although argumentative with each other, both critics basically agree that Sassoon was instrumental in the development of Owen's poetry. Their difference of opinion is based on the degree of influence Sassoon had on the younger poet.

⁵²Edmund Blunden, *War Poets: 1914-1918*, 34.

⁵³Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others*, 27.

⁵⁴Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle*, 208.

In his article, "Silkin on Owen: Some Other War" (29-32), Hibberd expresses his surprise at remarks made by Silkin in his introduction to the *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, in which Silkin comments on a 1975 essay of Hibberd's that was published by the British Council. "I am puzzled by some of his more belligerent statements," writes Hibberd, ". . . there is perhaps less disagreement between us than he assumes." Moreover, Hibberd finds Silkin's account of Owen "manifestly incomplete" and so proceeds to defend his own opinion: "Silkin's claim that I wish to deny Owen 'the Sassoon-like mode' is inaccurate; I have made strong claims for Siegfried Sassoon's impact on Owen in 1917." Hibberd explains that if the original version of "The Sentry", which is very much in Sassoon's style, is compared with the better-known version which was composed a year after Owen's stay at Craiglockhart, "one can see how Owen moved away from Sassoonish satire" (29). Hibberd claims that the point he was trying to make was "not that the 'Sassoon-like mode' does not exist in Owen's poetry (of course it does), but that it became something altogether broader and deeper in 1918."

Hibberd certainly does not blame Silkin for the disagreement but rather attributes it to an omission committed by both of them: "If Silkin and I had looked more carefully at the [proposed] table [of contents], we might have found ourselves more clearly in agreement" (30). Hibberd then comments on the difference of approach to the war by the two poets: "Owen devoted his spare time in the spring of 1918 to reflecting on what he called 'the inwardness of war'; Sassoon, on the whole, had been concerned with its outwardness (Owen said of him on 30 December 1917 that 'Poetry with him is become a mere vehicle of propaganda', a remark which Silkin naturally fails to notice)" (31). The idea that the 'Sassoon-like mode' was being given too much importance is hinted at: "I object to an over-insistence on the 'Sassoon-like mode' in Owen, as Silkin appears to define it, partly because

it results in a distortion of the 1918 poems and partly because it is a mode of limited (albeit real) value" (31).

Unwilling to allow Hibberd's remarks to pass without further comment, Silkin replied by defending his previous opinions as regards Sassoon and Owen in another article published in the *Stand* in which he responded to other criticisms made by Hibberd concerning his work on Owen.⁵⁵

Writing about Owen in another piece of work published in *The Proceedings of the Symposium on the British Literature of the First World War* (1986), Silkin reiterates the idea of the importance of Sassoon's example as both man and poet: "Sassoon's example served . . . to determine in Owen a particular course of action with respect to the writing of his poems. Of course, Owen's responses, in his poetry, are wider than Sassoon's."⁵⁶ Here, Silkin once again makes reference to Hibberd's earlier comments and fervently speaks out "in defence" of Sassoon:

It is not so much that Owen **imitated** Sassoon, as that Sassoon provided in like form a living receptacle for Owen's moral and poetic energies. . . . What Sassoon had made and then proceeded to share was a community of active, living values which merely helped to concentrate Owen's own apprehensions of what the War was about. . . . Yes, there clearly are elements of Sassoon's poetry in Owen, as late in fact as his last but one poem "Smile, Smile, Smile" so that to say that Owen outgrew Sassoon is both to devalue Sassoon, and to underestimate the diffusion of Sassoon's influence

⁵⁵Jon Silkin, "Owen: Elegist, Satirist, or neither; a reply to Dominic Hibberd", 33-36.

⁵⁶Jon Silkin, "Sassoon, Owen and Rosenberg", 95.

throughout Owen's poetry (97).

In conclusion, Silkin states that "Certain editors have shown a clear and in my view an at times disrespectful if not contemptuous view of Sassoon and his influence upon Owen. My view is just the opposite. In my estimation, Sassoon's influence is almost entirely beneficial, sharpening Owen's anger and inducing in him the capacity to marshal it in the first place (103).

Whether Silkin and Hibberd agree to respectfully disagree or not is immaterial since the critical challenge between them has provided stimulation for further thought. The first chapter of this piece of work opened with a quote from John Donne and the following comment ". . . it is impossible for any one individual not to be influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by many of those with whom he comes into contact" (31). Silkin and Hibberd may choose to differ but what is clear is that Sassoon did help liberate Owen socially, politically, sexually and poetically - but only because Owen himself was willing to change. He needed to find some kind of direction in his life that would allow him to reach a more personal, inner satisfaction and this search led him to write a "truer" type of poetry. Resorting again to the familiar, overused idea, it must be insisted upon that Owen happened to coincide with Sassoon at the right time, in the right place and under the right circumstances for this to have happened.

Owen was acquainted with Sassoon's protest about the war and it was quite possibly his knowledge of this, coupled with the acquaintance that he had established with Sassoon, that made Owen more politically aware in terms of war and government policy relating to it. D. J. Enright feels that "Sassoon's example confirmed Owen in his resolve to speak out against the War, in harsh, clear and unpleasant words, unsoftened by any poetic or patriotic

euphemisms."⁵⁷

In the early days of their association, Owen showed some of his work to Sassoon: "Some of my old sonnets didn't please him at all. But the 'Antaeus' he applauded fervently; and a short lyric . . . he pronounced perfect work, absolutely charming, etc. etc" (CL 486).⁵⁸ Owen's newly-found critic "condemned some . . . and amended others, and rejoiced over a few" (CL 491). On Monday 21 October, Owen wrote to his mother:

I wrote six poems last week, chiefly in Edinburgh; and when I read them to S. S. over a private tea in his room this afternoon, he came round from his first advice of deferred publishing, and said I must hurry up & get what is ready typed. He & his friends will get Heinemann to produce for me. Now it is my judgement alone that I must screw up to printing pitch (CL 503).

Interestingly, Owen did not jump to the opportunity. His own critical judgement had been sharpened by his acquaintance with Sassoon and he knew that he had to be responsible for his own work; relying on the expertise of others was not sufficient. Here, Owen's behaviour shows that despite his feelings for Sassoon as poet, critic and friend, he was independent enough to make his own decisions as regards his poetic future. He was also discerning enough to recognise that Sassoon had given his poetry a definite direction, although he knew that he would eventually find his own path: "I spun round you a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon" (CL 505). Six months later, Owen was still reticent about publishing in haste. He wrote to sister, "I can now write so much better than

⁵⁷D. J. Enright, *The Literature of the First World War*, 161.

⁵⁸The short lyric referred to later became "Song of Songs".

a year ago . . . You see I take myself solemnly now, and that is why . . . I refrain from indecent haste in publishing" (*CL* 554).

In Douglas Kerr's opinion, "combat experience provided no material for poetry until the example of Sassoon showed him how modern war experience could only become a subject for a kind of poetry as unprecedented as modern war."⁵⁹ In his book, he elaborates on the point: ". . . experience of the army does seem to have coincided with a tightening up of style. . . . when the army became available to Owen as a literary subject it gave his writing a field of material observation and at the same time a new quality . . . a widening of stylistic range" (*WOV* 159).

For Adrian Caesar, the poems Owen wrote at Craiglockhart, Scarborough and Ripon, before his return to France, bear witness to Sassoon's influence. Without committing himself to any specific period between Craiglockhart and France, Caesar states that, "Sassoon's satiric poems with their blatant ironies and obvious didacticism seem to have influenced Owen for a time. . ."⁶⁰

3.2.2 Something in Sassoon's Style

On 22 August 1917, Owen wrote to his cousin Leslie Gunston and told him about his first two visits to Sassoon. So impressed was Owen that "After leaving him, I wrote something in Sassoon's style" (*CL* 485) and he gave it the title "The Dead-Beat". Of Sassoon's opinion, Owen wrote, "He was struck with the 'Dead Beat', but pointed out that the facetious bit was out of keeping with the first & last stanzas. Thus the piece as a whole is no good" (*CL* 486). The poem was, in fact, unlike anything he had ever written before.

⁵⁹Douglas Kerr, "Wilfred Owen and the Social Question", 194.

⁶⁰Adrian Caesar, "The 'human problem' in Wilfred Owen's Poetry", 75.

In his 1975 British Council essay, published in the series *Writers and Their Work*, Hibberd describes the final draft of the poem as "a representative example, though perhaps not the best, of his work in Sassoon's manner . . . even in later drafts of 'The Dead-Beat' he moved away from Sassoon's style" (24). In *Owen: War Poems and Others*, Hibberd claims that the poem was:

a rushed and ill-planned piece, built out of re-used and borrowed materials. However, a close comparison between the first and final drafts will show how the poet moved away from his first crude attack upon non-combatants to a recognition that his own hands were far from clean. One may see, too, how he accepted Sassoon's advice about the poem and yet produced a final version which was less like Sassoon's work than the first (38).

In *OTP*, Hibberd explains exactly why he thinks "The Dead-Beat", is an imitation of Sassoon's style: "The accurate representation of events evidently seemed a principal characteristic of 'Sassoon's style'; others were colloquial language, deliberately unpoetic imagery, dramatic abruptness and topical references" (98).

Owen revised the poem without eliminating the "facetious bit" Sassoon had pointed out, and a two-stanza version of it, together with "Song of Songs", was published in the September 1917 edition *The Hydra*.⁶¹ However, Owen was not satisfied with his work and revised "The Dead-Beat" several times at Ripon between March and May 1918. The poem shows a definite move away from Owen's more Romantic style. As D. S. R. Welland has

⁶¹"Song of Songs" was written between late June and mid-August 1917. It was Owen's first completed poem to be published.

suggested, in this poem, Owen "subordinates his predilections for a beautiful world to his sense of realism"⁶² and Douglas Kerr makes an interesting observation:

"The Dead-Beat" (as well as "The Chances" and probably "The Letter") was drafted at Craiglockhart, in the phase of Owen's military career when he was most isolated from the actual speech of the soldiers of the 'other ranks' (Craiglockhart was a hospital for officers only) but in almost daily contact with Siegfried Sassoon, whose 'trench life sketches' (CL 484) Owen took as a model (CL 214)⁶³

Owen's attempts at representing the common soldiers' speech are commendable as a "beginner" but presumably he did not write any more poems using the vernacular because he was not satisfied with the results. Kerr adds that "There are other poems in Sassoon's style which date from this period and deal with the lives of ordinary soldiers, but in them Owen continues to find ways round the stylistic problems of speech representation" (214).

Jon Silkin's comment describing "The Dead-Beat" as reporting "the fate of a man whose body has apparently collapsed under the strain of war, although the medical officer chooses to believe he is malingering"⁶⁴, and Kenneth Simcox's description of it (and "Insensibility") as "redolent of bodies and minds fatigued to breaking point"⁶⁵ force one to examine the content of the poem in relation to its title. In everyday speech, to be "dead

⁶²D. S. R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, 51.

⁶³According to Stallworthy, "The Letter" was not written at Craiglockhart, but probably at Scarborough or maybe even at Ripon, between January and March 1918. (CPF, 137).

⁶⁴Jon Silkin, *Out Of Battle*, 221.

⁶⁵Kenneth Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, 137.

beat" means to be tired to the point of complete exhaustion. In the case of the subject of the poem, the soldier's exhaustion had gone a stage further and he had died. At the beginning:

He dropped, - more sullenly than wearily,
Lay stupid like a cod, heavy like meat,
And none of us could kick him to his feet;
- Just blinked at my revolver, blearily;
- Didn't appear to know a war was on,
Or see the blasted trench at which he stared.

There was no reaction to being physically and psychologically bullied by his fellow soldiers: he could not be kicked to his feet and he did not respond to being threatened with the narrator's revolver. Under no circumstances could the soldier have responded to orders.

John J. Johnston describes "The Dead-Beat" as having "affinities with Sassoon's 'Lamentations' and 'Suicide in the Trenches', both of which portray the effects of utter personal demoralization."⁶⁶ Hibberd suggests that the poem resembles 'Blighters', which was published in *The Old Huntsman*⁶⁷, whilst Simon Wormleighton feels that Owen's poem was inspired by Sassoon's "The Daffodil Murderer", an inscribed version of which Sassoon had given to Owen.⁶⁸ In his article, Wormleighton outlines the similarities between the two

⁶⁶John J. Johnston, *English Poetry of the First World War*, 175.

⁶⁷Dominic Hibberd, *OTP*, 101.

⁶⁸Simon Wormleighton, "Something in Sassoon's Style: a Note on Wilfred Owen's 'The Dead-Beat' and Other Late 1917 Poems", 66. "The Daffodil Murderer" was part-parody of John Masefield's "The Everlasting Mercy". Sassoon had written 'To Wilfred Owen/from Siegfried Sassoon' on the fly-leaf of the copy he had given to him.

pieces of work and to lend support to his suggestion, adds that "Owen revised the poem in 1918; that January he had asked for "The Daffodil Murderer" to be sent to him in Yorkshire from his bookshelves at home"⁶⁹ (65).

Hibberd considers that the value of "The Dead-Beat" lies in the fact that it "marks a new phase in [Owen's] poetry, standing at the beginning of his *annus mirabilis*" (OTP 99). Indeed, the poem takes Owen to a crossroads in his poetic career since it is a poem that contains a mixture of old and new ideas.

"Inspection", "The Letter" and "The Chances" all bear an echo of Sassoon. Stallworthy suggests that "Inspection" resembles Sassoon's poem "They" (CPF 55); Hibberd feels that it is more like "Stand-to: Good Friday Morning" whilst it is "The Chances" that is similar to "They" (OTP 101). Similarly, Fred Crawford also finds a connection between "The Chances" and "They" and comments that "Owen presents in colloquial fashion a discussion recalling Sassoon's "They" in its catalogue of soldiers' injuries . . ." ⁷⁰ Stallworthy does not make a comparison between "The Chances" and any of Sassoon's work but limits himself to saying that "this poem shows the strong influence of S. S" (CPF 171). For Hibberd, "The Letter" echoes Sassoon's "In the Pink" (OTP 101). Referring to Sassoon's influence with respect to the use of a more colloquial and less verbose style in "The Chances" and "Inspection" (and to a lesser degree, in "A Terre" and "The Sentry"), Johnston feels that "Put on his guard against romantic luxuriousness by Sassoon, Owen doubtless felt that the colloquial manner afforded an antidote to this type of verbal

⁶⁹Owens' request for "The Daffodil Murderer" can be found in the post-script of a letter written to Mary Owen on 4 January 1918 (See CL 525). Susan Owen kept her son's copy of "The Daffodil Murderer" which is now housed in the English Faculty Library in Oxford.

⁷⁰Fred Crawford, *British Poets of the Great War*, 185.

excess."⁷¹ Sven Bäckman warns against attributing too much importance to the influence of Sassoon in "The Chances" and "The Letter" and on presenting several examples, he makes the point that "Wilfred Owen already had this strong interest in colloquial speech, and had been developing his skill at rendering such speech for years, in his letters."⁷² In her unpublished PhD. thesis Jennifer Breen suggests that the successful recreation of vernacular speech in "The Letter", "probably owes something to Owen's reading of Kipling's colloquial verse dialogues" (203). Later on in her book *Wilfred Owen: Selected Poetry and Prose*, Breen refers the reader to CL 250 and points out that, "WO had helped students to translate some of Kipling's poetry into French" (216). Gregson's opinion is that "The Letter" "lacks the force and discrimination of Sassoon: the soldier's language is not counterpointed by other elements to give it maximum effect."⁷³ For Gregson, "Owen's pieces in this vein rarely have the savage economy, the epigrammatic touch of the best of Sassoon" (47).

Quoting from Blunden's interpretation of "The Chances" in *Collected Poems*, Patric Dickinson suggests that Owen ". . . felt that the passive suffering of the soldier was the basic horror of all war. And with absolute truth he spoke of it:

But poor young Jim, 'e's livin' an' 'e's not;
'E reckoned e'd five chances, an' 'e 'ad:
'E's wounded, killed, an' pris'ner, all the lot,

⁷¹John J. Johnston, *English Poetry of the First World War*, 175.

⁷²Sven Bäckman, *Transition Transformed*, 150.

⁷³M. Gregson, *Poetry of the First World War*, 45.

The bloody lot all rolled in one. Jim's mad."⁷⁴

In her thesis, Jennifer Breen submitted the idea that the Roman Catholic funeral service that Owen had witnessed in Bordeaux (around the time of his paternal grandfather's death) in 1914 was probably one of the sources of "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (188), whilst in his biography of Owen, Stallworthy has suggested that the anonymous Prefatory Note to *Poems of Today, 1916* was what stimulated Owen's imagination (216). But whatever the source of inspiration, it is patently clear from the available evidence that Siegfried Sassoon played a crucial role in the revision of it.

In comparison to the second draft, the first draft of "Anthem for Doomed Youth" did not contain many rhymes. A series of changes suggested by Sassoon led to a sixth and final draft which satisfied Owen and greatly pleased Sassoon, who had suggested the final title of the poem. In his biography of Owen, Stallworthy outlines the help Owen received from Sassoon (216-22). In his book, *Siegfried's Journey*, Sassoon made the following comments about his reaction to Owen and his latest poem:

It was, however, not until some time in October [1917], when he brought me his splendidly constructed sonnet, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, that it dawned on me that my little friend was much more than the promising minor poet that I had hitherto adjudged him to be. I now realized that his verse, with its sumptuous epithets and large-scale imagery, its noble naturalness and depth of meaning, had impressive affinities with Keats, whom he took to be his supreme exemplar. This new sonnet was a revelation. I suggested one

⁷⁴Patric Dickinson, "The Poetry of Wilfred Owen", 330-331.

or two slight alterations; but it confronted me with classic and imaginative serenity (59).

For Gregson, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" shows "Owen's efforts to combine dignity with realism, and his own Keatsian strain with the approach encouraged by Sassoon."⁷⁵ In *Heroes' Twilight*, Bernard Bergonzi comments on some of the changes Owen made in the poem and refers the reader to a discussion of the various drafts in C. Day Lewis's edition of Owen's poems (128).

Dominic Hibberd was confident that on seeing Owen's first offering of the poem, "Sassoon would have seen the first draft's shortcomings at once" (*OTP* 110). The principal drawback for Sassoon would have been that the poem, as it stood, could have been interpreted as "a statement in support of the British war effort" and so Sassoon cancelled and changed and "Owen followed these pointers in subsequent drafts" (111). At the same time, Hibberd considers "Anthem for Doomed Youth" to be a tentative search for poetic independence:

It should be seen as Owen's first attempt to bring his own style into line with the views he was learning from Sassoon. Unlike his more obviously Sassoonish poems, 'Anthem' draws extensively on what he had heard and read in Bordeaux as a way of resisting his friend's overwhelming stylistic influence. The elegiac tone, elaborate sound-patterns and elegant metaphors are more Tailhadesque than Sassoonish (111).

⁷⁵M. Gregson, *Poetry of the First World War*, 51.

In his article "Sassoon on Owen", D. S. R. Welland informs the reader that on the draft copy of his PhD thesis, Sassoon had made the following written comment in response to Welland's speculations on Sassoon's contribution to the revising of the poem:

I am certain that the first version shown me was almost the final form. Its merit was obvious to me at once, but I distinctly remember discussing one or two of the epithets with him and suggesting *Doomed*. It was the first occasion on which I was able to hail him as my equal, since he had hitherto withheld (sic) the MSS of his most powerful poems ('Exposure', for one) possibly because he feared they would pain me (589).⁷⁶

"The Next War" was written at Craiglockhart in September 1917. The first connection between this poem and Sassoon is obvious since it opens with an epigraph, (addressed to Graves by Sassoon) which consists of the closing lines of Sassoon's "A Letter Home", which was the last war poem published in Sassoon's *The Old Huntsman*. Douglas Kerr makes the interesting suggestion that in this poem, "Owen is setting about (or fantasizing about) taking the place of Graves as Sassoon's comrade-in-arms and fellow-poet" (WOV 191). In more general terms, however, Owen's poem reflects Sassoon's work in its tone of buoyant comradeship that is seen immediately in the use of the pronoun "we": the soldiers and the soldier poets are united against the horrors of war and in accepting the inevitability of death. Owen published this poem anonymously in *The Hydra* of 29

⁷⁶It was commonly believed that the date of composition of "Exposure" was prior to August 1917 until Stallworthy's research revealed that the poem was begun at Scarborough in December 1917, revised there in early 1918 and finished in France in September 1918 (See *CPF* 186 and Hibberd's article "The Date of Wilfred Owen's 'Exposure'", 305-8.)

September 1917, but revised it at Scarborough in July 1918.

Dominic Hibberd describes "Disabled" as "Owen's first thoroughly original war poem, bringing his new skills and knowledge into active partnership with pre-Sassoon verse . . . the poem grew from several related 1916-1917 sources" (*OTP* 112).⁷⁷ The poem is based on a combination of some of his earlier work (particularly "Perseus" "Lines to a Beauty seen in Limehouse" and "Has your soul sipped") and his Craiglockhart experiences and could even be seen as a tribute to the literary traditions of the past in the sense that it is an excellent example of how the Romantic tradition could be moulded and adapted to an unconventional war that provided examples of cruelty, mass slaughter and unbelievable horror on an unprecedented scale. "Disabled" is an ironic reversal of A. E. Houseman's "To an Athlete Dying Young" from his collection, *A Shropshire Lad*. Unlike Houseman's hero, the subject of "Disabled" does not drift into a death that provides relief. He is incarcerated by a body that does not function properly and by a mind flooded by anger, frustration, silent memories and an acute awareness of his condition.

"Another late-nineteenth century influence is apparent in the Swinburnian juxtaposition of purple (sexual passion) and grey (impotence and repression)," writes Dominic Hibberd and he suggests that the greyness of the disabled soldier's attire, the fading twilight and the 'purple' of his spilt blood combine Romantic elements of the Victorian period with the realities of war experience (*OTP* 113). Earlier on, Hibberd had described the purple wound in "Disabled" as an illustration of "the Decadent element in Owen's mature poetry, the colour still carrying its poetic significance and thereby giving new meaning to the bloodthirstiness of war" (33).

⁷⁷Hibberd has discussed the relationship between "Disabled" and Owen's earlier verse in detail in *OTP* 79-82.

In *WOV*, we learn that traces of Flaubert can be seen in poems like "Long ages past", "Has your soul sipped", "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Disabled". We are also informed that echoes of the French writer can be seen in Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (266). Sassoon had lent his copy of the book in translation to Owen. (Shades of Keats's "Lamia" and Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* are also evident in "Disabled").

After plaiting strands of his own work with the fibres from Romantic and Decadent literature, Owen also drew on Sassoon to make "Disabled" a more complete poem. Sassoon helped Owen to realise that in order to write an effective piece of poetry, he had to bear his soul and allow his imagination to filter through his experiences.

Fred Crawford is of the opinion that "Disabled" resembles Sassoon's "Does it Matter?" although the focal point of Sassoon's piece suggests the limit of his influence: "Sassoon economized to the point of distortion. Owen has adopted a curative purpose and has presented an event from the victim's point of view, but he has been more intent on presenting the whole truth of the invalid's situation than making one blatant point."⁷⁸

"Disabled" is similar to Sassoon's "In the Pink" in that the subjects of both poems ask themselves unanswerable questions. In "Disabled", the mutilated soldier wonders why he told a lie and joined up, despite being under-age. Sassoon's soldier questions the continuing war: "And still the war goes on - he don't know why".

In his article, "Something in Sassoon's Style", Simon Wormleighton mentions the similarity Hibberd discovered between "Disabled" and Sassoon's "The Daffodil Murderer" and refers us to Hibberd's article "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians". Wormleighton explains that in "Disabled", "the poet has clearly moved some way from the jaunty style typical of Masfield and of much of Sassoon's writing towards a more eloquent and

⁷⁸Fred Crawford, *British Poets of the Great War*, 78-9.

heightened idiom." In conclusion, he considers that "The Daffodil Murderer" ought to be recognised as "one of several influences which helped Owen in his development towards his own distinctive voice" (67).

In *Poetry of the First World War*, Gregson offers the opinion that "Disabled" is an excellent example of the best effects of Sassoon on Owen: " Taking a typical Sassoon theme, Owen grafts a passionate pity on to echoes of his earlier verse music to achieve a greater remoteness and despair. . . . Always when not imitating Sassoon, Owen is able to suggest a wider vision and conception" (47). In his book, Kerr acknowledges that Owen learnt a lot from Sassoon's *The Old Huntsman* and in "Disabled", he "out-Sassoons Sassoon in laconic pace" (WOV 306).

Sometime around the middle of October 1917, Owen met Robert Graves who had travelled up to Edinburgh to see Sassoon. At one stage, the conversation among them turned to poetry and Owen showed them "Disabled". Graves was so impressed by the poem that he wrote to Owen the following week, encouraging him to pursue his poetic talents.⁷⁹ Owen was so motivated by the response of Sassoon and Graves to "Disabled" that he worked on six poems the following week. "Disabled" underwent revision at Scarborough in July 1918 and Owen was obviously satisfied with it, as he intended publishing it and other poems in a book that was going to bear the title *Disabled and Other Poems*.

"Dulce et Decorum Est" was the next poem to flow from Owen's pen. It was drafted at Craiglockhart in the first half of October 1917 and then revised between January and March 1918, either at Scarborough or Ripon. It is apparent from Owen's letters that he suffered occasionally from nightmares prior to his war experiences, and after falling victim to neurasthenia, his nightmares became more horrific and more frequent. The

⁷⁹Graves's letter to Owen is reproduced in Appendix C of *CL* 595.

haunting, grotesque face and the underwater imagery of his dreams appeared in poems like "Dulce et Decorum Est", "The Sentry" and "Strange Meeting". Hibberd explains that the face was "a projection of his own imagination and unspoken urges, arousing guilt, fear and helplessness" (*OTP* 18) and in his opinion, by incorporating elements of his nightmares into his poetry e.g. in "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Owen is directly facing the central experience of his war dreams, the sight of a horrifying face, which, Gorgon-like, renders him a 'helpless', paralysed spectator" (115). ("Dulce et Decorum Est" and "The Sentry" were both started whilst Owen was a patient of Dr. Brock's at Craiglockhart. It was mentioned earlier that Brock encouraged Owen to write as part of his therapy and it is possible that these poems were born as part of Owen's progress towards recovery after his shellshock.) Kerr has described "Dulce et Decorum Est" as "the most straightforward example of that challenging realism Owen learned from Sassoon" (*WOV* 322). It was written around the time he read Sassoon's *Counter-Attack*.

John J. Johnston considers that "Dulce et Decorum Est" shows that Owen was "experimenting with the attitudes and techniques that Sassoon had employed so successfully", yet for him, the poem has a negative, cynical attitude that, together "with its emphasis on shockingly realistic details, represents an element in Owen's verse that is not really natural to it."⁸⁰ For him, the poem was more a failure than a success. But "Dulce et Decorum Est", like "Disabled", has a didactic element to it and provides a response to another poet's work (Jessie Pope). The poem is explicit, imaginatively - perhaps shockingly - realistic and it is dramatic, and like much of Sassoon's work, its message is effectively transmitted.

Although in *Poetry of the First World War*, Gregson recognises Sassoon's influence

⁸⁰John J. Johnston, *English Poetry of the First World War*, 174.

in "Dulce et Decorum Est", he suggests that Owen's poem, presents "a wider conception of the war tragedy than his mentor." At the same time, it offers "the explicit picture of war horror followed by [a] savage satiric conclusion pillorying the civilians at home, which is Sassoon's most typical method of constructing a poem" (48).

Simon Wormleighton believes that inspiration for "Dulce et Decorum Est" might have come from chapters 21 and 23 of the translation of Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu*, which Sassoon had lent to Owen.⁸¹ In a further piece of work, he has argued quite convincingly of the link that "Dulce et Decorum Est" (as well as "Disabled") may have with Sassoon's "The Daffodil Murderer" and points out what he describes as "a number of close verbal parallels."⁸²

The influence of Sassoon in the writing of "Dulce et Decorum Est" is unquestionable but if Hibberd is to be believed, it was at this stage that Owen was beginning to "outgrow" his poet-hero: "Owen's true courage is evident in his exposing his imagination to war experience as material for poetry; there is nothing comparable in Sassoon's work except perhaps 'Repression of War Experience'. . . a poem clearly based on a shellshock nightmare but making no direct reference to war" (*OTP* 115-16).

Owen started to write "S.I.W." whilst he was a patient at Craiglockhart and his description of the young soldier's mental anguish could be considered autobiographical to a certain extent since Owen was only too familiar with the horrors and interminable suffering that had to be faced day after day in mind and body, both at the front and as a patient suffering from a nervous disorder that was either aggravated or brought about by

⁸¹Simon Wormleighton, "Some Echoes of Barbusse's 'Under Fire' in Wilfred Owen's Poems", 191. For further reading, see Jon Glover's "Owen and Barbusse and Fitzwater Wray", 22-32.

⁸²Simon Wormleighton, "Something in Sassoon's Style", 66.

combat experience. The bitterness and irony of the poem is reminiscent of Sassoon's "The Hero", "Suicide in the Trenches" and "Stand to: Good Friday Morning". Owen, like Sassoon, does not free anyone of blame and the responsibility must be shared by everyone. The final, cutting irony comes in the last phrase, with the lie "Tim died smiling".

3.3 Beyond Sassoon's Orbit

Wilfred Owen was aware of and acknowledged the importance of Siegfried Sassoon in his life: ". . . you have fixed my life ___ however short" (*CL* 505). He also seemed to accept that the two of them would gradually move away from each other: "I spun round you like a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze." As predicted, Owen did move away from Sassoon, but the artistic seal of the older man was left on Owen and although Owen was to write of his own war experiences in poetry, the influence of Sassoon still remained.

3.3.1 A Matter of Experience

With a return to relatively good health and the continuing war, Owen and Sassoon were separated and obliged to resume an active part in their country's war effort. The constant and close contact was gone forever but for one meeting and the occasional piece of correspondence (mainly written by Owen) which helped maintain their friendship. Owen and Sassoon bid farewell to each other on the night of 3 November 1917 and Owen wrote to Sassoon on 5 November, telling him in no uncertain terms how deeply fond he was of him: "I love you dispassionately, so much, so very much, dear Fellow . . ." (*CL* 505). Just over three weeks later, Owen wrote again, bemoaning the fact that they had not coincided with each other whilst they were both in London: "I had a Third Heaven of a time in

London, and should have got into a Fourth or Fifth if I had not missed you on Wednesday" (CL 511). Owen's enthusiasm is evident but one wonders how interested Sassoon was in maintaining a close friendship with Owen once they had moved beyond the confines of Craiglockhart. In the same letter, hoping for support and encouragement with his poetry, Owen sent Sassoon copies of his latest pieces of work:

My 'Vision' is the result of two hours' leisure yesterday, - and getting up early this morning! If you have objections to make, would you return it? If not, pass it on to R. R.

I trust you'll like the 'Soldier's Dream' well enough to pass it on to the *Nation* or Cambridge?

This was the last piece from Craiglockhart.

Winchester Downs gave me 'Asleep' (CL 512).

One can assume that Sassoon did not respond to the letter and further insistence from Owen is seen again on 6 December when he writes, "I shall continue to poop off heavy stuff at you, till you get my range at Scarborough, and so silence me, for the time. This 'Wild with all Regrets'⁸³ was begun & ended two days ago, at one gasp" (CL 514). Owen was patently in need of approval: "If simplicity, if imaginativeness, if sympathy, if resonance of vowels make poetry I have not succeeded. But if you say 'Here is poetry', it will be so for me. What do you think of my Vowel-rime stunt in this, and 'Vision'?" (CL 514).

There is no poem under the title "Vision" printed in any collection of Owen's poetry

⁸³'Wild with all Regrets' later became "A Terre". See letter from Owen to his mother, in which he enclosed a copy (CL 545).

but on matching the dates of the letters in which Owen refers to it (November 27 and December 6 1917) with Stallworthy's dates of composition of Owen's work, it can be deduced that the poem could have been drafted about the same time as "Page Eglantine", "The Rime of the Youthful Mariner" and "Who is the god of Canongate?" i.e. November 1917-January / February 1918. Stallworthy suggests that this 'Vision' referred to by Owen in his letters later became "The Show" which was drafted at Scarborough in November 1917 and revised at Ripon in May 1918. The editors of *CL* are of a different opinion. In a footnote to *CL* 512, they explain that the full title of "Vision" is "A Vision of Whitechapel", which was later retitled "Lines to a Beauty seen in Limehouse", but if this was written at Craiglockhart in July-August 1917 as Stallworthy suggests (*CPF* 481-84), then the editors of Owen's letters are mistaken: the 'Vision' Owen refers to in his letters of November and December can have nothing to do with "Lines to a Beauty seen in Limehouse". A certain degree of confusion might arise because both Stallworthy in his biography of Owen (*WO* 212) and Hibberd in *OTP* (108) reproduce a poem called "Vision" which Sassoon wrote after reading three sonnets called "Beauty" written by Owen, his cousin and their friend Olwen Joergens. Stallworthy describes Sassoon's "Vision" as an "easily identifiable relic of the two poets' association . . . an unpublished manuscript poem in Owen's handwriting but signed S. S."

Owen continued to write poetry but according to evidence provided by *CL*, attempts to cajole Sassoon into writing to him appear to have ceased. Nevertheless, the possibility that regular correspondence might have occurred between the two men should not be ignored simply because copies of letters have not been discovered. At the same time, though, Sassoon never made any reference to further letters when talking about Owen years later.

Sassoon did eventually write to Owen as we learn from a postcard Owen sent to Susan Owen, which was postmarked 1 July 1918: "Had 2 long belated letters from Siegfried (in France)" (*CL* 561). Once Sassoon was invalided home, it can be assumed he contacted Owen since Owen wrote the following to his mother around 30 July: "I send you this precious letter, from the Greatest friend I have" (*CL* 567) and then again on 8 August, "I send you S.S.'s last note. The first sentence refers to a poem I wrote last week and sent him" (567).⁸⁴

The last piece of correspondence from British soil that Owen sent to Sassoon was a brief note dated 31 August in which he said good-bye to him (*CL* 571). The following day he wrote to him from France (*CL* 572). Owen was to write to Sassoon on two more occasions before he died. On 22 September, another attempt to induce Sassoon to write is seen: "Here are a few poems to tempt you to a letter. I begin to think your correspondence must be intercepted somewhere" (*CL* 578). (Stallworthy suggests that two of the poems referred to were "The Sentry" and the still incomplete "Spring Offensive" (*CPF* 189 & 193)). In his last letter to Sassoon, Owen started, "Your last letter reached me at the exact moment it was most needed" (*CL* 581-83). The need for emotional and psychological support from his friend cries out from the pages of this letter as he explains to him that he has found a copy of Sassoon's poem "Sick Leave" in a Lieutenant Corporal's possession. Quoting the line "In bitter safety I awake unfriended", Owen demanded an immediate apology from Sassoon, obviously because he felt that Sassoon had no need to feel "unfriended". Owen wanted and needed security in the knowledge that Sassoon considered him a friend.

Even though there was not a great deal of contact between Owen and Sassoon once

⁸⁴The Editors of *CL* suggest that the poem referred to is "The Kind Ghosts" since it is dated 30 July 1918.

the two men had left Craiglockhart, it is apparent from Owen's letters and postcards (principally to his mother) that Sassoon was very much in his thoughts. From the time he left Craiglockhart up to his death, Owen wrote 117 pieces of correspondence, 7 of which were addressed to Sassoon. Of the remaining 110, 24 contained references to Sassoon or his work.

After leaving Craiglockhart, Owen had three weeks' leave. First he went home and then to London where, thanks to Sassoon, he met Robert Ross, who introduced him to Osbert Sitwell, Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells. Delighted with the possibility of broadening his literary horizons, Owen first described the meeting briefly in a letter to his mother: "I have just lunched with Ross, H. G. Wells, & Arnold Bennett. Wells talked exclusively to me for an hour over the coffee & made jokes at the expense of the Editor of the *Daily News*, who joined us" (CL 507). At the end of the month, Owen described the same meeting to Sassoon, savouring every detail of the occasion (CL 511).

Whilst on light duties in Scarborough from November 1917 to March 1918, retraining at Ripon from March-June and back again in Scarborough until the end of August, Owen found the opportunity to draw together the strands of his pre-war existence, his war experiences and everything he had learnt at Craiglockhart from Dr. Brock and Sassoon about himself and his poetry - and the results were remarkable.

He made reference to the following poems in his letters: "Soldier's Dream" (CL 512), "Miners" (CL 527 - in two different letters), "Last Words" (which was an earlier draft of "The Last Laugh": CL 534 & 535), "A Terre" (CL 545), "Insensibility" (possibly), "A Terre" or "The Send-Off" - at this time called "The Draft" (CL 547), "Exposure" (CL 548), "The Send-Off" (CL 550), "The Deranged" (which later became "Mental Cases" (CL 553, 554 & 559)), "Hospital Barge" and "Futility" (CL 559), and "The Kind Ghosts" (CL

567). At the same time, Owen composed a considerable number of poems at Scarborough and Ripon that were not mentioned in his letters. The following poems and fragments were written either at Scarborough or Ripon or after Owen had gone back to France for the last time. None of them saw its beginnings at Craiglockhart, which does not necessarily mean to say that they bear no sign of Sassoon's influence:

P 122 I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell.

P 123 Apologia Pro Poemate Meo

P 124 Le Christianisme

F 127 Mourn for the nights not yet begun

F 128 Cramped in that funnelled hole

P 129 Hospital Barge

F 131 Earth wheels run oiled with blood

P 133 Page Eglantine

P 134 The Rime of the Youthful Mariner

P 135 Who is the god of Canongate?

P 139 Miners

P 141 The Letter

P 142 Conscious

P 143 Schoolmistress

P 145 A Tear Song

P 148 Strange Meeting

P 150 Asleep

P 151 Arms and the Boy

- P 152 The Show
- P 153 Futility
- F 156 O true to the old consistent equities and probities
- P 157 The Calls
- P 158 Training
- F 159 As bronze maybe much beautified
- P 162 The Last Laugh
- P 163 Mental Cases
- P 165 The Send-Off
- P 166 The Parable of the Old Man and the Young
- P 168 A Terre
- P 169 The Kind Ghosts
- P 171 I am the ghost of Shadwell Stair
- F 172 The roads also have their wistful rest
- P 173 Elegy in April and September
- P 174 Exposure
- P 176 Smile, Smile, Smile
- P 177 Spring Offensive

According to Stallworthy, the final fair copy of "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" was written at Scarborough and dated November 1917 (*CPF* 125), but at the same time, he feels that the poem may have been a response to a letter Robert Graves had written at the end of December 1917, in which he had told Owen to cheer up and write more optimistically. In order to make a logical connection between the poem, dated in November and the letter

written a month later, Stallworthy suggests that "some elements of the poem were in Owen's head before Graves's letter brought them together" (*WO* 252). However, if the final fair copy of the poem is dated 'Nov 1917', then Stallworthy's suggestion is not valid: once the poem was finished, then the "elements of the poem" were no longer in Owen's head - they had already been put down on paper. Of course, the possibility that the content of Graves's letter might have been the written result of a conversation that he had had earlier with Owen (i.e. before the poem was composed) does exist, but this is pure conjecture. At the same time, nobody seems to have considered the possibility of Owen mistakenly writing 'Nov 1917' instead of December 1917. (It should be noted here that in *OTP* (121) and in *The Last Year* (73), Dominic Hibberd has followed Stallworthy's line of thought and he too suggests that Owen's poem was written as a reply to Graves's letter).

Despite all this, it is probable that Graves was in Owen's mind when he wrote the poem since an allusion to Graves's poem "The Two Fusiliers" is made. In his piece, Graves describes his friendship with another fusilier, who could easily have been Sassoon. On writing "I, too, saw God through mud, -" (1), was Owen trying to draw the three soldier poets closer together, thus showing the need he had to feel closer to Sassoon? Or, on the other hand, was Owen's "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" just a response to Graves's poem and nothing else?

Although Sassoon does not appear to have had much to do with this poem, he did correct the Latin in the original title (Owen had written "Apologia Pro Poema Mea"). However, in *British Poets of the Great War*, Fred Crawford has suggested that Sassoon's influence in Owen's poem is evident in the sense that in it one can find "traces of the bitterness of Sassoon's anticivilian verse. . . . in the last two stanzas he shifts to a rejection of civilians that recalls the one in Sassoon's "Suicide in the Trenches"" (180).

Owen's cousin Leslie Gunston had his volume of poems, *The Nymph and Other Poems*, published in the same month as Graves's *Fairies and Fusiliers* and since Owen was in contact with both authors at the same time, Douglas Kerr feels that "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" bears both of them in mind:

'Apologia' is audibly in dialogue with the two poets and two kinds of poetry, the 'old song' of Leslie Gunston and the Georgian realism of Graves. You can hear the negotiations as Owen distances himself from one and orientates himself by the other . . . Gunston is silenced by Graves, within Owen's style . . . (WOV 224).

"Miners" was written at Scarborough on or around 13 or 14 January 1918. The poem is based on a colliery disaster at the Podmore Hall Colliery in Halmerend, North Staffordshire on 12 January 1918, in which 155 miners died in a pit explosion.⁸⁵ For many writers, "Miners" heralded a major swing away from Sassoon's influence in Owen's verse but according to Jon Stallworthy, Owen showed "Miners" to Siegfried Sassoon, who proposed alterations, which "with questionable judgement", Owen seems to have accepted (CPF 136). In *English Poetry of the First World War*, John J. Johnston suggests that "Miners", (as well as "Futility") evinces ". . . an ability to see far beyond the urgent but limited issues developed by Sassoon" (175), whilst Hibberd writes that "Miners" has a 'bigness' "which Sassoon had not attempted, a largeness of expression which is elegiac rather than satirical, universal rather than immediate . . ." (OTP 141).

Owen himself was clearly satisfied with the poem; he sent a copy of the "Coal

⁸⁵See Jennifer Breens' article, "The Dating and Sources of Wilfred Owen's 'Miners' ", 336-370.

Poem" to his mother in a letter dated 17 January 1918 (CL 527). Two days later, he wrote again and informed her that after sending a copy of the poem to the *Nation*, it had been accepted for publishing (CL 527). It was published in the *Nation* on 26 January 1918). In a letter dated 8 February, Owen wrote that he had spent half an hour composing the poem, for which he was paid two guineas (CL 530). "Miners" was the first poem to be published in Owen's own name, as his two earlier publications "Song of Songs" and "The Next War", had appeared anonymously in the Craiglockhart journal, *The Hydra*. ("Futility" and "Hospital Barge" appeared in *Nation* on 15 June 1918).

It is hardly surprising that Owen was inspired to write "Miners" after hearing of the colliery disaster since he came from a region of England where coal mining was virtually a part of everyday life. Also, the fact that as an officer in training he had been in charge of men whom he described as "hard-handed, hard-headed miners unlovely Lancashire soldiers, Saxons to the bone" (CL 395), may well have influenced his writing of the poem in the sense that his fondness for his soldiers made him want to speak out for them.

The opening of the poem leads the reader to expect a poetic account of how coal is made and ends up glowing in the hearth, but the idyllic mood of the poem is suddenly shattered when we read of the destruction of the miners who provide the coal:

But the coals were murmuring of their mine,
 And moans down there
 Of boys that slept wry sleep, and men
 Writhing for air.

And I saw white bones in the cinder-shard,

Bones without number.
 Many the muscled bodies charred,
 And few remember.

The poem then takes an even sharper twist and draws a parallel between the dead miners and soldiers killed in war:

I thought of all that worked dark pits
 Of war, and died
 Digging the rock where Death reposes
 Peace lies indeed.

After seeing the change in direction of the poem, it is perhaps worth considering the ambiguity of the line 'Peace lies indeed'. Did Owen mean that after an awful death, both miners and soldiers could finally rest in peace, or was he referring to the uselessness of their deaths because peace does not exist, it is a lie?

Stallworthy explains the "The Halmerend disaster prompts a vision of the fate of such miners and those others who dug perilous 'saps' under 'No Man's Land' to mine the enemy lines. At the poem's end WO sees himself sharing their common trench, mine, grave, hell" (*CPF* 136). It is Owen's skilful merging of mining imagery with that of war and his identification with ". . . us poor lads / Left in the ground" (33-34) that makes "Miners" such an interesting poem.

Dominic Hibberd explains how, in "Miners", Owen drew on both the Halmerend disaster and the war: "The image of the dark pit . . . suggests the trenches; the miners

become soldiers, hewing out peace for the comfort of later ages but not for their own. The fuel of peace, as only Death knows, is the bodies of dead men" (*OTP* 124). In her article, "The Dating and Sources of Wilfred Owen's 'Miners'", Jennifer Breen draws special attention to the official mining activities carried out by the army as part of their military tactics and discusses both counter-mining and aggressive mining. She feels that in the poem, "Owen's imagination links the digging of coal-pits by civilian miners with the excavation of the trenches and dug-outs with military mining by soldier-miners at war" (368-9). What David Daiches feels in *New Literary Values* about Owen being able to bring together aspects of both civilian and military life, without losing the notion of the separateness that existed between the two, can be applied to "Miners". Daiches writes that "Owen never forgot what normal human activity was like, and always had a clear sense of its relation to the abnormal activity of war" (60).⁸⁶

"Conscious", which was probably written at Scarborough, but possibly at Ripon between January and March 1918, recalls Sassoon's "The Death-Bed" and "Stretcher Case". So impressed was Owen by Sassoon's "The Death-Bed" that he referred to it as "the finest poem" in a letter to Leslie Gunston (*CL* 486) and to his father he commented that the poem was "a piece of perfect art" (*CL* 488). In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd presents a detailed comparison between "Conscious" and 'The Death-Bed' (101-3).

Before entering into a detailed analysis of "Conscious", it is worth noting Desmond Graham's observation of how this poem (and "Futility") "reveals how much we 'read-in' as soon as we know that the poem is one of war". Graham comments:

⁸⁶William Cooke discusses "Miners" in his article "Wilfred Owen's 'Miners' and the Minnie Pit Disaster" (213-17). He remarks on the parallels between "Miners", "And I Must Go" (i.e. "The Calls"), "Insensibility", "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Strange Meeting".

Owen devoted a whole poem to a portrayal of the patient's state of mind, 'Conscious'. Concerned only with the sick man's fear, relief and confusion, the poem is connected with war by a single word, 'slaughter' and that, without the context of the rest of Owen's work, could represent any sick man's nightmare.⁸⁷

"Conscious" describes the confused and weak agony of a presumably dying man, who is conscious, but not fully aware, and therefore not fully in control, of his situation, despite his efforts to be so. A sense of helplessness invades the poem as the reader realises the dulled panic of the soldier as his senses flit from one thing to another in a vain attempt to grasp the meaning of his situation. In the first stanza, the soldier relies on his sense of sight to come to terms with his reality and the reader is taken through the process until some flies create a distraction that culminates in a fear so intense that it requires the calming effect of professional medical staff:

His fingers wake, and flutter; up the bed.
 His eyes come open with a pull of will,
 Helped by the yellow mayflowers by his head.
 The blind-cord drawls across the window-sill . . .
 What a smooth floor the ward has! What a rug!
 Who is that talking somewhere out of sight?
 Three flies are creeping round the shining jug . . .
 Nurse! Doctor" - 'Yes, all right, all right.'

⁸⁷Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War*, 160.

But really, nothing can be done. We know that it is a question of time (just as it is in "A Terre") and the soldier, aware, in his state of semi-consciousness, of a lack of time - though he knows not why - passes between visions of wartime horror and hospital peace. As his strength diminishes, colours mingle to bring back memories but the memories and colours fade to a feverish, delirious, dark nothingness:

But sudden evening blurs and fogs the air.
 There seems no time to want a drink of water.
 Nurse looks so far away. And here and there
 Music and roses burst through crimson slaughter.
 He can't remember where he saw blue sky . . .
 The trench is narrower. Cold, he's cold; yet hot -
 And there's no light to see voices by . . .
 There's no time to ask . . . he knows not what.

For Kerr, the nurses in "Conscious" "seem to neglect their patient", as they do in "Disabled" (WOV 59). His interpretation of the last line of the first stanza, "'Nurse! Doctor!' - 'Yes, all right, all right'," seems to be that the nurses' and doctors' response is such because they have no intention of attending the patient; as if the "Yes, all right, all right" were a form of keeping the patient silently waiting in the hope of being looked after. However, these words can also be interpreted as words of comfort spoken to a suffering or dying man: nothing can be done for him but a few positive words can have a soothing effect. (After all, how many mothers or school teachers soothe the sufferings of a distressed child with a grazed knee with the same or similar words? And their intention is not usually

to ignore the child).

Later on, Kerr writes that "the hospital poem was a popular 'sub-genre', invariably optimistic in the hands of the Soldier-Poets (pointing to recovery or at least to serene death) but problematized in Owen's inconclusive 'Conscious'" (*WOV* 326). However, this is precisely what gives Owen's poem its impact. The reader is almost - but not quite - convinced that the wounded soldier is going to die. In the first stanza, the reader (as well as the soldier) is lulled into a warm sense of slow calmness within pain by phrases such as "fingers wake, and flutter", "yellow mayflowers", "the blind-cord drawls", "smooth floor", "flies are creeping", only to be coldly jolted by a "sudden evening [that] blurs and fogs the air" at the opening of the second stanza. And here lies the strength of the poem: the poor soldier is left in his semi-conscious state to face the torments of his shattered mind, with the feeling of wanting to ask "he knows not what" and with the sensation that he has no time to ask. The reader is left with the same feeling: an impression of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. The lack of "conclusiveness" suggests Owen feels that the reader does not deserve to know what happens, does not deserve to know whether or not the injured soldier drifted into unconsciousness or death. The effect of the poem is complete because of the incompleteness it leaves behind.

Although Owen used Sassoon's "The Death-Bed" as a springboard for "Conscious", his own experience no doubt provided inspiration as well. In *CPF*, Stallworthy draws attention to a letter Owen penned to his sister when he was at the 13th Casualty Clearing Station in May 1917, prior to his transfer back to England: "Meanwhile I have superb weather . . . great blue bowls of yellow Mayflower . . ." (*CL* 456). Dominic Hibberd explains that:

truth to experience was the rule above all others which Owen needed to learn and 'Conscious' shows him making good use of it, remembering details such as the yellow flowers from his own stay in the CCS and striving to re-create that sick, visionary sensation of being on the border of life and death that he had felt in dreams, and after his 1912 bicycle accident, and perhaps on the railway embankment after Savy Wood" (*OTP* 103).

The yellow and blue tones of this hospital poem are also seen in a November 1917 letter addressed to Sassoon in which Owen recalls a morning in which he and Sassoon had spent some time together at Craiglockhart War Hospital: "We have had some strong sunshine; and when it strikes anything blue I see you sitting by the bedside as on That Morning in September . . ." (*CL* 512).

Stallworthy has calculated that the fragment "Earth's wheels run oiled with blood" was probably written at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918 (*CPF* 515). The fragment is important because it was later incorporated into the complete poem "Strange Meeting". In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd has devoted a whole chapter to "Strange Meeting" and in *Tradition Transformed*, Sven Bäckman also dedicates a chapter to a thorough discussion and analysis of the poem, summing up its genesis and background. He acknowledges the previous research of scholars and critics whose work has enhanced his own and names Edmund Blunden, D. S. R. Welland, Jon Stallworthy and Dominic Hibberd. To attempt a further analysis of the poem would result in a repetition of what has already been more than adequately pointed out by the above-named writers. What remains to do here is to offer a summary of Sassoon's influence in the composing of the poem.

Bäckman points out that since the many drafts of "Strange Meeting" were written

in late 1917,

. . . when Wilfred Owen's friendship with Sassoon was at its most intensive stage, it is tempting to give these drafts a biographical reading, as addressed by a promising young war poet - aware of his own wisdom and "mystery" - to a somewhat older one, who had already achieved "mastery" and beauty in his craft, and who really had "broken ranks", by defying military authority and by publicly protesting against the prolongation of a war that he considered unjust (98-99).

Bäckman and Hibberd suggest that Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Goal" had a direct influence on Owen's "Strange Meeting". Owen probably first became familiar with Wilde's work through his acquaintance with Laurent Tailhade. (Tailhade was a key figure in the Decadence and as Hibberd informs us, he "had been a close friend of Verlaine, a regular attender at Mallarmé's *mardis* (where he had met Wilde)..." (OTP 30)). Any previous tenuous links with Wilde's work were re-established thanks to Sassoon, who gave Owen an introduction to Robert Ross in London. "The spirit of Oscar Wilde was still alive in Ross's elegant flat in Mayfair, for Ross had been Wilde's most devoted friend and was still his loyal defender," writes Hibberd (151), and, "getting to know Ross [Owen] came as near as possible to knowing Wilde himself. Ross . . . stood for Wilde's values in art and life" (152).

Echoes of the translation of Henri Barbusse's novel *Le Feu*, which Sassoon had lent to Owen, are also evident in "Strange Meeting". In his autobiography, *Siegfried's Journey*,

Siegfried Sassoon mentions the profound effect this novel had on Owen (60).⁸⁸

"Enemies" is a poem published in *The Old Huntsman* that Sassoon dedicated to the memory of his brother who had been killed during the war. Bäckman points out the similarities between this poem and "Strange Meeting", which demonstrate, yet again, the influence - albeit indirect - that Sassoon had on Owen's poem. Bäckman writes:

What this poem has in common with 'Strange Meeting', apart from the setting (which is only vaguely described, however) and the dream vision technique, is the theme of recognition - and reconciliation - after death. However, Sassoon's poem is weakened by a certain sentimentality as well as by a fundamental improbability as regards the situation evoked, and it totally lacks the visionary power and universal appeal of Owen's Hell. Still, it may have made Owen realize the inherent possibility of such a theme, handled in a different way (112).

"Strange Meeting" also has affinities with Sassoon's poem "The Rear-Guard" (with the sub-title "Hindenberg Line, April 1917"), which was first printed in *The Hydra* in September 1917, when Owen was editor of the Craiglockhart journal. According to Bäckman, the poem describes "a dead soldier's ghostly walk through a long dark tunnel, where dazed or dead soldiers lie around. In this case, it is not the dream vision approach or the theme that are reflected in 'Strange Meeting', but rather the rendering of the setting and the atmosphere" (112).

⁸⁸For further reading, see John Glover's essay, "Owen and Barbusse and Fitzwater Wray", and Jonathan King's essay, "Henri Barbusse: Le Feu and the Crisis of Social Realism".

Several authors have commented on the resemblance that Owen's "Arms and the Boy" has with Sassoon's "The Kiss". In *British Poets of the Great War*, Crawford suggests that Owen's poem is similar to Sassoon's in its description of "bayonet and bullet" but it is not as ambiguous in meaning (183). Herbert Lomas feels that in these two poems, both Owen and Sassoon use the mask of irony "for admitting the inadmissible".⁸⁹ It is true that both poems can be interpreted on a quasi-erotic level, where in Sassoon's poem "Sister Steel" is the bayonet that makes the soldier "Quail from your downward darting kiss", while in Owen's poem it is suggested that the boy should be allowed to run his hand along the bayonet-blade and then encouraged ". . . to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads, / Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads" (5-6). The phallicism hinted at in both poems is unmistakable.

Stallworthy suggests that the title of Owen's poem comes from a combination of Sassoon's "Arms and the Man" and Harold Monro's "Youth in Arms" and he also draws attention to Paul Fussell's observation that the poem, "What the Bullet Sang" by Bret Harte, might have been the source of inspiration behind both Owen's and Sassoon's poems (*CPF* 154). Jennifer Breen has offered the suggestion that Owen's title might even be related to George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man*.⁹⁰

"Mental Cases" was clearly inspired by Owen's Craiglockhart period. In his book, John J. Johnston compares it and Sassoon's "Survivors" which is dated October 1917. For Johnston:

The two poems afford an interesting contrast in attitude and technique.

⁸⁹Herbert Lomas, "The Critic as Anti-Hero: War Poetry", 384.

⁹⁰Jennifer Breen, *Wilfred Owen: Selected Poetry and Prose*, 234.

Sassoon's sarcasm is aimed at those who were too obtuse to understand the terrible mental and spiritual effects of the war on individual soldiers . . . Owen's treatment, modelled after Dante's rhetorical method, is much more impressive Sassoon deals with a contemporary public attitude toward the incapacitated, whereas Owen enlarges upon the tortures of the mad as the effect of sin and guilt (185).

Jon Silkin also detects Sassoon's influence in "Mental Cases", but in his article, "Silkin on Owen: Some Other War", (1980) Dominic Hibberd states that "Mental Cases" "does not seem to me to be at all in Sassoon's style" (30). In his article "Some Notes on Sassoon's *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*" (1982), however, he appears to contradict himself when he writes that "Owen is likely also to have seen "Survivors" , which was perhaps in his mind when he came to write "Mental Cases" in the following spring" (341). At the same time, one has to admit that in the first article, Hibberd may be referring to an strict imitation of style whilst in the second, he is merely suggesting a similarity in tone and atmosphere.

Whether or not "Mental Cases" is in Sassoon's style and whether or not it is similar to "Survivors" is of secondary importance if one considers that both men were able to write such powerful poetry from a similar and sometimes shared experience. In this case, the source of inspiration for their poems was the same. After leaving Craiglockhart, Owen wrote to his cousin: "I think every poem, and every figure of speech should be a matter of experience" (CL 510). After his war experiences and his contact with Dr. Brock and Sassoon, it appears that Owen's poetry did become "a matter of experience".

Writing to his mother from Scarborough on 3 December 1917, Wilfred Owen told

her that he had finished an important poem that afternoon (CL 513). Three days later, he wrote to Sassoon, "This 'Wild with all Regrets' was begun & ended two days ago" (CL 514). In April 1918, at Ripon, 'Wild with all Regrets' became "A Terre" and underwent further revision at Scarborough the following July.

In his essay "Wilfred Owen", published in the series *Writers and Their Work*, Dominic Hibberd comments: "One can see the Georgian style emerging in a poem such as 'Wild with all Regrets', where the monologue is comparable in character to Sassoon's *The Old Huntsman*" (27). Simon Wormleighton directs us to Dominic Hibberd's article "Wilfred Owen the Georgians" where Hibberd has suggested that the crude rhythms and rough language are based on the style of Sassoon's poem "The Daffodil Murderer".⁹¹

For Jon Silkin "A Terre" and other poems like "Disabled", "Mental Cases" and, to a certain extent, "The Chances" all help expose and permit closer examination of the effects of war on survivors, be they wounded, maimed or doomed to drawn-out deaths in asylums. He remarks that Sassoon had written what are in some ways similar poems, such as "Does it Matter?" and "Repression of War Experience". With reference to "A Terre", Silkin suggests that Owen consciously acknowledges his debt to Sassoon in his reference to the "buffers": "In "A Terre" Owen's 'I'd willingly be puffy, bald / And patriotic' recalls Sassoon's scarlet majors in 'Base Details', who are 'fierce and bald', have 'puffy petulant' faces, and are of course patriotic."⁹²

Stallworthy also comments on the similarity between "A Terre" and "Base Details" and goes on to draw a comparison between "A Terre" and Sassoon's "The Tombstone-Maker", saying that Owen's lines "To grain, then, go my fat, to buds my sap, / For all the

⁹¹Simon Wormleighton, "Something in Owen's Style", 66.

⁹²Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle*, 223.

usefulness there is in soap. / D'you think the Bosche will ever stew man-soup?" (48-50) echo Sassoon's: "I told him with a sympathetic grin, / That Germans boil dead soldiers down for fat." (*CPF* 180).

For Sasi Das Bhusan, Sassoon's influence in "A Terre" is obvious if one considers the presence of the same note of irony and satire that characterises so much of Sassoon's own war verse.⁹³ Owen's attack on cheap patriotism, patriotic verse and the glory of war exposes the hollowness of the traditionally romantic view of war that both he and Sassoon so fervently denounced.

Another of Owen's poems that contains traces of Sassoon is "Smile, Smile, Smile" in that its manner and style is similar to the contents of *Counter-Attack*. "Smile, Smile, Smile" is Owen's own counter-attack against all the lies and exaggeration found in the newspapers of the time.

The influence Sassoon had over Owen cannot be doubted but care should be taken to neither over- nor underestimate it. Both men were united in their efforts to substitute the ignorance of those at home with the hard facts and truths of war. Sassoon, as man and poet, provided Owen with practical advice and encouragement and showed him how he could combine his artistic talents with his experiences in order to produce a new type of poetry that would expose the horrors of war. In *The Truth of War*, Desmond Graham recognises the importance of Sassoon in Owen's poetic development, yet he feels that Owen's success was due more to his own efforts:

What is obvious is that the meeting with Sassoon brought to Owen the realization that war was simply not another subject which faced him as a

⁹³Sasi Bhusan Das, *Aspects of Wilfred Owen's Poetry*, 98.

poet, his art being somehow a more extensive part of him than that aspect of his experience, but that his role as poet was to write of war, to employ his art to convey the truth of war as he had experienced it. How he achieved this was the result, not of the influence of Sassoon or of any other, but of his own art: his own turn of mind, his own view of war and the skills he had built up in the preceding years of writing (17).

It was the example of Sassoon as both man and poet that was so important to Owen on both a personal and artistic level and Owen, "though strongly influenced by Siegfried Sassoon, nevertheless went far beyond that point in his efforts to comprehend war in all its various aspects and to grasp its real significance to the age in which he lived," writes Howard Sergeant in his article, "The Importance of Wilfred Owen" (9). But how far beyond that point, one wonders, would Owen have travelled if it had not been for Sassoon? It is Philip Larkin's opinion that "it would have been hard to imagine that Owen would have written 'Smile, Smile, Smile' or 'The Dead-Beat' without this coincidental and fortunate contact."⁹⁴ What Sassoon perhaps did for Owen, writes Jon Silkin in *Out of Battle*, "was to give him the confidence to draw into his work a greater realism, a more stringent anger and satire, which in their turn may have helped him more fully to realize his compassion to Sassoon's anger, Owen added compassion, and advances a further term into the perspective on war . . ." (208-9). Sassoon was perhaps more sentimental and sensationalist than Owen who took his didactic function as a war poet more seriously and as a result, writes Abilio Hernández Cardoso, "Owen é quase sempre mais profundo e complexo do que

⁹⁴Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, 160.

Sassoon e a sua linguagem mais articulada e rigorosa do que a do seu mentor."⁹⁵

After taking what he needed from Sassoon in terms of poetic experience, Owen outstepped Sassoon and expanded in his own direction and in his own style so that, as Michael Thorpe suggests, "Several of his poems are like paintings in depth exploring the themes upon which Sassoon had earlier sketched a few bold strokes."⁹⁶ According to Douglas Kerr, by moving beyond Sassoon's orbit, Owen was not to leave behind such "truthfully descriptive representations of the war, but to present and understand them in a different context" (*WOV* 328). Owen had learned from Sassoon "how to be a war poet. But he brought, to the realistic treatment of war subjects he had learned from Sassoon, an understanding of war and a discourse of war poetry that was more radical and more desolate than his friend's" (330-31).

3.3.2 A Poet's Poet

By nature, Wilfred Owen was a person who tended to plan for the future rather than live from day to day; he did not follow his mother's firm belief that God was the Great Provider and would look after everything. From the time he was a child, he knew he wanted to be a poet and he was always firm in his resolve. In *JFO* I, his brother Harold explained that Owen's poethood was born at Broxton in Cheshire, where Wilfred and his mother had spent a summer together: "It was Broxton among the ferns and bracken and the little hills, secure in the safety and understanding love that my mother wrapped round him with such tender ministrations, that the poetry in Wilfred, with gentle pushings, without hurt began to bud . . ." (103). In a poem first published in *Collected Poems*, Owen confirms

⁹⁵Abilio Hernández Cardoso, "Rupert Brooke e Wilfred Owen", 403.

⁹⁶Michael Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon*, 26.

the importance Broxton held for his poetry:

at Broxton, by the Hill
 Where first I felt my boyhood fill
 With uncontainable movements; there was born
 My poethood (148).

Throughout his childhood and adolescence, during the time he spent at Dunsden and Bordeaux, and during his life as a soldier, right up to the time of his death, Wilfred Owen wanted to be a poet. His war experiences changed the direction of his poetry and influenced his style, but the same basic desire was always present. However to be a poet was not enough: he wanted to be a good poet and strove for excellence.

After meeting Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart, Owen's poetic production increased and continued to do so whilst he was on light duties in Scarborough from 24 November 1917 to 12 March 1918, retraining in Ripon between 13 March and 4 June and back at Scarborough from 5 June, where he awaited further instructions after being passed fit for general service. He received his second embarkation order on 26 August and left England on 31 August 1918.

Some of Owen's letters from Craiglockhart demonstrate how the style of his poetry began to change under the auspices of Sassoon. His correspondence from Scarborough and Ripon show the sense of urgency he had to better his work: on 30 December 1917, he told Leslie Gunston, "I have had some good inspirations in Scarboro', but my need is to revise now, rather than keep piling up 'first drafts'" (CL 520) With a justified sense of satisfaction, he also told his cousin in the same letter that Robert Graves had written

encouraging words to him, "telling me to 'puff out my chest & look big', for I have as much right as most of Them. . . . They believe in me, these Georgians, and I suffer a temptation to be satisfied that they read me; and to remain a poet's poet!" A day later, Owen wrote to his mother expressing this same sense of satisfaction: "I go out of this year a Poet, my dear Mother, as which I did not enter it. I am held peer by the Georgians; I am a poets' poet" (*CL* 521).

Exactly a week later, Owen once again corresponded with his cousin. Referring to the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves and recent reviews of their work, Owen wrote that "these men are not out for fame. They simply say what Everyman most needs. And everyman is glad" (*CL* 526). Since Owen considered himself a friend and fellow-poet of Sassoon and Graves, then presumably he considered himself to be writing for everyman too - but everyman in the case of his war poetry referred to the soldiers and not to the general public. Reticence about composing further poems, probably because of the need he saw for the revision which he had mentioned in his previous letter to his cousin, is also evident in this letter: "I am in much doubt whether to put forth any poems next spring or not."

On 18 February 1918, Owen sent a copy of a poem entitled "Last Words", which was an early draft of "The Last Laugh", to his mother. By telling her in a later letter that "Last Words" "baffles my critical spirit" (*CL* 535), he was showing how, since Sassoon was no longer present to assess or comment on his poetry, he was judging it objectively himself.

By the end of March, Owen was installed in a tiny cottage in Borrage Lane, Ripon. In the peace and tranquility he found there, Owen was able to allow all his past experiences to merge and in the quietness of daytime, he was able to spill poems of nightmarish quality out onto the waiting pages. But even then, he was sorely aware of his shortcomings as a

poet. He soon moved up to the attic of his Borrage Lane cottage so that he would not be disturbed by the sound of children playing outside: "One poem I have written here; and thought another. I have also realized many defectuosities in older compositions" (*CL* 543). One poem that Owen revised shortly afterwards was "A Terre": "This afternoon I was retouching a 'photographic representation' of an officer dying of wounds - " (*CL* 545). On 21 April, he wrote to Leslie Gunston: "In my Chambers under the roof of a cottage (7 Borage Lane, Ripon), I have written, I think, two poems: one an Ode which, considering my tuneless tendencies, may be called dam good" (*CL* 546-7). Despite being aware of the defects of his work, Owen was able to produce pieces which brought him considerable satisfaction.

By the end of May, Owen was able to recognise that his skill in poetry writing had vastly improved but even then, he was still extremely critical of his own creations. He was aware that writing poetry was a serious business and he did not want his work to be published before he considered it ready. He wrote to his sister Mary: "I can now write so much better than a year ago that for every poem I add to my list I subtract one from the beginning of it. You see I take myself solemnly now, and that is why . . . I refrain from indecent haste in publishing" (*CL* 554).

Despite saying this, however, Owen was already planning his poetic future and seriously considered getting his poems published in book form. Stallworthy suggests that it was probably in Ripon around May 1918 that Owen drafted a preface for a collection of war poems he was hoping to publish in 1919.⁹⁷ Stallworthy feels that it was with Robert Ross's suggestion and Osbert Sitwell's encouragement that Owen began gathering his poems

⁹⁷For a draft copy of Owen's preface, see *CPF*, 535-6.

for a book that was to be called *Disabled & Other Poems*.⁹⁸ Seemingly, Owen chose this title after rejecting "With Lightning and with Music" and "English Elegies" (WO 265).

The use of imagery, diction, metaphor, irony, metre and other formal devices may be considered elements necessary for technically good poetry. However, for a poem to reach beyond the sphere of technical appreciation, the intention and purpose of the poet are of utmost importance and form one of the most crucial parts of a poem. As David Daiches states in his book, *Critical Approaches to Literature*, "it is the non-poetic objective which gives the poetry its ultimate value" (55). Owen's non-poetic objective was to tell the truth of war as he saw it and then to use poetry as a vehicle to tell his truth.

3.2.3 Owen's Preface

In his memoir to *Wilfred Owen, Collected Poems*, Edmund Blunden wrote:

Owen was preparing himself to the last moment in experience, observation, and composition for a volume of poems, to strike at the conscience of England in regard to the continuance of the war. This volume had begun to take a definite form in his mind, which may be traced in the hastily written and obscurely amended Preface and Contents found among his papers (179).

Several writers have reproduced Owen's preface. Stallworthy describes it as "perhaps the most famous literary manifesto of the twentieth century, [which] he left not as a finished and final statement but as a single rough draft" and in his biography of Owen,

⁹⁸On 30 November 1995, a new edition of Owen's poems entitled *Disabled and Other Poems* was published.

Stallworthy reproduces the preface (266) that was printed in *Collected Poems*:

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

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

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why true Poets must be truthful.

If I thought the letter of this book would last, I might have used proper names; but the spirit of it survives - survives Prussia - my ambition and those names will have achieved themselves fresher fields than Flanders.

The response of critics to Owen's preface has varied but most recognise the fragmentary nature of it, and as Dominic Hibberd so rightly reminds us in *OTP*, "*Disabled and Other Poems* was never put together and Owen's notes for it should not be taken as his final thoughts about his poetry" (148). At this point, it is perhaps convenient to refer to Dennis Welland's *Times Literary Supplement* article, "Sassoon on Owen", in which he quotes Sassoon: "My feeling about the Preface has always been, that had W lived he wouldn't have printed it. And even now I feel that the ms. could have got along quite well without it" (589).

In *Poetry of the First World War*, Gregson provides a word of warning as regards

the preface and how various critics have interpreted it according to their convenience:

the statement of a poetic creed as it stands is so crowded with semantic difficulties as to be almost without meaning. Critics have seized on the statement and elaborated on it to suit whatever critical view of Owen's work they were projecting. No doubt Owen knew what he meant by the statement and would have elaborated it in due course into something much more definite and with more obvious implications for his work; as it is, his brief notes remain a basis for conjecture rather than poetic manifesto for which they have often been accepted (50).

C. Day Lewis and Edmund Blunden were the first two critics to differ in their interpretations of Owen's preface. Part of the third chapter of Dennis Welland's book, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, presents the two different 'versions' and enters into an analysis of Day Lewis's and Blunden's representations of the text.

In the 1920 edition of Owen's poems, the penultimate paragraph of the preface is printed as follows: "Yet these elegies are not to this generation. This is in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next." C. Day Lewis quotes the passage in this form in *A Hope For Poetry* (1934) and Welland explains that presented this way, there is an implication of "a recognition on Owen's part of the prophetic nature of his poems, which are addressed not to his own unsympathetic generation but to a later one who will find his attitude more acceptable" (53). On the other hand, Blunden follows the more widely-accepted version of the preface which has been fully reproduced above and so, for him, Owen was addressing his own generation. In Welland's opinion, Owen's poetry and his

preface were intended as "a challenge, calculated, by their relentless exposure of the pity of war, to disturb the equanimity and indifference into which the reader has been lulled" (53).

Welland recognises that C. Day Lewis's reading of Owen's preface flatters his prophetic powers but he considers that Blunden's interpretation is more in keeping with Owen's views about the realities of war and his desire to inform those at home about life in the trenches. Referring to the sentence that has caused Day Lewis and Blunden to interpret the preface in different ways, Welland reaches the conclusion that "the manuscript leaves no room for doubt . . . careful reconstruction of the successive steps by which it was changed is possible and establishes the rightness of Blunden's version" (53).

By describing Owen's preface as a sketch in *The Truth of War*, Desmond Graham shows his agreement with Hibberd in so far as the preface provides nothing definite, but at the same time, he does not appear to agree totally with Sassoon's opinion. Graham's impression is that Owen would have worked on the preface and finally presented a complete one, with the intention of publishing it:

The Preface is no more than a sketch. But as the intensive revisions of the manuscript reveal, it is far from a casual sketch. Rather, they show Owen seeking the kind of precision which would produce something he could stand by as a true definition of what he desired and believed about his war poems. The words are not final, the thoughts not all resolved, but there is nothing occasional or provisional about them: the manuscript's confusion comes from the difficulty of exactly defining passionate convictions, and presenting beyond misrepresentation, a complex realization of what Owen felt his poems

had sought (17).

It was infinitely clear to Owen that he had to transmit his feelings about war and what he considered to be the subject of war, to anybody who was willing to pay attention to him. The only means he had of gaining a wide audience was his art, but he had to use it in a way that made what he wished to communicate clear. Just as his mother's old-fashioned religion did not "work" for him, neither did the popular traditional-style war poetry of the time. They were failures for Owen in the sense that neither was adequate under the circumstances in which he found himself. Owen could not change religion but he could at least try to adapt or change poetry so that it would come to provide a more adequate means of reflecting the war. Hilda Spear recognises Owen's need to change his poetic style when she writes that he "became convinced of the inadequacy of his former poetic creed to express contemporary poetry . . . sentimentalism could have no place in a world at war."⁹⁹

In his preface, Owen attempted to define what he thought war poetry should be and therefore what it was to be a war poet at that time. The preface opens with the statement that his book was not to be about heroes because, in his opinion, English poetry was not worthy of them. As Spear explains, "It was sentimental falsification of the searing truths of war experience that made him claim that 'English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of [heroes]'. . . His own poetry spoke not of heroes, but of suffering men . . ." (115). Neither did Owen want his book to contain any poetry that was related to the traditionally patriotic-style verse that was always used to romanticise war.

As it stands, Owen's next statement, "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry",

⁹⁹Hilda Spear, "Wilfred Owen and Poetic Truth", 112.

is somewhat confusing as it blatantly contradicts some of the letters he had written only a few months before he was killed in which he talked about being a poet, the necessity of improving and revising his work and the dangers of premature publishing. Owen was concerned with poetry and to claim otherwise is nonsense - unless of course he meant that he was concerned with poetry but other matters (like the welfare of the soldiers, anti-war protests and excessive patriotism) were of greater importance. In other words, perhaps he wanted to say that he did not place poetry above all else, and in that sense "above all", he was "not concerned" with it.

Another possibility to contemplate is that on writing "Poetry", Owen was referring to the ever-popular traditional war poetry that made a soldier's mangled or destroyed body into something romantic and turned the victims (and often the aggressors) of war into heroes. If this was the "Poetry" to which he referred, then the phrase "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry", takes on a different, more comprehensible meaning. In fact, in his war poetry, Owen often relied on his knowledge of Romanticism and used it with stinging irony, thus making use of it whilst at the same time partially rejecting it.

In "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo", Owen relies heavily on the romantic to show how united the soldiers are:

I have made fellowships -
 Untold of happy lovers in old song.
 For love is not the binding of fair lips
 With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,
 By Joy, whose ribbon slips, -

But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong,
 Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
 Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

I have perceived much beauty
 In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
 Heard music in the silentness of duty;
 Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate.

But finally, excludes his reader from the fellowship of the soldiers:

You shall not hear their mirth:
 You shall not think them well content
 By any jest of mine. These men are worth
 Your tears. You are not worth their merriment.

The dramatic beginning of "Greater Love" gives the impression of being the opening to a traditionally romantic war poem in which all the soldiers are heroes:

Red lips are not so red
 As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
 Kindness of wooed and wooer
 Seems shame to their love pure.
 O love your eyes lose lure

When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

But again, the ending excludes any form of identification of the reader with the soldiers: "Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not" (24).¹⁰⁰ Perhaps what Owen wanted to say was that he was not interested in composing the typically romantic style war poetry that had satisfied generations, but he was interested in using poetry as a means of communication, as a vehicle without trappings to transmit what he had to say. In other words, if Owen chose poetry as the medium through which to express himself, then he was obviously interested in and concerned about it and the fact that he revised much of his work and attempted to develop and perfect his rhyming techniques is further proof that he was concerned with poetry.

Owen wrote to Sassoon implying that he wanted to write simple verse that would be generally understood by the poorly educated common soldier: "I don't want to write anything to which a soldier would say 'No Compris!'"¹⁰¹ And poems like "The Letter" and "The Chances" most probably would have been understood by almost any literate infantryman (or illiterate one, if the poems were read to him). But in poems like "The Show", "Strange Meeting" or "Spring Offensive", Owen seems to forget the intellectual capacity of the regular soldier and pays more attention to poetic style than to the men's possible comprehension.

Whether Owen was 'above all' concerned with poetry or not has provided plenty of

¹⁰⁰In *CPF*, Jon Stallworthy makes mention of the possible romantic influences in this poem. He suggests that it is "a response to Swinburne's poem 'Before the Mirror' / (Verses written under a Picture) / Inscribed to J. A. Whistler," (186-7) and he also points out the influence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*.

¹⁰¹According to Stallworthy, this comment formed part of a note that accompanied a letter written on 22 September 1918 that was addressed to Sassoon. Although the letter has been reproduced in *CL* (578), the note remains unpublished. The original manuscript of the note can be found in the Manuscript Collection at Columbia University.

material for debate and several writers have expressed their opinions. In "Wilfred Owen", Dominic Hibberd is quite adamant in his view: "It was no more true of him in 1918 than it ever had been that he was 'not concerned with Poetry' (29). In his article "A Sociological Cure for Shellshock: Dr. Brock and Wilfred Owen", Hibberd has suggested that perhaps Owen was not concerned with Poetry in the sense that he was not interested in poetry just for the sake of it - it had to have a greater, more far-reaching use. Recalling Dr. Brock's practical therapy, Hibberd writes, "in his assertion that he is 'not concerned with Poetry', we can surely hear an echo of the practical Scots doctor who warned his patients to 'beware of Art for Art's sake'" (382). And in *OTP*, Hibberd suggests that what Owen was doing in his statement was dismissing "the sentimental versifying of writers who are more interested in being poetic than in their subjects" (139).

It is John J. Johnston's view that "Owen is concerned not only with war poetry but with poetry as a whole", and he makes the very valid point that if Owen wanted to be truthful in his poetry, he could never have abandoned his preoccupations with "Poetry".¹⁰²

In writing about the form and content of Owen's and Sassoon's verse, Arthur Lane explained why they composed poetry: "Their poetry is as much a manifestation of conscience than of artistry; they spoke not simply because the Muse bade them, but also because an intolerable situation demanded it."¹⁰³ A few lines later, Lane sums up what he considers to be Owen's statement of purpose:

He was concerned with the *subject* of his verse, he said, not with the process of verse making as a self-justifying act . . . for Owen poetry was a medium

¹⁰²John J. Johnston, *English Poetry of the First World War*, 164.

¹⁰³Arthur Lane, *An Adequate Response*, 11.

. . . and his primary aim was the most meaningful expression possible for his message. Thus, in a rare combination of simplicity and sensitivity, he stated his credo:

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry . . .

His concern was with his subject, a subject rendered in poetry. What Owen meant when he capitalized *Poetry* was that poetry was a way of looking at things, as well as a way of rendering them (11-12).

C. K. Stead cited Philip Larkin, who felt that Wilfred Owen numbered amongst those " 'people to whom technique seems to matter less than content, people who accept the forms they have inherited but use them to express their own content' ".¹⁰⁴ In other words, for Owen, poetry was a means to an end. The subject was more important and it existed for the poem, not the poem for the subject.

In *British Poetry of the Great War* Fred Crawford speaks of Owen's "commitment to articulate painful experience at the expense of 'Poetry'" (188), but it is difficult to find an example of "sacrificed poetry", particularly as Crawford does not offer any example to support his statement.

The next point Owen made in his preface was that his subject was "War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the Pity." For Owen, it seems, pity was of prime importance. Although his subject was the war, it was the pity and the tragedy of war that inspired him to write his poetry and for that reason, "The Poetry is in the Pity" - because his poetry is pity and his pity is manifest in his poetry. According to Vivian de Sola Pinto, "Owen did not write *about* his pity. His poetry *was* his pity", and for de Sola Pinto, "Greater Love"

¹⁰⁴C. K. Stead, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement*, 329.

provides the best illustration of Owen's statement on pity.¹⁰⁵ In "Wilfred Owen", Dominic Hibberd suggests the significance of pity for Owen: "He saw that pity was 'the one thing war distilled' and that it was the most important thing, for it showed that love was stronger than hate and that truth could not be wholly overcome" (34).

In *An Adequate Response*, Arthur Lane also attempts to explain what pity meant for Owen: "Pity, in Owen's sense is not a maudlin weakness, but a compassionate understanding . . . Owen was a poet, and when he said 'The Poetry is in the pity' he postulated for a higher role for poetry than that of a skilled art to which moral standards are irrelevant" (12).

In her introduction to *Wilfred Owen: Selected Poetry and Prose*, Jennifer Breen offers an explanation of what Owen meant by pity and then suggests what his main intention was in writing his poetry:

By 'pity', Owen did not mean compassion but rather the pity which is invoked in the reading and comprehending of the tragedy in poetry and other literature. Owen's main concern in his poetry and prose about the war was therefore to reveal its high tragic quality while simultaneously subverting the ideologies of militarism and patriarchy by being truthful about these sets of assumptions . . . (5).

It is accepted that pity - or an emotive reaction to it - can inspire the production of poetry but some writers (depending, of course, on their concept of pity) suggest that pity in itself is not enough. In *English Poetry of the First World War*, John J. Johnston's

¹⁰⁵Vivian de Sola Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry 1890-1940*, 130.

expresses the opinion that "The poetry of modern warfare may be in the pity, but neither pity nor self-pity in themselves can inspire great poetry" (183).

Stephen Spender recognises that for Owen an attitude of pity is "the only attitude possible for him to adopt towards the War . . . The poetry is only in the pity when the motive for pity is quite overwhelming . . . pity was forced on to Owen, by his sense that the War was quite beyond his control".¹⁰⁶ However, Spender has his reservations: "Except in circumstances of catastrophic accident, or of resignation to a predestined fate, pity is not an adequate emotion in poetry. It tends to become negative, exhausting, sentimental, masochistic" (208).

Johnston agrees that in Owen's case, pity can produce poetry but "only in a partial and sporadic fashion does the poetry produce pity as an effect of tragic events" (206). Like Spender, Johnston feels that pity is not sufficient for good poetry. On referring to Owen's work, and writing that pity is "an emotion that cannot be maintained or repeated without psychological strain or aesthetic loss," he asks:

How many successful poems can be written in the tenor of 'Disabled'? The very intensity of the author's compassion tends to exhaust both the emotion and the force of its stimulus. Unless pity is generated and objectified within a large tragic context, it cannot of itself support a tragic vision . . . When the compassionate attitude is apparently the only attitude with which war can be truthfully described, the possibilities of poetry are severely restricted: only passive suffering and death can provide its materials (206).

¹⁰⁶Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element*, 217.

Johnston judges that Owen and other poets of the time possessed "a sensibility deprived of vision and value; their experiences - so alien to anything dealt with by the romantic tradition - required an intellectual and imaginative discipline far beyond that provided by the vision of poetry, which was itself a product of tortured sensibility" (207).

Although Owen appears to show a distinct capacity to feel pity and compassion, this is only reserved for the soldiers whom he considers to be the war's true victims. Readers of his poetry are not allowed to experience it. In *Poetry of the First World War*, Hibberd quotes an article by Basil de Selincourt which was published in the *Times Literary Supplement* of January 1921 in which he wrote that "a sustaining impulse of [Owen's] poetry . . . a positive feature of unimpeachable worth - is sympathy in pity. He is pitiless with his readers, but for the sake of utter truth and faithfulness where pity belongs" (58).

For Owen, his poems "are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next." By this, he probably meant that although he was addressing his generation, they would find no comfort in his words (because it was his generation who had inflicted the damage and therefore did not deserve any comfort) but he hoped that future generations (who would, hopefully, be future readers of his poetry), would learn something from his words. It is hoped that this interpretation of these words from Owen's preface provide a balance between Blunden's and Day Lewis's readings which were presented earlier.

Referring to the phrase "All a poet can do today is warn", Stephen Spender felt that Owen "evidently realized that his war poetry could only represent a *transitional* attitude... He meant the next generation must occupy itself with different problems."¹⁰⁷ How wrong Spender was; twenty one years after Owen had written his fragmentary preface and four years after Spender had made this remark, the world was tormented by another more

¹⁰⁷Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element*, 219.

destructive and even more horrific war. The problems were the same, only worse. The 'today' of Owen's preface is applicable to any modern war. As Owen predicted in "Strange Meeting":

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.

When Owen wrote that the only thing a poet 'can do today is warn', he was warning against all future wars. As Dominic Hibberd has explained:

Poems such as 'Exposure' and 'Strange Meeting' show that he lost hope for the war generation, concluding that civilians could never understand and soldiers could never explain. All that a true war poet could do was to warn children, who might find consolation later in the knowledge that a true voice had managed to speak. His poems might prove that there was something indestructible in the human spirit, but that would be consolation only if future generations acted on his warning and loved their fellow men (*OTP* 149).

It was because Owen saw that the role of the poet was to warn that he reached the conclusion "That is why true Poets must be truthful." In *Out of Battle*, Jon Silkin has drawn parallels between Byron's "Don Juan" and some of Owen's verse and "Byron's concern that the poet should tell the truth anticipates Owen's remark in the Preface to his

Poems . . . Byron remarks: 'But then the fact's a fact - and 'tis the part / Of a true poet to escape from fiction...' (VIII, lxxxvi)" (25).

But, of course, we should ask ourselves what is truth? What does it mean in the sphere of politics, war, religion or art? Did Owen tell the truth or was it a truth told from his perspective? For Owen, one of his truths was to contradict the age-old lie that it was a sweet and decorous thing to die for one's country, another was to tell of the catastrophic effects of war on man and the earth. And another truth was to tell the non-romantic war stories of all soldiers. In *Poetry In Our Time*, Babette Deutsch comments on Owen's notes for his preface and doubts his understanding of the truth: "Perhaps had he lived to revise those notes, he would have seen the truth more clearly" (351).

In *An Adequate Response*, Arthur Lane presents the idea that Owen's need to speak out about and against the war was based on a strong moral conviction to tell the truth, and as far as Owen was concerned, it was an untold truth (13). "Owen's ironic use of romantic terms and concepts", suggests John J. Johnston, "indicates the conflict between a sensibility long devoted to 'Poetry' and experiences that demanded the truth".¹⁰⁸ In other words, Owen learnt to use his knowledge of the romantic in such a way that it was converted into a tool which, on being deformed, could be used so that the ugly, unromantic truth of war could be told.

And so, Owen made it his business to tell the truth - or the truth as he saw it. He knew he had to tell it if he hoped to combat the propaganda and lies that encouraged the frivolous ignorance of the people at home. He had to match army experience and poetry together and he made it his responsibility to reflect his truth in his poetry. Douglas Kerr explains that the aim of Owen's poetry was "to rewrite the language of war. He believed

¹⁰⁸John J. Johnston, *English Poetry of the First World War*, 207.

war was possible and perhaps inevitable so long as wars were lied about. A poet could change the meaning of war by changing its language. This would involve changing the language of poetry " (WOV 131).

One writer who has been sharply critical of Owens' preface is Charles Sisson who, in *English Poetry 1900-1950*, describes it as an "embarrassing statement", saying that "On the one hand, it communicates a sentiment which cannot be disregarded, coming from a young man who expresses it after undergoing great hardship, and exhibiting great courage On the other hand, it contains so many unresolved perplexities that it comes near to being absolute rubbish" (82). Sisson feels that on attempting to "establish the primacy of pity", Owen was only able to write "a very limited kind of poetry" which, in the worst cases, would result in a "relapse into sentimentality" (83). Sisson attributes Owen's unacceptable preface to insufficient intellectual training and ability and emotional immaturity.

But if faults are to be found in Owen's preface, then greater praise is due to him if, despite inadequate intellectual training and immaturity, he was prepared to attempt to formulate a text that would summarise what his poetry was about. And for a piece of writing that "comes near to being absolute rubbish", it has done remarkably well to survive and to be commented on by so many critics.

In a challenging article, "The 'human problem' in Wilfred Owen's Poetry" (67-84), Adrian Caesar attempts to contest the nature and role of 'pity' in Owen's work and demonstrate the absence of anything approaching realism. In Caesar's opinion, there is a conflict between pity and suffering in Owen's verse. But if such a conflict does exist, it is hardly surprising if one considers Owen's religious background. Owen was brought up to believe that passive suffering was positive and should be borne silently by the individual.

And if suffering (passive or not) is to be endured, it either has to be self-inflicted or exacted by someone else. If, for Owen, passive suffering was positive, then the inflicting of it also had to be acceptable. Consequently, if suffering is acceptable, then why should it be pitied? One should therefore ask oneself how this ties in with Owen's attitude towards his soldiers, whom he considered to be the passive, innocent victims of a war that was controlled by men in boardrooms, hundreds of miles away from the combat area. In other words, if passive suffering and the infliction of it are "necessary" for Owen's soldiers and can therefore be condoned, then why should Owen be so "concerned" about pity?

Caesar quite correctly remarks that Owen evades the fact that "thousands of men were slaughtering each other", and continues by saying that "Owen castigates the reasons for fighting, but not the fighting itself" (72-3). Naturally, if Owen had emphasised the mutual annihilation or condemned the fighting, perhaps there would have been less reason to pity the soldiers. After all, Owen's 'greater love' for his soldiers was based on the fact that they fought each other and died. The question of pity is also considered by Caesar in his book *Taking it Like a Man*:

Owen wrote in a letter from the 13th CCS that he was a 'conscientious objector with a very seared conscience' (CL 461). He later wrote from Craiglockhart, 'I hate washy pacifists as temperamentally as I hate whiskied prussianists' (CL 498). The latter phrase explains the former, and both illuminate the problems in so many of his war poems. We, as an audience are asked to pity, but we are also implicitly told that we *can not* either understand or pity unless we too go and fight. Thus, anti-war poems become in subtle ways war poems in quite a different sense from that accepted by the

myth of First War writing. Owen is not a pacifist and his poems are not either (158).

If one contemplates Caesar's last phrase, then a return to the preface is inevitable. Owen said that as a true poet (and he considered himself to be one), he had to be truthful. But in the light of Caesar's statement, one should ask to what extent was Owen truthful to himself? Was he a pacifist or not? Was he attempting to tell the whole truth but was unable to because it did not fit in with his 'poetic plans'? Or was he unable to do so because the poetry / pity conflict was just a further contradiction that made up part of his complicated and often variable personality? Was this why he invited pity, rejected it on behalf of his soldiers and often would not permit his readers to feel sympathy and understanding for them?

Owen's soldiers are more innocent victims than heroes. What they do is of little consequence; it is what is done to them that is of importance. What is done to them by those who are not there is what interests Owen.

In his article "Whose Owen?", Jon Glover introduces a balance between Owen's advocates and detractors. With reference to what he describes as Owens' "perplexing Preface", he suggests:

. . . we must remember that he was not permitted to set his work in the context of a developing critical reaction; almost none was published in his lifetime. He could not re-assess his motives in the light of his perceived successes . . . The divisions of his table of contents, written in the summer of 1918, look back on a year of immense but varied development, and often

suggests confused, arbitrary and private contexts (29).

Along with his preface, Owen also drew up a list of contents for his collection of poems. There are three rough lists of contents which are reproduced in *CPF*, 538-40. Dominic Hibberd examines the manner in which Owen grouped his poems, explaining that the arrangement "was devised to take the reader through a developing, coherent experience" (*OTP* 148).

But of course, Owen's war experiences themselves were by no means coherent. His poetry, his preface and his table of contents are a demonstration of his attempts to reflect, in some kind of order, the reality of war as his personal experience revealed it to him. With his war poetry, Owen wanted to solder his life as a soldier and a poet together in such a way that he could represent the men at the front, explain the devastating effects of war on soldiers and on the landscape and deepen mankind's awareness of the tragedy and horror of war. On speaking on behalf of the thousands of soldiers who became unwilling victims of the war, Owen made traditional war poetry a reluctant victim too. Although neither was finished, Owen showed the possible scope of non-traditional war poetry in his preface and table of contents, and both reflect what he considered his poetic mission to be.

IV

INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

4.1 A Poetic Backdrop

Just as the necessary skills to become an adept carpenter or a successful surgeon are gradually acquired, so are the skills to become a good poet. The bases of these skills are learned from past and present experts in the field and with time, the apprentice gradually learns to combine the knowledge he acquires from them with his natural talents to become a master himself. Beginning from the moment he first started composing poetry, Wilfred Owen's work was built up from what he learnt from and about others' verse.

4.1.1 The Early Days

A friend from Susan Owen's girlhood days offered the Owen family the use of a small cottage in the hills around Broxton, Cheshire for the summer of 1903 or 1904.¹ The family spent a short while there together and then Susan and Wilfred stayed on by themselves for a few weeks. The tranquility of Broxton was important for both mother and son: Susan Owen took a long-earned rest and it appears that it was here that Wilfred's interest in poetry was born:

Something in the little boy was beginning to stir and quicken. His reading continued, encouraged and uninterrupted, and the restless stirrings were able to emerge with doubting delight. It was in Broxton among the ferns and bracken and the little hills, secure in the safety and understanding love that my mother wrapped about him with such tender ministrations, that the poetry

¹See Stallworthy's *WO* (290, note 25): Harold Owen originally believed that the family went to Broxton in 1907, when Wilfred would have been fourteen years old (See *CL* 352, note 2). Quoting from *Collected Poems*, Stallworthy writes that "Susan Owen told Edmund Blunden that Wilfred 'must have been about ten years old when I took him for a holiday to Broxton' (148). As a result, Harold Owen acknowledged his mistake in dating the Broxton holiday.

in Wilfred, with gentle pushings, without hurt, began to bud, and not on the battlefields of France (*JFO*, I, 103).

A 1914 fragment which begins "Instead of dew, descended on the moors", contains lines that suggest that Owen himself felt that his poethood came into being at Broxton. In his memoir in the 1931 edition of Owen's poems, Edmund Blunden presents these lines from the fragment:

For I fared back into my life's arrears
 Even the weeks at Broxton, by the Hill,
 Where first I felt my boyhood fill
 With uncontainable movements; there was born
 My poethood (148)

In a letter to his mother written on 21 February 1918, Owen comments, "Still, was there not Broxton Hill for my uplifting, whose bluebells it may be, more than Greek iambs, fitted me for my job" (*CL* 535). One could gather from this that Owen perhaps felt that his first close contact with, and therefore understanding and appreciation of Nature occurred at Broxton, and it was as a result of the development of a more refined concept of Nature that his sensitivity as a poet grew.

It is evident from several of his letters that Owen had always wanted to be a poet. Whilst at Dunsden, he had expressed his anxiety about not being able to dedicate the time he felt was necessary to develop his poetic skills, and writing to his mother from Mérygnac, where he was tutoring the de la Touche boys, he said, "I seem without a footing on life;

but I have one. It is as bold as any, and I have kept it for years. For years now. I was a boy when I first realised that the fullest life liveable was a Poets (sic). And my later experiences ratify it" (CL 320). Exactly one month later Owen repeated himself: "To some I seem a fellow without a footing in life. But I have my foothold, bold as any, kept for years. A boy, I guessed that the fullest, largest liveable life was that of a Poet" (CL 325). It was because of his determination and resolve to become a poet, together with his sensitive nature, vivid imagination and intellectual curiosity that on 31 December 1917, Owen was able to write: "I go out of this year a Poet, my dear Mother, as which I did not enter it" (CL 521).

In his edition of Owen's poems, Edmund Blunden suggests that on examining the manuscripts of many of Owen's early poems, his enthusiasm for poetry becomes evident. Owen's early work is important because it reflects the period in which he was "finding his own way to the secrets of style, and discovering the form of verse on which he would build his House Beautiful" (147). Owen's first known complete piece is called "To Poesy". Here, Owen declares his faithfulness to her and beseeches her help in achieving his ambition to become a poet.

Although Susan Owen was keen to further her son's artistic interests, she was able to provide him with little else except encouragement since her academic and cultural experiences were rather limited. School, however, did provide a certain degree of stimulus and motivation: in *WO*, Jon Stallworthy writes of one of Owen's attempts at poetry whilst at school in Shrewsbury, receiving English classes from a teacher called Miss Wright. Inside the front cover of a school edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Owen had begun to draft a blank verse poem, "Within those days" (40).

Owen's fascination with and dedication to poetry is evident from his adolescent

years. He hero-worshipped Keats, Shelley and others and he came across different writers with distinct styles that he found interesting, and he made a point of emulating their work. In his memoir, Edmund Blunden quotes a verse-letter which Owen wrote in December 1911 from Oxfordshire. The letter, whose manuscript no longer survives begins with the line "Full springs of Thought around me rise" and goes on to mention Shelley, Grey, Arnold and Tennyson (150).

In the introduction to *Collected Poems*, C. Day Lewis admits that he has not been able to determine the age at which Owen began to write poetry but he suggests that his "poetic temperament was fully formed by the age of eighteen" (14). That Owen had been contemplating the possibility of becoming a poet at least since his Dunsden times is confirmed in a letter he wrote to his mother in May 1918 in which, on referring to his friendship with Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, he writes, "As I looked out into the untravelled world over the hedges of Dunsden Garden, I saw them in the dawn and made ready to go out and meet them" (CL 553).

Lack of time and preparation weighed heavily upon Owen. As a temporary Pupil-Teacher at the Wyle Cop School in Shrewsbury, he found he did not have enough time to study. After spending three months at Dunsden Vicarage, it seemed apparent that the vicar was not going to tutor him and Owen complained, "I want to be reading. The time I am at Book and Pen seems to be growing smaller and smaller" (CL 108). Dissatisfaction with his situation in Bordeaux began to creep in when Owen found once again that he did not have enough time to pursue his own studies and that he was writing nothing. He was fully aware of the need for some sort of training if his ambitions to be a poet were to be fulfilled: "My heart is ready, but my brain is unprepared, and my hand untrained. And all, - untested", he wrote from Mérignac in March 1915 (CL 326). Harold Owen commented on

his brother's obsession with becoming a poet and linked this to his pressing anxieties about lack of time:

He was writing, thinking, and living poetry prodigiously at this age, and condemning and destroying most but not all of what he wrote. He developed an obsession not only to write poetry but to be a poet, to be known as a poet, to be in a professional sense a poet, and, above all, to be recognized as a poet. He day-dreamed and longed with all the passion of his taut intensity for this and for this alone. . . . This, and this only, was what he wanted to do and be. . . . From the age of ten years, until he was killed, this passion to be recognized as a poet burned in him continuously; it gave him no rest, nor did he want it to do so; all other things were secondary. . . . His obsession with time was extraordinary, the morbid thought of the lack of it possessed his mind until it became a monstrous threat; he was shaken with panic and fear that he would not have time, time TIME. How greedily he wanted and demanded this. And how desperately he disbelieved that it would ever be his to take and use (*JFO II*, 262-3).

In the third volume of *JFO*, Harold Owen once again makes reference to his brother's feelings of frustration with his lack of poetic production and how this affected his mental state: "This at times brought him to despair, increased his gravity, and sometimes overwhelmed him with deep despondency" (59).

The importance of the time Owen spent at Dunsden as lay-assistant to the Reverend Herbert Wigan has already been discussed in chapter one. It was suggested that his

experiences there helped to guide him down the pathway of self-discovery and, on acquiring greater emotional independence and maturity, Owen was able to use some of his experiences as subject matter for his poetry, including some of his war poetry.

"Lines Written on My Nineteenth Birthday" (March 1912) was the first complete poem to be penned at Dunsden. In this poem, where two spirits visit Owen on his birthday, his devotion to his mother is apparent. So, too, is his awareness of the possible pleasure that can be derived from suffering. The second of the two spirits that visited Owen was silent and shapeless:

. . . . no sound it made;
 No form it had; but quietly it drew
 Its tightening hand of Pain through every thew
 Of my frail body . . . Pain? - Why Pain today? (20-23)

Owen's use of a capital 'P' when referring to pain draws attention to it and partly prepares the reader for the end of the poem, where Owen's masochistic tendencies are noticeable:

For there have been revealed
 Heart-secrets since the coming of this day,
 Making me thankful for its thorn-paved way.
 Among them this: 'No joy is comparable
 Unto the *Melting* - soft and gradual -
 Of Torture's needles in the flesh . . . (48-53)

With time, Owen started to come to terms with his masochistic attitude towards pain and suffering and eventually they came to be used - in a more subdued manner - as central themes in much of his later verse.

Whether it was feelings of loneliness and lack of direction in his life that first made Owen become more aware of the social injustices he was witness to or not, it was certainly as a result of his experiences at Dunsden that he came to relate the notion of suffering to the idea of social injustice. In his biography of Owen, Jon Stallworthy suggests that the stimulus of first-hand experience brought about a more authentic response in Owen (60). Stallworthy might consider "The Dread of Falling into Naught" (September 1912) as "inflated" (80), but at least it serves as a contrast to the more natural response which was to come later in "Deep under turfy grass and heavy clay" (October 1912- June 1913). This poem deals with a mother and her four-year-old-daughter who had died in appalling conditions. Owen's feelings of anger are transformed into a rebellious attitude which is particularly evident at the end of the first stanza and the beginning of the second. This defiant stance could be considered a forerunner to the similar nonconformist attitude Owen was to show in his later poetry.

On reading Owen's first religious poem "O believe that God gives you" (May 1912), the reader has the impression that Owen's faith in God is uncomplicated and steadfast. However, Owen's experiences at Dunsden shook his religious beliefs to their foundations and a gradual distancing from God the Father (as opposed to God the Son) is seen in many of his poems and the ideas expressed in this short piece change to such an extent that the opposite attitude is manifest in later works. Owen used the theme of religion in his poetry to thrash out a belief in God and religion that was adequate for him in the circumstances in which he found himself. The theme is made more complicated because Owen combines it

with his feelings towards people in authority.

Owen's two longest poems were composed at Dunsden. Neither was based on original material as both were adaptations in verse of Hans Christian Andersen stories, but the iron will to write poetry and the discipline required to write such lengthy pieces were obviously present in the aspiring artist's make-up. At times, both poems show Owen experimenting with the use of alliteration and novel rhyme schemes.

Owen's allegiance to the Romantics was unwavering and threads of the Romantic-Victorian tradition run constantly throughout his work. In his early poetry, Owen imitated the Romantic style and dealt with the more traditional poetic themes of the era but this imitation eventually led to an adaptation of the style Owen had once tried so hard to copy when he realised that as it was, it was inadequate for what he wanted to express in his war poetry. However, Owen never fully rejected his old literary heroes. Instead, the sensitivity and the ideals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were used by Owen to emphasise the baseness and horror of war, so that the Romantic became unromantic and the acceptable, unacceptable. The works of Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson and other Romantics were digested and reformulated so that, quite often, deliberate allusions to them can be seen in several of Owen's 1917-18 poems.

In her article, "Wilfred Owen: 'Greater Love' and Late Romanticism", Jennifer Breen comments upon the impact the Romantic tradition had on Owen's poetry. At the time of writing (1973-74), and bemoaning the fact that the only Romantics discussed in relation to their influence over Owen had been Keats and Shelley, Breen mentions the importance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson and Swinburne and a few other late Romantic poets who were mentioned in his letters. In her opening sentence, Breen states that Owen "eventually reacted against the Romantic tradition" (173). Here, this reaction could be

interpreted as an outright rejection of Romantic poetry but it is, in fact, as she explains later on, an "ironic inversion and dislocation of traditional language and beliefs": this inversion and dislocation of the tradition language and beliefs of the Romantics is not a rejection of them but rather an adaptation of them (177).

For Breen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" shows a turning point in Owen's poetry and reflects the need he saw to adapt the Romantic ideal to the circumstances of the war. She writes that "From this point onwards in his war poetry Owen ironically inverts many of the conventions and sentiments of both Romantic poetry and institutionalised Christianity" (176). Similarly, in "The Send-Off", Owen presents a transformation of the Romantic image. According to Breen, "Greater Love" "repudiates the values not only of late Romantic love poetry, but also of the culture it represents" (177).

In his book *Tradition Transformed*, (1979), Sven Bäckman also discusses the influence the Romantic tradition had on Owen's poetry and, like Breen, includes references to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson and Swinburne. He does not say whether or not he was familiar with Breen's article, but much of what he writes repeats the ideas and opinions she had expressed earlier. In Backman's opinion, Owen was deeply influenced by the thinking of the Romantics and he outlines the "artistic debt" Owen had towards them:

He was brought up in the tradition initiated by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, and his remarkable development towards true poetic originality in 1917-18 can to some extent be described in terms of a marked shift of emphasis - from a predominantly aestheticizing attitude to a position where the poet's empathy with his subjects and his role as a pleader and spokesman became more and more essential - *within* a total concept of the

poet's role and responsibilities that he had inherited from the Romantics (25).

Owen had a tendency to identify at a personal level with the Romantic poets, particularly Keats and Shelley, who were his idols. In the case of Keats, Owen constantly tried to find parallels between his life and that of the poet's. Keats's early death and the idea of the need to endure pain whilst in pursuit of beauty were attractive to Owen. At the same time, Shelley's humanism, his social conscience and his attitude towards the underprivileged sections of society appealed to Owen's developing sense of social justice. In the third volume of *JFO*, Harold Owen suggests that his brother poured his knowledge of his Romantic heroes into whatever mould best suited his purpose:

With his literary idols of the dead . . . he seemed strangely at ease and would with imaginative grace build and fashion them into what he most desired for himself, delving and probing into their characters, vicissitudes, and temperaments but seeking always to enhance their greatness, and ignoring . . . any undesirable traits which presented themselves to his intellect" (59).

In the first volume of his trilogy, Harold Owen had already suggested that his brother's idolatry for the Romantic poets was sometimes carried to the extreme: "Keats was ever-present in his mind, and he was given to this absorption in the life of work and men in all the arts who had died young; he was also wont to compare the histories of these talented short-lived lives with his own plans for his writing of poetry" (161).

4.1.2 John Keats

Much of Owen's early poetry is mere imitation of the subjects, forms, imagery and diction used by the Romantics, but as his poetic experience broadened, elements from the Romantics assumed a different role and became vehicles through which Owen could reflect his own experiences. Contrast, for example, the poems "To Poesy" and "Exposure". According to Stallworthy, "To Poesy" owes much of its content to Keats's "The Fall of Hyperion" and contains elements of both Tennyson and Coleridge.² On the other hand, "Exposure" is not an imitation but rather an ironic reflection of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale". Here, Owen uses Keatsian traits to convey the truth of the situation the soldiers found themselves in. The poem had its origins in war experiences Owen had described to his mother in a letter dated 4 February 1917.

On being Owen's first "master", the influence Keats had over Owen is vitally important. It seems that Owen became familiar with Keats whilst still at school. In his biography on Owen, Jon Stallworthy informs us that Owen's school work includes references to and quotations from Keats and Shakespeare (40). In *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, Edmund Blunden describes Owen as being "deep in the works of Keats and others" by 1911, "but particularly Keats. His own verses of such an early date supply an engaging record of that dominant devotion" (149). A sonnet entitled "Written in a Wood, September 1910" pays homage to Keats, as do other pieces like "Sonnet: Written at Teignmouth on a Pilgrimage to Keats's House", which was dated 21 April 1911, or "On seeing a lock of Keat's Hair", which was penned in the summer of 1912. With the fragment "There is a set of men today who deal", where Owen walks "with spirits, and the voice / Of men long dead . . ." (9-10), Owen's infatuation with Keats was complete. At times, though, it did seem

²CPF, 6; WO, 53-4.

that Owen was aware that his admiration for Keats was somewhat exaggerated: on one occasion, he commented that "To be in love with a youth and a dead 'un is perhaps sillier than with a real live maid" (*CL* 187).

Owen's love of Keats as poet and man could be related, to a certain extent, to the problems he seemed to have in establishing or recognising his sexual identity. Adrian Caesar suggests that Owen's excessive fondness of Keats was due, in part, to his sexual and sado-masochistic tendencies.³ Kenneth Simcox also links Owen's sexual dilemmas to Keats: "Those sub-Keatsian murmurings, so evident in the early verse, can in fact be detected right to the end of his brief career; they can be heard rhythmically alternating with the bouts of shell-fire. He never grew out of them because the sexual tensions of which they were the outward sign, remained."⁴ At this point, one is forced to consider whether Owen's attraction to Keats, the Romantics and to all things beautiful might have been more emotionally than philosophically orientated.

When he suggests that Owen wrote no serious verse before April 1911, Dominic Hibberd is attributing the cause of Owen's true poetic beginning to Keats, since 1911 was the year for Keats.⁵ By quoting from a letter Keats wrote to John Taylor on 27 February 1818, it is clear that Owen wanted to consider the development of lasting poetry along the same lines as Keats had done: ". . . but a Poem does not grow by jerks. If it is to be worth a place in Human Time, it must be worth more than the fag-ends of the Poet's time. . . . But Poetry, 'coming naturally as leaves to a tree', grows as incessantly and as delicately. And as trees in Spring produce a new ring of tissue, so does every poet put forth a fresh,

³Adrian Caesar, *Taking it Like a Man*, 127.

⁴Kenneth Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, 142.

⁵Dominic Hibberd, *OTP*, 3.

and lasting outlay of stuff at the same season" (CL 333).

Owen compared himself constantly to Keats during the Dunsden period, as can be seen in a letter he sent to his mother on 5 March 1912, in which, as Jennifer Breen points out, "He showed his conscious desire to emulate Keats when he suggested that his correspondence with his mother might resemble that between John and Fanny Keats."⁶ However, Dominic Hibberd warns against over-emphasising the influence Keats had on Owen since Keats was not the only influence during Owen's formative years in terms of artistic development: "By 1912", writes Hibberd, "Keats was already losing his supremacy, Owen reluctantly admitting that Shelley was 'the brightest genius of his time'" (4).

Like Hibberd, Sven Bäckman also feels that "the instances of excessive and uncritical adulation [of Keats] in the letters become fewer and farther between after 1912" and he remarks on how the influence of Keats lessens as Owen moves towards greater poetic maturity: "Compared with Keats's dominant influence on Owen's early poetry, there are relatively few instances of specific and direct Keatsian influence in the mature poems of 1917-18."⁷

Most of the critics who have researched into Owen's work acknowledge the influence Keats had on Owen. When he saw Owen's draft of what was to become "Anthem for Doomed Youth", Siegfried Sassoon came to recognise Owen's worth as a poet: "I now realized that his verse, with its sumptuous epithets and large-scale imagery, its noble naturalness and depth of meaning, had impressive affinities with Keats, whom he took to be his supreme exemplar."⁸ For Gregson, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is the result of

⁶Jennifer Breen, *The Development of the Poetry of Wilfred Owen*, 56. (Fanny Keats was John Keats's sister).

⁷Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed*, 46.

⁸Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey, 1916-1920*, 59.

"Owen's effort to combine dignity with realism, and his own Keatsian strain with the approach encouraged by Sassoon."⁹ In the fifth and last volume of his autobiography, *Noble Essences and Courteous Revelations*, Osbert Sitwell comments on one of the characteristics that distinguished Owen: "He manifested a tremendous capacity for admiration, for reverence. . . . It showed in his conduct towards contemporaries and elders no less than in his attitude towards the great who had gone before", and to support his statement, Sitwell quotes from Owen's "On seeing a lock of Keat's Hair", which shows the intense admiration Owen had for Keats (90).

Not all comments about Keats's influence over Owen are positive. For Bernard Bergonzi in *Heroes' Twilight*, Owen's poetic beginnings were markedly sub-Keatsian and, in his opinion, Owen sometimes carried Keats's excessive sentimental strain into his 1917-18 verse, particularly if the central theme of the poem was not war, as for example in "The Kind Ghosts" (125). Charles Sisson also felt there was a profound affinity between Keats and Owen and although he accepts that the "eloquence of his speech is unquestionable," he complains that "the basis of Owen's language remains that of a century of predecessors."¹⁰ Gregson describes Owen's earlier work as "vague, vaporous, subjective, highly 'poetic' in a pseudo-Keatsian way . . . the verse of a youth in love with the *idea* of poetry."¹¹ He feels that Owen became of age emotionally and spiritually during his first tour of duty with the British Army in France, but it was only after his stay at Craiglockhart that Owen produced verse of a "poetic intensity which curiously parallels that of his beloved Keats" (41). In Gregson's opinion, whilst Owen's Craiglockhart poetry bears the stamp of

⁹M. Gregson, *Poetry of the First World War*, 51.

¹⁰Charles Sisson, *English Poetry 1900-1950*, 84.

¹¹M. Gregson, *Poetry of the First World War*, 41.

independence and originality, it also shows the influence of both Keats and Sassoon. That Owen was able to reap the benefits from two very distinct sources highlights his ability to connect two different styles in such a way that he could create his own style in order to be able to transmit his message. As if to avoid attaching too much importance to Keats's influence over Owen, a note of caution is sensed when Gregson writes that with Owen's "Keatsian strain, it is only when he adds something of himself, that his work is memorable" (47). In other words, Keats's influence could not have stood on its own; it was his influence coupled with Owen's own personal style that gave Owen's work its impact. Thus, it should be borne in mind that Keats provided Owen with the groundwork that was to help him become a better poet, but Owen actually evolved as a poet because he was capable of uniting his background of the Romantics with the discipline and experience that comes with maturity, and under the guidance of Sassoon together with his natural flair, Owen gradually began to acquire a reputation that would bring him posthumous fame.

No discussion on the Keatsian influence in Owen's poetry would be complete without reference to some of the poems that reflect this influence. Owen's juvenilia was clever and shows a strong Keatsian strain which is most apparent, firstly in a series of poems which are direct imitations of Keats's work, and secondly, in the lush sensuousness that is present in many pieces. In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd points us to some of the poems which can be paired with Keats's originals and he suggests that "Before reading a biography of Keats for the first time" can be matched with "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", "Sonnet Written at Teignmouth, on a Pilgrimage to Keats's House" can be paired with "Sonnet Written in a Cottage where Burns was Born", "On seeing a lock of Keats's Hair" is partnered with "On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair" and "To Poesy" is twinned with "Sleep and Poetry" and "Endymion" (3). Jon Stallworthy prefers to draw a parallel between "To

Poesy" and "The Fall of Hyperion" and he also sees a link between "Hyperion" and "O world of many worlds, O life of lives".¹² The "leafy grot" of "Written in a Wood, September 1910" is reminiscent of Keats's "Endymion" and shows considerable mastering of technique for a relatively inexperienced poet.

In the annotations accompanying both volumes of *CPF*, Stallworthy frequently remarks on the similarities he considers to exist between Keats's and Owen's work. On occasion, the connections Stallworthy finds between the works of the two poets could be regarded as a little far-fetched. However, having said this, the possibility that tenuous links may exist makes Owen's work appear richer and perhaps more inviting to the reader who is interested in learning a little more about the possible literary background of Owen's verse.

In spite of similarities to Keats's "Isabella" and "Lamia" in terms of form and diction and despite echoes of "Endymion" and "To Homer", "The Little Mermaid" can stand independently of Keats's work. Through his descriptive verse, Owen shows an ability to conjure up images - pleasant or otherwise - in the mind of the reader. The exquisite description of the mermaid princess in stanza five gives the reader an idea of the daintiness and beauty of the sea-nymph:

Her skin is delicate and freshly clear,
As petals of wild rose; and in her eyes,
As in the stillness of an evening mere,
All heaven's purple concentrated lies.

¹²Jon Stallworthy, *CPF*, 6 & 72.

The contrast between this and the description of the underwater witch and her foul den that the mermaid comes across is stark:

- The witch's den! Around was filthy quag,
 In whose soft mire slow-wallowed water slugs,
 Large, fat, and white. There sat the fishy hag,
 Beneath her hut of bones. About her dugs
 Clung toads; while snakes, with lazy drag,
 Wound round her arms, which she, with fulsome hugs,
 Embraced and stroked, and fed from her own mouth.

This horror parched the maid's full voice like drouth. (Stanza 45)

The reader is both attracted and repelled by Owen's description of the old hag and the temptation is almost to push the description to one side yet, at the same time, one feels compelled to read on. Owen's ability to entice the reader to continue despite a feeling of intense disgust was developed further so that in later poems, like "The Show" and "Mental Cases", the same conflicting feelings between fascination, attraction and revulsion are experienced. In spite of the fairy-tale quality of the poem, certain phrases found in "The Little Mermaid" are forerunners to expressions found in Owen's later war poems. The final lines of the twelfth stanza, ". . . Then, from some campanile, / Hummed the low voices of the midnight bells, / And bugles fluted in far citadels" (94-96) somehow prepare us for the bells and bugles in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "The Calls" and the "vain citadels that are not walled" (33) of "Strange Meeting". One wonders if the slaughter of Europe's young men due to the indestructible pride of the older generation in "The Parable of the Old Man

and the Young" saw its poetic beginnings in stanza twenty, when the witch warned the mermaid that " 'Pride must suffer pain' "(153). The mermaid, like the older generation, took no heed of the warning given and tragedy was the outcome. The line, "the stunning guns are dumb" (202) from "The Little Mermaid" could be a line from any of Owen's later war poems, yet it found itself penned among the lines of a fairy tale written in verse. This shows that even in the early stages of his poetic development, signs of what was to come later were evident.

In "Dulce et Decorum Est", we learn that the soldiers, "knock-kneed, coughing like hags . . . cursed through sludge" (2). One man did not have time to put his gas mask on and suffered the awful consequences. The narrator explains that "Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light, / As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. / . . . guttering, choking, drowning" (13-16). To a point, this is reminiscent of the atmosphere in stanza 44 of "The Little Mermaid": just before the delicate creature had the misfortune to come across the witch's den, she found herself in ". . . a region of warm, bubbling mud, / With slimy weeds and greenery bemossed" (347-8). A few lines later, we learn that the slimy weeds had "ever-groping arms" (351). The nightmarish quality of one poem is an echo of that found in the other. The sensation of being imprisoned by mud, mire and evil smells is also felt in "The Sentry":

Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime,
Kept slush waist-high and rising hour by hour,
And choked the steps too thick with clay to climb.
What murk of air remained stank old, and sour
With fumes . . .

Written in sonnet form with an abbaabba cdecde rhyme scheme, "Perversity" shows itself to be an exercise in the practice of conventional sonnet structure. The first four lines of the octave deal with points that nowadays are of great interest to psychologists: the tendency to live with the mind focussed either on the past or on the future rather than living and enjoying what the present has to offer, and the inclination to treasure "Rather the rare than the fair" (4). In the next four lines, Owen develops these ideas by applying what he has said in the previous four lines to himself: by choosing to find Greek statues - presumably ancient ones - more attractive than modern man, he is living in the past (he finds "More loveliness in Grecian marbles clear / Than modern flesh" (6-7)); and by finding the shape of a tree more appealing than the human form, he is encountering beauty and treasuring the unexpected rather than the traditional and expected. (For him, there is "Less glory in a man than any tree" (8)). The sestet opens with the naming of objects with which Owen tends to fall in love and closes with a declaration of his love for Keats. The sonnet contains several allusions to Keats's work, as Jon Stallworthy points out in *CPF*: traces of "Lamia", "Fragment of 'The Castle Builder'" and "La Belle Dame sans Merci" can be found on lines three, six and nine respectively. Where Owen explains that he finds "More loveliness in Grecian marbles clear / Than modern flesh", there is little doubt that this means he finds the traditional Greek sculptures of the human body more attractive than a living body. Although Stallworthy has not noted the connection, this line could be an allusion to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", where Keats finds the elaborate workings on the urn (which contains marble carvings of Romantic woodland settings populated by beautiful people) the epitome of perfection and a reflection of truth and beauty.

"1914" is another piece in which Owen exercises his skills as a composer of sonnets. The octet follows the usual abbaabba rhyme scheme but a slight variation is seen in the

sestet, which rhymes cddcee. The influence of Keats is evident in the closing lines of the octet and the beginning of the sestet, where traces of "To Autumn" can be detected. With the onset of real war experiences, however, Owen was forced to adapt his old style: a purely Keatsian approach to a scarred and maimed world was not adequate.

In the previous chapter, it was commented that glimmers of Keats's sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be" can be seen in Owen's "With an Identity Disc", which was drafted in May 1917 whilst he was at the 13th Casualty Clearing Station at Gailly, near the Somme Canal. Jon Stallworthy suggests that despite the similarity between the two pieces, a definite move away from Keats is evident: even though "Owen shows a new self-confidence in his master's presence. . . . the use of the identity disc gives this sonnet a distinct and poignant identity of its own" (*WO* 175-76).

In their article "Authorial Revisions and Constraints on the Role of the Reader", John Stephens and Ruth Waterhouse comment on the six complete drafts of "Anthem for Doomed Youth". In their opinion, parts of the poem are "resonant of the sad and pale figures of romantic poetry" but they do not feel that this is inappropriate and point out echoes of Keats's "Melancholy" and "La Belle Dame sans Merci". Siegfried Sassoon's and M. Gregson's opinions of Keats's influence in the composing of the poem have been mentioned earlier and are representative of the thoughts of most other critics on the subject.

Welland, Backmån, Stallworthy, Hibberd and Kerr are amongst those critics who have dealt with the possible influence Keats may have had on the creation of "Strange Meeting". On discussing the genesis and background of the poem in *Tradition Transformed*, Sven Bäckman considers that "it is not so easy to single specific situational or verbal parallels. . . . It is more a question of similarities as regards more impalpable elements, such as atmosphere, mood, rhythm, descriptive technique, imaginative colouring etc., which

Owen's poem has been said to have in common with Keats's unfinished poem "The Fall of Hyperion" (109).

Bäckman writes that in an article in *The Athenaeum* in early 1919, John Middleton Murry was the first critic to point out the general likeness between the two poems even though the qualities common to both "are somewhat vague and elusive" (110).¹³

According to Bernard Bergonzi, more markedly Keatsian than many of its predecessors is "The Kind Ghosts". Bergonzi's opinion that the poem is heavily Keatsian in flavour because its central theme does not evolve around war was mentioned earlier but, in fact, the poem seems more Decadent than Keatsian in style and when considering the possible genesis of the poem, the Decadent element within it cannot be ignored: the female in the poem is allowed to live a peaceful, quiet life at the expense of the suffering of young men who will not complain, for fear of disturbing her tranquility. The fact that Jon Stallworthy suggests that the poem was revised at Scarborough on 30 July 1918 but that it might have been written earlier (*CPF*, 181) is worth bearing in mind because this could mean that the basic outline of the poem was drawn up before Owen's participation in the war, hence its more Keatsian - or Decadent - elements. Unfortunately, only a fair copy of the manuscript is available. If earlier drafts were to be found, then the dates of its beginnings could be calculated on examining the type of paper Owen used.

The ironic reflection of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" in "Exposure" has also already been mentioned (see page 332). In "Exposure", the desolate emptiness of the landscape reflects the soldiers' isolation from the comforts of a pre-war existence and Owen's appeal to the senses of sight and sound is reminiscent of Keats. Douglas Kerr

¹³In a later article, "The Poet of the War", Middleton Murry describes "Strange Meeting" as Owen's finest poem but makes no reference to Keats's influence (705-07).

considers "Exposure" in depth in the introduction to his book, *WOV* (7-14). Rather than consider that Owen was able to learn from and adapt Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" for his own purposes in "Exposure", Kerr appears to have missed the point and on quoting the first line of Owen's poem he comments that "Everything Keats's Victorian successors learned from him about writing beautifully seems to have been lost on the author of this compellingly ugly line, with its unlovely vowel-rhyme, its chaotic rhythm, fussy consonants, and the unfortunate neighbouring of 'iced' and 'east'. Worse is to come: 'knife us' is going to be made to rhyme, barbarously, with 'nervous'" (7). For Kerr, "a surprising mutation or mutilation takes place" and the reader is presented with "a sourly distorted echo of the Keatsian formula" (8). But this is precisely what Owen intended: by mocking what was, for him, a most important piece written by his once-adored Keats, he was showing what a poem had to be like if it were to honestly reflect the truth of war.

Owen uses Keats's work as an ironic framework upon which to build in his last poem, "Spring Offensive". Although the poem draws on Owen's experience of the allied offensive of April 1917, he sets his poem in the half-Spring-half-Summer month of May. Suspended between life and death by time, the soldiers awaited their doom:

Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.
 Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled
 By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge;
 And although the summer oozed into their veins
 Like an injected drug for their bodies' pains,
 Sharp on their souls hung the imminent ridge of grass (6-11).

The murmuring of wasps and midges captures the "wailful choir" of the mourning gnats in the third stanza of Keats's "To Autumn"¹⁴, whilst the summer oozing into the soldier's veins is reminiscent of the sensation of drowsiness and stupour seen at the beginning of "Ode to a Nightingale":

My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk: (1-4).¹⁵

The opiate-induced respite of this poem can be seen as early as August 1912 in the fragment "Why should the anguish of leaving those we love" where Owen was working on the lines: "Our wakening to this life is one of pain / Attended with it the mist, the sickened gust / Of one who wakes from slumbers opiate."

In "Spring Offensive", the lines: "So soon they topped the hill, and raced together / Over an open stretch of herb and heather / Exposed. . . ." (27-29), the notion of scores of men dressed in battle gear, racing over the brow of a hill into a sacrifice from which there is no escape, as if they were herds of cattle going to slaughter, vaguely recalls the fourth stanza of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" that begins:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

¹⁴For Stallworthy, this line from "To Autumn" is reflected in "Anthem for Doomed Youth": "Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,- / The shrill demented choirs of wailing shells;" (6-7) (*CPF*, 99).

¹⁵This, and all other quotations from Keats's work, are taken from *Keats, Poetical Works*, edited by H. W. Garrod.

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garland drest? (31-34)

The heifer, with her silken flanks garlanded with flowers, was exposed to the danger of sacrifice and bloody slaughter just as the uniformed soldiers in their battle dress were exposed.

Bäckman and Gregson recognise that the opening lines of "Spring Offensive" capture the same slow rhythm and relaxed atmosphere of Keats's "To Autumn", whilst in his notes in *CPF*, Stallworthy also draws a parallel between the two pieces (193).

4.1.3 Other Masters

In order to avoid the possibility of placing excessive emphasis on Keats's influence over Owen, his other "masters" in the art of poetry writing should also be given consideration.

In *CPF*, Stallworthy sums up Wordsworth's influence in "Sweet is your antique body, not yet young": "In its theme and phrasing, the poem shows the influence of Wordsworth's ode, 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' " (129). The line, "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears", from the same ode, is reflected in "Strange Meeting", where Owen speaks of "...truths that lie too deep for taint" (36). Stallworthy mentions an allusion to the first two lines of Wordsworth's "Character of the Happy Warrior" in Owen's "Insensibility" (147).

Stallworthy also points out references to Coleridge in Owen's work. For example, he finds traces of Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" at the end of Owen's "To Poesy" (6), he

attributes the title of "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind in Dejection", firstly to Owen's reading of Tennyson's "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind", and secondly, to Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" (15). Anyone familiar with Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" will immediately recognise several allusions to it in "The Little Mermaid". Owen's "The Rime of the Youthful Mariner" makes obvious use of Coleridge's poem.

It can be seen from a letter Owen wrote to his sister, Mary, in January 1912, that he was developing an interest in Shelley, or rather, in Shelley's concern for the underprivileged and how he attempted to help them:

I find that Shelley lived at a cottage within easy cycling distance from here. And I was surprised (tho' really I don't know why) to find that he used to 'visit the sick in their beds; kept a regular list of the industrious poor whom he assisted to make up their accounts;' and for a time walked the hospitals in order to be more useful to the poor he visited! I *knew* the lives of men who produced such marvellous verse could not be otherwise than lovely, and I am being confirmed in this continually (CL 106).¹⁶

Since Shelley had lived within cycling distance of Dunsden vicarage, it is quite possible that Owen came to equate his life of visiting the poor and needy in Dunsden to the life Shelley had led. Owen's respect for Shelley grew to such an extent that in a letter to his mother on 26 January 1912, he wrote that Shelley was "the brightest genius of his time" (CL 112).

¹⁶In a footnote to this letter, Harold Owen and John Bell explain that Owen had been reading John Addington Symond's *Shelley* at the time.

Given that Shelley was born in 1792 and died in 1822, and Keats was born in 1795 and died in 1821, Owen's comment is indicative of a shift in allegiance from Keats towards Shelley.

In *Tradition Transformed*, Sven Bäckman has discussed several possible similarities between Shelley's and Owen's work. In his opinion, "The Swift" corresponds to Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark" and is the only poem Owen wrote that is Shelleyan in style, although there are other poems that resemble Shelley's work in tone and imagery. He suggests that "O World of Many Worlds" can be matched to "Ode to the West Wind" whilst "Strange Meeting", "1914" and possibly "Spring Offensive" all contain reflections of "The Revolt of Islam". To complete his list of Owen's Shelleyan poems, Bäckman mentions that in *Out of Battle*, Jon Silkin has written of a parallel between the first stanza of Owen's "Arms and the Boy" and stanza lxxvii of Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy" and that Dominic Hibberd has suggested a link - albeit weak - between "Storm" and the eleventh stanza of "Ode to Liberty". Owen's "The Show" has been paired with "The Triumph of Life", and "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" and possibly "Greater Love" with "A Defence of Poetry". Finally, Bäckman suggests that certain passages in "Queen Mab" may have served as inspiration when Owen came to express his attitude towards the role played by the Church and clergy during the war (49, 61).

In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd explains why he feels that "Insensibility" and Owen's Preface to his intended volume of poetry refer to both Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" and Wordsworth's preface to "Lyrical Ballads" and he draws a parallel between "A Terre" and Shelley's "Adonais" (140-47). Just by glancing through Stallworthy's notes in both volumes of *CPF*, the reader can grasp the extent to which he feels Shelley influenced Owen's work.

With time, Owen came to outgrow Shelley because the Romantic poet's experiences were too limited for a young man who had lived through the horrors of the Somme and the

torments of neurasthenia. As soon as he had stepped onto French soil on 1 September 1918, Owen wrote to Siegfried Sassoon and spoke of how calm he felt, but then he asked, "Will it last when I shall have gone into the Caverns & Abysmals such as he [Shelley] never reserved for his worst daemons?" (*CL* 571). It seems that Owen had to side-step Shelley because his life was clearly taking him in a different direction.

Without recognising his source of information, Dominic Hibberd writes that when Owen "returned to the front in 1918, knowing that he would kill and be killed, he took volumes of both Shelley and Swinburne with him, but after he had been in action he sent Shelley back to Shrewsbury" (*OTP* 56). The inference here is that Owen sent the Shelley back home because his work no longer suited Owen and his experiences. This may indeed have been true, though Owen may have sent his volume of Shelley back simply because there was no room to accommodate it in his kit. Unfortunately, there appears to be no evidence that throws light onto Owen's reasons for sending Shelley back home.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a deeply Christian woman of high ideals who championed the underprivileged and was not afraid to speak out against the social injustices of her time. The influence she had on Owen was due more to similar ideas and beliefs rather than specific themes or the use of similar imagery and diction. No doubt, the humanistic attitude and Christian tone evident in "Aurora Leigh" appealed to Owen's sense of responsibility and thus created a deep impression on him.¹⁷ Owen was reading "Aurora Leigh" whilst on his first tour of duty at the front and quoted from it in a letter he sent from the 13th Casualty Clearing Station to his sister, Mary (*CL* 445). The passage Owen quoted from describes how difficult it is for people to compose verse, which shows that he had poetry writing on his mind even when he was under the strain of combat fatigue. (Four

¹⁷Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed*, 51-52, 61.

months later, Owen quoted from the same poem in a letter to his mother which was written at Craiglockhart War Hospital (*CL* 478-9)). Whilst at the 13th Casualty Clearing Station, Owen penned "How Do I Love Thee?", a sonnet whose title seems to be taken directly from a line in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese" which reads "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" (43). In *CPF* (167), Stallworthy points out that in "Greater Love", there is a link between the line "Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot" (20) and several lines from Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh", Second Book, ll. 718-20: "As my blood recoiled / From that imputed ignominy, I made / My heart great with it." In his article "Wilfred Owen and Elizabeth Barrett Browning" (29-41), Sven Bäckman deals with the importance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning with respect to Owen's poetry. He considers that her influence is principally found on a technical level and discusses her use of approximate rhyme which he feels was influential in Owen's use of half-rhyme and pararhyme.

Owen's reading of Tennyson also contributed to the wealth and depth of his background of the Romantics. In *CL*, Owen described a steam-tug trip he took down the Somme Canal in the company of another soldier and fellow-patient who, like Owen, was suspected of suffering from shellshock and who was also receiving treatment at the 13th Casualty Clearing Station (457). Owen explained that the scenery he saw reminded him of Spenser's "Faerie Queen", which he had read at school (*WO* 40) and as a result, his imagination wandered into the realms of King Arthur, thus recalling Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur". The final outcome of the canal trip was the poem "Hospital Barge". The idea of the slow, steady movement of the barge as it laboured up the canal is an echo of Tennyson's poem, which can be found in *The Holy Grail and Other Poems*, a copy of which Owen had bought in Edinburgh in July 1917 (*WO* 248 & 321).

Admiration for Tennyson is evident in some of Owen's letters where he actually quotes him and hints of him are also seen in a few early poems e.g. the title "To Poesy" is taken directly from Tennyson. But, as with Shelley, Owen's views of Tennyson could not stand the pressures of modern warfare. In a letter to his mother from Craiglockhart War Hospital, Owen showed his disappointment with the poet and his apparent inability to experience happiness despite all the physical comforts he enjoyed:

The other day I read a Biography of Tennyson, which says he was unhappy, even in the midst of his fame, wealth and domestic serenity. Divine discontent! I can quite believe he never knew happiness for one moment such as I have - for one or two moments. But as for misery, was he ever frozen alive, with dead men for comforters. . . . Tennyson, it seems, was always a great child (CL 482).

Owen's final comments about Tennyson in this letter are important as they indicate the place and the time around which Owen felt that he himself had matured, not only on a personal level, but also in terms of his poetic development: commenting that Tennyson was always "a great child", Owen adds, "So should I have been, but for Beaumont Hamel. (Not before January 1917 did I write the only lines of mine that carry the stamp of maturity . . .)".

Several days later, Owen's opinions about Tennyson are made even clearer in another letter when he writes, "I think if I had the choice of making friends with Tennyson or with Sassoon I should go to Sassoon" (CL 485).

Sven Bäckman salvages Tennyson's reputation when he writes that despite distancing himself from Tennyson's poetry, Owen "never stopped admiring Tennyson's technical

brilliance, his ability to achieve subtle effects by means of a skilful handling of sound and rhythm, and consciously or unconsciously he echoes Tennyson here and there even in his later poetry".¹⁸ Some of Jon Stallworthy's notes in *CPF* lend support to Bäckman's statement e.g. he feels that line 56 of "Insensibility": "Before the last sea and hapless stars", is an echo of line 215 of Tennyson's "Oenone": "Between the loud stream and the trembling stars" (147). Later on, Stallworthy explains that the title "Futility" has its origin in Tennyson's "In Memoriam" (lvi, 25) and refers the reader to Dominic Hibberd's "Wilfred Owen" (32-3) for a discussion on the influence of Tennyson's elegy on Owen (158).

Stallworthy has detected only one hint of Matthew Arnold in Owen's poetry: on the verso of one of the manuscripts of "Elegy in April and September", Owen had referred to Arnold, and for Stallworthy, it appears that "WO had Arnold's elegies in mind as models for his own" (*CPF* 184).¹⁹

The need Owen had to rely so much on the poetic material that the Romantics provided gradually started to lessen, as Bäckman explains in *Tradition Transformed*:

by the latter half of 1917, Owen had found his own way as a poet, and did not have to draw so heavily on earlier poets as he had done in his more immature pieces . . . instead under the pressure of his war experiences, he was trying to liberate himself from his Romantic heritage, by striking completely new paths, or by developing themes and formulae used by the Romantics in new directions (46).

¹⁸Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed*, 90.

¹⁹See Stallworthy's "W. B. Yeats and Wilfred Owen", 199-214, for a discussion on the influence Matthew Arnold may have had in Owen's preface to his intended volume of poetry.

Dominic Hibberd attributes Owen's interest in the late Romantics to their "obsession with pain, martyrdom and physical sensation" (*OTP* 56) and their obsession presumably matched Owen's own views on pain, martyrdom and physical sensation with regards to his war experiences. If one bears in mind the Decadent style of the content and tone of Swinburne's poetry, it should come as no surprise that Owen started reading him. (Owen's identification with the Decadents had been gathering momentum ever since his introduction to Decadent Literature whilst he was in France in 1913-14). It is interesting to note that the only volume of poetry among Owen's possessions in France at the time of his death was Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*.

Bäckman considers Swinburne's influence on Owen: "There are many signs that Owen admired Swinburne's technical skill as a poet, and that he tried to achieve similar effects in his own poems" (53). Bäckman then proceeds to outline the musical effects in some of Owen's earlier pieces that reflect Swinburne's work. He also detects similarities between some of Swinburne's pieces and some of Owen's poems such as "To Eros", "Sunrise", "Purple" and "Elegy in April and September" (54). The Decadent element present in Swinburne's work is also felt in "Has your soul sipped" and "The time was aeon" as well as in "The Kind Ghosts". For Stallworthy, the first nine lines of Owen's "Asleep" had their beginnings in the first four lines of Swinburne's "Laus Veneris" (*CPF*, 153) and "Greater Love" is Owen's response to Swinburne's "Before the Mirror / (Verses Written under a Picture / Inscribed to J. A. Whistler" (*CPF*, 153 & 166).

On discussing Owen's early ideas of poetry, Dennis Welland suggests that it was Owen's emotional response to Romanticism that he found so compelling and this is the reason for his attraction to the poetry of Swinburne and Oscar Wilde.²⁰ Welland suggests

²⁰Dennis Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, 34.

that the only motivation behind the poem "Long ages past in Egypt thou wert worshipped" seems to have been "a surfeit of Swinburne and Wilde, as is apparent from the heavily-accented alliteration, the reliance on a naïvely employed sensuous imagery that recalls Wilde's "The Sphinx", and such phrases as "furious beauty", "wild desire", and "bitter pleasure" (43).

As well as the allusions to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Swinburne that are evident in "Greater Love", it is also possible that Owen recalled Wilde's "Salomé" in the opening lines of his poem. In *OTP*, Hibberd describes "I am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair" as "enigmatic", which is true to Wilde's style. Several critics have suggested that Owen's poem is based on Wilde's "Impression du Matin". Hibberd suggests that the poem is "not a mere copy of Wilde . . . but 'a *matter of experience*' " (155).

Although not as influential as the early Romantics, both A. E. Houseman and W. B. Yeats had an effect on Owen's poetry. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell suggests that Owen's unfinished poem "The Ballad of Purchase Money" is an indication that Owen learned to write by imitating Houseman (293). According to Stallworthy's biography of Owen, the young poet had bought a copy of Houseman's *A Shropshire Lad* in August 1918 (138) and in his annotations to the poems in *CPF*, Stallworthy refers to links between several of Owen's and Houseman's poems. For example, "Le Christianisme" is connected to "On Wenlock edge the wood's in trouble" (126), "Disabled" is an ironic reference to "To an Athlete Dying Young" (176), and "A Terre" contains a vague allusion to "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now" (180).

In his article "In Memory of W. B. Yeats - And Wilfred Owen", Joseph Cohen recognises the existence of a "poetical kinship" between the two poets and examines Yeats's harsh criticism of Owen, whom he had described as "a revered sandwich-board Man of the

Revolution" and had gone on to say, "He is all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick" (639). Yeats objected to Owen's style of war poetry because, as he had said in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry" (34). Cohen suggests that several parallels between the poets' work exist, "not only in diction but also in the imagery of Owen's juvenilia. These indicate that Owen was influenced by Yeats's early volumes in his choice of poetic materials. . . . Certainly the war poet's later use of epigraphs for his poems "S.I.W." and "The Show" from Yeats's "The King's Threshold" and "The Shadowy Waters" confirms his thoroughgoing interest in those turn-of-the-century productions" (642-3). Allusions to Yeats's work can also be seen in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell".

Stallworthy deals with Yeats's attitude to Owen in his article "W. B. Yeats and Wilfred Owen" (199-214). Quoting from *CL*, he points out that Yeats formed part of a literary project Owen hoped to carry out: "To write blank-verse plays on old Welsh themes. Models: Tennyson, Yeats, 1920" (*CL* 551). It is ironic that the 1923 winner of The Nobel Prize for Literature should have so adamantly rejected Owen's poetry when Owen obviously thought so much of him and, as Stallworthy points out in his article: "Even more sadly ironic is the second-to-last entry in the list of 20 names he compiled . . . of those people to whom copies of his published poems were to be sent: 'W. B. Yeats' " (204).

Máire Sexton has considered Yeats's rejection of Wilfred Owen in her article, "W. B. Yeats, Wilfred Owen and Sean O'Casey" (88-95). She agrees with both Cohen and Stallworthy about Yeats's opinions on the relationship between war, passive suffering and poetic themes and relates Yeats's response to Owen to his response to O'Casey, since she feels that a certain affinity existed between Owen and O'Casey. Sexton explains that the purpose of O'Casey's play *The Silver Tassie*, was to "expose war to the criticism of

reason," (95) just as it was Owen's intention to expose the horrors and truth of war to the criticism of reason in his poetry. "If it is a coincidence", writes Sexton, "it is an extraordinary one that the theme of "Disabled" by Owen happens to be identical with that of *The Silver Tassie*" (91).²¹

After examining the influence the Romantic poets had on Owen, it becomes evident that there are no clear boundaries with which to measure the quality and extent of their effect on him.²² In a note in their article, "Authorial Revisions and Constraints", Stephens and Waterhouse support this idea when they write that "Silkin, for example, sees Owen's work as constituting a break with the nineteenth century, whereas Welland and Hibberd stress elements of continuity" (72). It has already been mentioned that in her article, "Wilfred Owen 'Greater Love' and Late Romanticism", Jennifer Breen seems to detect a rupture with the tradition (180), when perhaps what really occurred was a partial break which permitted the development of a more personal style. At the same time, this individual style drew upon a background that had been so heavily seasoned with Romanticism that traces of the Romantic tradition never really disappeared from Owen's work. What did change with the passing of time was the manner in which Owen came to use his knowledge of the Romantics. Much of his juvenilia was an imitation of the early Romantic style. Being inexperienced in matters of love and coming from a sheltered background, Owen could do little more than reproduce other people's feelings, thoughts, perceptions and observations. Later, Owen found that he had to adapt a great deal of what he had learned from the Romantics if he wanted to create a vivid impression of the destruction, ugliness

²¹For further reading, see Donald Davie's article "In the Pity", where he discusses John J. Johnston's *English Poetry of the First World War* and touches upon Johnston's and Yeats's attitude to Owen's poetry (282-3).

²²For further reading on Owen and the Romantic tradition, see Jacques Vallette's "Trois Poètes Anglais Morts à la Guerre", 641-53.

and horror he had encountered in war-stricken France. Instead of freeing himself from the Romantic culture, he harnessed its conventionalities to the war. Referring to how Owen adapted his knowledge of late Romanticism to his war experiences, Dominic Hibberd discusses the "usefulness of the literary tradition in which he [Owen] had trained himself. Late Romanticism had always associated love and horror, so that an image such as the staring face, which had originally been a way of interpreting his own fears and craving for beauty, could easily develop into a metaphor for the 'truth untold' of war" (68). A distinct mingling between Owen's knowledge of late Romanticism and French Decadence, with which he had become familiar whilst teaching English in Bordeaux, is seen in some of his work.

Particularly after he had become acquainted with Laurent Tailhade, a leading Decadent and cult figure in the artistic circles of Paris, the France of 1914-15 opened the door to a literary world that had previously been unknown to Owen. Decadence and all that it implied suited him on his way to self-discovery and poetic maturity. What Owen learned from Tailhade was completely at variance with the path his work would eventually take but important as a stepping stone because it led to greater awareness of language and feeling and the acceptability of expressing feelings through the language of poetry. That Tailhade felt that Owen was beginning to master the use of language is evident in a letter he wrote to Owen in April 1915. Osbert Sitwell quotes from the letter: "Votre lettre est charmante . . . Vous peignez avec un délicat pinceau; votre piano a les touches nécessaires pour la grâce et l'émotion."²³

The Decadents formed a cult following whose melancholic tendencies were well-suited to imagery and diction that stirred the fires of passion and allowed the hidden

²³Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences and Corteous Revelations*, 94.

chambers of the imagination - usually cloaked in secrecy and locked behind the doors of decorum - to be opened up. Any matter or subject that created intense feeling was of value, particularly if it contained an element of shock or rebellion against the conventions of the staid and unimaginative morality of the middle-classes. Voracious women who delighted in cruelty were preferred, death was not to be shunned, martyrdom was of great importance, questions about sexuality and sexual deviance created avid interest, pain, suffering, passion and any type of sado-masochistic pleasure that could be derived from suffering were the order of the day. In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd explains that the cult colour was purple and he provides a brief outline of evidence of the decadent colour in some of Owen's poetry:

The Mermaid's willow tree (1912) had cast a 'purple shade' and in the Verlaine-like sonnet 'Purple' (1916) the colour's association with melancholy and passion are fully, if crudely set-out. The purple wound in 'Disabled' (1917) illustrates the Decadent element in Owen's mature poetry, the colour still carrying its poetic significance and thereby giving new meaning to the blood thirstiness of war" (33).

In a note, Hibberd adds that "The 'chasms' round mad eyes in 'Mental Cases' began as 'blue chasms' in 'Purgatorial Passions'. Such marks usually signify sexual excess in decadent imagery" (212). As further evidence that Owen carried elements of the decadent tradition into his poetry as late as 1918, Hibberd mentions "The Kind Ghosts" and "Greater Love". For Hibberd, the "sado-masochism, erotic reverie and elaborate sound effects of Decadent poetry find what is perhaps their final expression in "The Kind Ghosts" " (161).

Art and art form was of prime importance to the Decadents and the tighter structure

evident in Owen's sonnets from 1915 onwards has been attributed to Tailhade's keen interest in style and structure and his influence over the young poet.

Although Shakespeare and Keats had been Owen's original masters of the sonnet, for Hibberd, traces of Verlaine can be detected in sonnets like "The Unreturning", "Autumnal", "On a Dream" and other pieces that were worked on whilst Owen was at Bordeaux. Hibberd suggests that "Verlaine was an obvious model to follow . . . the erotic melancholy and quasi-Symbolist imagery of those poems clearly show the influence of the master and of his sometime disciple, Tailhade" (40).

Between 1914 and 1917, Owen wrote many of his pieces in sonnet form but after that date, only three sonnets were perfected - all of them having been worked on before the end of 1917: "Sonnet: On Seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought into Action" was revised at Scarborough in May 1918, although it was possibly begun as early as June 1917. "The End" was probably started late 1916 but possibly underwent revision at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918. "The Next War" was revised at Scarborough in July 1918.²⁴

Elements from nineteenth century Decadence and late Romanticism sometimes enjoyed a combined existence in Owen's poetry. In his article, "Wilfred Owen and Gustave Flaubert", Christopher Bentley recognises the possible influence of Laurent Tailhade in Owen's work but at the same time, he draws attention to the fragment "All sounds have been as Music" (now known as "I know the music") and argues that Flaubert also played a part in forming Owen's poetic background since the opening of the sonnet can be compared to chapter six of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (456-7). In his writing, Flaubert showed concern about the conflict between Romantic attitudes and bourgeois materialism,

²⁴Jon Stallworthy, *CPF*, 151, 159, 165.

two matters which may have been of interest to Owen. For Dominic Hibberd, "Long ages past in Egypt thou wert worshipped" is an obvious result of Owen's reading of Flaubert (*OTP* 40) and in Douglas Kerr's opinion, this poem as well as Owen's "Has your soul sipped", "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Disabled", show traces of Flaubert's influence (*WOV* 266).

In chapter four of *Essays in Criticism*, Sasi Bhusan Das has presented an argument in favour of the influence, albeit limited, of the Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Owen's interest in him may well have been aroused in the first place because of the publicity he received after winning The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.²⁵ Tagore's influence can be detected in "The Next War", "Strange Meeting", and "Song of Songs". According to Das, "Owen fully recaptures the rhythm, style and thought of Tagore's devotional lyrics" (77) and even reflects some of his writings in his letters home from the Western Front. In his notes to "O world of many worlds, O life of lives", Stallworthy finds a possible trace of Tagore's influence (*CPF*, 72).

When Owen left England for the last time, he quoted Tagore in a letter to his mother, which for Das, is an indication of the importance Owen attached to his writings. To support this theory, Das mentions that Susan Owen wrote to Tagore on 1 August 1920, requesting information on his verse since part of it was found recorded in a notebook that had been in Owen's possession at the time of his death.

Owen's reaction to Arthur Christopher Benson's book *Where No Fear Was: A Book About Fear* is the principal subject of Simon Wormleighton's article, "Wilfred Owen and A. C. Benson" (435-437). Benson's book, which Owen read at Ripon in May 1918, deals

²⁵Owen attended a poetry reading from the works of Tagore at Harold Monro's "Poetry Bookshop" in November 1915. (See *WO* 129).

with an attempt to reach an understanding of the fear an individual might experience and one wonders if Owen chose to read it in order to solidify what he had learnt at Craiglockhart War Hospital insofar as his own fears were concerned. Wormleighton points out that Owen was reading the book "at a time when he was not only trying to overcome his own terrors, but was also working on what were to be some of his major poems, several of which - notably "A Terre", "Mental Cases", "S.I.W." and "Insensibility" - concern the psychological disturbance which war can cause among its participants" (435).

It was whilst he was at Craiglockhart that Owen began to draw together fibres of a literary past into a poetic present. The Romantic and Decadent elements were threaded together with Owen's sensitivity and perception so that his talents were naturally channelled towards a startling and effective style of war poetry. Romanticism, Decadence, the Georgians and the poetic conventions of these traditions, dreams, and wartime experiences all combined to make Owen the war poet he was to become.

4.1.4 The Georgians

Before examining the importance the Georgians held for Owen, their "identity" must be established. The greatest obstacle in describing and defining them arises because their era spanned a time of great social and political upheaval which means that the word "Georgian" came to denote something different between 1910, 1914 and 1922. Society changed dramatically and this was naturally reflected in changing literary interests that had to be satisfied by the writers of the time. By undertaking an essentially historical study of the Georgians and their age, Robert H. Ross outlines the difficulties that exist in attempting

to provide an adequate definition of the Georgians.²⁶

Critics' views on the Georgians are generally not positive but many recognise their importance in the development of post-Victorian English Literature²⁷ In *The New Poetic*, C. K. Stead describes Georgian poetry as the precursor to modern poetry: ". . . it represented a revolt against the established poetry of the time" (81) and this is possibly why it was not widely accepted at first. On quoting writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Laura Riding, Robert Graves and Edmund Gosse, John Press gives an outline of the critical climate that prevailed towards the Georgians and comes to the conclusion that "The more one studies the Georgians the less inclined one is to write them off as mediocre upholders of a stale poetic tradition."²⁸ C. K. Stead remarks that many critics insist that any poet from the Georgian period that is admired does not really belong to the Georgian movement (88). This being said, it was with great pride that Owen considered himself to be a Georgian. At the end of December 1917, Owen wrote to his mother: "I go out of this year a Poet, my dear Mother, as which I did not enter it. I am held peer by the Georgians; I am a poet's poet" (CL 521).

It is often claimed that the Georgians were limited in their experience and therefore limited in their poetic range but this could be considered a virtue since they tried to confine their poetic boundaries to their own experiences, which signified that they wanted to be specific and tell the truth about specific things. Their aim was to bring life and poetry

²⁶Robert H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt - The Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal, 1910-1922*, 13-15. Chapter six, "Georgian Summer" provides details of pre-war Georgian poetry whilst Chapter Seven, "War and the Georgians" is of particular interest when considering Owen's relationship with the Georgians.

²⁷For further reading, see Timothy Rogers, *Georgian Poetry 1911-1922: The Critical Heritage*, Chapter six of Lawrence Durrell's, *A Key to Modern British Poetry*, and Neil Brennan's article "Sweet Georgian Brown", which reviews Ross's book.

²⁸John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse*, 111.

together, not to keep them in separate compartments that were decorated with excesses of many kinds. To be realistic meant to get back to basics and that is precisely what the Georgians intended. With the outbreak of the war, the basics became truly horrific and the Georgians' task was to present the horror of that reality and the reality of that horror.

At first, as with many things, poetry was slow to respond to the effects of war and to change and as David Perkins explains in *A History of Modern Poetry*, "For at least two years the war had no important effect on poetry. Poets described the sights and incidents of war, but with methods and sensibilities carried over from peacetime. Only toward the end of the war do ideas of the nature and function of poetry begin to change - at least to expand - under the pressure of war emotions" (268). Thus, it seems that it was only with the passing of the war years that some of the war poets realised that their function could be to respond, with shock, indignation and criticism to what was happening and so the voice of intolerance towards "greed, deceit, false pride, blind unimagination, selfish indifference to the suffering of others, and stupid slowness to learn from the past" was eventually raised (268). Perkins has put forward reasons why he thinks poetry took so long to change: "Trauma does not usually induce an immediate change in habits of feeling. The tendency is much rather for the old patterns to assert themselves even more. Secondly, the Georgian mode of nature poetry could not easily assimilate war and the responses it awakened. . . . Poetry. . . . had nothing to do with the war" (273-4). But then, poets like Sassoon and Owen began to produce poetry that reflected what war was really like for those who had to endure its hardships: it was as if the poetic landscape had suddenly been converted from a peaceful Constable-like scene into a gnarled and twisted Nash painting.

Referring to a letter Owen wrote to his mother from Dunsden vicarage on 21 November 1911, in which Owen wrote that he had bought "a five shilling book of poetry

by a modern aspirant, (unknown to me). . ." (CL 96), Dominic Hibberd suggests that this was Owen's first encounter with the Georgian movement since he believes that the book was undoubtedly *Before Dawn: Poems and Impressions* by Harold Monro, who was the publisher of Edward Marsh's anthologies *Georgian Poetry*. Almost two months later, Owen quoted from Monro's book in another letter.²⁹ Hibberd feels that "The impact of this verse on the immature and doubting Owen must have been considerable and traces of it are evident in a number of poems he wrote in 1912 and 1913" and he names "The Unreturning", "The time was aeon" and "Impromptu" as examples of Monro's influence (29-30). "It was thus at this early stage in his career", writes Hibberd in *OTP*, "that he encountered Monro's work and not, as might otherwise be supposed, in 1915, when his letters first record a conversation with Monro in person" (14). In Hibberd's opinion, it was not only from Siegfried Sassoon that Owen learnt to write satire; Monro's work also played its part - to such an extent that echoes of Monro can be seen in some of Owen's more Sassoon-like work. Hibberd finds similarities between a piece from Monro's *Impressions* and the final part of "The Dead-Beat" as well as early work on "The Sentry" (15 & 101). An item of information that would support any argument about Monro's influence over Owen is revealed by Hibberd in his article "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians" when he points out that a minimum of fifty percent of the twenty-two sonnets which were selected by C. Day Lewis for *Collected Poems* were written after Owen had met Monro but before his first meeting with Siegfried Sassoon (32). Thus, it seems that Monro was Owen's principal contemporary model until mid-1917, when he met Sassoon at Craiglockhart.

During the last week of October 1915, whilst Owen was in London to initiate his army training, he met Harold Monro after a poetry reading in Monro's shop.

²⁹Dominic Hibberd, "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians", 28-40.

Approximately four months later, Owen had to attend a ten-day course in London and was fortunate to find lodgings in one of the two small attics over the shop. It was only on the last night of his stay there that Owen managed to speak to Monro who commented in some detail on a few of the sonnets that Owen had left him to read. When, with delight, Owen described Monro's assessment of his work to his mother in a letter, he commented: "The curious part is that he applauded precisely those phrases which Professor Morley condemned" (CL 384).³⁰ Owen's remark about Professor Morley's condemnation of parts of his work is interesting as it reflects how academic opinion can sometimes be at variance with current trends.

It seems that Owen's last known visits to Monro's "Poetry Bookshop" were whilst he was on leave on 8 November 1917 and then a few days later, on his way back home to Shrewsbury. In *Wilfred Owen: The Last Year*, Dominic Hibberd suggests that it was during these two visits that Owen bought Monro's latest volume of poetry, *Strange Meetings*, and Robert Graves's *Fairies and Fusiliers* (58 & 62).

Constant references are made to the influence Monro had on Owen in Hibberd's *OTP*. In *WOV*, Douglas Kerr refers to Monro's *Before Dawn: Poems and Impressions* and explains that it "can be read as a sort of Georgian manifesto, inaugurating a counter-discourse to challenge a debilitated late Romanticism" (274). A few lines later, Kerr describes it as "an intelligent book, and Monro had an important lesson for Owen, showing a fresh modern idiom - plain, realist, above all not conceived with poetical decoration - and a role for the socially responsible modern poet, facing the future with the confidence of his progressive views." In Kerr's opinion, the plainer Georgian style and their experience-

³⁰Professor Edith Morley was Head of the English Department at University College, Reading, when Owen first met her in 1912.

based poetry served Owen as yardsticks against which to measure his tendency to be over-sensuous and excessively Romantic. In other words, through the Georgians, Owen learnt to reinterpret and adapt Romanticism to his poetic needs.

It was mentioned in the previous chapter that Owen met Robert Graves and other important literary figures thanks to introductions from Siegfried Sassoon. He met Robert Graves at Craiglockhart War Hospital when the latter had gone there to visit Sassoon. Graves was positive in his appraisal of "Disabled" and in a letter which is reproduced in Appendix C of *CL*, he encourages Owen to carry on writing poetry. Whilst on leave in November 1917, Owen also met Robert Ross, Osbert Sitwell, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett as well as the editor of the *Daily News*.

Owen's delight at being a Georgian and becoming a "poet's poet" can be linked to the need he always had to identify with somebody or something. Earlier, he had been just as happy identifying with the dead Romantic poets. As an officer in the army, he enjoyed the identity he partly shared with the soldiers and officers. Now, he was content to be a Georgian. In *An Adequate Response*, Arthur Lane describes Rupert Brooke as having been the typical Georgian: ". . . well-educated, socially conscious, and more bound by the conventions of his predecessors than he would have been willing to admit" (59). If one accepts Owen as having been well-educated in the sense that he was highly motivated towards intellectual self-improvement, then he fits the description of the typical Georgian. In a paragraph that sums up the characteristics which mark off the Georgians from their immediate predecessors, C. K. Stead explains why he feels that Owen could be classed as a Georgian despite the fact that none of his work was ever published in a Georgian anthology. The characteristics of the Georgians are:

. . . a rejection of large themes and of the language of rhetoric that accompanied them in the nineteenth century; and an attempt to come to terms with immediate experience, sensuous or imaginative, in a language close to common speech. The work of a poet like Wilfred Owen proceeds naturally out of the Georgian method. . . . And poets like Sassoon, Owen and Sorley inherit the honest gentleness and openmindedness of the liberal intellectual movement out of which had come the Georgian anthologies. Observing suffering that they felt could be avoided, they attacked stupid patriotism, not with abstract argument, but with a true presentation of the facts. (88).

In "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians", Hibberd explains that Owen's work never appeared in Edward Marsh's anthologies simply because he was "discovered" too late; and Marsh did not accept the work of dead authors (37). In Hibberd's opinion, Owen rapidly became a Georgian in terms of style: "Nineteenth-century diction, vagueness and insincerity were to be rooted out, and satirised if necessary; realism, technical accuracy, and fidelity to experience were the modern goals in composition, and the lifestyle that went with them was expected to be perhaps unconventional but always plain, sincere and courageous" (*OTP* 120). Thus, Owen abandoned his old custom of writing for the sake of writing and that was why, in his Preface, he wrote that above all, he was "not concerned with Poetry": poetry without a message was no longer valid for him, and so he became spokesman for those who were unable to transmit their own messages in poetry.

Owen was concerned with the idea of merging life and poetry so that they could reflect reality and each other and he realised that the way to achieve this was through precise observation and accurate reporting. In order to do this, he had recourse to some of

the techniques of his old Romantic heroes: their emphasis on perception and the importance of the senses in order to appreciate things was to be a useful tool for Owen, who hoped to become a modern and technically accurate poet. Despite a certain degree of dissatisfaction, Owen was aware that he was making changes in poetry, as can be seen from a postcard he sent to his cousin, Leslie Gunston, in February 1918: "I suppose I am doing in poetry what the advanced composers are doing in music. I am not satisfied with either" (*CL* 531). Perhaps Owen's dissatisfaction was caused by a feeling that he had not yet quite attained the degree of "reality" he was searching for. In his article, "Brooke and Owen", Geoffrey Matthews explains how difficult it was for most Georgian poets - including Owen - to differentiate between reality and idealism:

There is all the difference in the world between a realist who understands that "reality" is an alloy and an idealist on whom ugliness presses because his only real interest is in Beauty. Almost all the Georgian poets began with this same disability - the anomalous urge to pursue Beauty in a world suddenly full of dusty streets and insurance offices - and the best of them solved the problem in their own ways. An early letter from the Army shows that Owen at first felt this problem as acutely as any; surrounded as he was by ugliness, how could he write poetry? (30).

Perhaps Dennis Welland was aware of the "reality" problem many of the Georgians had and this was possibly why he felt that Owen was not a true Georgian. In his opinion, Owen belonged to the Georgians in terms of time and in the sense that he received help and encouragement from some of them. However, his poetic style and content was far removed

from that of the Georgians: ". . . he was engaged upon the composition of poetry markedly different from and far more important than anything the Georgians produced."³¹ Having said this, Welland also found affinities between Georgian poetry and some of Owen's work. He made specific reference to the poem "To Eros", which he feels resembles the Georgian style in theme, diction and imagery (40). Later, Welland draws our attention to the similarities that exist between Owen and other Georgian poets, explaining that Owen's "Purple" is reminiscent of Brooke's South Sea poems³², that "Long ages past" recalls Flecke's *Hassan* and that "The Fates" is similar to Masefield's "Forget". (The fact that Masefield's sonnet was not published until 1919 shows that, unknown to each other, the two men were thinking along parallel lines). Welland suggests that these similarities are due to the poets drawing on common sources because they all shared the same desire to escape from the "pressing actualities of their time." Welland observes, however, that it was "Owen alone among them [who] realised the ultimate impossibility of this" (43-45). As Robert Ross points out, the Georgians "were possessed of positive, definitive beliefs about life and art; they tried to see once again with their own eyes, feel with their own passions."³³ Does Welland, like Geoffrey Matthews, feel that perhaps the Georgian beliefs about life and art were too positive and too definitive in the climate of the war?

If a Georgian line were to be traced through Owen's poetry, it would begin at Dunsden. Monro's influence in Owen's early work has already been mentioned and echoes are present from time to time even in his later pieces. Both Jon Stallworthy and Dominic

³¹Dennis Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, 32.

³²In an article in *The New Statesman*, 28 August 1964, Donald Davie suggests the importance of Rupert Brooke with regard to Owen and Sassoon: ". . . without Rupert Brooke as their foil, both Owen and Sassoon would shrink" (282-3).

³³Robert H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt, 1910-1922*, 117.

Hibberd have detected similarities between Monro's work and Owen's "The Unreturning", "Strange Meeting", "Asleep", "Arms and the Boy", "The Show", and "Mental Cases".³⁴ Siegfried Sassoon substituted Harold Monro as Owen's guide in the field of poetry and introduced Owen to Robert Graves. The artistic and personal relationship between Owen and Sassoon has already been discussed in the previous chapter. In "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians", Hibberd reminds the reader of Sassoon's "The Daffodil Murderer", which was a parody of John Masefield's "The Everlasting Mercy". Hibberd suggests that "A Terre" is a reflection of Masefield's piece thanks to the influence of Sassoon (34-35). Hibberd then discusses the influence of Robert Graves and refers to Owen's "The Next War" and "Asleep" and suggests that "the friendly help of Sassoon and Graves, much more than the war experience itself, helped to set him [Owen] on his feet as a mature poet" (36 & 38). Towards the end of his article, Hibberd mentions other Georgian influences that Owen was subject to:

He read in December Nichols's *Ardours and Endurances* (1917), W. W. Gibson's *Battle* (1915), and two books by Masefield. . . . Some of Owen's poems, particularly "Disabled", "A Terre", and "The Sentry" are close to Gibson both in spirit and in style. His first composition in 1918, "Miners", may be compared with the introductory poems in Gibson's *Fires* (1912)³⁵. . . . In all, ten Georgians were represented on his shelves: Brooke, Chesterton . . . de la Mare, Drinkwater, Gibson, Graves, Masefield . . .

³⁴For further details, consult Stallworthy's *CPF*, Hibberd's *OTP* and his article "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians."

³⁵In *OTP*, Hibberd describes "Miners" as "the first product of the fully launched poet in 1918, but his consciously Georgian phase was already nearing its end" (126).

Monro . . . Nichols, and Sassoon . . . his batch of Georgians was his only substantial holding of twentieth-century poetry" (38-39).

4.2 A Personal Style

Becoming an imitator of the styles and conventions he had learnt from other poets was not sufficient for Wilfred Owen and so he took the traditional framework of his poetic heroes and gradually built around it in such a way that a more personal style that was better fitted to the circumstances in which he found himself emerged.

4.2.1 The Basic Ingredients

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Warren suggest that the form a poem takes is important since it helps organise, shape and define what the poet hopes to articulate: form means "a shape, a pattern, a structure, an articulation. In poetry. . . the form is an articulation of words, so selected and so arranged as to communicate a total experience"³⁶. It is this total experience that is offered to the reader who, with his own poetic and cultural knowledge, is more or less disposed to accept what the poem has to offer.

In her book, *The Language Poets Use*, Winifred Nowottny writes that "meaning and value in poems are the products of a whole array of elements of language" (18). These elements are set up alongside one another in order to produce a poem. The technicalities used to create the poem help to give it sense and structure, and to create an atmosphere that will, one way or another, affect the reader of the poem. All techniques employed by the poet contribute to the poetic end he wishes to achieve. Poetry can reflect the attitude and feelings of the poet at the time of writing. It is a linguistically structured reproduction of

³⁶Cleanth Brooks and Robert Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 18.

the way he perceives his reality which requires a merging of his intellectual, sensory and emotional responses. If the poem is to be understood by the reader, he too must possess a combination of the above-mentioned responses.

Wilfred Owen's interest in the technicalities of poetry was awakened early on and even in his first known piece, "To Poesy", where he declares his faithfulness to her as a disciple of poetry, discipline in rhyming and attempts at alliteration can be seen. As he became more adept in the art of poetry writing, Owen experimented with different and more unusual rhyming schemes and became bolder in his use of alliteration. He was never afraid to venture down new pathways in his desire to enhance his skills.

Many of the themes which are central to Owen's early poetry are carried through into his later work and often a link between different themes is established because of the use of diction and imagery which is common to them. For example, the general theme of Nature, which is evident at all stages of his poetic development, can be broken down into smaller thematic compartments and therefore be reduced to more specific terms. For instance, Owen centres much of his earlier work around the theme of the four seasons and he makes full use of the elements, applying varying weather conditions according to the mood and atmosphere he hopes to create within the poem. Fully aware of the importance of light - or the absence of it - Owen also uses the theme of darkness and light to deal with fear, gloom and in his later poetry, the effects of war. With the outbreak of war, Owen saw the need to change the focus of his work. The beautiful landscape of a Romantic era had to yield to the hideousness of a landscape that belonged to the 1914-18 conflict. In summary, Owen had to re-channel his imagination into dealing with his changing reality and to do this, he did not change the basic themes of his early poetry: he adapted them to a new situation.

If several themes are used constantly, then it can be assumed that the imagery and diction associated with them is also repeated. This repetition is not a negative quality as Nowottny assures us when she quotes R. A. Foakes who observes that familiar images tend "to gather richer associations with repeated use, and come to embody a complex of relationships which do not need to be stated in the poem (176).³⁷ A poet's use of imagery and diction also reveals his own relationship with the subject under discussion in his poetry: the richer the texture of the imagery and diction, the closer or more aware he is of his subject and the language he can use to portray it. The managing of imagery and diction can become an indication of the degree to which a poet controls his subject. For example, in his early poetry, Owen often relied on the theme of Nature to portray pleasant pastoral settings presented in traditionally poetic language, tidy poetic structures and smooth, fluid rhyming schemes. Later, on observing the chaotic reality in which he found himself enmeshed, he adapted the imagery and diction so that in his war poetry, it became sufficiently harsh, sinister and menacing and therefore suitable for his purposes. In this sense, Owen learnt to distance himself from his work and in his role as witness, participator and informer, he was able to control his material.

At this point, it would be convenient to point out the difficulties that surround the meaning of the word "diction". Nowottny sums up "what is usually referred to as the 'diction' of the poem - that is (in vague and general terms) the individual words or locutions as bearers of meaning and their fitness for the work they seem to be called upon to do in a poem" (26). The fact that the word can only be summed up in "vague and general terms" is a reflection of how complex poetic language can be, and for this reason no suitable

³⁷Nowottny quotes from R. A. Foakes, *The Romantic Assertion: A Study in the Language of Nineteenth Century Poetry*, 36.

definite meaning has yet been found. "It is used by critics," she writes, "who concern themselves primarily with the vocabulary of a poet, especially in so far as it contains unusual words or excludes certain classes of ordinary words. It is also used by critics who are concerned primarily with the effective handling of words (whether these are, severally, 'unusual' words, or not)" (27). In the case of Owen, it is his effective handling of words rather than the inclusion or exclusion of certain words that is of interest here. In his use of vocabulary, Owen employed words which could be described as the "diction of his poetry" as well as his "poetic diction". Sometimes, the diction of his poetry was simple and was based on reality - there was nothing particularly poetic about it. See, for example, the type of vocabulary used in "Dulce et Decorum Est", where Owen has no time for the subtleties of refined language. His prime interest lies in describing the suffering of the soldier as effectively as possible. There is nothing poetic about being affected by poisonous gas and being flung into a wagon to die like a rabied dog:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

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

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs (9-22)

Apart from the unusual choice of the word "ecstasy" to describe the slowness and clumsiness of the soldiers as they reached for their gas masks, the diction in this poem seems to be geared more towards creating a realistic impression of what it was to be a victim of a gas attack rather than to being poetical.

At other times, however, Owen seems to be more poetic and possibly less realistic in his use of language as is seen, for example, in a poem like "Greater Love", which has its roots in both the Romantic and Decadent traditions. Here, Owen adapts the style of both to military circumstances:

Red lips are not so red
 As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
 Kindness of wooed and wooer
 Seems shame to their love pure.
 O love, your eyes lose lure
 When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

Here, Owen's use of language is less harsh and therefore its initial impact is not as strong.

However, it is still effective and the religious allusions are unmistakable. In the opening lines of the poem, an image of bloodied soil is created and the reader can almost imagine the bodies of hundreds of dead soldiers drained of blood and strewn around the battleground. In this poem, Owen's intention was to stress the idea that soldiers at the front were heroes and martyrs who had died for a cause which made them far superior to those who were not involved in front-line combat. For this reason, the soldier-martyrs were untouchable: "Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not" (25). Even though J. Loiseau describes the opening of the poem as "pathetic", he recognises that Owen succeeds in his intention of exalting the soldiers' sacrifice and humbling those who do not participate in the fighting.³⁸ Perhaps Loiseau found the beginning of "Greater Love" pathetic because he considered it too sentimental but Owen was no sentimentalist. Rather, he was searching for an effective form of impressing the value of the soldiers' sacrifice on the reader. He turned to the literary resources available to him in order to make his point and present his personal response to what was happening on the battlefields.

The importance of the 'Perseus' fragments as a mirror of Owen's earlier experiences and as a springboard to his more mature work has already been mentioned in chapter one. Dominic Hibberd, who frequently stresses the significance of these fragments, describes them as "a fascinating if enigmatic key to the rest of his poems" (*OTP* 53), partly because many of the important images in Owen's later work first appear in them. In Hibberd's opinion, "Material from or similar to P1 [the first draft of 'Perseus'] occurs frequently in Owen's verse from 1915 onwards" (47). For him, the most important 'Perseus' images that reappear later on are related to a bodily entry into hell ("Strange Meeting"), staring faces ("Mental Cases") and a sun whose blessing is rejected ("Spring Offensive").

³⁸J. Loiseau, "A Reading of Wilfred Owen's Poems", 101.

war and subsequently ignores the fate of soldiers in battle:

So the church Christ was hit and buried
 Under its rubbish and its rubble.
 In cellars, packed-up saints lie serried,
 Well out of hearing of our trouble.

In "At a Calvary Near the Ancre", the impression given is that Christ-soldiers are united against God, the established Church and politicians, who pay no attention to the plight of those at the front.

"A Tear Song" is a striking poem that contains several elements found in other poems. It shows no hesitation in criticising the cruelty of God. The poem is about a beautiful and innocent young chorister whose eyes sparkle like polished jewels but God, in His greed for worldly comforts, snatches the boy away, and discards the youngster's religious practices.³⁹ Owen starts the sixth stanza by describing the boy's eyes and goes on to explain God's actions:

But his eyes jewelled were
 Of his own singing,
 God saw the sparkle there
 On his lids clinging.

³⁹The idea of God snatching people away is echoed in "Spring Offensive", where the soldiers rush into battle and fall ". . . away past this world's verge, / Some say God caught them even before they fell" (36-7).

God the boys' jewel took
 Into His casket,
 Flinging the anthem book
 On His waste-basket.

God for his glittering world
 Seeketh our tears.
 Prayers show as eyelids pearly.
 God has no ears.

It is interesting to note that perhaps in keeping with his religious background and tradition, and out of the habit of deference to God, Owen started the possessive pronoun "His" with a capital letter when referring to God in stanza seven. The absence of the use of a capital letter in the final stanza is significant in that it suggests that all respect for God has disappeared.

A heartless and unthinking God is present in "Soldier's Dream", where Christ takes pleasure in preventing the continuance of war by damaging all the weaponry:

. . . kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;
 And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;
 And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts;
 And rusted every bayonet with His tears. (1-4)

However, God the Father objects to His son's interference and so undoes the "permanent

stoppage". The second stanza finishes: "But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael; / And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs" (7-8). In this last line, the "he" who had "seen to our repairs" can be taken to be referring to God or to Michael, the Archangel, who as God's henchman, was representing God in what he did. Again, the absence of a capital letter when using a pronoun which could be used to denote God the Father, should be noted. This contrasts with the use of a capital letter when Christ's tears were described as "His tears" (4), thus showing that Christ held the poet's respect in a way that God Almighty did not.

In "Futility", the sun creating life could be paralleled to God and His power to create, but the sun is unable to pour life back into the dead soldier, which means that God cannot restore life either. By asking "O what made fatuous sunbeams toil" (13), is Owen implying that God, too, is fatuous and therefore inane and useless?

In "Exposure", we come across the lines : "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" (33-5). The first of these lines could mean either that because of God's power, the soldiers are afraid, or, that in their desire to reach his "invincible spring", they are full of awe and therefore fearful of His power. Because of the fear, whatever its cause, the soldiers do not mind having to suffer the atrocities of the trenches - they were born to endure them. The line "For love of God seems dying" suggests either that God's love and therefore his concern for the soldiers at the front is waning, or that the soldiers' love for God is fading because of what they are experiencing.

4.2.2 The Four Seasons

However, since the theme of Nature is central to much of Owen's work, and if his

treatment of it with its concomitant themes and corresponding imagery and diction is to be examined thoroughly, then one must go back to the time when Owen's interest in all things natural began to stir. Early poems containing references to Nature and Nature-related themes are considered and on the occasions where they herald later works, these later ones are also commented on in an attempt to show how the same theme is treated differently at different stages of Owen's poetic development.

As a youngster, Owen was never keen on the typical rough-and-tumble activities of childhood. His interests veered more towards less physically demanding and more intellectual and genteel pursuits. He adored reading, was fascinated by botany and developed an interest in geology and archaeology. Nature belonged to and formed a very important part of Owen's childhood and apart from being the base of the sciences he was interested in, it also provided the foundations of Owen's literary interests since it formed one of the cornerstones of the Romantic tradition. As with Shelley, Keats and the other Romantics, Nature provided Owen with a rich source from which to draw his imagery and diction - and scope for the imagination to roam was limitless. It is interesting to note Owen's "see-saw" approach to his use of the four seasons in his poems. Generally, spring is seen as benign, gentle and full of refreshing vitality, whilst summer is portrayed either as warm and clement or harsh and ruthless in her savage heat. Autumn and winter are sometimes attacked for their remorseless cruelty although at other times, they are viewed through the eyes of a Romantic poet whose mind is still firmly entrenched in the more beautiful aspects of Nature.

In "Written in a Wood, September 1910", Owen relates the idea of the passing of time to a succession of ninety autumns and winters and by emphasising the harsh conditions these two seasons can bring, he manages to suggest the hardiness and resistance of the

"ancient beech" which is the subject of the poem.⁴⁰ This sonnet, with its fairy-tale-like diction, was the first of many poems that relied upon the seasons as a focus around which they were developed. To celebrate his nineteenth birthday in March 1912, Owen wrote a lengthy piece called "Lines Written on My Nineteenth Birthday". The poem does not rely on the changing seasons as a central theme but spring is referred to as an indicator of how quickly time races along. In the poem, which clearly reflects what was a permanent preoccupation with time for Owen, he has a dream in which he is visited by two spirits. The first one warns him that lost time can never be regained:

. . . . 'Look back! and learn
 To number life by moments, not by years;
 Know that thy youth to its completion nears.
 This night the final minute hath been laid
 Upon thy nineteen Springs. Aye, be dismayed
 To see the fourth Part of thy utmost Span
 Now spent! What then? Affrighted dost thou plan
 To crowd the Rest with Action, every whit?
 Ev'n so essay; but know thou canst not knit
 Thy web of hours so close as to regain
 E'en one lost stitch! For ever gaps remain!' (8-18)

"The Dread of Falling into Naught", which, according to the date on the

⁴⁰In *CPF*, Stallworthy says that this sonnet was written in September 1910, as the title suggests (7). Hibberd disagrees and offers September 1911 as the date of composition (*OTP*, 209).

manuscripts, was written on 18 September 1912, also deals with the passing of time in terms of the changing seasons. The opening lines sum up the fading summer beautifully:

Now slows the beat of summer's dancing pulse;
 Her voice has weak and quaverous undertones;
 Cold agues in her hectic limbs convulse;
 Slow palsies creep into her sapless bones.
 Ah! is she falling into death so soon, so soon? (1-5)

The death of summer is reflected in the changes that take place in the forest and an invading sense of decay is felt to be draining the world of all its strength and colour. The viciousness of the approaching winter is seen in the early mornings, when the damage done becomes evident to the onlooker who "Fresh bloodstains every misty morn may see, / Spilt from her veins by Winter's lance . . ." (14-15). As summer dwindles, the poet's verve for life also seems to wane until, in the penultimate stanza, a temporary change in attitude becomes apparent and the poet attempts to be less despondent. He explains that with its healing properties, snow will wash away winter's harshness and cruelty, and it will gradually yield to another summer and thus life will be renewed. However, the poet's enthusiasm is not complete because he knows that although with the passing of winter and the birth of spring, a new summer always follows, mankind can never experience the same type of cyclical renewal that restores life: man has no choice but to die and pass into eternity, in the knowledge that he will never see life, as he knows it, again.

Relying on Nature for renewal or for the restoring of life to a human body is the central theme of the much later poem, "Futility". Here, Owen is not lamenting the passing

of time or yearning for eternal life. Rather, he bitterly regrets the death of a soldier who has died from exposure and who cannot be revived by the warmth of a winter sun. In an article published in 1979, F. W. Bateson condemns Owen's personification of the sun and his use of "nonsensical astronomy" in "Futility" (157)⁴¹ but had Bateson delved beyond this, he might have been able to appreciate the symbolism within the poem. The sun, as a life-giving symbol, represents God and that fact that the helpless "kind old sun" is unable to restore life to the dead man reflects Owen's resentful attitude towards God the Creator. Because Bateson is seemingly unable to see into the deeper meaning of the poem, he describes the "superficial elegance of 'Futility' - especially the metrical elegance - almost [as] a mockery of the tragically pathetic subject-matter" (159).⁴² Owen's poem was certainly not meant to bear hints of mockery; his prime concern was to emphasise the hopeless, tragic waste of human lives caused by participation in a futile war. Counterbalancing Bateson's criticism of "Futility" is Douglas Kerr's high opinion of the poem that he feels "makes a place for itself in the discourse of English poetry" (*WOV*, 287).

The harshness of winter is contrasted to the benevolence of a life-giving summer in the fragment "When on the kindling wood the coals are piled", where we are told that the "North wind is racing wild." Re-working the fragment, Owen had crossed out the phrase "the grip and stringency of Winter" (but this was to appear in the later fragment "The Wrestlers") and later he wrote that "Tis a long-treasured summer that we feel / It is the strength of years when earth was young."

In the last week of July 1917, Owen wrote to his mother telling her that following

⁴¹F.W. Bateson, "The Analysis of Poetic Texts: Owen's 'Futility' and Davie's 'The Garden Party'" (156-164).

⁴²For further comments on Bateson's article, see *OTP*, 145.

his doctor's advice whilst at Craiglockhart, he had written a piece of blank verse about the African giant, Antaeus, and he enclosed a copy of what he considered to be the best lines of the poem (now known as "The Wrestlers"). These lines, which describe how Antaeus gained his strength from his Mother Earth, contain references to the four seasons. Owen explains:

. . . . How Earth herself empowered him with her touch,
 Gave him the grip and stringency of Winter,
 And all the ardour of th' invincible Spring;
 How all the blood of June gluttled in his heart.
 And all the glow of huge autumnal storms
 Stirred on his face, and flickered from his eyes (*CL* 478)

The line containing the reference to "th' invincible Spring" is echoed six months later in "Exposure", where Owen writes: "For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid" (33).

Spring is also referred to in "Song of Songs", which was penned around the same time as "The Wrestlers". However in this poem, Spring is not considered as all-powerful but rather it is referred to in more conventional terms. Owen's use of alliteration and parhyme adds to the energy, gaiety and liveliness that is usually associated with spring-time: ". . . sprightly Spring that laugheth into leaf; / Like Love, that cannot flute for smiling at Life" (2-3). The use of alliteration and parhyme in this poem is later reflected in the very carefully worked out and technically precise poem, "From My Diary, July 1914", which is original, light and pleasing. (The only season referred to in this poem is

summer). The fragment "I know the music" was written either in late August or early September 1917. An indirect reference to winter is made whilst autumn is also mentioned: "The crunch of boots on blue snow, rosy glistening. / Shuffle of autumn leaves. . . ." Here, unlike the other poems mentioned above, neither season is referred to as an aggressor. Instead, Owen seems to view both autumn and winter in a typically pleasant and romantic fashion and these lines do not provide any hint at all of the harsh weather conditions that he had experienced at the front before he was sent back to England suffering from shellshock.

In comparison with "The Dread of Falling into Naught", "Winter Song" lies at the extreme end on a scale of opposites. Fair copied on 18 October 1917, it is a conventional poem that centres around the death of autumn, which yields to winter. However, autumn's death, the ensuing lack of colour and the disappearance of all traces of summertime are treated with a calmness and gentleness that is totally lacking in the earlier piece, and similar to the fragment "I know the music", this poem gives no indication of Owen's feelings about his war experiences.

Stallworthy suggests that Owen may have abandoned the fragment "Spells & Incantation", which was probably drafted in mid-November 1917, after drawing on its diction for the poem "I saw his round mouth's crimson darken as it fell" (*CPF*, 406). Although this is most probably the case, the fragment contains references to the four seasons, which do not appear in the poem. Ignoring Owen's crossings-out and alterations, it can be seen that in this fragment, each of the seasons is partnered with a jewel and a specific time of day. Thus, we have winter which is accompanied by "A vague pearl, a wan pearl". Despite their beauty, pearls are often associated with sadness and so the reader connects the notion of winter to sadness. The "snow-lit dawn" of winter seems gentle and

calm and somehow very much in keeping with a melancholic and depressed air. Spring is described as having "diamond dawns" that glitter and glow.⁴³ Here, a sense of crystalline strength and freshness is felt. The pleasure that can be derived from a brisk spring is hinted at when the poet suggests that looking into the eyes of the person addressed in the poem, he is able to "laugh, and lightly take / All air of early April in one hour." Summer's relentless heat and excessive brightness is compared to the richness of "Tiger-eyed" and "Wrathful" rubies. Here, the passion that summer can bring with it, is intimated by phrases such as "furious summers" and "fury of noondays". In contrast, the relative calm of autumn is seen in a "Quiet amber, mellow amber." Phrases like "evening, and the auburn autumn cloud", "evening hay" and "September mist" could suggest both the tranquility of the close of day as well as the end of a scorching summer.

The fragment "Sunrise", which was drafted in early May 1917 possibly influenced Owen in his writing of "Spells and Incantation" approximately six months later because in this piece, the different stages of sunrise, instead of the seasons, are compared with different jewels. The delicate colour of an early sun is likened to a pearl paler than the moon's own pearl. The dawn pearl then becomes an opal, thus suggesting a wide range of gentle shades and hues. This opal-like dawn leads into a colourful emerald and sapphire awakening which is accompanied by the stirrings of early morning birdsong. This in turn takes us through "the shaking jewels of dawn" to the point where the sun assumes a fiery red hue and is described as the "immortal Ruby".

Owen's oscillating approach to his use of the four seasons in his poetry was

⁴³Over a year earlier, in September 1916, Owen had written a first draft of "Purple". The sonnet was then revised either at Craiglockhart in October-November 1917 i.e. at the same time that "Spells and Incantations" was started, or at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918. It is worth noting that the fourth line of the sestet contains the phrase "diamond dawns of spring".

mentioned earlier. This vacillating manner seemed to last from his adolescence up to the time his health improved whilst at Craiglockhart War Hospital. Owen's indecisiveness in his poetry could have been a manifestation of his lack of self-confidence. The therapy he received from his psychiatrist at the hospital more than likely helped him to overcome his insecurity at a personal level whilst the influence of Siegfried Sassoon probably helped to give him a clearer idea of what he hoped to express in his poetry. Whatever the cause of his fluctuating treatment of the seasons in his earlier poetry, it disappears once he comes to grips with himself, to such an extent that once Owen leaves Craiglockhart, the seasons as such are only referred to in passing and are no longer used as a central pivot in his work.

4.2.3 The Elements

Sometimes, instead of relying on references to the seasons to create atmosphere in his poems, Owen depended on the theme of the weather and the effects the elements have on man and earth alike to convey certain moods and feelings. As early as April 1911, he showed a remarkable ability to communicate an intense sense of sadness by using diction and imagery associated with dull, rainy weather, as can be seen in his "Sonnet - Written at Teignmouth, on a Pilgrimage to Keats's House". An air of gloominess is immediately captured in lines four and five, where he writes that ". . . lowly-brooding clouds now loom / In sable majesty around". The use of alliteration and the heavy-sounding vowel combinations help create a density of feeling which is carried through to the end of the sestet which finishes with lines once again laden with alliteration: "While mournfully trail the slow-moved mists and rain, / And softly the small drops slide from weeping trees, / Quivering in anguish to the sobbing breeze".

Alliteration is also used in describing the icy rain that falls in "Lines Written on My

Nineteenth Birthday", where Owen explains that he only stops reading, either to write or " . . . to mock the rain / Shooting its sleety balls at me in vain" (43-4). These sleety balls of rain, which could be seen as heralders of the appalling weather conditions that are described in "Exposure", do not shoot in vain in "Asleep", where the aggressive conditions the soldiers have to endure are suggested by the lines ". . . these rains, these sheets of lead, / And these winds' scimitars" (13-14).

In an attempt to describe the dramatic effects of depression in "Supposed Confessions of a Secondrate Sensitive Mind in Dejection", Owen compares it to stormy weather and writes of how the personified despondency fiendishly makes her presence felt. She:

. shows me an aged tree
 Bending and groaning in its agony
 Before a wind tormenting it for leaves,
 Spreads out a wild strange sky where towering shapes,
 Black and chaotic, choke the sickening day.
 Voices moan round; and from the sodden day
 Mist-shrouds crawl up. . . .

In his retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's tale "Little Claus and Big Claus" in blank verse, Owen writes of a pleasant early morning in the country: ". . . the morning sun was warm, and mist / Rose from fresh furrows like the horses' steam" (15-16). A change of mood within the poem is reflected in a change in the weather when "curdling storm clouds" (49) envelop the bereft Little Claus. This sense of foulness is also captured in stanza 21 of "The Little Mermaid", where a tinge of light "Curdled the sea, like mingling

oil and ink" (164-5). The curdled sea was a foreteller of bad weather and misfortune. (The evilness of the woman who had silken hands yet, ". . . skin that was foul as curdled milk" (11) in "The Rime of the Youthful Mariner" recalls the heinous hag of "The Little Mermaid").

It can be seen from the manuscript that a great deal of effort was put into the unfinished fragment "Nights With the Wind. A Rhapsody". The different versions of this fragment contain a series of references that appeal principally to the reader's sense of sound. Images of a turbulent night are conjured up in the first line: "Upon a night of gales and sweeping rain" and we soon learn that "It was the Wind / Most woeful and most weird" that made up the solemn noises that could be heard by the young man in this piece. The eeriness of the wind is suggested in the lines "Once more the near invisible murmurer / Moaned very mournfully", although here, Owen's use of alliteration is perhaps excessive. Later on, Owen attempts to relate the sound of the wind to the sound of music.

Despite its fragmentary nature, "Nights with the Wind" is also a precursor of some of Owen's poems. Written well before his involvement in the 1914-18 conflict, many expressions contained in its drafts anticipate poems that recall the effects war had on Owen. The "solemn noises" heard "through the walls beyond the hearth" of the first draft of the fragment somehow anticipate the haunted feeling in "The Kind Ghosts", where a reference is made to "the stillness of her [Britannia's] palace wall". In this poem, tranquility reigns, whilst at the beginning of "Nights with the Wind", the opposite occurs. However, a few lines further on, the author "listened to a silence". Silence also invades the beginning of "Exposure", where, "Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous, / But nothing happens" (4-5). The "Wind most woeful and most weird" of the fragment is also echoed in "Exposure", where "Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire" (6). Both

fragment and poem rely heavily on alliteration for effect. The second part of the first draft of "Nights with the Wind" is over-laden with a cacophony of peace-invading sounds, where the wind is described:

Sometimes it hummed sonorous monotones
 Like poems sung in southern tongues and tunes
 By moving crowds with gongs; headstrong
 With the drone of drums. drawling
 And sometimes he shrieked, as shriek demented minds.

The sonnet "Music", begun almost two years later, is also heavy with sound. This piece was begun whilst Owen was training in October 1916 and revised nine months to a year later at Craiglockhart. Although it spanned a large part of his military career, its subject matter is more concerned with communicating the sensations experienced on what appears to have been his first sexual encounter rather than with war. The reader encounters the beating of a drum, "Thuds of gods' thunder" (6), fifes, gongs, oboes, laughter, sighs and tears.⁴⁴

"I know the music", which was written around the time Owen revised "Music", is another fragment which appeals strongly to the sense of sound. Unlike "Music", however, there is no urgency of feeling, no aggressive force that propels the reader into a state of emotional flux. Instead, there is an air of calmness and serenity which is created by lines like "The crunch of boots on blue snow, rosy-glistening / Shuffle of autumn leaves. . ."

⁴⁴See Sven Bäckman's *Transition Transformed* (121-46) for a detailed discussion on the relationship between Owen's work and music. Specific references to "Music" can be found on 129-31.

or

Gurgle of sluice surge through hollow rocks
 The gluttonous lapping of the waves on weeds
 Whisper of grass; the myrid-tinkling of flocks.
 The warbling drawl of flutes and shepherds' reeds.

But a hint of disturbance follows when stormy October nights with "Drums, rumbling and rolling thunderous" arrive. In a note in *CPF*, Stallworthy suggests that Owen may have abandoned this fragment after drawing on its diction for the poem "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (486).

"The Calls" is also a poem which relies heavily on sound and although each stanza deals with a different sound, the reader does not feel trapped by an excess of it. Moving from first to final stanza, we encounter the howling of "A dismal fog-hoarse siren" (1), "Quick treble bells" (5), slower and more sonorous "Stern bells" (9), the moaning of a church organ, "a blatant bugle" (13) which disturbs the peace of quiet afternoons, "rag-time tunes" (15), gongs that "hum and buzz like saucepan-lids at dusk" (17), the noise of firing practice, the sound of "shell-shrieks and the crumps" - with the resulting noise of a thumping heart stirred by fear - and finally, "the sighs of men" (25).

Returning to the use of the seasons as a theme in Owen's poetry, the first part of the fragment, "About the winter forest loomed", describes a miserable wintry scene which contrasts sharply to, and is much more effective than, the second part. "A terrifying dark" is mentioned, there is a "sinister clamour" and a "sharp scourging rain". In *OTP*, Dominic Hibberd writes that this fragment "contains a few draft images which were probably more work for 'Perseus'. . . . Like the trees in P3, the forest has a psychological connotation,

seeming like the 'horrors of an obscene mind. . . . afraid of self'" (50). Hibberd's theory about the fragment's psychological connotations makes sense if one considers that it was written in France in March-April 1915, following Owen's personal and religious crises at Dunsden and during an intense period of self-discovery, shortly after his meeting with Laurent Tailhade, who had introduced him to French Decadent Literature and who had possibly helped him to begin to come to terms with his sexuality.

"Storm" is a sonnet which deals with the stirrings of love and is another piece that could be described as having psychological connotations. In the first quatrain, the menacing storm represents the threat of falling in love and love personified, is likened to "glimmering lightning":

His face was charged with beauty as a cloud
 With glimmering lightning. When it shadowed me,
 I shook, and was uneasy as a tree,
 That draws the brilliant danger, tremulous, bowed.

The second quatrain shows Owen recognising that he must allow the storm to break. In other words, he must accept falling in love, as this will be beneficial to him:

So must I tempt that face to loose its lightning.
 Great gods, whose beauty is death, will laugh above,
 Who made his beauty lovelier than love.
 I shall be bright with their unearthly brightening.

In the sestet, Owen contemplates what would happen should the storm break and he were to fall in love. He reaches the conclusion that the aftermath would be so wonderful - providing a sensation of total relief - that it would not matter if others reacted adversely to his falling in love:

And happier were it if my sap consume;
 Glorious will shine the opening of my heart;
 The land shall freshen that was under gloom;
 What matter if all men cry out and start,
 And women hide their faces in their shawl,
 At those hilarious thunders of my fall?

In *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, Dennis Welland describes "Storm" as a "very powerful sonnet remarkable for the range of its associational reference" and offers the suggestion that its theme may be "the awakening of love. . . tragically conceived. . . . a symbolic statement of apprehension for his [Owen's] personal future. . . . Alternatively, Owen may be visualising his poetic career. . . . or it may be nothing more personal than an experimental variation on the theme of *Hyperion*" (41-2). For Jon Stallworthy, "That thunder cloud is a fine image for brooding, pent up passion and we see the poet for the first time facing up to the possibility that the cloud might break and to the consequences of the resulting storm" (*WO*, 139). Dominic Hibberd associates the fragment "Shook and were bowed before embracing winds" (which he considers to be part of Owen's plans for 'Perseus') with "Storm" and the idea of sexual and poetic awakening (*OTP*, 48-9 & 51).

Different aspects of "Storm" are echoed in other pieces. "The Sleeping Beauty" also

deals with the awakening of love but none of the troubled weather and its associated references is present. ("The Sleeping Beauty" also bears a similarity to "Sonnet", which had been written one and a half years previously). Unrequited love is the theme of "Autumnal", where Owen describes the sense of loss often experienced after love has gone. For him, in the "dead calm" (13) of the voice of the loved one who does not reciprocate his love, "The menace of a drear and mighty storm" (14) might be heard. The opening of "The Unreturning" is similar to "Storm" in the sense that a tense, inhospitable atmosphere is created by what appears to be the unexpected descent of night or a violent tempest:

Suddenly night crushed out the day and hurled
 Her remnants over cloud-peaks, thunder-walled.
 Then fell a stillness such as harks appalled
 When far-gone dead return upon the world.

A much gentler, more romantic approach to weather conditions is evident in "Winter Song". This traditional poem parallels the fading of autumn and its colourful leaves which are transformed into pale snowflakes with the disappearance of a healthy summer glow from the complexion of the subject of the poem. According to Jon Stallworthy, the subject of the poem was the seven-year-old son of some friends from Edinburgh (*CPF*, 101), which partly explains the high degree of conventionality in the poem: anything less conventional would have been less suitable for a boy of that age.

Nature in all her hostile aspects is seen in "Exposure". In this poem, war mirrors Nature, and man is helpless in his fight against her. Her malevolence is expressed in elemental imagery that uses military terms to fight against and gain a vicious victory over

man. The intense cold of the western front is suggested by the opening line of the poem: "Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us . . ." and the erratic squalls of wind are likened to the jerky uncontrollable movements of suffering men: ". . . we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire, / Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles" (6-7). We do not know whether the suffering Owen refers to here is physical or mental - or both - but his reference to brambles may have been made with the intention of recalling Christ with His crown of thorns and all the suffering He endured. This is fitting since Owen frequently paralleled Christ with the soldiers. At the beginning of the third stanza, when dawn arrives, she brings more foul weather with her so that the shivering soldiers have to contend, not just with fighting a war, but also with surviving the effects of another cruelly miserable and wretched day:

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. . . (11-13)

It is clear that the soldiers fear less the dangers of flying bullets than the threatening snow storm, and the gentle swirling of the falling snowflakes that wander "up and down the wind's nonchalance" (19) suggests a carelessness that almost amounts to deliberate cruelty. Despite the snow's apparent frailty and gentleness, she is deathly and the effect she has on the soldiers is one that causes them to escape into hallucinations:

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 (21-24).

It appears that whilst trapped in reality, the men find refuge in what is unreal and, as Jon Stallworthy points out, "Cowering from the murderous wind, the soldiers escape briefly into a vision of benevolent Nature" (*WO* 247). However, the irony here is that in the soldiers' hallucinations, Nature might be benevolent, but hallucinations themselves are intrinsically dangerous.

In *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, Kenneth Simcox recognises that, without doubt, Nature can be extremely cruel but he also puts forward the idea that she can be beneficent. Referring to "Exposure", he writes that "Trickling blossoms . . . remind us of Nature's free gift of beauty, and at the same time, while cringing in holes we are made aware of 'grassier ditches'" (137-8). One can respect Simcox's opinion, but at the same time it would seem unlikely that soldiers fighting against death from war or through exposure would have the energy or the inclination to appreciate the idea of "grassier ditches" or compare falling snowflakes to drifting blossoms. If they did, it would only be because they had lost a grasp of their reality.

Night-time brings no respite but is a continuation of what the previous dawn had brought and what the following one will inevitably bring. Nature has completed her circle of pitiless weather; there is no end to her inclemency and so the deaths of many of the soldiers is guaranteed: "Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us, / Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp" (36-7).

4.2.4 Darkness and Light

Images of darkness and light abound in Owen's poetry and help connect the different strands of the general theme of Nature. Throughout his life, Owen was plagued by nightmares in which he would often feel that he had been plunged into darkness and this sense of darkness was often related to his various mood swings. In much of his poetry, the theme of darkness is connected to feelings of fear: dusk and night-time bring renewed horrors; sunrise often brings relief but is frequently accompanied by a repetition of unceasing fear and consternation. The shadowy twilight of horror is always present.

"The Unreturning" was drafted in late 1912 or early 1913 and further work was done on it between October 1917 and January 1918, thus covering much of Owen's poetic life-span. In this poem, Owen effectively creates a sense of isolation by a sudden plunging into darkness. We find ourselves in a no-man's-land which is neither terrestrial nor celestial. There is an intensity of feeling, of insecurity, that cannot be relieved and so poet and reader alike are trapped in an unpleasant and morbid twilight zone where ". . . the indefinite unshapen dawn / With vacant gloaming, sad as half-lit minds" (9-10) gradually begins to appear. The sensation of being caught in a lifeless trap is echoed later in "The Kind Ghosts" where Britannia's heavily curtained palace is inhabited by the invisible ghosts of the thousands of soldiers who sacrificed their lives for her.

The sonnet "On My Songs" had its beginnings around the same time as "The Unreturning" and connects the feelings of fear and gloom to darkness. In the sestet, Owen explains that at times when he feels that he cannot be consoled by the words of earlier poets, he voices his own reveries, which are made up of the "Low croonings of a motherless child, in gloom / Singing his frightened self to sleep. . ." (10-11). Two lines later, he shows his full understanding of a child's fear of the dark when he writes of

"Dreading the Dark thou darest not illumine".

A patient's regaining of consciousness, which symbolises his passing from darkness into light is dealt with in "Conscious". Here, helped by Nature, the sick man attempts to grasp reality by focussing on the "yellow mayflowers by his head" (3) and the flies crawling around a shiny jug. But his fight to remain conscious is interfered with by his memories of war to the extent that "sudden evening blurs and fogs the air" (9). The colourless tones of dusk mingle with the violence of "Music and roses [that] burst through crimson slaughter" (12). As he drifts into semi-consciousness, his mind returns to the gloom of a dull twilight so that "He can't remember where he saw blue sky . . . / And there's no light to see the voices by. . ." (13 & 15).

The murkiness of the ". . . misty panes and thick green light, / As under a green sea . . ." (13-14) through which the poet witnessed the agonising death of a soldier by gas in "Dulce et Decorum Est" shows Owen's ability to use shades and tones of light to create atmosphere. The reader is made to wade through the cloying greenness that invades the poem so that he too can imagine, ". . .in some smothering dreams. . ." (17) the slow torture of the soldier whilst he was hovering between the claws of life and the talons of death.

A few lines in "Supposed Confessions of a Secondrate Sensitive Mind in Dejection" provide an early hint of the poetic heights Owen was to reach in "Mental Cases". In this 1911-12 poem, we read that Despondency descended upon Owen:

With Autumn mists, and hand in hand with Night,
She came to me. But at the break of day,
Went not again, but stayed and yet doth stay.

' - O Horror, doth not Pain take note of light?
 And darkness, - doth he not hold off betimes,
 And yield his victim for an hour to Sleep?
 Then why dost thou, O Curst, the long night steep
 In bloodiness and stains of shadowy crimes?' (29-36)

These lines of sleepless nights and haunted days anticipate the sensation of mental claustrophobia the men in "Mental Cases" have to live with because they are unable to rest and forget the horrors of war that have permanently imprisoned their minds. "Mental Cases" is probably the poem which best creates a feeling of being ensnared in an oppressingly hellish existence where light cannot reach beyond the turmoil of the minds of the living who are not quite dead. This poem saw its beginnings in the above-mentioned poems as well as in the fragment "Purgatorial Passions", which was penned two years earlier, in 1916. From start to finish, the reader feels suffocated by a desire to break free of the permanent half-light in which the patients are condemned to spend the remainder of their painfully pathetic lunatic days. The poet asks who these men are and he receives his answer. His sense of pity mixed with desperation at the thought of their plight is a manifestation of his guilt and the guilt of all those responsible in any way for the war:

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
 Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
 Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
 Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?
 Stroke on stroke of pain, - but what slow panic,

Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
 Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms
 Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
 Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

- These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.

Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
 Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
 Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
 Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
 Always they must see these things and hear them,
 Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
 Carnage incomparable, and human squander
 Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
 Back into their brains, because on their sense
 Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
 Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.

- Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
 Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.

- Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
 Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
 Snatching after us who smote them, brother,

Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.⁴⁵

On considering the theme of light and darkness in Owen's poetry, the importance of the sky cannot be ignored. Naturally, to many soldiers who spent so much time cramped in the trenches and dug-outs, the sky provided relief in the sense that it was a sign of life above ground. At the same time, it was a treacherous enemy that could spew out such fierce weather conditions that it could almost be as deadly as the war itself. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell explains that soldiers had to stand-to at daybreak and nightfall, "occasions when the sky especially offered itself for observation and interpretation" (51-2) and he quotes from Siegfried Sassoon's *Memories of an Infantry Officer*, in which Sassoon, on recalling an evening stand-to, writes "the sky was one of the redeeming features of the war" (45).

In "Conscious", the injured soldier's lifeline is the blue sky although he is unable to recall it because he is sinking into oblivion - and possibly death. The sky is conspicuous by its absence in the fragment "An Imperial Elegy" and in "The Show" where the soul of the dead poet looks down "from a vague height with Death" (1). He observes a desecrated land that is "pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues" (5). There is no room for sky in a hell on earth. Although the sky is not mentioned at all in "Exposure", it is clearly the malefactor, the cause of all evils and root of the soldiers' pain, suffering and, in many cases, death.

On 14 April 1917, Owen's battalion moved forward to Savy Wood but in order to reach it, open ground had to be covered. Exactly a month later, Owen wrote to his brother, Colin, from the 13th Casualty Clearing Station and described what appears to have been this

⁴⁵For further reading, see Dominic Hibberd, "Images of Darkness in the Poems of Wilfred Owen", 156-62.

advance over open land, "The sensations of going over the top are about as exhilarating as those dreams of falling over a precipice, when you see the rocks at the bottom surging up to you. I woke up without being squashed. Some didn't. There was an extraordinary exultation in the act of slowly walking forward, showing ourselves openly" (CL 458). The experience described in this letter could well have provided material and inspiration for "Spring Offensive", thus making Owen's last known poem semi-autobiographical. Dominic Hibberd's last chapter in *OTP* deals fully with the poem. At one point, Hibberd writes:

He does not refer to himself in "Spring Offensive" yet the poem came - as naturally as leaves to a tree - out of his inner life, rounding off his poetic career and at the same time giving promise of further achievement. Its setting corresponds to the landscapes where his imagination had first been touched by beauty, while its language and imagery show how much he had learned from the great nineteenth-century writers whom he had admired since his schooldays . . . (191).

Being relieved of the weight of their knapsacks, the soldiers in "Spring Offensive" were free to eat and rest "against the shade of a last hill" (1), but many chose not to rest: they "Stood still / To face the stark blank sky beyond the ridge, / Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world" (5-7). The last hill which provided them with protection and shade was the only thing that separated them from a nothingness. For many, they had in fact come to the end of the world because they were going to die. Going over the hill, they would find nothing but an unfriendly sky that is described as "stark" and "blank", a sky fanned by a gentle May breeze that represented hidden danger: "Sharp on their souls hung the

imminent ridge of grass, / Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass" (11-12). Once the order to attack was given, the soldiers advanced over the hill and raced into the treacherous space between sky and earth. Nature had united her forces to commit massive slaughter:

So soon they topped the hill, and raced together
 Over an open stretch of herb and heather
 Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned
 With fury against them; earth set sudden cups
 In thousands for their blood; and the green slope
 Chasmed and deepened sheer to infinite space (27-32)

Owen bestowed a strange power upon the sun so that sometimes it was seen as a life-giving force and at other times, it was the denier of life. Sunlight is not always equated with happiness, as can be seen in one section of the fragment "Science Contradicted":

Another day dawns,
 Sallow, grim, morose.
 Gloomier
 More gloomy than the midnight
 without stars . . .

In "The Little Mermaid", sunset is impressively described :

The sun that moment dipped, but fairy pink

Still flushed the clouds, and long their trailing fringe

Swept on, and waved above the airy brink

Where day was slipping from the earth. (161-64)

But a sense of doom is felt when we read immediately after that "A tinge / Curdled the sea, like mingling oil and ink" (164-5).

A splendid sunrise is encountered in the 1914 fragment "Completion of 'Tonight I have my friar'", where the morning sun is described as "A tangible phantasy of diamond dust / yellow, and purple, glorious". The sun's magnificence is also seen in the first part of the 1915 fragment "The sun, far fallen in the afternoon" where, even though it is rapidly sinking, it leaves an aura of majestic splendour. Its radiance is seen in phrases such as "the air was thick with gold", "Poured fire into the air cloud", "And clouds hung heavy with their aureal", all of which Owen had struck out in his manuscript. Because of the sunlight, everything "Became blessed to behold. / And every stalk of plant and hand of man / Fell languid in the joy. . . ". The one reference to the sun in "It was a navy boy, so prim so trim" is also pleasant and light. Describing an attractive young member of the British Navy, Owen writes that "(His head was golden like the oranges / That catch their brightness from Las Palmas sun)" (6), which anticipates the fragment "Golden Hair", where Owen writes " -This is more like the aureole of Aurora, / The pale, clear leaves of flame of her corona."

Almost as if he is testing ways to use the sun as a theme in his poetry, Owen changes his approach and in mid-1916, the benign sun is cast aside and replaced by an oppressive one in a fragment beginning "It was an evening". Virtually all of the fragment has been crossed out but if pieces are slotted together, it can be seen that he was going to

describe an evening which was more like a "horrid", "blasted" or "stagnant" dawn. A few lines later the sun, which "sunk sultrily" is described as ". . . for ever smouldering blood." The fragment ends with the short sentence "And this is Hell." The oddness of the sentence is striking since in Hell, no sun can burn, but at the same time, Hell is perhaps the most fitting place for such a vile ball of fire. With the waning of a delicate moon, a majestic sunrise is described in the fragment "Sunrise", which was started mid-1917. It shows a return to what appears, at the beginning, to be a more tranquil setting. However, the strength of the sun is so over-powering that ripples of cruelty are sensed in the closing lines. Almost in disbelief, the reader has to accept that despite her unchanging and ageless qualities, the sun is destructive and kills what is weaker:

Then slowly through the shaking jewels of dawn,
 Moved the immutable Ruby of the Sun,
 Hung the immortal Ruby, huge with morn.

And the moon was finished like a reel unspun,
 She vanished as a Pearl that talks in wine.
 She died. . . .

In "The Promisers", the sun once again appears to assume a benevolent role. It is described as "prosp'rous" and a certain degree of chuminess is even seen to exist between it and the poet: "The sun fell strong and bold upon my shoulder; / It hung, it clung as it were my friend's arm" (5-6).

Given that the reader has already witnessed Owen's varying approach to the sun,

change comes as no surprise and "I saw his round mouth's crimson darken as it fell" shows Owen moving from a more simple representation of the sun towards a much more complicated and intricate use of solar imagery. Here, sunset is compared to the fading colour on the lips of a dying man. Since this short but effective poem was written in November-December 1917, it can be assumed that Owen is describing the death of a soldier. A sensation of fading glory is felt as the lines reach their end. As the sun disappears and death approaches, cold stars, bearing no life or warmth, come out:

I saw his round mouth's crimson darken as it fell,
 Like a sun, in his last deep hour;
 Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,
 Clouding, half gleam, half glower,
 And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.
 And in his eyes
 The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,
 In different skies.

In December 1917, Owen wrote a poem called "Wild With all Regrets", which was expanded into "A Terre" in April 1918. The latter contains lines that suggest the healing, or at least, comforting, powers of the sun:

Friend, be very sure
 I shall be better off with plants that share
 More peaceably the meadows and the shower.

Soft rains will touch me, - as they could touch once,
 And nothing but the sun shall make me ware. (52-55)

Here, the moribund soldier attempts to console himself with the idea of a peaceful after-life, blessed by Nature.

In the first stanza of "Futility", the reader is led to believe that Owen views the morning sun as a renewer of life. He suggests that the body of the soldier should be moved into the early morning sun because of its restorative powers. The irony of the poem lies behind the idea of a new day dawning and supposedly bringing new life to the earth, but instead of creating life, dawn destroys it.⁴⁶ Dawn also brings death in the "The Show", "Exposure" and "S.I.W.", where a young soldier has committed suicide and his body is still bleeding when it is discovered: "One dawn, our wire patrol / Carried him. This time, Death had not missed. / We could do nothing but wipe his bleeding cough" (24-26).

The association of death and dawn was not something peculiar just to Owen's war poetry, as can be seen in "The Little Mermaid". Dawn brings both the possibility of death and life in stanza 29, where the Prince is on the point of drowning in a storm at sea, but:

At dawn, the outspent wind sank down as dead;
 And gloriously uprist the eastern hues.
 They touched the Prince's pallid cheek with red,
 And soon with certain life he did infuse.

⁴⁶The idea of the taking of life at dawn appears in Owen's work as early as 1912 or early 1913, when in "The Unreturning", he writes of the "indefinite unshapen dawn" being the "weak-limned hour when sick men's sighs are drained" (9 & 11).

Much later on, the wicked witch of the sea gives the mermaid a potion that will change her life and eventually lead to her death. The old sorceress instructs the young mermaid to drink the concoction at sunrise (stanza 47), when it will take effect and it is later, in the "doleful light of dawn" (558) that the mermaid's sisters offer her the chance to become a sea-creature once more and return to the ocean's depths. Unable to kill her Prince in order to return, the lovelorn creature casts herself into the sea, just as the merciless sun is rising like the molten mass of evil in a witch's cauldron: "Sudden, like bubble on hot metal seething, / Bulged the great sun" (583-4).

A total rejection of the sun is seen in "Spring Offensive", where the soldiers view it as an ex-friend or lover. The use of the word "flare" in the eyes of the soldiers as they look into the sun suggests an air of defiance, a feeling that they no longer need to rely on it:

Only a lift and flare of eyes that faced
 The sun, like a friend with whom their love is done.
 O larger shone that smile against the sun, -
 Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned (23-26)

Was it for this reason that "instantly the whole sky burned / With fury against them" (29-30)?

Time is a concept fashioned by man in an attempt to come to a closer understanding of Nature. It is based on the changing seasons, the rising and setting of the sun and the waxing and waning of the moon. On several occasions in his trilogy, Harold Owen mentioned his brother's fixation with time and Owen himself often protested about his lack

of it. In July 1918, he complained to his mother that "Time goes cruelly fast" (CL 564). Since he was so obsessed with time, it is hardly surprising that several of Owen's poems are built up on or around time sequences. The early fragment "How do the heavens rule my gloomy moods" shows Owen working through the times of day in chronological order. In "Uriconium", the number of harvests that have been reaped since the fall of the Roman Empire and the number of times the moon has risen and set gives an impression of the speedy passing of time:

Ah! me! full fifteen hundred times the wheat
 Hath risen, and bowed, and fallen to human hunger
 Since those imperial days were made complete.
 The weary moon hath waxen old and younger
 These eighteen thousand times (29-33)

Reducing the time-scale several lines later, Owen says that Roman times are in fact only separated from modern times "by no more spanless guage / Than day and night, succeeding day and night" (45-46) or "the rote of common dawn and dusk" (51).

Each stanza of "Song of Songs" deals with a different time of day, beginning with dawn and working through day to dusk and midnight. The mood of the poem changes at the beginning of each verse so that the lightheartedness of dawn, "Sing me at dawn but only with your laugh" (1) becomes slightly more serious during the day: "Sing to me only with your speech all day" (4). This leads to dusk and a more sombre tone, where the person who is being addressed is told to "Sing me at dusk but only with your sigh" (7). As night falls, sadness descends: "Sing me at midnight with your murmurous heart; / And let its

moaning like a chord be heard / Surging through you and sobbing unsubdued" (10-12). It seems that the passing of time and the encroaching darkness are accompanied by an unavoidable and unconsolable feeling of despondency.

"From My Diary, July 1914", which is stylistically remarkably similar to "Song of Songs" contains only three references to different times of the day: "early day" (6), "morning gold" (16) and "nocturnal flowers" (32). It is interesting to note, however, that the activities mentioned prior to the "early days" create a sense of stirring, an awakening that comes with dawn. From here, up until "morning gold", the poem is bursting with the energy of a bright morning and a gradual slowing down of activity leads us to the poem's close and its "nocturnal flowers". And so, by association of certain activities with specific times of the day, the poem is, as its title suggests, like an entry in a diary which recalls a day's happenings.

"The Promisers" is another poem which can be looked at from the point of view of time. At first glance, the poem is light in tone and, like "Song of Songs", takes the reader through from dawn to night-time. A distinct undercurrent of seriousness is felt when one connects the title of the poem to its content. It seems that each section of the day is accompanied by a voice which urges the poet to go to town to meet someone: at dawn, the air encourages him, then the morning birds join in until he reaches town, "and there they ceased to charm" (8). Although it was mentioned earlier that the sun appears to have assumed a benevolent role in this poem, its strength and boldness falling upon the poet's shoulder and its clinging is only part of what turns out to be an empty promise. Noon chimes in the passing hours and the "sly twilight" persuades the poet to be patient. However, night falls and the poet finds himself sad and alone. Each part of the day comes with idle promises of a meeting but deserts the poet in the end. According to Stallworthy,

this poem was probably composed between August and October 1917, whilst Owen was at Craiglockhart (*CPF*, 97). What a reader might gather from a first reading of the piece is probably quite different from his understanding of it on closer reading. The poem could be a reflection of Owen's state of mind at the time of writing: he was most likely still under the care of his psychiatrist and possibly felt mistrustful of people or things that seemed to hold promise. After all, Owen's breakdown whilst on active service occurred, in part, because he was unable to trust in and fall back on the army for support.

"The Calls" is a tidy, tightly structured seven-stanza poem with a fixed rhyme scheme, each stanza ending in a shorter line that rhymes internally (except for the fifth stanza, which is of three lines⁴⁷ and the sixth stanza, which has no internal rhyme⁴⁸). The poem contains a logical development of thought accompanied by a clearly-marked time sequence and each unit of time is introduced by a specific sound or call, hence the poem's title. The poem starts with the dawn chorus of a "dismal fog-hoarse siren" and suggests the heavy, mechanised inhuman aspects of a labourer's job, which Owen rejects. The second stanza opens with the sound of nine o'clock bells calling children to school but Owen spurns the picture of formal education presented in the first three lines by suggesting in the last that he learns from Nature. Rejection of the formal aspects of religion occurs in the next stanza where church bells call worshippers to prayer. Then, the peace of the afternoon is torn apart by the sound of a bugle and soldiers on training exercises. This is the first indication that "The Calls" is a poem linked to the war and once the connection is made, the strict pattern within the poem loosens slightly. Dusk in the fifth stanza brings references to the

⁴⁷Stallworthy explains that the "MS shows two cancelled attempts at a line following this, and one must suppose that WO intended to try again" (*CPF*, 163).

⁴⁸Stallworthy writes, "Cancelled attempts at this line suggest that WO intended 'But that's not all' to be only its second half."

black market and profiteering but it is the night-time of the last two stanzas that brings home the sound of warfare to Owen. It is the silent voices of the soldiers at the front that are calling him to return.

The most shocking use of a time sequence which manages to poignantly draw together the three themes of light, darkness and eternal suffering is in "Mental Cases". Referring to the patients, Owen comments that ". . . on their sense / Sunlight seems a blood smear; night becomes blood-black; / Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh" (19-21).

4.2.5 A Changing Landscape

True to the Romantic style he was imitating, Owen wrote of a countryside that was full of peace and tranquility in his early verse. For example, in "Written in a Wood, September 1910", there are references to "the listening dell"(9), "leafy grotts / And bird-pavilions hung with arras green" (9-10) and the fragment "Within those days" opens with a mention of celandine and hyacinth. Earlier on in this chapter, reference was made to a letter Owen wrote in verse in December 1911 in which he mentioned Shelley, Gray, Arnold and Tennyson (see p.35). The poem, which was composed in Oxfordshire, reflects the idyllic calm of the English countryside and connects a serene landscape to each of the four Romantic poets mentioned.

At the same time, Owen was aware of the constant conflict within Nature, as is seen in the fragment "At Dawn, I love to stray along the meeting-line", where he writes of the erosive battle between land and sea. He speaks of his delight of walking along ". . . the meeting-line / Of misty seas and iron rocks / To hear the licking waves. . . / To muse the bitter feud of Stone and Brine / Changing unceasingly our Planet's vast design."

A return to Nature and a rural setting is seen in "The Rivals", where Owen - in the hope of making the lover who will not pay him the attention he seeks jealous - mentions his "garden chums" (10), which include "many a slim tree, dark of tresses" (19) and wild flowers which are described as "my lovers of bud and stem" (38). The flowers mentioned are orchids, harebells, ferns, foxgloves, water lilies, roses, violets and snowdrops and represent the elegance and beauty of a natural haven.

Another 1912 piece called "The Dread of Falling into Naught", shows Owen relating a mournful landscape to the feelings of depression that have come with the disappearance of summer: ". . . and now the peerless forest green / Is streaked with silvery pallor of decay" (6-7). The destructive effect winter has on the forest is reflected in the flowers and woodland that have to endure the violence of seasonal change:

The expression of her once-rich mind, the flowers,
 Are feeble-born, else rank unnaturally;
 And whoso looks on leafy garden bowers,
 Fresh bloodstains every misty morn may see,
 Spilt from her veins by Winter's lance, and conflict strewn. (11-15)

In some ways, this verse anticipates Owen's later poems in which he describes the havoc and desolation wrought by the unyielding iron fist of war.

In the first stanza of his next piece, "Science has looked, and sees no life but this", Owen makes the point that within the vast universe, man and earth are little more than nothing and he predicts the destruction of Earth and her inhabitants:

Thou art as animals, as worms, as clay;
 Earth - thy small planet, of a thousand, one -
 Shall slowly waste, unto an outburnt ash:
 And thou and all thy race, be blotted out.
 For in the dissolution of man's brain
 Himself dissolves, and passes into naught'. . . (3-8)

A similar sense of foreboding is captured more than five years later in "Strange Meeting", when Owen regrets that man does not seem to learn from his mistakes:

Now man 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 (26-29).

Parallel to "Science has looked, and sees no life but this", Owen wrote "The Little Mermaid". The exquisite fairy-tale description of the Sea King's palace contrasts sharply to the realism of the previous poem. With such poetic grace and elegance, the reader feels invited to enter the underwater realm of the poem and indulge in flights of Romantic fancy:

His palace, golden-bright and ruby-red,
 Gleams like a crown and among those velvet dells.
 Pink, shimmering streams of light its windows shed,
 Like waterfalls of wine; and pink-white shells,

Like Alpine snows, its lofty roof o'erspread;
 Which close and open, close and open wide,
 With every ebb and flow of the tide. (10-16)

The seascape around the King's palace with its "fiery-blossomed grove / And golden-fruited gardens" (74-75) adds to the splendour of his domain and accompanies the rich description of the land that is spied by the third princess on her coming of age: ". . . she made her way / Far up a river, passing vine-clad hills, / And wooded castles all the sunny day" (104-07). Much later, once the mermaid has saved her prince, refuge was to be found in a warm and fertile land: ". . . they approached a balmy, sunlit land, / Whose marble mountains, silver-tipped with snow, / Towered o'er a seabord fringe of citrons bland" (233-35). However, with the threat of danger hovering, a change takes place and the seascape assumes a frightening aspect as the little mermaid propels herself towards her own doom. In search of the old witch of the sea, the young maid swims:

Towards the abysmal deserts, where the flood
 Spins fierce in spiral fantasies; which, crossed,
 Led to a region of warm, bubbling mud,
 With slimy weeds and greenery bemossed,
 And serpent-polypi, that feed on blood,
 And huge old rust, gaunt hulks and treasures lost.
 Between their ever-groping arms the lithe girl shot (345-51)

In a much less Romantic vein, Owen penned the lengthy ode "Uriconium". In the

third volume of *JFO*, Harold Owen recalls how he and his brother used to cycle to the Roman ruins at Uriconium and spend hours searching for vestiges of the past. No doubt, combing the ancient site helped Owen to sharpen his powers of observation. On describing the site in this ode, Owen asks if anyone, on a visit to the spot, ever stops to consider what had happened there in the past. He explains that ". . . cities such as these one time would breed / Apocalyptic visions of world-wrecks" (100-01). He then asks if modern man has learnt "The precious truth distilled from Rome's decay?" (107). In these lines, "Uriconium" hints at the disastrous, chaotic wreck of the world seen later in "The Show" and at the regret that man does not learn from the past, as suggested in "Strange Meeting".

Once Owen had had first-hand experience of the war, he had to accept as reality the destruction of what had previously been a beautiful and majestic landscape which had earlier inspired him to write poetry. He realised he would have to change the focus on his work since a purely Romantic approach to the upheaval of the natural world was inadequate. Traditional poetry, with its traditional Nature imagery and diction, was incongruous with the horrors of modern warfare; Owen had to find ways of re-channelling it, and so, instead of rejecting his Romantic background, he re-moulded and applied it to his war poetry. Nature continued to be an important theme in much of his war verse, as it became an important instrument for Owen in interpreting his experiences. He adapted his poetry to the circumstances of war and presented Nature dressed in the tired garments of a war-torn landscape. Together, Nature and war provided a rich source of imagery and helped Owen discover a language that was suitable enough to express in poetry what had never been expressed before. During the war years, the land had been ripped apart and became one vast battleground of destruction and decay. Nature and her beauty had been wiped out by an invasion of suffering and death, but Owen refused to abandon her.

Owen provides a hint not only of the magnitude of earth's destruction, but also of the great numbers who had been killed in the first two years of the war in the fragment "An Imperial Elegy", which was written sometime between September 1915 and early summer 1916:

And not one corner of a foreign field
 But a span as wide as Europe
 Deep as the grave
 I looked and saw
 An appearance of a titan's grave
 And the length thereof a thousand miles
 It crossed all Europe like a mystic road. . .

This "titan's grave", however, did not just represent the graves of soldiers killed in the war; it was a trench scarred by deep craters that contained thousands of living soldiers who spent much of their time at the front, partially or completely underground.

The imagery and diction of the fragment "Cramped in that funnelled hole" is most evocative and on reading the piece, one can almost imagine the sickeningly fearful sensation of being holed-up in a crater on a battlefield, where life itself is limited and cramped by war. The very title of the fragment creates a feeling of claustrophobia because there is a sensation of the lack of space and therefore of freedom that those who found themselves confined to life inside such craters had to endure. There is an oppressing feeling of being caught in a whirlpool of slime and death because the hole is funnelled, and it is easy to fall into it because of the width of its rim, but difficult to get out. In Edmund Blunden's

construction of the fragment, which Jon Stallworthy has reproduced in *CPF*, the crater is "only felt / As teeth of traps", which suggests the impossibility of escape: the curve of the edge of the crater is similar to the teeth of a hunter's snare - entry is easy but exit is impossible. For the soldiers, being trapped in the hole is the same as being at the mercy of death: helpless, unable to do anything, "These men have lain / gathered in the jaws of death". The awfulness of the situation the soldiers find themselves in is aggravated at dawn when "The crater widened round them like a yawn", once again suggesting there is no escape. The nauseating, decaying and over-powering landscape was going to deprive the soldiers of life: "Death had swallowed them / And they were stuck in his throat of fetid flem." What was worse was that this hell on earth was only one of the many craters or trenches in which the soldiers at the front could have found themselves: "They were in one of the many mouths of Hell." The never-ending mercilessness of the stagnant mud-and-death-logged inferno of craters, which for Owen constituted a land violated by war, is summed up in the final lines of Blunden's version of the fragment: ". . . bones and the dead are smelt / Under the mud where long ago they fell / Mixed with the sour sharp odour of the shell."

"Cramped in that funnelled hole" and "Exposure" resemble each other in the sense that both pieces present an aggressive, alien landscape which provides no shelter but harbours death. Even though in "Exposure" the soldiers ". . . cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams. . ." (22), their dreams are illusions; the holes or craters in which the soldiers shelter are cradles of agony and death. The connection between the two pieces is also obvious from the incomplete opening line of the fragment, "successive of bullets streak the silence", which is almost identical to "Exposure"'s "Sudden successive flights of bullets

streak the silence" (16).⁴⁹

"Miners" is another poem that considers the subterranean existence of many of the soldiers who fought on the western front. It is a piece that connects ordinary mining activities with military mining during the war, as can be seen from the sixth stanza, where the poet recalls ". . . all that worked dark pits / Of war, and died / Digging the rock . . ." (21-23). In "The Dating and Sources of Wilfred Owen's 'Miners' ", Jennifer Breen explains that "The pits are "dark", not only because they are below ground, but because they also facilitate war; "dark pits" connotes the hell-like atmosphere of battle, as well as the actual tunnels and other military excavations" (369). ("Miners" echoes the much earlier fragment "All children" in its diction and mood).

In his article "Dark Pits of War: Wilfred Owen's Poetry and the Hermeneutics of War", Tadeusz Slawek discusses the idea of the earth as a prison for the soldiers of the First World War: "World War I, from a military point of view, marks the extreme moment of man's grounding in the earth; although technology working for the purpose of war produced such achievements of "artifice" as tanks and planes, manpower remained rooted in the soil, in the trenches of the "natural"" (325).

Just as "Cramped in that funnelled hole" is an example of the soldiers' terrestrial imprisonment, so is "S.I.W.". In the poem, the young soldier commits suicide because he cannot escape, ". . . never leave, wound, fever, trench-foot, shock, / Untrapped the wretch. And death seemed withheld / For torture of lying machinally shelled" (17-19), and so, eventually, he decides to seal his own fate, because, explains Owen:

⁴⁹See Dominic Hibberd's "The Date of Wilfred Owen's 'Exposure'" for further discussion on the relationship between it and "Cramped in that funnelled hole", 305-08.

It was the reasoned crisis of his soul
 Against more days of inescapable thrall,
 Against infrangibly wired and blind trench wall
 Curtained with fire, roofed in with creeping fire,
 Slow grazing fire, that would not burn him whole
 But kept him for death's promises and scoff,
 And life's half-promising, and both their riling (29-35)

Alienation from the normal world is complete in "Strange Meeting", where the poet flees from the swirling cesspool of war via a battle-torn escape route only to find himself in what he realises is hell: "It seemed that out of battle I escaped / Down some profound tunnel, long since scooped/ Through granites which titanic wars had groined. . . . I knew we stood in Hell" (1-3 & 10). This hell was inhabited by restless, distressed "encumbered sleepers" (4), who groaned, just like the dead boys and men in "Miners", who ". . . slept wry sleep . . . / Writhing for air" (15-16). One of the striking features of Owen's "Strange Meeting" is that even though the poem centres around man's separation from his natural environment, imagery and diction directly associated with the theme of Nature is scarcely used. Nature is made conspicuous by her absence. She cannot exist in the poem because it is set in hell, which is a place immersed in darkness and misery, cut off from the natural world and therefore from Nature. Owen's use of para- and half-rhyme at the end of lines help create the unworldly atmosphere of the poem. Sven Bäckman comments on Owen's successful portrayal of the subterranean scene, which is achieved, in part, by a combination of onomatopoeia and pararhyme and quoting from Robert Graves's "Contemporary Techniques of Poetry", adds that it was Graves who first pointed this out. Bäckman also

discusses how Owen skillfully handles metre in order to vary the tempo of the poem so that a sensation of slowness and weariness is felt.⁵⁰

In his article, "Digging In: An Interpretation of Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting'", Elliott B. Gose Jr., suggests that this poem "concerns the landscape of the mind" (417). A paralleling of the physical effects of war on the landscape and its psychological effects on man is interesting because it leads the reader to create a subconscious connection between man and his environment. In "Mental Cases", the patients are alienated from a natural landscape and forced to live in a psychological landscape that pushes them further into the torturous labyrinths of dementia: "Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander, / Treading blood from lungs. . ." (13-14).

On 16 November 1917, Owen sent a copy of the poem "Asleep" to his cousin Leslie Gunston and explained that inspiration for it "came from Winchester Downs, as I crossed the long backs of the downs after leaving you. It is written as from the trenches. I could almost see the dead lying about in the hollows of the downs" (CL 508). "The vision on the downs," writes Dennis Welland, "indicates how the poetic imagination has, by the Coleridgean process of dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating, re-created the original experience."⁵¹ Owen's mixing of civilian and military life is also an indication of the difficulty he had in suppressing his war experiences which were very much alive in his subconscious. Owen wonders if after his death, the soldier's body has become one with the earth:

- Or whether yet his thin and sodden head

⁵⁰Sven Bäckman, *Transition Transformed*, 158-9.

⁵¹Dennis Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, 74-75.

Confuses more with the low mould,
 His hair being one with the grey grass
 Of finished fields, and wire-scraggs rusty-old (15-18)

thus suggesting that the physical differences between man and his environment become more difficult to define as the body begins to decompose and man and Nature merge. The frailty of the soldier's lifeless body is suggested by the reference to his "thin and sodden head" (15), whilst the colourless weakness and debility of the earth itself is implied by the "grey grass" and "finished fields, and wire-scraggs rusty-old" (17-18), thus creating an atmosphere of a tired, worn-out and decaying landscape. This leads to another possible interpretation of the "confused" blending between man and Nature: jaded Nature is a drastic consequence of the war and as she falls into decay, she has little or no energy left and so the final bringing together of man and Nature, the return of man to the dust of his very origins, is described as something confused and unclear. It is a weary finale for those who die in war.

Other pieces like "Inspection", "As bronze maybe much beautified", "Disabled", "A Terre" and "Smile, Smile, Smile", touch upon the idea of a reluctant fusion between man and the earth.

In "Inspection", a soldier who is punished for having a spot of blood on his uniform resentfully recalls how he nearly died in battle: "'Blood's dirt,' he laughed, looking away, / Far off to where his wound had bled / And almost merged for ever into clay" (9-11).

In the fragment "As bronze maybe much beautified", the beauty assumed by the souls of buried soldiers whose bodies are decomposing underground is compared and found to be superior to the beauty that a piece of bronze that is buried in the soil can acquire on becoming tarnished:

As bronze may be much beautified
 By lying in the dark damp soil,
 So men who fade in the dust of warfare, fade
 Fairer, and sorrow blooms their soul.

Regretting the unretrievable past and acknowledging his present condition, the invalided war veteran of "Disabled" matches his loss of a normal life to the time he was wounded and blood gushed from his leg into the ground:

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 from his thigh (17-20)

The soldier in "A Terre" is painfully aware of how close he is to his final hour and bitterly thinks that if Shelley were alive, the poet would tell him that he would soon become " ' . . . one with nature, herb, and stone' " (44). The soldier explains that even the most ordinary and ignorant infantryman tries not to be fearful of death and attempts to find comfort in the idea of taking part in the creation of plant life: "The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now. / 'Pushing up daisies' is their creed, you know" (46-47). Struggling to accept his fate, the dying man seeks comfort in the belief that he will be better off forming part of the landscape:

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. . . (52-55)

The idea that death and the body's subsequent burial in the earth is what returns a man's soul to him can be seen as another way the soldier tries to view his death positively: "Soldiers may grow a soul when turn to fronds" (59), thus suggesting that it is only through death that soldiers can acquire a soul.

No comfort is found in "Smile, Smile, Smile", where it is quite obvious that the wounded war veterans are fully aware of the fact - even if the people at home choose to ignore it - that vast numbers of soldiers killed whilst on active service now form an everlasting part of the French landscape: "(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.)" (21-23).

"O World of many worlds, O life of lives" and "The time was aeon, and the place all earth" are two Dunsden pieces which were begun towards the end of 1912. Both help set the scene which is to be encountered in the much later piece, "The Show". The first poem contains the line "I see men far below me where they swarm. . ." (13) and prepares the reader for the maggot-infested view of earth in "The Show". In the second poem, Owen writes, "The spectacle I saw was not a dream, / But true resumption of experienced things / The scene meseemed one mass deformity. . ." (2-4). However, the mass deformity is made lovely in this poem ". . . by pervasion of a spirit" (5), whereas in "The Show", it is for ever hideous. Set in a dream context, the catastrophic panorama present in "The Show" is a caustic reminder of the death and destruction caused by war. Man's vicious self-annihilation is reflected in the havoc he creates when he destroys the very land which gives

him life. Perhaps the most cataclysmic of Owen's poems, "The Show" appears to have been based on Owen's own war experiences, when he actually witnessed man's demolition of his own world. In January 1917, shortly after arriving in France on his first tour of duty, Owen described No-Man's-Land to his mother as being like:

. . . the eternal place of gnashing of teeth; the Slough of Despond could be contained in one of its crater holes; the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah could not light a candle to it. . . It is pock-marked like a body of foulest disease and its odour is the breath of cancer. . . . No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness (*CL* 429).

Four months later, he explained to his brother, Colin, that on looking back at the battlefield he saw "the ground all crawling and wormy with wounded bodies" (*CL* 458). Both letters are clearly reflected in "The Show". The poem opens with the depressing image of a weak and sad land that has an aura of greyish pallor - usually associated with sickness and disease -around it. The poet 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" (3-5). The expression "hollow woe" suggests the hopelessness presented by the scene. As if it were a bearded face, the cratered earth is covered by a "horror of harsh wire", across which armies moved. These armies are compared to caterpillars slowly crawling to their deaths:

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. (6-9)

Later, the viciousness of these caterpillars show towards each other reflects the agonies the Germans and the Allies inflicted on each other:

Those that were grey, 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. (19-22)

The after-effects of the mobilised armies are summed up in terms of the slimy trails left behind by insects that vanish down holes:

By them had slimy paths been trailed 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. (10-13)

So extreme was the human and environmental decay on the battlefield that it is compared to a festering, ulcerous mouth or wounds that will not heal: "(And smell came up from those foul openings / As of mouths, or deep wounds deepening.)" (14-15). The poet, who

is viewing all of this from above, is so affected by what he witnesses that he falls to the battlefield and his own death:

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. (23-29)

In "Images of Darkness in the Poems of Wilfred Owen", Dominic Hibberd offers an interesting view of the final lines of "The Show" when he wonders whether the half-hidden "manner of worm" that got no further represents Owen (in Spring 1917) abandoning his men because he was already suffering from shellshock. Paralysed by fear, Owen, like the worm, would have been half-exposed and half-protected whilst many of his men would have been killed before they managed to find shelter (160).

Joseph Cohen presents a slightly different interpretation of this sinister and disturbing poem in his article, "Owen's 'The Show'", when he sees the landscape as a maggot-infested head. For him, "The earth is depicted as a severed, decaying, foully wormed head of a dead soldier."⁵²

If Owen's intention on writing this poem was to shock his readers, he was

⁵²The page numbers on the photocopy of this article are illegible.

successful. He has turned Nature upside-down so that what should have been pleasant under normal circumstances becomes totally repulsive under circumstances which are far from normal. Dawn brings suffering and death and shuts out life, and green fields are lost in mire: all natural beauty has been lost.

The sad irony of "The Sentry" lies in the fact that the soldiers were sheltering in "an old Boche dug-out" (1), which was supposed to have provided them with some sort of protection against enemy shells and it was whilst on duty at the entry to the dug-out that the unfortunate sentry was hit and blinded by enemy fire. Owen's description of the dug-out echoes the crater of "Cramped in that funnelled hole" and creates similar feelings of claustrophobia and panic. The idea of the dug-out being a potential death trap as well as a refuge leaves the reader with a feeling of unease:

Rain guttering down in waterfalls of slime,
Kept slush waist-high and rising hour by hour,
And choked the steps too thick with clay to climb.
What murk of air remained stank old, and sour
With fumes from whizz-bangs, and the smell of men
Who'd lived there years, and left their curse in the den,
If not their corpses. . . (4-10)

The final irony of the poem comes in the last line when the blinded sentry shouts out hopefully "'I see your lights!' - But ours had long gone out" (36). In the hell-hole of a dug-out not even hope could light the darkness of war.

The "before-and-after" appearance of the landscape in "Spring Offensive" shows the

effect war has on Nature. Before the offensive takes place, there is an air of expectancy but the soldiers and the land seem calm and even the personified brambles that catch on the soldiers' trouser-legs want to maintain the peaceful tranquility of a balmy summer afternoon by detaining the soldiers:

Hour after hour they ponder the warm field
 And the far valley behind, where buttercups
 Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up;
 When even the little brambles would not yield
 But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing arms.
 They breathe like trees unstirred. (13-18)

However, the order is given, the attack commences and soldiers race to their destiny together. At the same time, earth sheds her peaceful attire and man and Nature lock together in mortal combat:

. . . And instantly the whole sky burned
 With fury against them; earth set sudden cups
 In thousands for their blood; and the green slope
 Chasmed and deepened sheer to infinite space. (29-32)

4.2.6 From Ignorance to Understanding

Most people learn from experience and as a result of their learning processes, they often change, albeit to a small degree. Wilfred Owen was no exception: many of the

personal changes he underwent are reflected in his poetry and also in the way his poetry changes. Greater personal maturity led consequently to more mature poetry.

The creation of several of Owen's poems, including "Whither is passed the softly-vanished day?", "The Swift", "The Unreturning", "On My Songs", "The Sleeping Beauty" and "1914" spanned a considerable number of years. Some of these poems are significant in the sense that they helped provide the foundations upon which Owen was to build some of his later work, whilst other pieces are of lesser importance.

"Whither is passed the softly-vanished day?" was initially drafted at Shrewsbury around 1911-12 and then revised either at Craiglockhart in October or November 1917, or at Scarborough between November 1917 and the following January (*CPF* 112). Despite the time it took for Owen to complete this poem, the changes he made were few, as can be seen from the manuscripts that are housed in the English Faculty Library at Oxford University. Since Owen barely made any alterations between the first and final drafts of this sonnet, it sheds no light upon the development of style, technique or content in his work.

Another 1912 piece, "The Swift", saw its beginnings at Dunsden and underwent revision first in Bordeaux during the summer of 1915 and then at Craiglockhart in August 1917, probably, as Stallworthy suggests, "before WO came under the influence of SS" (*CPF* 94). Owen put considerable effort into perfecting the poem: manuscript copies consist of two pages of rough work, a rough draft of lines 50-70, a complete working draft and two fair copies, both of which have undergone extensive corrections (*CPF* 234). Although the final touches were added to the poem as late as August 1917, it contains no traces of Owen's war experiences. However, the poem is important as it could be understood to provide part of the framework for the two pieces "Song of Songs" and "The Promisers" - both of which were started and finished at Craiglockhart - in the sense that the first 25 lines

of "The Swift" deal with different times of the day (though not in chronological order) and connect each one with a particular bird and its characteristics. In the other two poems, a natural sequence of time is also followed, but connected, not with the swoopings, soarings and chirpings of birds, but with the more serious idea of the ebb and flow of human emotions.

Several lines in "The Swift" show Owen testing his technical ability. Examples of alliteration are found when "the moon slides slowly" (19) in with the coming dusk and in lines 33-40, where a keen sense of rhythm is also evident when the flight of the swift is described:

Strung in the tautest tension
 By the lust of speed,
 And the mad contention
 Of instatiate greed,
 Thou suck'st away the intoxicating air,
 Trailing a wake of song in trilling bubbles,
 Till distance drowns thee. Then thy light wing doubles,
 And thou art back, - nay vanished now, Oh where?

Evocative phrases like "western fires" (23), which describes a sunset and "dark butterfly clinging" (50), which describes the swift at rest, indicate that Owen's artistic potential had begun to flower long before his world was shattered by war.

In an earlier section of this chapter, it was mentioned that "The Unreturning" was another piece which covered much of Owen's poetic life-span. Stallworthy's reproduction

of the poem's manuscripts reveals the work Owen put into its composition: there is one page of rough work, two fair copies with corrections (one of which is labelled BL1.12v is reproduced in *CPF* 266) and a heavily corrected revised version (labelled BL1.10 and reproduced in *CPF* 263-64). Work on the poem started in late 1912 or early 1913, during the time Owen was at Dunsden vicarage experiencing great personal difficulties which were eventually to lead to a more mature and realistic outlook on life. Since the poem was penned at a critical point in Owen's life, it is hardly surprising that an atmosphere of gloom and despondency invades its lines. The heaviness and melancholic pessimism of those long Dunsden months match the intense feelings of emptiness and isolation that Owen suffered at Craiglockhart. (The poem underwent revision either at Craiglockhart in late 1917 or at Scarborough at the beginning of 1918). The poem is haunted by sadness and oppression to the extent that the lines themselves become haunting and an attempt to draw the reader into the cloying darkness is felt. In the BL1.12v copy, nightfall is described: "Implacable night crushed out the day, and hurled / The remnants of the light behind the Vald". The word "implacable" which suggests ferociousness and intractability is then crossed through and replaced by "ponderous", which has more deliberate but less aggressive connotations attached to it. However, in the final version, the lines read "Suddenly night crushed out the day and hurled / Her remnants over cloud-peaks, thunder-walled" (1-2). "Suddenly" suggests the hostility and ruthlessness with which night descended to mercilessly hurl the remains of the day into a nothingness. It should be noted here that daytime has been personified and the effect of this personification is to make the reader identify more closely with the intensity with which daytime was flung into oblivion. The turbulent violence of these first two lines of the poem then contrast sharply with the empty silence of the next two lines, thus leaving the reader with an eerie sensation of dread and uncertainty: "Then fell

a stillness such as harks appalled / When far-gone dead return upon the world" (3-4). On assuming the role of narrator, Owen ensures that these feelings of dread and uncertainty cannot be ignored by the reader. As such, Owen is in direct contact with the reader, thus forcing him to experience the same sensations albeit in a passive form.

Owen's desire to include the reader in the poem in order to make him reach a more profound understanding of it is more evident in the final version than in the first draft: in the first draft, Owen refers to the dead as "life's exiles" and although he called to them "none spoke from his sleeping". In the final draft of the poem, the singular possessive pronoun has been eliminated and the line reads ". . . never one feared back to me or spoke" (8), thus creating the impression that Owen is perhaps forcing the reader to acknowledge the universality of death. This is emphasised even more when the word "dead" (line 5) is started with a capital letter rather than a small case letter: "There I watched for the Dead". The move from the particular and more personal to the general and more universal which is evident in this poem became a trait in Owen's later poetry: his juvenilia was much more egocentric than his later verse. With experience, Owen acquired a broader and more mature vision of life which was reflected in his work.

The manuscripts of "The Unreturning" also bear witness to the attention Owen paid to the creation of atmosphere in his work. For example, the dawn of the final version had to undergo changes before it became the "unshapen dawn" of line 9 and the impressive line "The weak-limned hour when sick men's sighs are drained" (11) was "the hour when sick men's sighs are drained" on two occasions before it gained its full impact.

That Owen was able to mould his experiences at Dunsden into poetry has merit in itself and is indicative of considerable artistic ability. Adapting part of this experience and the poetry that came from it to a different experience so that more poetry could be born

shows Owen's creative skills as well as his capacity to take a general view of different events in his life and link them to each other. Thus, the atmosphere of intense sadness in "the indefinite mishapen dawn / With vacant gloaming, sad as half-lit minds, / The weak-limned hour when sick men's sighs are drained " (9-11) of "The Unreturning" raises its forlorn and tragic head first in the fragment "Purgatorial Passions" which Owen wrote in late spring or early summer 1916, shortly after his first experiences at the front and then in "Mental Cases" (May 1918) where the patients with their half-lit minds are condemned to an eternal nightmare of horror.

The sonnet "On My Songs", which was originally titled "Sonnet on My Songs" was written and revised at approximately the same time as "The Unreturning" i.e. it was drafted at the beginning of January 1913 and then underwent revision either at Craiglockhart in October - November 1917, or at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918 (CPF 113). The intensity of feeling and the poetic depths reached in "The Unreturning" are lacking in this piece but the corrections made to the manuscripts show Owen's attempts to create the same atmosphere of despair, particularly when describing the "Low croonings of a motherless child, in gloom / Singing his frightened self to sleep " (10-11). In the closing lines of the sonnet, Owen offers help: "One night, if thou shouldst lie in this Sick Room, / Dreading the Dark thou darrest not illumine, / Listen; my voice may haply lend thee ease" (12-14). It is interesting to note the "timelessness" of this poem in the sense that it can be identified with Owen's experiences at home, at Dunsden and at Craiglockhart. If the poem is placed within a childhood setting it could be recalling Owen's tendency to have nightmares. In a 1913 Dunsden setting, Owen could have been addressing these final lines to Vivian Rampton, one of his protegés, or to himself because there was nobody there to help him when he felt he needed someone. (He might have been recalling his desperate need

for words of comfort and explanation from his mother which were not forthcoming when he needed them during his adolescence).⁵³ However, if this sonnet is placed in a 1917-18 setting, then the lines quoted above could be interpreted as an offer and demonstration of Owen's willingness to help the soldiers at the front by listening to them and speaking on their behalf.

The content of "The Sleeping Beauty" is a reflection of the timidity and lack of maturity that Owen suffered from when he first penned the poem in France sometime between summer and autumn 1914. It was revised either at Craiglockhart or at Scarborough between autumn 1917 and January 1918. The changes made to the manuscript (see *CPF* 258) indicate Owen's precision in selecting what he considered to be the adequate vocabulary with which to paint a romantic picture of the first stirrings of innocent love. The poem certainly does not reflect any of Owen's war experiences, which suggests that despite what he had suffered, Owen was capable of separating reality from his work if he chose to do so. In this particular case, it appears that Owen did not want to sully this fairy-tale like piece with bellicose fact.

Shortly after the start of the 1914-18 conflict, Owen wrote to his mother: "The war affects me less than it ought. . . . I feel my own life all the more precious and more clear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe" (*CL* 282). In a lecture entitled "Wilfred Owen", Jon Stallworthy comments on Owen's "first, rather callous reactions to the conflict in terms of euphemistic natural imagery" (255)⁵⁴ and he quotes from the same letter as above: "While it is true that the guns will effect a little useful weeding, I am furious with

⁵³In a letter written in February 1918, Owen recriminated his mother for her lack of communication with him during his youth. One wonders if the content of this letter reflects the contents of the poem (see *CL* 536).

⁵⁴Jon Stallworthy, "Wilfred Owen", Chatterton Lecture on an English Poet.

chagrin to think that the Minds which were to have excelled the civilization of ten thousand years, are being annihilated - and bodies, the product of aeons of Natural Selection, melted down for political statues." Owen's awareness of political manipulation during the initial stages of the war is evident in this last comment, but his indifference to the deaths of all those who were to die or had already died at the front is quite shocking.

In *CPF*, Stallworthy explains that the sonnet "1914" was drafted in France in late 1914 and underwent revision either at Craiglockhart in October or November 1917, or at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918 (116). In other words, it spans the last part of Owen's pre-military life and approximately two of the three years he was on active service. (Owen was sworn in on 21 October 1915 and was killed in action on 4 November 1918). It was mentioned in chapter one that this sonnet marked a change in Owen's poetry in the sense that it was the first piece he had written that considered the seriousness of war and for this reason, it is worth considering the sonnet in greater detail.

When he wrote the first draft of "1914", Owen had not yet had any direct experience of the conflict, but being in France when the war broke out and witnessing some of the sufferings experienced by the soldiers who were taken to a makeshift hospital in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, near to where he was staying, Owen was able to draw on his experience as a detached observer.⁵⁵ Referring to this sonnet and a piece by Sassoon, Arthur Lane suggests that both poems are ". . . indications of how the actual experience of war altered the poets' approach to their art. . . the subject of the poem is a diffuse awareness of historical forces, forces impersonal and elevated. . ." ⁵⁶ It is also worthwhile noting that around this time, Owen's letters show a change in attitude and tone and his comments

⁵⁵See *CL* 48 for Owen's account of a visit to a temporary military hospital.

⁵⁶Arthur Lane, *An Adequate Response*, 21.

reflect a shift from complete ignorance to a partial understanding of the horrors of war. In this poem, Owen conveys the international impact of the war through the use of Nature imagery.

In the second volume of *CPF*, Stallworthy provides the location details of the manuscripts of "1914" as well as a transcript of the only rough draft known to exist (270-71). The original rough draft of the sonnet (henceforth referred to as OEF) can be found in the English Faculty Library at Oxford University. A preliminary fair copy - titled 'The Seed' and dated 1914 - was written at Craiglockhart in 1917 and is now located at the British Library, London. There are two later fair copies, both with corrections. One of these is in the English Faculty Library, Oxford, whilst the other is in the British Library. It is the second corrected fair copy (henceforth referred to as BL) that Stallworthy has presented in *CPF* as the final text of "1914" (116).

The first four lines of the octet in "1914" open with the outbreak of the war which is compared to the onset of a merciless winter and the effects of the conflict are likened to a tornado whose path of destruction wreaks havoc throughout Europe:

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
 With perishing great darkness closes in.
 The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
 Is over all the width of Europe whirled.

The second half of the octet considers the effects war has on mankind: progress is stunted, art is destroyed, poetic activity is adversely affected, intellectual initiative is halted, feelings and love are weakened and perhaps, even die, and the fruit of all this activity, which is

described as a "human Autumn", is discarded and falls into decay:

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.

In the sestet, Owen recognises that all eras come to an end, and even though the ancient Greeks enjoyed a period of great intellectual advancement - which is paralleled to spring - and the Romans reaped the benefits of a powerful empire - which is compared to summer - they, too, experienced a decline, which is seen in terms of the onset of autumn. But the point Owen wants to make is that the disappearance of the Ancient Greek civilisation and the Roman Empire did not involve the drastic changes modern man has to undergo as a result of his participation in the destruction of Europe. So great are the changes that man has to live through a winter of catastrophic dimensions, which trails behind it the need for a new spring. However, from the last line of the sonnet, it seems apparent that men have to be slaughtered if spring (which is synonymous with peace) is to return. Unlike in ancient times, transition is no longer painless:

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 rich with all increase.
 But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need

Of sowings for new Spring and blood for seed.

On comparing the transcript of OEF with the BL version of the sonnet, the changes Owen made to it become evident. These alterations are a reflection of his changing attitude to war as well as his awareness of the need to tighten up his poetic style in order to achieve a more effective result. To facilitate a comparison between the OEF and the BL, both have been reproduced below from *CPF*.

OEF 272

191~~5~~ 4

- 1 War broke; and now the winter of the world,
with
with
2 With tempest and ~~keen~~ horror closes in
had-as-centre
3 The cyclone that ~~had gathered~~ at Berlin
origin
4 Is over all the width of Europe whirled.
all fair wait ~~are~~ close -
5 The sails of ~~all human~~ progress ~~now are~~ furled
rent;
6 ~~Torn Reefed~~ are the sails of progress, ~~closed torn~~ or furled;
Rent art
7 ~~The flowers of life are shrivelling.~~ Now begin

And all Art's flowers are shrivelling

blood ~~flows~~

9 Famines of thought and feeling. ~~Blood runs~~ thin.

~~is~~

harvests men's ; ~~pulse love~~

10 The ~~cornfields of our~~ autumn rot, down-

hurled.

when Earth's ~~budded~~

11 For ~~after~~ Spring had blossomed in young Greece

12 And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome;

[NO BREAK]

A

13 An utmnn softly fell, a harvest-home.

a

14 A sweet slow age, and rich with all

~~sets in hard~~ increase

15 now ~~begins the~~ Winter. We ~~must~~

~~we feel the~~

16 But ~~we must die in~~ Winter! ~~Die we!~~ ~~Bleed!~~

17 , for us, and the need

18 That if Spring come again there may be seed.

19 ~~That we, if Spring return, may leave her seed.~~

A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
 But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
 Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.

Originally, the title of the sonnet was to be "1915" but Owen crossed through the number five and replaced it with the number four. Presumably, Owen first thought "1915" a suitable title since that was the year he became actively involved in the war. However, if the title and the opening line of the poem were to tally, the title had to be 1914 - the year war broke out. The preliminary fair copy shows Owen toying with the possibility of "The Seed", which was to have preceded the date 1914, as the title. The idea was sound as the seed of worldly unrest was about to burst open with the assassination of the Austrian Archduke on 28 July 1914. This led to the Austrian declaration of war on Serbia exactly one month later. By the beginning of August, the seed of disaster was bearing tragic fruits: on 1 August 1914, Germany declared war on Russia and on 3 August, she invaded Belgium and declared war on France. Unwilling to tolerate such aggression, Britain declared war against Germany on 4 August, sent her Expeditionary Forces to France's aid and, at home, Lord Kitchener started to gather a massive new army.⁵⁷

The first line of OEF, "War broke; and now the winter of the world", is the same as the first line in BL, except for the punctuation: "War broke: and the Winter of the world". In BL, "War broke" is separated from the remainder of the line by a colon, as if Owen were giving an explanation as to what had happened as a result of war breaking out. In other words, winter descended on the world because of the outbreak of the war. The use of a capital letter to begin "Winter" draws more attention to the effect war was to have on

⁵⁷See Liddell Hart's *History of the First World War*, 1-27.

the world than does the word "winter" written in lowercase letters. The alliteration of the consonant, /w/, at regular intervals along the line gives it balance and leads comfortably into the second line which also begins with /w/.

In OEF, the "winter of the world" is described as closing in "With tempest and horror" (2). The diction of the corresponding line in BL is more sinister and therefore much more effective: here, the "Winter of the world" closes in "With perishing great darkness." A sensation of unfathomable danger is felt as Owen attempts to create an impression of the menace of war.

The two possibilities for the third line of OEF read "The cyclone that had gathered at Berlin" and "The cyclone that had as centre at Berlin", whilst the third line of the BL reads "The foul tornado centred at Berlin." The BL line creates a much stronger impact than the two possibilities for the OEF line, partly because it is more compact, containing one less syllable. However, all three lines are equally precise in disclosing the origin of the conflict but the use of the adjective "foul" in BL has connotations that would link the disasters provoked by tornados to those associated with war. Owen's use of the word "tornado" is interesting if the meteorological characteristics of it are paralleled to the activities one would expect to occur at the centre of the place where a world crisis was being master-minded and manoeuvred. A tornado, caused by a build up of atmospheric turbulence, is comparable to a war caused by the accumulation of political and economic turbulence. *The Chambers's Encyclopaedia's* description of a tornado is both interesting and apt:

It begins as a swirling commotion in a low dark cloud which then spreads downwards towards the earth in the shape of a funnel or solid-looking pipe,

which is the visible sign of a whirlwind's intense violence. Where the tip of the pine touches the ground great havoc is caused, trees are uprooted, crops are flattened and houses are wrecked as completely as by a bomb. . . . much of the damage is done by winds. . . .but many of the phenomena seem to be explosive, like the blast of a bomb (680-81).

To the layman, there is no difference between a cyclone and a tornado: European English speakers generally use the word "cyclone" whilst American English speakers usually use "tornado" and there is no apparent reason why Owen finally opted for "tornado" rather than "cyclone". However, the word "tornado" when spoken aloud, is much harsher and more explosive in sound than "cyclone", and therefore perhaps more effective for Owen's purposes.

Whilst the final line of the first quatrain of the sonnet is the same in both OEF and BL, the use of alliteration (width / whirled) is worth noting as it balances with the alliteration of the first line.

Composing the second quatrain of the sonnet proved more problematic for Owen than the first but he finally managed to compress the six lines of attempts into four, more or less maintaining the same ideas but changing the way he expressed them. Lines 5 and 6 of OEF show Owen considering possibilities that could create an impression of the notion of the path of progress being obstructed. The violence with which progress (which was first described as "human" and then as "fair") was interrupted, is implied by the idea of her sails being "furled", "rent", "torn" and "reefed". Line seven, most of which has been crossed through, compares the untended fruits of life to flowers that are shrivelling, thus creating a sense of waste through neglect. In line eight, Owen's more general vision of a shrunken,

withered life has been narrowed down to the area of artistic creativity, which is failing due to the extreme circumstances of war. It is these circumstances that bring about a dearth in human creativity, warmth and kindness, which is described in line nine as "Famines of thought and feeling." The second half of the line ("Blood runs thin"), which has been cancelled, seems to have been a further attempt at recognising the consequences of war on human nature. One wonders if Owen had in mind the old saying "Blood is thicker than water" when he considered the possibility of including "Blood runs thin" in his sonnet. If he did, then the weight behind the concept of blood running thin cannot be ignored since it implies the notion that man's love for fellow-man is disappearing; that his respect for human-life is dwindling as a result of war. "Blood runs thin" could also be referring to the number of deaths that have already been caused by war; further fighting will bring more deaths and therefore cause a decrease in numbers i.e. there will be less blood pulsing through the veins of the living. Line ten transmits the thought-provoking idea that modern-man, in his maturity, is allowing the results of a life-time - or a complete history of experience - to go to waste through war.

Turning now to the second quatrain of the final version of the sonnet, it can be seen that the fifth and sixth lines of OEF have been reduced to half a line in BL. The idea of general progress being hampered is effectively combined with the notion of growth in the Arts being stunted and the two ideas are closely linked by the clever use of a run-on line: "Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled / Are all Art's ensigns" (5-6). It is interesting to note that in OEF, Owen attempts to describe the restricting of general progress with the adjectives "furled" and "rent" but in BL, he applies these adjectives not to the sabotaging of general progress but more specifically to the "blockage" on progress in the arts. The effective repetition of sound in the words "Rending" and "rent" cannot be ignored

as it inextricably links the different aspects of progress and the violence with which it has been destroyed.

In BL, Owen even manages to make a specific reference to his own area of art and in two words is able to create an impression of the effect war has on poetry: "Verse wails" (6). (In both OEF and BL, "Art" is written with a capital letter, thus indicating the importance it held for Owen). In BL, as in OEF, the effects of war deprive man of progress in all areas. This deprivation is closely associated with the concept of famine and the two ideas are paralleled by the use of another run-on line (6-7). The "Blood runs thin" of OEF appears to have fallen back onto Owen's earlier literary background to become "Love's wine's thin" in BL. At the same time, the notion of a lack of wine fits in with the famine mentioned at the beginning of the line. Although this expression is more Romantic and less war-like than "Blood runs thin", it is possibly more effective because of the emotions inherent in the concept of love, which are not usually associated with blood.

The idea transmitted in the last line of the octave in BL is virtually the same as that in the corresponding line of OEF. Both lines contain the same number of syllables yet the smoother rhythm of the line "The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled" (BL) makes it more effective than "The harvests of men's autumn rot, down-hurled" (OEF). Owen's intention in using a capital letter in the word "Autumn" (BL) should be considered: when referring to a "human Autumn", was he drawing attention to the maturity of man in terms of evolution? In other words, after centuries of evolutionary progress at all levels, could man be considered as being at the peak of progress and therefore at the stage where he should be able to enjoy it? Or was Owen referring to the inevitable decline of man, to his 'autumn of life', following the inescapable laws of Nature? Autumn always leads to winter and winter is often associated with cold, misery and death. Did Owen feel that mankind

was about to fall into a predetermined autumn of decline, brought about by the onset of war?

The word "harvest" can refer to an actual crop or to the gathering of ripened fruit or crops. In other words, it is the final product of a previous combination of efforts. In the context of OEF, "harvest" (10) can represent the benefits of man's experience or maturity. The word "grain" (8, BL) is more complex in its connotations when set within the context of Owen's poem since it can refer to a harvest or crop (i.e. the already ripened product) or it can refer to the seed that is the origin of the harvest. In other words, when Owen refers to the rotting of the "grain of human Autumn" (BL), he could be combining the possibility of spoiling what has already been achieved by man and his experience, with the severance of the hope for any further development. (At the same time, the reason for Owen's substitution of "grain" for "harvest" might not be any more complicated than the wish to avoid repetition of the word "harvest" which appears once again in the third line of the sestet).

The word "Earth" has been eliminated from the first line of the sestet of BL, which coincides with line eleven of OEF. Before settling for "bloomed" to describe the cultural wealth of ancient Greece, Owen had considered the words "budded" and "blossomed". Although at first glance the effect of the words seems identical, the subtle differences in meaning are significant: "Budded" suggests the appearance or beginnings of something that will flower, but that has not yet reached maturity, "blossomed" suggests a more advanced stage in the flowering process, whilst "bloomed" suggests that the flowering is rich and complete in the fullness of maturity. Thus, "bloomed" is more suitable to describe the richness of the bygone era.

The next two lines of the sestet (10-11) show no variation from OEF - except

Owen's indecisiveness in the earlier version has been resolved and he has chosen to begin the word "Autumn" with a capital letter. The only difference between the two versions in the following line is seen at the beginning: The ". . . sweet slow age" of OEF (14) is replaced by "A slow grand age" in BL (12). The alliteration in the OEF line is effective in creating a notion of a lengthy time-span and a feeling of slowness with which it has passed, but at the same time, a sense of clumsiness is felt with the repetition of the 's' sound. The magnificence of the previous era is conveyed more effectively by the combination of heavy vowel sounds in "slow" and "grand" in BL, whilst at the same time, the impression of the passing of a lengthy period of time is not lost.

The last two lines of the sonnet cost Owen considerable effort, taking approximately nine lines of rough work to reach the final rhyming couplet. The principal idea of the first three lines of the nine lines of rough work (corresponding to OEF, 15-17) is that for modern man, the end of autumn signifies a "hard Winter" and possibly death, i.e. the end of an era and the onset of hard times. Continuing this idea, the next two lines (OEF, 18-19) suggest that the arrival of winter is accompanied by the necessity to leave seeds so that another spring can bloom.

The last four lines of OEF (most of which have been cancelled) echo the previous five, line 21 being exactly the same as line 18, except for the use of a comma, which alters the focus of the line: compare "That if Spring come again there may be seed" (18) to "That if Spring come, again there may be seed" (21). In line 18, doubt about the return of spring is suggested. In line 21, the emphasis lies less on the return of spring and more on the hope that on its return, there will once again be seeds to plant.

The ideas put forward in the last nine lines of Owen's work in OEF are tightly compressed into the rhyming couplet of the final version: "But now, for us, wild Winter,

and the need / Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed." Although no mention of dying is made, death is implicit in the notion of the need for blood - or human sacrifice - if spring is to bring new life. The "hard winter" of OEF is replaced by the more dramatic "wild Winter" in the final version. Use of the word "wild" is effective in conjuring up the unpredictability of winter weather conditions and ties in with the destructive element of the "foul tornado" referred to in line three of the sonnet. The effect of the final rhyming couplet of the sonnet is made more complete by the repetition of the /w/ and /s/ sounds, which balances perfectly with the alliteration of the opening lines.

The changes Owen made to "1914" during its completion demonstrates his meticulousness and a move towards greater artistic elegance. It is also a poetic marker that shows a shift from ignorance to a more profound understanding of the seriousness of war. The sonnet could almost be described as a cross-roads that indicates Owen's initiation into a process of personal and poetic metamorphosis: a merging of Romantic elements with reality and a transition from childishness to maturity.

CONCLUSIONS

In chapter one, several events that took place during Owen's formative years have been discussed in such a way that they shed some light on the way Owen's personality and creative talents developed. It is clear that the relationship that existed between Owen's parents and the relationships he had with each one of them contributed to the stirrings of unconscious conflicts which Owen first addressed in a poetry that contained references to religion, mother and father figures and symbols of authority in general. I have argued that Owen's relationship with his parents was a primary source of his poetry and that his poetry provides a reflection of Owen's interpretation of the type of relationship he felt he had with his parents.

On presenting the views of other writers in chapter one, it has become apparent that most consider the influence Susan Owen had on her son to be of greater importance than the influence Tom Owen had over him. However, it could be argued that Tom Owen's influence over his son was of equal - if not of greater - importance since it was through Tom Owen's constant demonstrations of tolerance and kindness during difficult family times that Owen learnt to be less self-centred. It was only after he had left home and his mother's clinging protectiveness that a genuine concern for others gradually began to flower in Owen. Susan Owen's possessiveness was detrimental to her son's personal growth whilst Tom Owen's more detached behaviour and impartial attitude was healthier. It was the more natural fatherly care he received from Tom Owen that provided Wilfred with a more balanced sensitivity and awareness that came to act as a springboard to Owen's more mature poetry. With time, Owen learned to combine his personal family history with other experiences and this eventually led him to write poetry of considerable depth and power.

Owen's move to Dunsden was the first step towards greater independence and helped him to begin to formulate his own conclusions about the religion his mother had so fervently

attempted to educate him in. Although contact with his mother was constant whilst he was at Dunsden, Owen began to experience life more as an individual and less as an extension of her. Removed from the shelter of an over-protective mother, Owen's sensitivity towards others was awakened and he gradually became more aware of the social injustices that surrounded him. He also became painfully aware of the inadequacies of text-book religion. The contrast Owen found between life inside the vicarage and the harsh realities in the parish surrounding it spurred his desire to write poetry and to advance intellectually. He was doing neither at Dunsden and so resolved to leave, taking with him the emotional baggage and intellectual scaffolding that was to provide the background for many of his poems. An attitude to passive suffering that had been inculcated through his religious upbringing combined with newly discovered feelings of sympathy, pity, concern and resentment and this was to finally emerge in a poetry that was to shield and protect innocent soldiers against what Owen considered to be the irresponsible behaviour of those not involved in war. Thus, Owen's time at Dunsden could be viewed as a stepping-stone in his development towards personal and poetic maturity. Although Owen had not learned to break completely free of his mother's control, Dunsden clearly marked his first move towards greater personal freedom. The "Dunsden experience" actually repeated itself in varying degrees but in different forms throughout the rest of Owen's life: the religious "rebellion", the social awakening and subsequent awareness constantly reappear in Owen's life as a soldier and form the backbone of many of his poems. The poetry Owen wrote at Dunsden reflects the personal conflicts he was experiencing at the time and thus shows his ability to transform experience into poetry. However, from the technical point of view, the poems are of little merit.

In the final part of the first chapter, I have emphasised Owen's move to even greater

emotional independence since it was this that eventually enabled him to feel free enough to create a more original, personalised poetry. The importance of Owen's meeting with Tailhade was of vital importance as it was Tailhade who introduced Owen to and educated him in a literary culture that had previously been unknown to him. With this newly-found source of inspiration, Owen was free to experiment and explore further afield in his writing and more importantly, he was to learn to express more intimate facets of his own personality in his work.

Although Owen was dissatisfied with his poetic production whilst in France, he worked on many pieces, several of which were revised at later dates. Some of these poems are important not only because they act as links which connect different phases of Owen's life but also because they show that thoughts about technicalities were being considered at this early stage in his poetic career. Owen's first stretch of time in France helped to set the foundations for the artistic scene that would eventually be created as a result of his second period there.

Wilfred Owen enlisted in the British Army of his own free will but did not take the decision to sign up lightly. In the first part of chapter two, I have suggested that certain aspects of army life and discipline must have been difficult for Owen to accept, particularly because his sensitive nature would have been a disadvantage in an environment that was so alien to any manifestation of feeling, sensation, emotion and creativity. Before Owen learned to re-direct the more sensitive side of his nature towards the soldiers under his command, he gave the impression of being aloof and snobbish. It was only when he could come to terms with his immaturity and lack of experience in such overwhelming circumstances that Owen could begin to reveal his feelings, through his poetry, as an officer, poet and soldier-poet. On contrasting some of Owen's earlier war pieces to later

ones, a change in attitude towards the ordinary soldier can be detected.

The role Owen saw himself in as officer often conflicted sharply with the role he had created for himself as poet and this gave rise to feelings of confusion and guilt, which in turn resulted in a powerful poetry which portrays participation in and protest against the war. At the same time as Owen sympathised with the plight of the common soldier, he attempted to defend the seemingly cruel and uncomprehending behaviour of some of the officers at the front. In fact, one of the paradoxes in Owen's poetry is that whilst he defended the behaviour of the participants in combat areas - he identified with the ordinary soldiers and the officers - he was against the war.

Contrary to the general view, I have proposed that the feelings of guilt which helped galvanise Owen into poetic activity did not have their origins in the officer - poet conflict but in his childhood and adolescence when he was learning to establish his own identity with respect to his mother and religion. Since one of Owen's earlier inner conflicts revolved around feelings of guilt and religion (which in turn stemmed from the intense relationship he had with his mother), then it is hardly surprising that Owen's sentiments of guilt as regards his role in the war mingled with his views on religion. With considerable skill and insight, Owen managed to combine these two elements so that they became background themes in his war poetry. Owen the officer was a mirror-image of Owen the child.

Also, contrary to the views of other critics, Owen's return to the front after his illness was not voluntary. However, once he realised that his return was inevitable, he assumed the task of relating the truth of war and the effects it had on the soldiers and the environment. The poems analysed in the first part of chapter two show how Owen acted as a go-between as he drew the officers, the soldiers and their experiences closer to his poetry. Although this drawing together of officers, infantrymen, war experiences and

poetry bears witness to the mutual loyalty that existed among members of the British army, Owen was aware of, and perfectly willing to accept that officers and soldiers were different and would always be so. An army functions because of the differences and distance between ranks and despite Owen's claims to the contrary, he never wanted to belong to the ordinary ranks: he was happy trying to understand them and represent them in his poetry, but he would never have abandoned his cherished position as an officer for them.

The first sub-section of the second part of chapter two reflects how Owen created a stark and shocking contrast between the home and war fronts. In order to present the full impact of the weighted criticism in Owen's anti-war verse, this sub-section has been set against the traditional social attitudes and patriotic war poetry of the time. It can be seen that with a controlled use of emotion and language, Owen successfully painted a picture of the great chasm that separated those who fought and those who did not. Owen's war poetry shows no flicker of pity for non-combatants but considerable understanding and concern for the physical and mental suffering of the men in the trenches. Although Owen's poetry most certainly reflects his war experiences, it also demonstrates an ability to draw on earlier experiences (e.g. childhood nightmares) and unite his past with his present to create a poetry whose message, Owen hoped, could reach the future.

On referring to several of Owen's poems, I have made the possibly unpopular suggestion that the emotional distance and lack of frank, open communication between the home and the war fronts existed partly because the soldiers themselves - perhaps unintentionally - permitted those at home to live in sheltered ignorance : they did not tell the truth. For them, the truth was a secret which belonged only to them - and if the truth was never revealed to those at home, then how could they react to it? Attempts to defend the attitude of those at home were made by a few of the older generation but Owen

dismissed them just as he dismissed the attitude and behaviour of women at home.

After analysing several of Owen's poems, it becomes quite plain that he considered women guilty of the mutilation or deaths of the British soldiers who went to France to defend their country and their womenfolk. In several poems, Owen's attitude to women might seem particularly harsh but when viewed within the social context of the time, his verbal tirades against them are more understandable: women were campaigning for greater social and sexual equality and demanding more rights, yet when war broke out, they were automatically exempt from doing national service. However, to balance this view, I have also suggested that many soldiers were masters of their own fates: many joined up to satisfy their vanity because the thought of being in uniform and being brave appealed to their masculine pride.

A general picture of the state of propaganda and censorship during the First World War leads into a study of some of Owen's poems which reflect his rejection of the hypocritical attitudes of the politicians and clergy of the period. At the same time, Owen's attempts to counteract the public's ignorance in matters becomes obvious. On discussing pictorial propaganda, I have suggested that Owen himself was a victim of it. (Evidence presented by Owen in his letters indicates that he was fully aware of the influence and effects of propaganda). Several of his poems show a link between the notions of propaganda, persuasion and betrayal and it becomes apparent, that for Owen, betrayal came from every section of society, including the Church. So convinced was he of this that Owen boldly condemned the political and religious attitudes of the time.

Owen's uncompromisingly critical attitude of the Church and the role she played during the war has been discussed in the closing pages of chapter two: he was angered by the Church's attitude and felt that she had betrayed her own principles. In the war poems

which contain religious references, Owen successfully combined his early religious doubts with his feelings about the Church in wartime. On examining the theme of organised religion in Owen's poetry, it becomes evident that Owen separated the Church as an institution from the figure of Christ. For Owen, the Church was worthy of nothing but contempt whilst Christ provided a parallel for the suffering soldiers; and just as He was sacrificed for others, so were the soldiers. Owen felt that for those people who safely watched the war from the comfort of armchairs, kitchen sinks or the passageways of political, religious or military power, loss of life at the front was of little or no consequence to them, unless, of course, someone close to them had "died for the cause".

In order to reach a deeper understanding of the effects of shellshock, the symptoms of the disorder have been explained at the beginning of chapter three in accordance with what was known about the illness during the time of the First World War. On establishing the different types of neurasthenia which generally became manifest in soldiers at the front, Owen's particular case has been classified, and it seems that the sense of responsibility he demonstrated as a child was an important factor in succumbing to a breakdown. Owen had his own theory as to the cause of his shellshock and this has been explained before other writers' comments on the subject have been considered. A history of Owen's brief military career prior to falling ill has been given and an outline of the appalling contemporary attitudes towards the condition accompanies it so that the reader can appreciate the difficulties Owen must have had in coming to terms with his situation. This also throws a different light on Owen's war poetry: he was a soldier who had suffered from shellshock and therefore he had had to bear the weight of the social stigma that was attached to it and the inevitable feelings of guilt this must have caused, but despite this Owen was able to transfer many of his horrific war experiences, his feelings for his soldiers and his contempt

for those at home to his poetry.

Dr. Arthur Brock, the psychiatrist assigned to Owen's case, was instrumental in Owen's return to health and was of vital importance in helping Owen re-discover his interest in poetry. In fact, it could be said that Brock was the link through which Owen learned to express his war experiences in verse. From the tables presented in the second part of chapter three, it can be seen that ten fragments and twenty-three poems were almost definitely worked on to a greater or lesser extent whilst Owen was a patient at Craiglockhart and a further two fragments and twenty-two poems can be added to this list as probably having been worked on whilst he was there. In other words, Owen's stay at Craiglockhart acted as a catalyst in terms of an increase in poetic production.

Almost as if he had been trying to block the war out of his mind, Owen made very little reference to it in his early Craiglockhart work. However, by presenting some of the more "innocent" earlier pieces, I have demonstrated that many of them provided the poetic background which would inspire Owen in the composition of later poems. Thus, Owen's Craiglockhart work reflects a move from innocence to experience. I have drawn attention to the fragment "Beauty" because it not only provides a reflection of Owen's changing attitude to the concept of beauty but it also indicates his changing attitude to what poetry should be about.

As well as the innocence / experience division that is evident in Owen's Craiglockhart work, it can be divided into two further blocks: the first one containing poems and fragments that do not show any signs of Siegfried Sassoon's influence, the second presenting work that bears signs of some of Sassoon's artistic traits. At a personal level, the effect Sassoon had on Owen is unmistakable and on examining several of Owen's Craiglockhart and post-Craiglockhart letters, it is clear that the high esteem Owen held

Sassoon in almost amounted to a hero-worship which would perhaps have been more characteristic of a young adolescent than a twenty-four year old man. This serves to illustrate Owen's emotional immaturity as far as friendships were concerned and is also possibly an indication of homosexual tendencies.

Despite varying opinions as to the degree to which Sassoon influenced Owen's work, it is obvious that an influence existed: prior to his stay at Craiglockhart, Owen had written nothing of great significance, partly because he was not sure what he wanted to write. Then, his war experiences supplied him with unusual and unconventional subject matter; he had all the raw materials before him and Sassoon helped him assemble the separate parts so that he could present a coherent and solid whole. Sassoon provided Owen with the intellectual stimulus and poetic encouragement and confidence he was lacking and with his atypical, anti-war poetry, he also furnished Owen with the key which would finally set his talent free.

On referring to several of Owen's and Sassoon's poems, I have outlined the influence Sassoon had on him and although this influence is unquestionable, care should be taken to neither over- nor under-estimate it. Both men sought to educate in order to create a change in the shallow comprehension of the vast majority of the people at home who did not see war as it really was. Owen had found a source of motivation in Sassoon as a man and poet who had given him practical advice and reassurance, but rather than put Owen on the right path for his poetry writing (Owen was already there), Sassoon indicated a different, more unusual route that could be taken.

Owen's poetic growth with respect to Sassoon's influence can be likened to a small child learning to walk. At first, dependence on the figure who lends support is almost a necessity but with the acquisition of experience and confidence, a natural move away from

the original fount of assistance is to be expected. With an improvement in their health, Owen and Sassoon were separated and each resumed his normal life. Whilst on re-training exercises, Owen found the opportunity to draw together the strands of his pre-war existence, his war experiences and everything he had learnt at Craiglockhart from Dr. Brock and Sassoon about himself and his poetry - and the results were remarkable. A discussion on several of Owen's post-Craiglockhart poems shows just how remarkable these results were.

Several writers have re-produced the draft copy of the preface Owen hoped to present with the volume of poetry he intended to publish. The critical response to this preface has been so varied that on comparing and contrasting some of the points made by different writers, a somewhat fresher picture of a highly-commented piece of writing has been given. Owen made it his business to tell the truth - or the truth as he saw it - because he wanted to combat the propaganda and lies that encouraged the frivolous ignorance of the people at home. He had to match army experience and poetry together and the extensive notes for his preface show him working towards that end. On analysing Owen's preface, one comes across many questions which cannot be answered, but at least the reader is forced to examine Owen's motives for his poetry writing: to what extent was Owen truthful to himself? Was he a pacifist or not? Was he attempting to tell the whole truth but was unable to do so because it did not fit in with his poetic plans? Or was he unable to do so because the poetry / pity conflict was just a further contradiction that made up part of his complicated and often variable personality? Was this why he invited pity, rejected it on behalf of his soldiers and often would not permit his readers to feel sympathy and understanding for them? For Owen, soldiers were more innocent victims than heroes. What they did was of little consequence; it was what was done to them that was of greater importance. What was done to them by those who were not there was what interested

Owen. The fact that Owen's preface has given rise to so many unanswered questions is an indication of its "incompleteness": had he lived he would undoubtedly have completed it, thus eliminating the need for so many queries.

Owen's preface may not be coherent - but neither were his war experiences. His poetry, his preface and his table of contents were a demonstration of his attempts to reflect, in some kind of order, the reality of war as his personal experiences revealed it to him. With his war poetry, Owen tried to solder his life as a soldier and a poet together in such a way that he could represent the men at the front, explain the devastating effects of war on soldiers and on the landscape and deepen mankind's awareness of the tragedy and horror of war. On speaking on behalf of the thousands of soldiers who became unwilling victims of the war, Owen made traditional war poetry a victim too. Although neither was finished, Owen showed the possible scope of non-traditional war poetry in his preface and table of contents, and both reflect what he considered his poetic mission to be. By attempting to define what he thought war poetry should be, Owen was also defining what it meant to be a war poet as well as a poet of the war.

Within the limits of this dissertation, it has been impossible to discuss in detail the different aspects of Owen's technical accomplishments; to carry out such a task adequately would require volumes to be written on the subject. Therefore, in the final chapter I have outlined only one or two technical aspects of the poetic pathway Owen followed from the moment his interest in poetry was awakened. These aspects have been touched upon in such a way that it is hoped that the door to further enquiry will have been opened.

In *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, Paul Fussell wrote that "Poetry can only be made out of other poems . . . It is the work of knowing the prosodic conventions and of manipulating them so as to induce appropriate responses and illustrations The

individual talent is speechless without conventions" (176). One of the objectives of this chapter has been to show how Owen built up his individual talent firstly, by falling back on other poetic traditions and conventions and, secondly, by adapting them to the circumstances he found himself in and to his own artistic needs. In other words, by relying on a creative framework he had learnt from others, Owen was able to move to greater poetic independence and originality. He learnt to remould his literary background in order to engage in a war against war; he twisted the conventionalities of Romantic poetry and created a new use for poetic language so that he could tell the truth about what he saw. By examining the influence the Romantics, the Decadents and the Georgians had on Owen, I have presented a poetic backdrop which shows that Owen's personal poetic style grew from his literary background. This demonstrates that Owen was not a Romantic, or a Decadent or a Georgian: he was a combination of all three. He was a poet that was made out of other poets and his own experiences.

In poetry, themes are presented through the poet's skill in combining his knowledge of syntax and rhyme with diction and other technical devices and it is his use of language that enables him to explore different themes within the boundaries of his medium. The poet's choice of vocabulary is important when considering his desire to influence or control his reader through the themes portrayed in his poetry. Although the previous knowledge of the reader and his interpretation of the language used cannot be ignored, the manner in which the poet manipulates language can determine, to a greater or lesser extent, the readers' response to his work. Owen was very much aware of the power of language and skillfully managed it in his exploration of themes in order to create the desired response in his readers.

I have shown that although the type of poetry Owen composed changed with the

passing of time and the acquisition of new experiences, many of the themes he considered within his poetry remained constant. The fragment "Listen! The multitude is wailing for its sins" (1912) has been presented as an example of a piece whose religious theme is reflected in much later pieces, but in a different manner. In other words, what changed in Owen's poetry was the way he presented the themes in his work. For example, Owen's fondness for and perception of Nature was very much in evidence in his early verse and persisted in a different way in his later work. In an attempt to illustrate a shift in emphasis in the use of the Nature theme in his poetry, which in turn reflects a change in the development of his work, I have made a comparison between some of Owen's earlier and later pieces that relied on this theme.

As the discussion on the theme of Nature in Owen's early poetry progressed, it became clear that his use of it spread out like a fan, in such a way that each section of the fan provided a Nature-related theme. (Although the range of these Nature-related themes is considerable, the character of this dissertation has limited the extent of the discussion on the subject). Nature has first been examined as Owen conceived of it during his early years, when the Romantic influence was dominant. On growing through adolescence towards adulthood and a more independent life, Owen's contact with French literature caused a gradual change of direction and the Nature theme became more realistic. Many of the social, religious and personal conflicts Owen went through are often reflected in his use of Nature in terms of the elements and darkness and light.

With his war experiences, Owen saw the need to change his focus on Nature and so adapted his pre-war ideas to the circumstances of war. Thus, pastoral landscapes gave way to mud-engulfed areas of torment and desolation. Nature, at times, was seen to be cruel but her kindness was never forgotten. The use of Nature in terms of the elements once again

emerged and weather conditions were frequently referred to but Owen's use of language was different. The vestiges of a Romantic poet had been supplanted by a realism tinged with Romantic remnants and earlier poetic influences.

In the last part of chapter four, I have examined some of the pieces that Owen took several years to complete in order to demonstrate that as Owen's poetic skills developed, there was a gradual movement from the particular and more personal to the general and more universal. The egocentricity of his earlier verse gave way to a broader, more mature vision of life in the later poems. The adaptation of earlier experiences - and the poetry that came from them - to different experiences, so that more poetry would emerge, shows how Owen's capacity to take a general view of different events in his life and link them to each other, had developed.

On comparing the original rough draft of the sonnet "1914" to the final version, the changes Owen made to it become evident. The alterations are a reflection of his changing attitude to war as well as an awareness of the need to tighten up his poetic style in order to achieve a more effective result.

In his transition towards greater personal maturity and in his shift from ignorance to understanding of the war, Owen tried to close the gap between art and reality and therefore narrow the breach that he felt existed between the home and war fronts. From the very time he first started to write verse, Owen attempted to use the literary devices that were at his disposal so that he could define his experiences in poetry. With the onset of the war, Owen had to re-direct his Romantic fancies and mould them into a more realistic framework: the pleasant pastoral pictures of the past had to give way to the harshness and starkness of war. Even so, the origin of much of Owen's mature work is to be found in his earlier poetry. With the reality of war bombarding him, Owen changed the tone and diction

of his verse and he stretched his capacity to combine poetic and actual experience to the full. The result was a poetry that revealed the truths of war, a poetry that was moving, sharp, direct and often bitter. From being an adolescent dabbling in the techniques of poetry, Owen became a war correspondent who relied on a combination of experience, language and a love of poetry to present his war reports.

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