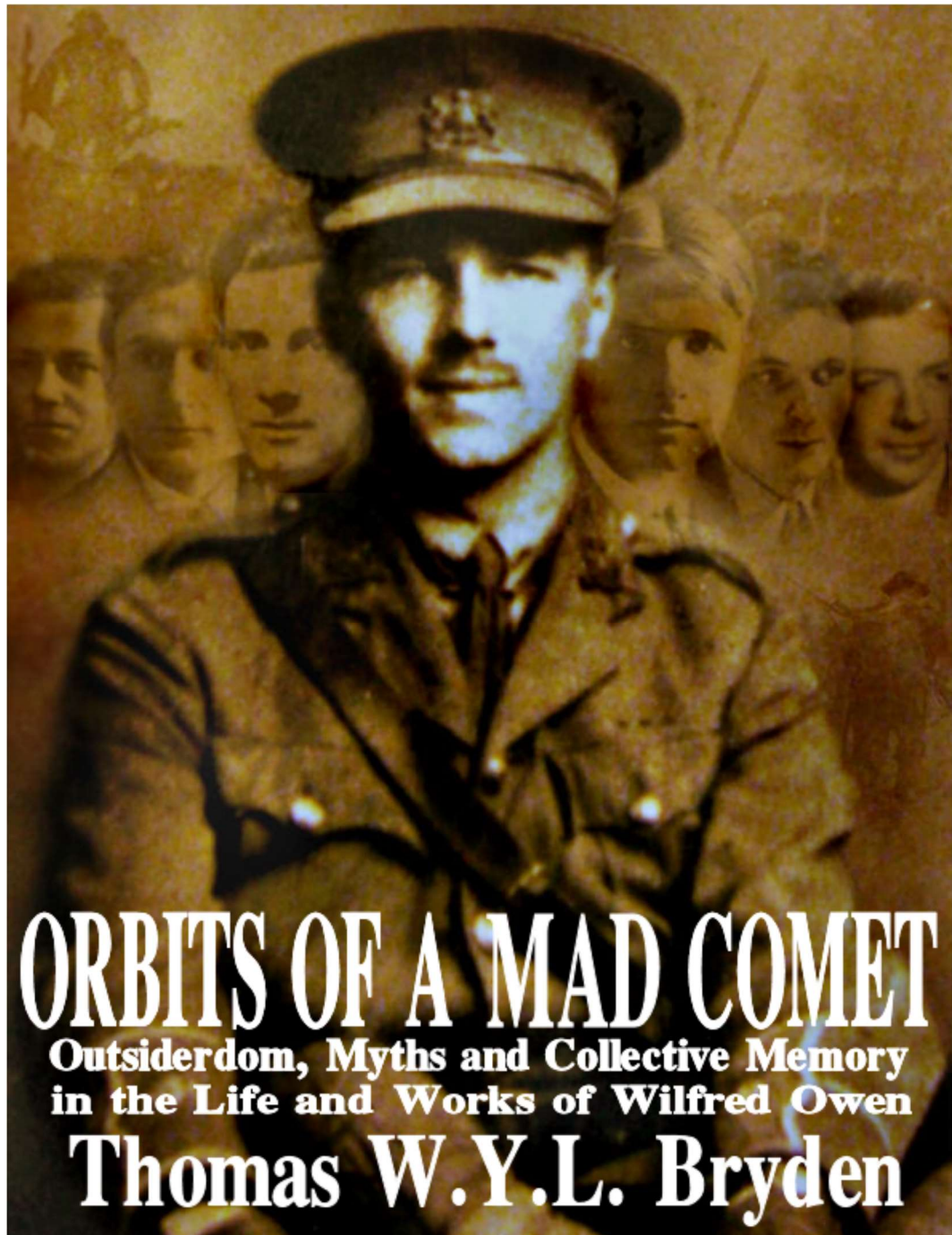


Orbits of a Mad Comet:
Outsiderdom, Myths and Collective Memory in the Life and Works of Wilfred Owen
Thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis examines the work of Wilfred Owen in the context of his lifelong compulsion to present himself as an outsider possessed of elevated knowledge—as one who transcends the expectations of his social background and allies himself with groups who value esoteric knowledge. Though these tendencies have previously been noted by biographers and literary critics, this thesis posits that they are more influential on his poetry than has been previously observed, and explores the different outsider groups with which Owen aligns himself.

This thesis also discusses Owen as an influential artistic figure alongside recent historical criticisms of myths about the First World War. As new perspectives on the conflict are explored, Owen's place in collective memory has increasingly been questioned and criticized as limited, and the reasons behind this, as well as the validity of the central place Owen holds in the conception of the 'War Myth' are investigated.

These two elements are connected by the central assertion of this thesis, which is that while it can be shown that Owen is disproportionately influential and provides only a limited, personal account of a very complex historical event, when his work and his personal philosophy are taken into account, Owen in fact presents himself as representational only of outsider groups that consider themselves separate and elevated.

It therefore becomes apparent from his writing, correspondence and from the proclivities made apparent by the decisions he made in the course of his short life that he should not be considered as an everyman, nor as a spokesperson for all soldiers. This was neither his intention, nor an appropriate didactic use for his writing.

Through this interpretation, this thesis asserts that in tandem with expressing caution when confronted with widespread acceptance of the myths of the First World War, the informed observer must also be cautious about accepting the myths about Owen himself.

Abbreviations used in this thesis—also noted in

WOCPF:	Wilfred Owen, <i>The Complete Poems and Fragments</i>
WOCL:	Wilfred Owen: <i>Collected Letters</i>
CWDC:	Wilfred Owen: <i>Complete Works: Delphi Classics</i>
POWO:	<i>The Poems of Wilfred Owen</i> , ed. by Jon Stallworthy
HOJFO:	Harold Owen, <i>Journey from Obscurity</i> , abridged version
JSWO:	Jon Stallworthy, <i>Wilfred Owen</i> , 2 nd edn.
DHTLY:	Dominic Hibberd, <i>Wilfred Owen: The Last Year</i>
DHANB:	Dominic Hibberd, <i>A New Biography</i>
DHOTP:	Dominic Hibberd, <i>Owen the Poet</i>

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

Dedication

For Dominic Hibberd and Paul Fussell, both of whom in different ways are at the very centre of this thesis, and both of whom passed away during its writing. Their influence cannot be overstated, and nor can my gratitude to them.

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Introduction

Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and trouble
is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place
where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse
ways!

-John Keats¹

Owen stated that his subject was war, and the pity of war. This was his claim in the drafted preface intended for his first collection, which also contains his famous statement, ‘The poetry is in the pity.’² While Owen did not write war poetry exclusively, this would have been a collection of war poems, and it is these poems that have earned Owen his reputation in the years since his death.

This thesis sets out to establish Owen as one who idealised the position of an outsider, in spite of—and in many ways as a result of—the numerous ways in which he was a typical, unremarkable member of English society at the time he lived. The purpose of establishing this position is to gain new insights into Owen’s stature in the context of collective memory and myth. Owen as a literary figure occupies the peculiar space of being one of Britain’s best-known poets who at the time of his death was a virtual unknown, and whose reputation grew slowly over time rather than having an immediate far-reaching cultural impact.

My proposition is that while indeed, ‘many of our ideas of First World War poetry have developed around the figure of Owen’,³ no current study of Owen’s influence on collective memory of the period is built upon a full understanding of his work or intentions, because he is most often considered either an authoritative spokesperson for the true

¹ *John Keats: Selected Letters*, ed. by Robert Gittings and Jon Lee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.233.

² *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. by Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), p.192, hereafter abbreviated ‘POWO’.

³ Santanu Das, ‘Reframing First World War Poetry: An Introduction’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, ed. by Santanu Das (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2013), pp.3-34, p.17.

feelings of the suffering and generalised soldiers, or as a largely ignorant officer who was out of his depth in attempting to speak for all soldiers. My assertion is that neither position shows an appreciation for what a close reading of Owen's work and a familiarity with his biography reveal, which is that what Owen prized was the position of an outsider, excluded from conventional British society by various innate qualities and esoteric knowledge. This personal philosophy influenced everything in Owen's work, as well as his personal decisions before and during the war. Approaching him in this context raises new questions about Owen as a person, as a poet and as a historically representative figure, and questions his position as an 'authority' in the scenario expressed by Mark Rawlinson in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*: 'Some historians fear that Owen has become, by default, the primary authority on 1914-18, the pointsman in literary criticism's supposed campaign to wrest the First World War from the military historians.'⁴

For many Britons, Owen has become an integral part of a shared cultural memory, insightfully expressed by Esther MacCallum-Stewart when she argues that because the First World War 'has been heavily documented and studied as a historical and literary event, many readers presume a homogenous past with which they can identify directly. A handful of poets and authors, dominated by the experiences of Wilfred Owen, are studied as if they were a sanctified truth in relation to World War One. To step away from this understanding is considered not only historically inaccurate but offensive.'⁵

It is true, of course, that Owen had only his personal experiences and those of the relatively small numbers of fighting men he had met upon which to base his views. He does not represent the experiences of those of different nationalities or backgrounds from his

⁴ Mark Rawlinson, 'Wilfred Owen' in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall, paperback edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.114-133, p.114.

⁵ Esther MacCallum-Stewart, 'The First World War and Popular Literature' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2005), p.4.

own, nor of women, nor of his superiors, nor of an older generation. His experience was also atypical even for one of his upbringing—he joined the war later than many of his peers after having been overseas at the outbreak of the war, but before conscription was introduced; he was an officer who was awarded the Military Cross; he suffered what is now generally labelled ‘shellshock’; and he fell into the sphere of influence of a circle of established writers known for rebellious and unorthodox points of view. While the sum of these experiences can hardly be considered a ‘typical’ war experience, so pervasive has his poetry become that all have become elements of a war narrative that can be called canonical: ‘Poetry as memory distilled is deep in the English romantic tradition, and for this reason the doomed voices of Great War poets became part of the canon of remembrance in Britain in a way few poets’ voices did elsewhere.’⁶ Owen also espoused a general view of the generality of the soldiers surrounding him that they were unable to articulate or convey their suffering to wider society, writing in ‘The Calls’, ‘I heard the sighs of men, that have no skill | To speak of their distress, no, nor the will!’⁷ In some of his poetry and correspondence, he takes on the role of a representative of soldiers as an outsider group, giving the impression he wishes to be read as a spokesperson for all the plurality of British soldiers involved in the war. It is perceived that ‘during the war, Owen and Sassoon spoke for the majority of soldiers who felt there was an unbridgeable psychological division between those in France and those who remained back in England, avant-garde artists included.’⁸ But that ‘majority’ is not so homogenous that two voices could speak for them all, and even from within the ranks of the soldiers, Owen differentiates himself as an observer, as in ‘Insensibility’:

⁶ Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, English translation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.178.

⁷ POWO, p.139.

⁸ Daniel Hipp, *The Poetry of Shell Shock: Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005), p.192.

We wise, who with a thought besmirch
Blood over all our soul,
How should we see our task
But through his blunt and lashless eyes?⁹

Owen groups himself with the ‘wise’, perhaps the poets, or those who are able to observe others on the battlefield, or simply those ‘dullards whom no cannon stuns.’ He speaks of ‘the lad whose mind was never trained’, happy in his ignorance, and while the poem approaches insensibility as both enviable and contemptible, what is consistent is Owen’s stance as one who cannot be oblivious to the suffering around him, part of a group marked by sensitivity and thoughtfulness.

Owen’s familiarity in a national context results in a tendency to read his work in a lax manner, critically and contextually. As Desmond Graham expresses it, ‘We tend to read Owen slackly, assuming that we already know what he is saying; and it is partly the result of general familiarity with the Great War and the anti-war spirit it engendered. The familiarity is dangerous as it encourages us to absorb both Owen’s poetry and the war itself back into clichés of attitude.’¹⁰ Readers are not wholly culpable for a lack of nuance in interpretation, however, for Owen’s brother Harold and Siegfried Sassoon presented him as an ordinary, albeit talented, individual who speaks as an abstracted everyman.

What results is a noteworthy simplification, not only of the complexity of opinions about the war and the variety of experiences Owen did not and does not represent, but also of Owen himself. As he became seen by many as ‘the war’s greatest poet’,¹¹ Owen’s impressions of the Great War became perceived as a coherent and unchanging set of observations and condemnations, rather than reflecting his own changing impressions, his

⁹ Wilfred Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Complete Works: Delphi Classics*, Delphi Poets Series edn (Hastings: Delphi Classics, 2015), p.32, hereafter abbreviated ‘CWDC’.

¹⁰ Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War: Owen, Blunden, Rosenberg* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1984), p.24.

¹¹ *In Flanders Fields and Other Poems of the First World War*, ed. by Brian Busby (London: Arcturus, 2005), p.11.

idiosyncrasies and his regrets. He is also seldom contextualized in terms of his audience and the level of support he received, both during his life and subsequent to his posthumous publication.

Nonetheless, Owen's 'quintessential statement of the pity of war'¹² is so central to the British cultural view of the Great War that when historians such as Dan Todman and Neil Ferguson attempt to deconstruct the 'myths' of the period almost a century later, his words and views are linked to a collectivized conception of the event. Much recent scholarship on the Great War from a historical perspective has placed emphasis on deconstructing the myths of the period. Concurrently, the significant influence of Owen's poetry on those myths means that he has become emblematic of a narrow, misleading version of history.

Owen has also sometimes been dismissed as melodramatic—notably by Yeats, who 'infamously excluded Owen from his 1936 edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*'¹³ as he felt his war poems 'too theatrically lit up the subject matter, turning the grim details into Gothic.'¹⁴ The developments in poetry in the wake of Eliot and Pound left Owen behind,¹⁵ though the direct influence of his writing has been stated by such poets as Auden, Day-Lewis and Larkin, the latter of whom believed Owen represented a kind of English poetic tradition, contrasted with the 'Irish-American-continental properties of both Eliot and Yeats'.¹⁶

Considering Owen as originator of misleading myths, even acknowledging that his contribution to their creation was inadvertent, has led to a divisive—even dismissive—attitude. Nicholas Murray supplies us with an anecdote: 'I encountered at a social occasion a prominent British military historian of the First World War who, on learning of my new

¹² Robert H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt: Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal 1910-22* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p.167.

¹³ Hipp, p.192.

¹⁴ Mildred Davidson, *The Poetry is in the Pity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p.18.

¹⁵ C.f. Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed: Studies in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen* (Lund: C W K Gleerup, 1979), pp.7-8.

¹⁶ Steve Clark, "'The Lost Displays": Larkin and Empire' in *New Larkins for Old*, ed. by James Booth (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp.166-81, p.175.

project [on the lives of the war poets], observed sardonically: “Teachers of English have a lot to answer for”.¹⁷ This thesis does not set out to argue that Owen has *not* had a significant and enduring effect on the British popular conception of the First World War, nor that his limited experience is representative of the extremely varied and complex stories that different writers can give us concerning the period. Instead, as a result of my assessment regarding his intentions and focus on the concept of the ‘outsider’, this thesis calls for a reassessment of Owen’s status as a spokesperson. It is my contention that Owen was aware that he represented only a narrow set of experiences, confirmed this in his writing, and considered his body of work to be unsuitable for the establishment of a widespread and popular ‘myth’. While he would have been unlikely to have imagined just how widely his poetry would come to be read, what becomes apparent under scrutiny of his work and correspondence is that that he considers himself an observer from the fringes who stands apart and speaks to what he considers the enlightened few.

My contention is that his intention was not to become ‘a pleader and spokesman for the silent victims of the war, against the men and institutions responsible for their destruction’,¹⁸ but to speak in a far more limited and personal capacity. In the ways he is remembered and represented, he, too, is made into myth, mediated through fiction. While the war is simplified in collective memory, so too is Owen himself. No matter how responsible he may be for the construction of myths about the war—and it is my argument that his contribution to misconceptions was relatively small—the deconstructive processes that are applied to the historical depiction of the war ought also to also be applied to Owen.

While we have a remarkable amount of biographical information on Owen, many of his personal documents were made public as recently as the 1970s, and for such a well-

¹⁷ Nicholas Murray, *The Red Sweet Wine of Youth: The Brave and Brief Lives of the war poets* (London: Little, Brown, 2010), p.4.

¹⁸ Bäckman, p.37.

documented figure, much about him has been disguised, distorted or embellished for political purposes. Owen regarded himself as an outsider in numerous ways, all of which informed and shaped his poetic voice: he was an outsider in his attitude to the war, in his poetic technique, in his views on spirituality and in terms of sexuality, too. Perhaps as a result, Owen had a keen sense of what it meant to belong to a community or a society, the expectations connected with that sense of belonging, and also what it meant to set oneself apart. Though he appears with somewhat striking frequency as a character in later literary works, Owen is not usually considered an archetypal poet in general terms—only as the archetypal *war poet*.¹⁹

While it is useful to create a subcategory like ‘war poetry’, Owen was also unlike other war poets, in terms of class and background, and later also in terms of his distinct poetic style—though of course the other war poets were also very different from one another, as unlike one another socially as Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon, as various as writers as Hilda Doolittle and Rupert Brooke. For all the social and artistic differences between the writers remembered for their writing on the war, however, the condemnation of suffering and loss of life is common enough that historian Corelli Barnett noted, ‘Despite great contrasts of style and personal response [...] the outstanding trench reminiscences told much the same story.’²⁰ But as was the case with Owen’s poetry, it is likely most of the works that came to be perceived as outstanding were brought to national attention precisely because there was an appetite for that consistent, condemnatory style. This is what Elizabeth Vandiver calls the ‘old paradigm’, wherein war poets can be grouped cohesively: ‘The old paradigm treats “the war poets” as an easily-defined, unified group with a single viewpoint, almost all of them officers (and therefore upper class), all of

¹⁹ The term ‘archetype’ is used in a Jungian sense, as will be illustrated later in the thesis.

²⁰ Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, Alan Sutton edn. (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), p.429.

them idealistic at the war's beginning, all of them bitterly disillusioned by the war's midpoint.²¹ Critics and historians increasingly recognise the far wider range of voices that responded to the Great War, and as observers gain a wider perspective, it becomes easy to criticise the limitations of the former, narrower point of view.

While Owen is undeniably at the centre of modern conceptions of what a war poet is and represents, he wrote about outsiders and exclusion in a way that has resonated with successive generations. Prefiguring the prevalence of the theme of exile in 20th-century poetry,²² ubiquitous in Owen's writing and his expressed aspirations can be found the tension between seeking a place to belong, feeling displaced and excluded and wishing to be admired as an iconoclast. Owen knew that he was not inherently the kind of person who would be recognised as an outsider with elevated knowledge, being for most of his life a decidedly average and unremarkable member of his society, lacking most of the qualities he associated with romanticised outsiderdom. The thesis does not posit Owen was always an outsider, and it is evident he was in many ways an insider: rather, it is Owen's desire to present himself as an outsider that was so influential upon his work.

This will be illustrated by a great deal of Owen's poetry, but the poem that perhaps best encapsulates Owen's desires and self-doubts is a piece of juvenilia, 'O World of Many Worlds.'²³ The poem was written, at least in its earliest form, in 1912, when the young Owen was doubting his future and the personal value of organised religion. Owen finds himself searching for a 'centre of mine own' in a confusing world where 'loud machinery spins, points work in touch; | Wheels whirl in systems, zone in zone.' Helped by Fate to a

²¹ Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.2.

²² For a sample overview, see Michael Murphy, 'Writing in the Dark: Exile and Identity in the Poetry of W.H. Auden, Joseph Brodsky and George Szirtes' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Nottingham Trent University, 2000).

²³ CWDC, p.118.

vantage point 'where but few advance', Owen is afforded a view of 'men far below me where they swarm...'

Owen has some admiration for the complexity of human experience: 'Not more complex the millions of the stars | Than are the hearts of mortal brothers.' However, Owen has no envy for the lives of the 'swarm', the ordinary members of society:

But all hold course unalterably fixed;
They follow destinies foreplanned:
I envy not these lives in their faith unmixed,
I would not step with such a band.

Though his philosophising centres on his musings about religion, this formative experience affects Owen. At nineteen, he finds himself determined to excel in some manner, to be set apart and elevated through unique ways of living:

To be a meteor, fast, eccentric, lone,
Lawless; in passage through all spheres,
Warning the earth of wider ways unknown
And rousing men with heavenly fears...

The connection between this lone meteor whose mission is to warn others cannot be extricated from the later assertion in his draft preface that, 'All a poet can do today is warn.' To be freed from the swarm and the bewildering machinery of society is to be free, yet alone, while also held in awe. The 'fears' by which men are roused are to be envied: 'O glorious fear!' the poem goes on.

Critically, Owen is not the only meteor in his symbolic universe. Others are living the kind of life he yearns for:

Those other wandering souls
High burning through that outer bourne
Are lights unto themselves. Fair aureoles
Self-radiated these are worn.

And when in after times those stars return

And strike once more earth's horizon,
They gather many satellites astern,
For they are greater than this system's Sun.

Over the course of his life Owen's views would be refined and alter in some ways. But his personal philosophy never deviated far from this pursuit of an elevated, eccentric status admired by others but not quite unique in the universe. Later he would describe himself in the same terms to Sassoon, as a 'Mad comet' fixed only for a while as a satellite around his mentor before seeking his own place in the firmament as a 'dark star'.²⁴

It is for the individual to decide whether this sort of ambition was admirable or contemptible, whether it echoes Nietzschean 'master morality' or suggests adolescent delusions of grandeur, or conceivably both. But these desires motivated and inspired Owen, shaping his life and work. The disdain for being part of the 'swarm' has something of the conception of desire put forward by Deleuze and Guattari, becoming 'the abject fear of lacking something' before becoming a productive machine in its own right,²⁵ points I will return to later in this thesis.

There is a central irony to Owen's current position as the populist writer whose take on a period has muddied the waters of historical truth, contributing to the descent of representations of the period into—as Gordon Corrigan evocatively puts it in the title of his book—*Mud, Blood and Poppycock*.²⁶ The irony comes when we trace Owen's growing reputation as a figure of rebellion beloved of small, select groups through the decades after his death, until with Britten's *War Requiem* and some of the popular anthologies of the 1960s, he becomes a far more popular writer and this position is inverted.

²⁴ *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. by Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.505, hereafter abbreviated 'WOCL'.

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 10th printing, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.27.

²⁶ Gordon Corrigan, *Mud, Blood and Poppycock: Britain and the First World War*, Cassell Military Paperbacks edn (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2004).

This watershed of sorts is why the final two chapters of the thesis use the *War Requiem* as their point of division. As we will establish, it is not quite such a simple matter as the *War Requiem* rescuing Owen from obscurity, but in broad terms that general suggestion is not baseless, making 1962 a useful reference point for the beginning of Owen's ascent to prominent poet.

Inevitably, this thesis will touch on many questions and themes that lie beyond its scope. Owen is my subject here, and where I speak of the other war poets, it is in relation to Owen or for context: I am not extending my argument to the cultural impact of that entire disparate group. I also cannot attempt to give a complete overview of all ways in which current historical studies treat memory, individual or collective, particularly where trauma is involved, nor in a single thesis hope to give a comprehensive overview of how British culture deals with memorialization. Historians are varied in conclusions and methodology, and there is little consensus here.

As Mark Rawlinson puts it, 'Wilfred Owen's cultural prominence is obvious, but also extraordinary.'²⁷ I aim not to simply show the way Owen's reputation grew and changed, or that he has a unique relationship with a nation's cultural remembrance of an event, but to offer an explanation as to why these circumstances came to pass. Other commentators will express their views on the ways in which they see Owen as extraordinary, but this thesis offers an interpretation not found elsewhere.

In this way I mean to provide an original contribution to knowledge. It bears noting that my interpretation of the basic events of Owen's life does not differ significantly from what has been put forward by Dominic Hibberd in his 2002 biography, though I may depart from his views of Owen's sexuality and perception of class. This thesis' original

²⁷ Rawlinson, 'Wilfred Owen', p.114.

contributions centre on the importance of Owen's wish to be perceived as an elevated outsider, the examination of the unpublished work of Dennis Welland to clarify the development of Owen's reputation in the period between his death and the War Requiem, and the assertion of a fundamental link between the way that reputation was established and the outsider status Owen projected. Owen, I believe, would be disappointed to learn of his central place in an increasingly reviled interpretation of the Great War, and resisted being pinned down like one of Nabokov's butterflies. The idea of being codified, annotated with board-approved interpretations and made safe for the study of schoolchildren would have been abhorrent to him, and this thesis aims to illustrate why.

Chapter 1: The ‘War Myth’, and Owen’s Place Within It

Owen’s poetry came to play such a dominant role in popular mythology through a combination of fortune, structural factors and potential malleability. His death offered an attractive mix of romance, tragedy and heroism. His association with other poets who survived the war meant that he had influential advocates who ensured that his word did not fade into obscurity, as it could so easily have done in the 1920s. Whilst poetry and war remained important elements in British culture, the forms Owen chose—relatively short poems which aimed to communicate primary emotions—turned out to be useful to television producers and classroom teachers. An Owen poem could bookend an episode or be dealt with in an hour.²⁸

In late 2013, David Reynolds published his book *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century*. To promote it, he wrote an article for the *Cambridge Alumni Magazine* entitled ‘Lest we Forget’, wherein he asserted that while the centenary of the Great War would lead to a variety of commemorative events, the British public did not have a good collective understanding of the war. ‘Away from the rhetoric of remembrance,’ he wrote, ‘the Great War is being reinterpreted in challenging new ways.’ This challenging discourse was limited to academic fields, however: ‘British remembrance of the Great War seems stuck in the trenches—literally and metaphorically. The period between 1914-18 evokes images of mud and blood, of young men sent to their deaths for no purpose by boneheaded, upper-class generals: the interpreters of this war experience are not historians but a few soldier poets, supremely Wilfred Owen.’²⁹

Upon publication, *The Long Shadow* was to elaborate:—

We [...] need to think more critically about the now iconic “war poets”. Certainly they are remarkable both as men and as writers—fascinating in their complicated, often

²⁸ Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (Hambledon and London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005), p.171.

²⁹ David Reynolds, ‘Lest We Forget’, *CAM: Cambridge Alumni Magazine*, Issue 70: Michaelmas 2013, pp.24-27, p.25.

contorted, responses to the experience of modern war and how it should be represented in poetry. Yet these men were typical neither of the British Tommy in general nor of the writers (a quarter of them women) who published poems in 1914-18. Their verse should not be used as historical description of the soldier's experience, as suggested by the still influential anthologies of the 1960s. Most Tommies were not hypersensitively reflective about their own manhood, sexuality or even suffering. [...] It is also surely bizarre that more words have been written about a score of war poets than about the 4 million non-white troops who fought for the Allies during the Great War.³⁰

The Great War was an event of undeniable social and cultural significance, and as Reynolds suggests, the works of many historians in recent years have challenged the way it is portrayed and understood. The war poets are deemed to disproportionately influence how the British public collectively remembers the conflict, and increasingly, commentators refer to a 'war myth' believed by broad sections of the public. This chapter is an exploration of how this 'myth' is understood, how Owen is related to collective memory of the Great War, and how accurate this impression of disproportionate influence may be.

Historians such as Reynolds point out that the words of a handful of men writing poetry cannot possibly be representative of the experiences of millions, and should not be presented as such. The popularity of the war poets' views on the war in which they were fighting means that their statements become sufficiently dominant to obfuscate more objective assessments. Thus begins a tension that in recent years has become an area of focus for many historians: the subjective artistic verse of poets as a mode of expression is set in opposition to a more detached, wide-reaching and objective historical approach. In Reynolds' introduction, he warns that 'by reducing the conflict to personal tragedies, however moving, we have lost the big picture: the history has been distilled into poetry'.³¹

³⁰ David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2013), p.431.

³¹ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, p.xv.

As the Centenary Year of the beginning of the Great War arrived, this tension reached the pages of national newspapers, in a somewhat simplified form that could be used as ammunition in the squabbles between the contemporary left and right. A row erupted over Education Secretary Michael Gove's *Daily Mail* article 'Why does the Left insist on belittling true British heroes?', in which he firmly established a sense of opposition between historians on one side and writers of fiction on the other, the latter being responsible for 'myths': -

The conflict has, for many, been seen through the fictional prism of dramas such as *Oh! What a Lovely War*, *The Monocled Mutineer* and *Blackadder*, as a misbegotten shambles—a series of catastrophic mistakes perpetrated by an out-of-touch elite. Even to this day there are Left-wing academics all too happy to feed those myths.

Our understanding of the war has been overlaid by misunderstandings, and misrepresentations which reflect an, at best, ambiguous attitude to this country and, at worst, an unhappy compulsion on the part of some to denigrate virtues such as patriotism, honour and courage.³²

Gove's article focuses on the conception that the War was poorly-run by its generals, and that brave men were sent to unnecessary deaths by incompetents. This is an idea popularized by Alan Clark's 1961 book *The Donkeys*, which severely criticises Field Marshal Haig,³³ and by the views of A.J.P. Taylor in his 1963 *The First World War: An Illustrated History*.³⁴ Part of the conception is that many of the fighting men were fooled into thinking that they would be participants in a noble, heroic struggle only to be confronted by the stark, bloody reality of war and becoming disillusioned. This, Gove states, is an oversimplification. He offers alternate perspectives: 'the war was also seen by

³² Michael Gove, 'Why does the Left insist on belittling true British heroes?', *The Daily Mail*, 2 January 2014 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2532930/MICHAEL-GOVE-Why-does-Left-insist-belittling-true-British-heroes.html>>[accessed 29 August 2014].

³³ Alan Hutchinson, *The Donkeys* (London: Hutchinson, 1961), passim.

³⁴ A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), passim.

participants as a noble cause. Historians have skilfully demonstrated how those who fought were not dupes but conscious believers in king and country, committed to defending the western liberal order.’ He continues: ‘Other historians have gone even further in challenging some prevailing myths. [...] Generals who were excoriated for their bloody folly have now, after proper study, been re-assessed.’³⁵ Thus, on two fronts Gove challenges what he feels are the prevailing, politically-motivated myths of the conflict: not all the soldiers ended up violently opposed to the conflict or felt lied to, and the generals who were considered ‘donkeys’ may not have deserved such censure.

The political point Gove wishes to make is that left-wing historians aim to present the authority figures of the period as farcical to undermine nationalistic pride derived from their successes. But the article warns above all else of an incomplete understanding—of believing in myths. ‘The war was, of course, an unspeakable tragedy, which robbed this nation of our bravest and best’, Gove concedes, though he gives no indication as to why he feels those who fought and survived could not be considered of the same quality. His conclusion revolves around the word ‘myth’: ‘but even as we recall that loss and commemorate the bravery of those who fought, it’s important that we don’t succumb to some of the myths which have grown up about the conflict’.³⁶

Predictably for such a politically charged article, the reaction was condemnatory. The main target of Gove’s ire, historian Richard J. Evans, answered him in an article for *The Guardian*, ‘Michael Gove shows his ignorance of history—again.’ He points out that Gove quoted him out of context to make it seem what was in fact a condemnation of a proposed school curriculum, an ‘uncritically celebratory narrative of English history’, was actually

³⁵ Gove, web.

³⁶ Ibid.

universally attacking positive representation of British leadership.³⁷ ‘The arguments that will rage about the war over the coming months and years have nothing to do with left versus right’, Evans continues, citing several right-wing sources whose views are in opposition to Gove’s. But at the centre of his response is the same warning, the same bogeyman: ‘just as he did in his proposals for the national curriculum, Gove has again shown his ignorance of history and his preference for mythmaking over scholarship.’ The central attack that each side of this argument levels at the other is that they are ignoring facts, exhibiting a preference for *myth*.

Two days later, *Guardian* columnist Van Badham lashed out: ‘As an Australian, I’m more concerned that the man at the head of any national history curriculum anywhere is mythologising world war one as an historical event to which only Gove’s United Kingdom meaningfully turned up.’³⁸ This word, ‘myth’, and its manifold derivatives—including but not limited to ‘mythologising’, ‘myth-making’ and ‘mythistory’—recur in discourse on the subject of the First World War, almost universally as a negative codification of the tenet that the general public, and often the writer’s political opponents, lack a full understanding of historical events, insofar as such a thing is possible.

‘Myths’ are put forward in opposition to ‘truth’: they give a distorted, or severely limited, version of historical events. They are also lamentably widespread: ‘Myths prevail over historical reality,’ Brian Bond tells us³⁹. Myths are closely connected to interpretations of memory, especially collective memory, as we will come to later in this chapter, but more generally, the point that the word ‘myth’ becomes relevant is the point that the historian believes collective memory diverges from a preferred, more rational, more informed

³⁷ Richard Evans, ‘Michael Gove shows his ignorance of history – again’, *The Guardian*, 6 January 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/06/richard-evans-michael-gove-history-education>>[accessed 29 August 2014].

³⁸ Van Badham, ‘Michael Gove, the British education secretary belittling Australia’s war dead’, *The Guardian*, 7 January 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/07/michael-gove-gallipoli-world-war-one>>[accessed 29 August 2014].

³⁹ Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain’s Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.1.

presentation of events. To discuss how Owen is perceived today in terms of collective memory and myth-making, it is first necessary to establish a sufficient context by exploring the connotations of this word ‘myth’.

The opposition—which is not always a dichotomy—between myths and ‘fact’ has for the past several decades been a significant point of discussion for historians. Eric Hobsbawm in particular is vociferous in establishing myth as a kind of enemy for historians to combat and strive to destroy: in his 1997 work *On History*, he speaks of the historian’s ‘function as destroyer of myth’ and, a paragraph later, their ‘function as myth-slayer’.⁴⁰ The method by which myths can be destroyed or slain is through being taken apart: ‘the deconstruction of political or social myths dressed up as history has long been part of the historian’s professional duties, independent of his or her sympathies.’⁴¹ Hobsbawm’s view on myth is not uncommon for a historian, and no doubt influenced many of those who followed him: myths are the overviews of history that have, through repetition on a mass scale, become influential, yet are either incomplete or inaccurate. The result is that they replace or distort truer factual analyses. Jan Ifversen in his essay ‘Myth in the Writing of European History’ is in agreement: ‘Historians are not—at least not explicitly—involved in creating and justifying communities. They do not need myths. On the contrary, they often see their role as revealing and deconstructing myths in the public use of history.’⁴²

The difficulty the historian encounters is the doubt of Descartes considering the reliability of his senses: when no sources are beyond question, is it reasonable to consider any of them trustworthy, and by extension any narrative of history objectively accurate? But the answer is that when a wealth of evidence suggests certain interpretations are

⁴⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), p.274.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.273.

⁴² Jan Ifversen, ‘Myth in the Writing of European History’ in *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe*, ed. by Stephan Berger and Chris Lorenz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.452-79, p.463.

probable, that interpretation can be favoured. And when popular belief tends towards a version of events that contradicts that interpretation, the term ‘myth’ becomes useful. ‘Most historians still tend to dismiss myths as false histories’⁴³, writes Joseph Mali—they can be considered false because available evidence suggests another version of events is more likely.

Of course, generalising historians to make a point about the generalisation of war poets is self-defeating. Historians’ approaches to myth and objective truth are myriad, and not every historian will agree with this ‘destroyer of myth’ image. Myths are a part of history and can be analysed or reconceptualised. We can speak only of tendencies or generalisations in these approaches, but when historians consider Owen as a figurehead for a poor understanding of the Great War, the ‘myth’ he is a part of is never considered positive or worthy of preservation. It is always presented as an obstacle to be overcome for the sake of better understanding, though the opposition from an established culture of memorial will be strong. To clarify, it is worth going back to definitions of the word ‘myth’ that are centred more on the term as associated with classical literature. In *Other People’s Myths: The Cave of Echoes*, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty provides us with a definition:

A myth is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past or, more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered.⁴⁴

Myths are upheld and passed on, regardless of whether those who participate are cognisant of debates about evidence, because they reflect the beliefs and values that the society wishes to uphold. Mali has a similar view: ‘However legendary a myth may be, it

⁴³ Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.7.

⁴⁴ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other people’s Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p.27.

does not signify fabrication or pure fiction, because it usually contains or refers to certain crucial issues in the history of the community.⁴⁵ This is somewhat different, it should be noted, from the term ‘myth’ as employed by Georges Sorel: he describes the myths used by revolutionaries and others ‘participating in great social movements’, who ‘picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph’.⁴⁶

A distinction is made by Robert Ellwood in his *The Politics of Myth* to differentiate between the ‘mythologists’ upon whom he focuses—Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell—and Sorel. Unlike Sorel, these figures emphasize ‘the way myth functions in individuals and society as a means to a profound understanding’, where Sorel’s version is designed for ‘immediately inciting revolutionary action’.⁴⁷ Ellwood’s subjects had more personal aims for interactions with myth, which are connected with the way an event such as the Great War becomes perceived: ‘these interpreters of ancient myth said much to lead their public to believe that a rediscovery of meaning in myth could contribute to solving the personal and social problems of those tumultuous times.’⁴⁸ Myth is used first as the basis on which a catastrophic event like the Great War could be understood, leading to a simplified version that can be utilized to make comparable future events more comprehensible.

But this, incorporating how the War Poets are seen, is not interpreted as involving outright falsehoods—indeed, they are known as wishing to show the reality of the war despite the propaganda that adumbrates and glorifies a bloody and horrific conflict. Owen himself is often occupied with truth, railing against ‘The old lie’ in ‘Dulce et Decorum

⁴⁵ Mali, p.4.

⁴⁶ Georges Sorel, *Reflection on Violence*, ed. by Jeremy Jennings, English translation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.20.

⁴⁷ Robert Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C.G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), p.33.

⁴⁸ Ellwood, p.vii.

Est'⁴⁹ and insisting 'The true poets must be truthful'⁵⁰ in his draft preface. Owen and his circle placed emphasis on writing in an autobiographical manner, and their direct experience would be critical to their later perceived authority—to speak of the war capably, one had to have experienced it, which is why, for example, most of the major poets of the period were 'suspicious of Nichols as an exponent of the war, not only for the tenor and quality of his poetry, but also because of his extremely limited war service'.⁵¹

When Owen's role in the establishment of myths is considered, it is not suggested that he intentionally crafted a misleading version of events, nor that he anticipated the influence he would have. The poems' unforgettable fury is not posturing: as Nicholas Murray points out, 'just as the preface made a virtue of witness—as opposed either to aestheticising or polemic—so the best of Owen's poems draw their primary strength from their authenticity of feeling and perception of war's actuality.'⁵²

If Owen emphasised the importance of truth, why is he now associated with misconceptions and poor understanding? Where Owen is seen as culpable for 'war myths', he is not seen as deceptive, but rather espousing narrow and limited versions of the truth: the myths are developed as Owen's poetry is taken as universal or broadly representative. As Tim Kendall observes, 'The war poets' emphasis on truth-telling, against the grain of a dominant contemporary discourse which mistakes opinion for truth, always risks being smoothed into an acceptable narrative by the critic's dishonouring intention.'⁵³ Owen's statements are truthful and misleading, powerful but limited by personal experience, and should be considered the definitive sources of myths in perfect alignment with

⁴⁹ POWO, p.117.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.192.

⁵¹ Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p.155.

⁵² Murray, p.164.

⁵³ Tim Kendall, 'Introduction' in *Modern English War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.1-4, p.3.

misconceptions about the war only as far as they should be considered objective and irrefutable truths about a universal war experience.

The ‘war myths’ are myths of inadequacy, of select sources being disproportionately influential. The myths about the Great War revolve around shallow understanding rather than outright untruths, some propounded with a political goal and some intended to mitigate grief. Though Gove may have simplified the debate to suit a political agenda, he maintains that shallow understanding in certain writings have led to ‘misunderstandings, and misrepresentations’ of the Great War. Though he does not mention the war poets, it is in that context that they are often discussed. For example, Esther MacCallum-Stewart’s doctoral thesis *The First World War and Popular Literature* gives us an enlightening view of the perception of the influence of Owen and his circle, as well as another permutation of the word ‘myth’: -

A mythopoeia, albeit a highly attractive one, has been supplied by the poems of the war, and is now used as a basis for subsequent prose, historical exploration and critical thought. The war poets and their anthologies have replaced history, and now inform the popular understanding of the war.⁵⁴

There is not, as Gove suggests, significant debate between those who appreciate the sacrifices of the soldiers and accept the heroism of warfare and those who consider the war to have been an absurd waste of life. This could be called a myth about myth-making—the perception that there is a concerted effort to give historical credence to the notion of unfortunate and misled soldiers universally enduring little but mud, bombardment and the whims of insane generals for the duration of the war. Even satirical works allow for more nuance. Effectively, this is a reductive summary of debates as to whether or not the war was wholly unnecessary or whether it had a positive outcome—which in recent years have on

⁵⁴ MacCallum-Stewart, p.20.

both sides called for wider overviews. Indeed, encouraging nuance to be applied in all circumstances is why when Max Hastings and Niall Ferguson each put forward their contrasting views on television programmes for the BBC in February 2014—*The Necessary War* and *The Pity of War*, respectively—both sought to challenge prevailing notions⁵⁵. But the point at which these two historians depart from one another was not in Gove's terms, with one side claiming the war was glorious and the other portraying it as pointless and wasteful, but on the hypothetical matter of what Europe would ultimately have become had Britain never participated. Each was keen to stress that the period was complex, and that there were a number of misconceptions to dispel.

I began this chapter with a quotation from Todman seeking to explain why 'Owen's poetry came to play such a dominant role in popular mythology'.⁵⁶ When questioning if this dominance is appropriate, first we must explore how Owen has been used to construct a myth. Since his remarkable surge in popularity in the 1960s, Owen has become such a fixture of 21st-Century discourse on the Great War that a significant part of the scholarly movement to reconsider and more objectively evaluate the commonly-held beliefs of the period necessarily involves questioning how much of what Dominic Hibberd calls the 'mythical Wilfred Owen'⁵⁷ is a fictional, political construct. Indeed, Hibberd's work on Owen has largely revolved around the question of who Owen was and what he believed, based on available evidence.

That there are numerous myths about Great War, particularly from the British point of view, is a point of consensus for numerous scholars. These myths may suggest that the war was an unmitigated triumph, or that the war was an abject failure, or close enough to either

⁵⁵ Cf. Keith Lowe, 'The Necessary War, BBC Two, review', *The Telegraph*, 25 February 2014 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/tv-and-radio-reviews/10660290/The-Necessary-War-BBC-Two-review.html>>[accessed, 29 August 2014].

⁵⁶ Todman, *The Great War*, p.171.

⁵⁷ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: The Last Year* (London: Constable and Company, 1992), p.114, hereafter abbreviated 'DHTLY'.

extreme so as to seem absurd, as Gary Sheffield highlights: ‘In Britain, opinion is sharply polarized between those who see the war as a monstrous tragedy which should never have happened, and those who agree it was a tragedy but say that it was not of Britain’s making and Britain had no choice but to get involved.’⁵⁸ The myths may also indicate suffering crossed all class boundaries, or that those most affected were the poor, or the less-acknowledged combatants from former colonies. It may be that generals were hopeless ‘donkeys’ with no idea what was happening on the battlefields, or it may be that the strategies used have been misunderstood and were in fact not only sound but the best possible choice for the situation. In almost all cases, these ‘myths’ are overly broad or simplistic views—they are black and white, and lacking in nuance, views most commonly found in satire.

This is why *Blackadder* features prominently in the debates about the truths of the war, as the programme derived much of its comedy from exaggerating familiar notions of the historical period. It is in deference to *1066 and All That* that Todman defines the word ‘myth’, as the ‘history you can remember’⁵⁹—not an untruth but something inadequate for a full understanding. He goes on, ‘Myths simplify, reducing the complex events of the past to an easily understood set of symbols,’⁶⁰ which is in accordance with many scholars’ interpretation of common perceptions of the Great War. Brian Bond notes that the standard of understanding has been improving: ‘Due in part to the availability of a much wider range of sources, but even more to changing perspectives and greater objectivity, really excellent military history began to be published in the last decade or so of the twentieth century.’ He continues by mentioning some of the myths that are now being dispelled: ‘Historians are now successfully challenging the deeply rooted notions of British “butchers and bunglers”,

⁵⁸ Gary Sheffield, *The First World War Remembered*, André Deutsch Limited edn. (London: André Deutsch, 2014), p.4.

⁵⁹ Todman, *The Great War*, p.xiii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

of “lions led by donkeys”, and of general disenchantment with an unnecessary, pointless and ultimately futile war.’⁶¹

This word, ‘futile’, is conspicuously linked with Owen and his writing. Assuredly, he wrote a poem with the title ‘Futility’⁶². But it is not a poem stating the war is futile. The short poem concerns the attempt to rouse a man who is beyond help by moving him into the sun. And yes, the futility of this attempt is extended to nihilistic closing lines, ‘O what made fatuous sunbeams toil | To break earth’s sleep at all?’ But to conflate the speaker reacting to a single event by despairingly asking what the purpose of the sun giving any life to the world at all is not the same thing as asserting there is no purpose to the war. Though as we will see, some poems question elements of the war and lament the loss of life, they do not claim there is no purpose or objective to the fighting, which by the last stages of the war Owen was participating in willingly.

Todman is firm in his assertion that a certain two poets are the primary sources of the prominent war myths, alongside a few visual images: ‘repetition and simplification can be seen in the development of a readily understood symbolic vocabulary of the war, made up of a limited number of black and white still photographs and the shorter poems of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, which is used in particular by newspapers and television. Once formed, such habits were hard to break.’⁶³ But to what extent can Owen truly be demonstrated to have influenced these ‘habits’? Are today’s myths truly a result of a process by which the ‘war poets were transmuted into the supreme truth-tellers of the Great War’,⁶⁴ as Reynolds puts it? Undeniably, when considering individual suffering on the battlefield—or the plight of those who had horrific experienced but survived—Owen’s

⁶¹ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, p.viii.

⁶² POWO, p.135.

⁶³ Todman, *The Great War*, p.40.

⁶⁴ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, p.187.

imagery will soon be evoked. The man who founders as if in fire or lime in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, the lonely quadriplegic of ‘Disabled’, the dead and dying in the likes of ‘Futility’, ‘The Dead-Beat’ or ‘The Sentry’—they are familiar points of reference for any who encountered Owen in the British education system.

The images are not dishonest or misleading. If myths are constructed by Owen writing these poems, it is not through invention: it is not disputed that similar experiences of suffering and death occurred on the fields of battle in the Great War. Stories like those told by Owen and the other war poets certainly occurred. The myth, if one is to be found, is that this was the experience of *all* fighting men, or a sufficiently universal experience as to be called typical.

Yet though some of Owen’s poems, such as ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, make a point of generalizing young soldiers to increase the effect of objectification, and others like ‘Exposure’ meld all soldiers in the vicinity together into a kind of collective, united in suffering, the majority of the figures of pity in Owen’s poems are isolated individuals. His ‘Dead-Beat’ loses his mind and becomes sub-human, but there are other soldiers looking on, observers who do not suffer the same, or even express sympathy. The men in this poem who try to kick the fallen comrade to his feet are figures who do not fit into the myth of a universalised suffering, and Owen shows them as men who are not negatively affected by the experience of witnessing death, marking them as different from the men in ‘Futility’ who hope in vain to save a comrade. Similarly, the officer in ‘Inspection’⁶⁵ is exposed as ignorant for not having suffered in the same way as the man he is criticising, yet he is still a part of the war—as is the doctor with the ‘well-whiskied’⁶⁶ laugh who celebrates the dead-

⁶⁵ POWO, p.72.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.121.

beat's death: the latter is a satirical figure, but both illustrate that not every soldier is the pitiable, suffering figure associated with some of his other poems.

These latter two examples—unlike the men of 'The Dead-Beat' and 'Futility', distinguished as individual characters—are authority figures. The narrating officer who shows his naivety in 'Inspection' and the pitiless doctor in 'The Dead-Beat' are separate from the common soldier in ways that will be explored in my discussion of social class. Yet they are not the 'lions' of the 'lions led by donkeys' myth, a misconception which Bond addresses with the somewhat unspecific, 'Contrary to popular myth the army was generally well led'⁶⁷. The officer in 'Inspection' may not be the most sympathetic character, but the poem is loosely autobiographical and this authority figure derives from Owen's own contrition over insensitive leadership. Indeed, Owen's poems fit the conception of war poets condemning those in command rather poorly. While Owen allied with Sassoon, who had criticized those who were responsible for how the war was run in his famous letter to *The Times*⁶⁸, Owen himself is less directly critical.

The closest Owen comes to a Sassoonish criticism of those who could bring an end to the war is his 'Parable of the Old Man and the Young'. In this poem Abraham—or, here, Abram—is offered the ram to sacrifice instead of his son, yet refuses this 'Ram of Pride', and instead 'slew his son, | And half the seed of Europe, one by one'.⁶⁹ This is in alignment with the conception that the war has been prolonged unnecessarily over something as foolish as pride, but it is still very far from the notion of generals as incompetent bunglers who are ignorant of their actions—this version of Abraham understands precisely what he is doing in his sacrifice, and does so in perfect awareness because he is too proud to accept an alternative. It may be that Derek Jarman's 1988 film version of Britten's *War Requiem*

⁶⁷ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, p.19.

⁶⁸ See Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p.146.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.151.

contributes to the impression that Owen felt the authority figures of the war were absurd, pairing the section setting ‘Parable of the Old Man and the Young’ to music with images of cartoonish decadence—men with powdered faces looking on at a scene of sacrifice with derision. This, however, is not Owen’s image, and though the Abraham of his poem’s final act is rendered in glib, understated terms, he remains a powerful symbol of authority rather than an incompetent ‘donkey’.

One may read Owen’s poetry and from the evidence therein decide that no political goal was worth the suffering these men endured, but Owen never leads his reader to that conclusion; he illustrates their experiences with pity, certainly, but he remained proud of being a soldier and fighting with a political goal, even expressing contempt for ‘washy pacifists’.⁷⁰ If it is assumed that all soldiers shared Owen’s view that war was ‘pitiable and futile’ based on his poetry, that view derives from an incomplete reading that does not acknowledge Owen’s portrayals of trench humour, exhibited for example in ‘Apologia Pro Poemate Meo’ and in the depictions of the soldiers who confront death and say only, ‘We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum’ in ‘The Next War.’⁷¹ Nor does it fully support the conception that Owen considered the war itself ‘futile’, or expand upon why he should not be viewed as the ‘voice of a generation.’ All of these points should be self-evident from Owen’s poetry alone, corroborated by an understanding of the relationship he established between himself and the society around him.

Regardless of whether in returning to the Western Front for the final time, ‘Owen consciously took Sassoon’s place as the war poet at the front’,⁷² Owen is not Sassoon, and whatever Sassoon’s contributions to the establishment of myth, he and Owen are different

⁷⁰ WOCL, p.498.

⁷¹ POWO, p.142.

⁷² Philip Hoare, *Wilde’s Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy & The First World War* (London: Duckworth, 1997), p.204.

poets and ought not to be conflated, any more than all the war's 'Tommies' ought to be conflated.

Owen's poetry primarily rails against the ignorant and apathetic, the 'Old men's placidity' of 'Insensibility'. But these are the outsiders to the war who lack the knowledge to understand the suffering of the fighting men. They are not the old men orchestrating the attacks or perpetuating the war, and I can find no suggestion the generals are bunglers or incompetents in Owen's writing. Nor do accounts of mud and miserable trench life derive wholly from Owen's writing. Trenches, in fact, barely feature in his narrative poetry, the exception being 'The Sentry', which takes place in 'an old Boche dug-out', with steep steps 'thick with clay', noisome air and 'Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime'.⁷³

Here we find perhaps the full complement of the images of myth—horrific death, surviving soldiers enduring a harrowing experience, and 'deluging muck'. Yet any attempt to support the idea that Owen's poems depict the soldiers spending extended periods in muddy underground trenches with this poem is incompatible with that word, 'Boche'. This is not the soldiers' home trench, or their daily experience. This is a highly exceptional circumstance, compounded by torrential rain and the shelling of the German soldiers aware that their former 'dug-out' is occupied. For all the mud encountered in this operation, Owen rather more famously presents the natural beauty of the world before battle in 'Spring Offensive', giving us the buttercups that 'blessed with gold' the soldiers' boots. The implication of 'Spring Offensive' may be that this halcyon world is about to be irrevocably destroyed by a battle, but it is still very unlike the idea of British soldiers spending the war in muddy trenches that has become one of the myths of the era. While it has sometimes

⁷³ POWO, p.165.

been claimed that Owen had ‘a long experience of trench warfare’,⁷⁴ in fact he was not in combat for as long as many of his peers. As Mark Rawlinson notes, Owen ‘endured very little of what is thought of as the standard Western Front experience, the ghastly monotony of routine trench duty.’⁷⁵ There is something undeniably iconic about the mud of the trenches and battlefields, and returning to ‘Apologia Pro Poemate Meo’, Owen uses it as a kind of symbolic shorthand for soldiers’ lives, even though his purpose is subverting its connotations: ‘I, too, saw God through mud—| The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.’⁷⁶

The trench forms a kind of symbolic space that is in a historical sense ephemeral but in a symbolic sense enduring and deeply associated with the conception of a soldier in the Great War. Foucault notes, ‘We do not live in a kind of void, within which individuals and things might be located. [...] We live inside an ensemble of relations that define emplacements that are irreducible to each other.’⁷⁷ There is a certain intensity to the relations between the men who are displaced from their homes and forced together by the necessities of warfare, and the elements unique to such a space become emblematic. Yet that process of identifying key signifiers to ease understanding of a place and time leads to simplified, codified understanding, and if conceptions of a typical soldier’s life were to be derived from Owen’s writing, the images of trench life would simply not gain the prominence they have from other sources. Mud certainly has a prominence in Owen’s poetry, but it tends to be the mud of the battlefield. It features prominently in ‘Exposure’, where the soldiers ‘cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed, | Deep into grassier ditches’, before the speaker becomes resigned to his fate: ‘Tonight, this

⁷⁴ R.P. Hewett, ed., *A Choice of Poets* (London: George G. Harrap and Co., 1968), p.153.

⁷⁵ Rawlinson, ‘Wilfred Owen’, pp.114-133

⁷⁶ CWDC, p.24.

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, ‘Different Spaces’ in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology, volume 2*, ed. by James D. Faubion, (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp.177-8.

frost will fasten on this mud and us.’⁷⁸ For all the prominence of the mud and the glib priority it is given in this line, this is a poem about being exposed, left in freezing temperatures outside the home trench. It is a poem about displacement, and the fatal consequences of the soldier unable to survive outside his defined emplacement.

⁷⁸ CWDC, p.37.

Historiographical Engagement with Wilfred Owen

Having established that recent historical discussion of the Great War has revolved around myth and misconception, it is conducive to my examination of whether Owen should be perceived as partially responsible for myths to examine historiographical responses to both his work and his emblematic status.

For the way Owen is framed in the period around the centenary of the Great War regarding cultural memory, one useful resource is poet Ian McMillan's contribution to the educational BBC website *iWonder*. The website contains a short page entitled, 'Has poetry distorted our view of World War One?'⁷⁹ This is not an overview of all the poets who wrote about the war: it concerns just one poem by one poet: 'Dulce et Decorum Est' by Wilfred Owen. The message is consistent: Owen alone is insufficient. 'It is easy to assume that the powerful words from this man from Shropshire captured the true experience of the war. But is that assumption right?' the page asks, before stating:—

Relying on a small canon of poems gives us a very narrow view both of war poetry and the feelings and thoughts of people who lived through the conflict. Historians have realised this and long since moved away from a 1960s mindset. However, many of us are still stuck with this skewed view of the war because we still learn about it through a handful of poets in English class.

The piece goes on to quote Santanu Das making the salient points that 'War poetry is often read as history by proxy and this needs to change'. This page is a useful overview how Owen is presented as a problem for understanding—and it is refreshing to see in the conclusion the claim that 'Owen never set himself up as "the voice of a generation"—he was simply expressing himself.' But the problem is that at no point does the page answer

⁷⁹ Ian McMillan, 'Has poetry distorted our view of World War One?' for *BBC iWonder* <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z38rq6f>>[accessed 15 October 2014].

the question in its title. Has poetry distorted our view of World War One? This is not truly what is debated. Nothing in the poetry itself distorts. The case made by the website is that reading *only* canon poets distorts, which is entirely reasonable. But that does not reflect an inherent quality of the poems—rather, the way they are consumed.

In addition, a video of men enjoying themselves on the front lines is captioned, ‘soldiers also used humour [...] to cope with the conflict’. This is set up in opposition to how ‘we now assume Owen’s poems reveal what war was really like and that soldiers shared his view that war was pitiful and futile. This shows how dominant a voice he has become.’ Owen himself sought with ‘Apologia Pro Poemate Meo’⁸⁰ to make this same point, although that act goes unacknowledged here. This poem is crucial to support the claim Owen was aware his poetry did not sufficiently encapsulate the totality of even his own war experience. It is true that here we find that division of soldiers’ enlightenment in opposition to civilian ignorance, with Owen railing against those who do not share the secret knowledge of the soldiers: ‘These men are worth | Your tears: You are not worth their merriment.’ This, as we will see, was one of the ways Owen was eager to distinguish himself as an elevated outsider figure, as a member of a group with secret knowledge.

However, this poem, this *apologia* that retracts a previous assertion, revolves around the bittersweet positivity that can be found in the trenches:

*War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child.
Merry it was to laugh there—
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.*

Owen is providing a counterpoint to the negative or satirical imagery of his most famous poetry. He concedes there is ‘beauty’, ‘music’ and ‘peace’ to be found amidst the wounds and turmoil of warfare, without of course claiming the suffering and infernal

⁸⁰ CWDC, p.24.

images do not exist. The merriment comes alongside what ought to bring feelings of the ‘remorse of murder’ and Owen’s spirit surges ‘Past the entanglement where hopes lie strewn’. The narrator feels exultation, just as Owen claimed to have felt only an ‘immense exultation at having got through the Barrage’⁸¹ to his brother Colin after a battle experience of his own.

The poem does not undo Owen’s prior imagery of war as full of pity and loss, but dispels the notion that the universal response was disillusionment, fury and nihilistic abandon. There is more here than Bond’s simple ‘waste and horror.’ But certainly, some potent symbols that recur in discourse on the Great War are readily identifiable—the irredeemably stupid generals who care nothing for the lives of men; the naive Tommies who don’t know what they’re fighting for; the muddy trenches and the traumatic experiences that lead to broken bodies, broken minds and broken trust, and ultimately a sense of deep futility. To a lesser extent the term ‘pity’ has come to represent Owen’s take on war, and by extension that of war poets as a group. So familiar is this description that Reynolds can go so far as to refer to the term ‘the pity of war’ as ‘Owen’s now cliched words’.⁸²

As a figure, Owen informs perceptions of what a ‘war poet’ is. According to Elizabeth Vandiver, his draft preface and ‘Strange Meeting’ together provide ‘implied definitions’ of ‘war poet’ and ‘war poetry’—the former, critically for a discussion of seeking to dispel misconceptions, including ‘the telling of unwelcome and iconoclastic truths.’⁸³ This certainly aligns with Owen’s views on ‘the true poets’: Owen certainly desired for the ‘truth’ about the war to be revealed, but it was of course the truth as he knew it, which is little more than anecdotal when contextualized within the breadth of lives

⁸¹ *WOCL*, p.458.

⁸² Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, p.347.

⁸³ Vandiver, pp.4-5.

touched by a conflict on an unprecedented scale. Vandiver is assessing the impact of Owen's work on modern-day perceptions of a literary movement that, as will be discussed later, is remarkably disparate, united by its historical setting as opposed to stylistic or even ideological coherence.

There is something of a sequence of myths for observers to attempt to dispel here, not only with Owen seeking for truth, but that very act becoming myth and begetting myth. As Brian Bond reminds us in *The Unquiet Western Front*, we must 'avoid the trap of believing that two conflicting views of the war existed in British society between 1914 and 1918: the "true view", stressing waste and horror, belonging to the fighting soldiers, and the "false view", that of deluded civilian belief in patriotism and the nobility of sacrifice.'⁸⁴ This is a division that is certainly found in Owen, though in his poetry, as ever, there is nuance to be found.

It is understandable to wish to step away from the 'homogenous past' described by MacCallum-Stewart,⁸⁵ but part of doing so is to create a distinction between the Owen of myth and the Owen who has in recent years been reassessed. Critical to this is to disassociate him from the image of an everyman who documented the war for the common soldier—Reynolds is correct that he and Sassoon were 'atypical soldiers as well as unrepresentative poets, being young, unmarried officers, sometimes uneasy about homosexual leanings and uncertain about their own courage—who often ended up with a martyr complex. [...] the fact that Owen, Sassoon and their ilk penned some of the most powerful anti-war poetry in modern literature should not blind us to their atypicality.'⁸⁶ Just how atypical Owen was, and wished to be, is the subject of my second chapter. But once it

⁸⁴ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, p.12.

⁸⁵ MacCallam-Stewart, p.4.

⁸⁶ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, p.187.

is accepted that Owen was not a typical soldier, it ought to follow that myths derived from his work and experiences are illustrative only of an atypical soldier.

When considering the influence of literature on perceptions of the Great War, Corelli Barnett has an unambiguous view about the derivation of misconceptions: 'How [...] did this depressing, and as I believe, false, picture of the war and the Western Front come to get fixed in the national mind? Who originally created this myth more appropriate to a national defeat than a victory? My answer is simple: it was the famous writers who served in the trenches on the Western Front.'⁸⁷ Elsewhere, he goes so far as to suggest it is impossible for writers and poets to represent non-writers:

The writers of the trench memoirs and novels collectively gave a highly subjective, unbalanced and misleading version both of the experience of the Western Front, and of the British army's reaction to it. For the war writers were not in the least representative of the men of the British army as a whole; they were writers and poets, and with few exceptions they came from sheltered, well-off, upper- or upper-middle-class backgrounds, the products of an upbringing at home and at their public schools which had given them little knowledge or understanding of the real world of their time.⁸⁸

While his point about a lack of balance in memoirs is cogent, Barnett seemingly gives the impression that the writers' backgrounds and proclivities as literary men preclude them from being able to make balanced statements. In writing memoirs, a high degree of subjectivity is expected, as is a personal perspective rather than historical overview. If these accounts are misleading or distort, that is the fault of readers that perceive them as broadly representational, and Barnett does not qualify what 'the real world' may be or what makes an upper-middle-class background unreal, though I agree these perspectives are emphasised

⁸⁷ Corelli Barnett, 'The Western Front Experience as interpreted through Literature', *RUSI Journal*, 148.6 (2003), pp.50-56, p.50.

⁸⁸ Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, p.430.

to the detriment of rarely-represented voices. Even if their backgrounds were relatively homogenous, the ‘war poets’ also produced remarkably varied work: Jane Potter observes that ‘The poetry of the Great War was generated across a continuum in which protest and patriotism, modernists and Georgians, propaganda and remembrance, humour and pathos, coexisted, if uneasily’.⁸⁹

Other historians also give Owen primacy as a voice representing a particular point of view representing experiences of the Great War. Bond writes, ‘today Owen is widely taken to be ‘the voice’ of Western Front disillusionment’⁹⁰, while Todman calls him ‘the celebrity poet of the First World War’ and remarks that ‘Owen has become a remarkable symbol of the modern myths of the war’.⁹¹ He claims that the Battle of the Sambre-Oise Canal being remembered, ‘if at all, for Owen’s death’ rather than a ‘crucial victory’ only supports Sheffield’s view that the First World War is Britain’s ‘forgotten victory’⁹². This quotation comes from the title of one of Sheffield’s books, in which Sheffield exhorts readers not to base perceptions of the war on the literary output of ‘a tiny group of atypical officers with literary inclinations.’⁹³ In reference to disillusionment as a widespread sentiment amongst soldiers, he opines that ‘literary specialists and cultural historians are apt to make sweeping statements about this particular phenomenon, often based on the experiences of a small handful of officer-poets.’

Corrigan also has a deep scepticism for authors who write what they know will make money, rather than emphasising truthfulness, as ‘few publishers will invest in work that will not sell, and from about the early thirties onwards, anti-establishment doom and gloom

⁸⁹ Jane Potter, ‘English Poetry of the Great War’ in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp.20-30, p.28.

⁹⁰ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, p.28.

⁹¹ Todman, *The Great War*, p.163.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War – Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2001), p.130.

was always a winner.’⁹⁴ He places the blame for ‘disillusionment’ on ‘authors with an axe to grind [...] and poets who wrote for money,’ on journalists who feel a balanced assessment of the war and its leaders make for ‘a dull headline’ and on Alan Clark, characterised as one who ‘cannot be described as a historian’ as he had no source for his famous ‘lions led by donkeys’ quotation.⁹⁵

Owen does not fit well into several of the generalisations of war poets given here. Perhaps he intended to be commercially successful later in life, but most of his famous poetry was written primarily to impress Siegfried Sassoon in Craiglockhart, not a mass-market editor. But where Owen enters into this historiographical debate is less about the context in which his work was written than how it was used and when it became popular. Part of Owen’s renown derives, as Todman notes, from his ‘good background story’, primarily the ‘mix of pathos and romance’ of his death ‘in one of the last battles of the war.’⁹⁶ He was used by Sassoon and the Sitwells, by Britten, and finally by the educational system⁹⁷ as a tool to reinforce a pre-existing narrative. Episodes from his life and a selection of his work could be cherry-picked to emphasise his views of pity, futility and suffering. I would argue this was more for reinforcing a political position, especially an anti-establishment view, rather than for pecuniary gain, but that is only speculating on motivation. Certainly Owen himself had no opportunity to enjoy success.

Owen’s influential status largely came about in the 1960s, and in a later section I will expand upon the views of Bond and Todman in particular in the context of that decade. At this stage, it is important to acknowledge that historians view Owen with cynicism and hold him partly responsible for the lack of nuanced knowledge of the Great War. For my part, I

⁹⁴ Corrigan, p.167 (footnote).

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.166.

⁹⁶ Todman, *The Great War*, p.165.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.166.

agree Owen and his fellow war poets represent only a limited perspective, and presenting them as authoritative is misleading. Acknowledging other points of view, other voices and other experiences is healthy for an informed view, as is more awareness of specific events. But I also accept that it is easier to hold an audience's or a student's attention with emotional responses and individual's stories than, for example, an objective account of gains made by bridging canal.

Owen is also poorly-understood, generalised and mythologised. He wrote some striking poetry unrelated to war (I personally hold late poem 'Who is the God of Canongate?' and pre-Craiglockhart sonnet 'To –' in high regard), spoke neither from a place of established influence nor to take advantage of popular trends, and several prominent myths are in fact not supported by his writing or correspondence. But his significance in historiographical discussion of why certain beliefs are held in regards to the war cannot be doubted. However, if the impression given by historians' views of this influence is that Owen should be entirely dismissed, his personal expressions considered invalid, that would go too far. Owen does not need to be erased: he needs to be reassessed and presented in a proper context. A fuller understanding of Owen makes it clear to his readers that he should never have been perceived as a suitable voice to dominate perceptions of an event on the scale of the Great War.

Wilfred Owen, Collective Memory and the Culture of Memorialization

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

- Charles Hamilton Sorley⁹⁸

The impact of the Great War on British culture has been profound, as we are often reminded. As MacCallum-Stewart writes, 'The First World War has a tangible presence in day-to-day life,'⁹⁹ and the question of just how to remember those who died in the First World War has troubled cultural commentators since the Armistice. Irrespective of the resurgence of interest that came with the Centenary during the writing of this thesis, the Great War is of utmost importance in the cultural history of Britain, and of course numerous other countries worldwide.

Owen's place in the question of how we remember the period is problematic, part of a seemingly contradictory double-standard neatly expressed by Niall Ferguson in an anecdote about his childhood in the sixties, when he was studying Owen's verse: 'I found it bizarre that we should be expected to memorize this in the morning, only to don our Cadet Force uniforms and parade around the playground that same afternoon.'¹⁰⁰ The tension is vaguely similar to the issue Gove wished to highlight, of what seems to him to be a sense of shame about celebrating anything about the combat of the Great War: that on one hand we have our monuments to the 'Glorious Dead', the statues and the Remembrance Days, and on the

⁹⁸ From the 1915 sonnet usually given the title 'When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead'. Charles Hamilton Sorley, *Death and the Downs: The Poetry of Charles Hamilton Sorley*, ed. by Brett Rutherford, Yogh & Thorn Edition (Providence: Yogh & Thorn Books, 2010), p.79.

⁹⁹ MacCallum-Stewart, p.12.

¹⁰⁰ Ferguson, p.xxiii.

other we have the perception that the War was not worthwhile, that the loss of life far outweighed what was gained in fighting back against the Kaiser and his allies, and that therefore the War was not worth fighting and ought to be remembered with shame. This latter stance is informed by the harrowing individual stories of terrible suffering designed to remind an audience that soldiers are not statistics but individuals who in almost unfathomably large numbers gave up everything they had and endured the most horrific ordeals. Emblematic of this opposition is on one side, ‘*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*’ and on the other, Owen’s furious tirade against the use of a concept such as ‘glory’ to encourage men to suffer and die.

The opposing ideas have been debated for a long time:—

It is not true, as is sometimes assumed, that a general wartime enthusiasm for war and its values was overwhelmed and replaced at the war’s end by a total disillusionment that informs and defines English culture of the Twenties. Rather, both existed throughout the decade—two cultures, separate and mistrustful of each other, a conservative culture that clung to and asserted traditional values, and a counter-culture, rooted in rejection of the war and its principles. Each culture had its art, its literature and its monuments; and each denied the other.¹⁰¹

Today, while the two opposing ideas are widely-recognised, they continue to coexist uneasily, culminating in the generalized belief that the War was entered into as the correct reaction to German aggression, unwillingly but out of grim duty, whereupon men suffered horrifically and died deaths without dignity, but Britain and her allies finally prevailed and those who fought to make that possible ought to be honoured. Owen, perhaps surprisingly, suits this hybridized belief set well: he was not a pacifist, but fought and willingly returned to the fighting and participated in a victorious endeavour while lamenting the suffering around him and ultimately losing his life. Brian Bond acknowledges Owen was no pacifist,

¹⁰¹ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1991), p.283.

and nor were his closest associates: ‘some of the angriest anti-war satirists were not pacifists or conscientious objectors, but brave, efficient and even zealous subalterns such as Sassoon (a notable killer), Graves, and Owen who voluntarily returned to the front after recovering from wounds or illness.’¹⁰²

Though much of Owen’s anger was directed against naivety to the realities of war, the modern form of remembrance incorporates the sorrow at individual suffering, and thus does not have the same qualities of naivety he finds objectionable. Owen protests against a generalized, idealized form of honouring the war dead while remaining ignorant to battle’s realities, and as a result of similar views becoming championed in the 1960s, collective memory now incorporates stories of individual sacrifices and abject suffering. Rather than two incompatible, opposing ideas, Owen’s protest and its eventual currency make for a complex yet ultimately consistent set of beliefs.

The word ‘memory’, like ‘myth’, has been extensively used and debated by historians in recent decades, Joan Tumblety opening her anthology *Memory and History:*

Understanding Memory as Source and Subject with this assertion:—

Whether measured by the number of books, journals or doctoral dissertations poised to explore it, the array of scholarly conferences devoted to its dissection, or the number of university courses that engage with the concept, “Memory” has become over the past 20 or so years a familiar word in the vocabulary of academic history.¹⁰³

Discussion of memory becomes prominent and necessary when attempting to separate historical accounts from contemporary sociopolitical bias: ‘Working with the concept of memory—provisional, subjective, concerned with representation and the present rather than fact and the past—suggests a way out of the impasse into which historiography might have

¹⁰² Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, p.31.

¹⁰³ Joan Tumblety, ‘Introduction: Working with memory as source and subject’ in *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject*, ed. by Joan Tumblety (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp.1-14, p.1.

been driven by the poststructuralist assault on truth.’¹⁰⁴ I would interpret this as a kind of Cartesian questioning of the subjectivity of ‘truth’—if post-structuralism or any other system of analysing the reliability of human perception or knowledge calls into question the nature of knowledge, the reliability of the human mind to portray experience or to accurately retain and convey memory, then all recorded history can be called into question and, potentially, disregarded. The need for increased focus on memory, while accepting that memory is fallible, is useful when other systems of assessing historical veracity also become perceived as less reliable: ‘After the revolutions of the last decades [...] not only the reliability of memory and experience as exact records of the past, but also the very notion of historical truth, have come into question.’¹⁰⁵

The field of memory studies must begin from the premise that memories are not wholly reliable, with fictional accounts based on those memories removed by another step: ‘The fictional presentation of memory emerges through a series of filters. Individual memories are, of course, shaped by time, by personal belief systems and, just as importantly, by the sociopolitical context of the time in which the writer is producing the work,’¹⁰⁶ writes Maggie Sargeant. Accepting these limitations and incorporating them into discursive fields of historical study allows for progress based on likelihood and nuanced evaluation of sources.

Even working in a field that acknowledges the problems of memory-as-source, the memories of combatants in large-scale conflicts are particularly problematic, with trauma often an additional layer of obfuscation. As Jason Crouthamel reminds us, ‘Historians dealing with [traumatized soldiers’] memories must be attentive to memory as an elusive,

¹⁰⁴ Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, ed., *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2007), p.2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Maggie Sargeant, ‘Memory, distortion and the war in German popular culture: the case of Kongsalik’ in *Memory and Memorials: The Commemorative Century*, ed. by William Kidd and Brian Murdoch (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.195-206, p.195.

apparently fragmented and contradictory, or even terrifying, phenomenon that individuals struggled to convey to those who did not share their experiences.’¹⁰⁷ As a result, the idea of a collectivized memory comes about, an interpretation of events shared by a number of people based on commonly-held beliefs. This is where discussion of Owen’s influence becomes relevant: his fictionalized accounts of autobiographical events with a clear political message are sufficiently well-known to have a significant impact on collective memories of the Great War. In a situation where ‘changes to our understanding of the nature of history as a discipline reflect how closely memory and history have become intertwined over the last few years’,¹⁰⁸ it is understandable that one individual holding such sway over the way an extremely important historical event is remembered should be questioned. The desire to offer a more balanced overview is then framed as the dispelling of myths. But when Owen is simply one of several contributors to an overall collectivized mythmaking process, the specifics of how and why he rose to this position and which precise elements of these myths relate to him and which do not are only covered when an observer focuses on him specifically—as I do now. While many scholars have made assertions regarding Owen’s place in collective memory, this thesis’ specificity in contextualising his work and analysis of the progression of his influence is not found in any scholarly work of which I am aware.

Collective memory and myth are related concepts in historical works. Where collective memory contradicts well-supported historical records, or where limited accounts are deemed as fully representational, this is either the process by which myths are incepted, or the result of already established myths. Arguably, it is myths that separate collective

¹⁰⁷ Jason Crouthamel, ‘Letters by traumatized German veterans and contested memories of the Great War’ in *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject*, ed. by Joan Tumblety (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp.143-159, p.156.

¹⁰⁸ Paula Hamilton, ‘Sale of the Century? Memory and historical consciousness in Australia’ in *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts*, ed. by Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London: Transaction Publishers, 2007), p.136-52, p.141.

memory from that most coveted and impossible of ideals, historical truth. Yet the historian must accept that myths will always be present: Duncan Bell goes so far as to reject the term ‘collective memory’ in favour of the term ‘mythscape’, defining it as ‘the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of people’s memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly’.¹⁰⁹ This effect is perhaps amplified when the medium contributing to collective memory is intended to inspire heightened emotion, as Owen’s poetry was, and recent historical observers have been sensitive to how ‘the depiction of the war is so emotionally loaded that challenges, even if they seek to elucidate different aspects of the war, provoke a response that is almost entirely emotional’.¹¹⁰

Not only are collective memories made up of myths and unreliable accounts, but they are protean, malleable—in a constant state of flux. Our nation’s collective memory of the Great War is at present heavily influenced by Owen, but like every element of this ‘mythscape’, his contribution will be discussed and his influence debated as new and ever-changing viewpoints give new insights. Historians, while of course dissenting from one another and debating sources, can add insights, put forward new points of view and attempt to ‘slay’ what myths can be found to contradict reliable evidence—but the word ‘truth’ must always be treated with suspicion. It is dependent upon *whose* truth it may be: ‘collective memory’, according to Paula Hamilton, ‘can be variously defined, though the term usually refers to the making of a group memory so that it becomes an expression of identity, and accepted by that group as the “truth” of experience’.¹¹¹ And even this definition is not without its inadequacies, because of course, as Elizabeth Tonkin reminds

¹⁰⁹ Duncan Bell, ‘Mythscape: Memory, Mythology and national identity’, *British Journal of Sociology*, issue 54 (1) (2003), pp.63-81, p.66.

¹¹⁰ MacCallum-Stewart, p.20.

¹¹¹ Hamilton, p.142.

us, ‘The word “collective” is misleading, because there is no single undifferentiated collectivity which is the “social”. Human beings are born, mature and die, and not simply as cohorts but unevenly.’¹¹² Which is a very similar argument to that which suggests the problem with how the War is perceived is too reductive because it assumes there are large collectives to be generalized.

Amidst this complex discursive field, war has a special place, making it perhaps inevitable that Owen should come under scrutiny. When Mark Rawlinson speaks of Owen as the ‘pointsman in literary criticism’s supposed campaign to wrest the First World War from the military historians’, he indicates that the ‘von Schlieffen behind this territorial *coup*’ is Paul Fussell. Fussell’s landmark 1975 work *The Great War and Modern Memory* heralds from its title page the coming of the age of ‘memory studies’, as well as becoming a key text in all studies of the literature of the period: ‘All criticism of First World War literature is in some way indebted to Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*’, Daniel Hipp tells us¹¹³, while Sarah Cole believes the critical tradition regarding the war is ‘near-binary’, with on one side Paul Fussell, and on the other ‘a diverse array of scholars questioning central Fussellian premises’.¹¹⁴ It is thus no surprise that this influential text has at its heart and in its title the question of ‘modern memory’. If, as Fussell asserts, ‘the whole texture of British daily life could be said to commemorate the war still’¹¹⁵—as asserted earlier in this chapter—how a country collectively remembers such an event is an integral part of that society’s culture. There is a distinction to be made between commemoration and memory, but memory—especially collective memory—is deeply

¹¹² Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.106.

¹¹³ Hipp, p.2.

¹¹⁴ Sarah Cole, *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.272.

¹¹⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.315.

influenced by methods of commemoration, for therein lie cultural signifiers as to what is perceived as the ‘correct’ way for members of a society to remember.

This is an important element of memory studies: even acknowledging Fussell’s great influence, the question of *how* one ought to remember and commemorate the War arose long before the publication of his work. What resulted was the culture of memorialization. This is a culture that sits uneasily alongside Owen’s writings and his condemnation of ‘the old lie’, of the pat sentimentality of the ‘certain poetess’ and her ilk encouraging young men to give their lives for the promise of ‘some desperate glory’.¹¹⁶ The question of how to remember the events and the sacrifices of the Great War affected not only all study of the conflict since, but approaches to memory and remembrance on a broader scale—and it is important to acknowledge the probability that Owen came to prominence in the 1960s because he seemed to contain influential elements to embody a preferable alternative to the established memorial culture.

Even in the inter-war period, historians were taking notice of the country’s approach to remembering the Great War, and perceiving that it seemed to be taking on a particular collective significance: Sir Basil Liddell Hart wrote in 1930 that, ‘Armistice Day has become a commemoration instead of a celebration,’ and that ‘every anniversary of the Armistice kindles emotions and memories such as no other day in the year has at present the power to do’.¹¹⁷ It was apparent that the attitude to the War was becoming one of mourning more than one of triumph. Enough had died that solemnity was the appropriate response. The process of remembering became codified as ‘remembrance’, eloquently defined by Jay Winter: ‘Remembrance is an act of symbolic exchange between those who remain and those who suffered or died. They went through much; they lost or gave much;

¹¹⁶ POWO, p.117.

¹¹⁷ Basil Liddell Hart, *History of the First World War* (London: Pan Books, 1972), p.459.

we give the little we can—starting with recognition and acknowledgment and then moving on, at times, to material expression of both'.¹¹⁸

One of the most conspicuous results of this process was the construction of memorials, of physical, architectural pieces designed to honour the dead and to give some material representation to the notion that those who sacrificed themselves did so for a purpose. Alex King, in his *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: the Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance*, details how by the 1920s 'commemorating the dead was regarded as a sacred act'¹¹⁹ and that even today it is 'a national cult'.¹²⁰ Because 'no section of British society was immune from the repercussions of war conducted on such a scale',¹²¹ it was necessary to establish a gesture of remembrance that was accessible to all and not only to a few:—

Commemorating a war that killed and maimed so many citizens demanded more than just traditions steeped in class privilege, or hollow notions of grand, heroic victory. Memorials had profound social and emotional functions. But they also had to have a degree of universality in order to reconcile competing political, national, community, and individual interests.'¹²²

While this tension Ana Carden-Coyne feels was reconciled by 'monumental classicism', not all historians are in agreement with the efficacy of the physical monument. According to Laurence van Ypersele, memorials mislead—'The war was so dirty and so ugly that men persuaded themselves that it had been great. It was so omnipresent in the survivors' memories that they were unable to forget. To be able to live with this memory,

¹¹⁸ J.M. Winter, excerpt from 'Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century' in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. by Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Daniel Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.426-30, p.426.

¹¹⁹ King, Alex, *Memorials of The Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), p.21.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.20.

¹²¹ J.M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War: 1914-1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p.178.

¹²² Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.111.

the inter-war generations invented a new war: clean, beautiful and above all useful.’¹²³

While this is the kind of generalisation that lends itself to mythmaking processes, it is a useful overview. While the war’s repercussions were wide-reaching, in its immediate aftermath upheaval was limited: ‘the society which those boys left in 1914 and to which some of them returned in 1918 was a strongly disciplined, in some ways repressive one in which obedience, duty and self-sacrifice were considered public as well as private virtues.’¹²⁴ Monuments were not designed to fit Owen and Sassoon’s poetry.

In this interpretation, memorials are another iteration of the ‘*dulce et decorum est*’ attitude: ‘Justifying the death of loved ones and glorifying it in the name of God is quite commonplace; the value around which religion and patriotism meet and unite is the principle of self-giving, of sacrifice in the name of a superior interest,’¹²⁵ writes William Kidd, speaking specifically of Scotland but in terms applicable to all of Britain. While accessible to all and in some ways a necessary expression of significance and remembrance, a memorial is limited in expression and by nature ennobles. Perhaps had he lived to see them, such memorials would satisfied the Owen who asks what passing-bells are sounded for the young men dying ‘as cattle’,¹²⁶ now honoured in stone and an ever-more-solemn Armistice Day, but what of the Owen who finds expressions of honour in death outrageously hollow and insincere? How many of these sacrifices were not noble at all, but undignified, anonymous and militarily insignificant? What of the Owen who wanted above all else to ‘warn’? Owen addressed the idea of monumental memorialisation in ‘With an Identity Disc’, though he was speaking of the honouring of notable individuals

¹²³ Laurence van Ypersèle, ‘Making the Great War great: 1914-18 war memorials in Wallonia’ in *Memory and Memorials: The Commemorative Century*, ed. by William Kidd and Brian Murdoch (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. pp.26-40, p.37.

¹²⁴ William Kidd. “‘To the Lads who came back’: memorial windows and Rolls of Honour in Scotland’ in *Memory and Memorials: The Commemorative Century*, ed. by William Kidd and Brian Murdoch (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.107-26, pp.114-15.

¹²⁵ Kidd, pp.28-29.

¹²⁶ POWO, p.76.

in Poet's Corner, 'High in the heard of London'¹²⁷. Perhaps he would have enjoyed the idea of soldiers being collectively, anonymously honoured, but it seems unlikely from his conclusion, preferring the deeply personal memorialisation of a single 'sweet friend' taking his identity disc, where his 'death be memoried'. The speaker in the poem asks his friend to wear the disc. 'Inscribe no date nor deed. | But may thy heart-beat kiss it night and day, | Until the name grow vague and wear away.' While I would call this sentiment a little insincere judged beside Owen's conduct when seeking poetic renown, it does show a rejection of the conventional mourning culture with which he was familiar.

Certainly, the images evoked by memorials were not the images Owen himself propounded: 'Because it was perceived to be just, one could even think that [the Great War] was beautiful, clean and silent: no mud, no blood, no noise, no smell, no mutilation, no cries,' van Ypersèle continues: the act of making grand memorials is the act of 'desperately trying to make a "Great War" out of this unspeakable slaughter'.¹²⁸ The 'monumental classicism' mentioned by Carden-Coyne can also be extended to other forms of expression than architecture, the literal monument. It can also be expressed in other art forms, including visual arts, music, and of course poetry.

Initially, Owen could be said to reject this mode of expression, too, stating of war heroes that 'English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them' in his draft preface. And in 'Dulce et Decorum Est', as Elizabeth Vandiver puts it, 'Owen himself has told us that the classical tradition was an old Lie, made utterly irrelevant by the conditions of modern warfare, and who are we to disbelieve him?'¹²⁹ Quite apart from the fact that this rhetorical question is intended to provoke the response that certainly we should question Owen, Owen himself was extremely interested in classical forms and delighted in odes and sonnets.

¹²⁷ CWDC, p.114.

¹²⁸ Van Ypersèle., p.37.

¹²⁹ Vandiver, p.4.

Arguably part of the myth of Owen is that the young man who was inspired by the Roman ruins at Wroxeter to write 'Uriconium: An Ode', with its closing assertion that the blood spilt in clashes between opposing forces is what 'makes poets sing and prophets see,'¹³⁰ was disillusioned by the war and came to see this sort of classical rhetoric as deeply inadequate, but these were themes, modes of expression and sentiments he would return to, re-examine and incorporate into his more modern style in his final poems close to his death. What Owen sought was a balance of idealism and realism that derived from true knowledge of the realities of warfare and was comprehensible only to a select few who either directly experienced the battlefield or had the sensitivity and intelligence to comprehend it. Because of the admixture of conflicting elements that form the modern understanding of the Great War in modern collective memory, this is the same struggle found in attempts to adequately commemorate the event.

When it comes to a conflict of this scale, the act of remembrance begins with an acknowledgement that what individuals can symbolically 'give', to use Winter's term, is inherently inadequate. Our cultural processes of honouring the dead, including constructing grand memorials, are recognition and acknowledgement, but what follows is a desire for greater understanding. Observers, including but not limited to historians, express a desire to know the truth in a way free of myths—or at least freer. This manifests in a desire to better comprehend the subjects of our remembrance, and to further understand the profound implications of sacrifice—as well as to take the brutal simplicity of violence out of the abstract and make it more immediate, for abstraction seems insincere. Twentieth century conflicts also involved such large swathes of the population that the conception of the 'people's war' arose, redirecting the process of remembrance from generals and admirals to

¹³⁰ CWDC, p.112

the personal acquaintances of members of the public who gave their lives. ‘The commemoration of death in battle having been [...] democratized, memorials in stone or bronze listing the names of all the dead from particular regiments or places were psychologically essential,’ writes Angus Calder.¹³¹ While Owen was alive, this kind of recognition seemed to be important to Owen, as just before he signed up he remarked to his mother with bleak, resentful humour that he would soon be ‘National Hero, number million.’¹³²

If a desire for a material acknowledgement of sacrifice is met by monuments, it is the written word that offers a deeper understanding for the purpose of commemoration, and can bring attention to individual stories rather than a generalised, large-scale sacrifice. There was a market for works that made sense of the conflict or gave insight through individual memoirs, manifested in the ‘War Books’: a ‘wealth of important material produced in the late 1920s, at a ten-year reflective distance from the armistice, and produced by those who had experienced the war and could look back on it themselves’,¹³³ as Murdoch puts it. These anecdotal works did not need stringent research, nor would their veracity be questions, which may be why Corelli Barnett carefully and somewhat disapprovingly catalogues as many of them as he is able to list.¹³⁴

The question of whether these war books were an appropriate response to a significant historical event divided opinions: they ‘sold in huge quantities, although their reception was mixed. They were regarded not only as sensationalist, but in rather poor taste.’¹³⁵ This is testament to how difficult a socially acceptable way to remember an event that evokes grief in the bereaved was to create: there is an extended process of mediation before a coherent

¹³¹ Angus Calder, *Disasters and Heroes: On War, Memory and Representation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p.14.

¹³² WOCL, p.348.

¹³³ Brian Murdoch, ‘Memory and prophecy among the war-graves: Hans Chlumberg’s drama, *Miracle at Verdun*’ in *Memory and Memorials: The Commemorative Century*, ed. by William Kidd and Brian Murdoch (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.92-104, p.100.

¹³⁴ Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, pp.428-429.

¹³⁵ MacCallum-Stewart, p.45.

collectivism can develop with a prevailing sense of approval reflected by widespread acceptance of a narrative. 'The memory—or memories—of war are a function of age and experience, of receptivity to the value associated with war, values tested (or damaged) by it, and mediated through imagery and written and oral tradition, history and school,' write William Kidd and Brian Murdoch.¹³⁶ Despite the lack of historical scrutiny, the process of creating a collective memory of war is often didactic, seeking to correct misunderstandings with anecdotes and recollections from individual memory: autobiographical works about the Great War 'are told from a perspective designed to correct what were considered to be the exclusions and distortions of both fictional and historical approaches'.¹³⁷ Accepted narratives began to take shape, and Barnett's objection is that these 'books gave a distorted impression of the soldier's experiences and state of mind',¹³⁸ but the problem with this assumption is that 'soldier's experiences' cannot be universalised, and there is no correct, unified, holistic experience to be distorted. The problem with memoirs is that they gave inadequate overviews based on a limited number of perceptions, shaped by public desires. Accordingly, for all the public appetite for truth and authenticity, emerging victorious from the conflict was a considerable part of how it was framed in memory: 'The two world wars provided the UK with enduring myths of patriotic glory', writes Richard Keeble,¹³⁹ and it is entirely possible in a hypothetical sense that the reception of the war poets would have been different had Britain been forced to surrender.

Inevitably, tensions arose between the soldiers and the civilians on the subject of appropriate modes of remembrance, and one of Owen's themes was of the secret

¹³⁶ William Kidd and Brian Murdoch, 'Introduction' in *Memory and Memorials: The Commemorative Century*, ed. by William Kidd and Brian Murdoch (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.1-10, p.6.

¹³⁷ Evelyn Cobley, 'History and Ideology in Autobiographical Literature of the First World War' in *Mosaic: A journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* 23, no. 3, ed. by Evelyn J. Hinz, pp.37-54, pp.37-38.

¹³⁸ Barnett, , *The Collapse of British Power*, p.430.

¹³⁹ Richard Keeble, 'The Necessary Spectacular "Victories": New Militarism, the Mainstream Media and the Manufacture of the Two Gulf Conflicts 1991 and 2003' in *Communicating War: Memory, Media and Military*, ed. by Sarah Maltby and Richard Keeble (Bury St Edmunds: Arima Publishing, 2007) pp.200-12, p.201.

knowledge only soldiers could share. It is also very important when attempting to write in awareness of the myths about the Great War to note that not all soldiers thought that protesting against the war was a cause they could support, and nor were all civilians labouring under the misconception that the war was a glorious show of British might or a jolly, trivial lark: upon writing his letter to *The Times*, ‘Sassoon found surprisingly little support. His backers were civilians [...] Soldiers seem to have been unimpressed. His comrades wrote to him from the front, saying the war had to go on.’¹⁴⁰ Nonetheless, there was a need to consolidate various disparate attitudes and voices into a form of remembrance that was deemed fitting: as Winter states, ‘The Great War brought the search for an appropriate language of loss to the center of cultural and political life.’¹⁴¹

Owen was not one of the more prominent of the voices to emerge from the conflict in its immediate aftermath. As we will establish in chapter 3, he would not ‘achieve canonical status until the 1960s: it was Britten who popularized him’¹⁴², though this is also something of an oversimplification. Certainly his initial sales were modest: Hew Strachan goes on to note that before Owen’s poems had managed to sell 1430 copies, Brooke’s had run to 300,000¹⁴³. And, as Britten scholar Philip Brett appositely puts it, ‘In order to warn, or do anything else, the poet/composer has to be heard,’¹⁴⁴ so it is difficult to make the case that initial forms of remembrance were influenced in any significant way by Owen’s writing.

Owen would, of course, be heard, and eventually be known to just about every schoolchild to go through the British education system, but his fame now leads to an assumption that he has held such a reputation for long enough to be one of the originators

¹⁴⁰ Ferguson, p.146.

¹⁴¹ J.M. Winter, ‘The Great War and the Persistence of Tradition: Languages of Grief, Bereavement and Mourning’ in *War, Violence and the Modern Condition*, ed. by Bernd Hüppauf (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & co., 1997), pp.33-45, p.39.

¹⁴² Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (London and Sydney: Pocket Books, 2006), p.xvii.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Philip Brett, ‘The Britten Century’, in *Britten’s Century: The Centenary of Benjamin Britten’s Birth*, ed. by Mark Bostridge (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.16-32, p.31.

of popular images of war. It is a task beyond the scope of this thesis to establish the exact origins of all the myths of war mentioned in the previous section, which are distilled from the copious amount of literature about the Great War that was published during and after the event, but certainly Owen has less to do with their inception than is suggested by Reynolds or implied by McMillan. Even Gary Sheffield seems to suggest that the length of time that elapses between Owen's writing and his recognition, was short: 'Wilfred Owen, perhaps the greatest of British war poets, wrote of "the pity of war", although his work only became widely known once it was over (Owen himself was killed in 1918).'¹⁴⁵ While this statement is not untrue, it was not only after the war was over that Owen's work became 'widely known', but decades after, with another world war and a number of significant cultural changes in the meantime.

Upon his death, his level of influence on critical thinking about the War was inadequate for him to have had an impact on the early codification of collective memories, in spite of even informed commentators like Gerard De Groot implying that he had a significant impact in the inter-war years: 'By 1928, Haig was dead and it was open season on those commanders deemed to have squandered the lives of the innocent. The war poets like Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg and Sorley grew immensely popular because the sense of futility they evoked harmonized with a common disillusionment.'¹⁴⁶

As he was a relatively obscure poet from the time of his first publication until the 1960s, rather than shaping the thinking of that generation, is it not more likely he was simply compatible with a new mode of thinking and raised from obscurity as one who fit the new paradigm? Rather than serving as a source of 1960s understanding of the Great War, it is more likely his surge in popularity was a result of his poems chiming with what

¹⁴⁵ Sheffield, p.70.

¹⁴⁶ Gerard De Groot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1996), p.204.

seemed like new, more enlightened attitudes to war—a shift in the collective methods of memorializing the period. If, as Paula Hamilton puts it, we share ‘a historical consciousness, that is, a sense of living in time or being a subject of history, which expresses itself through artefacts of memory’,¹⁴⁷ when we find a historical source compatible with prevailing beliefs, is it not tempting to consider that source as the originator? Yet for decades, Owen was known almost exclusively in literary circles and attitudes shifted slowly: ‘It is easy to exaggerate the extent of anti-war feeling in Britain between the wars. [...] Yet the point remains. After 1918 revulsion against war had plainly increased among Englishmen.’¹⁴⁸

‘Like individual memory, collective memory can also be a site of repression and selectivity, of negotiation and denial,’ Kidd and Murdoch state.¹⁴⁹ Particularly for a period characterized by traumatic experiences, the conception of ‘collective memory’ brings with it intrinsic questions of reliability, and with Owen’s poetry we know he is writing fictional accounts, even if they are based on his conception of ‘truth’. As so much of his correspondence has survived, wherein we can find descriptions of some events that he adapted into poems, we can see where Owen’s ostensibly factual accounts differ from what is represented after the process of creating fiction. Owen also wrote on the subject of memory: his sonnet ‘The One Remains’ is a study of the sadness that comes with memories fading or never fully formed because of the brevity of contact, yet which bring to mind recollections of places dear to the speaker.

Often pore I on the secret traces
Left in my heart, of countenances seen,
And lost as soon as seen,—but which mine eye
Remembers as my old home, or the lie

¹⁴⁷ Hamilton, p.137.

¹⁴⁸ Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), p.757.

¹⁴⁹ Kidd and Murdoch, p.7.

Of landscapes whereupon my windows lean.¹⁵⁰

The recollection gives way to a reflection on the sadness that comes with the silencing of voices that corresponds to farewells and death. ‘Their reminiscences would cease my heart’, Owen claims, except that he hopes a new meeting will reveal a face so ideal that it contains ‘All beauty, once and forever.’ While this conclusion is curiously unrealistic or reductive, the sadness of fading memories and parting from loved ones remains the core of the poem.

Owen’s focus on authenticity meant that beyond obviously fictional conceits such as narratives from the dead and the phantasm of ‘Strange Meeting’, he aimed for realism. Owen rose to his dominant position because his words were compatible with the way the British public two generations later saw the Great War—and war in general—through a process that included repression and selectivity, negotiation and denial, and the formation of myths independent of Owen’s presence.

Though his subject is the sculpture of Rodin, Axel Lapp—in his essay for Kidd and Murdoch’s anthology on memory studies—illuminates a key point about collective processes. He writes:—

The understanding of the past, the present and the future of a community is determined by its collective information. On its own, it functions as the accepted history of a community, by keeping the most important and shaping information about its past in the public domain, thus establishing a historical narrative that, until challenged, will form the framework for the accepted self-knowledge of this community.¹⁵¹

At this juncture numerous historians of the Great War are concerning themselves with challenging the ‘accepted history’, revisionists and counter-revisionists alike asking why

¹⁵⁰ CWDC, p.150.

¹⁵¹ Axel Lapp, ‘Rodin’s *Bourgeois de Calais*: Commemorating a French national ideal in London’ in *Memory and Memorials: The Commemorative Century*, ed. by William Kidd and Brian Murdoch (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.13-25, p.16.

the particular pieces of ‘shaping information’ that have endured have so overshadowed accounts and events that may be worthy of being considered equally significant. For all that poetry and other fictionalised art forms are one step removed from direct personal narrative, such creative work is very important to the establishing process of a collectivized historical narrative—‘Memory, be it of the individual or of the group, is also mediated in art and literature, text and film’¹⁵²—and as the quote at the beginning of this chapter from Todman stresses, Owen’s poems are short, accessible, immediate and easily digested, by schoolchildren as well as adults.

But historians increasingly are finding this approach unsatisfactory; returning to Reynolds, he writes: -

[There has been a] ‘cultural turn’ in academic history as a whole which, in the case of 1914-18, has resulted in a fascination with the public memory and memorialization of the conflict. Since the 1980s numerous scholars have illuminated the Great War’s cultural legacies, especially attitudes to death and mourning that have been ignored by traditional military historians. Yet the cult of memory, like many new historiographical trends, has sometimes been pushed too far, obscuring the direct, material impacts of the war.¹⁵³

Reynolds stops short of defining where the threshold for ‘too far’ lies, and if from his contrast we infer that it is by returning to the methods of the ‘traditional military historians’ who do not acknowledge ‘attitudes to death and mourning’, we can have a clearer image of these ‘direct impacts’, does that neglect to acknowledge the usefulness of the accounts of poets and writers of fiction striving to present what they believe to be the truth? In avoiding the impacts Reynolds sees becoming obscure, must some voices be silenced altogether? What emerges from this debate is the need to have a broader overview, but that does not

¹⁵² Kidd and Murdoch, p.2.

¹⁵³ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, p.187.

mean excluding Owen and other similar voices that are now familiar. It means reading his statements in tandem with a number of others and presenting neither as false or misleading, but only as limited. From our cultural fixation with the individual experience of suffering, we reflect our hope that we are now in some way enlightened enough to avoid the situation repeating itself, whereas a more objective stance allows us to consider benefits and losses in a more detached manner.

Yet debates about the war continue from different perspectives, often returning to the same discussion Ferguson and Hastings held in their individual programmes for the BBC—the debate over whether the war was worth fighting or not. Given the number of hypothetical questions that must be considered in providing an answer, this question is the sort of ‘What if’ that Richard J. Evans disparaged in his *Guardian* article, “‘What if’ is a waste of time’, centred on the assertion that ‘such speculations are of course unprovable’.¹⁵⁴ That the question is still debated so publicly reflects on the post-1960s emphasis on memorialization: since the most prominent cultural expressions of the Great War are overwhelmingly negative, when they are challenged the question arises again each time there is a reassessment—‘was all the suffering worthwhile?’ Whenever the answer is offered that individual suffering outweighed political or military benefits, it is the stories Owen told that are the primary point of reference. This becomes Owen’s role: giving powerful imagery to conceptions of loss of life and suffering. This is where he looms large in collective memory.

There is an element of idealism in the works of literature about the war that have persisted, certainly—but the more one moves to subtract emotive issues from the historical context, the more one must contend with the idea that one is missing what poets have to say

¹⁵⁴ Richard Evans, “‘What if’ is a waste of time”, *The Guardian*, 13 March 2014
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/13/counterfactual-history-what-if-waste-of-time>>[accessed 31 August 2014].

about treating human beings as statistics or tools. The more one pushes against an objective, analytical view the more one is seen as having one's vision clouded, and certainly Owen champions the emotional rather than analytical response, even for a truthful poet:

Rather be my part
To write of health with shaking hands, bone-pale,
Of pleasure, having hell in every vein,
Than chant of care from out a careless heart,
To music of the world's eternal wail.¹⁵⁵

This thesis cannot offer a solution to all ongoing historical debate, and seeks only to illustrate that Owen has a prominent place in modern conceptions of myth, collective memory and remembrance, and to question in what way it would be most beneficial to consider him for these contexts. It is for individuals to determine how important or persuasive the poetry he left may be in a consideration of what was lost and gained by the conflict he attempted to render in human terms. However, while he has a major place in today's collective memory of the conflict, and in how we as a culture memorialize the war dead, it is important to stress that he was simply compatible with prevailing beliefs in the 1960s about how it was appropriate to remember the conflict, rather than having established those beliefs himself upon initial publication. His role in the inceptions of myths was minor, though he may have a role in perpetuating some of them, and certainly is over-representative beside the vast numbers of equally valid experiences that are far less well-documented.

Building upon this premise, my second chapter will explore the idea that Owen perceived himself as an 'outsider' figure in many and varied ways. This will lead on to my central assertion that Owen's influence on collective memory is in conflict with this image

¹⁵⁵ 'The Poet in Pain', CWDC, p.158

of himself as an outsider, or not fully contextualised by that stance. This makes him an inappropriate choice as a broadly representative figure and is perpetuated in defiance of his stated intentions and what is expressed by his body of work as a whole.

Chapter 2: Societies and Separation

He was set apart all his life. First, he was his mother's favourite, isolated from the rest of the family. Then his poethood began in secret darkness, born out of a tradition which had made the poet both the prophetic voice of the people and a solitary, damned figure, a dreamer cast out from sunlight.¹⁵⁶

Far from considering himself as a spokesperson for a popular movement or the 'voice of a generation'¹⁵⁷, Owen was aware that his view on war was unpopular and divisive. This was what gave him the compulsion to become a poet. Threaded throughout his writings—whether on the subject of war or otherwise—is a particular fixation, so prominent that excluding it from arguments about Owen as a representational figure provides an incomplete picture. That fixation is with standing apart, choosing to reject the views of those in authority, seeking out an alternate, elevated path that leads to pride in separatism and often a sort of self-inflicted exile.

This chapter sets out to re-contextualize Owen in this context. It aims to establish that while it is reasonable for some historians to assert Owen's influence is disproportionate, it must also be acknowledged that what Owen desired to become, stood for ethically and propounded in his writing was to be 'set apart', as Hibberd puts it.

Central to this standpoint is the assertion that Owen saw himself as making the case for a distinct minority, radical in its views, and that at all times he emphasized that his views were meant only for a small elite possessing secret, exclusive knowledge. Owen's predisposition towards idiosyncrasy and individualism is reflected in many ways in the different parts of his life, and this chapter sets out to establish what is meant by 'an outsider' and the ways in which Owen throughout his life identified as one, idealizing the

¹⁵⁶ Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* (Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press, 1986), p.192, hereafter abbreviated 'DHOTP'.

¹⁵⁷ McMillan, web.

concept—while all the time struggling against a social background that marked him as in many ways ordinary and typical.

I do not disagree that there is ‘an accepted canon of Great War poetry [...that] centres on the work of a few important writers whom we think of as the First World war poets—such men as Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon and Edward Thomas’,¹⁵⁸ but contend that any reader of that canon ought to be made aware by Owen’s work that he never presented himself as a suitable representative for all soldiers, or even all soldiers of his rank and background.

What, then, is meant by ‘outsider’, in reference to Wilfred Owen? Is it the ‘*etranger*’ of Camus? Is it the hermit who turns his back on society, or is it the firebrand preacher who looks to convince crowds of an alternative way of being? To a greater or lesser degree, both of these are applicable, in accordance with Hibberd’s conception of the poet as both solitary and prophetic. However, while Camus’ ‘*etranger*’ is of course variously defined and analysed, Meursault’s outsiderdom is perhaps the very opposite of what Owen strove for, and in that light provides a useful basis for establishing an important definition. Meursault cannot be understood by the other members of his society, and so they attempt to force him into a position where he can be easily comprehended, his actions rationalized. Ultimately, though, he defies attempts to explain his logical processes and though he is scrutinized, he is ultimately only rejected as an outcast. Owen, on the other hand, while being aware of this kind of outsider, was fascinated by those who chose to disassociate themselves from the expectations and limitations of a society yet have some demonstrable superiority of knowledge. Owen wanted to transcend the limitations of his background to become an exalted yet lonely prophet-like figure. Such a figure, while existing outside conventional

¹⁵⁸ Vivien Noakes, *Voices of Silence: the Alternative Book of First World War Poetry* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2006), p.11.

society, is respected by those who understood him, and part of his status was that he was privy to secrets available only to select few. Meursault, perhaps especially when considered prior to the murder, may be expected to have a place in society, yet through abuse of power or mercilessness on the part of an authority becomes forced out—deprived of the support of a society. This is not what Owen aspired to, and indeed a portion of that famous ‘pity’ that became his subject was reserved for such wretched figures. So there are two kinds of outsiders to consider—those set apart by transcending what is expected of them, rising above the rest of society, and the others forced into their position through misfortune.

Rather than being centred upon the physical suffering of the dying and permanently injured, it is their rejection by society that Owen is most keen to make the centre of his discourse, from the ignored paraplegic in ‘Disabled’¹⁵⁹ to the man seen by his fellow soldiers as a ‘clot of meat’ in the early version of ‘The Dead-Beat’.¹⁶⁰ It is for those who put these human beings into such a position or accept it unquestioningly that Owen reserves his most vituperative language.

While this thesis relies on the standpoint that Owen sought in a number of aspects to self-define as an outsider, of course it must be acknowledged that in many ways Owen was not remarkable, not atypical and had to struggle to be accepted as in any way elevated. When he was originally presented as a soldier tragically killed and through his initial popularisation, part of the impact of his story was that he seemed such an ordinary youth, distinguished primarily by his poetic gift. According to a 2014 article in *The Herald*, “Owen was, in so many ways, an unexceptional man.”¹⁶¹ He was easy to identify with and

¹⁵⁹ POWO, p.152.

¹⁶⁰ Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. by Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus), volume ii, p.299, hereafter abbreviated ‘WOCPF’.

¹⁶¹ ‘Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Poet’, *The Herald*, 23 February 2014

<http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/13147138.Ordinary_man__extraordinary_poet>[accessed 15 November 2017]

could easily be considered an ‘insider’ who could readily be accepted by a mass readership. But my argument is that Owen struggled to defy this all his life.

Owen’s image of an idealized outsider figure, set apart from a broader society that misunderstands him or her, derives from multiple sources—religious, social, familial—but one particularly significant influence was that of the poet with the qualities Hibberd lists. As a youth Owen idealised poets—and for much of his adolescence, it was their deeds and acts he sought to imitate, until later he came to realize the necessity of setting himself apart from them, too.

The Lonesome Genius: Poetic Glamour and Altered Perspectives

According to the Romantic way of thinking, the poet was a special kind of being, gifted with a particularly refined sensibility that radically distinguished him from other men. [...] Poets in this tradition tended to become alienated from society.¹⁶²

Few commentators on Owen's poetic development fail to mention his debt to Keats—and consequentially, most recent works about Owen mention how frequently the link between the two is raised. 'Criticism of Wilfred Owen the poet always begins with a reference to his early fondness for Keats,' writes Nicholas Murray¹⁶³, and indeed, the *Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Literature in English* quickly makes mention of 'his devoted admiration for Keats.'¹⁶⁴ Such is the opacity and intensity of Owen's admiration that Sven Bäckman calls it 'Keats idolatry', remarking that it is at times 'ridiculous'.¹⁶⁵ For Owen, Keats represented an ideal of exclusion and suffering that later became vindicated by recognition and validation, a process that embodied the abstract ideal of a poet—as an outsider who becomes elevated by his prowess and knowledge. The poet was to be eloquent, insightful and introspective, misunderstood until his genius came to be recognized by a select few, whereupon he would gain more widespread recognition, while always considered idiosyncratic and individualistic.

From some of his earliest extant correspondence to his mother Susan, Owen speaks of Keats in terms of great fondness—in a letter of 2 April 1911, when he was eighteen years old, he quotes Keats' lines to Reynolds on the nightingale and encourages his mother to read the poems of his idol. Owen reads the introduction in his volume of Keats' verse and goes so far as to claim his knowledge surpasses that of its writer—'let me warn you

¹⁶² Bäckman, p.25.

¹⁶³ Murray, p.139.

¹⁶⁴ *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature in English*, ed. by Jenny Stringer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.519.

¹⁶⁵ Bäckman, p.45.

about believing what it says of Keats' "attitude to knowledge, which cannot be justified, must not be copied, etc." I know of something which proves the contrary to this view,' he staunchly informs his mother,¹⁶⁶ without revealing what this proof may be. This correspondence is not only a good indication of his enthusiasm for Keats, but of his revelling in the possession of secret knowledge.

There is nuance to be observed here. Hibberd points out that by 1912, 'Keats was already losing his supremacy' in Owen's affections: he cites letter 112, in which Owen concedes that Shelley was 'the brightest genius of his time, (yes, tho' *I* say it)'.¹⁶⁷ The parenthetical remark shows us that he expected his mother to be familiar enough with his admiration for Keats that this would come as a surprise. Also, to come to the conclusion Shelley may have been the 'brighter' genius does not strip Keats of the status of being a genius. Hibberd is understandably keen to emphasize that while 'critics' give prominence to Owen's 'passion' for Keats 'almost as a matter of routine', they do not 'pay enough attention to other influences'.¹⁶⁸ While certainly valid, there is still ample evidence that Keats was a poet Owen admired profoundly, and appeared to feel a deep personal affinity with him. Even if Shelley's genius was brighter, Keats embodied Owen's conception of the poet as an outsider, misunderstood yet extremely gifted and sensitive, and immortalised by his verse, and at least in his youth he envisions himself devoted to Keats for many years:

Ah, ninety times again, when autumn rots
Shall birds and leaves be mute and all unseen,
Yet shall I see fair Keats, and hear his lyre.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ WOCL, p.68.

¹⁶⁷ DHANB, p.4. Note that in the version of *Collected Letters* used herein, the correct reference is letter 117, p.112.

¹⁶⁸ DHOTP, pp.3-4.

¹⁶⁹ From 'Written in a Wood, September 1910', CWDC, p.60.

It is perhaps an irony of Owen's methodology that as an expression of how he idolized individualism, his first response was to imitate. He celebrated the original with unoriginal derivations. Later he would seek to innovate, but only close to the end of his life. Generally, his method was to look to others who were considered idiosyncratic geniuses, and wish to be like them. It would be misleading to claim that his desire to be regarded as an outsider was based upon a compulsion to be entirely solitary or to innovate to a degree that would make him entirely unique—he wished to be an outsider, but in the manner of other outsiders who had gone before. He did not have the character of a mad genius or eccentric, and it was in large part how unnaturally outsiderdom came to him that made him yearn for it to such a degree that he gave it primacy in many of the decisions in his life.

For some years, Owen's desire to be regarded as one who was in Bäckman's words 'alienated from society'¹⁷⁰ seemed viable to him only through following in the path of others, and poets in particular. Though there is a certain irony in that, in fact it is not so contradictory as it may first appear. What Owen coveted was the status of the Romantic poet—misunderstood but celebrated, different from those around them yet still commanding great respect, and being noted for unusual sensitivity to the world around them: what Bäckman calls a 'special kind of being'.¹⁷¹ Much of Owen's early poetry revolves around solitary pursuits and becoming attuned to nature, of which Dennis Welland notes: 'The loneliness, then, which forms a dominant motif in much of Owen's early poetry may be partly, as its conventionality of form and idiom imply, the product of a literary conviction that this is what poetry ought to be about, but it is the reflection also of real, if not wholly conscious, sense of isolation on Owen's part.'¹⁷² Owen wanted to be set apart in the lonely pursuit of poetry, yet it was not without a degree of regret that Owen felt he did

¹⁷⁰ Bäckman, p. 25.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Dennis Welland. *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, 2nd edn (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p.37.

not belong in normal society. In 'On My Songs', Owen speaks of the encouragement the words of other poets can give the distressed, the 'unseen Poets' who 'Have answered me as if they knew my woe,' and hopes that if the addressee of the poem should be in need, 'my voice may haply lend thee ease.'¹⁷³ There is loneliness for a poet, but the words of fellow poets can ease that loneliness.

Later, he would reject his preference for the solitary qualities of nature in 'A Palinode', describing a 'mania' wherein 'I thought I could | Be quit of men, live independently.' The narrator has had a change of heart, so that 'The City now | Holds all my passion'¹⁷⁴: Owen outgrows his conception of the lonesome genius as he begins to realize it is by belonging to select outsider groups with elevated knowledge that he can achieve his goals. The ideals of nature become abstracted in his later war poems, as for the shell shock victim of 'Conscious' who 'can't remember where he saw blue sky,'¹⁷⁵ and the conflation of becoming one with nature and, being dead, becoming part of nature again in 'A Terre':

"I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,"
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:
The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.
"Pushing up daisies," is their creed, you know. ¹⁷⁶

Quite apart from its questions about religion and the afterlife, the strange sonnet 'The Unreturning', which Owen first penned around the end of 1912 but returned to right up until the end of his life, is centred on the fear of being resurrected on judgement day and finding oneself entirely alone:

¹⁷³ CWDC, p.160.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, pp.124-125.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p.45.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pp.46-47.

There watched I for the Dead; but no ghost woke.
Each one whom Life exiled I named and called.
But they were all too far, or dumb, or thrall'd,
And never one fared back to me or spoke.¹⁷⁷

Owen wished to be distinguished, but feared being alone. He never wished to live as an exile or an outcast—rather, as part of a small, select group, supporting his insecurities.

‘Owen was unusually impressionable’, according to Welland,¹⁷⁸ and would attempt to imitate not only writing styles and themes, but also the way those he admired conducted their lives, leading to what Hibberd calls Owen’s ‘habit of sharing in or imitating the experiences of an admired poet’.¹⁷⁹ Buying Sidney Colvin’s *Keats*, for example, Owen marked the purchase with a sonnet, ‘Before reading a biography of Keats for the first time’, which echoes Keats’ ‘On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer.’ Indeed, Keats was not only a stylistic influence on Owen, he was also a fit poetical subject, with Owen pursuing the pattern of taking poems that Keats wrote about other poets and applying their themes to Keats himself—Keats’ ‘On Seeing a Lock of Milton’s Hair’, for example, is mirrored as ‘On seeing a lock of Keats’ hair’¹⁸⁰, which James Campbell—acknowledging the poet is not necessarily directly represented in the poem—says ‘makes explicit the comparison between Roman Catholic adoration of saints’ relics and the persona’s fascination with a surviving fragment of a poet’s body’¹⁸¹.

This kind of quasi-religious reverence was how the young Owen expressed admiration, though it is interesting to note that amongst the few pages that are left uncut in Owen’s copy of the *Complete Works of John Keats* kept in the Oxford University English Faculty include those containing, ‘Sonnet—Written in the Cottage where Burns was

¹⁷⁷ CWDC, p154.

¹⁷⁸ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.33.

¹⁷⁹ DHOTP, p.3.

¹⁸⁰ WOCPF, p.447. Misspelt ‘Keat’s’ in the manuscript.

¹⁸¹ James Campbell, *Oscar Wilde, Wilfred Owen and Male Desire*, eBook edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.73.

Born,¹⁸² which would seem to serve as the inspiration for Owen's 'Sonnet: Written at Teignmouth, on a Pilgrimage to Keats' House', with its language that is so derivative of its subject: 'Eternally may sad waves wail his death, | Choke in their grief 'mongst rocks where he has lain.'¹⁸³ Still, while it may come as a surprise to find these pages uncut in Owen's library copy, therefore never read, it is entirely possible Owen came across the poem in another edition.

Of Sidney Colvin's *Keats*, the purchase of which was momentous enough to warrant a sonnet, it is illuminating to examine Owen's annotations and notes. The young Owen clearly identifies with the young Keats. The great majority of Owen's notes and annotations centre on Keats' school life, where Owen underlines, for example, the description of Keats as 'a boy all spirit and generosity, vehement both in tears and laughter, handsome, passionate, pugnacious, placable, loveable, a natural leader and champion among his fellows.'¹⁸⁴ This kind of straightforward, boyish purity was something Owen would admire and seek out throughout his life and clearly considered praiseworthy.

It may seem redundant to say that Owen was drawn to Keats as a famous Romantic poet who was set apart from the rest of society—any renowned individual could be said to be 'set apart' by having attained fame. But it is less Keats' prominence that is significant when considering Owen's attitude to the status of the outsider, but rather the often tragic glamour of the particulars of his life. Keats was disparaged by critics who branded him part of the 'cockney school' yet was defiant in persisting in his style. He was sickly and vulnerable at the end of his short life, highly perceptive and of course greatly talented, as well as rather virginal in his relationship with Fanny Brawne. Changeable as Owen's

¹⁸² John Keats, *Complete Works of John Keats*, Owen's copy (Glasgow: Gowars & Gray, 1901), Oxford University English Faculty, pp.225-226.

¹⁸³ POWO, p.8.

¹⁸⁴ Sidney Colvin, *Keats*, Owen's copy (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1909), Oxford University English Faculty, p.6.

writing was as it incorporated more and more influences, he always remained convinced of a proper methodology of writing, based on the belief that the poetic vocation fundamentally altered the individual's lifestyle. Writing in a way that critics and mainstream commentators found unappealing yet a small sympathetic but informed crowd celebrated was much to be admired.

Though he admired Keats and Shelley, Owen was not drawn to all the prominent Romantics. The confident and often scathing quips of Byron elicit next to no comment from him, and in his library there is only a Penny Poets edition of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, part II, to indicate he had any interest in the elevated outsider figure of the Byronic hero. Perhaps Owen found it difficult to identify with a lord, elevated by birth, as opposed to Tennyson who was made a peer for his writing and to whom Owen refers with the 'gleams' of 'Six O'Clock in Princes Street'¹⁸⁵. Likely he preferred the direct sincerity of Keats and Shelley to the irony and satire found in Byron's work, a mode of expression that Owen adopted only in imitation of Sassoon. Shelley's influence is even plainer in Owen's work, 'The One Remains', for example, taking its title from Shelley's 'Adonais', a handy double-reference because Shelley was writing about Keats.¹⁸⁶

More modest and unassuming personalities take precedent: 'From his poems and his letters it is clear that he knew Shelley and Keats better than Wordsworth and Coleridge, Tennyson better than Matthew Arnold.'¹⁸⁷ Of Blake he seems to have been ignorant altogether—he had none of Blake's works in his library upon his death and makes no mention of him, and given that Blake's unique style, religious commentary and eventual status as a kind of prophetic figure who commanded great respect, this may have been a missed opportunity. Those he knew well, though, he wished to imitate, in his private life as

¹⁸⁵ CWDC, p.149.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p.150.

¹⁸⁷ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.33.

well as his early poetry: 'he and his sister must keep their letters, because Keats and his sister kept theirs; he ought to write home every day, like Ruskin; he was glad to visit the poor, because Shelley did.'¹⁸⁸

Though his maturity as a poet arguably came where the influence of the Romantics on his language became secondary or tertiary, Owen retained a lifelong enthusiasm for Keats: J. Foulkes, one of Owen's fellow officers, related how even in late 1918, when he quoted from Keats, Owen's face lit up, 'after which Foulkes felt Owen regarded him fondly'.¹⁸⁹ When he wished to impress on Sassoon that he held him in the highest esteem, he wrote, '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.'¹⁹⁰ Keats is given a remarkable priority in such company, with no other poets in the list. Hibberd concedes that even if in surviving letters, mentions of Keats 'by 1918 disappear'¹⁹¹, the literary influences persists, and 'Strange Meeting', one of Owen's last poems, also 'echoed' *The Fall of Hyperion*. For Owen, Keats the poet was a truth-teller, who found truth beautiful, even if telling truths led to pain for the truth-teller. If 'Keats emphasises the need to accept suffering by presenting it as a set of palpable facts rather than theories', as Andrew Motion contends,¹⁹² that is upheld by Owen's stark war images.

As a 'very impressionable poet, with a great capacity for admiration and imitation,'¹⁹³ Owen's views of the world were formed by those he considered worthy of veneration. From the Romantics, and especially Keats, Owen's early ideal of an elevated outsider figure was conceptualized: this outsider was set apart by talent and special sensitivity, even if critics and a broader public failed to comprehend their artistic talent. The outsider was

¹⁸⁸ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.6.

¹⁸⁹ DHANB, p.175.

¹⁹⁰ WOCL, p.505.

¹⁹¹ DHOTP, p.3.

¹⁹² Andrew Motion, *Keats* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.401.

¹⁹³ Bäckman, p.38.

solitary but identifiably a part of a broader movement rather than entirely isolated, yet could distinguish himself within that movement with unique idiosyncrasies.

Writing that ‘I sometimes feel [...] that I would give ten years of life to have been born a hundred years earlier (always providing that I have the same dear mother)’,¹⁹⁴ the young Owen fixated upon a world that he could not be a part of. The fundamentals of these feelings can be traced to an attitude of inferiority, but with an aspirational element—the desire to be something else was rooted in feelings of inadequacy, but also a desire to better himself, which he set out to accomplish primarily through imitation and assimilation. Because successful Romantic poets were seen as a collective of elevated outsiders, the seeming contradiction of wanting to be set apart and elevated by wanting to be just like these others is not so paradoxical, nor so ironic as it may seem in the abstract.

Accordingly, as a young man Owen wrote a lengthy, self-indulgent poem called ‘To Poesy’¹⁹⁵. Owen imagines himself standing amongst ‘A thousand suppliants’ at the throne of Poesy, where he groans and stretches up his arms in subservient longing. Beside those who have proved themselves as poets, ‘No man [...] has loved thee with a purer love than mine,’ claims the young Owen, and though daunted by the ‘vasty seas | Of learning to be travelled o’er’, he is ready for ‘long training’ he hopes will ‘ne’er undo | My simple, ardent love.’ Though he recognizes others have gained mastery over poetry, while he is yet a beginner, using highly derivative language and the kind of artificial vernacular that would later earn him some mockery from Modernists, this is a sincere expression of yearning, ambition and to a degree egoism. James Fenton paraphrases: ‘No man loves Poesy more purely than I do. And he appears to mean this boast, for he goes on to point out that other poetry-lovers tend to be half-hearted, tend to turn to other goddesses, but he, Wilfred, is

¹⁹⁴ WOCL, p.69.

¹⁹⁵ CWDC, pp.57-59.

absolutely single-minded.’¹⁹⁶ There is a note of disapproval here, but the poem is not necessarily boastful. Rather than deprecating the efforts of others, Owen rather wants to suggest that it is not possible to love poetry any more sincerely and devotedly than he does—though he may have equals. Boastful or not, though, it is a naïve and immodest piece of juvenilia useful primarily for showing how central to his life Owen believed a poetic calling to be.

While exploring whether Owen was disproportionately representative, it is worth noting that though Keats could be said to have been misunderstood by critics in his lifetime, after his death he grew to be admired to the extent that he could be considered overly representative of the Romantic poets. However, this thesis is not questioning that Owen is a dominant force in defining the idea of a ‘war poet’, which is equivalent to Keats’ influential position. Owen’s work is considered as defining an event in history, not merely a poetic movement. Keats’ poetry helps to define Romantic concepts, but he is not considered overly influential of how we collectively remember the time period in which he lived. This is the fundamental difference when considering posthumous influence. Initial publication of Owen’s work was his developed war poetry, with juvenilia appearing much later. As Rawlinson notes, ‘A further issue in evaluating Owen is the posthumousness of his literary career,’ as he ‘was revealed to his growing public in a process which reversed his poetic development, a factor which has perhaps given renewed life to the legend of the poet made by the war.’¹⁹⁷ It also minimises the importance of poetic development and the succession of influences that Owen absorbed.

In his later adolescence, Owen’s burgeoning talent for learning French introduced him to a new but related poetic movement: he became aware of the Decadents. What he learned

¹⁹⁶ James Fenton, *The Strength of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.24.

¹⁹⁷ Rawlinson, ‘Wilfred Owen’, p.118.

of rebellion and eccentricity from the Romantics he found developed by the likes of Verlaine and Wilde, and for all that the scansion and diction of Owen's war poems owes to Keats and the other Romantics, the depiction of injuries, the immediacy of violence and the sense of fascination derived from suffering owes much to Decadence—though modified by the genuine, sincere sense of horror that comes with battlefield experience. As Welland points out, the idea of beautiful suffering in Decadence informs—indeed finds additional meaning in—the concept of a wound being regarded as beautiful because it can take a soldier home to safety.¹⁹⁸ It should be noted that while a certain glamour was associated with wounds in the Decadent tradition, the association of wounds with heroism continued as part of the response to the Great War: as Jane Potter observes, they become 'badges of honour'¹⁹⁹ that prove a man has done his part. In her *Girls in Print: Women's Literary Responses to the Great War*, Potter argues that wounds were associated with masculinity and attractiveness, but in a very different way from the Decadent glamour of suffering and dying that influenced Owen. Indeed, the theme of 'Disabled' stands in opposition to this, presenting a war veteran whose beauty has been irrevocably destroyed by the war. Perhaps there is a certain limitation to the severity of the wounds that can be perceived as attractive—the appeal of a 'blighty' that sends a soldier home to safety and a normal life, or even the loss of one limb ('Novelists went out of their way to show that the loss of a limb was no bar to manly/sexual performance'²⁰⁰) is different from a man losing all of his limbs and thus becoming the kind of outcast Owen presents. If there is a proverbial line in the sand, perhaps it is individual agency: the soldier in 'Disabled' is emasculated because he can no longer live without the care of others. While Potter is exploring the masculinity of

¹⁹⁸ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, pp.46-47, cf. *Collected Letters*, p.450 – 'a beautiful round hole deep in his biceps'. See also the fragment 'Beauty'.

¹⁹⁹ Jane Potter, *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women's Literary Responses to the Great War 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), p. 91.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.92.

war wounds as depicted in ‘novels that exploited the Great War’²⁰¹, incidentally ‘the kind of novel of which Owen later complained’²⁰², certainly it is helpful when considering his wartime representation of wounds to consider that any perceived eroticism or glorification was not derived purely from Decadent aesthetics, but also part of a prevailing sentiment in which ‘Wounds, which were increasingly visible in everyday life, became increasingly normalized in popular fiction.’²⁰³

Owen’s interest in Decadence seems to have taken shape in tandem with adolescent feelings of personal incompatibility with the social systems in place around him, which were of particular concern for him while working in a vicarage in the town of Dunsden. His unsatisfactory life there made him question the professional path set ahead of him, the rituals and hierarchies of organized religion and the expectations of conventional sexuality—as opposed to the pronounced and scandalous sexual deviance of prominent Decadent poets. More so than the life of a Romantic Poet, Decadence directly opposed the sort of future that he seemed compelled inevitably towards, so it was small wonder that he seized upon it to fulfil escapist fantasies. As evidence for Owen being attached to Decadence during this period, Hibberd points to the symbolism the group attached to particular colours: ‘Wilfred had perhaps not been altogether ignorant of Decadent conventions even at Dunsden, where he had affected a purple tie and purple slippers.’²⁰⁴ Purple begins to recur in Owen’s poetry, from one of the colours worn by ‘the Deep’ in ‘Sonnet: Written at Teignmouth, on a Pilgrimage to Keats’ House’ to the title of perhaps Owen’s most obviously Decadent poem, ‘Purple’, which ends on the evocation of ‘Venus,

²⁰¹ Potter, *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print*, p.91.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p.90.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.92.

²⁰⁴ DHANB, p.172.

whose rose skin, | Mauve-marbled, purples Eros' mouth for sacred sin.'²⁰⁵ It would have been difficult to write lines more directly imitative of the English style of Decadence found, for example, in the poetry of Wilde and Swinburne. This influence does not disappear in Owen's later poetry, with Hibberd seeing 'the purple wound in "Disabled"' as a direct reference, stating that it 'illustrates the Decadent element in Owen's mature poetry'.²⁰⁶

Hibberd goes on to claim, 'The relevance of Aesthetic, and more particularly Decadent, conventions to Owen the future war poet is not difficult to see. For example, Aestheticism's search for exquisite sensations and its rejection of orthodox moral constraints'²⁰⁷—that latter point in particular directly appealed to Owen's desire to defy convention and be 'set apart'. Indeed, there is a direct causal line from the early influence of Decadence to the bleeding sun in 'Mental Cases': 'the purpose is different; the imagery and language are the same.'²⁰⁸ This very derivation is to some critics a weakness in Owen's writing: the 'physical realism of desecrated flesh and blood, limbs and broken bodies' is derivative of Decadent tradition, and thus as open to criticism as 'the Georgian stock-in-trade'.²⁰⁹ However, others find a distinction to be made, while acknowledging the influence: Welland, for example, viewed Owen's initial reaction to the war while still a civilian as 'only a surfeit of Swinburne and Wilde',²¹⁰ but considered the nuances of standpoint and personal experience to allow his mature poetry to capture 'the tragic beauty of human suffering'.²¹¹

For Welland, the ideas Owen had collected from the Decadent tradition were transformed and developed by similar and yet dissonant elements he encountered in reality.

²⁰⁵ CWDC, p.163.

²⁰⁶ DHOTP, p.33.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p.30.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p.31.

²⁰⁹ Davidson, p.19.

²¹⁰ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.43.

²¹¹ Ibid, p.47.

Even so, Owen sometimes had difficulty showing his Decadent influence without seeming insincere or even absurd: ‘dreaming of a book of his own sonnets in 1917, he decided to call it “Sonatas in Silence” and to have it bound in purple and gold.’²¹² I would agree with Welland, however, that in his best work, Owen incorporates the Decadent tradition in a way that makes it something unique and original. This is wholly different from the most derivative juvenilia, with ‘Purple’ and ‘A Sunrise’ leading Bäckman to note Owen’s tendency ‘to write poetry where the density of musical effects—alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, onomatopoeia, etc.—counted for more than the actual content of the poem, or the experience [Owen] wanted to convey,” postulating that the influence of Swinburne was the root.²¹³ The mark of Owen’s maturity was the ability to incorporating these influences alongside his brutally realistic approach to the viscera of warfare into something individualistic: only then does he become the sort of idiosyncratic outsider-figure poet he dreamed of becoming, for only then does he gain the independent voice that sets him apart amongst poets.

Though evidence for Owen’s awareness of Decadent conventions in his late adolescence is somewhat circumstantial and must be extrapolated from the verse he was writing, it is certain that he was well aware of the poetic tradition by the time he was living in France as an English tutor. At the time, aged Decadent poets were still alive, some with significant political influence, and Owen was even able to make the acquaintance of one such a figure. Tutoring the children of the affluent Léger family, he was introduced to the renowned, somewhat infamous Laurent Tailhade, a colleague of Verlaine’s. Owen seized upon the chance to become associated with this nationally-acknowledged symbol of anti-establishment eccentricity, and again exhibited his tendency towards imitative behaviour by

²¹² DHOTP, p.33.

²¹³ Bäckman, p.54.

adopting a new set of personal mannerisms—he became rather ‘dapper’.²¹⁴ This derivative quality carried over to his verse,²¹⁵ again illustrating that for all his desire to be set apart and for all that he was capable of displaying behaviour that differed from the norm, he did not have the confidence to do it without the support of another who was in a position of authority, a direct analogue to his later reinvention as a rebellious war poet once enabled by Sassoon.

Until finally reaching poetic maturity toward the end of his life, Owen lacked the self-confidence and audacity to become the rebel he idealized. For Owen, realising his aim of becoming the distinct and prophetic figure of his youthful ideals was a conscious struggle against his natural behaviour, with the resultant derivations often being conspicuously insincere. He was not gifted with natural self-belief, a distinctive mode of expression or an innate sense of superiority—outside fantasies on paper, he could only assume the role of an eccentric poet with reticence, and with the direct support of others.

Though Owen could not meet Oscar Wilde, who had died when Owen was seven years old, he would soon meet others in Decadent and Aesthetic circles. Decadent poets were still active, and the movement was more recent than Romanticism. The *fin de siècle* had brought with it the dawn of psychoanalysis as well as the philosophies of men such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, which would be so influential on the politicians of the subsequent decades. While his engagement with philosophy was minimal and a poor understanding of Kant in one fragment making references to his ideas of truth led Welland to comment ‘Owen was never in any sense of the phrase an “intellectual poet”,’²¹⁶ he engaged with contemporaneous schools of thought through literature. Thus, he was indirectly influenced by prominent thinkers, and it is possible to view Owen’s compulsion

²¹⁴ DHANB, p.170.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p.184.

²¹⁶ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.32.

to separate himself from a ‘herd’ in the context of Nietzsche’s ‘Will to Power’ and equate his desire to become a celebrated outsider distinguished from the rest as an iteration of ‘Master morality’.²¹⁷

While this indirect engagement with interesting, however, Owen-as-*übermensch* is a trifle unlikely: his timidity, fixation on how others viewed him and reliance on others to support him in any endeavour to advance his position all rather preclude him from the description. Again, he did not aspire to be heroic in the Byronic mode. His ‘Lines Written on my Nineteenth Birthday’, stresses the weakness of a ‘frail body’ and suggests the years have ‘found and left me still a boy.’²¹⁸ What *can* be supported is the idea that Owen’s ideals derived from the influence of thinkers who were engaging with Nietzschean ideas, and the same *zeitgeist* that led to the thinkers of the period theorising about the ways elevated ‘masters’ could transcend the ‘slaves’ influenced the contemporary poets and literary figures. For Owen, the existence of the poet was also elevated in a quasi-Nietzschean sense: ‘[As] a boy, I guessed that the fullest, largest liveable life was that of a poet,’ he wrote on March 15, 1915. ‘I know it now: but I have still to know whether it is the highest and richest: though I begin to think so.’²¹⁹

Returning to Decadence, in 1914, Owen’s reactions to the war—still remote to him—came through the filter of Decadence. Rimbaud had written a war poem as a youth (as, indeed, he wrote all of his poetry) entitled ‘The Sleeper in the Valley’. In the poem, ‘a young soldier is described sleeping peacefully amongst nature, until the final twist that he has bulletholes through his body changes the image’.²²⁰ There are of course parallels

²¹⁷ See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²¹⁸ CWDC, p.64

²¹⁹ WOCL, p.112.

²²⁰ Edmund White, *Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel*, British hardback edn. (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), p.40.

between this image and the dead youths of Owen's later poems, where amidst the loss of innocence, 'Boys' griefs are not so grievous as youth's yearning.'²²¹

Youth and beauty are important themes. Romantics prized youth, which Guy Cuthbertson links to Owen's affinity with the childlike, writing, 'the Romantics' obsession with childhood seems to have created a literary tradition in which the poet must retain the child within himself.'²²² Certainly his childlike nature and affinity with children are important and will be discussed further in this thesis, but for the Decadent tradition, youth and beauty in connection with the mystery of death were given a particular glamour. 'I do shun | The thought that death is misery's friend,' Owen wrote in his youth.²²³ The tension between the influence of this quasi-erotic idealism and the stark reality of the battlefield became central to Owen's mature poems, as we will discuss in chapter four.

In acquainting himself with Tailhade, Owen was afforded a glimpse of the poetic elite he yearned to be part of. As Fenton notes, 'Poetry was a club which he dearly wanted to join, a peerage by which he longed to be accepted'²²⁴. Owen was drawn less by Tailhade's connection with renown than by the possibility of finding himself included amongst a secretive coterie. Soon, the older poet's attitude to the war was shaping Owen's own: Tailhade and fellow aging poet Anatole France took it upon themselves to go to a recruiting station to volunteer for active service despite being well over the maximum age and avowed pacifists, intending the gesture to symbolize their commitment to defending not the people of France, nor the country itself, but specifically the French language.²²⁵

Owen was moved, and a sense of defending a national identity through preserving a beautiful language set in: he decided as early as November 1914 that if he were to fight, his

²²¹ From 'Happiness', CWDC, p.134.

²²² Guy Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p.4.

²²³ From 'Supposed Confessions of a Secondrate Sensitive Mind in Dejection', CWDC, p.65.

²²⁴ Fenton, p.26.

²²⁵ DHANB, p.184.

presence on the battlefield would be justified by ‘the sense that I was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote’.²²⁶ This symbolism struck him as appealing not just because of his love for poetry, but because it was an abnormal motivation and thus striking: it was derived from a heightened sense of appreciation of art, another element that was constituent to the ideal of a poet. Thus, though he was a pacifist, ‘far from influencing Wilfred against volunteering, Tailhade was indirectly responsible for turning his mind towards it’.²²⁷ It has been observed that Owen’s vocation having taken him away from England at the outbreak of the war was a significant contributory factor in his ‘disenchantment’, making for an ‘atypical’ war experience because he had largely avoided British propaganda and thus did not write with the idealism of the likes of Brooke.²²⁸

Owen seems to have considered the Decadents as directly descended from the Romantics. It was not difficult to see the poetry of Oscar Wilde as derived from that of Keats, especially as, like the young Owen, he acted with quasi-religious reverence towards sights of poetic ‘pilgrimage’: when Wilde came across ‘the grave of Keats, “The holiest place in Rome,” he prostrated himself on the grass’²²⁹ and afterwards wrote a sonnet about it. This was the sort of gesture—physical, emotionally-driven and rather un-British in its lack of stoic restraint—that Owen found striking and attractive, though it was wholly out of his own character. Writers in the Aesthetic and Decadent tradition like Wilde had the same appreciation for the writers Owen favoured, and were demonstrative about their refusal to conform or behave with socially-accepted constraint: Wilde was known as eccentric and flamboyant, and of course was infamous for being a practising, convicted homosexual during a time when it was criminalized. ‘I am one of those made for exceptions, not for

²²⁶ WOCL, p.300.

²²⁷ DHANB, pp.84-85.

²²⁸ Andrew John Frayn, ‘Writing Disenchantment: The Development of First World War Prose, 1918-1930’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Manchester, 2008), p.35.

²²⁹ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p.71.

laws', Wilde wrote,²³⁰ embodying the sort of stance to which Owen aspired. Wilde had given his freedom and, essentially, his life for an ideal—for choosing to live in a way that marked him out as abnormal. Even before his trial, however, he had set himself apart from wider society with his eccentric manner, his renowned wit and his literary talents. He was very unlike Owen, perhaps making him a lesser figure of admiration than the more unassuming Keats, but in many ways Wilde's lifestyle was what Owen aspired to: artistic, elevated, misunderstood save by a select few, and surfeit with secrets.

It was the French Decadent tradition with which Owen came into direct contact. While Edmund Blunden's claim that Owen is 'at moments, an English Verlaine'²³¹ is perhaps overstatement, the influence of the Symbolist and Decadent poets became central to Owen's life in France. Through meeting others with literary pedigree and finding himself valued by them, Owen gained the confidence to begin expressing himself as one who could transgress the boundaries of his social status. This mirrors his poetic growth once ensconced in a literary circle in London: accepted by Robbie Ross and his circle, Owen began to leave behind imitations of Sassoon and develop those literary elements that he considered his hallmarks—pararhyme, the juxtaposition of brutal realism with more abstract concepts, and a very direct expression of anger as opposed to Sassoon's more detached satire or Graves' observational standpoint.

Owen fancied himself a 'mad comet' who was for a time 'fixed' by Sassoon, but then returned to an individual, lone path: 'I spun round you a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze.'²³² In short, while he needed to be legitimized by association with others, what he truly desired was his own individual

²³⁰ Oscar Wilde, *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Centenary Edition*, ed. by Martin Holland (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1999), p.1019.

²³¹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.97.

²³² WOCL, p.505.

path and isolated but highly visible position away from others—Sassoon included. Though often imitating others, Owen found maturity when he wrote in such a way as to be set apart: ‘As a poet, too, he was different.’²³³

The successful poet, to Owen, represented his ideal. They were gifted individuals set apart from society, defying convention, sharing secrets amongst a small group and frequently isolating themselves from others who could not understand them. That said, to be a successful poet alone was not enough—his famous anger directed at the misleading work of Jessie Pope, ‘whose doggerel was frequently published in the right-wing press’,²³⁴ shows that he did not admire all poets, only those who produced serious verse that challenged and uplifted. Arguably, his anger in that case derived not only from his vehement disapproval of civilians encouraging children to take up arms and head to the bloody battlefields of France in the name glory and honour, but also from the sacrosanct territories of poetry being debased for this purpose—‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ was directed in drafts towards this ‘certain poetess’,²³⁵ not to the creators of propaganda posters, or films, or newspaper editorials.

Noting that there were recognized poets Owen did not admire is also important. While it is true that to be a poet—implying it is one’s profession and therefore one has garnered some success—one has already been set apart from others in society, this was not sufficient for Owen. To become famous for verse that he did not admire was not to be elevated; Owen’s ideal poet was not necessarily famous because he was admired, understood and celebrated, but because he defied convention and endured rejection to advance his art. This was true of Keats, Shelley, Wilde, Verlaine, Rimbaud and, indeed, Swinburne. When considering his unpopular anti-war stance and his impression, laid out in his draft preface,

²³³ DHTLY, p.1.

²³⁴ DHOTP, p.114.

²³⁵ POWO, p.118.

that it was only the *next* generation who could even potentially understand his message, this is no small oversight. To be a renowned poet made one an outsider in a sense, as any fame or infamy sets one apart, but Owen had no desire to be Jessie Pope.

Poetry in and of itself was not what elevated. Understanding was more important, and as his identity as a soldier became central to his life, it took precedent. The contemporary poet was unable to convey the exploits of the war's finest: 'This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.' Poets can be insincere, unfeeling and ignorant just like civilians: in 'Insensibility', Owen writes, 'But they are troops who fade, not flowers, | For poets' tearful fooling.' The idea of 'my dead name | High in the heart of London' seems shallow and irrelevant after experiencing comradeship in 'With an Identity Disc.' Part of this expression is self-effacement, for a hunger for fame is something rather base and contemptible, and certainly inferior to love—in 'The Peril of Love', Owen describes himself as having 'found too late love's grave significance. | A fierce infatuation, far above | The zeal for fame or fortune.'²³⁶ Whether famous or unrecognized, it is important to stress that as an adult, Owen did not consider the poet intrinsically elevated above all others. A poet unable to understand the reality of war was not worthy of admiration.

The aim of this section has been to illustrate that in large part, Owen's idealized image of an outsider figure is derived from his perception of the Romantic and Decadent poets he admired. But in establishing this, we have also seen that simply following a poetic vocation was not satisfactory, but that there were other elevating qualities associated with the ideal poet that were also necessary, including a sympathetic character and deep understanding of others. We have also seen that while he wished to be considered eccentric

²³⁶ CWDC, p.157.

and individualistic, Owen lacked the confidence to act independently, and flourished when enabled by the approval of others he admired. Finally, we have seen those Owen wished to imitate operated outside of the approval of a wider society, and were rebellious or even disreputable, yet admired as geniuses. All of these—the need for approval twinned with the desire for rebellious, the lack of confidence and the deep concern for how a wider society perceived him—can be considered to have derived from a lifelong insecurity. And this insecurity derived in large part from Owen’s perception of his social class.

Perceptibly Provincial: Social Hierarchy and Class Consciousness

Sassoon, tired of questions about his one-time protégé,
snapped that Owen's accent had been an embarrassment.²³⁷

'To all outward appearances', wrote Stallworthy, 'there could hardly be two men less alike than Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.'²³⁸ Sassoon was older than Wilfred, as well as almost a foot taller, but in all the variety of men found on Earth, they in fact were rather alike. What Stallworthy actually intended to emphasize was self-presentation more than appearance. The most striking difference between the men was that Sassoon was of a higher social class. Owen's particular attraction to the status of an elevated outsider derived in many ways from ideals related to his aspirations connected to perceptions of an elite. As a result—or perhaps as a root cause—Owen's class was a pressing issue throughout his life. Owen was in numerous ways an average middle-class man of few exceptional qualities, by birth and nature not an eccentric, an outcast nor elite. It is true that his early poetry prized eccentricity and exhibited marked indifference to the reaction of normal society:

What matter if all men cry aloud and start,
And women hide bleak faces in their shawl,
At those hilarious thunders of my fall?²³⁹

But outside of the fantasies of poetic narrative Owen was not easily able to distinguish himself as peculiar or idiosyncratic.

This section examines the relationship between Owen's self-perception in terms of class behaviour and his ideals of self-betterment and elevation. While of course there is a relationship between a man's self-perception and his ideals, for Owen that relationship is complex and multi-faceted: to belong to a higher social class is still to be part of a society, and upper social classes have not been 'set apart' by any notable sensitivity or talent. For

²³⁷ Max Egremont, *Siegfried Sassoon: A Biography*, paperback edition (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2006), p.351.

²³⁸ JSWO, p.205.

²³⁹ From 'The Storm', CWDC, p.129.

Owen, rather than an aspirational perception of higher social classes, rather he seemed to view his own background negatively, related to qualities with which he did not wish to find himself associated, such as obedience, lack of ambition and the impression of being content to keep one's head down and pass unnoticed. There is an element of Deleuze and Guattari's perception of desire in Owen's sense of ambition in this sense: in their interpretation, desire can become 'the abject fear of lacking something,'²⁴⁰ and it was what Owen perceived himself as lacking by birth that drove his ambition. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is a productive force, a desiring-machine, and give rise to actions felt to be necessary: 'Desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary; needs are derived from desire: they are counterproducts within the real that desire produces.'²⁴¹ Owen was driven by desires, as can be said for almost everyone, and many of his desires were noble or selfless. However, many of them were selfish, petty and showed contempt for social equals or inferiors.

Returning to Stallworthy, it is first of all worth noting that his emphasis on the difference in 'outward appearance' is part of a comparative culture that very often exaggerates the easy confidence of Sassoon with the then-deferential Owen—both elements of simplifying myths. On the other hand, it was true that upon their meeting, Sassoon was an established poet, a public figure and a wealthy man of leisure who despite his hospitalization had not genuinely been found mentally unsound by any doctor, whereas Owen had no reputation, diagnosed mental problems and the diffidence of an admirer of Sassoon's work. 'The description of their first meeting strikes the note of master and disciple or, at least, hero and ardent admirer', writes Sassoon biographer John Stuart Roberts. 'When they became more certain of each other that did not change. Owen always

²⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, p.27.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p.27.

felt inferior and indebted. This was not due exclusively to Sassoon being first in the field of a new poetic realism: Owen was conscious of their social differences.’²⁴²

While this is true in general, it is easy to oversimplify the meeting between poets. Though he may have developed a stammer, Owen was at this point not a nerve-addled, sheltered young innocent coming into contact for the first time with a man of substance: he had learned to conduct himself around gentlemen in France, he was a commissioned officer and he had already befriended renowned poets like Laurent Tailhade and Harold Monro. But in Sassoon’s presence he was immediately cast in an inferior role thanks to social standing and Sassoon’s fame, which led to the rather misleading impression that Owen was at the time a ‘nervous and battle-shocked wreck’.²⁴³

As one of the more prominent biographical elements of the two poets’ lives, Owen and Sassoon’s first meeting features prominently in fiction written about them, including Pat Barker’s novels and the play *Not About Heroes*. The simplified characterization of the two men in the latter led MacCallum-Stewart to cite it as a prime example of ‘the fictionalisation of the war poets’,²⁴⁴ which also applies to the former. Simplification did not have an overly negative impact on the reception of *Regeneration*, however: ‘reviewers did not appear to notice or mind that Sassoon, Owen and [W.H.] Rivers had become fictitious creations, and Barker was thus left free to reinterpret them as required.’²⁴⁵ But while it is expedient in fiction to portray Owen as an overawed young man utterly lacking in confidence who was essentially a member of an ordinary society allowed to meet an elevated outsider and reacting with wonderment, it is also reductive.

²⁴² John Stuart Roberts, *Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)* (London: Richard Cohen Books, 1999), p.121.

²⁴³ *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature*, ed. by Michael Stapleton (London: Book Club Associates, 1997), p.664.

²⁴⁴ MacCallum-Stewart, p.127.

²⁴⁵ Martin Stephen, *The Price of Pity: Poetry, History and Myth in the Great War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 1994), p.177.

This is partly Sassoon's fault, for it was part of the likeable, identifiable image of Owen he wished to promote, and very possibly the genuine impression he had of his friend's temperament. Dennis Welland, who upon his death left behind an unfinished manuscript which would have been titled 'The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen' and traced the efforts of Owen's friends and family in developing his reputation. The manuscript reveals the frustrations some of these felt at one another, and, for example, Osbert and Edith Sitwell were 'irritated at what they felt was the patronising tone of Sassoon's chapter on Owen in *Siegfried's Journey*'²⁴⁶ Harold Owen also took umbrage, Welland quoting him as objecting that Sassoon 'has the impertinence to refer to my brother, who was a far greater poet than *he* ever was, as "little Wilfred"'.²⁴⁷ Welland attempted to defend Sassoon: 'my placatory suggestion that, taken in context, this was not a reference to literary merit but a recognition of the difference in height between the two men, was given short shrift, as was my reminder that "little" was, for Sassoon, an affectionate diminutive which he applied to several people, including Blunden.'²⁴⁸ Whether or not the word 'Little' was inflammatory, Sassoon certainly played a significant role in portraying Owen as a man of few striking qualities and as an average everyman, which was useful for creating a mythos of a poet made by the war and inspired to greater things by a meeting with a fellow poet.

That the meeting was deeply meaningful to Owen and thrilled him deeply is not in question, however, corroborated as it is by his letters, but it becomes more complex the more is known about how Owen had learned to acquit himself in the years prior. For all that a truly objective account of the meeting is impossible, when considering Owen's class-

²⁴⁶ Dennis Welland, *The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen*, MS numbered DSW/1/3/3/3/1. The Welland Archives, John Lylands Library, University of Manchester, p.28.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.30.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

consciousness, it is worth questioning the abiding impression that Owen was always in the role of 'ardent admirer'. The reason Owen has been portrayed as timid likely derives from three different elements: firstly, as was already mentioned, the stammer he developed as a result of his shell-shock. Secondly, Owen may have taken the apprentice role as a way to flatter Sassoon, exaggerating a submissive manner to flatter Sassoon and presenting himself as a harmless admirer to ingratiate himself, where attempting to assert himself as an equal could have seen him being treated as a threat and rejected. Thirdly, there was the simple fact that Sassoon was indeed in a superior position as someone whose class, physicality and early literary success had already distinguished him; as a fox-hunting man of leisure he was from the highest echelons of the middle classes, he was prominent in the national newspapers when Owen met him, and he conducted himself with confidence.

It is not a point of contention that this meeting is important to the subsequent careers of both men. That is why it looms large in biographical overviews. The problem is that it becomes too representative of Owen's character: given that he was institutionalized for poor mental health at the time, very possibly was purposely adopting a timorous character, and it would have been unseemly for an unrecognised poet to attempt to interact equally with a published and famous poet, it is a poor event to consider a defining moment for Owen's personality. This is even before we consider the possible distortions of Sassoon's version of events.

Sassoon habitually emphasized inequality when he began new friendships: 'Reading his books one realizes that [Sassoon] never describes himself in a relationship as an equal partner, since in nearly all his friendships he is either an apprentice [...] or a fatherly figure, giving advice and (financial) assistance', writes Paul Moeyes.²⁴⁹ Possessing a good deal

²⁴⁹ Paul Moeyes, *Siegfried Sassoon: Scorched Glory* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 1997), p.259.

more confidence and arrogance than his visitor, perhaps as a result of his family's wealth and social connections, or simply his own regard for his accomplishments, Sassoon's mere presence in Owen's life effectively brings to the fore his insecurities about his social position, which in turn inform us about just why he placed such importance on advancing himself to a position where he would no longer have to consider himself inferior.

Sassoon was in Craiglockhart only to avoid a court-martial—his institutionalization was a way for the authorities to claim political victory by propounding the idea he had been of unsound mind when he wrote his protest letter. This was not as unusual a political move as it may seem—as Jay Winter and Antoine Prost put it, ‘The difference between men who had what Sassoon's doctor W.H.R. Rivers called an “anti-war complex” and men who had shell shock was not at all clear.’²⁵⁰ But certainly, Sassoon viewed his admission as a ruse, with no commensurate shame, nor psychosomatic symptoms.

For Owen, Sassoon had achieved all that he wanted for his own life. Having the advantages of free time, wealth and social influence, Sassoon been able to contact literary figures in London such as Robert Ross and Edward Marsh in his youth. With their help, he became a significant enough literary figure for his protest letter to be of interest to the national press. As a statement of resistance, this was an action that chimed with Owen's ideals of rejecting the expectations of a wider society. Sassoon was also speaking not as a pacifist who could be accused of cowardice, but after a military career that included capturing a trench single-handedly. Having been shot and invalided during the Battle of Arras, he made his protest from a position of authority as one who had proven himself. If his initial success came thanks to his family's money and influence, he had distinguished himself both with his acerbic literary works and with his battlefield actions.

²⁵⁰ Winter and Prost, p.185.

While sufficiently educated and well-bred to have undergone officer training, Owen was in the middle of the social strata of his country and was, in Hibberd's words, 'intensely class-conscious'.²⁵¹ This manifested itself in both directions—he felt inadequate in the presence of those with a higher social status, including Sassoon, but he could also act in a patronising or dismissive manner to those who were lower-class; Hibberd even includes 'snobbishness' on a list of Owen's key personal traits to be cross-referenced *passim* in his biography.²⁵² This section does not set out to definitively prove that in psychosocial terms, Owen's actions derived from insecurities set in place by a middle-class family who felt they deserved higher social status. However, it seems reasonable to propose that as one of several elements that gave Owen his focus on becoming distinguished by his achievements and defying expectations, particularly as it illuminates the manner in which he interacted with other poets and literary figures—Sassoon, Graves and Robert Ross in particular. And certainly, class affected Owen from the youngest age.

As a child, Owen's first home was Plas Wilmot, a 'house of comfortable proportions on several acres of good land'.²⁵³ It may not have been a grand aristocratic estate, but it was a source of pride for the Owens and a mark of high status for a middle-class family. Indeed, considering how he judged Owen, it is likely Sassoon would have been surprised by Owen's first home having been as substantial as this. However, it was indeed more than the family could afford—the inherited home was beyond Tom and Susan Owen's pecuniary means, because while wealthy in life, Wilfred Owen's maternal grandfather Edward Shaw had been in such a poor financial position upon his death that in 1897, his will necessitated the house be auctioned.²⁵⁴ Wilfred was at this point four years old.

²⁵¹ DHANB, p.8.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p.533.

²⁵³ JSWO, p.1.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

Soon after, ‘the Owens watched their world disintegrate under the blows of the auctioneer’s hammer’²⁵⁵ and the family was never again to live in such a comfortable home. ‘The loss of the family home [...] was a bitter, very public humiliation’,²⁵⁶ and the series of homes the family occupied afterwards were far more modest. Prior to these events, Susan Owen, of the relatively wealthy Salter family, had been ambitious enough to dream of grand titles and nobility—shortly before Wilfred’s first birthday, she took a lock of his hair for her jewel box, labelling it, ‘The hair of Sir Wilfred Edward Salter-Owen’. This prompted Stallworthy to write, ‘the title and the hyphen are eloquent of her hopes for her son, and shed a revealing light on her view of the relative importance of her family and her husband’s.’²⁵⁷ Additionally, a ‘legend’ that was ‘passed down through generations of yeoman stock’²⁵⁸ suggested the Owens were descended from a baron, a claim which Hibberd says ‘seems a trifle unlikely’²⁵⁹—though this does not mean the Owen family themselves doubted it.

The family moving from upper middle-class comfort to a more modest lower middle-class life led Owen’s brother Harold to give exaggeratedly negative accounts in his autobiographical *Journey from Obscurity*. Wishing to ‘emphasise the depths to which the family has fallen’,²⁶⁰ Harold’s stories, written by one who shared Owen’s upbringing, are crafted to portray a family tragically bound to a station below that which they deserve. That said, Owen’s father Tom was of more humble origins than his wife, and it was Susan’s family’s financial problems that had necessitated her change in lifestyle. While the stoic Tom Owen likely never complained, as Kenneth Simcox notes, ‘one might argue that Tom’s was the sacrifice in marrying Susan Shaw and helping to put to rights the financial

²⁵⁵ JSWO, p.11.

²⁵⁶ DHANB, p.15.

²⁵⁷ JSWO, p.9.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

²⁵⁹ DHANB, p.8.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.16.

muddle inherited from Susan's father, Edward.'²⁶¹ Nonetheless, from Harold's account it is clear that the abiding feeling within the family was that they had fallen on hard times.

When Harold wrote his autobiographical *Journey from Obscurity*, he chooses to open with a chapter entitled 'Early Days', which begins thusly:—

My father's life had always been one of struggle in which personal ambition and inclination had to be sacrificed to family needs and financial necessity. Although he came of a family of some standing, circumstances were such that at an early age it was indicated to him that he would have to fend for himself.²⁶²

The theme of a family who deserved better than they have is at the centre of Harold's narrative, and framed as a noble struggle: of the frugal routine observed through his childhood, Harold writes, 'It was through this that poverty, sickness, and pressing anxiety were all somehow, if not surmounted, at least kept at bay.'²⁶³ It ought to be noted that Harold is certainly exaggerating his story for effect: when the family moved to Birkenhead in 1900, Tom having been appointed stationmaster at a railway terminus,²⁶⁴ Harold recalls the streets as 'a long line of small, squalid and near-slum dwellings' and tells of discovering 'armies of black beetles' in the house, the sight of which, coupled with a 'loathsome smell' caused him first to vomit and then to faint.²⁶⁵ 'The thickly-applied adjectives reveal the painter at work', notes a sceptical Hibberd, accepting that while it was possible the house had been infested, having independently researched the area he had found that 'Elm Grove, a street of detached and semi-detached villas and one small terrace, was by no means a slum.'²⁶⁶ However, even if he saw his childhood in less dramatic terms, it is probable that Wilfred shared his brother's qualms and the overall impression that the family belonged to

²⁶¹ Kenneth Simcox, *Wilfred Owen: Anthem for a Doomed Youth* (London: The Woburn Press, 1987), p.7.

²⁶² Harold Owen, *Journey from Obscurity*, abridged version, ed. by H.M. Gornall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.1, hereafter abbreviated 'HOJFO'.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.3.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.17.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.66.

²⁶⁶ DHANB, pp.18-19.

a better station in life: ‘Susan’s life was to be conducted on a rather lower social level than that experienced in the halcyon days at Plas Wilmot’, Simcox writes,²⁶⁷ which was no doubt conveyed to her children. Writing as Owen’s popularity began to swell, Harold also probably had no reason to suspect his brother’s life would be scrutinised as closely as it has been and intended to write the definitive version of his brother’s life to the exclusion of others. In Dennis Welland’s archival manuscript, he quotes correspondence from Blunden: ‘H.O. has a deep intensity in him and after seeing him & receiving letters from him again I feel sure he has been for some time preparing to make W.O. his subject. It is this sense which kept me from advising you to attempt further discussion with him, with loss of time & trouble after all.’²⁶⁸ Harold had specific ideas about how to shape the public perception of Owen, and while they have not held up to scholarly scrutiny, they are at least indicative of a prevailing sentiment and a conception of undeserved misfortune that Owen seems to have shared.

The boys’ upbringing, in a ‘provincial middle-class *milieu*’,²⁶⁹ would be hugely influential on Owen’s feelings about class and social status. This strongly suggests matters of class and status were very important to Owen, going some way to explaining his fixation upon belonging, and upon leaving behind mainstream society for an elevated subgroup.

If Owen began to see those who belonged to higher social classes as aspirational figures, it helps illuminate why even though he met Harold Monro before Sassoon and read his poetry, it was the more confident, wealthier and more conspicuously rebellious Sassoon he idolized. Again, here we see the distinction between a change of status through personal choices and the very different way of considering one that results from factors beyond

²⁶⁷ Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, p.7.

²⁶⁸ Welland, *The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen*, p.35. The letter from Blunden itself is dated October 10, 1947 and is archived as 1/1/1/4/7.

²⁶⁹ Kerr, p.193.

controlling—to be perceived as privileged was to be ‘set apart’, but to be forced downwards was shameful. It is for this reason that Hibberd considered Owen snobbish, for by necessity one who wishes to be distinguished, set apart and made noteworthy as an outsider wishes to reject inclusion by larger society. One who dislikes fitting in with peers, of passing unnoticed or finding oneself in a lower, less exclusive social bands may express that disinclination snobbishly. And certainly, Owen had limited sympathy for lower classes outside the war: in December 1914, still in France and displaying the kind of ignorance he would later abhor, he wrote to his mother, ‘while those ten thousand lusty louts go on playing football I shall go on playing with my little axiom: that my life is worth more than my death to Englishmen.’²⁷⁰ This letter certainly shows an unpleasant side to Owen: as Adrian Caesar observes, ‘The massively unfeeling and superior attitude to the working class here sits uneasily with those critics who have tried to make Owen a champion of the left.’²⁷¹ Politically, this is a valid observation, but it also fits neatly into the simplistic myth of naïve, ignorant boys who are fundamentally changed and made into poets when they confront the realities of the war. In fact, there are signs of Owen’s snobbishness throughout the war, and even when he becomes affectionate towards lower-class ‘Tommys’, there is still a sense of objectification, as we will see. Owen was neither wholly unfeeling, nor transformed into a great champion of the common man. He was more complex than either, and motivated by his own self-interest in setting himself apart.

Owen’s desire to transcend his social status was important enough to him that as a young man, he had few qualms about lying and misleading others to give the appearance of being richer and more privileged than in fact he was. While teaching in France as a young man as a ‘professeur’ at the Berlitz school—‘a title Wilfred unhesitatingly translated as

²⁷⁰ WOCL, p.299.

²⁷¹ Adrian Caesar, *Taking it Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p.138.

“Professor” for the benefit of [those] at home’²⁷²—Owen pretended that his father was a knight. He was so consistent in this ruse that when Tom Owen came to visit, he found that he was ‘invested with a title and that in his—Wilfred’s—circle of friends he was, unfortunately, very well known as Sir Thomas Owen’.²⁷³

The anecdote is generally treated as a harmless piece of fun which brings the father and son—whose relationship could be strained—closer. Even if it shows Owen contrite after telling a lie that could cause embarrassment, making the grandiose claims in the first place is telling. He was not above deceit if it meant others would believe he was of a superior social position. This sort of deception had a precedent with the family—Tom had conducted himself with such confidence and gravitas when visiting a café frequented by seafarers at his local docks that he was addressed as ‘Captain’, and had been flattered enough by that misunderstanding that he became a regular to encourage and revel in it.²⁷⁴

While training at the Dunsden vicarage, Owen had learned how to interact with others in relatively polite society, and as a result, ‘he began to make friends in France at higher social levels than he might ever have reached in Shrewsbury’.²⁷⁵ He had learned how to pass as more socially privileged than, in fact, he was—which is why Sassoon’s quick recognition of the difference between them is fairly surprising—but more notably, he was willing to deceive others to create a false, flattering image of himself. His priority as a young adult in a new situation was to invent a past for himself which he preferred to reality, indicating he was sufficiently ashamed of his background to desire an illusory replacement.

This is the underlying issue beneath the amusing anecdote of Sir Tom: as a young adult, Owen felt so detached from his upbringing that he invented another, though when

²⁷² DHANB, p.136.

²⁷³ HOJFO, p.53.

²⁷⁴ DHANB, p.34.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p.138.

exposed he was suitably contrite. Considering this thesis' premise of Owen wishing to leave behind a mundane self-identity to find a new, elevated group, this detachment from his past is informative. It becomes indicative of a highly personal, problematic view of the identities of the soldier, the poet and the everyman that is quite incompatible with any suggestion Owen's war experience captured a universal attitude. Owen cannot be both an everyman and contemptuous of the idea of being undistinguished. If 'With An Identity Disc' hints that fame is irrelevant besides being remembered by comrades, that is still a kind of remembrance. There is sincerity in the juvenile, 'The Dread of Falling Into Naught', ostensibly about the death of seasons and the impossibility of returning to what passes, but also imbued with a sense of regret that after death, the speaker—just like the seasons—has vanished forever: 'I shall not see the same sweet life again, | Nor the dear Sun, nor stars, nor tender moon.'²⁷⁶

Owen's conception of class was also linked to the sense of privilege that came from association with elite schools and universities, in particular Oxford and Cambridge. In the same period in which he was claiming noble heritage, while teaching in France, Owen was also to falsely 'hint' that he was 'waiting to go up to Oxford'.²⁷⁷ That institution commanded respect, and was linked with high social standing and influence. The fact that he never did experience life amidst the dreaming spires remained a sore point for him: 'Couldn't you divine why "Oxford" is a banned word with me. [*sic*] Because it is one of my most terrible regrets', he wrote to his cousin Leslie Gunston in 1915 from France. 'I ought to be there, not fuddling among the Vines. I ought to have been there, rather.'²⁷⁸ It is a small misconception about Owen that he attended university: the *Cambridge Guide to*

²⁷⁶ CWDC, p.84.

²⁷⁷ DHANB, p.138.

²⁷⁸ WOCL, p.349.

English Literature erroneously claims he was educated at ‘London University’,²⁷⁹ when in fact he was never an undergraduate. On 27 April 2014, Reading University unveiled a commemorative plaque²⁸⁰ that claimed he studied there: as he had attended some supplementary classes in 1912 for the correspondence courses he was taking, strictly speaking the plaque is not inaccurate, but if it leads any to believe Owen was an undergraduate at Reading, that will be another misinterpretation of the events of his life. He ardently wished to have been a scholar, but was never able to matriculate at Oxford, or any other institution, even though as Vandiver states, ‘Owen was determined to regain the social rank his family had lost through pursuing a university education.’²⁸¹ His failure to win a university scholarship weighed heavily on the young Owen.

All this had its effect on how Owen perceived Sassoon—a fox-hunter who had drifted into Cambridge to study but dropped out without taking a degree. Owen was raised class-conscious, ambitious and, if we are to equate his deceptions with his desires, somewhat covetous of privileged social standing. If ‘a ruse which made him acceptable in higher social levels than had been open to him at home’²⁸² could go undetected, he apparently felt no shame in it, but rather elation that the deception was tenable.

Owen’s brother was very sensitive about how his family’s status could be portrayed: in editing Wilfred’s letters, Harold ‘removed comments about money and other topics that may have revealed more than he wanted to be known about the family’s social position’.²⁸³ As a man of no great standing, who was outside the elite education system, Owen has in the years since perhaps been presented as more relatable to a mass audience than his more aloof peers, just as Rosenberg and Sorley’s place as privates rather than officers is also

²⁷⁹ *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature*, ed. by Michael Stapleton (London: Book Club Associates, 1997), p.664.

²⁸⁰ ‘Reading and the Great War’ in *Connected*, issue 5, 2014, ed. by Samantha Horsfield, pp.12-13, p.13.

²⁸¹ Vandiver, p.114.

²⁸² DHOTP, p.29.

²⁸³ DHANB, p.134.

emphasized as part of a narrative that points out that ‘the soldier-poets were a far more diverse group than what is usually acknowledged’,²⁸⁴ but attitudes to class were different in Owen’s lifetime, and while the Great War brought the classes together, by no means equalized them.

On that note, Owen was relatively privileged to have his writing survive as it did: ‘surely there was no more pitiable sacrifice to the stupidity of war than Isaac Rosenberg’,²⁸⁵ wrote Robert H. Ross. As a private, Rosenberg was unable to even send poems home because the censor did not want to have to read verse. It is perhaps the case that Owen was particularly conscious of class not only because he sought to befriend those of higher standing than his own, but because the course of his life happened to bring him into contact with such people with a fairly remarkable frequency, first as a teacher then as a poet brave enough to introduce himself to Sassoon. An additional degree of causation is even suggested, in literary terms: ‘The disenchantment of Wilfred Owen’s poetry derives from his position outside the public-school tradition, and his atypical wartime experiences’,²⁸⁶ writes Frayn: he writes the way he does not only because of what he witnesses during the war, but because of his background, intrinsically incapable of writing as one who had experienced the public school system. This perhaps made him more relatable than many of his peers, even if he would likely have felt a great disappointment at being ‘perceptibly provincial’,²⁸⁷ at his work being of a recognisably different calibre than that of his privately-schooled peers, even if framed as a positive observation.

Additionally, Owen was no Rosenberg: as a commissioned officer, he was anxious regarding his socially *superior* status, which when he was newly-commissioned caused him

²⁸⁴ Santanu Das, p.17.

²⁸⁵ Ross, p.171. This Robert Ross is not to be confused with Owen’s later mentor and Wilde’s literary executor Robert “Robbie” Ross.

²⁸⁶ Frayn, p.35.

²⁸⁷ Cuthbertson, p.113.

considerable guilt. He was middle-class, not a salt-of-the-earth Baldrick type, and if myths derived from his relationship with Sassoon infantilize him or make him seem like a pure-hearted admirer smitten with hero-worship, this is the oversimplification of fiction. When he met Sassoon, he was knowledgeable about poetry and eloquent despite his stammer; he had the respected position of being editor of the Craiglockhart internal paper *The Hydra*, which he had been confident enough to propose be made free to patients.²⁸⁸ He showed no sign in his letters that he felt inadequate socially in the hospital. In the past Owen had lied to advance his social standing amongst his peers, but the war now brought him into direct contact with not only his social superiors, but those amongst them who wrote poetry and had earned a literary reputation. Craiglockhart was for officers, but Owen was not intimidated: he had declared he felt he was ‘one of the ones’ there²⁸⁹—that is to say, one of the notable individuals with a remarkable level of influence. In other words, one who had distinguished himself and was standing out.

And yet, as Sassoon’s biographer Jean Moorcroft Wilson reiterates, Sassoon’s ‘social standing [...] had given him the confidence to dismiss Owen as “Provincial”. It was a subject on which Owen felt particularly sensitive’.²⁹⁰ Even after his death, Sassoon would consider Owen childish, naïve and somewhat inept, even as a poet: ‘I can imagine him as a sort of farmer—or doing some sort of social (youth) educational work. [...] But not as a professional literary man [...] Helping young men would have been his vocation, apart from his poetry,’ Sassoon wrote in his diary,²⁹¹ wryly adding, ‘And I don’t think he would have married.’

²⁸⁸ DHANB, p.327.

²⁸⁹ WOCL, p.482.

²⁹⁰ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Poet: A Biography (1886-1918)* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1998), p.399.

²⁹¹ Egremont, p.467.

Whatever Sassoon's personal judgements and whatever he would later say in anger to Spender, Sassoon was not so disapproving of Owen that he rejected his friendship. Sassoon had offered at their first meeting to read some of Owen's poems, and so taking him at his word, Owen produced some of his latest efforts. Some older sonnets were received poorly, but 'Antaeus' was admired and the work that was later to be titled 'Song of Songs' Sassoon pronounced 'perfect work'.²⁹² Buoyed by the confidence of an established poet's approval, Owen began to imitate him, injecting more colloquialism and increasingly using satirical bathos, as well as writing more directly from experience. Using his editorial position, he self-published his verse anonymously in the hospital magazine *The Hydra*. In the September edition, he included 'Song of Songs' and quoted some lines from 'The Dead-Beat' in his editorial as if from an anonymous source.

Sassoon remained privately somewhat dismissive, sending a copy of *The Hydra* to his friend Lady Ottoline Morrell with a note next to 'Song of Songs': 'The man who wrote this brings me quantities & I have to say kind things. He will improve, I think!'²⁹³ But by the end of that month, Owen had improved sufficiently to have drafted one of his most celebrated works, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. Sassoon would approve, making suggestions that Owen took on board, and by the time the work was in its final stages, Sassoon had realized just how capable this young man from the hospital for neurasthenic patients really was.²⁹⁴

Owen had taken full advantage of the opportunity he was given. He had been unthreatening but ingratiated himself, then proven himself with his literary talents. He had seen a direct path to literary recognition through another, and been able to seize it. With the same irony that can be observed in the young Owen's pursuit of rebellion and distinction

²⁹² WOCL, p.486.

²⁹³ DHANB, p.340.

²⁹⁴ JSWO, pp.221-22.

through imitation of other poets, here his path to becoming set apart and elevated was to rely on another and to assume the role of the disciple rather than the eccentric.

As a result, through Sassoon Owen would soon meet the literary acquaintances who would determine the course of his final year and his reputation afterwards—Robert Ross, Robert Graves, Charles Scott Moncrieff, the Sitwells—effectively opening the door to a previously inaccessible social stratum.

The immediate effect the desire to impress new acquaintances had on Owen's writing was a series of attempts to affect sophistication. Having never studied Latin at school, attempts at using it in the title of a new poem led to mistakes: Owen wrote 'without a proper formal education.'²⁹⁵ This, perhaps, is a manifestation of Owen's fears regarding academic prowess. Insecurity derived from being thought of as intellectually inferior is evident in his brother's account: 'He was so obsessed—there is no other word—with the necessity to equip himself scholastically'.²⁹⁶ The choice of the word 'equip' is telling—Harold did not believe his brother to be studying for love of knowledge, but to gain useful tools for a purpose.

Graves, the first of Sassoon's group Owen met, was another significant influence upon him. Though Graves' descriptions of Owen may not have been in terms that suggested great awe or respect—he makes passing mention of Owen in *Good-bye to All That* as a 'quiet, round-faced young man'²⁹⁷—neither did he seem to find him embarrassing or socially inferior. When they first met, Graves was appreciative of Owen's work, writing to him soon after to compliment 'Disabled' as a 'damn fine poem'. He also offered some technical advice, writing, 'Owen, you have seen things; you are a poet; but you're a very

²⁹⁵ Bäckman, p.7.

²⁹⁶ HOJFO, p.19.

²⁹⁷ Robert Graves, *Goodbye [sic] to All That*, rev Penguin Classics edn (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p.234.

careless one at present'.²⁹⁸ While the didactic tone may seem disparaging, it is constructive: Unlike Sassoon, he is not just saying 'kind things'. Graves acknowledged Owen as a fellow writer and wished to assist him as a more experienced peer rather than as part a master addressing a disciple. Indeed, Graves humbles himself at the end of his letter, assuring Owen that though he currently needs to 'observe the rules', once he has mastered poetic craft he may in fact 'obtain Parnassus in no time while I'm still struggling on the knees of that stubborn peak'.²⁹⁹

It was Graves rather than Sassoon who passed Owen's poems along to Robert Nichols and Edward Marsh, though noting the reservation that he was 'too Sassoonish in places'.³⁰⁰ Owen was readily accepted as a friend by Graves despite not having the breeding of the likes of Sassoon, and later that year Owen took leave because he had been invited to attend Graves' wedding. True, there is a difference to be observed between how Owen first appeared to Sassoon—as an unknown, stammering young man knocking on his door for autographs—and the introduction Sassoon will have given him once he was considered a friend, but the fact remains that from nobody else does Owen receive the kind of disparagement Sassoon metes out in relation to his social class.

Owen also became acquainted with Osbert Sitwell in this period, who was used to moving in high social circles, and took to Owen very quickly—according to his biographer Philip Ziegler, while Osbert was 'often grudging in his praise of fellow poets,' towards Owen 'he behaved with selfless magnanimity and never ceased to mourn his loss'.³⁰¹ It would seem that inflammatory statements Sassoon made about Owen being his social inferior cloud Owen's acceptance by the wider literary circle within which Sassoon was by

²⁹⁸ JSWO, p.229.

²⁹⁹ WOCL, p.595.

³⁰⁰ DHANB, p.368.

³⁰¹ Philip Ziegler, *Osbert Sitwell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), p.78.

no means remarkable for his social standing. That said, Owen was also noted by Sitwell as very shy—Ross expressly asked Osbert ‘not to frighten him’, and described him as ‘the most diffident and sensitive of men [...] It was easy to perceive that by nature he was shy’.³⁰² But Sitwell qualifies this by suggesting that it was literary reputation rather than social standing which impressed Owen: ‘Only in the presence of such literary nabobs of the period as Wells and Bennett could he scarcely bring himself to speak: and this silence, apart from being rooted in his natural modesty and good manners, was due, I think, to the immense esteem in which he held literature and those who practised the profession of author.’³⁰³ Again, the confidence of one who was set apart as a poet did not come naturally to Owen, and he did not live long enough to enjoy truly accomplishing the goal of literary success. But clearly these circles were where he wished to belong.

Shyness aside, Owen seems to have been accepted without comment upon his social background. He developed his writing in new and surprising ways, gaining the confidence to cease imitating Sassoon and write with the more singular and idiosyncratic tone that characterises ‘Strange Meeting’ and ‘Spring Offensive’. ‘Strange Meeting’ was the poem, when posthumously published in the Sitwells’ *Wheels*, that earned Owen enough of a reputation that his work persisted long enough to finally flourish into popularity.

This section has illustrated how Owen’s attitudes to class originated with his mother’s impression that her family deserved higher social status, complicated his relationships with those he met in his youth, and made him conscious of how others judged him. He was insecure enough that he would resort to lies about his origins and education, but in many ways those experiences prepared him for interactions with higher social orders. In these insecurities lie the probable origins of his desire to transcend expectations, accomplish

³⁰² WOCL, p.597.

³⁰³ Ibid.

more than was expected of him and to be set apart by accomplishments—to become an outsider figure through elevation.

My assertion is that this is why he regarded conformity with shame, and the idea of remaining content in his social class without finding a way to be distinguished was anathema to him—and poetry was the primary way he hoped to become set apart. Owen wished to be regarded as an outsider—and anxiety about social standing played a major part in the formation of that desire.

An Account of Owen's Activities and Outlook During the War

The following sections are concerned with how Owen's war experience altered his conceptions of societies and otherness. Therefore it becomes useful to give a brief account of Owen's activities during these years.

Since September 1913, Owen had been in France, teaching English³⁰⁴. His naïve outlook shortly after war was declared in August 1914 is evident from 'The Ballad of Peace and War'³⁰⁵ written in an idealistic tone that Stallworthy suggests, 'shows as great an ignorance of the issues involved as anything from the pen of the maligned Rupert Brooke'.³⁰⁶ He had no direct exposure to warfare and was influenced by Romantic interpretations of battle and heroism³⁰⁷.

Working as a tutor at Bagnères-de-Bigorre, the twenty-one-year-old Owen first experienced the consequences of war. He was able to see wounded soldiers, and wrote a letter home about it. While Stallworthy identifies 'the natural compassion he had shown for the poor and the suffering at Dunsden'³⁰⁸ in his words, there is something very matter-of-fact and unsympathetic in his account of the 'chamber of horrors', with illustrations, and the arch way he claims he imparts this information to 'educate' Colin 'to the actualities of the war'³⁰⁹. That it occurs to Owen he must justify his letter with a didactic purpose indicates he feels he ought to observe remotely; it is not an outpouring of anger or pity, but detached.

Despite seeing these victims of warfare, Owen was generally sheltered from recruitment campaigns. Hibberd feels that had he returned to England in 1914, 'he would probably have joined up within a few months under pressure from recruiting

³⁰⁴ Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.93, hereafter abbreviated 'JSWO'.

³⁰⁵ WOCPF, p.504.

³⁰⁶ JSWO, p.104.

³⁰⁷ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography* (London: Phoenix, 2002), p.202, hereafter abbreviated 'DHANB'.

³⁰⁸ JSWO, p. 109.

³⁰⁹ WOCL, pp.284-285.

propaganda.³¹⁰ However, it can be contended that one of Owen's socio-economic background could have resisted volunteering and lived as a conscientious objector, for after all his cousin Leslie Gunston made only a cursory effort to secure a 'Sedentary Flying Commission'³¹¹ and upon rejection never enlisted and remained a civilian. Owen went to war because he made the decision that it was the best course of action, in part influenced by Laurent Tailhade, as we will see later.

Owen's teaching obligations were fulfilled in September 1915. Having seen an advertisement specifically for 'gentlemen returning from abroad'³¹², he enlisted in the Artists' Rifles, and Owen began his cadet training on 21st October 1915³¹³. His initial attitude to enlisting brought with it a certain awareness of the soldier's perceived lack of worth, Owen's remark to his mother that he would be 'National Hero, number million'³¹⁴ cynical about conceptions of heroism. During training in London, he paid his first visit to the Poetry Bookshop, owned and run by H.H. Monro³¹⁵, then in October was sent to continue his training at the Artists' camp in Romford³¹⁶. After a period of leave from May 19th, Owen was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Manchester Regiment³¹⁷.

As an officer, initially he was in a position of power, but felt isolated: 'I am marooned on a Crag of Superiority in an ocean of Soldiers'³¹⁸. Later in this chapter we will also discuss the dynamic of the officers and the men within the context of Owen's feelings of superiority and elevation. Initially Owen aspired to join the flying corps, making an

³¹⁰ DHANB, p.185.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.244.

³¹² *Ibid.*, p.199.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

³¹⁴ WOCL, p.348.

³¹⁵ JSWO, p.127.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.214.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.232-233.

³¹⁸ WOCL, p.395.

application for transfer, but ‘nothing came of it, and he seems to have had no lasting regrets’³¹⁹.

After moves to Oswestry, Owen’s birthplace, Southport and Fleetwood, Owen was instructed to report to Folkestone on the 29th December. He boarded a ferry for Calais and made his way to base camp at Étaples. After training exercises, Owen was, contrary to what he had been told in Southport, ordered to join the 2nd Manchesters, staying with his own regiment. He joined them near Doullens, and found himself under the command of an officer he admired greatly, Lieutenant-Colonel Noel Luxmoore: Owen’s response to authority was not based on his immediate seniors. Once allocated to A Company, Owen also referred to his captain, H.R. Crichton-Green, in approving terms.³²⁰

The Battle of the Somme was in its final stages, but Owen and the rest of the Manchesters were sent to Serre. Owen and his men relieved soldiers of the Highland Light Infantry in a dugout on the ‘Outpost line’ on January 12th³²¹. Here, he would have the first harrowing experience to later be developed into a poem: one of his ‘lads’, even though he was told to stand halfway down the tunnel if bombardments were intense, was blown down the stairs by a shell and blinded. ‘The Sentry’ in 1918 would recall this experience³²². Owen also told his mother a man he had rejected as his servant was ‘blown to nothing’ in a nearby dug-out³²³, and had to face the possibility that had he chosen differently, the man would have survived.

The Manchester Regiment prevailed, capturing Serre as the Germans withdrew to the Hindenburg Line, but this retreat occurred while Owen was spending February on a course

³¹⁹ JSWO, p.144.

³²⁰ DHANB, p. 258.

³²¹ Ibid., p.266.

³²² POWO, p.165.

³²³ WOCL, p.425.

at Abbeville on ‘transport duties’³²⁴. Some of the poignant lines of verse he wrote on the subject of ‘Happiness’³²⁵ would become extremely important to him; as Hibberd writes, ‘Six months later, he said that these lines [...] had been his first mature work’³²⁶.

Returning to the 2nd Manchesters, Owen found his company south of the Line. Working on fortifications, Owen fell into a deep hole, sustaining a concussion, and when symptoms worsened, he was hospitalised³²⁷. By the time he re-joined the Manchesters at the end of March, operations against Hindenburg outposts had begun. While Owen had missed triumphs significant enough for a nearby hill to be renamed ‘Manchester Hill’ after his regiment, he had also been safe from fighting resulting in heavy casualties³²⁸.

In the days that followed, the battle of Arras begun and the United States of America officially declared war. Two French attacks on the town of St. Quentin failed, and Owen again saw action in an operation to capture a nearby trench: he and his battalion had to descend a ridge in full view of the enemy, walking in straight lines through shell bombardment. The battalion was fortunate to sustain only eight deaths and twenty-two injuries, and I agree with Hibberd that this experience likely informed the narrative of ‘Spring Offensive’³²⁹.

Owen soon developed clearer signs of mental illness. Hibberd cites his army file for 30 April 1917: Owen was ‘observed to be shaky and tremulous, and his conduct and manner were peculiar, and his memory was confused.’³³⁰ At the beginning of May he was sent to the Medical Officer, then to the casualty clearing station. He remained there for a

³²⁴ JSWO, p.163.

³²⁵ CWDC, p.134

³²⁶ DHANB, p.280.

³²⁷ Ibid., p.284.

³²⁸ Ibid., p.291.

³²⁹ Ibid., pp.298-299.

³³⁰ Ibid, p.303.

month before evacuation. After this process and an appearance before a medical board,³³¹ Owen arrived at Craiglockhart Hospital, Edinburgh on 25 June.

After meeting Sassoon and writing some of his best-known work, Owen was discharged on 30 October with three weeks' leave. After visiting his family and making literary connections in London, Owen rejoined the Manchesters at their new base at Scarborough. He would retrain after his recovery with the 5th (Reserve) Battalion, and was given the additional duty of running the hotel in which officers were accommodated. He expected a promotion to full lieutenant in the near future, and indeed was promoted in December 1917, though it was not announced until after his death³³². Owen took leave to attend Graves' wedding, by which time he Owen had been informed he was to be published nationally for the first time, with 'Miners' appearing in *The Nation*.

In late January 1918, the Scarborough Medical Board decided Owen would undertake three months of light duties before beginning fitness training once again. However, the light duties lasted only until March 9th, when he was ordered to Ripon. Within days he was in the camp and, finding it dirty and unpleasant, rented a room in a nearby cottage to set himself apart physically from the rest of the soldiers³³³.

On June 4th, Owen wrote home that he had been certified fit, and the next day he was in Scarborough once again with the Manchesters. He was ordered to return to France in August, though his departure was delayed by a medical exam that detected a heart murmur³³⁴. This allowed Owen time to take leave, using it to visit his parents and sister at home, then his friends in London, including Scott Moncrieff, Osbert Sitwell and Sassoon. Owen passed what Stallworthy calls a 'golden evening' at a private concert by harpsichord

³³¹ JSWO, p.187.

³³² DHANB, p.361.

³³³ Ibid., pp.387-388.

³³⁴ Ibid., p.414.

player Violet Gordon Woodhouse³³⁵, but in fact the concert concluded in time for tea and was in the company of Sitwell and Sassoon, not Sitwell and Scott Moncrieff³³⁶.

After spending the last night of his leave at home with his family, Owen went back to the barracks, and very quickly, he was abruptly certified fit and told to be in Folkestone in five days, so that he could return to France. Owen returned to his family once more, this time with draft leave. Colin Owen had been posted to Hastings, now a cadet in the Royal Flying Corps³³⁷, so Owen went with his mother to visit him there.

Owen joined his battalion near Amiens on September 9th. He was made Bombing Officer not because of significant knowledge on the subject, but because the Adjutant felt that an experienced officer ought to have a specialist job. It was not until the 24th of September that the Manchesters were once again sent into action, and by the 28th they were marching for the front lines. On October 1st, Owen's company attempted to break through part of the Hindenberg reserve line, but the charge was unsuccessful, and Owen's servant was shot through the head, dying slowly in his arms³³⁸. Later that afternoon, the company received more support and Owen led a charge that captured the position, fighting 'like an angel' and capturing 'scores' of enemy soldiers³³⁹. A counterattack threatened to establish a position on the hill behind Owen's company, so Owen laid down covering fire with a machine gun, allowing his second lieutenant to fight off the counterattack and recapture a crucial farm. This action earned Owen the Military Cross³⁴⁰. Later, he was to be accused of cowardice, and this official recognition of bravery gave Owen credibility as a fighter. While Owen's self-regard was not affected by the award, for he never knew about it, it is significant for his posthumous reputation.

³³⁵ JSWO, p.267.

³³⁶ DHANB, p.414.

³³⁷ JSWO, p.267.

³³⁸ DHANB, pp.436-437.

³³⁹ WOCL, p.580.

³⁴⁰ DHANB, p.439.

The captured trench was not safe, being well-known to the German soldiers and its vulnerabilities easily targeted, so Owen and his men withdrew. The Germans rallied for counterattacks, so no further gains were made on October 2nd³⁴¹. Owen braved machinegun fire attempting to get the wounded to cover after three stretcher-bearers were shot down, but there was nothing he could do. He was relieved at five o'clock the following morning. The following weeks were spent in the safety of a camp at Hancourt. Fierce fighting broke out on October 17th on the River Selle, and the 32nd Division, including the Manchesters, were ordered there. By the time they reached the Hindenberg Line, the Germans had been pushed back, allowing for a rest at Lehaucourt before the march resumed on the 20th, taking Owen to Bohain³⁴².

Owen's final letter to his mother was written on October 31st, from a cellar in The Forester's House, near Ors. West of the Sambre-Oise Canal, the 96th Brigade was holding a line, hoping to capturing a spur that would secure the canal for the Allies³⁴³. On the night of the 1st November, the west bank was cleared, with three German machine-guns captured³⁴⁴. A plan to aid the Royal Engineers to construct bridges fell to the 32nd division, including Owen in the 2nd Manchesters³⁴⁵. During this battle Wilfred Owen was shot and killed.

³⁴¹ DHANB, pp.440-441.

³⁴² Ibid., pp.449-450.

³⁴³ Ibid., p.454.

³⁴⁴ JSWO, p.283.

³⁴⁵ DHANB, p.454.

Secret Men and a Certain Poetess: The Schism between Soldiers and Civilians

At some levels, military service seems to have appealed to [Owen] because it offered him the chance for a new start in life and made him a member of an exclusive brotherhood.³⁴⁶

Early negative criticism of Owen's poetry centred on his observing too much of a distinction between soldiers and the civilians at home. He had taken up a confrontational stance that of course alienated a much of his readership.³⁴⁷ This was, however, precisely Owen's intention, tying directly into the ideals of becoming an elevated outsider privy to secret knowledge that sets him apart. The poets he admired had been distinguished from the masses by their heightened sense of understanding, the inability of others outside their circles to fully appreciate their artistic statements and the special bond between those in the know. It is small wonder then that when he found himself part of a group of men with those same qualities—special knowledge, views that ran contrary to prevailing public sentiments, and lives that a wider population simply could not understand—he found special meaning in his new vocation. Not the vocation of a poet, but of a soldier; the fighting men in France were removed from society in a physical as well as symbolic sense.

Owen's war poetry often places emphasis on the exclusive knowledge shared only between soldiers, and the impossibility of those outside this group of comprehending their discourses or bonds:

Nevertheless, except you share
With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,
Whose world is but a trembling of a flare
And heaven but a highway for a shell,
You shall not hear their mirth³⁴⁸

³⁴⁶ Todman, *The Great War*, p.161.

³⁴⁷ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.135. Alienation in wartime literature, particularly as applied to Owen and fictional representations of him as a figure, is examined by Christopher Bond in his doctoral thesis, "'Cruelties Incomprehensible': The Alienated Gaze at War in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* Trilogy"

³⁴⁸ From 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo', CWDC, p.24.

First-hand knowledge was for Owen the only way to truly understand the Great War, and without such direct experience, even poetry rang hollow: he was ‘clearly convinced, in his last two years at least, that the kind of imaginative understanding reached through direct experience is primary to a poet’.³⁴⁹ Thus, he wrote poetry that stressed personal experience as vital to ‘truthfulness’ reemphasising his words in the draft preface: ‘The true poets must be truthful.’³⁵⁰ Accordingly, when he read his cousin Leslie Gunston’s volume *The Nymph and Other Poems*, he wrote to him didactically, ‘every poem, and every figure of speech should be a *matter of experience*’,³⁵¹ a stance which naturally gives rise to a kind of hierarchy of authoritative statements. This is directly connected to Owen’s beliefs regarding select groups bonded by special, exclusive knowledge—one of the crucial elements marking an outsider who is to be admired.

In speaking from genuine experience, Owen is confirming his place amongst such a group beyond any doubt, and has made the particularity of his experiences his subject. Veracity as a result of true experience is powerful: ‘the invisible presence of actual experience in the later poems is [...] a source of their strength.’³⁵² His early poem ‘The Poet in Pain’ stresses the meaninglessness of writing about pain without experience: Some men sing songs of Pain and scarcely guess | Their import, for they never knew her stress.’³⁵³ Though his poetic techniques may have changed in the interim, Owen’s mature poems contain the same theme, and even imply that the visceral immediacy of the war experience has a priority over all poetic expression that has gone before:

³⁴⁹ Bäckman, p.33.

³⁵⁰ POWO, p.192.

³⁵¹ WOCL, p.510.

³⁵² DHOTP, p.65.

³⁵³ CWDC, p.158

Your dear voice is not dear,
Gentle, and evening clear,
As theirs whom none now hear,
Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed.

Heart, you were never hot
Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;
And though your hand be pale,
Paler are all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail:
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.³⁵⁴

These traditional signifiers of heightened, sincere emotion are inadequate: large, hot hearts and pale hands and gentle voices commonly seen in love poems cannot compare with the losses on the battlefield. The conflation of love and injury and the religious imagery of the trailed cross all signify other important themes to be discussed later in this thesis, but the primacy Owen gives to direct experience, particularly experiences on the battlefield, demonstrates the exclusionary nature of his late poetry. Owen essentially represents the Great War as incomprehensible to those outside his group—although his preface concedes that while the poems are not ‘consolatory’ to his generation, ‘they may be to the next.’ Owen accepted the possibility his poetry could be understood clearly by another generation, who could not possibly have participated in the fighting.

To be credible while taking this stance, Owen had to return to the Front after recovering in Craiglockhart: he knew if he wrote as a ‘nerve-ridden casualty who had been sent home, shell-shocked and suspected of cowardice,’³⁵⁵ his position would be greatly weakened, even though Sassoon tried to persuade him that he was of more use as a writer than a casualty. Owen knew that he would have to combat the impression that his institutionalization was connected to cowardice, and subsequent brave conduct on the battlefield would redress that, making him eager to prove himself. Respect for soldiers, be

³⁵⁴ From ‘Greater Love’, CWDC, p.23.

³⁵⁵ DHTLY, p.1.

they officers, soldier-poets or even army chaplains, was directly linked to brave actions: As Linda Parker writes in *The Whole Armour of God: Anglican Army Chaplains in the Great War*, ‘As many chaplains realised quite early in the war, the respect they received from the troops was directly related to the courage shown by the padres in action.’³⁵⁶

Simple institutionalisation perhaps should not be equated with cowardice, but at the time shell shock and post-traumatic stress disorders were poorly understood. By the time of his admission to Craiglockhart, Owen had experienced the blinding of his sentry, a night without shelter in temperatures so cold that one of his men died, and a gas attack during a scouting mission in the snow, events that inspired ‘The Sentry’, ‘Exposure’ and ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ respectively. He had also narrowly escaped being shot by a sniper, contracted dysentery, developed insomnia and had a bad fall into a hole that resulted in a concussion severe enough that he forgot his own birthday. By coincidence, he also missed his regiment’s greatest triumphs, away on training when they captured Serre at the end of the First Battle of the Somme, and missing another notable victory while recuperating from his concussion.³⁵⁷

When he had returned to action, it was for the battle of Arras, where he and his battalion were ordered to descend a ridge in full view of the enemy, walking in straight lines through shell bombardment. The battalion was considered extremely fortunate to sustain only eight deaths and twenty-two injuries in this march, and Hibberd believes it was this experience that informed the similar narrative in ‘Spring Offensive’:³⁵⁸ Owen wrote to his brother Colin of looking back at ‘the ground all crawling and wormy with wounded bodies’ but feeling ‘no horror at all but only an immense exultation at having got through

³⁵⁶ Linda Parker, *The Whole Armour of God: Anglican Army Chaplains in the Great War*, (Solihull: Helion & Company Limited, 2009), p.70.

³⁵⁷ JSWO, p.163.

³⁵⁸ DHANB, pp.298-99.

the Barrage’.³⁵⁹ Owen could easily have died in this battle, before meeting Sassoon or writing his best-known poetry; for all his misfortunes, Hibberd wrote even before this extremely dangerous march, ‘he seemed to have a charmed life’.³⁶⁰ For all his good fortune in avoiding death, he had certainly had his share of harrowing experiences, and developing shell shock was by no means surprising.

Today, appreciation for Owen suggests his writing has mass appeal—‘People who have never been near a battlefield, including children, respond to him because they know he is writing about something vital and because, for all his experimenting, he never lost touch with the common reader’³⁶¹—but this view developed only after a significant shift in attitudes to war. Owen was keenly aware that soldiers regarded themselves as entirely separated from the non-combatants at home, who were ignorant of the realities of battle:—

“The greatest glory will be theirs who fought,
Who kept this nation in integrity.”
Nation? -- The half-limbed readers did not chafe
But smiled at one another curiously
Like secret men who know their secret safe.
(This is the thing they know and never speak,
That England one by one had fled to France
Not many elsewhere now save under France).³⁶²

This, from one of Owen’s final poems, ‘Smile, Smile, Smile’,³⁶³ explicitly draws a division between soldiers and civilians—particularly the civilian press. Owen goes so far as to allude that the idea of the Nation of England has been fractured by the War, with almost all of those who truly represent the nation dead and buried in France, a grim echo of Brooke’s corner of a foreign field. The poem concludes with these lines: ‘Pictures of these broad smiles appear each week, | And people in whose voice real feeling rings | Say: How they

³⁵⁹ WOCL, p.458.

³⁶⁰ DHANB, p.294.

³⁶¹ Merryn Williams, *Wilfred Owen* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1993), p.71.

³⁶² POWO, p.167.

³⁶³ A reference to popular, naïve 1915 marching song, ‘Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag, and Smile, Smile, Smile’.

smile! They're happy now, poor things.' The civilians, hopelessly ignorant, have only a superficial and rather patronising understanding of those who suffer and die for them.

Though his suffering is appalling, the first-hand experience has given the soldier a privileged position of understanding. While soldiers are disfigured and see their comrades die, the civilians remain in ignorance, creating an isthmus that is not easily crossed. Here, transmuted, are the same ideals of the Decadent poets, enjoying secret and privileged knowledge. But there cannot be the same question of sincerity: the traumas of witnessing large-scale death and suffering give a terrible enlightenment, inaccessible to others but unquestionably based in truth. The lack of dialogue between the soldiers in 'Smile, Smile, Smile' is also illustrative of Owen's giving experience priority over testimony: there is no need for his veterans to exchange stories, establish boundaries of discourse or divulge the particulars of their secrets. They do not speak, but only give each other curious smiles: what they have lived through has given them a deeper comprehension not only of the reality of war, but of one another.

Today, rather than being described as Georgians, Romantics, Decadents or Modernists, Owen and his close associates are described as war poets. This is no surprise for one who states his subject is war. It was as a soldier that he wrote his mature verse, and as a soldier he died, believing—or at least, stating the belief—that he could write sincere poetry only if it was informed by his personal experiences. For this reason, we can judge that all of his late verse is to some extent autobiographical, excluding where it is satirical, religious or explicitly fantastical, as in 'Strange Meeting'. Short biographies of Owen written for anthologies frequently repeat the claim that his juvenilia and pre-war poetry was substandard and only his experiences on the battlefield matured him enough to write adequate verse: the anthology *Our Greatest Writers and Their Major Works* even goes so

far as to claim that Owen was ‘urged into poetry by Sassoon’,³⁶⁴ implying that he had until their meeting been ignorant of it, or that his prior attempts did not deserve to be called poetry.³⁶⁵ While more devoted critics who trace Owen’s literary growth are often keen to impress on readers that his poetic talents did not abruptly manifest themselves in the face of war but can be traced back to his earliest attempts at writing, Welland for example writing that ‘it is grotesquely untrue [...] to imply that it was only the War that made him a poet’,³⁶⁶ with the exception of the *Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Literature in English*, which notes that ‘he had written much accomplished poetry [...] before he joined the army’,³⁶⁷ short biographies most often emphasize Owen’s strong connection to the Great War. Welland elaborates: -

The impression that Owen became a poet solely as the result of meeting Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart is one that has gained some currency although Mr Sassoon would be the last person to wish to see it perpetuated. The plain fact is that Owen had begun writing poetry at a much earlier date and no study of his work can afford to begin in 1917, however much it recognises the indisputable inferiority of the greater part of the juvenilia.³⁶⁸

In literary criticism, perceiving a group as so inextricably linked with an event in history is unusual, particularly as Kerr notes, ‘insofar as it originates in a shared historical experience, and in various ways celebrates that experience, war-writing may be classified as a kind of occasional literature’.³⁶⁹ Yet because Owen’s cultural impact revolves entirely around his commentary on that ‘occasion’, this is what contextualizes him rather than being a part of a particular literary movement, particularly since the one he would likely have

³⁶⁴ John Carrington, *Our Greatest Writers and their Major Works*, 2nd edn (Oxford: How To Books, 2005), p.266.

³⁶⁵ Incidentally, this same charge is laid against Sassoon himself in *Literary Lives*: ‘The war of 1914-1918 turned him from a versifier to a poet’: Rupert Hart-Davis, ‘Sassoon, Siegfried Loraine’ in *Literary Lives*, ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.299.

³⁶⁶ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.14.

³⁶⁷ Jenny Stringer, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.519.

³⁶⁸ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.33.

³⁶⁹ Douglas Kerr, ‘A Comparison of Some French and English Literary Responses to the 1914-1918 War’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 1978), p.ii.

chosen—‘Georgian’—has gained connotations he could never have perceived, as we will explore in the next chapter. What is undeniable is that Owen as a poet is inextricably linked with Owen as a soldier, because throughout his military career, he sought to frame and represent soldiers in very similar terms to those he understood for the elevated poet: as misunderstood but enlightened outsider figures. However, the soldier risks far more, and suffers far more, and is often placed in a situation where no amount of sensitivity or elevated understanding will save him from suffering and death.

With, for example, ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ and his drafted preface, Owen establishes his agenda of division. He focuses on the schism between soldiers and civilians—one that was based upon Owen’s perception of the ignorance at home and the media’s attempts to mitigate the severity of their accounts of human suffering in deference to fanciful concepts like honourable sacrifice and glory. His divisive attitude is not uncommon: ‘again and again, in contemporary accounts, we find those who had been in France showing extreme hostility to those on the home front who appeared indifferent to their suffering.’³⁷⁰ Soldiers simply did not see the great majority of civilians as capable of understanding them—their suffering and first-hand knowledge gave them a closer bond to one another than was possible for those who had not experienced the traumas of war. For soldiers, sacrifices were personal and meaningful rather than abstract. War, and the comprehension of it, was a place of privileged understanding, ‘a “special” world that for many is impossible to imagine and fully understand’.³⁷¹

This is what informs the contemptuous dismissal of ‘the old lie’ in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, and explains why that poem was dedicated to Jessie Pope. The simplistic patriotic verse of this civilian writer had enraged Owen with its poor understanding of the realities of

³⁷⁰ Williams, p.73.

³⁷¹ Sarah York, ‘Introduction’, in *War, Memory, Trauma*, ed. by Sarah York (Rugby: Nine Arches Press, 2012), p.6.

battle. Casting soldiers as outsider figures in the same manner as poets is slightly anomalous in Owen's interpretation of the 'outsider', since although numerically they were in a significant minority when juxtaposed with the greater British society, they were far larger in number than the other select groups with whom he identified. But further distinctions were to be made: the next section shows the differences Owen saw between officers and men, and why Owen did not necessarily consider them part of the same group.

Owen's stance was with the men, but that did not mean every poem was written as a narrative placing him with them in opposition to an established order. His ideas of the elevation of the experienced soldiers' awareness speaks much more of contempt for the ignorant than of pride in the acquisition of this knowledge: Owen's themes suggest his ideal would be for the wider public to come to share in his understanding and for the ignorance to be replaced with a new 'spirit', as he put it in his combative prologue. On the other hand, that same preface exhibits scepticism that the 'current generation' are capable of sufficient empathy for this, while the soldier characters of his poems are never didactic or keen to enter discourse with civilians, rather being content to exchange looks and 'know their secret safe'.

Though the easiest point of division to be observed in Owen's poetry is that between soldiers and civilians, that is a slight oversimplification of Owen's presentation of pity. Those at home are not untouched by the war or indifferent to the suffering of loved ones fighting. 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' focuses not solely on the youths themselves, but on the 'sad shires' left behind to mourn³⁷². There are indifferent and ignorant citizens in 'Six O'Clock in Princes Street', who, 'gay of eyes' 'seek no further than their quiet home.' But

³⁷² POWO, p.76.

there is also the newspaper boy, who despite his link with the inadequate national press represents a far-off war and the terrible events there, barely noticed by onlookers:

Or be you in the gutter where you stand,
Pale rain-flawed phantom of the place,
With news of all the nations in your hand,
And all their sorrows in your face.³⁷³

The division Owen propounds is not so much between soldiers and civilians, but between those touched by the war and untouched by it. Only those made to suffer by the war are fit to be pitied, and only those with direct experience can understand. Owen is an insider here, privy to elevated knowledge as part of a group set apart from the majority of society by their direct experience of war.

A similar but somewhat unusual conception of the insiders and outsiders in the context of war comes in his first nationally-published poem, 'Miners'³⁷⁴. The poem draws parallels with miners, particularly those who had died in the Minnie Pit Disaster that inspired the work, and soldiers who 'worked dark pits / Of war, and died'. It is not irreverent to draw this parallel, though the soldiers are not enduring the same ordeal as the miners, and nor are the miners soldiers who can comprehend warfare. Yet Owen unifies them, as well as himself, and emphatically excludes the outsiders who have no knowledge of them in later years: 'But they will not dream of us poor lads / Left in the ground.' The insiders here are the soldiers, the outsiders the oblivious beneficiaries of sacrifice, the pity deriving from the 'poor lads' going unremembered and unacknowledged. The poem offers an analogy, and Owen is not suggesting the miners are soldiers or vice versa, nor that there is shared knowledge between the groups. They are simply comparable in that their tragedy

³⁷³ CWDC, p.149.

³⁷⁴ POWO, p.112.

is to suffer and die for others who neither understand nor appreciate them while benefiting from what they gave. What Owen primarily criticises is the lack of knowledge and understanding, and miners forgotten in the ground serves as a timely, relevant parallel for his conception of soldiers' sacrifice.

Despite his famous dictum on truth and beauty, it was the influence of Keats that had led Owen in his juvenilia to display a proclivity for the fantastical—including a lengthy epic based on Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid'³⁷⁵, which consciously imitated the rhyme scheme and diction of 'Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil'. Later, the influence of Sassoon and the need to embrace serious political realities to write about war necessitated a shift towards the depiction of true events, but moreover, Owen felt a need to base his poetry on his own experience and his personal impressions of the war because he was eager to impress the place of shared knowledge as one of the contributing elements to his ideal outsider figure.

A significant influence on Owen's need to write poems that mirrored his own harrowing experiences were that they were cogent proof of his own place there—if the outsider figure was elevated at least in part by his knowledge of secrets, Owen was eager to demonstrate that he, too, was privy. According to Harold Owen, when his brother spoke to him about the necessity to go back to the front lines even though he fully expects to be killed, he tells him it is 'the only place that I can make my protest from'.³⁷⁶ And the reason for this was that amongst soldiers, being a group of outsiders meant that it was only comrades could speak about comrades with any kind of authenticity. In Mark Rawlinson's

³⁷⁵ POWO, p.18.

³⁷⁶ DHTLY, p.114.

words, Owen's discourse 'ventriloquized the mute suffering soldiery and harrowed the insensitive civilian.'³⁷⁷

Yet Owen was writing poetry, poetry that towards the end of his life he was expecting would be read by an audience of civilians, if not necessarily a receptive one. Again, his intentions are elucidated by his drafted preface: it serves as an outline of what he meant to accomplish with his poetry, as well as defining the sort of person he felt would be receptive to his work. Though he may have suggested they were, the poems were never intended to be hidden away for years, to be discovered years later. Nor were they meant only for a small circle of sympathetic acquaintances, though perhaps they were the only ones who would truly understand them. In truth, they were crafted to be read, nationally, as a response to the war like Sassoon's letter to *The Times*, with the same anti-establishment stance and controversial effect. As Welland puts it, 'That Owen thought of these poems primarily as propaganda is clear.'³⁷⁸

Taking 'propaganda' to mean a communication with the purpose of influencing its audience's political views, Owen's implication that he did not expect to find an appreciative audience can be read as a challenge rather than a dismissal, a kind of exercise in reverse psychology, hoping his reader would be compelled to prove him wrong and gain a deeper understanding of the plight of the soldiers. But it also pre-empts the criticism he would receive for his divisive stance and indicates that he expects to be misunderstood and go unappreciated—just as Keats was, thanks to the stigma of the 'cockney school'. Again, here is an echo of the ideal of the misunderstood outsider poet, only now it is through the prism of the soldier set apart from the civilian world. And if there exceptions were to be made for perceptive civilian allies like H.G.Wells, or for the grieving relatives of lost

³⁷⁷ Rawlinson, 'Wilfred Owen', p.122.

³⁷⁸ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.54.

soldiers speaking out in guilt and condemnation like Kipling, this was implied in the poems themselves rather than made explicit.

In this context, it should be noted that Owen's beliefs, too, were naïve at first. Like many of his generation, Owen's initial response to the war was idealistic and ignorant, and the reality he encountered was a profound shock. 'Dulce et Decorum Est', such an execration of Jessie Pope's naivety and the effect it had on impressionable young men, was also a rejection of Owen's younger self. It is often pointed out that he had also paraphrased the Horace quotation in his 1914 poem 'The Ballad of Peace and War' without irony: -

O meet it is and passing sweet
To live in peace with others,
But sweeter still and far more meet
To die in war for brothers.³⁷⁹

While this poem is useful for illustrating a transition from an idealistic youth to a cynical soldier, for our purposes it is notable that it gives priority to a special bond within an outsider group. Owen would return to this poem and alter it many times rather than simply abandoning it,³⁸⁰ making it an enduring reminder of his foolishness before he came into the hidden knowledge brought by experience, but perhaps he resisted outright rejection of the work because it remained consistent with his views of the schism between groups.

Still, by 1917 and Craiglockhart, where 'Dulce et Decorum Est' was first drafted, idealism had vanished. Though dying for another was not necessarily to be bereft of purpose or spiritual significance, by then he considered it contemptible to give the impression that it would be glamorous, heroic or 'sweet' to do so, particularly to impressionable youths. There is an important distinction here: if a soldier is to give his life intentionally, it is for his comrades, not for his country in the abstract. During training,

³⁷⁹ WOCPE, p.504.

³⁸⁰ DHANB, p.201.

Owen wrote to his mother of learning to ‘lay down our lives for another, the highest moral act possible’³⁸¹, but that was refined as Owen made a distinction between the bonds of brotherhood and the expectations of an unfeeling state.

‘The Next War’ puts forward the peculiar idea of those fighting the war feeling no enmity towards a personified Death—‘We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum’. In its closing lines, it firmly establishes that soldiers act for their own purposes and not for the lofty idealized heroism of popular conception: ‘when every fighter brags | He fights on Death, for lives; not men, for flags’.³⁸² In objecting so vehemently to Pope’s message, Owen is by necessity offering an alternative point of view: he opines on the way children should and should not be taught, assuming the role of a teacher, the profession that for much of his life he trained for, yet dreaded. He became incensed by the idea of misleading the impressionable: ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ was ‘the immediate product of the white-hot indignation to which he had been brought (as one manuscript reveals) by the patriotic lines of Miss Jessie Pope’.³⁸³

Yet once again, as in ‘Inspection’, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ is also something of a criticism of the self, and a conscious expression of transition from ignorance to a new informed standpoint as part of a group with secret knowledge. The climactic final stanza, conveying its fury in one continuous sentence, also establishes firmly the limitations of writing on a subject without experiencing it: ‘The organisation and clarity of the first half is replaced by confused, choking syntax and a vocabulary of sickness and disgust, matching the nightmare which is in progress’, Hibberd writes.³⁸⁴ This emphasis on truth through verifiable experience would ultimately put Owen at odds with the critical movements in the

³⁸¹ WOCL, p.387.

³⁸² DHANB, p.201, p.142.

³⁸³ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.60.

³⁸⁴ DHOTP, p.115.

coming decades that would attempt to distance works from their authors, in particular New Criticism, which stressed ‘the autonomy of the literary text,’³⁸⁵ but of course that separation would always ill-suit a poet whose behaviour was at all junctures measured by his place relative to others and attached such importance to the poet as an emblem. Owen wrote not simply for the expression of a concept, but with a political agenda, and a central tenet of that was to identify himself as a soldier-poet who had the authority to speak from amongst a group that, it is implied, has an intrinsic understanding of certain shared values. But, as I will contend in my final chapters, to extrapolate from his identifying as part of the group that he considered himself a good spokesperson for all within it is excessive.

Nonetheless, it is beyond doubt that Owen hopes to speak on behalf of those he has personal contact with, yet who are voiceless, the men who, in ‘The Calls’, ‘have no skill | To speak of their distress, no, nor the will.’³⁸⁶ Owen’s fellow soldiers deserved a voice, and he was amongst the few who could understand them to speak for them, from amongst them. It is worth noting that these are men he has been able to personally hear, however: there are men in other theatres of war very different from theirs, and there is no indication that Owen intends to speak for them. Owen even qualifies this in ‘A Terre’, which he subtitles ‘Being the philosophy of many Soldiers.’³⁸⁷ Not soldiers in general, nor all soldiers, but many of them.

It may seem contradictory to argue that Owen’s desire was to be an outsider when he was taking such pains to prove he was included in a group, and this an insider—but considering the broader social composition of the day, and remembering that soldiers felt misrepresented and marginalized, the assertion stands. Owen remained an outsider while

³⁸⁵ Stephen Matterson. ‘The New Criticism’ in *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. by Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.166-76, p.170.

³⁸⁶ POWO, p.139.

³⁸⁷ CWDC, pp.46-47.

part of a group because this was always his ideal—to belong to a disadvantaged fringe group with close comrades, even one as large and various as the front-line soldiers, keeping in mind ‘the immensity and complexity of the ex-serviceman story, in sheer scale, and in the divergence of experience across class, rank, geography, and nature of combat’.³⁸⁸

‘A Terre’ gives a nuanced and sometimes contradictory personal philosophy along those lines. The soldier speaking to the narrator, finds himself using inventive poetic imagery, comparing medals with discs placed on dead eyes and claiming ribbons were ripped from his back before adding ‘That’s for your poetry book’, distinguishing him from a vocational poet. This soldier, confronting his imminent death, turns his back on his previous convictions: ‘We used to say we’d hate to live dead-old,— | Yet now ... I’d willingly be puffy, bald, | And patriotic.’³⁸⁹

This may seem like a surprising reversal of the philosophy normally set out in Owen’s poem, stressing how reprehensible these old patriotic men are, but in fact the poem is consistent with Owen’s view. Firstly, there is still the note of deep disapproval in ‘dead-old’. And secondly, this character is despairing and after being mutilated on the battlefield so that he is ‘blind, and three parts shell’ and envies not just these puffy old civilians but also rats (‘Not worse than ours the lives rats lead’), mites (‘Dead men may envy living mites in cheese’) and even microscopic life forms (‘Microbes have their joys.’) This mutilated soldier’s plight is such that he wishes to be absolutely anything other than himself.

There is nothing enviable or elevated about this character, even though he shares in the secret knowledge of those on the battlefield and exemplifies the divisive stance between soldier and civilian. This is because the character has been forced into his position, as we

³⁸⁸ Cole, p.189.

³⁸⁹ CWDC, p.46

will explore in the next chapter. What is useful to observe from 'A Terre' is that Owen felt it necessary to point out he could represent only 'many' rather than 'all' soldiers, that even the most despairing injured soldier establishes a division between soldiers and civilians, even if there are enviable qualities to being an ignorant civilian (just as there are enviable qualities to being a germ), and that Owen did not wish to write such a poem from a first-person perspective, presumably because he does not share the character's views on being the lowest possible form of life.

Owen's view of the division between civilian and soldier was not derived from Sassoon's statement or beliefs, and there is evidence that not only was it his belief before they met, but that he thought the division was perceived by many of his fellow soldiers as well. The most obvious example of this is the editorial he wrote for Craiglockhart's paper *The Hydra* in the issue of 1 September, 1917, which was also the issue in which Owen began to print his own poetry.

Some of us were not a little wounded by 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.³⁹⁰

Owen, writing for an audience of fellow injured soldiers, makes an ironic joke about their suffering shock not as a result of battle, but from coming home and finding the civilians so complacent. A soldier writing amongst soldiers could easily pit himself against an apathetic public, but that division is crucial to Owen's writing intended for a wider audience: he takes a stance that firmly separates soldiers and civilians. There was a gulf between the two groups, who in generalised terms could not understand one another, even when civilians came to understand a degree of the horror of the front lines. 'There were, as many have said, two worlds: the soldiers who could not fathom the mentality of the

³⁹⁰ DHTLY, p.34.

civilians [...] and the civilians who, well aware by now that the Front Line was a place of horror [...] were yet baffled by the soldiers' apparent refusal to hate "old Fritz".³⁹¹

Civilians, as a group that was varied and divided as any others, had numerous opposing views on the war, but no matter how supportive or well-informed, they were incapable of understanding the battlefield experience like those who experienced it directly, particularly in terms of comradeship and a perception of brotherhood. Even well-meaning civilians could only make hollow gestures: 'The Send-Off' suggests the sentiments of the women sending the men off with flowers will be mocked by the new soldiers sooner or later, and that there will be no adequate celebrations if they return home:—

Shall they return to beatings of great bells
In wild trainloads?
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,
May creep back, silent, to still village wells
Up half-known roads.³⁹²

Even if his views on civilians were not derived directly from Sassoon, certainly he was influential on Owen and an emboldening ally. 'The Next War', written in Craiglockhart and also self-published in *The Hydra*, begins with an epigraph that neatly establishes his new closest allies: lines are quoted from Sassoon's 'A Letter Home'—which is a poem addressed to Graves. Again, it was through the support of others who had already achieved success that Owen sought to set himself apart. Arguably, Sassoon was also similarly legitimized by the political stance of his patron Robbie Ross and the circle around him.

After Craiglockhart, Sassoon returned to the front lines, and when declared fit, Owen did the same. He felt 'the time had come for him to take his friend's place as spokesman for

³⁹¹ E.S. Turner, *Dear Old Blighty* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1980), p.253.

³⁹² CWDC, p.188.

the troops’,³⁹³ though it ought to be qualified that ‘the troops’ cannot be said to encompass all soldiers, either from a modern perspective or in Owen’s mind—he knew his opinions were not universal. While the propaganda surrounding the war and the suffering caused might have been contemptible to Owen, the war itself was still worth fighting. There was now a community on the front lines, and to Owen, representing those he knew but perceived as voiceless was important. It took priority over being a conscientious objector, over potentially individualistic pacifism, and over the preservation of his own life.

Even with this mission, Owen’s poetry shows he struggled to find adequate ways to express solidarity with common soldiers. Where he has attempted to convey his understanding of them, the results have met with a mixed critical reception. As well as in ‘A Terre’, where the dying soldier reflects on the thoughts of ‘the dullest Tommy’, this can be seen in ‘The Chances’, a poem written entirely in dialect. It contains numerous examples of trench slang, such as ‘show’ substituting for ‘battle’ and ‘a blighty’ indicating a non-fatal wound that would necessitate a soldier being sent home.³⁹⁴ Dropped ‘H’s and crude language (‘ruddy’) are attempts to show Owen’s knowledge of the vernacular of the common soldier, but opinion on its success is divided.

Welland felt the poem successful, calling the ‘everyman speech’ more ‘naturally idiomatic’ than when Kipling writes in a comparable manner,³⁹⁵ while pointing out that it was not until 1931 that the final line, including, ‘the bloody lot’, was accurately printed—before it had been replaced by a repetition of ‘ruddy’. Owen’s rendition of the natural language of the trenches was considered too crude for publication for over a decade after his death, even by those who supported him, indicating he was going to some lengths for verisimilitude.

³⁹³ CWDC, p.142.

³⁹⁴ POWO, p.148.

³⁹⁵ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.69.

Conversely, Simcox finds the idiomatic language to be in an ‘artificial style to which [Owen] is not naturally suited’. The poem, Simcox adds, ‘was published in *WHEELS* in 1919 together with, among others, *STRANGE MEETING*, *THE SHOW* and *THE SENTRY*. Alongside poems of real distinction, this one would seem at best a dubious selection.’³⁹⁶ Whether the effect is artificial or natural, it is clear that Owen’s intention is to show his understanding of and affinity with his soldiers. Even if it strikes the reader as forced or inept, or comes across as patronising, the intention is to project solidarity.

From the inclusion in *Wheels*, we can see that Owen’s literary friends decided soon after his death that ‘The Chances’ was a good way to represent this unknown poet, suggesting that the while the other poems provided evidence of Owen’s literary ability and his conceptions of pity and grief, ‘The Chances’ brought with it a clear indication of his position as an officer who stood by his men. The poem made a political point: Owen wanted it to illustrate that he understand the language, the suffering and the fortitude of common soldiers, and by implication, to appear as one who understood them, and was privy to their secret knowledge. We can at least be certain that Owen did not intend the poem to be seen as aloof and denigrating; that would be in direct opposition to its sentiments and Owen’s desire to evoke sympathy for voiceless soldiers. This is also not the only time Owen mimicked the voices of the common soldiers—the opening line excepted, ‘The Letter’ is a similar monologue, including the slang, crudity and dropped ‘H’s, and ‘The Sentry’ is also full of soldiers’ colloquialisms.³⁹⁷ Owen slipped such language even into otherwise very Romantic-influenced work—for example, when ‘The Next War’ puts forward the idea that soldiers feel no enmity towards death, they refer to Death as ‘old

³⁹⁶ Kenneth Simcox, ‘The Chances’ (2001) <<http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/poetry/chances>> [accessed 03 August 2014].

³⁹⁷ POWO, p.165.

chum'.³⁹⁸ 'The Last Laugh', while intentionally glib and emotionless as it catalogues three perfunctory battlefield deaths, catalogues Owen's views of the final expressions of average soldiers—Christ, family and love³⁹⁹. While the poem intentionally shows no sympathy with the plight of the dying men, it does indicate a desire to express understanding of what is important to three nameless soldiers.

Despite these attempts to show understanding, the fact that Owen slips from one idiom into another, artificially adopting a voice, only illustrates that he is not truly one of the soldiers. He is posturing, rather than integrated; he is a part of a new society and wishes to show his solidarity, but only with the same relationship a poet has to wider society in civilian life—he remains aloof and stands apart. Owen is a soldier amongst soldiers, but he also remains a poet amongst men, and writing like an ordinary soldier was an imitation rather than his natural mode: 'Owen's act in writing takes him out of their ranks, too,'⁴⁰⁰ writes Peter Howarth. Indeed, 'Owen and Sassoon's lives swung somewhat surreally between the battleground of the Western Front and the "decadent" modern London world of art and letters',⁴⁰¹ which is another element of why his experience was atypical. Nor was the poetry a product of a new life of combat—as Welland observes, though 'new conceptions of poetry coincide chronologically with the Great War they were not [...] in all cases occasioned by it: that several of them originated before the War is a salutary warning against too facile a dovetailing of literary and social history'.⁴⁰²

Which is not to argue Owen was an ordinary soldier. Indeed, he felt it was difficult for him to be accepted as 'ordinary' amongst his men. To cast him as a representative of an under-conceptualized mass of 'ordinary soldiers' ignores many salient points—he was

³⁹⁸ POWO, p.142.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p.145.

⁴⁰⁰ Peter Howarth, 'Poetic Form and the First World War' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, ed. by Santanu Das (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2013), pp.51-68, p.62.

⁴⁰¹ Hoare, p.204.

⁴⁰² Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.13.

divided from most by rank; he agonised over his initial lack of comprehension; he feared he was perceived as a coward; he was influenced by the Romantic notion that the poet always stands apart; and he always needed to be individualistic even when speaking on behalf of a broad, varied group.⁴⁰³ Critics of Owen's place in the war myth point out that his experience of the war was far from universally representative, coming as he did to the conflict relatively late, participating as an officer before being evacuated with mental health problems. But Owen was aware he was atypical and could speak only of his individual experience, and wrote several poems making that clear.

Still, as this section has illustrated, Owen felt that the soldier was set apart from the rest of society not only in geographical terms, but more fundamentally in terms of understanding. They were involved in the war in a way the civilians were not, and their perception was unhindered by propaganda or out-dated conceptions of war. The precise dynamics of how soldiers are separated from society, including whether they have chosen to be set apart or not, are complex, but fundamentally it is certain that Owen felt a kind of pride in being a soldier, for all he emphasized the suffering it entailed. While deploring the necessity of war and the brutal things it occasioned, he also enjoyed the privileged understanding that came with participating.

Requiring further exploration, however, is to what extent Owen felt he was one of the ordinary soldiers. Within the military ranks he found important divisions, and as an officer, better-educated than his men and of a higher social class, he was set apart in a way that did not please him as might have been assumed from the section about class. While he was painfully aware of being middle-class and not having the lifestyle of Sassoon and his ilk, he was also aware of the difference between him and those who served him, and how being an

⁴⁰³ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, p.431.

officer might have excluded him from some private knowledge. In the next section, we will return to how Owen was keenly aware of his place in the social strata of his country, but this time how it affected his conduct as an officer.

A Crag of Superiority: The Class Dynamic between Officers and Men

He came from a lower middle-class background which, though hardly as comfortable as that of his fellow officer-poets Brooke or Sassoon, was at a remove from the industrial poverty experienced by most of his men.⁴⁰⁴

Class remained throughout the war an issue that preoccupied Owen, but one of his chief concerns was an inversion of what has come to define his relationship with Sassoon—Owen found himself surrounded by men who class structures dictated were his social inferiors. Though it might seem that he would delight in this situation, being set apart by the advantages of his position, in fact this sort of outsiderdom was not at all to his tastes: as we have established, what Owen admired was the rebellious figure who distinguished himself by superior understanding and knowledge, and transcended expectations. In this context, he found at least in the first months of his service that it was in fact his men, not himself, who possessed superior knowledge. Coupled with the impression that his position was unearned, at least by anything beyond having gone through officer training, his famous ‘pity’ derived at least in part from a desire not to be excluded—to be able to share in what his men had come to understand through harrowing experiences.

As soon as he was commissioned, Owen’s duties included the supervision of men, and it seemed absurd to him that a novice with no experience of battle whatsoever was put in charge of a platoon that included men who had seen action several times. Of course, at the beginning he observed his men in terms that objectified them, which was his idea of a witty, observational style: ‘the generality of the men are hard-handed, hard-headed miners, dogged, loutish, ugly. (But I would trust them to advance under fire and to hold their trench;) blond, coarse, ungainly, strong, “Unfatigueable”, unlovely, Lancashire soldiers,

⁴⁰⁴ Todman, *The Great War*, p.161.

Saxons to the bone...'⁴⁰⁵ It has frequently been observed that Owen was at first snobbish and disapproving of his men, over whom he felt an innate superiority, only to then grow to see them with great affection—something emphasized perhaps to equate a growing personal maturity with a perceived improvement in skill as a poet. For example, Jeremy Paxman wrote in an article for *The Telegraph* that Owen's 'initial distaste at the vulgarity of the sweaty, noisy men among whom he was obliged to live became a genuine love.'⁴⁰⁶ However, there are nuances to be observed, and it is misleading to suggest that Owen was a misanthropic snob transformed by war to a warm-hearted soul who in his final letter home from the front wrote of the 'band of friends'⁴⁰⁷ surrounding him.

Owen's most commonly-cited correspondence showing a haughty and callous attitude to troops is his letter of 28 August 1914,⁴⁰⁸ the same letter in which the civilian Owen refers to the war effecting 'a little useful weeding'. Therein, he tells his mother that he cares more for the conscripted 'continental armies' because they contain the 'finest brains and temperaments of the land', whereas the English regulars are inferior because they 'are all Tommy Atkins, poor fellows'. He implies that the only tragedy in war is if the intelligent—'the Minds which were to have excelled the civilisation of ten thousand years'—are killed. Undeniably a patronising and ignorant opinion. Again, this letter was from before Owen enlisted and was still making excuses for avoiding enlisting. The fighting men were still, for him, considered in abstract general terms. In short, he was exactly the sort of ignorant civilian he grew to abhor, weighing lives against each other and deciding their values on some vague notion of eugenics, of potential to contribute to the arts and sciences.

⁴⁰⁵ WOCL, p.395.

⁴⁰⁶ Jeremy Paxman, 'Why Wilfred Owen was the greatest war poet', 18 March 2016 < <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/jeremy-paxman-why-wilfred-owen-was-the-greatest-war-poet/>>[accessed 14 September 2016]. Originally titled 'Wilfred Owen: The Soldier's Poet', *The Telegraph*, 3 November 2007 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3669019/Wilfred-Owen-The-soldiers-poet.html>>[accessed 12 August 2014].

⁴⁰⁷ WOCL, p.591.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p.282.

Even later, after enlisting, he still perceived the soldier's life and identity with cynicism, including his own: as we have seen, he referred to himself as 'National Hero, number million.'⁴⁰⁹ As a new officer, it took him some time to cease perceiving his men in this simplified, aloof way—as a generalized conglomeration rather than as individuals. However, it should be noted that Owen's letters from the camp at Romford also exhibit a propensity to list his own errors and embarrassments rather than criticising his men. He made a mistake in drilling his platoon, and felt guilty for criticising a soldier for not having a toothbrush, only to realise it had been lost in the trenches⁴¹⁰—very likely the event which inspired 'Inspection'. Owen's bewilderment and respect is reflected in his letter to his little brother Colin, in which he writes, 'It is rather strange to feel that these heroes feel me as their boss!'⁴¹¹

It should also be noted that Owen's tendency to describe other people as though they were characters in a Dickensian novel, in a rather objectifying manner, was a consistent habit throughout his life. It was applicable to his social superiors and higher-ranked officers as well as his men: Major J. N. Mashall was in 1918 lampooned as the 'Mad Major' and the 'Terrible Major'⁴¹² while another, unnamed major at Southport was lambasted as a 'snotty, acid, scot, impatient, irritated wretch'.⁴¹³ Equally, before the war, respectable society members who were higher on the social ladder than Owen were afforded the same treatment: 'Miss Patterson is ridiculously English', he wrote on 2 December 1914⁴¹⁴ of the sister of a vice-consul. 'She a lengthy, young lady, neck as long as a lamp-post, blond-hair, blond as dead palm-leaves [*sic*].' Even notable literary figures Owen admired were

⁴⁰⁹ WOCL, p.348.

⁴¹⁰ DHANB, p.236.

⁴¹¹ WOCL, p.451.

⁴¹² DHANB, p.424.

⁴¹³ WOCL, p.417.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.299.

described in an observational, rather objectifying style when Owen met them—Arnold Bennett was described as resembling ‘an upstart rodent’.⁴¹⁵

While thus describing individuals and generalising an entire group can be differentiated, Owen was keen to see people as caricatures that emphasized not their idiosyncrasies but the ways they acted in ways expected for their group. There is a degree of contempt in this activity, save perhaps in the case of Bennett which reflects mostly surprise—but it also derives again from the importance he places on the status of the outsider: groups and individuals alike can be described in such simple terms because they behave in a manner expected for their group, which was everything Owen wanted to avoid. If they were not transcending expectations and surpassing limitations, but simply being part of a group behaving as expected, Owen had little admiration for them. Of course, those of lower classes than himself were held to the same standards, and ones who surpassed his expectations to show superior knowledge and understanding, like the soldier in ‘Inspection’, were to be admired.

Rather than leaving behind these habits, until his final days, Owen persisted in his tendency to regard the other soldiers in a somewhat distant, jocularly objectifying manner: new recruits at Scarborough in June 1918 were described as ‘awful specimens’ in contrast with the ‘mahogany swashbucklers who have finished their training’,⁴¹⁶ and a new officer’s servant was to be described as ‘a Herefordshire gardener’s-boy’ with ‘the garden still lying in loamy beds about his ears’.⁴¹⁷ His snobbishness was also still in evidence at this stage: one man was described as ‘a little too strapping ponderous and bumpkinish a fellow for my much liking’,⁴¹⁸ but this was the attitude expected of an officer: an officer was trained to

⁴¹⁵ DHANB, p.353.

⁴¹⁶ WOCL, p.559.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., p.560.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., p.559.

demonstrate ‘wherever possible that he was better at everything’ than his soldiers.⁴¹⁹ As with his younger self, newcomers were also as yet unable to understand battle, as they had not participated yet. The new soldiers ‘with faces grimly gay’ in ‘The Send-Off’⁴²⁰ are treated indifferently and the narrator is certain they will soon grow jaded and likely very few will return home.

Part of Owen’s patronising attitude was a paternal sort of affection that was connected to his love of children and the childlike, and he soon grew to see the imposed role of a leader of the inferior as one he could mould into a fond familial relationship. The certainty that those men *were* inferior, however, did not waver. Though there is no denying Paxman’s ‘initial distaste’, the impression that the disapproval was dispelled by a long process of coming to understand and empathise with his fellow man overstates the case: not only because the objectifying behaviour would never change, but because within days, Owen began to retract his initial judgements as he began to notice ‘the intelligent, and the smart’ amongst his men.⁴²¹ What pride he felt in his social superiority was tempered by the impression that his knowledge was inadequate, and the result was loneliness: ‘I am marooned on a Crag of Superiority in an ocean of Soldiers’, he wrote.⁴²² This unearned ‘superiority’ was not a source of particular happiness.

Owen’s poetic ire is not reserved for the ignorant civilians, but also extends to the ignorant on the battlefield, and the lack of understanding that in the right circumstances precludes the officer from sharing in the elevated knowledge that distinguishes soldiers. In ‘The Dead Beat’, after the dying man’s comrades fail to kick him to his feet, the narrator points his revolver at the man but gets no response, after which the unfortunate is dragged

⁴¹⁹ DHANB, p.235.

⁴²⁰ CWDC, p.188.

⁴²¹ DHANB, p.237.

⁴²² WOCL, p.395.

away, with the narrator expressing relief at getting him ‘out of the way’.⁴²³ When he dies, the doctor is very pleased, referring to the dead man as ‘scum’ and celebrating his death. Only the second stanza, spoken by an anonymous ‘low voice’ amongst those looking on, conveys Owen’s sympathetic criticism of such callous behaviour, establishing that the true sadness of this man’s death is how far he is from home and those who care for him, while those who look at him so unsympathetically consider him subhuman.

It is important to note that while identifying his narrator as a merciless officer who cares nothing for the dying man, Owen is still signalling that he, as the writer of the poem, is aware that the standpoint of cold-hearted indifference is contemptible. The narrator is not sympathetic: the wise, anonymous voice criticizes his actions. Owen was showing authority figures—like himself—within the army failing to understand the men. The result is that the soldiers are presented as divided. Again, this is not the Nietzschean division between masters and slaves: those who lead without understanding and sympathising, those who focus on their goals and on getting the weak and useless out of their way, are the ones to be condemned. Owen’s ideal outsider figure must not be set apart only by his birth, leadership qualities or even strength of character, but by his understanding and his sensitivity to the needs of those for whom he can care, as well as his ability to transcend expectations.

The narrator and the doctor here, as authority figures, are presented as emotionally subnormal, failing entirely to understand the importance of the lives of those for whom they are responsible. Similarly, in ‘Inspection’, Owen as the narrator takes on the role of an officer who does not understand what his men endure, which as mentioned in the previous section was likely inspired by a genuine event. This is conscious self-critique: in earlier drafts of the poem, the narrator is junior to a sergeant, and speaks the insightful closing

⁴²³ POWO, p.121.

lines, but in the final poem, the narrating officer punishes the man for his dirty uniform, only to discover later that the mark was the man's own blood. Though there is some Sassoon-inspired vernacular speech in the poem, the soldier himself answers with poetic diction, with the final stanza devoted to giving him a powerful voice as he responds to the narrator's assertion that 'blood is dirt'.⁴²⁴ The officer is not given a chance to respond in the poem, nor to demonstrate his understanding in a manner that would exonerate his character—unless one conflates narrator with poet and interprets his next deed as setting down the poem. The rebuked soldier states that the world is 'washing out its stains', that it finds youth and healthiness objectionable, and cryptically concludes that when all are dead, it will be God who inspects them, implying a less fallible authority will consider the situation differently. Here, the common soldier is elevated by experience and knowledge, despite his inferior rank and social status—and his eloquence shows that he has the kind of advanced understanding the officer does not. Rank was not sufficient to set one apart, any more than poets like Jessie Pope were elevated simply by writing verse.

In Owen's poetry, a lack of understanding, or unwillingness to understand, is often what is most severely censured. Again, this is tied to Owen's particular understanding of what it meant to be set apart from society. The most contemptible element of 'Inspection' is the claim that blood is no more than dirt, and what is harrowing in 'The Dead-Beat' is the dehumanization of the soldier: driven insensible by his war experience, the eponymous man is described as lying 'stupid like a cod, heavy like meat',⁴²⁵ and in an early draft is depicted as becoming 'a lump of stench, a clot of meat'⁴²⁶. This early war poem, written consciously 'in Sassoon's style'⁴²⁷ in hopes of impressing him soon after their first meeting, is perhaps

⁴²⁴ POWO, p.72.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.121.

⁴²⁶ WOCPF, p.299.

⁴²⁷ WOCL, p.485.

the most obvious example in Owen's body of work of a living soldier being treated as something less than human. When Owen wanted to capture something of the acerbic satire of Sassoon's work, the subject that came to his mind was the living soldier not only being mistreated, but being forced outside the boundaries of humanity. This is in a sense class division taken to an extreme: the soldier incapable of adequately serving his officer is depicted as no longer being considered human. If Owen considered those forced into being outsiders through no choice of their own deserving of pity, this is the same concept taken applied to humanity as a whole, and with the increase in scale comes the appropriate level of outrage. Howarth deals with this issue in *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*, writing that on one hand, the army sets soldiers aside by putting them into a context where the social paradigm is entirely different and killing the enemy is not only accepted by expected, but on the other hand the individual choice in the matter is therefore taken away:

The army is therefore what makes him [Owen] break the most primary social laws, and gives him an alternative society of shared loyalties to substitute for the civilian ones that have been broken. This question of agency was, of course, rendered particularly acute for the First World War because of its felt absence for most soldiers, conscripted and then pinned down in trench warfare.⁴²⁸

The same concept is at the heart of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', one of Owen's most well-known and widely-celebrated poems: 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?'⁴²⁹ The question is rhetorical, but the implication is clear: there are no bells to mark the soldiers' deaths, in their place only the sound of guns. Also denied to them are prayers, voices of mourning, candles and palls, replaced only by the sounds of warfare, the bugles played for the dead back home, and small actions from mourners. The poem revolves

⁴²⁸ Peter Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.183.

⁴²⁹ POWO, p.76.

around this contrast—between what is expected for a dying man in English society and what a soldier gets. When his subject becomes war, Owen develops his ideas of outsiderdom beyond the conception of soldiers being set apart by being physically removed from their homes and societies—in war, the soldiers become outside humanity itself, thanks to the callous and pitiless attitudes of others.

The tragedy of the ‘doomed youth’ Owen made his subject is that their deaths are anonymous, unmarked and do not involve the expected process of mourning. They are killed without the event being followed by any of the various rituals and traditions designed to show respect to the dead, sincere or insincere. As outsider figures, but not *elevated* outsider figures, they have not transcended expectations, but been forced downwards: they have been pushed below the surface of basic human dignity. ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ is not intended to be universal: it is about the society of a particular country, identified by the distinctively British ‘sad shires’ (though it is worth noting that other parts of the English-speaking world have used the term under British influence). Owen is writing about the tragedy of British youths not only being killed, but being killed in such a way that they are permanently divorced from their homelands and cultural traditions.

Even if with the word ‘mockeries’, Owen criticises the rituals of the Church as inadequate to honour the dead, far worse is the anonymous death greeted only by the mindless sounds of warfare, the ‘monstrous anger of the guns’. Hibberd is diffident on this: ‘whether such rites are adequate or not, the poem does not say; they are the only possible ones, that is all’.⁴³⁰ But I would argue that the poem’s central message is that they are deeply inadequate, hence the despairing tone of ‘what passing-bells for these who die as

⁴³⁰ DHOTP, p.110.

cattle?’ Some form of ritual mourning is expected, and to deprive the soldiers of that is to dehumanise them, which is a strong source for Owen’s pity.

All Owen’s poems are in some way cathartic, but they outline a philosophy: the distinguished outsider earns his position through privileged knowledge, talent and sensitivity, as well as through kinship with others. The forced outsider is to be pitied because he has been pushed in the other direction, diametrically away from Owen’s ideal circumstance. This is what unites the men facing death, who lose their limbs and lose their minds, yet excludes the others who are also on the front lines yet act with callous indifference. Almost all of the latter group are also authority figures, but it is lack of comprehension and empathy rather than an intrinsic wickedness for which they are censured. ‘Not every officer, even those from privileged backgrounds, was shocked by the horrors of the front. Some wrote accounts which deliberately played down such things,’⁴³¹ writes Todman, and Owen acknowledges this, but has little but contempt for those who refused to confront the realities of battle. The division between officer and private is not as significant as the division between the sensitive and the callous.

Owen was an officer, a position open to him because he was of the right social background when he volunteered for the Artists’ Rifles—the advertisement Wilfred saw in London solicited applications from ‘gentlemen’.⁴³² At first, he lacked understanding and acted without sensitivity. He could view himself as elevated only after gaining understanding of the war and the men who fought in it. Though previously we established that he does not show contempt for generals in the manner associated with satires of the Great War, he wished to show that those in positions of power, himself included, were not

⁴³¹ Todman, *The Great War*, p.9.

⁴³² DHANB, p.199.

always to be admired, just as poets who gained a wide audience were not always the elevated. To truly be set apart as an elevated outsider, understanding was crucial.

Whatever his initial attitude, the struggle to understand the men he had once derided as ‘Tommy Atkins’ was important to Owen. This is fortunate for the way he is remembered, for the ‘Tommy’ is now considered more fondly than the authority figure: when noted Sassoon scholar Jean Moorcroft Wilson turned to Isaac Rosenberg, she made much of his background. She pointed out that Rosenberg ‘differed wildly in terms of race, class, education, upbringing and experience from almost all the other well-known names of the time’,⁴³³ and noted how that makes modern observers more sympathetic to his position. Over the last three decades, she asserts, there has been something of a shift and ‘we are now far more inclined to understand and identify with the ordinary “Tommy” in the First World War than with his officers’.⁴³⁴ Owen sometimes spoke for the men around him, trying to capture the experiences of ‘many’ soldiers, but throughout his work is a clear struggle to understand his men. He sought to give a voice to those he perceived as having none of their own, but was at every juncture aware that he did so from a position of observation, one step removed from direct experience. This is clear from his poetic work and correspondence, and another clear indication that Owen was not an everyman or a typical representative of a British soldier, and had no inclination to present himself as such.

⁴³³ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Isaac Rosenberg: the Making of a Great War Poet* (London: Phoenix, 2008), p.2.

⁴³⁴ Moorcroft Wilson, *Isaac Rosenberg: the Making of a Great War Poet*, p.13.

Narcissism; Injustice-Collecting; Rejection of Women; and Transference of Affection to Male Equivalents: Alternate Approaches to Wilfred Owen's Sexuality

Although the early 1970s saw two critically acclaimed literary novels about the First World War by women, Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* and Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?* [sic], both these books took as their subject relationships between men before and during combat. They played heavily on what Fussell termed the homoerotic.⁴³⁵

In the November 27, 1975 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, a letter appeared under the heading 'Conspiracy of Silence'. Written by Joseph Cohen in reaction to a review of his book on Rosenberg, the letter objected to how Stallworthy's biography of Owen had left Cohen feeling snubbed—'Out of a sizeable number of essays I have published on Owen, [one] slight relic was the only thing of mine Jon Stallworthy mentioned in his biography.'⁴³⁶ This 'relic' was, to make matters worse, a misinterpretation of Cohen's 'final comment in a controversy with Professor Dennis Welland over Owen that erupted in the *TLS* in 1956'.

Stallworthy's 1974 biography was a major contribution to Owen scholarship, published after close contact with family members alongside the heavily-censored but otherwise comprehensive *Collected Letters*. Cohen's objection was that it was 'apart from being dull, the latest and most sophisticated effort to maintain the long-standing conspiracy of silence surrounding Owen's sexual proclivities'. Cohen believed his essays, particularly 1965's *Owen Agnistes*, had established 'Owen's homosexuality', while the 'conspiracy' was the refusal to acknowledge it. Already at this juncture in Owen scholarship, Owen was being framed in terms of what was and was not said about him, and it seemed to Cohen that Owen's sexuality was being disguised.

⁴³⁵ Todman, *The Great War*, p.178.

⁴³⁶ Joseph Cohen, 'Conspiracy of Silence', letter to the editors in *The New York Review of Books*, October 16, 1975 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1975/nov/27/conspiracy-of-silence>>[accessed 12 August 2014].

In my fourth chapter, exploring the myths that arose regarding Owen himself after his rise to national popularity in the 1960s, I will be discussing how the interpretation of Owen's work as homoerotic has coloured its critical interpretation, especially in the wake of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. But here, while establishing the ways Owen presented himself as an outsider figure, it is important to establish if he presented himself as homosexual.

The association of Owen with homosexuality was established early. A short passage in Graves' first edition of *Good-bye to All That*, omitted from subsequent versions, described Owen as an 'idealistic homosexual'. While much in Graves' account has been called into question, Owen's sexuality has become an important element in academic works devoted to him, with many prominent scholars concluding that he was a gay man. That said, the somewhat sensationalist rhetoric employed by the author of *A History of Gay Literature* is more confident than the evidence warrants: 'Teachers do not say so in British schools—where the poetry of the Great War is just about the only literature in verse that students will put up with—but the three most famous war poets were either bisexual (Rupert Brooke) or homosexual (Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon).'⁴³⁷

In fact, there is some evidence all three can be called bisexual: Sassoon biographer John Stuart Roberts certainly believes so of his subject—'Sassoon's sexual orientation [...] was bi-sexual, not homosexual.'⁴³⁸ In his study of sexuality and the war poets, Adrian Caesar also puts this suggestion forward for Owen, suggesting that the sometimes confused gender of the love interest in 'Perseus' 'may not be merely Owen trying to "disguise" his homosexuality, but rather an expression of genuine bisexual feelings.'⁴³⁹ For my part, I would say that there is no conclusive evidence of how Owen self-identified, and his writing

⁴³⁷ Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p.121.

⁴³⁸ Roberts, p.279.

⁴³⁹ Caesar, p.134.

exhibits desire for male and female youths, but with the numerous labels of modern gender studies it is fruitless to attempt to apply labels such as ‘gay’ and ‘bisexual’ to a man who did not clearly state any preference. I am in agreement with James Campbell when he disagrees with Hibberd claiming Owen as a ‘gay poet’ by saying, ‘I think the term anachronistic.’⁴⁴⁰ All that can be established was that Owen’s writing praised male and female beauty and we have no reason to believe the desires he expresses are insincere. There are certainly numerous conspicuous examples of homoeroticism, in ‘Time was Aeon’ where a statue of a naked boy is described in superlatives:

It bore the naked likeness of a boy
Flawlessly moulded, fine exceedingly,
Beautiful unsurpassably⁴⁴¹

But acknowledging an admiration for male beauty does not erase the heterosexual desire of such passages as this, from ‘On a Dream’:—

For hours I felt her lips warm on my cheek,
As through the vast void of the dark we fled.
For precious hours her limbs in mine were curled,
Until with utter joy I tried to speak⁴⁴²

Simcox cautions against drawing hasty conclusions from homoeroticism, and lists instances of Owen’s attraction to girls, with one example being, ‘He does not conceal from his sister Mary that during an expedition on Whit Monday 1914 he kissed the curly-haired daughter of Bordeaux’s Town Clerk.’⁴⁴³ Cuthbertson takes a similar line, writing ‘Owen was, though, attracted to girls too’, supporting this with a letter from his cousin Leslie Gunston to Dennis Welland, in which he states that while ‘the little boy Eros, as it were, held ascendancy over the woman Aphrodite’, Owen was ‘far from being insensible to the

⁴⁴⁰ Campbell, p.vii.

⁴⁴¹ CWDC, p.120.

⁴⁴² Ibid., p.164.

⁴⁴³ Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, pp.23-24.

beauty of women'.⁴⁴⁴ The stance that Owen was also attracted to women is generally agreed upon after establishing that Owen was primarily homosexual. Though this is never stated by Owen, it is extrapolated from several biographical episodes as well as late poems with unambiguously homoerotic themes.

Looking closely at *Collected Letters*, Harold's censorship also seems to have often been aimed at homoerotic passages, where we often find such excerpts as, 'Who should I see but the boy-youth whom we met with Russell Tarr, and who played croquet with us on the hotel lawn, as Harold will [remainder missing].'⁴⁴⁵ In his autobiography, Harold depicts his brother as a rather sexless prude, or at least one who believes sexuality should be private and virtuous. Harold imparts the story of telling his brother, while still at the Vicarage, of having seen a naked child in India during one of his sea voyages, being deliberately provocative with his wording: 'I was looking at a lovely little brown girl without any clothes on.' Wilfred's response is contemptuous: 'The sea has started to ruin you, and it's a good job for all our sakes that you can't go back again—to be completely ruined.'⁴⁴⁶ The purpose of this anecdote is to give Owen cause to be unhappy in the vicarage—in a way rather opposite to the speculations of some biographers—by suggesting that the conversation led to him feeling he was 'stagnating' there; the anecdote about prudishness hints that Owen wished for more experience with the opposite gender.⁴⁴⁷

Cohen's accusation of a 'conspiracy of silence' levelled at Stallworthy is not altogether fair: any reader of the 1974 biography will learn of Owen's homoerotic tendencies. Stallworthy in fact remains somewhat ambiguous in a way that suggests awareness of the question of Owen's sexuality with a degree of critical scepticism, as befits

⁴⁴⁴ Cuthbertson, p.58.

⁴⁴⁵ WOCL, p.69.

⁴⁴⁶ HOJFO, p.143.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., p.144.

a subject where there is no definitive answer. Of Owen's Dunsden poems, Stallworthy points out that 'in poem after poem he describes, often luxuriantly, the beauty of the human body and, with hardly an exception, it is the male body that is celebrated',⁴⁴⁸ adding, 'this fact must not be overlooked, for it is relevant to a proper understanding of the later poems, but neither must it be overemphasized'.⁴⁴⁹ Similarly, when looking at later poems, especially the fragmentary 'Ballad of a Morose Afternoon', he notes that they seem to 'indicate an adolescent infatuation for another boy',⁴⁵⁰ and is careful to point out that there is no evidence that the boy in question 'recognized, let alone reciprocated, [Owen's] feelings.'⁴⁵¹ While this is perhaps a long way from what Cohen might have wished to read, it is simply not the case that 'when Jon Stallworthy published the first full-length biography of Owen in 1974 he failed to say anything about' the subject of homosexuality and the homoerotic, as Andrew Motion asserts⁴⁵².

Over six months after Cohen's letter, Stallworthy's response would appear in the *New York Review of Books*, given the rather trite heading 'In the Closet?'⁴⁵³ Stallworthy would appear therein to be more disapproving of homosexuality than his biography suggests. He implies Cohen has jumped to conclusions in his impressions of Harold Owen's censorship: 'since Wilfred committed no perverse act there is no specific information to withhold.' Stallworthy then lists a series of contributory factors to what he calls Owen's 'inverted development', none of which are complimentary: 'overattachment to the mother accompanied by estrangement from the father; narcissism; injustice-collecting; rejection of

⁴⁴⁸ JSWO, p.70.

⁴⁴⁹ Stallworthy, 'Wilfred Owen', p.70.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.73.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² Andrew Motion, 'The Poets of the Great War by Harry Ricketts', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2010 <www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/nov/13/strange-meetings-poets-war-review>[Accessed 16 August 2014].

⁴⁵³ Jon Stallworthy, 'In the Closet?' in *The New York Review of Books*, 'Letters to the Editor', May 27, 1976 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1976/may/27/in-the-closet/>>[accessed 16 August 2014].

women; and transference of affection to male equivalents'.⁴⁵⁴ He concludes with the somewhat naïve assertion that 'religious and literary restraints existed to prevent Owen's becoming a practicing homosexual', despite what he must have known about Robbie Ross, Sassoon, Graves and Scott Moncrieff. While Cuthbertson is correct to ask 'Is Wilfred Owen's sexuality revealed by the company he chose to keep?',⁴⁵⁵ as it is of course entirely possible for a heterosexual to keep company with homosexuals without being one himself, why would Owen be affected by 'religious and literary restraints' when these others he so admired were not?

While Stallworthy's standpoint is seemingly influenced by a desire to disassociate Owen from what is perceived as a negative trait, his cautioning against overemphasis is prescient. Homosexuality has become a critical element of modern-day studies of Owen and his work, including Hibberd's 2002 biography, and is central to Fussell's reading of war poetry. When considered in the light of an abiding war myth closely linked to a popular representation of Owen, as well as his propensity to involve himself with esoteric groups who could consider themselves in various ways superior to a wider society, the question of whether or not he should be considered gay becomes important—not least because to be part of a closed circle of London's privileged, literary homosexuals tallied neatly with Owen's views on how an outsider should have privileged knowledge and advanced sensitivity. If the case was that Owen was bisexual, it would of course be the thrilling, secretive elements connected to homosexuality he would include in cryptic poems for an inner circle, because that demonstrated his awareness of the insider knowledge that proved his membership.

⁴⁵⁴ Stallworthy, 'In the Closet?', web.

⁴⁵⁵ Cuthbertson, p.258.

One significant biographical event, often raised in this context even though it may be the most unclear episode of Owen's life, was the question of what led him to dramatically leave the Dunsden vicarage in 1912. Certainly, he was unhappy and stifled in his position there, but in the intriguing fragments of a letter on the subject that survived Harold Owen's censorship, he writes of a 'furore' that has by then abated, as well as of having "“discovered”" an unidentified male 'something over a year ago'.⁴⁵⁶ Not long afterwards, Owen departs from Dunsden and has something of a breakdown, beginning to complain of vivid, horrific dreams close to hallucinations,⁴⁵⁷ symptoms which would later recur in the wake of his war experiences. The mystery surrounding this persists, but there are certain recorded facts that can be taken into account, including the fact that Owen was welcomed back by the community later and even contemplated settling in Dunsden as a teacher later in life, so evidently was not in disgrace after some sort of scandal.⁴⁵⁸

The event garners particular attention because it is the most notable example of Harold Owen's censorship, entirely obscuring the truth of the event, likely in perpetuity. Stallworthy, who of course worked closely with Harold in preparing his biography, charitably notes that his censoring was for the purpose of removing 'trivial passages of domestic news of the kind that would certainly be left out in any volume of selected letters [...] to remove names of people whose families might have been upset by some particularly scathing reference [...] and to remove words or expressions that seemed displeasing or unworthy'.⁴⁵⁹ But Hibberd believes the scale of censorship was extensive: all but two pages of a notebook, as well as Owen's 1918 diary 'and many letters, are missing'.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁶ WOCL, p.174-75.

⁴⁵⁷ DHANB, p.123.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., p.121.

⁴⁵⁹ JSWO, p.83.

⁴⁶⁰ DHANB, p.xx.

The mystery of why Owen left Dunsden fascinated Hibberd, largely because of the possibility of a homosexual scandal. Stallworthy downplays it, finding the missing section of the letter describing the ‘furore’ unremarkable: ‘one can only guess at the events described in these pages, but in that Owen was himself able to describe them to his extremely prudish mother, they cannot have been very shocking.’⁴⁶¹ But Hibberd sees here hints of a youthful homosexual attraction. At the time, ‘his closest friendship was with a thirteen-year-old boy, Vivian Rampton’,⁴⁶² and despite the age gap, ‘the relationship was perhaps Owen’s first love affair, although he may well have been much less aware of its sexual implications at the time than Wigan probably was’.⁴⁶³ Cuthbertson takes a more detached view: ‘This friendship probably appeared to Herbert Wigan as inappropriate, and possibly was, although it is highly unlikely that it was sexual in any real way.’⁴⁶⁴ While suggesting this attraction was chaste may seem slightly naive, there is absolutely no evidence to support any sexual activity, and one of those who later welcomed Owen back to the community was Rampton’s mother,⁴⁶⁵ suggesting she bore him no ill will.

If Owen was having an intense emotional relationship with a younger boy, it aligns with his burgeoning interest in Decadence at the time. Wilde and Verlaine had notoriously taken younger male lovers, and Owen’s poetry at the time was derivative of Swinburne’s. In the poem ‘Perversity’, Owen has what Fenton calls ‘a problem with inappropriate or unsubstantial love-objects’⁴⁶⁶, writing that he prefers Grecian marbles to ‘modern flesh’, and that the glory of a tree outstrips that of a man. What he finds beautiful is the ephemeral or inaccessible:

I—fall in love with children, elfin fair;

⁴⁶¹ JSWO, p.83.

⁴⁶² DHOTP, p.21.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., p.22.

⁴⁶⁴ Cuthbertson, p.57.

⁴⁶⁵ Hibberd, *A New Biography*, p.123.

⁴⁶⁶ Fenton, p.34.

Portraits; dark ladies in dark tales antique;
Or instantaneous faces passed in streets.⁴⁶⁷

The poem is rather an oddity in Owen's oeuvre, because it contains an instance of Owen trying to claim universal agreement, a value shared by all mankind rather than by only an elevated group. Unsurprisingly, the statement is one that would be unlikely to be universally accepted. 'Perverse we all are somehow.' But the perversion Owen speaks of is a preference for the rare and for objects of the past and future rather than common beauty in the present. This includes the beauty of a child, though whether because it is linked with true beauty in the future or because it is ephemeral is open to interpretation.

Nonetheless, the beauty Owen praises most frequently is childlike and often supernatural. Admired females are 'elfin', as in the 'careless elf' of 'The Rivals'.⁴⁶⁸ Male beauty is perhaps more direct, and, aligning well with Gunston's wry statement about 'the little boy Eros', Owen very much enjoys using a personified boy-angel as a proxy for homoerotic desire: in 'To Eros' he claims, 'I slew all falser loves; I slew all true, | That I might nothing love but your truth, Boy.' However, after this show of dedication, he is scorned: 'But when I fell upon your sandalled feet, | You laughed; you loosed away my lips; you rose. | I heard the singing of your wing's retreat'⁴⁶⁹. It is Eros' mouth that is purpled for 'sacred sin' in 'Purple', and even Owen's ode, 'The Swift' mentions 'like young Love thou'rt frantic and unsteady.'⁴⁷⁰ Still more erotically-charged imagery is found in 'To the Bitter Sweet-Heart: A Dream', wherein Eros flies with the narrator: -

But when I heard his singing wings expand
My face fell deeply in his shoulder.
Sweet moons we flew thus, yet I waned not older
But in his exquisiteness I flagged, unmanned

⁴⁶⁷ WOCPF, p.108.

⁴⁶⁸ CWDC, p.78.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., p.162.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., p.139.

Till, when his wings were drooping to an end
Feeling my empty hand fulfilled with His,
I knew Love gave himself my passion-friend.⁴⁷¹

Perhaps most erotic of all is the sonnet 'Music', wherein the narrator claims he 'touched Love's body into trembling cries'⁴⁷², but in truth there is a certain evasiveness to writing about a boy-god or surpassingly beautiful statue. Of 'Time was Aeon', James Campbell writes, 'Owen's transformation of the "flesh" into "statue" and "music" still bespeaks a difficulty with the flesh as flesh.'⁴⁷³ Indeed, in his love poems, juvenile or mature, Owen is always in pursuit of or manipulated by a playful, childlike, otherworldly object of desire able to easily elude him. Later homoerotic poems written after associating with Robbie Ross and his circle, as we will see, do not depart far from this model.

Whether sexual or not, the memory of Owen's relationship with Vivian Rampton affected Owen deeply: 'The memory of Rampton persisted, becoming an idealised figure,'⁴⁷⁴ writes Hibberd, something of an echo of Byron's ostensibly chaste love affair at a similar age with 14-year-old John Edlestone. Stallworthy was clearly aware of speculation that Owen's departure from Dunsden could be interpreted as resulting from some matter of the heart, carefully noting that, 'one should not overlook the accumulated evidence that the real point at issue between [Owen and the Vicar] was Christ rather than Eros'.⁴⁷⁵ Even without providing a firm categorization of Owen's sexuality, the event illustrates the fact that Owen's sexuality has been scrutinised and has even become a point of contention for scholars.

This is because whether the truth as that Owen was homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual or anything else, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that there are

⁴⁷¹ CWDC, p.130.

⁴⁷² Ibid., p146.

⁴⁷³ Campbell, p.132.

⁴⁷⁴ DHOTP, p.22.

⁴⁷⁵ JSWO, p.85.

homoerotic elements in his poetry. It is also naïve to imagine that the question of his orientation has had no effect on his reception since his works began to be recognized by a wider literary establishment. Indeed, being known as homosexual may have been a factor in why he quickly gained allies at the Reform Club, and why he would later appeal to members of the Auden Group, notably Benjamin Britten.

At least some part of the speculation about Owen's sexuality goes back to his adulation for Keats. The aforementioned poem 'Perversity' concludes 'One friend I love unique, | But now, thou canst not dream I love thee, Keats!' Owen seems to have responded eagerly to Keats' language, and he was careful to glue together the pages of 'erotic description' from 'Lamia', and underlines and bookmarks 'sensuous passages in which he evidently delighted' elsewhere in the poem⁴⁷⁶. In a 1913 letter, the 20-year-old Owen told his mother that he was in love with Keats still—'To be in love with a youth and a dead 'un is perhaps sillier than with a real, live maid' he wrote, likely intending to shock Susan.⁴⁷⁷ The tone is jovial, but the humour is derived from the subversion of his mother's expectations—where she might expect an admission of love for a girl, instead she has an expression of adulation not only for a male youth, but one long-dead. The joke is of course that the love is not that of sexual attraction, instead being love for poetic skill, but Owen is broaching a conflation, hinting to his mother at other possibilities than love for 'maids'.

Though the popular conception of Keats does not align with the elfin or angelic, childlike imagery of Owen's ideals, it is interesting to inspect Owen's copy of Sidney Colvin's *Keats*, the purchase of which inspired a derivative juvenile sonnet. The great majority of annotations and markings are in sections about Keats' youth, for example when there is a description of the schoolboy Keats' 'extraordinary vivacity and personal

⁴⁷⁶ DHOTP, p.3.

⁴⁷⁷ WOCL, p.187.

beauty.⁴⁷⁸ By the time the biography reaches Keats' adulthood, Owen's notes stop altogether. The connection Owen felt with Keats seemingly centred on Keats as a child and adolescent, though of course Owen first read the biography as a youth himself, so it is small wonder that these parts resonated the most, and the number of markings may reflect an initial enthusiasm that waned over time more than a particular attention to childhood.

Another letter to Susan Owen, written on Valentine's Day 1914, reveals more about Owen's sexuality, at least to the extent he was able to convey to his mother—though part of it has suffered from Harold Owen's censoring pen. Still in France, this section of his letter was brought on by a suspicion that his mother thought he was likely to marry soon—which she would see as too young.

I was never so free of "heart trouble" within these last ten years past. This will no doubt give you immense satisfaction. But it should not...
You ought not to discourage too hard.
If you knew what hands have been laid on my arm, in the night, along the Bordeaux streets, or what eyes play upon me in the restaurant where I daily eat, methinks you would wish that the star and adoration of my life had risen; or would quickly rise.
But never fear: thank Home, and Poetry, and the FORCE behind both. And rejoice with me that a calmer time has come for me; and that fifty blandishments cannot move me like ten notes of a violin or a line of Keats.
All women, without exception, annoy me, and the mercenaries (which the innocent old pastor thought might allure) I utterly detest; more indeed than as a charitable being, I ought.⁴⁷⁹

The following paragraph, beginning 'But I should not like to have seen myself in this town, two years earlier', is heavily censored by Harold, the remaining fragments containing only such curious but evocative words as 'confession' and 'blush'. Many interesting questions regarding Owen's sexuality are raised here: what was it that Harold was afraid

⁴⁷⁸ Sidney Colvin, *Keats*, Owen's copy, p.8.

⁴⁷⁹ WOCL, p.234.

the world would see that was shocking in a way that the preceding passage about prostitutes and apparent misogyny was not? Is this truly misogyny, or is Merryn Williams correct to say it is ‘no more than most of us have said at some time about the opposite sex’?⁴⁸⁰

Certainly Owen was a product of a different society, and the war did much to enfranchise women: ‘in early 1918, in what it defined as a gesture of recognition for women’s contribution to the war effort, Parliament granted the vote to women over the age of thirty.’⁴⁸¹ But if all women ‘annoy’ Owen, does he indeed prefer the company of men? As Simcox muses, ‘Did Owen’s pity for the suffering of his comrades spring from an inherent sympathy towards the male sex and a perhaps submerged hostility towards women?’⁴⁸²

Simcox does not think so. His approach is different, seemingly rooted in Freud’s conception of the Oedipal complex, in light of the close relationship between Owen and his mother and his more strained and formal relationship with his father. So affectionate is Owen in his letters home that Simcox asks, ‘Where does the boundary lie between filial affection and sexual feeling?’⁴⁸³ The rhetorical question, of course, has no simple answer, but for all the looming influence of Freud—also acknowledged by Helen McPhail as she writes ‘the intensity of the relationship between Wilfred and his mother raises questions in a post-Freudian world’⁴⁸⁴—it would seem abrupt to conclude that one so enamoured of youth and male beauty would harbour such feelings for his mother, even if this, too, would be a way to defy social norms.

Certainly, the narrator figure of Owen’s poem mentions his mother with notable frequency and intensity. ‘Lines Written on my Nineteenth Birthday’ contains the lines: -

how do I miss

⁴⁸⁰ Williams, p.153.

⁴⁸¹ Susan Kingsley Kent, ‘Love and Death: War and Gender in Britain, 1914-1918’ in *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War*, ed. by Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), pp.153-74, p.154.

⁴⁸² Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, p.26.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁴⁸⁴ Helen McPhail, *Wilfred Owen: Poet and Soldier* (Petersfield: Gliddon Books, 1993), p.69.

*Thine eyes, thy voice, my Mother! Oft I kiss
Thy portrait, and I clutch thy letter dear
As if it were thy hand.*⁴⁸⁵

And 'A New Heaven', a very florid and allusive poem written during Owen's military training, concludes on a quasi-mythical note: -

To us, rough knees of boys shall ache with rev'rence.
Are not girls' breasts a clear, strong Acropole?
-There our own mothers' tears shall heal us whole.⁴⁸⁶

The image of the mother recurs in a number of war poems, from the final cry of the dead soldier in 'The Last Laugh' to the recipient of the consolatory letter that closes 'S.I.W.'⁴⁸⁷ The mother symbolises home and safety, as well as a sympathetic character when experiencing loss.

Simcox goes on to state of Owen, 'basically his attitude to women is more superficial than towards men',⁴⁸⁸ though he does not mention that this attitude may be largely attributable to our primary source of evidence being letters to Susan Owen. We must remember Owen was writing to her, and may be reading what a son believed his mother wanted to hear. How frank would he have been able to be about sexual desire, for women or for men, in such letters? Though there is some evidence that 'equality was not a status that Wilfred Owen was prepared to accord to women',⁴⁸⁹ certainly he mused on the possibility of marrying and having children. How he contemplated this was decidedly unromantic. Of what he looked for in a woman, he wrote:—

Supposing I have progeny, they must be given the maximum chance of being fair of face and limb [...] By this, must be understood that she satisfy my sense of beauty: not entirely, of course, I have gone too far in

⁴⁸⁵ CWDC, p.64.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., p.128.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., p.41.

⁴⁸⁸ Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, p.24.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., p.26.

aesthetics, seen too many persons, pictures and statues, lived too long for that—but she must exhibit say 75 out of the hundred essential characters. Not every man need have even his own sense of beauty realised in order to be happy [...] but that was settled for me time and time ago. In thus laying down such exigencies I risk making myself ridiculous later on.⁴⁹⁰

In the interest of mitigation, this followed immediately after a passage about how unsatisfactory Owen found his own appearance, but it certainly sounds more like a man considering a purchase than finding a lover. Still, we can at least discern Owen had a conception of an ideal woman. Ultimately, Simcox concludes that the close relationship between mother and son may not have erotic connotations, but had a profound impact on Owen's relationships with other women. Simcox is also certainly not ignorant of speculation on Owen's homosexual inclination: though it was he who warned against drawing conclusions without evidence, he conceded that 'there was something unfettered about Wilfred Owen's associations with his own sex',⁴⁹¹ and calls 'Now let me feel the feeling of thy hand' a 'blatantly homosexual poem'.⁴⁹² Also acknowledging 'To ----',⁴⁹³ and 'Arms and the Boy',⁴⁹⁴ as containing homosexual themes, Simcox writes, 'these poems with their unmistakably homosexual tone are few in relation to Wilfred's total output, yet they are numerous enough to convince us of their validity, poetry being the expression of a man's deepest preoccupations, and these poems [span] the whole of his writing period.'⁴⁹⁵

Beyond his mother, there were a number of women for whom Owen showed great admiration: Williams lists Mrs Browning, Olwen Joergens, Margaret Sackville and Edith Sitwell.⁴⁹⁶ There is also evidence for heterosexual desire throughout his life: there was

⁴⁹⁰ WOCL, p.253.

⁴⁹¹ Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, pp.21-22.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, p.22. The poem is anthologized as 'Impromptu', POWO, p.53.

⁴⁹³ POWO, p.91.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.131.

⁴⁹⁵ Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, p.22.

⁴⁹⁶ Williams, p.153.

Henriette Poitou, a sixteen-year-old French girl he met shortly after his 21st birthday, whose ‘marvellous eyes had made him as immobile as a statue’,⁴⁹⁷ and later little eleven-year-old Nénette Léger, a girl he tutored and gave attention that ‘feels a little wrong to a modern observer’,⁴⁹⁸ enjoying stroking her hair and discussing romance with her. There also exist poems that show desire for women: other examples beyond those already mentioned include ‘Disabled’, which may centre on a handsome man changed by war into a helpless, lonely amputee, and may closely echo Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* (‘To an Athlete Dying Young’ being one of several poems marked for special attention in Owen’s copy⁴⁹⁹), but part of the tragedy of what he has lost is the evocation of a happy, heterosexual life. Of the lines describing ‘how slim | Girls’ waists are, or how warm their subtle hands’,⁵⁰⁰ Simcox writes, ‘Can one doubt the inner desire which underlies the following lines from “Disabled”?’⁵⁰¹ It is a small piece of yearning, and it is written in-character, but the poem is much enhanced by this line being convincing. In another example, while her ‘utter loveliness’ may not convince all readers, and the juvenile poem certainly lacks originality, the description of the Little Mermaid has some notes of sincere admiration:

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.⁵⁰²

It would be remiss not to note that Henriette Poitou and Nénette Léger were both rather younger than Owen, Nénette particularly being very young indeed for a discussion of sexuality. Though the subject is taboo, it is important in contemplating Owen’s sexuality to consider his attitude to youth. Léger is described in highly evocative terms: though Owen

⁴⁹⁷ DHANB, p.151.

⁴⁹⁸ Cuthbertson, p.100.

⁴⁹⁹ A.E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad*, Owen’s copy (London: Grant Richards Ltd, 1915),.

⁵⁰⁰ POWO, p.152.

⁵⁰¹ Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, p.19.

⁵⁰² POWO, p.18.

describes her as ‘perfectly a child, and, with that, is almost a perfect child’, her ‘physique is magnificent’⁵⁰³ and she has a ‘very pretty Body’ with eyes that on occasion become ‘extraordinarily alive; so that we say—she has the devil in her eyes tonight’.⁵⁰⁴

Cuthbertson’s response to this is to give a list of contemporary artists who fell in love with adolescent and pre-adolescent girls, wryly adding ‘somewhere Nabokov is smiling’.⁵⁰⁵

Whatever conclusions can be drawn, Cuthbertson is insightful when he concludes, ‘Nénette represented purity and happiness, and the ideal childhood. Falling for her, he fell for that childhood he never had; and she offered an escape from the unattractive realities of adulthood.’⁵⁰⁶

In his poetry, too, some of Owen’s most sincere expressions of admiration for female beauty come in poems where the object of devotion is described as a ‘child.’ In ‘The Sleeping Beauty’, there are some quasi-erotic lines about the ‘fair child’ found sleeping, whereupon the speaker takes it upon himself to play the part of the fairy tale prince, only to fall short: -

when I kissed, her eyelids knew no stir.
So back I drew tiptoe 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.

But this description, as with the addressee of ‘Impromptu’⁵⁰⁷ (referred to as ‘Child!’) does not necessarily indicate a literal child, any more than it does when Lord Windermere addresses his wife as such in Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* or when the Doge does the same in Byron’s *Marino Faliero*. The Sleeping Beauty is traditionally fifteen or sixteen, still by several definitions a child but not as young as Nénette.

⁵⁰³ WOCL, p.271.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., p.277.

⁵⁰⁵ Cuthbertson, p.101.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., p.103.

⁵⁰⁷ POWO, p.53.

Owen's conception of beauty revolves around an idealization of youth and youthful innocence. Children undeniably fascinated Owen: he spoke often enough of his advanced understanding of them that it irritated Simcox: 'There is a shade of arrogance in his assumption that he perfectly "knew" children, as if they any more than adults can, for analytical purposes, be lumped together. Wilfred's letter from Dunsden on 29 January 1913 [...] is full of sententious philosophisings about children and his profound understanding of them.'⁵⁰⁸ In addition, it seems that for all he liked spending time with young children, he struggled to understand them or sympathise when they misbehaved. When spending time with seven-year-old Arthur Newbould he acted primly when he saw the boy eating liquorice sticks, asking him 'to kindly put those dirty things in [his] pocket before we boarded the train',⁵⁰⁹ and Owen also seemed disapproving of babies, describing some as 'self-centred, unmannerly blobs of one to three years' which 'bored me utterly'. This, however, may have been more an extension of his disapproval of their parents, who he described as 'some "modern" people'.⁵¹⁰ As an amusing counterpoint, Cuthbertson relates that Maidie Gray, who claimed to be in love with Owen, thought that as a matter of fact, there was an uncanny understanding between him and her baby.⁵¹¹

Owen's own youth was not one of carefree frivolity. Harold portrays his older brother as rather stiff and straight-laced: he remembers Wilfred disapproving of using a bicycle to skid—'This he considered brainless and unedifying, as indeed it was.'⁵¹² Wilfred is cast as the bellicose, controlling older brother, prone to 'furious crossness' and the occasional 'vituperative harangue', so that his brother nicknames him 'Old Wolf'.⁵¹³ In actuality, there is a deep fraternal warmth to the anecdote as a whole—Harold reveals that occasionally

⁵⁰⁸ Simcox, p.25; letter to be found in WOCL, pp.178-80.

⁵⁰⁹ WOCL, p.594.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., pp.489-490.

⁵¹¹ Cuthbertson, p.1.

⁵¹² HOJFO, p.45.

⁵¹³ Ibid., pp.45-47.

Wilfred would get a gleam in his eye and chase after him on his own bicycle, and when the story leads to Harold careening dangerously out of control down a hill and realising for the first time that his rashness could kill him, Wilfred when he catches up to his little brother is full of concern and wipes at Harold's face with his handkerchief. But the fact remains that by accounts other than his own, Owen's conduct around younger children was stiff and authoritative—he assumed a patriarchal role that might surprise those who consider him a Peter Pan figure, 'childlike to the end'⁵¹⁴. Harold felt that being the eldest child, especially with his sister Mary being so sickly, Wilfred had to assume a responsible role, which 'denied [him], if not his boyhood, at least his boyishness'.⁵¹⁵ Perhaps it was the very lack of childish behaviour when he was truly a child that made Owen envy those who were carefree at such an age, and wish to be like them.

Whatever the cause, Owen had a propensity even during the war to seek out adolescent boys to spend time with, and Hibberd certainly read an erotic element to this. He hints at the possibility this was something to boast of behind certain closed doors—'He usually found a boy or two to befriend, wherever he was [...] These relationships could be presented as innocent or romantic, depending on the company present.'⁵¹⁶ He also assumes gaps in Owen's correspondence left by his brother were often to do with homosexuality becoming too blatant. When, for example, Owen met a young drummer boy during his military career, it was 'an emotional experience, which is no doubt why Owen's account of it is now "missing"'.⁵¹⁷

Once again, Simcox offers an alternative reading, interpreting Owen's predilections in a non-sexual context: 'It may be that in his relationships with the young he was acting the

⁵¹⁴ Cuthbertson, p.2.

⁵¹⁵ HOJFO, p.18.

⁵¹⁶ DHTLY, p.88.

⁵¹⁷ DHOTP, p.125.

role of the father he was destined never to become.⁵¹⁸ But Owen's tended to seek out boys in their middle and late teens, not small children—excepting little Arthur Newbould with his liquorice sticks. The boys Owen tended to befriend were more similar in age to Owen's brother Colin, so if anything familial, these relationships seem fraternal rather than paternal.

However, it is to this notion of how encounters with boys could be presented 'depending on the company present' that this section has been leading. At the very least, Owen made reference to homosexual themes in his poems, and almost all speculation about his sexuality suggests a non-heterosexual orientation. Unlike other sections in this chapter, this section has not intended to set out a way in which Owen considered himself an outsider figure, as how Owen felt his sexuality set him apart cannot be discussed until it is established that there can be no firm and definitive answer, in modern terms, regarding what his sexual orientation was. Thus, this section has explored the various possibilities put forward regarding Owen's sexuality, as well as contextualized why it has been seen as an important matter in Owen scholarship. It is for the next section to explore how expressions of sexuality may have been linked to conceptions of outsiderdom.

⁵¹⁸ Simcox, p.25.

A Member of the Sodomite Diaspora: Sexuality and Elevation

There is enough evidence to suggest that Owen was at least attracted to the world of Wilde and sufficiently attracted to homosexuality to write about it. It can also be said that he took an aesthetic interest in male beauty. But it is not at all clear that Owen was prepared to sleep with men.⁵¹⁹

If Owen could be deemed to have been bisexual, or uncertain about his identity, it may well be that he exaggerated homosexual inclinations to ingratiate himself with a literary circle that celebrated the homoerotic.

Britain in 1918 saw conservatism on the rise, with notable persecution of high-profile homosexuals. Owen lived long enough to see the 1918 libel trial that ensued when Noel Pemberton Billing published the article ‘The Cult of the Clitoris’ in his journal *Vigilante*, attacking Maud Allen as a lesbian collaborator of conspirators endeavouring to destroy British manhood. To emasculate British men was to make them less able to fight the war, thus arguably tantamount to treason.⁵²⁰

Robbie Ross had already been involved in a previous libel case in 1917 when Alfred Douglas, once Wilde’s young lover Bosie but now the ‘self-appointed, vindictive guardian of public morals’⁵²¹ had accused Ross of being ‘the High Priest of all the sodomites in London.’ Ross sued for libel, but withdrew the case when Douglas produced fourteen witnesses to testify against him: only Ross’s personal friendship with Herbert Asquith and others in government prevented him being arrested just as Wilde had been. These trials were a public humiliation for Ross, particularly with the rhetoric of Billing encouraging paranoia and a mistrust of influential homosexuals, and as they made national news, we can be certain that when Owen made Ross’s acquaintance, he was aware of the public

⁵¹⁹ Cuthbertson, p.262.

⁵²⁰ DHANB, p.398

⁵²¹ Ibid., p.354.

reputation of this circle: ‘When Owen met him, memories of Wilde’s notorious trial in 1895 had been revived by persistent persecution from Lord Alfred Douglas.’⁵²² Indeed, Ross did not hide his propensities, living as ‘an unrepentant aesthete and unrepentant homosexual’.⁵²³

Ross, apart from being the literary executor of Oscar Wilde’s estate, was a journalist and art critic, and though he wrote little fiction, his collection of short stories and essays, *Masques and Phases*, was a success. He is sometimes credited with partial authorship of pornographic novella *Teleny*, along with Wilde and several others, although this is dubious—Richard Ellmann ignores the novella altogether in his biography, while Neil McKenna, criticized in *The Sunday Times* for a ‘tendency to present mere fiction as fact’,⁵²⁴ states definitively that *Teleny* is Wilde’s work.⁵²⁵ Perhaps ironically, depending on the truth of this, one of Ross’s responsibilities as Wilde’s executor was preventing false attributions of pornographic work to him.

Ross, very probably Wilde’s first homosexual lover,⁵²⁶ could introduce Owen to the hidden, esoteric and elitist ‘Uranian’ subculture in London. ‘Though never one to keep a secret, [Wilde] had always been attracted by a secret life’,⁵²⁷ which resonated with Owen: he was attracted to secret knowledge, because it could elevate a person beyond the rest of society.

It is entirely possible that Owen did not present himself as homosexual, but toyed with a certain ambiguity because he found it thrilling to be included in a new and elevated circle. Still a neophyte, perhaps he felt he was more likely to be accepted if he shared in the

⁵²² McPhail, p.39.

⁵²³ John McRae, ‘Introduction’ in Oscar Wilde ‘and others’ (attrib.), *Teleny*, ed. by John McRae (London: GMP Publishers, 1986), pp.1-22, p.21.

⁵²⁴ Peter Parker, ‘Review: Biography: The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde by Neil McKenna’, *The Sunday Times* (26 October, 2003) <<http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/article248240.ece>> [accessed 18 August 2014].

⁵²⁵ Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Century, 2003), p.68.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.261.

⁵²⁷ Ellmann, p.259.

secret, othered identity of the homosexual poet. Of course, Ross's circle was not entirely populated by homosexuals—many of his literary associates, including H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, both of whom Owen met on his first visit to the Reform Club, were not gay, though both wrote on the subject of homosexuality. 'The atmosphere of literary freedom and sexual tolerance was one of liberation for an aspiring poet from a modest provincial background',⁵²⁸ writes McPhail, but if this gives the impression that Owen was out of his depth, this was a liberation that came entirely because he sought it out, with the driving ambition of one who wanted to join such a circle all his life.

Hibberd's statement that 'the artistic temperament which he had sought for and found in himself could be seen as essentially homosexual'⁵²⁹ is true only with provisos: principally, that this relies on a definition of 'homosexual' in the specific context of the first decades of the 20th Century, when homosexuals as a group were fancifully considered to have various elevated traits. As Edward Carpenter clarifies, 'Uranian men tended to be musical and artistic, with a highly developed capacity for aesthetic and emotional sensation; they were quick to feel affection for children and pity for the unfortunate.'⁵³⁰ Owen was drawn to a certain lifestyle and personal qualities, and these were associated with Uranianism: I would go beyond Hibberd's claim that 'sexually, he belonged to a group which had to be separate and even'⁵³¹ and suggest that he wanted to be more than even—to be elevated. Thus, if he were bisexual, there would be advantages to exaggerating his homosexuality.

It strikes me as unlikely that Owen was introduced as Sassoon's lover. Despite professing love for Sassoon, it is likely both from the available evidence and in terms of

⁵²⁸ McPhail, p.39.

⁵²⁹ DHOTP, p.151.

⁵³⁰ Cited, DHOTP, p.150.

⁵³¹ DHOTP, p.192.

Owen's intended dynamic within an elitist group of outsiders that this was a genuinely platonic love, expressing admiration and gratitude. Sassoon was rather unlike Owen's ideal of beauty, and from his conduct once doors had been opened for him, it becomes clear that Owen's primary interest was not retaining a relationship with Sassoon. Owen wanted to be regarded in his new literary group as standing alone, distinguished by his own merits—not as a disciple.

As MacCallum-Stewart wrote of the play *Not About Heroes*, which indulges fantasies about a love affair between Owen and Sassoon, 'in *Not About Heroes*, the homosexual overtones between the two poets finally become overt, taking a small step onwards from the attraction Owen obviously felt, to a giant leap which reconstructs the relationship in a later, more sexually permissive domain.'⁵³² It is wise to use the ambiguous word 'attraction' to describe Owen's feelings, the word encompassing everything from admiration to sexual desire. While the framing of the relationship in an anachronistic manner and implying permissiveness in a very repressive society is indeed a 'giant leap', it is also true that such relationships also define fictional representations of many homosexual poets, from Wilde and Verlaine in the sphere that influenced Owen to Auden and Isherwood amongst his later appreciators. The temptation to fit Owen and Sassoon's obviously impassioned relationship into this mould in a fictional representation is understandable. However, it is not strongly supported by evidence.

Much of the speculation regarding Owen's strength of feeling for Sassoon derives from his letter of November 5th, 1917—the letter which openly expresses love for Sassoon and names him his 'Keats + Christ + Elijah + my Colonel + my father-confessor

⁵³² MacCallum-Stewart, p.129.

+Amenophis IV in profile'.⁵³³ Owen was certainly in awe of Sassoon. He was the gatekeeper to the life Owen aspired to, of elevation above the mundane, of access to the esoteria of the homosexual literati and potentially of poetic recognition. This letter was also not one Harold chose to burn or otherwise censor, as he was seemingly prone to doing in response to any suggestion of homosexuality, so it would seem he must not have considered it an admission of desire.

Everything that Owen writes of Sassoon is quite unlike male beauty as represented everywhere else in his writing. 'He is thirty-one. Let it be thoroughly understood that I nourish no admiration for his nose or any other feature whatever,'⁵³⁴ he insisted. Sassoon was a large man, athletic of build and possessed of a broad chin and masculine face, with a patrician manner. 'Sassoon was strikingly distinguished in appearance, his large bold features expressed the courage and sensitivity of his nature, and he retained his slimness and agility into old age' goes his summary in *Literary Lives*⁵³⁵. His homosexual relationships are easily generalized: 'It cannot be a coincidence that Sassoon is in the apprentice role in most of his literary friendships and the elder partner in homosexual relationships.'⁵³⁶ It may be that short, slender, bright-eyed Owen attracted Sassoon, and certainly in all records of the dynamic between the two men, Owen is in the subordinate position. But here is clearly an exception to the rule that Sassoon was an apprentice in literary terms, Owen taking that role very soon after they met. Being the younger partner in a homosexual relationship also does not seem to have been Owen's preference: being very possibly homosexual did not make Owen attracted to all men, and all evidence suggests that what he sought for in male beauty, what moved him to eloquence and stirred the

⁵³³ WOCL, p.505.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., p.494.

⁵³⁵ Hart-Davis, p.299.

⁵³⁶ Moeyes, pp.259-60.

strongest feelings in him, was the youthful, the boyish and the innocent. Owen, like Sassoon, seems more likely to have desired a younger partner, and though he expressed surprise that Sassoon looked younger than his 30 years, he was aesthetically unlike the image of male beauty as presented in Owen's work. Incidentally, this same argument is used by Scott Moncrieff biographer Jean Findlay when she suggests it is unlikely Owen was attracted to her subject: 'his poetry admired beauty in younger men, while Charles was aged by war wounds and covered in eczema'.⁵³⁷

To corroborate, we can examine the language of 'Who Is the God of Canongate?', perhaps the most blatantly homosexual of Owen's poems, given the proviso we assume the narrator character is male and a likely cipher for Owen himself. The idealized boy is throughout the poem addressed as 'lily-lad', 'little god', 'London flower', and 'my delicate bud'.⁵³⁸ This language suggests a playful youth, quite unlike the figures with whom Owen compared Sassoon.

The previous chapter had other examples of male beauty, always youthful like the 'boy Eros', and though I asserted that the 'child' of the strange obscure poem 'Impromptu' is likely not literally a child, certainly that would not be an appropriate way to address Sassoon. 'Impromptu' goes on to address a subject whose hand is 'softer than the breast of girls'⁵³⁹—and, indeed, is 'warmer than the pillows of their cheeks, | And richer than the fullness of their eyes, | And stronger than the ardour of their eyes', a list of ways in which the youth is superior to the expected subject of poetic desire, rather echoing Shakespeare's Sonnet 20. In Owen's library can be found a copy of Shakespeare's Sonnets, a curious edition from J.C. and E.C. Jack, London which has on its inside covers a simple illustration

⁵³⁷ Jean Findlay, *Chasing Lost Time: The Life of C.K. Scott Moncrieff: Soldier, Spy and Translator* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014) p.152.

⁵³⁸ POWO, p.109.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.53.

of a naked adolescent fairy boy—or possibly short-haired girl. There are no special markings on any of the sonnets themselves, but their influence is found particularly in the imitative ‘How Do I Love Thee?’, which champions unrequited but passionate love: -

I do love thee even as Shakespeare loved,
Most gently wild, and desperately for ever,
Full-hearted, grave, and manfully in vain,
With thought, high pain, and ever vaster pain.⁵⁴⁰

Owen’s preference seems to be for young, slim youths, probably not dissimilar from Alfred Gilbert’ famous statue of Anteros for the Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain in Piccadilly Circus, only yards from a hotel in which Owen chose to stay. He has great praise for the navy boy, ‘so prim, so trim’ he depicts in a poem of praise for shapely lips and hidden ‘silken muscles’⁵⁴¹, the surpassingly beautiful statue in ‘Time was Aeon’ has its outline changing ‘from beauty unto beauty, | As change the contours of slim, sleeping clouds,’⁵⁴² and the list of conventionally attractive elements in ‘Greater Love’ includes for the body, ‘your slender attitude’⁵⁴³.

Sassoon was homosexually-inclined. Of his Craiglockhart doctor, William Halse Rivers, Moorcroft Wilson writes he ‘was almost certainly homosexual by inclination and it must quickly have become clear to him that Sassoon was too’.⁵⁴⁴ But she cannot perceive any love affair between Sassoon and Owen: ‘It was as a mentor rather than a lover that he saw himself in relation to Owen.’⁵⁴⁵ To corroborate my earlier statement that once he joined the literary circle at the Reform, Owen did not seem to care about maintaining the relationship, the two met only infrequently after Craiglockhart: Sassoon complained in a letter to Graves that Wilfred had been entirely out of touch with him between December

⁵⁴⁰ CWDC, p.132.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., p.126.

⁵⁴² Ibid., p.120.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., p.23.

⁵⁴⁴ Moorcroft Wilson, *The Making of a War Poet*, p.393.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., p.409.

1917 and May 1918. This surprises Hibberd, who is keen to emphasize Owen's love for Sassoon, but he must concede the point: 'This may seem scarcely credible, but there is no contrary evidence in WO's letters.'⁵⁴⁶

Within Ross's circle, at least one member felt later that the bond with Sassoon was overemphasized: Charles Scott Moncrieff 'felt he knew Owen better than Sassoon did'; Scott Moncrieff and Sassoon were not close, as 'Sassoon thought he was thoroughly objectionable.'⁵⁴⁷ Despite this, Owen coming to the club through Sassoon's letter of introduction did not prevent Scott Moncrieff befriending him. Indeed, he displayed an infatuation with Owen, and 'was not the sort of man to be satisfied with words':⁵⁴⁸ as Owen had imitated Sassoon, so Scott Moncrieff imitated Owen, using his par rhyme in *Song of Roland*, and dedicating it to 'Mr W.O.', another nod to Shakespeare's sonnets. Both Moncrieff and Owen were no doubt aware of Wilde's fanciful story positing a homoerotic answer to the literary mystery of Shakespeare's dedication, 'The Portrait of Mr. W.H.'

Some in Ross's circle were writing material that leaves us in little doubt of activities still considered taboo today, such as Philip Bainbrigge—who wrote a considerable amount of literature that was openly homoerotic and paedophilic, though he wrote ample heterosexual erotica too. When he wrote an 'extravagantly obscene' version of some classical mythology entitled *Achilles in Scyros* (published by friends in 1937), there is no disguising the identity of 'C.K.S.-M.', to whom the work was dedicated—these being the distinctive initials of Charles Kenneth Scott-Moncrieff.⁵⁴⁹ It is potentially a little disquieting that Owen went to visit Bainbrigge in his capacity as a schoolmaster when Bainbrigge's private writing sometimes detailed the opportunities for adults in educational

⁵⁴⁶ DHANB, p.512.

⁵⁴⁷ DHOTP, p.119.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., p.118.

⁵⁴⁹ P.J. Heslin, *The Transvestite Achilles: Gender and Genre in Statius' Achilleid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.52-53.

establishments to seduce their students, but it is also probable that Owen had no idea of this propensity, nor ever saw Bainbrigge's erotic work, none of which was published before his death. If some in the circle were writing pornographic works for private enjoyment, there is no evidence that Owen took part, and his attempts at similar themes were far more oblique, and often preoccupied with ideals of purity and innocence.

However we consider his 'prudish and restricted background',⁵⁵⁰ Owen was now closely associated with the group labelled 'The Cult of the Clitoris', and there is recorded evidence of his contemporaries writing obscene material. However, from all available evidence, Owen was not interested in promiscuity or hedonism. Homosexuality was to Owen something thrilling, strange and erotic. It represented a way to be accepted by social superiors that could offer him a place in the literary establishment. To be 'Uranian' was to rise from the constraints of a conventional upbringing, the upbringing reflected by Harold and his clear abhorrence of homosexuality in his brother.

There is no doubt that to Owen, the homosexual literary elite were both outsider figures and elevated. They were highly intelligent, sensitive men and certainly misunderstood, just like the poets he admired. They also enjoyed a high status, the ones he knew being of a higher social class than he was. While we established that there is no firm evidence that Owen was homosexual, or indeed, bisexual, there were homosexual and heterosexual elements to his poetry. He greatly prized youth and the youthful, but tended to use language evocative of childhood even for youths who were adolescent or post-adolescent, which continues into his war poetry, as with 'Arms and the Boy' or the 'boy's

⁵⁵⁰ McPhail, p.39.

murdered mouth' that wears a 'faint and exceeding small' smile in Craiglockhart poem 'Has Your Soul Sipped?'⁵⁵¹

But this section is built upon the supposition that ultimately, Owen's true sexuality is immaterial, because whether sincere or pretended, identifying as 'Uranian' aligned with his intention to be set apart as an elevated outsider. The 'Uranian' had many of the qualities of the idealized romantic poet, from being sensitive and intelligent to being misunderstood. There was in homosexual subcultures a chance to be distinguished from wider society. Even if hypothetically Owen was not in the least homosexually inclined, he may have seen it to be in his benefit to pretend to be so. Far more likely is that he was indeed so inclined, and in certain company found it was to his benefit to acknowledge or even exaggerate his propensities, in order to find a place in a group of elevated outsiders.

Another element of the thrill of taboo connected to Owen's exploration of homosexual society was that it was in direct opposition to the teachings of the Church. To embrace a gay lifestyle was to reject not necessarily God but the organised religions that had so occupied him in his young adulthood. The next section will cover this final way in which Owen sought to be an elevated outsider figure: through his expression of his faith. But perhaps it provides a note of interesting contextualization to return to *A History of Gay Literature*, in which can be found Gregory Woods' blunt summary of 'Maundy Thursday',⁵⁵² a poem that depicts how rather than kiss the crucifix held up by a 'server-lad', the narrator kisses the boy's hand. More than any others Owen wrote, this poem shows the narrator blissfully embracing transgression. Through the poem, claims Woods,

⁵⁵¹ CWDC, p.137.

⁵⁵² POWO, p.86

‘Owen is kissing goodbye to the Church, identifying himself as a member of the Sodomite diaspora.’⁵⁵³

⁵⁵³ Woods, p.381.

Teaching Christ to Lift the Cross by Numbers: Wilfred Owen and Christianity

Some undoubtedly found the rituals and memorials associated with annual remembrance consoling. Yet for others, whether any form of mourning actually ameliorated their grief is open to question.⁵⁵⁴

What could reasonably be described as praise for Owen from Paul Fussell is thin on the ground. However, one piece of Owen's writing, a section of a letter to Osbert Sitwell made to seem almost throwaway but carefully crafted to impress, drew unambiguous praise. It was an evocation of the soldier as a Christ figure, sacrificed again and again by a mechanised process of human indifference: -

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 [the] thirst until after the last halt; I attended his supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet to see that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands to attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.⁵⁵⁵

Fussell's praise when it comes is characteristically offhand and qualified: 'better prose, by the way, is hardly to be found in the war, except perhaps from the hand of Blunden.'⁵⁵⁶ But praise it nonetheless is, for a skilled craftsman. This ought not, however, be mistaken for praise for an original idea. The religious image was one that was immensely popular at the time in the rhetoric of both the supporters of the war and those who opposed it: 'The sacrificial theme, in which each soldier becomes a type of crucified Christ, is at the heart of countless Great War poems.'⁵⁵⁷ The religious, sacrificial theme was not exclusive to Christians, as 'the same was true of Jews, though without the theme of the

⁵⁵⁴ Todman, *The Great War*, p.56.

⁵⁵⁵ WOCL, p.562.

⁵⁵⁶ Fussell, p.119.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

imitation of Christ',⁵⁵⁸ but amongst Christians, it became commonplace to compare the soldier to Jesus. The image was conceived as a thought-provoking way to highlight the pity of the soldier's death when 'not even a pauper's grave, not even a stone, not even a cross' marks it, clearly 'too little for Him who died on the Field of Honour', as Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker put it.⁵⁵⁹ Certainly Sassoon employed the concept, to Owen's great admiration: before they were acquainted, Owen wrote that Sassoon's 'The Redeemer' was the poem he had 'been wishing to write every week for the last three years' in a letter to his sister.⁵⁶⁰

While such religious imagery may not have been unique, Owen had a singular view of religion, one that changed dramatically as he reached adulthood, connected at every point with his conceptions of outsiderdom. At first he saw the clergy of organized religion as a glamorous, elevated and esoteric community, and considered joining, until he worked in a vicarage and came to see that life as mundane. From considering men of the cloth to be elevated and enlightened, he grew to see their vocation to be one of mindless conformity, conservative views and rituals that exhibited not a higher understanding but only rote imitation. This is where the strange interpolation of 'mockeries' in 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' originates: 'prayers and bells are "mockeries", often insincere and in any case not adequate given the vastness of the tragedy.'⁵⁶¹ This cynicism also informs the thrill in transgression in 'Maundy Thursday', as well as the prose passage written to Sitwell. In the latter, Owen highlights how the soldier must act in a way that is far from Christlike: he 'is in every instance betraying the Christ-soldier and thus alienating himself from the mercy of Christ'.⁵⁶²

⁵⁵⁸ Stéphan Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, English translation, paperback edn (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), p.125.

⁵⁵⁹ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, p.218.

⁵⁶⁰ WOCL, p.489.

⁵⁶¹ Williams, p.77.

⁵⁶² Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.84.

Owen turned his back on the organized Church while retaining his faith in God. This is perhaps not unusual in accounts of the Great War, with Linda Parker outlining a common experience for many soldiers with, ‘When the realities of war hit home, the religious instruction provide (sic) by the Sunday and Church schools proved inadequate to sustain faith in difficult situations,’⁵⁶³ but few of Owen’s fellow soldiers will have grown up with faith so prominent in their lives that it almost became their vocation, or found education and a kind of employment at a vicarage. Nor were they so deeply influenced by firebrand evangelical preachers.

Disillusioned with what he realized was an institution that expected him to conform without aspiring to offer any individual expression, Owen sought his own path of spiritual expression. In his poems, religious imagery is laden with personal guilt, self-doubt and anger at an organization that for him failed to provide an accurate reflection of Christ’s teachings—as well as a certain pride in setting himself apart, seeking an alternative path rather than losing the way altogether.

‘Science has Looked, and Sees No Life but This’ is a juvenile poem dealing with the struggles of belief. Cold and ‘careful’ science is unromantic and promises only the slow death of the planet. While scientific principals initially had all the speaker’s ‘zeal’, there is a ‘Third Power’, alongside religion—which is ‘Poesy’. Personified, she turns her attention away from religion to science. Yet the narrator shows no doubt in the concept of a soul, within a ‘bitter case of flesh’, and begs Poesy to impart the truth. Despite the acceptance of these religious principles, the narrator figure is clearly disillusioned with religion: -

Pass hence, and yet behold no region more;
Fade from this company of distracted men

⁵⁶³ Linda Parker, p.76.

Where all are mad deluders, or else sick deluded...⁵⁶⁴

Even if rejected or reimagined, Christianity was a major influence on Owen's work. What Hibberd calls a background of 'simple evangelical faith'⁵⁶⁵ he also notes was incredibly influential: 'The adult Wilfred cannot be understood as man or poet unless his youthful experience of Evangelical religion is remembered. It was a religion based on the Word, on words, on language.'⁵⁶⁶ As a child, Owen thought he saw in the Evangelical preachers his mother took him to see a chance to become the firebrand individualist he admired. As a result, according to McPhail, 'although in later years Wilfred fell out of sympathy with the Church, the language and teaching of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer are often apparent in his work.'⁵⁶⁷ While still young, Owen associated the powerful preachers' sermons and his mother's pious displays with superior knowledge—he began to associate being a religious man with being set apart as a respected outsider who the wider public could only partially understand.

In his early years, Owen displayed strong convictions, with Hibberd suggesting that the practice inherited from his mother of reading from the Bible daily, as well as his extensively quoting from scripture and 'sermon topics' in letters of the period, is evidence of religion having 'an all-pervasive influence on his approach to life and literature, its effects persisting long after he abandoned orthodoxy in 1912-14'.⁵⁶⁸ What could be called the deification of his favourite poets had links to his religious life: 'Owen tackled literature in the way that he had been taught to read the Bible',⁵⁶⁹ which is why he made 'pilgrimages', memorized passages, and modelled his behaviour on that of the poets he admired in a somewhat superficial way. In his copy of Colvin's *Keats*, he also underlined a

⁵⁶⁴ CWDC, p.85.

⁵⁶⁵ DHTLY, p.5.

⁵⁶⁶ DHANB, p.27.

⁵⁶⁷ McPhail, p.15.

⁵⁶⁸ DHANB, p.5.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

description of the young Keats having a ‘mind naturally unapt for dogma :- ready to entertain and appreciate any set of ideas [...] he could never wed himself to any as representing ultimate truth.’⁵⁷⁰ This was how Owen approached religion, rejecting it when he realised there was only one possible path he could take. Perhaps he would also have seen some grim humour in the fact that, like Keats, his epitaph would run counter to his intentions—Keats wanted his pithy line about his name being writ in water to stand alone, only for his political allies to append a dig at their enemies, while Owen’s mother chose for him a line from ‘The End’⁵⁷¹, removing a question mark and turning an expression of doubt into one of certainty in God’s acts: ‘Susan’s choice of phrases and her omission of the second question-mark reverses her son’s meaning and offers the visitor a devout but misleading interpretation.’⁵⁷² The original lines were, ‘Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth | All death will he annul, all tears assuage?’

Owen’s development as a poet can be framed in terms of his spirituality: Welland recognizes a ‘spiritual progress from the artificial aestheticism of the early years to the altruistic, splendid pity of [his] last poems’,⁵⁷³ which is also the period during which he comes to terms with his sense of faith outside the confines of organised religion. Several poems from this transitional period display a scepticism in the deeds of preachers. ‘Unto What Pinnacles’ does not value devotion: ‘Their offered lives are not so grand, | So active, or so sweet as many a one’s | That is undedicated, being reason-swayed’⁵⁷⁴. The same is expressed in ‘Whither is Passed the Softly-Vanished Day’: ‘Not prayer, unfired and faint, the high gods heed, | But the spent essence of a life aglow | Perfumeth heaven with

⁵⁷⁰ Colvin, Owen’s copy, p.34.

⁵⁷¹ CWDC, p.52.

⁵⁷² McPhail, p.63.

⁵⁷³ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.101.

⁵⁷⁴ CWDC, p.107.

fragrance unsurceased.’⁵⁷⁵ Heaven and gods may exist, but it is a manner of living, elevated and enlightened, that is worth pursuing. With this personal philosophy, spiritual leaders of a misled organised church are not only foolish, but potentially malicious. ‘Unto What Pinnacles’ continues:—

Their sole mission is to drag, entice
And push mankind to those same cloudy crags
Where they first breathed the madness-giving air
That made them feel as angels, that are less than men.

Christianity remains central to Owen’s work throughout his life: ‘the bitter realism of his writing is sometimes interwoven with dark symbolism and Christian imagery.’⁵⁷⁶ Some of the last lines of poetry Owen ever wrote in one of his most celebrated works, ‘Spring Offensive’, are a complex mixture of hope and poignancy derived from Christian concepts of the afterlife, with its intrinsic admixture of sadness and hope: ‘Some say God caught them even before they fell.’⁵⁷⁷ As we saw, ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ revolves around religious imagery, and ‘Exposure’ ends on, a crisis of faith:—

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.

The young Owen formed habits as a result of religious study—Stallworthy notes that ‘letter after letter to Susan Owen [...] gives the text of the day’s sermon, the hymns that were sung, or ends with a pious postscript’.⁵⁷⁸ It may be something of a stretch to claim, as Hibberd does, that the ‘awe and humility’ with which Owen approached studies of literature seem ‘essentially religious’ merely because ‘the central textbook in his early

⁵⁷⁵ CWDC, p159.

⁵⁷⁶ Carrington, p.266.

⁵⁷⁷ POWO, p.169.

⁵⁷⁸ JSWO, p.39.

education was the Bible':⁵⁷⁹ all enthusiasm in a religious child is not inherently religious. But while these developmental influences may not be quite so influential as Hibberd suggests, the later parallels cannot be denied, and it coheres that Owen's beliefs gave him a 'sense of mission which outlasted his youthful piety and eventually found expression in his fervent preaching against war'.⁵⁸⁰ Thus, the youthful Owen saw the firebrand preacher as an outsider with a platform from which to point out the wrongs of society, thus exhibiting his elevation from it, on the basis of a privileged understanding of God: 'the public role to which he aspired in 1918 was that of an evangelising preacher against hypocrisy, false creeds, oppression and lack of pity.'⁵⁸¹

What changed his method of expressing his faith was his experience at eighteen, when he became an assistant to the Vicar of Dunsden. While, as Stallworthy suggests, 'it would seem from Wilfred's letters of this period that his religious ardour had somewhat abated',⁵⁸² the position at the vicarage was a pragmatic option, as it would give him not only vocational experience but also tutoring for the university entrance exams then shaping his ambitions, ideal for a young man who had always been 'a hard-working pupil and a voracious reader'⁵⁸³.

Excepting when 'his feelings [...] attached themselves to the parish children',⁵⁸⁴ Owen's time in the Vicarage was not happy. The tutoring seems never to have happened,⁵⁸⁵ and he rapidly became disillusioned with organized religion and the gulf between what he had expected from a life of faith and what he experienced. A draft letter to the vicar, Herbert Wigan, remained in his personal effects after his death, though there is no evidence

⁵⁷⁹ DHANB p.5.

⁵⁸⁰ DHTLY, p.5.

⁵⁸¹ DHOTP, p.13.

⁵⁸² JSWO, p.48.

⁵⁸³ Jane Potter, *Wilfred Owen: An Illustrated Life* (Oxford: Bodleian Library Publishing, 2014), p.24.

⁵⁸⁴ DHOTP, p.21.

⁵⁸⁵ JSWO, p.70.

whether or not a final version was ever sent; in it, Owen wrote, ‘The Christian Life affords imagination, physical sensation, aesthetic philosophy. There is but one dimension in the Christian religion, the straight line upwards whereas I cannot conceive of less than 3’.⁵⁸⁶

As previously established, the facts about Owen’s departure from the Vicarage are now lost, effectively censored by his brother, for reasons that can now only be a matter of conjecture. However, at the very least, dramatic changes in his feelings towards organized religion were made explicit: ‘I have murdered my false creed’, he told his mother shortly before leaving, continuing, ‘escape from this hotbed of religion I now long for more than I could ever have conceived a year and three months ago...’⁵⁸⁷ If ceasing work as a vicar’s assistant because of a crisis of faith does not seem dramatic to a modern reader, especially one aware of the extremes Owen would soon experience, to the young man barely out of his teens the about-face was dramatic indeed: given the language he used in his letters home he felt very strongly about the matter and it may have led to an explosive argument with the vicar. It is possible that this argument and the language used against the Vicar was what Harold saw as unbecoming the image of his brother he wanted to sculpt, and therefore censored—not any kind of homosexual scandal. But again, there is no definitive evidence.

This upheaval had a profound affect. Immediately after leaving the vicarage, Owen was tormented by nightmares to the extent that he stayed bedridden,⁵⁸⁸ though this may have been an overdramatic imitation of his mother’s hypochondria. These sorts of nightmares would recur later as a symptom of his shell-shock and gain prominence in his poetry—as in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, where ‘In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, | He plunges at me’⁵⁸⁹ and in ‘The Sentry’, where ‘Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids’, |

⁵⁸⁶ Reproduced *ibid.*, p.85; found on the reverse side of an early draft of the poem ‘The Unreturning’.

⁵⁸⁷ WOCL, p.175.

⁵⁸⁸ DHANB, p.125.

⁵⁸⁹ POWO, p.117.

Watch my dreams still'.⁵⁹⁰ After he recovered, Owen attempted the entrance exams to University College, Reading but failed,⁵⁹¹ and not being able to attend a university that he already considered inadequate compared with Oxford or Cambridge would, as we have already seen in our discussion of class, thereafter remain a sore point with him.

The rest of Owen's life was affected by this rejection of his creed. 'He never quite shook off the fear that his secret desires and his break from religion were sins which would not be forgiven, so that his poetry from 1912 onwards returns obsessively to images of guilt, fire, hell and everlasting pain',⁵⁹² writes Hibberd, which arguably stood Owen in good stead to describe the horrific, even infernal conditions of the Somme. Certainly the images recur at every stage in Owen's subsequent poetic development. One of Owen's earliest poems on the theme of death and his poetic capacity for sympathy, 1912's 'Deep Under Turfy Grass' muses on mortality after the funeral of a mother and child, with the closing thought that 'Hell's reprieve is worth not this one bloom.'⁵⁹³ Two years later, 'Long Ages Past', a deeply decadent poem close enough to Wilde's 'The Sphinx' that Campbell sees it as indirect evidence Owen reading Wildean poetry as early as 1914⁵⁹⁴, ends on an image of damnation ('The fires of Hell have held thee in their fangs'⁵⁹⁵. Later, the Craiglockhart sonnet that begins, 'The city lights along the waterside' closes on the line, 'Ineffable God, give Pardon that I sinned.'⁵⁹⁶ The image of religious contrition, sin or damnation was throughout Owen's writing career a powerful way to conclude a poem.

Sin and penance had somewhat thrilling connotations, resonating with Owen's admiration for Decadence. Stallworthy comments of 'Lines Written on my Nineteenth

⁵⁹⁰ POWO, p.165.

⁵⁹¹ DHANB, p.130.

⁵⁹² DHOTP, p.24.

⁵⁹³ CWDC, p.106.

⁵⁹⁴ Campbell, p.84.

⁵⁹⁵ CWDC, p.117.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., p.152.

‘Birthday’ that ‘a sense of sin, frequently associated with such an upbringing, may perhaps account for the masochistic note to be detected in certain poems of this period’.⁵⁹⁷ Sin and taboo were connected to rebellion and the rejection of traditional denominational religion, and as we have already seen, there was a sense of attractive opposition between Christianity and homosexual subsections of society. Aside from the images in ‘Maundy Thursday’, it is interesting to note that in Owen’s library, the only representation of notorious rebel Christopher Marlowe is *Edward II*, depicting the downfall of a king who pays his homosexual lovers too much attention. Yet in Owen’s copy, only two parts are underlined, not in Gaveston’s loving opening speech or any other potential homoeroticism, but when the king is confronting death and turns to his faith: ‘Even then when I shall lose my life, / My mind may be more steadfast on my God.’⁵⁹⁸ While Owen’s attraction to the play may have seemed to have been the taboo subjects of homosexual devotion and sin, his markings seem to show an overarching interest in religious devotion, particularly during times of heightened duress.

Quitting his position at Dunsden led directly to Owen’s work on the continent, following the advice of a doctor who suggested ‘a winter in the South of France would do him good’.⁵⁹⁹ It was during this period that Owen felt he greatly matured, as well as being where he met individuals like Tailhade who would be greatly influential on his work and give him the confidence to approach men like Monro and Sassoon. He never entirely left behind his faith, however, whether in terms of his beliefs or in terms of reliance on the

⁵⁹⁷ JSWO, pp.70-71.

⁵⁹⁸ Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, 5th edition, Owen’s copy (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1908), p.110. Emphasis Owen’s. The other line he marked is Gurney’s line as he stabs Lightborn, just after the King’s death: ‘Excellent well: take this for thy reward,’ p.112.

⁵⁹⁹ JSWO, p.93.

established place religion had in respectable society: when he required a character reference for his admission as an officer cadet, it was to the local Shrewsbury vicar he turned.⁶⁰⁰

The enduring image of Owen is not of a particularly godly man, and despite the religious imagery of ‘Spring Offensive’, the biting call to a higher authority that concludes ‘Inspection’ (‘The race will bear Field-Marshal God’s inspection’⁶⁰¹), it would no doubt be a surprise to many casually acquainted with his work that he came close to becoming a priest. To a degree, Christian beliefs are taken as a background element of most English writing, particularly when, like Owen, the writer had devout parents.⁶⁰² Where an ambivalent attitude to religion emerges in his poetry, the uninitiated may simply read irreverence directed toward all Christian spirituality, rather than only institutions—as in the ‘mockeries’ of ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ or the evocation of God in ‘Spring Offensive’ following only an experience of ‘the hot blast and fury of hell’s upsurge’.⁶⁰³ ‘Soldier’s Dream’ is more irreverent still—in it, the merciful, ‘kind’ Jesus stops the weapons of war, rusting the bayonets with tears and removing all bombs and weapons, only for God the Father to intervene, empower the warlike archangel Michael to see to it that all the Son’s work was undone. Owen’s vision of warfare encompass a sense of abandonment by God, but this was a preoccupation before his battlefield experience and before the popularity of the soldier-Christ took hold.

These poems also belie Owen’s complexity of feeling on the subject of religion. It may seem that he has a typical experience of disillusionment, but his was an atypical connection with religion rather than Owen lazily participating in the hackneyed imagery of

⁶⁰⁰Wilfred Owen, ‘Owen’s Application for Admission to an Officer Cadet Unit’, The First World War Poetry Digital Archive <<http://www.lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5100/5063>> [accessed 15 November 2017], p.2.

⁶⁰¹ POWO, p.72.

⁶⁰² See, for example, Raymond Tschumi on C.S. Lewis - ‘because of his education (Lewis was the son of an Anglican clergyman [...]), he is consciously or not, influenced by Christian doctrine’: Raymond Tschumi, *Thought in Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul., 1951), p.247.

⁶⁰³ POWO, p.169.

the period. Yet for Owen, religion represented something very personal—an expression of higher understanding and exclusive knowledge, so that although he became disillusioned with organised Christianity, he continued to have a great regard for the spiritually enlightened as displaying just the sort of knowledge and sensitivity that set apart the distinguished outsider figure. Even though he ceased to aspire to be like a clergyman, ‘changes of direction in his faith did not bring his church-going to an end’.⁶⁰⁴

Owen saw two different ways to align religious faith with his ideals of elevated outsiderdom: in his youth, he saw evangelical preachers as distinguished by their eccentricities and advanced knowledge. In becoming better-acquainted with organised religion, he came to see the linear path defined there as too limiting, too lacking in individualism—in essence, too ordinary to be elevated. Therefore he began to consider those of orthodox faith to represent the wider society he wished to transcend. The faith he retained—personal, sometimes irreverent, but strong and individualistic—thus replaced his earlier conceptions, and seemed to him the ideal path. As Welland put it in a letter to E.A. Lashford, ‘What changed was not, I think, the sincerity of his religious belief but its orthodoxy.’⁶⁰⁵

Through poetry, through religion, through the military brotherhood, through ‘Uranianism’—through all these possibilities Owen explored being set apart and elevated. Arguably, the pursuit led to his death—but it also led to his life. His work and message would have been fundamentally different without this preoccupation. As we will see in the next chapter, it was also at the centre of why in the decades after his death, he increasingly began to be favoured by key literary figures, until finally his popularity surged with a

⁶⁰⁴ Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, p.30.

⁶⁰⁵ Letter from Welland to E.A. Lashford, 15 December 1960: Welland archives DSW/1/1/3/9/50.

'boom in Owen studies'.⁶⁰⁶ His words resonated with a new generation, 'cynical of the long-accepted authority of Church and State, impatient of old barriers and divisions'⁶⁰⁷, chiming with a post-war propensity to question authority. The 'spirit' Owen dreamed he would be considered part of in his draft prologue was far more wide-reaching than he could have imagined.

⁶⁰⁶ Williams, p.125.

⁶⁰⁷ Lyn MacDonald, *1914-1918: Voices & Images of the Great War* (London: Penguin, 1988), p.2.

Chapter 3: Emblematic Iconoclast—the Changing Posthumous Reputation of Wilfred Owen

It is a critical commonplace that the Great War acted as a watershed in the early twentieth century, an important dividing line between Victorian England—with its gentility, marked gender differentiation, imperial self-confidence, bourgeois conventionality, and complacency about class stratification—and the modern age of skepticism, radical ambiguity, and the refutation of conventional wisdom. The story should be entirely familiar: men went to war with Rupert Brooke and returned with Siegfried Sassoon. [...] Now, of course, each element in this narrative has been challenged.⁶⁰⁸

Professor Dennis Welland's unfinished work provisionally titled 'The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen' was to be 'a kind of biography of the life and growth of Owen's *oeuvre* and reputation after his death, something that does not need to be recorded in this way on behalf of other poets.'⁶⁰⁹ This would have been an important contribution to Owen studies firstly because it would challenge the notion that Owen was immediately recognised as a celebrated and influential poet. Secondly, it would give a clearer impression of how slowly the complete poems and fragments and correspondence were made public, so that it would be possible to connect changing impressions of Owen with available information. It would have been useful to have a scholarly work to illustrate the 'phoenix-like aspect to the rise of these poems from what might so easily have become the ashes of their miscellaneous, unsorted, and usually unfinished, manuscripts that survived among his few effects.'⁶¹⁰ While this development is covered briefly at the end of several biographies, it has never received a dedicated work.

Professor Welland never finished the endeavour. In 1998, he stopped work, a post-it note on the manuscript reading, 'I came to a halt at about this point. It happens to be a

⁶⁰⁸ Hollis, p.187.

⁶⁰⁹ Welland, 'The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen', manuscript p.1, archive p.3.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

“natural break” and you read Sections III and IV as a self-contained piece. DW.’⁶¹¹ Four years later, he passed away, a respected academic not only for his works on Owen, but on Mark Twain, Arthur Miller and more. This chapter does not seek to finish his work, nor can it be informed by the wealth of first-hand knowledge Professor Welland would have been able to supply, but aims to trace the development of Owen’s posthumous reputation from the perspective of the effects of Owen’s conception of outsiderdom.

Owen was not immediately recognised as a war poet. Welland’s prologue would have pointed out that this can surprise readers: ‘So secure has Owen’s poetic eminence now become, and so familiar his work, that surprise is sometimes expressed at the length of time it took to achieve that position.’⁶¹² As mentioned in the first chapter, to understand Owen’s representative role as a spokesperson, it is necessary to dispel the myth that he was instrumental in the formation of misleading memories. As Brian Bond writes:

The ‘anti-war’ writers have exerted more influence on public opinion since the 1960s than they did in the 1930s. To take just one example, Wilfred Owen’s poetry was little known in 1930, whereas Rupert Brooke’s was still enormously popular⁶¹³

Owen was not prominent during the Second World War. When it began, the conflict had been long foreseen—Churchill, who had admired Sassoon’s verse to such an extent that during the First World War he could recite much of *Counter-Attack* from memory,⁶¹⁴ had made the poet’s acquaintance and warned him that a new war was ‘inevitable’.⁶¹⁵ If A.J.P. Taylor is to be believed, Churchill was also critical of how the First World War had been

⁶¹¹ Post-it Note, Welland archive, DSW/1/3/3/3/7.

⁶¹² Welland, *The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen*, p.3.

⁶¹³ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, p.28.

⁶¹⁴ Roberts, p.130.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.254.

run, and with the advent of the Second World War, was conscious of ‘the failures of the past’⁶¹⁶.

Even so, the prospect horrified both Sassoon and Blunden, the latter of whom was additionally conflicted after having been affected by propaganda in Germany: like Auden and Isherwood, he had lived there in the 1930s. Sassoon, whose protest was against the prolonging of the War, not its inception, was resigned when war was declared again: rather than attempting a rallying cry against war, he accepted that armed conflict was the only way to stop the Nazi threat.⁶¹⁷

Poetry is not associated with the Second World War as it is with the First. No new writer of the period is known as a ‘war poet’ like Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, or other name inscribed on the memorial stone in Westminster Abbey. Auden and his circle, who admired Owen and sought to witness the battles of the Spanish civil war for greater insight, avoided the subject, leading Mildred Davidson to speculate that while ‘to Owen and Sassoon war was horrible in itself, to Auden it is a “symptom” of a greater horror. That is why war as a subject on its own is rarely touched upon by this generation of poets.’⁶¹⁸ Welland feels that because of the Blitz and other attacks on British territories, ‘the reality of that war needed no poetic transcription by a second Owen, to make it real to the civilians at home’,⁶¹⁹ but this carries with it several dubious implications—that civilians during the Great War had Owen’s unpublished words to make the conflict real; that Owen’s words were intended for civilians rather than for fellow soldiers; and that the misery of the war experience at home was sufficiently similar enough to the misery of the war experience on the battlefield to have equivalence.

⁶¹⁶ A.J.P. Taylor, *The War Lords* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p.74.

⁶¹⁷ Roberts., p.275.

⁶¹⁸ Davidson, p.78.

⁶¹⁹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, pp.146-47.

Nonetheless, it is true the Second World War ‘differed from the First in kind, being a war not of men, but which involved men. There were many forms of death [...] but the day of trenches and bayonets was fast becoming obsolete and hand to hand fighting was reserved for the few,’ as Davidson puts it.⁶²⁰ Though R.N. Currey asserts that only in the twentieth century were wars fought by ‘the ordinary educated man’,⁶²¹ whereas prior to that England ‘sent off professional armies—rather as we might football teams’,⁶²² it would seem that the Second World War was also closer to kind of conflict, leaving only the First to widely involve civilians. Riddell feels this has its basis in historical circumstance: he feels that ‘the issues of the war were, for the most part, too clear and urgent to stimulate a rich poetry’,⁶²³ as clear opposition to the fascist policies of Nazi Germany made the English view of the conflict a ‘fundamental holy war between good and evil.’⁶²⁴ Corelli Barnett sees this in the resultant literature: ‘in the British memoirs and histories of the Second World War, there is the same emphasis on “victory” alone, the same exclusive preoccupation with the defeat of Germany.’⁶²⁵

A reduction in moral ambiguity and less of a division between soldiers and uninvolved civilians changed the messages put forward by poets. Effectively, poets were not stimulated by the stance of an outsider: the country was united against a threat that seemed purely, simply evil. There was no moral ambiguity, no opposing the way the war was being waged yet continuing to fight it and believe that victory was necessary. Since the Second World War clearly delineated good and evil, at least in the public consciousness, its poets were not taking a stance against the war machine of which they were a part.

⁶²⁰ Davidson, p.94.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁶²² R.N. Currey, *Poets of the 1939-1945 War* (Woking and London: Unwin Brothers Limited, 1960), p.8.

⁶²³ J.N. Riddell, *C. Day Lewis* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971), p.96.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.96-97.

⁶²⁵ Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, p.588.

It is easy to imagine, years later, with Owen considered one of the most popular of all English poets that had he survived he would have been a prominent opponent to the Second World War. It is tempting to imagine the kind of verse he would produce, the mode in which he would express himself, but of course it would all be pure speculation, for he 'did not live long enough to see how the implications of his work might be developed'.⁶²⁶

It would also perhaps surprise Owen to learn that when a second vast conflict swept across Europe, Sassoon was almost irrelevant. 'No one has asked me to write a word about this war, or shown any awareness of my existence [...] I am merely bracketed with Rupert Brooke by the Fleet Street scribblers!' he complained, evidently seeing the association as insulting.⁶²⁷ Sassoon was 'not regarded as a significant poet in the Second World War', Moorcroft Wilson adds, reflecting that perhaps it was because he did not give any indication that he wanted to speak out. Perhaps the same would be true of Owen; World War II simply did not produce poets associated with the event in the same way that Owen and Sassoon were associated with the Great War, and even before Owen's popularity markedly grew with Britten's *War Requiem*, one critic was writing, 'it is, of course, true that the Second War produced [...] no poet of quite the stature of Owen'.⁶²⁸

This critic was R.N. Currey, who in his 1960 book *Poets of the 1939-1945 War*, gives a good indication of how Owen was seen shortly before the remarkable growth in his popularity with the general public: the question 'Where are the poets of the Second World War?', Currey believes, is different when asked from different perspectives. 'From the journalist it means: Where is the Rupert Brooke of the Second War, the handsome, gifted young man who dies converting some portion of a foreign field to English soil? From the

⁶²⁶ Motion, *Keats*, p.577.

⁶²⁷ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Journey From the Trenches: A Biography 1918-1967* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2003), p.316.

⁶²⁸ Currey, p.7.

intellectual it means: Where is there a Second War Wilfred Owen?’⁶²⁹ This distinction may come as a surprise given the current attitude towards Owen, but before his popularization and the association of his work with school curricula, his work was seen as the preserve of intellectuals.

Currey continues:—

It is impossible to understand the good poetry of the Second World War except in relation to Owen, and Owen’s statement is incomplete today without the best of the poetic statement that followed it [...] Already young people growing up do not easily distinguish between the poetry of the First War and that of the Second.⁶³⁰

Who are these poets, then, who complete Owen’s statement? The poets Currey names as ‘worthy successors to Owen’—Sidney Keyes, Alun Lewis and Keith Douglas—while by no means entirely forgotten, could not in fairness be called popular poets today. None of them appear, for example, in the BBC’s *The Nation’s Favourite Poems* poll:⁶³¹ the 1941 poem ‘High Flight (An Airman’s Ecstasy)’ by teenage poet John Gillespie Magee is the sole poem on the subject of the war represented from that period, but he is not mentioned by Currey, suggesting that ‘High Flight’s popularity was largely confined to the United States, where it was originally published.

Owen’s current popularity perhaps obscures the fact his star waned rather than waxed with the advent of a new war, though he and Sassoon continued to be anthologised—the martyr more prominently than the survivor. ‘Even Sassoon fell from public view during the middle part of the century,’ writes Andrew Motion,⁶³² and Egremont recounts how in early 1945, ‘A New York anthology of war poetry annoyed him because Owen was more heavily represented than [he was]—“the canonisation of Wilfred is still in full swing”, he told

⁶²⁹ Currey, p.7.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., p.8.

⁶³¹ See BBC Books, *The Nation’s Favourite Poems* (Chatham: BBC Books, 1996).

⁶³² Motion, *The Poets of the Great War*, web.

Blunden. “It has become a sort of intelligentsia cant”.⁶³³ Stephen Spender, prominent poet and novelist of the Auden Group, admired Owen’s writing at around this time, and wishing to know more about him, went to visit Sassoon. However, the visit was not what Spender expected: when the visitor ‘asked him what Owen was like, Sassoon replied “He was embarrassing. He had a Grammar School accent”,’ which leads Moorcroft Wilson to assert that ‘the remark may have been a reaction to Spender’s desire to know about Owen rather than himself, but it is significant that he could make it at all.’⁶³⁴ He even showed a little resentment or inferiority toward Spender’s group later in a letter to Welland, who had mentioned 20th-century writers are being introduced into his university’s curriculum. ‘Eliot and the Auden group only?’⁶³⁵ Sassoon’s snobbish reaction may have been him exaggerating one of the negative traits he considered Owen to have—after all, at the time ‘increasing enthusiasm for Owen could be irritating to him’⁶³⁶—but it is notable that his attack was one based on class. Sassoon wasn’t only directing his anger at what he had felt was an irritation: he was saying what he knew would have upset Owen the most, which was casting him out of a privileged group and into the undistinguished masses—denying him a position as an elevated outsider.

While Andrew Motion is correct that ‘it wasn’t really until the 1960s that the kind of reverence now given to the war poets began to take shape’,⁶³⁷ it becomes tempting on that basis to conclude that Owen remained as little-known in the 1940s and 1950s as he was in the 1920s, which was not the case. Vincent Trott gives an excellent account of Owen’s appearance in anthologies and newspaper articles, arguing against Sheffield and Reynolds’ claims that Owen was little-known in the 1930s, concluding that “Owen was perhaps not

⁶³³ Egremont, p.436.

⁶³⁴ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *The Making of a War Poet*, p.400.

⁶³⁵ Welland, *The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen*, p.12.

⁶³⁶ Egremont, p.351.

⁶³⁷ Motion, *The Poets of the Great War*, web.

yet the pre-eminent poet of the war, but his reputation had already been secured.”⁶³⁸ Owen was by no means forgotten in this period, even if the statements of the First World War poets may seem surprisingly irrelevant to the way our nation contemplated the Second. Sassoon’s vexations can be said to reflect more about the comparative prominence of Owen than the two of them growing extremely obscure—he was also irritated when the BBC asked him to talk on the radio about his one-time disciple Wilfred and refused the request,⁶³⁹ the most noteworthy part being that the BBC wanted to make such a programme at all. In the event, he eventually agreed to write a ‘talk’, although not to read it, for a fee.⁶⁴⁰ By 1960 and Currey’s book, it appears that ‘important as he was on his own account, [Sassoon] was perhaps even more important for the confidence and sympathy he gave to Wilfred Owen’.⁶⁴¹ It is also notable that all of Currey’s assessments of Second World War poets come from the context of Owen and Sassoon: Sidney Keyes’ work is called ‘a continuation of Wilfred Owen’s’,⁶⁴² and even when there is an exception, it is framed in the same terms: Roy Campbell is unique in that his work owes ‘nothing to Owen and very little to Sassoon.’⁶⁴³

In an additional layer of complication, in *Modernism and the Second World War* Keith Alldritt challenges the dominance of the poets Currey mentions:—

Discussion of the poetry of the Second World War has largely been confined to the work of the lyric poets. I too greatly admire the work of the young lyric poets such as Alun Lewis, Keith Douglas, Lincoln Kirstein and Bernard Gutteridge. [...However,] the lyric finally proved an inadequate form for dealing with all the issues, many of them specifically related to language, raised by the Second World War. It took Modernism and the long

⁶³⁸ Vincent Trott, *Publishers, Readers and the Great War: Literature and Memory since 1918* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp.59-60.

⁶³⁹ Moorcroft Wilson, *The Making of a War Poet*, p.440.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.452.

⁶⁴¹ Currey, p.9.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.33.

poem to put the Second World War into a full and creative perspective.⁶⁴⁴

Aldritt's argument is that Pound and Eliot ought to be considered the major war poets of the Second World War, as they were 'poets who produced major works in response to the war of 1939-1945',⁶⁴⁵ built upon the valid assertion that 'The Waste Land' and 'Little Gidding' ought to be considered poems 'about the First World War'.⁶⁴⁶ While Owen's relationship with Modernism is a subject for the next chapter, if we accept Aldritt's premise and consider the Modernists the dominant force of early 1940s poetry, Owen not being considered Modernist and being condemned by Yeats may have to some extent made his work less popular. However, as Modernism was considered intellectualist and at this stage so was Owen's work, it seems unlikely the audience for each was mutually exclusive.

While acknowledging that during the Second World War, Owen remained popular primarily with intellectuals and fellow poets, what was it that gave him a relative growth in popularity while Sassoon was falling from public esteem? Assuredly, the appeal of martyrdom cannot be underestimated, and Owen's sincere fury perhaps conveys an idea more directly than Sassoon's scathing satire. But I contend that it is primarily Owen's status as one who belonged neither to a specific literary movement, nor to a social elite, that brought with it appeal to the poets and intellectuals of the day. Sassoon and Graves gave an impression of comfortable assurance in their superiority, where Owen seemed to represent one who had transcended limitations from ordinary origins, so it is small wonder his appeal was broad. But the reason he gave that impression was, ironically, his desire to rise above what made him who he was and to represent himself as elevated by secret knowledge.

⁶⁴⁴ Keith Alldritt, *Modernism in the Second World War* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1989), preface (printed without page numbers).

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., p.114.

While Owen's early sales had been limited, his work had reached influential people who would in one way or another keep his reputation alive, a list which as we will see includes Orwell, Day Lewis and Blunden—the latter of whom possibly recommended his work to Christopher Isherwood, Auden and Spender. The Auden group were then the most likely point of introduction for the young Britten to Owen's work. In general, studies of Owen besides Welland's unfinished work have either dismissed the years 1921-1962 as largely uneventful, whether in portraying them as years of obscurity or portraying Owen as a well-known war poet from his death, but in fact key identifiable figures championed his work to successive generations, and at every juncture Owen appealed to new literary figures. This appeal had its roots in his position as one who defied expectations, who transcended the perceived limitations of his background and who sought companionship in elevated societies centred on secret knowledge. Owen's sales were modest during this period, but, seemingly at least in some part because he was not yet ubiquitous or studied by children, he was seen as a challenging figure for intellectuals.

This unevenness in Owen's posthumous reception is sometimes recognized, but in lieu of Welland's study has not been examined in depth, quantified or analysed. Different studies give such different reports that further research is required for informed comment, and that is what this chapter seeks to do, in the explanatory context of Owen as an outsider figure. For it was this status, enhanced by Sassoon's desire to keep Owen mysterious and somewhat idolized, that determined Owen's reputation though the half-century following his death. The reasons Owen grew from relatively obscurity to nationally acknowledged representative of war poets can be traced to the manner in which he chose to present himself in relation to authority and, crucially, to what he considered the familiar and mundane. This becomes ironic when considered in the modern context, as Owen himself can now be called 'familiar'. This section, in conjunction with the others in this chapter,

seeks not only to provide a clearer picture of Owen's effect on literature, but to elucidate the reasons behind this effect in terms of our prior conclusions.

The Nation and Wheels: Early Appearances in Print

The pitiful survivors who returned to Britain were silenced by the trauma of their experiences—only the words of a tiny band of warrior poets could communicate the truth of what they had been through.⁶⁴⁷

Upon his death, Owen's poetry was almost entirely in the possession of his family, along with a bag of papers he had asked his mother to destroy should he be killed—which she dutifully burned. Hibberd relates that Susan was somewhat careless with documents: she 'often sent irreplaceable manuscripts to editors by ordinary mail [...] gave some drafts away to friends and even considered donating one to a charity auction'.⁶⁴⁸ To this he adds 'There is no evidence that any complete poems went missing, except for a few minor pieces that survive only as copies made by Leslie Gunston.' During his lifetime, only five of Owen's poems had been published—one of them on two separate occasions—and of these, only 'Futility' is amongst his best-known work.

In September 1917, Owen he used his position as editor of Craiglockhart's paper *The Hydra* to self-publish his verse anonymously, quoting lines from 'The Dead-Beat' as if from an anonymous source, and including the full text of 'Song of Songs', which Sassoon had praised as 'a perfect work' at their second meeting.⁶⁴⁹ This was the first full poem Owen would see published, even if only for the circulation of his institution, and at nobody's discretion but his own; he would later self-publish 'The Next War' in the same way. 'Song of Songs' was not only the first full poem Owen would see in print, however, it would also be the first time he was discussed amongst the literary elite, if not in particularly good terms: this was the poem alongside which Sassoon wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell,

⁶⁴⁷ Todman, *The Great War*, p.xii.

⁶⁴⁸ DHANB, p.461.

⁶⁴⁹ WOCL, p.486.

‘The man who wrote this brings me quantities & I have to say kind things. He will improve, I think!’⁶⁵⁰

Despite Sassoon clearly not being as impressed as he had suggested to Owen, ‘Song of Songs’ would be published again, this time nationally, winning a consolation prize in a *Bookman* competition. Owen played down the significance of the achievement to his mother: ‘The Bookman affair about which you are so kindly importunate was a mere idle job, an old lyric I condescended to send from Scarborough.’⁶⁵¹ This insouciant view may have been justified, however, as he had by then already accomplished a greater feat: upon hearing news of a mining disaster, he had written a war poem called ‘Miners’.⁶⁵² He sent it to *The Nation*, where it was accepted and published alongside ‘Futility’ and ‘Hospital Barge’—news of which Owen received as he made his way to London for Robert Graves’ wedding. Going to the wedding of a famous poet and meeting other literary persons there—Edward Marsh and Charles Scott Moncrieff in particular—Owen must have been gained confidence. This was the summation of all Owen’s ambitions: defying expectations based on his social background to join an elevated group.

Owen’s poetry appearing in *The Nation* had another significant consequence: Osbert and Edith Sitwell, the former of whom Owen also met at Graves’ wedding, asked him for a contribution to their publication *Wheels*. Owen managed to compile a submission before returning to active duty,⁶⁵³ and therefore as well as those with Susan, fair copies of a small selection of the poems Owen considered his best were in the possession of the Sitwells. Though divisive, Osbert, Edith and Sacheverell Sitwell were not only literary but extremely good at promotion: as Leavis with characteristic venom put it, ‘the Sitwells belong to the

⁶⁵⁰ DHANB, p.340.

⁶⁵¹ WOCL, p.554.

⁶⁵² POWO, p.112.

⁶⁵³ DHANB, p.416.

history of publicity rather than of poetry.’⁶⁵⁴ The poems Owen had sent would indeed appear posthumously, and advance the idea that Owen was for intellectuals: *Wheels*, according to Ziegler, ‘set out to revolt against the prevailing ethos, to surprise and, with luck, offend the leaden bourgeoisie. The leaden bourgeoisie, as was their wont, paid not the slightest attention but *Wheels* caused a stir among a small group of intellectuals and would-be intellectuals.’⁶⁵⁵ It contained primarily Modernist poems, and the time Owen had picked up a copy was the probable inspiration for his single, fragmentary poem that can be called Modernist, anthologized as ‘The Roads Also’⁶⁵⁶. It is a short work, and though it is not explicitly in the Modernist mode as we recognize it today, Hibberd calls it an ‘attempt’ at such.⁶⁵⁷

What Owen sent to the Sitwells was not Modernist, but still daring and unorthodox by the standards of the day, so *Wheels* was not as poor a fit for him as might be assumed. Owen’s verse may have been influenced by the Romantics, and in terms of scansion and structure aligned with the Georgians, but Owen considered himself to be pushing free from the constraints of conventional verse with his sound effects and pararhyme, feeling he was experimenting ‘like the advanced composers’.⁶⁵⁸ Though it seems from a 21st-century perspective to be overstating the case to call him a ‘Modernist’—as, for one example, Richard Greene does⁶⁵⁹—it can be difficult to truly pin down the differentiation between ‘Modernist’ and ‘Modern’ as used in 1917. Certainly Owen describes Sassoon’s verse as ‘Modern Poetry’,⁶⁶⁰ but the tradition of Modernism as developed from Symbolism is distinct from his sense here. Hibberd’s terminology is perhaps useful: he believes Owen

⁶⁵⁴ F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation*, new edn (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p.73.

⁶⁵⁵ Ziegler, p.69.

⁶⁵⁶ POWO, p.191.

⁶⁵⁷ DHANB, p.407.

⁶⁵⁸ WOCL, p.531.

⁶⁵⁹ *Edith Sitwell: Selected Letters*, ed. by Richard Greene, revised edn (London: Virago Books, 1998), p.XV.

⁶⁶⁰ WOCL, p.488.

‘holds a transitional place between the nineteenth century and Modernism, inheriting the aspirations and moral urgency of the Romantics and Victorians but seeing the need for modernist “insensibility”’.⁶⁶¹

At the very least, Owen was not seen as too old-fashioned for inclusion in *Wheels*, even though it was intended to be challenging and progressive. Published annually, *Wheels* lasted for six editions, which the Sitwells referred to as ‘cycles’,⁶⁶² and ‘its great triumph was that it was acknowledged, unequivocally, as a challenge and an alternative to the established and establishment *Georgian Poetry*’.⁶⁶³ However, it was ‘not, in literary terms, a heavyweight production,’ according to Sarah Bradford, who notes that ‘despite all the trumpeting about “modernism” and “free verse”, neither T.S. Eliot nor Ezra Pound was tempted to join the band’.⁶⁶⁴ Eliot in fact reviewed the 1917 anthology, criticizing the poets therein as having ‘a little the air of smattering [...] Instead of rainbows, cuckoos, daffodils and timid hares, they give us garden gods, guitars and mandolin...’, though he conceded that it was a ‘more serious book’ than the latest *Georgian Poetry*.⁶⁶⁵ He and Pound clearly had little respect for the Sitwell siblings on a personal level: in their correspondence, the pair would facetiously render their surname as ‘Shitwell’.⁶⁶⁶

Owen had none of this disdain: like him, Osbert had experienced trench warfare and his poetic response to it had been published in *The Nation*. ‘You know the misery that lies | Under the Surface—| And we will dig it up for you!’ concludes ‘Rhapsode’, published in

⁶⁶¹ DHOTP, p.x.

⁶⁶² Victoria Glendinning, *Edith Sitwell: A Unicorn Among Lions* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p.60.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁴ Sarah Bradford, *Sacheverell Sitwell* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), p.81.

⁶⁶⁵ Glendinning, p.60.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.81.

the July 27, 1917 edition.⁶⁶⁷ Osbert Sitwell had resigned from his military regiment in July 1914⁶⁶⁸ but upon the outbreak of a major war was resolved to do his duty⁶⁶⁹.

Though clearly viewing *Wheels* favourably, however, Owen had reason not to expect the impact of publication therein to be great: attempting to locate a copy for sale proved difficult even in Scarborough, where the Sitwells had a house, meaning he had to insist on it being ordered.⁶⁷⁰ Additionally, when mentioning being asked to submit to Murray McClymont, a fellow soldier poet who had been published in *More Songs by the Fighting Men*, McClymont had never heard of it.⁶⁷¹ Granted, little about a publication's reputation may be accurately gleaned from the knowledge of one individual, but that at least illustrates the publication was not universally recognized. That said, as Leavis emphasized, the Sitwells were recognized as accomplished publicists, so that at least amongst certain circles, 'Edith's and Osbert's talents for publicity had succeeded in attracting a good deal of attention'.⁶⁷² Aldous Huxley, while dismissive of the anthology, ultimately contributed, 'and was secretly flattered to be asked to do so'.⁶⁷³

The purpose of this contextualization of Owen's early publication history is to illustrate the unusual initial presentation of his works when they appeared shortly after his death: he had the support of the likes of Sassoon and Graves; his verse was enough of a departure from the kind of verse *Wheels* was set up to reject—not least in subject matter—that he was considered starkly modern in a literary landscape that had not yet been shaped by Eliot and Pound; and of course his personal story had the moving human element of sacrifice and martyrdom. Owen had died on the battlefield and his voice could now be

⁶⁶⁷ Ziegler, p.66.

⁶⁶⁸ John Pearson, *The Sitwells: A Family's Biography* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1930), p.88.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.89.

⁶⁷⁰ DHANB, p.406.

⁶⁷¹ JSWO, p.270.

⁶⁷² Bradford, pp.80-81.

⁶⁷³ Ziegler, p.69.

heard from beyond the grave, from one who had sacrificed himself and could be held up as a symbol of waste. But as one who had objected to how many perceived the war and emphasized the brutality of death rather than the glory of battle, he was also in opposition to then-current mainstream discourse on war—though by no means the only prominent discourse. ‘Unironic words about duty, glory, and honour may be unhearable for many modern readers, but those words were not by any means “unusable” for all poets during the war,’ writes Elizabeth Vandiver⁶⁷⁴, which I think is well-known to any who has studied Owen as a schoolchild and encounters his tirade against Jessie Pope.

As we have seen, he established an opposition between the soldiers, who had privileged understanding, and the civilians who could not possibly know what the war was truly like, making his verse seem belligerent and combative.

Though *Wheels* already had enough prominence to make ripples in literary circles, the inclusion of Wilfred Owen’s poetry in the fourth ‘cycle’, towards the end of 1919, is implied to have been something of an unexpected achievement by Sitwell biographers: Bradford considers the publication of the selection to have been a ‘coup’,⁶⁷⁵ while Victoria Glendinning calls the act ‘both an act of piety and a scoop on Edith’s part’.⁶⁷⁶ This may well be an opinion informed by hindsight, as publishing seven poems by an almost entirely unknown soldier poet cannot have seemed that much of a scoop in 1919, even if he had powerful friends and his style was unusual. Indeed, greater care could have been taken over the event: while the edition was dedicated to Owen’s memory, his name was ‘unfortunately spelt “Wilfid” on the title page’.⁶⁷⁷ The second ‘i’ is perhaps testament to the prominence of

⁶⁷⁴ Vandiver, p.3.

⁶⁷⁵ Bradford, p.97.

⁶⁷⁶ Glendinning, p.61.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, ‘the most popular young poet of the decade’,⁶⁷⁸ but the missing ‘r’ is more difficult to explain.

Owen’s appearance in *Wheels* and his compelling story brought him to the attention of a greater audience, but this was essentially limited to literary cliques. He was no Brooke, with his lauded personal beauty and his poetry that still gave an idealized picture of war and death in battle. He was also no Kipling, who wrote condemnations of the war with a literary reputation established well before hostilities in Europe began, and whose views on ‘the less creditable side of war’ were ‘conveniently overlooked’ by his public in any case.⁶⁷⁹ Owen was a mysterious figure, as no detailed biographical information had yet been released, and he took up an outsider’s stance in an outsiders’ publication.

As *Wheels* railed against the stagnation of the literary landscape, Owen was railing against the authorities in his life and the naivety of those at home—at least, that was how his war poems represented him. Though his literary merits were an obvious consideration, his inclusion was political: protests against the war made by an eloquent poet tragically killed in the last days of fighting, published by known pacifists, with words highlighting the ‘pity of war’, are clearly anti-establishment. Owen was cast in the tragic hero archetype, having fought until he lost his life. He was presented in simplified terms, and though in recent years this has come to mark him out as embodying all the myths and misconceptions about 1914-1918, before he became so widely-known in English culture he was an unusual fringe figure who fought and died for his minority beliefs. Archetypes are what feed myths, in a Jungian sense: ‘the archetypes were the undifferentiated raw material from which their

⁶⁷⁸ Hollis, p.6.

⁶⁷⁹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.15.

correlatives, like myths and fairy tales, might be distilled'.⁶⁸⁰ But Owen's story was but one of many, and his posthumous fame was still far off.

Owen's story clearly resonated with the Sitwells: though she never met him in person, and however cynical one may be about her business acumen, Edith's sincere sympathy can be detected in her letter to Susan Owen just before the publication of the 1919 cycle of *Wheels*, marking the anniversary of Owen's death. She wrote, 'All my thoughts are with you today, and will be tomorrow, unceasingly [...] I am dumb when I think what not only you, his mother, but we all, have lost. I shall keep the 4th of November always, as long as I live, as a day of mourning.' She was confident, too, that *Wheels* would help Wilfred's verse endure, adding, 'Tomorrow, his first poems in book form will be with you—the immortality of his great soul. What a wonderful moment it will be for you, though an agony, too. I cannot write more, because words are so little before the face of your loss and your grief. They sound too cold.'⁶⁸¹

Owen's writing had found a place. It was not amongst the conservative press, but equally, he was not ignored or forgotten. Owen had wanted to be published, and he had wanted to be read, and this was becoming a reality. There were others producing poetry similar to his, so he knew there was an audience who could discuss him; Owen could earn the respect of the few rather than the adulation of the masses, which is exactly what he hoped for. Owen had aimed his writing at a small, sympathetic readership while anticipating wider opposition, valuing as ever the opinions and kinship of those who presented themselves as having an elevated state of understanding. This at heart is the kind of outsiderdom Owen wished for, in a way that is very much in line with the ideas of the Decadents, but Owen's death on the battlefield gave his words a kind of additional,

⁶⁸⁰ Vincent Brome, *Jung: Man and Myth*, House of Stratus edn (London: House of Stratus, 2001), p.245.

⁶⁸¹ *Edith Sitwell: Selected Letters*, pp.31-32.

undeniable sincerity where the Decadents could be seen as merely posturing. He had given his life: it was clear he was not simply extemporizing in the abstract. Later writers, in particular Isherwood, would come to recognize this in his work.

Initial reaction to *Wheels* was mixed, though at the very least it is clear Owen's work was the outstanding part of the anthology's contents. 'Owen's quality was recognized by Middleton Murry—and dismissed by J.C. Squire in the *Mercury*', writes Glendinning.⁶⁸² Indeed, John Middleton Murry, while cautious in his praise for *Wheels* in general, had high regard for a particular poem, which he mentioned while holding comparing *Wheels* with the latest edition of *Georgian Poetry*:

We have our opinion; we know that there is a good deal of good poetry in the Georgian book, a little in *Wheels*. We know that there is much bad poetry in the Georgian book, and less in *Wheels*. We know that there is one poem in *Wheels* beside the intense and somber imagination of which even the good poetry of the Georgian book pales for a moment.⁶⁸³

The poem in question was Owen's 'Strange Meeting'. John Middleton Murry's review of the 1919 cycle of *Wheels*, published in the *Athenaeum* on 5 December 1919, was a keystone in establishing Owen's later reputation: Middleton Murry would go on to be a staunch supporter of Owen, and Ernest Griffin in his 1969 biography of Middleton Murry felt that he 'helped to reveal' the 'greatness' of a few major poets, including Owen.⁶⁸⁴ Soon after Owen's appearance in *Wheels*, Middleton Murry wrote in a letter to Katherine Mansfield, 'isn't that a fine poem of the dead soldier Wilfrid Owen? It's what Sassoon

⁶⁸² Glendinning, p.62.

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁴ Ernest G. Griffin, *John Middleton Murry* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969), p.42.

might have done, if he were any real good.’⁶⁸⁵ Owen’s initial appeal is summed up in this brief quote: he was instantly identifiable as a ‘dead soldier’, he represented the same anti-establishment stance as Sassoon, and at least in the influential critic’s view, wrote better verse. Middleton Murry’s attention did not go unnoticed by the canny Edith Sitwell, who wrote a letter of thanks for the positive review while further piquing his interest with another of Owen’s poems. This is revealed in another letter to Mansfield from Middleton Murry: ‘I had a very nice letter from Edith Sitwell, the editor of *Wheels*, about what I said of Wilfrid Owen—a nice letter, simple & straightforward—and (what is better) enclosing a poem by Owen, not quite as good as “Strange Meeting”, but with beautiful things in it. He’s a man I shall feel proud to have published.’⁶⁸⁶

If Owen’s poems had not received this sort of positive attention upon initial publication, perhaps his ‘posthumous life’ would have ended there. However, contact from Owen’s mother had already put further developments into motion: ‘soon after his death, [Susan Owen] wrote to Osbert, who confirmed that a selection of poems would appear in *Wheels 1919* and recommended that a book should be published, with an introduction by Sassoon.’⁶⁸⁷ After the positive reaction to the poems in *Wheels*, Edith began to prepare this volume, and was able to secure Owen’s manuscripts from Susan.

The task of sorting through the various different, incomplete drafts with many corrections and sometimes difficult handwriting proved problematic for Edith, whose ‘strong feelings and lack of scholarly experience led to a good many misreadings’.⁶⁸⁸ Nonetheless, she ‘worked hard on the difficult task of producing final texts from several drafts in varying states of revision and was extremely disappointed when, on consulting

⁶⁸⁵ *The Letters of John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield*, pp.234-35.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.246-47. There is no indication of which poem was sent.

⁶⁸⁷ DHTLY, p.135.

⁶⁸⁸ DHANB, p.462.

Sassoon about the last two,' he decided to take over the project.⁶⁸⁹ Arguably, he had a good case for doing so: 'Sassoon, who had belatedly heard of Wilfred's death, insisted on taking over the project, saying Wilfred would have wanted him to be editor.'⁶⁹⁰ However, Sassoon essentially swept aside Sitwell, whose 'relationship with him was uneasy' in any case,⁶⁹¹ thereafter doing almost nothing to improve upon her groundwork: after commandeering the project, he did no further editing and in the January of 1920 went to America, which as Edith complained to Susan Owen, meant he was 'leaving all your son's manuscripts with me to get ready for the printers by February 1st. Captain Sassoon has done nothing in the way of preparing them.'⁶⁹² The exact details of this process are obscure, with only Sitwell's correspondence to go on, but Welland wrote to Rupert Hart-Davis to ask if he could shed any more light on 'the respective roles of Siegfried Sassoon and Edith Sitwell in preparing the 1920 edition of Owen's poems,' because 'the accounts they each gave me of this differed.'⁶⁹³ Hart-Davis replied, 'I wish I could answer your [...] question but alas I can't.'⁶⁹⁴

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that Edith's editing was done 'not very accurately',⁶⁹⁵ but still, the task was completed 'and Sassoon wrote the introduction; *Poems by Wilfred Owen* came out in 1920.'⁶⁹⁶

The volume's publication did not immediately make Owen a celebrated literary figure, but it was also not ignored. In *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, Welland lists five reviews in prominent journals and newspapers, as well as articles that were written about Owen soon after his death, feeling that this indicated an unusually high degree of attention

⁶⁸⁹ Moorcroft Wilson, *The Journey from the Trenches*, p.127.

⁶⁹⁰ DHANB, p.462.

⁶⁹¹ Glendinning, p.62.

⁶⁹² Ibid.

⁶⁹³ Letter from Dennis Welland to Rupert Hart-Davis, 29 June 1996: Welland Archives DSW/1/3/1/6/2.

⁶⁹⁴ Letter from Rupert Hart-Davis to Dennis Welland, 9 July 1996, Welland Archives DSW/1/3/1/6/1.

⁶⁹⁵ DHTLY, p.135.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.

for one in his position: ‘That Owen’s poems attracted so much critical attention at a time when the posthumous publication of volumes by unknown soldier-poets was almost a daily occurrence says much not only for the quality of his poems but also for the devoted efforts of his friends on his behalf.’⁶⁹⁷ He also points out that these friends had seen to it that fourteen of Owen’s poems were also published in periodicals during the period, finding him a wider audience. Davidson perhaps overstates the case with ‘When Wilfred Owen’s work was published in 1920 no reviewer could ignore either the poetic power or the message’, but finds high praise in two prominent publications:

The *Spectator* cites Owen’s human sympathy, and the *New Statesman* hints at what has made other ‘realist’ poets before Owen fail where it must be admitted he succeeds. [...] Other poets (e.g. Sassoon) the review goes on, present merely intellectual concepts where Owen has arrested the imagination as soon as the intellect.⁶⁹⁸

The Spectator, which had in February 1917 printed Sassoon’s critical and satirical ‘Conscripts’⁶⁹⁹, not only declared Owen able to convey ‘the pitifulness of life in the trenches and its fineness in spite of the horror [...] more strongly than any other war poet to the non-combatant reader’, but stated ‘had he lived, one feels he had in him the makings of a finer poet than Mr. Sassoon will ever be, because his sense of compassion was so very strong, and yet it never sank into sentimentality.’⁷⁰⁰ However, it should be observed that this praise is primarily in direct comparison with Sassoon and other war poets, and the anonymous reviewer’s assessment free of those direct comparisons was “Mr. Owen might one day have written something great.”⁷⁰¹ Perhaps this adds to the poignancy of the

⁶⁹⁷ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.134.

⁶⁹⁸ Davidson, p.140.

⁶⁹⁹ Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried’s Journey, 1916-1920* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), p.28.

⁷⁰⁰ ‘Poets and Poetry: The Garden of Bright Waters’, *The Spectator*, 18 December 1920 < <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/18th-december-1920/21/poets-and-poetry>>[accessed 15 November 2017], p.21. The archival transcript contains an error (‘vary’ for ‘very’) that is not in the original newspaper.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

narrative of a tragic waste, and arguably greatness can be judged only after a significant amount of time has passed, but the central verdict is clear: of Owen's extant poems, none can be called 'great'. By 1931 and the release of Blunden's edition of Owen's poetry, their praise showed less reservation: in a review, another anonymous writer declares Owen 'a rare poet', who through the war has gained 'the immortality at which he aimed'⁷⁰²—an observation that must ring truer today than it did in 1931.

Another review from 1930 not mentioned by Davidson was published in *The Guardian* on 29 December 1920. Again, the newspaper directly compared Owen with other war poets—the poems 'are enough to rank him among the very few war poets whose work has more than a passing value. Others have shown the disenchantment of war [...] but none with such compassion for the disenchanted.'⁷⁰³ While the reviewer disliked Owen's half-rhyme, the same praise for imparting knowledge unavailable elsewhere recurs: 'He has revealed the soul of the soldier as no one else has revealed it.'⁷⁰⁴ It is curious that in spite of the proclamation of the drafted preface, from the beginning Owen was recognised as revealing hidden knowledge to outsiders, both here and in *The Spectator*. While some reviewers, such as W.R. Benet in *The Times*, criticised Owen for speaking against the war while participating in it⁷⁰⁵, in general Owen was quickly recognised in literary circles as an authoritative voice on the war, and by 1922 an article in the *Manchester Guardian* by 'C.P.', the same initials given for the 1920 *Guardian* review, expressed disbelief that Owen could be omitted from an anthology named *Poems of To-day*: 'How is it that a book that draws "mostly from younger men who have written under the influence and reactions of the

⁷⁰² 'The Crown of Immortelles', *The Spectator*, 6 June 1931 < <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/6th-june-1931/23/the-crown-of-immortelles>> [accessed 17 November 2017], p.23.

⁷⁰³ C.P., 'Poems By Wilfred Owen. London: Chatto and Windus' in *The Guardian*, 29 December 1920 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/1920/dec/29/fromthearchives.poetry>> [accessed 15 November 2017]

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁵ W.R. Benet, 'Literary Support', *The Times*, 6 January 1921, p.6.

war” has left out Wilfred Owen, who by that token should have been the very first choice?”⁷⁰⁶

Indeed, the positive reviews helped Owen to become a recognized artist amongst a select literary circle who had a specialized interest, but that did not make him a poet known to the wider population, able to have a significant influence on collective memory or national conceptions of mourning. He remained a voice that spoke a truth for which the majority of the public were not looking: ‘It would be wrong [...] to suggest that the poems became at once a best-seller.’⁷⁰⁷ But becoming a successful poet at this point would not have been a reflection of Owen’s stance—while he may have been spoken of internationally as a poet of note,⁷⁰⁸ after initial notices he remained the outsider intended for a small group with advanced understanding he had always aimed to become. Interestingly, a large portion of the original audience found by Owen was in France: ‘he found a responsive audience across the Channel more readily than across the Atlantic’, Welland wrote, while of the initial print run of 2,250 copies (according to Sassoon), just 750 went to the United States.⁷⁰⁹

As Winter and Post observe, ‘the first conversation in the discursive field of remembrance was between and among combatants. It proudly asserted the authority of direct experience, and spoke to a public with a seemingly unquenchable thirst for accounts of “What the war was really like”.’⁷¹⁰ Owen, with his purposeful division between the civilian majority and the enlightened but suffering outsider group of soldiers, may be a prime example of being able to provide this insight, but in his preface purposely excluded those of the public who were not there and could never truly know what the war was like.

⁷⁰⁶ C.P., ‘Poems of Today’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 25 July, 1922, p.7.

⁷⁰⁷ Davidson, p.135.

⁷⁰⁸ For example, in B. W. Huebach, “English Poets of Today”, *The New York Times*, 15 May 1921, pp.26-27, p.26.

⁷⁰⁹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.112.

⁷¹⁰ Winters and Prost, p.174.

The outsider was now excluding: he had found the companionship of groups set apart—soldiers as well as poets—and was defensive of their secret knowledge. Even if almost nothing was known to the reading public of his private life, his beliefs were reflected in a narrower form by his stance on war in his poetry, and already began to define him.

Some were not put off by Owen's divisive attitude. Middleton Murry continued to emphatically praise him: in the 19 February 1921 edition of *the Athenaeum*, he reviewed Owen's first volume of poems, again singling out 'Strange Meeting' with the belief that 'the reader who comes fresh to this poem does not immediately observe the assonant endings. At first he feels only that the blank verse has a mournful, impressive and oppressive quality of its own.'⁷¹¹ Owen's writing was considered technically unusual and challenging. Sassoon, too, was still acting as Owen's champion, though intentionally keeping him mysterious: how he wished his friend to be perceived can be recognized in the review of *Coterie*, in which Owen had been anthologized, that he wrote for the *Daily Herald*, writing simply, 'probably the most interesting poem in the book is one by Wilfred Owen, who was killed in action a week before the Armistice'.⁷¹² Owen was to be a symbolic fallen soldier first, with indications about his personality secondary—thus encouraging from the start the creation of myths based on limited understanding. As Hibberd observes, Sassoon had even put in his introduction to Owen's poems that 'any record of Wilfred's life would be "irrelevant and unseemly": the poems should speak for themselves'.⁷¹³

Hibberd continues, 'This stern discouragement to any attempt at biography was followed by silence for over a decade, except for little-noticed comments by Scott Moncrieff and Graves, who between them revealed that Wilfred's courage had been

⁷¹¹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, pp.118-19.

⁷¹² Egremont, p.238.

⁷¹³ DHANB, p.462.

doubted by the military authorities.’ Unfortunately, though Hibberd calls these comments little-noticed, they were amongst the only things written about Owen upon the release of his poetry, so mentions of the rumours of cowardice made it into reviews by Scott Moncrieff, Middleton Murry and Robert Nichols. This compelled Sassoon to write a letter to the *Nation* on 12 March 1921, ‘quoting Mrs. Owen, purportedly from Edith Sitwell but in fact written by Sassoon’ that set out to quash the rumour before it could gain credence,⁷¹⁴ objecting to claims that Owen’s ‘nerve had failed, and he was no longer fit to command troops’⁷¹⁵.

Sassoon must have known that the very mention of the rumour in such a public letter would give it a stronger association with the otherwise obscure figure of Owen, but it seems that he sincerely hoped the rumour would lose validity: from the very beginning, the desire to represent Owen in a specific way while keeping certain details hidden shaped how he was discussed. Sassoon may indeed have thought it ‘unseemly’ to document the life of his deceased friend, but we can also speculate that his prejudices regarding Owen’s class may have led him to think the public would find him unappealing, which would explain why in his bitterness years later, he would say to Spender that Owen’s accent had been an embarrassment. Speaking to Welland in late 1950 and blaming Edith for typographical errors, he added that he also felt she ‘should not have included the famous preface which Owen would surely have cut’.⁷¹⁶

Thus it was that for the years immediately following his death, Owen’s personality was kept obscured, defined only by his youth, his rank, accusations of cowardice, his role in the war and his words against it—and though this representation is limited and beyond a doubt contributed to the mythmaking we have discussed, that is in a way reflective of his

⁷¹⁴ Egremont, p.257.

⁷¹⁵ Siegfried Sassoon, Letter ostensibly from Edith Sitwell, *The Nation*, 12 March 1921, p.826.

⁷¹⁶ Egremont, p.466.

desires. He valued secret knowledge and esoteric societies, and now facts about his life and personality were just that sort of secret, shared only amongst the privileged few. And this was to determine several decades of how Owen was discussed, until the 60s and Britten caused a great upheaval.

Versions of Literary History: Re-examining 1914-1921 in Literature

Having been avant-garde in his own day, he now seems quite traditional.⁷¹⁷

Even if it is no secret that Owen's reception grew slowly, another aspect of the overemphasis of his role in establishing a pervasive war myth is the idea that his work was an early challenge to dominant poetic statements on the war, such as Brooke's—Churchill himself wrote in a letter to *The Times* of the 'sense of national loss' when Brooke died,⁷¹⁸ but nothing of the sort was said of Owen. As a long history of contrasting the two only serves to emphasize ('A favourite critical practice is to set up a sort of dialectic between Brooke and Wilfred Owen'),⁷¹⁹ their interpretations of the war were very different.

But while Brooke perhaps persists as the most prominent of the Georgian poets, what has become the canon of English literature gives a misleading image of the poetic landscape of the early decades of the 20th Century. Of course, certain patriarchal figures like Kipling and Hardy, whose reputations were by then well-established, loom large. Both had their place in writing on the Great War, with the former composing verse of fury and loss after his son was killed and the latter exerting a heavy influence on Sassoon's satirical style—as Fussell points out, 'Siegfried Sassoon recalled that during the war, Hardy had been his "main admiration among living writers," and acknowledged the debt of his satirical poems about the war to the pre-war ironies of *Satires of Circumstance*'.⁷²⁰ This influence persists in spite of whatever controversy there may have been surrounding 'Men who March Away' and its perceived naivety. Kipling, meanwhile, may have been removed from the battlefield, but in George Orwell's esteem was capable of a more nuanced view

⁷¹⁷ Williams, p.69.

⁷¹⁸ Ross, p.161.

⁷¹⁹ Kerr, p.3.

⁷²⁰ Fussell, p.7.

than most in his position: “Like most people capable of writing battle poetry Kipling had never been in battle, but his vision of war is of realistic. He knows that bullets hurt, that underfire everyone is terrified, that the ordinary soldier never knows what the war is about or what is happening except in his own corner of the battlefield”. Thus, while he may glorify war, it is “not in the usual manner, by pretending that war is a sort of football match.”⁷²¹

Aside from these established figures, widespread critical consensus suggests that in the isthmus between strong ideas of identity of the Victorian era and the great literary shifts that followed the war, there was a relatively inconsequential period where little of value was written, with the possible exception of war poetry. As Giddings wrote in 1988: -

In the version of literary history academically accepted until very recently, the doctrine was that there was a long lull during which little of value was created in English poetry, while the world waited for the revival of our genius in Modernism. [...] We can now see this for the pernicious nonsense that it is, in the just recognition of Graves, Sassoon, Brooke, Rosenberg and Owen, and numerous—possibly lesser—poets who tried to portray the indescribable, and express the unthinkable during the years 1914-18. Yeats could not have been more mistaken.⁷²²

This reference to Yeats, of course, concerns his dismissal of war poetry in the 1930s, which we will cover in the next chapter. Also, even Giddings’ view takes into account only the poets whose popularity increased in the 1960s. Many of the dominant literary figures while Owen was writing have largely been forgotten. We already encountered in passing the unfortunate figure of Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, whose reputation seemed secure until he fell out of favour: he ‘wrote the most popular non-combatant’s book of war poetry, but by 1934 it was obscure’.⁷²³ Just like Owen, Gibson lived for a time in the attic of the Poetry

⁷²¹ George Orwell, “Rudyard Kipling,” *Horizon* 5, February 1942, pp. 111–125, p.118.

⁷²² Robert Giddings, *The war poets* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1988), p.7.

⁷²³ Hollis p.337.

Bookshop, and Owen owned his book *Battle*. Gibson's poetry appeared in Monro's *Georgian Poetry* rather than *Wheels*, and it likely would have surprised many of his contemporaries to find that his poetry fell out of favour.

As an example of a poet who gained great renown but faded into obscurity, however, Gibson is far from unique—the Georgian poets who were famous in the first half of 1914 had little or no idea what was to come or how the Great War was to change the literary landscape, nor which names would endure: 'in 1911, the future of English poetry seemed to rest in the hands of poets like Stephen Phillips and William Watson.'⁷²⁴ These names are not attached to enduringly popular poems today, and most critical appraisal of the period is negative: 'in 1913, a new direction in poetry was desperately needed', writes Hollis,⁷²⁵ and Bäckman describes the period as one 'when the vitality of poetry in England was at a very low ebb'.⁷²⁶ Robert H. Ross's scorn is not disguised: 'In Watson and Phillips, the flame of the great tradition which had produced Keats and Tennyson, Shelly and Browning, Wordsworth and Arnold, finally guttered and died. In the twentieth century the verse of Watson and Phillips seemed little more than decorated rhetoric.'⁷²⁷ Welland is similarly dismissive when he refers to 'the debilitated condition of pre-1914 poetry which in the hands of such poets as William Watson was undistinguished in its mediocrity'.⁷²⁸

Even accepting that appreciation of poetry is subjective and that it is always possible that in the future these writers will be rehabilitated, for now at least the poets of the period are not well-remembered, and even Brooke, whose popularity has managed to endure largely thanks to being 'technically so much superior' to his peers,⁷²⁹ is criticized as naïve

⁷²⁴ Ross, p.31.

⁷²⁵ Hollis, p.8.

⁷²⁶ Bäckman, p.7.

⁷²⁷ Ross, p.31.

⁷²⁸ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.15.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.18.

and ignorant—Stallworthy calls him ‘the maligned Rupert Brooke’.⁷³⁰ He, like Sassoon, has also managed by being so closely associated with the War, to avoid being remembered as a ‘Georgian’, with the generalized ‘war poet’ taking precedence. To an eager Owen, to be ‘held peer’ by the Georgians—by which he meant Sassoon, Graves, Nichols and the others he met in person in 1917—was a delight, but as we have seen, *Wheels* was set up to directly oppose what *Georgian Poetry* represented.

In looking back to the great poetic movements of the previous century and even befriending one of Decadence’s survivors, Tailhade, Owen risked foundering in the same derivative movement, as seen right up until he was writing his best poetry: ‘drafts of several poems, especially “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, show how easily Owen slipped into a hackneyed Romantic idiom of grandiloquent and lush imagery.’⁷³¹ For all the criticism of the poetry of the period, however, this simplified history does a disservice to the ‘Georgians’, who were not simply every non-Modernist writing during the reign of George V: they were specifically the group writing for Harold Monro’s *Georgian Poetry* or associated with its founding, and as a matter of fact, most of the persisting associations with the term come largely from what Ross calls the ‘Neo-Georgians’: ‘by late 1917 their misty escape poetry was an anachronism. [...] Compared to the best of the Georgians the Neo-Georgians were pallid, lifeless, and monotonous,’ writes Ross.⁷³² The implication of this is that the original Georgians in fact wrote superior verse; while the distinction is subtle, it becomes necessary in understanding the context in which Owen’s poetry found its initial audience to distinguish between what ‘Georgian Poetry’ is now seen to represent, and what *Georgian Poetry* the anthology was established to accomplish.

⁷³⁰ JSWO, p.104.

⁷³¹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.49.

⁷³² Ross, p.186.

Neither Watson nor Philips are to be found anthologized in *Georgian Poetry*, and though it has been described as ‘established and establishment’⁷³³ beside *Wheels*, an examination of who *Georgian Poetry* was including by the time Owen was first widely published is indicative of its progressive tendencies and how little the publication was concerned with ‘escape poetry’ even as late as 1919: that year’s edition contained works not only by Monro but by Sassoon, Graves, Walter de la Mare, the ‘super-tramp’ W.H. Davies, Robert Nichols, D.H. Lawrence—and indeed, Wilfrid Wilson Gibson. Granted, when held in contrast to, for example, 1917’s *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse*, the American publication that in its final issue that year printed contributions from Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Hilda Doolittle and Man Ray, the list may not seem thoroughly Modernist, but nor are the poets listed banal and derivative.

In fact, many of the persistent negative connotations of *Georgian Poetry* derive from the influence of J.C. Squire, who contributed to the 1917, 1919 and 1922 editions, then began to publish his own *Selections from Modern Poets* anthology in 1921 in a fashion that was clearly intended to serve as a successor to *Georgian Poetry*. He later became something of an adversary to Modernism and the Bloomsbury Group, eventually coming to embody all that was perceived as backwards, conservative and trite about ‘Georgian poetry’, having the effect of associating the term with a kind of anti-progressive, imitative and ultimately doomed movement in the creation myth of Modernism, somewhat analogous to the role progressive rock was to play in the inception story of punk music around half a century later.

Robert H. Ross’s *The Georgian Revolt* details the period and offers definitions of terms—the ‘Georgian poets’ are those who, under the influence of Edward Marsh, then

⁷³³ Glendinning, p.60.

Harold Monro, attempted to overhaul the stagnant poetry of the time, though with some exceptions such as Lawrence, ultimately followed a different path to that of Modernism. The ‘Neo-Georgians’ are those who failed to offer further innovation and only imitated their forebears, while becoming increasingly politically involved—J.C. Squire in particular was by 1920 ‘well on his way towards establishing a literary coterie of the Right just as partisan, as militant and as dedicated as the Leftist coteries’, and his circle was soon mocked by the Bloomsbury Group as the ‘Squirearchy’⁷³⁴. Other writers both groups essentially set out to oppose, while being Georgian in terms of writing during the reign of George V, were not part of *Georgian Poetry*. While some of these were popular (William Watson’s poetry saw him knighted in 1917), they are not who Owen was referring to when he delighted in being ‘held peer by the Georgians’. Rupert Brooke being considered ‘Georgian’ derives from his relationship with Marsh and apparent presence at the inception of *Georgian Poetry*, but this means that the disapproval of the ‘Squirearchy’ would not apply to him. In its early days, and arguably throughout its run, *Georgian Poetry* was progressive and innovative, and even if *Wheels* had more anarchic Modernist leanings, *Georgian Poetry* still published De La Mare, Lawrence and in 1922, Virginia Woolf’s future lover Vita Sackville-West.

Eliot’s judgement, unsurprisingly, was disapproving: ‘Georgian Poetry [...] is inbred. It had developed a technique and a set of emotions all its own. [...] The Georgians caress everything they touch.’⁷³⁵ But it would be a misconception to consider *Georgian Poetry* as an antithesis to the innovations of Modernism: the writing of the Georgian Poets seemed to them daring and innovative, and even if not to the extent of Pound and Eliot, they felt they, too, were breaking down boundaries in verse. It was Georgians like Sassoon who

⁷³⁴ Ross, p.206.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., pp.181-82.

emphatically tried to distance themselves from a sentimental mode of writing by embracing the colloquial, the acerbic and the satirical, with Owen becoming ‘too Sassoonish’ (in Graves’ words) in his eagerness to imitate, but ultimately resulting in ‘the more direct, colloquial immediacy that begins to replace bardic rhetoric and the personal lyric’ in Owen’s work.⁷³⁶

Despite leaving behind the affected poetical language of his juvenilia and eventually finding a strong balance between direct, immediate language and spectacular analogy, Owen fits a little awkwardly into the world of Georgian, Neo-Georgian and Modernist verse. Much of the contempt for the poets of the day, with their lifeless imitations of Romanticism, can easily be levelled at Owen’s juvenilia. ‘Contemporary Romantic poetry was insipid,’ writes Ross: the ‘quaint Romantic notion of straining after infinity was only—in Harold Monro’s phrase—“Harmlessly ridiculous”’.⁷³⁷ But with *Georgian Poetry*, Monro sought to push poets beyond this. Owen considered himself an innovator and was seen in those terms by his peers. From our vantage point, looking back over the upheavals of 20th-century verse, Owen with his sonnets, careful scansion and strong Romantic influence seems traditional beside Pound, Eliot, H.D. and even Yeats, but he and his fellow Georgians were certainly not considered conventional at the time. Thus Hibberd’s observation that in being published in *Wheels*, ‘Owen appeared amongst Modernists, rather than the Georgians with whom he had proudly associated himself’⁷³⁸ rather overstates the division. Several of the ‘Georgians’ would go on to be considered Modernist, and Owen’s verse was sufficiently unorthodox to fit. The Modernists, of course, were also keenly aware of the forms and structures of the past. If it is tempting to think of Modernist writers as the outsider innovators who overturned the stale, empty derivations of the Georgians, that

⁷³⁶ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.26.

⁷³⁷ Ross, p.41.

⁷³⁸ DHTLY, p.135.

misses the challenges to authority and convention that came with early Georgian Poetry as well as the impact of the subject of war on many of its critical members. Georgians and Modernists alike sought to innovate, but Georgian writers were as the 1920s progressed ever more closely associated with J.C. Squire in opposition to Modernism, while those who had been Georgians yet pushed to innovate further simply became known as Modernists, like D.H. Lawrence.

Owen's reputation later in the century as Modernism became dominant in the literary canon will be examined in the next chapter, but it is important in examining the early development of his reputation to see that he was for many years considered an unusual, progressive, experimental poet admired primarily by those with speciality interests in literature. He was not considered a poet for children: his current ubiquity obscures the fact that at the time and for several decades after, his style of writing marked him as peculiar, an outsider to be contrasted with the mundane verse of the likes of Watson and Phillips and too strange and challenging for the popularity of Brooke. He aimed to be considered a progressive outsider, which from the context of the others writing at the same time for the same audience was not an outlandish claim.

Georgian Poetry was also an iteration of the ideas of Harold Monro. Monro was the first English poet of note Owen came to know personally, and even if Sassoon's influence was paramount, Monro's effect on both men should not be understated. 'Monro was convinced that the new poetry must be a strong, vigorous expression of the artist's personality, not spineless copying from the mouldy volumes of the past.'⁷³⁹ It is arguably one of the 'myths' about Owen's development that he met Sassoon and had his eyes opened to a more mature mode of expression, but Sassoon was simply part of wider poetic

⁷³⁹ Ross, p.85.

movement. Owen had already been interested in Monro and his work and taken lodgings in his Poetry Bookshop before meeting Sassoon. A focus on innovation rather than imitation allowed Owen to contextualize his poetic work in terms of the outsiderdom he had seen as so abidingly important all his life: he had to progress beyond thinking that the poet was an elevated outsider to the non-literary masses simply by virtue of being a poet, because there was a further and more important delineation—between the poets who wrote in a derivative, mindless and inconsequential manner and the poets who pushed boundaries and innovated.

Ironically, yet unsurprisingly, he did this at first by imitating others with the same intentions. But it was when he ceased imitating Sassoon and developed a mode of expression incorporating the influences of the Georgians, Romantics and Decadents without being derivative that Owen's poetry truly became mature: 'he learned to make use of his early writing,' as Hibberd puts it.⁷⁴⁰ In Motion's words, 'by using an avowedly Keatsian language to describe scenes more appallingly destructive than any that Keats or his heroes had imagined, he devised a way of celebrating the continuity between past and present while indicating that he belonged to a different age. Sometimes ironical, invariably elegiac, Owen's sensuality is both defiant and doomed.'⁷⁴¹ While it is true that the resultant poetry was 'a thousand miles away from the soft dreaminess of his Keatsian verses of so few years before',⁷⁴² it was in retaining that influence and applying it to a wholly new mode of thinking about an unprecedented event that gave Owen his strongest voice.

Without *Georgian Poetry* Owen may never have managed to strike this balance, even after coming into contact with Sassoon. Very possibly had he been more aware of Modernism's early, primarily American publications, he would have embraced the style—

⁷⁴⁰ DHTLY, p.2.

⁷⁴¹ Motion, *Keats*, p.577.

⁷⁴² Hewett, preface (printed without page numbers).

that they were published in a magazine with the title *Others* would no doubt have been appealing. Or like Sassoon, perhaps Owen would have later come to see taking a stance against Modernism as the true outsider's decision, had he lived long enough. It is likely, even, that the balance Owen struck thanks to his incomplete view of what we now know was the poetic landscape of the day was perfect for the audience he would eventually find four decades later. Without an influence from stream-of-consciousness, heavy symbolism or deconstructed imagist language, he wrote direct narratives that are for the most part easy to understand and conventional in narrative terms. He was however writing about his subject in an unconventional way, heavily developing the unsettling technique of pararhyme with 'its note of haunting uneasiness, of frustration and melancholy,'⁷⁴³ and aligning himself with anti-establishment, experimental writers. He was rebellious yet not so cryptic as to become inaccessible. While 'today, of course, half-rhyme does not shock',⁷⁴⁴ it was seen then as remarkable, and as tastes changed, Owen's writing was able to have broad appeal, while this 'stunt' and his heavy use of techniques such as assonance displayed an obvious technical flair. While pointing out that 'deliberate use of half-rhyme, however, is to be found in three poets before Owen: Henry Vaughan, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson',⁷⁴⁵ Welland goes so far as to say that 'one major influence that Owen exerted on the technique of English verse is, of course, his development of half-rhyme.'⁷⁴⁶

Whatever his innovations, Owen can be argued to have been left behind by the notable changes to the world of poetry that became influential after his death. He is only partially absolved by his ignorance, but his early death means that he is not considered to have been mired in a particular time while descending into irrelevance like some of his

⁷⁴³ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.119.

⁷⁴⁴ Willaims, p.68.

⁷⁴⁵ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.105.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.104.

contemporaries. With a consistent attitude to innovation and a distinctly personal sense of experimentation, Owen's techniques within the context of 1920s poetry put him in the ideal position to later be rediscovered as an underappreciated, rebellious figure that was not so cryptic he could not be understood by the layman.

Owen was never strictly a 'Georgian Poet', never having appeared in *Georgian Poetry* and instead becoming central to the story of its rival *Wheels*. But his allegiance was to the Georgians, and their reputation as the bloated, insincere movement swept away by the fresh and highly intelligent innovations of Modernism belies both the complexities of Georgian Poetry's origins seeking to innovate and Owen's unique position of benefiting from both the rebellious stance of his Georgian mentors and, later in the century, the relatively weak way they pushed against established traditions—relative to Pound and Eliot. Owen has in retrospect been favoured by fortune in stylistic terms, being regarded as still progressive and daring in the 1950s with his idiosyncratic technical tricks and use of sound effects, but also as highly accessible in the 1960s.

Owen's work on initial publication caught the attention of some key figures, including Middleton Murry. But these allies were not enough to keep his reputation alive as the literary world went through new, exciting changes. However, he was also noticed by other important figures, especially Edmund Blunden and Christopher Isherwood—and the latter in particular was part of one of the most influential circles in 20th-century English literature.

Into the 1930s: Graves, Blunden, Isherwood and Auden

The death of Rupert Brooke in 1915 was regarded as a national literary calamity, but the passing of Wilfred Owen seven days before the Armistice was a tragedy known only to a few.⁷⁴⁷

Wilfred Owen's current fame rests unquestionably on the way his reputation endured the 1930s. His work was largely out of the purview of all but a very limited literary circle, and he—or at least, what he represented—earned only contempt from Yeats. However, having caught the attention of key figures, they kept his reputation alive, and through them he became known to Britten, who would eventually bring him to the attention of a wider public. For most of these men, especially for Christopher Isherwood—whose admiration has been described as 'hero-worshipping'⁷⁴⁸—it was Owen's status as a strange, obscure yet gifted and somewhat evangelical outsider figure that captured the attention. Very little had been revealed about Owen in biographical terms by the 1930s, but what came through both from the scarce details available and through the poems themselves, in spite of Sassoon's attempt to depict him as an everyman soldier, was his outsider's stance. His refusal to conform or to suffer silently was conveyed, while he retained in literary terms his strong links to the past. Relatively under-emphasized in Owen studies, the 1930s are crucial to explaining Owen's later explosion in popularity—and the reasons behind this revolve around his ideals regarding the elevated outsider.

After the publication of Owen's first volume of verse, it is true that his reputation changed little for another decade. His attitude towards civilians had cut him off from wider recognition amongst his own generation—as he made clear that he expected in his draft preface—and his anger may have seemed inappropriate as the culture of mourning became

⁷⁴⁷ R.R.S., 'A War-Lost Genius: Wilfred Owen, Poet of Pity', *The Age*, 3 November 1939, p.34.

⁷⁴⁸ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.137.

established. However, it was in these years that university undergraduates who would go on to be amongst the most prominent English writers of the following decade—indeed, of their century—were taking an interest in Owen. Christopher Isherwood, most notably, by the mid-1920s considered Owen amongst his ‘favourite writers’,⁷⁴⁹ and enjoyed referring to him by his first name as part of an imagined clique of literary friends: he ‘refers regularly to Owen in this book as “Wilfred”’.⁷⁵⁰ This is described in his fictionalized autobiography *Lions and Shadows*, though he does not make clear where he first came into contact with Owen: he describes Chalmers—his fictionalized version of Edward Upward—as having at Cambridge ‘lots of books [...] the old favourites and the latest acquisitions of his first year’,⁷⁵¹ and in the list of these that follows, Owen is included. Whether Owen was newly-acquired and whether or not this was the first Isherwood had heard of him is not clarified.

However Isherwood first came upon Owen, by the period described in the book—accepting, of course, that it is a fictionalized account—he and Upward had begun to treat Owen as though he knew him personally. Of Owen and other favourite writers Katherine Mansfield and Emily Brontë, Isherwood writes, ‘we talked about them as if they were personal friends, wondered what they would have said on certain occasions, how they would have behaved, what advice they would have given us.’⁷⁵² Eccentric though Isherwood was throughout his life, ‘if this seems a matter more of personality than of literature it must also be remembered how much the Auden group of poets were indebted to Owen’.⁷⁵³ It was entirely possible that it was through Isherwood, who was his senior in school and with whom he shared a close relationship, that Auden himself came to know of Owen, and Auden continued to spread the word: at the very least, Auden presented the

⁷⁴⁹ Peter Parker, *Isherwood: A Life* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2004), p.93.

⁷⁵⁰ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.137.

⁷⁵¹ Christopher Isherwood, *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties*, Methuen edn (London: Methuen, 1985), p.31.

⁷⁵² Isherwood, pp.44-45.

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.136.

works of Owen, along with the likes of Eliot and Hopkins, to the young Cecil Day Lewis while they were studying at Oxford in the late 1920s.⁷⁵⁴ Welland speculates that the angry young men had something to prove:—

[They were] longing to have been subjected to such a test [as the Great War] and yet fearful they would have been unequal to it. To such feelings [...] Owen provided an obvious imaginative appeal as one who, subjected to the test had proved his manhood by the success with which he had simultaneously discharged his military duty, protested against the ubiquitous “them” who had caused the war, and hymned the comradeship and humanity that the test had evoked in its victims.⁷⁵⁵

Owen had acted on his ideals in the right way to now seem heroic to a younger generation—he had not fled service, nor refused it, but had been tested, showed vulnerability, then ultimately taken the bravest course, all the while producing moving expressions of anger and pity. He had found a secret and exclusive band of like-minded comrades and spoken out in support of them while rebelling against authority. This had a certain resonance with the young Auden group, and hints of his homosexuality must have appealed to a subtly different sense of rebellion too, possibly being what piqued Isherwood’s interest—this is essentially based on conjecture about the glamour of homosexuality in the 1930s, but is aligned with Todman’s more general view: ‘the War Books were adopted by the literary establishment, in particular the “Auden Generation”, who found the fetishisation of the male body and response to war by Wilfred Owen a potent mix.’⁷⁵⁶ What is more often observed is that Owen had simply been able to prove himself in a way the Auden Group, and particularly Isherwood, admired: Welland finds throughout *Lions and Shadows* ‘a subconscious feeling of shame at not having been old enough to take part in the war and a consequent mental image of war as a supreme test of one’s

⁷⁵⁴ Riddell, p.40.

⁷⁵⁵ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.136.

⁷⁵⁶ Todman, *The Great War*, p.47.

manhood'.⁷⁵⁷ The position of a soldier and martyr was to be envied, as Isherwood considered the 'postwar sensibility of the younger generation as bogus and smug'.⁷⁵⁸

Despite this significant strand of interest, little further critical attention was paid to Owen for the rest of the 1920s, and his biographical details remained obscure: 'there was, of course, no further printing until Edmund Blunden's revised and enlarged edition in 1931.'⁷⁵⁹ It was a 'revival of interest in "war books" in the late 1920s' that occasioned the new edition, according to Hibberd,⁷⁶⁰ and part what fuelled this revival of interest was Graves' *Good-bye to All That: An Autobiography*, published in 1929. *Good-bye to All That* not only contained a considerable amount of detail regarding Graves' friendship with Sassoon, but makes passing mention of Owen, as a 'quiet, round-faced young man'.⁷⁶¹ As we saw in the previous chapter, a short-lived mention that he was a 'homosexual' sparked some controversy, but with his flair for the sensationalist, Graves also included another throwaway sentence that revived a contested piece of information first seen in the early reviews and suppressed by Sassoon: 'it had preyed on his mind that he had been accused of cowardice by his commanding officer'.⁷⁶²

To begin with, we can draw from the very fact that in 1929 Graves thought Owen worthy of mention in a work intended for a mass audience that he was not the total obscurity he is sometimes portrayed to be at the time. Writing of him that, 'it was meeting Siegfried there [in Craiglockhart] that set him writing his war-poems'⁷⁶³ intimates that Graves expected his audience to understand the reference. Graves in 1929, despite there having been only a single, poorly-edited edition of Owen's poems published, expected his

⁷⁵⁷ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.136.

⁷⁵⁸ Paul Piazza, *Christopher Isherwood: Myth and Anti-Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p.20.

⁷⁵⁹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.135.

⁷⁶⁰ DHANB, p.462.

⁷⁶¹ Graves, p.234.

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*

⁷⁶³ *Ibid.*

readers to know who Owen was, or to be able to find out without the need for further explanation. Little had been written about Owen, but he was still in a position of remarkable prominence for one who had as yet received so little critical or biographical attention.

Good-bye to All That has not endured as a trusted work of documentation, despite its success and prominence in study of the era. Egremont is damning of the work in his biography of Sassoon, and perhaps places too much weight on the brief mention of Owen: ‘*Goodbye to All That* revelled in unpleasantness, as in the descriptions of soldiers’ lechery and the resurrection of Owen’s reputed cowardice. Graves appeared as Sassoon’s saviour in the protest turmoil of 1917. He left out the fact that Sassoon had made him swear on the Bible that he would never be court-martialled.’⁷⁶⁴ This is not to suggest that Graves wrote spitefully or in an attempt at defaming Owen. He valued the friendship of his late acquaintance and was proud to have been his peer in poetic terms: he wrote of his part in the English poetic tradition, ‘it has meant a great deal to me that I once lived on terms of friendship with my elders Thomas Hardy and William Davies, and with men of my own age like Wilfred Owen and Norman Cameron—to name only the dead’.⁷⁶⁵ In addition, the nugget of information included in *Good-bye to All That* was indeed true: the accusation of cowardice preyed on Owen’s mind. That said, the phrasing misleadingly implies that there had been a direct confrontation or that Owen had been disciplined, which was likely by design, as Graves had a vested interest in sensationalism: ‘Graves frankly admitted in 1930 that he had deliberately mixed and spiced up all the incidents he could think of to produce a bestseller because he desperately needed the money.’⁷⁶⁶

⁷⁶⁴ Egremont, p.346.

⁷⁶⁵ D.N.G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1989), pp.2-3.

⁷⁶⁶ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, p.31.

The inclusion of rumours about Owen was unwise, as with the paucity of biographical information Sassoon had ensured had been revealed to the public, there was still a danger of the accusation of cowardice dominating public perception of Owen, and that could lead to Owen being dismissed and marginalized—the sort of exclusion he deplored. But the fact that he had died in battle proved that he had returned to the front, and arguably the reason he died was for the very purpose of proving he was not a coward. His conception of belonging had given him a keen sense of the right and wrong ways to be set apart from a society: it was not enough to be in the clergy, for example—one had to form an individualistic conception of God and maintain faith. So it was with the military—to be an outsider by avoiding fighting as a conscientious objector was not enough, for one taking that position lacked true understanding.

Without sufficient information available to an audience to make this distinction, however, the question of cowardice threatened to overpower Owen's message, something his supporters attempted to suppress: 'The anxiety of Owen's supporters that he should not be presented as a coward helps to explain the insistence on his courage that often appears in early criticisms of his poetry.'⁷⁶⁷ Graves was no doubt speaking the truth as he saw it, and perhaps meant to show Owen in a sympathetic light. After all, when he genuinely intends to present another poet as cowardly, his intentions are clear: of Robert Nichols, for example, he writes, 'still another neurasthenic ex-soldier [...] Nichols served only three weeks in France, in the gunners, and was in no show; but he was highly strung and the three weeks affected him more than twelve months affected some people'.⁷⁶⁸ Of course, there is no doubt Owen would have been considered a part of these implicitly numerous neurasthenic

⁷⁶⁷ DHOTP, p.76.

⁷⁶⁸ Graves, p.265.

ex-officers. But the point remains that when Graves wished to be acerbic, he was clear about it.

Sassoon's reaction to *Good-bye to All That* was fury, though his anger was not centred on the remarks on Owen. A section that did not mention Sassoon by name—but was between two paragraphs which did—contained an anecdote hinting at the irrational and potentially humiliating actions of Sassoon's mother. With threats of legal action, Sassoon had the section excised before publication, the first edition of the book published with blank spaces,⁷⁶⁹ but this action was not repeated for the question of Owen's sexuality. Perhaps Sassoon was aware that he would not have a strong legal standpoint to challenge that assertion, or was simply far more concerned with the section concerning himself and his family. It seems that Graves did not understand the way his old friends wished to be represented, and in Owen's case, that was because while he may have understood Owen's desire to be presented as set apart, he may not have understood the need to be seen as elevated. Certainly Sassoon's opinion was that he knew Owen better than Graves did, even though Graves had less objections to Owen's class status. In a letter from Edmund Blunden to Dennis Welland in the Welland Archives, Blunden says, 'S.S. used to say that R.G. didn't know much about Owen, but R.G. is anyway an anecdotist!'⁷⁷⁰

Blunden was certainly unimpressed. In a letter to Sassoon he called *Good-bye to All That* 'reminiscental neuroses' and condemned its war scenes for their 'unreliability, obvious in all passages where I was able to test from my own information'.⁷⁷¹ He commented on the section regarding Owen too, calling it 'unpardonable and inaccurate'.⁷⁷² Blunden, who was to become a key figure of support for Owen, was incensed: to his

⁷⁶⁹ Roberts, p.235.

⁷⁷⁰ Letter from Edmund Blunden to Dennis Welland, 5 May 1949, Welland Archives 1/1/1/4/17.

⁷⁷¹ Roberts, pp.234-35.

⁷⁷² Ibid.

acquaintance Saito Takeshi, he wrote ‘R. Graves has published, for money and to create a sensation, a most ugly and untruthful autobiography.’⁷⁷³ Perhaps ironically, he criticized Graves for the very thing for which Graves had dismissed Nichols: ‘Graves [...] saw comparatively little of the front line; it is his own conscience that he is shouting down.’⁷⁷⁴ Indeed, if the length of time spent on the front lines could be taken in some way to bestow authority on writers of the war, which seems to be what Graves’ disparaging comments on Nichols allude to, Blunden had spent two years there, to Graves’ one⁷⁷⁵. Both experiences were notably longer than Owen’s, however, and as we have established, war experiences were not directly analogous, so such simple comparisons made little sense. For their part, neither man directly expressed the view that enduring the battlefield somehow validated statements made about it: Blunden’s comments are only a reaction to what he perceives as a poor view to hold, and Graves is characteristically indirect.

Blunden was never quite able to leave behind the war he had experienced. ‘Unlike Robert Graves, he was unable to say “Goodbye to all that”’, writes Webb.⁷⁷⁶ But perhaps that meant he was more vociferous when defending the war writers he admired, including Owen. Thus he seemed a good choice to organise a new, more carefully edited edition of Owen’s poetry for an audience whose interest had been piqued by war memoirs. Thus, Blunden took on the project ‘at Sassoon’s suggestion’.⁷⁷⁷ As for Sassoon himself, he had decided his feelings were still too tumultuous for the task, feeling ‘too emotionally involved with Owen to undertake it himself’.⁷⁷⁸ It was perhaps natural for Sassoon to turn to Blunden, a man who he considered ‘brought me one of the best and most fruitful

⁷⁷³ Cited, Barry Webb, *Edmund Blunden: A Biography* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), p.171.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁵ Webb, p.51.

⁷⁷⁶ Webb, p.98.

⁷⁷⁷ Moorcroft Wilson, *The Journey from the Trenches*, p.258.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

friendships of my life’,⁷⁷⁹ and to whom he could confide that he had never ‘faced squarely’ the shock of Owen’s death.⁷⁸⁰ Blunden, so obsessed with the Great War long after its conclusion, understood Owen’s adversarial stance on civilians and soldiers, and that it was only the special knowledge shared by the soldiers themselves that led to what he perceived as true understanding of the war. In his own work, he sought to develop the statements Sassoon and Owen had made: ‘he was left with fifty years to take the First World War beyond the brutal ironies of the first and the eloquent “pity” that had been the latter’s proclaimed goal.’⁷⁸¹ Those left behind could never quite escape the shadow of the Great War, and that applied to Sassoon as much as Blunden: Egremont credits Welland with the observation that death ‘had at least freed Owen from a war that had condemned Siegfried Sassoon to imprisonment in the past as he tried to come to terms with its lasting horrors.’⁷⁸²

As well as being an ‘experienced soldier’ himself,⁷⁸³ Blunden had like Middleton Murry been a positive early reviewer of the 1920 edition: works with themes of comradeship and sacrifice such as ‘Greater Love’⁷⁸⁴ and ‘Apologia Pro Poemate Meo’⁷⁸⁵ were singled out by him as ‘the truest and most beautiful in the book’.⁷⁸⁶ Blunden had been Middleton Murry’s assistant at the *Athenaeum* before taking over from Nichols as professor of English literature at Tokyo Imperial University, so may have heard of Owen from one of these men.⁷⁸⁷ The greater part of Blunden’s career was devoted to writing about the war, and about his fellow artists of the period: for example he would ‘with special care and sympathy’ edit the poetry of Ivor Gurney,⁷⁸⁸ and published *War Poets 1914-1918* in 1958.

⁷⁷⁹ Michael Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon: A Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.170.

⁷⁸⁰ Moorcroft Wilson, *The Journey from the Trenches*, p.258.

⁷⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.53.

⁷⁸² Egremont, p.467.

⁷⁸³ DHOTP, p.57.

⁷⁸⁴ CWDC, p.23.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁷⁸⁶ DHOTP, p.57.

⁷⁸⁷ Mallon, Thomas, *Edmund Blunden: Twayne’s English Authors Series* (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company, 1983), pp.7-8.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.67.

Thus, despite not having known Owen, he had a vested interest in his words, and supporting his work became almost a personal crusade:—

Sassoon repeatedly emphasised Owen's status, but it was Edmund Blunden who did most to ensure that Owen's poems were known and accessible. Blunden seems to have become convinced of Owen's stature during the 1920s, not only because of his work's quality, but because it could be fitted in with his own developing reaction to the war in terms of a shift from initial enthusiasm to resigned disillusion.⁷⁸⁹

Of course, this conception of a shift would become central to Great War mythology—and Owen, as the most powerful of the voices representing the disillusioned, the critical and the condemnatory, could be framed as emblematic of the outsider proven correct by time.

The task of putting together an anthology of Owen's poetry that would not only increase his stature but establish more authentic versions of the poems was not an easy one, but nor was it unwelcome: 'The editing of Owen was a time-consuming and complicated problem of establishing an authentic text from a host of variants, but was very much to Edmund's taste.'⁷⁹⁰ The publication was intended as a 'critical edition',⁷⁹¹ and would also contain an introduction with the first major biographical information on Owen ever published: 'a new, enlarged edition of the poems, with notes and a long memoir'.⁷⁹² This memoir was laudatory and respectful: Blunden equivocally stated that his subject was 'apart from Mr Sassoon, the greatest of the English war poets',⁷⁹³ and even that subordinate position can be said to have resulted from the considerations of friendship and personal bias. As Hibberd puts it:

Blunden had gathered reminiscences from a few people who had known Wilfred in 1917-18, but most of his

⁷⁸⁹ Todman, *The Great War*, p.164.

⁷⁹⁰ Webb, p.178.

⁷⁹¹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.52.

⁷⁹² DHANB, p.462.

⁷⁹³ Webb, p.178.

information came from Susan Owen. She supplied quotations from the letters, holding back most of the originals because she felt they were too personal. When Blunden submitted his typescript for the family's approval, she asked him not to quote a mention of beer in one of the letters ("not quite 'Wilfred'"); Tom asked for the omission of a reference to "the British Government & its accomplices" in a late 1918 letter ("too political"); and Harold was emphatic that nothing should be said about the cowardice question. Blunden himself presented Wilfred as a typical junior officer of the Great War, heroic, selfless and long-suffering. Invaluable though the memoir was, it had the effect of enshrining an idealised version of its subject.⁷⁹⁴

The publication would for a long period be the definitive version of Owen's poetry, as well as establishing his iconic image that would later feed into the 'mythical' archetype of the soldier-poet and attain the quasi-religious reverence that came with burgeoning attitudes to memorialization. Owen's outsider status was making it easy to paint him as not only a man who chose to stand apart, but a man who was set apart by a superior nature, as his faults had been excised—something that decidedly clashed with his own self-image. Yet, as Barry Webb puts it, 'Edmund's' was the first wide-ranging selection and for thirty years was to remain the standard text which brought Owen's poetry into popular readership.⁷⁹⁵ As a biographer of Blunden, Webb also notes that other than his *Undertones of War*, this edition of another poet's works received the widest circulation of any work with which Blunden was associated.⁷⁹⁶

It was by this point 1931, and though the stirrings of fascism were perceptible, the Second World War was still some years away. The young, impassioned Auden group had attached themselves to Owen's work and proliferated it amongst their circle, and Auden himself admired Blunden: he picked out a volume of his work when looking through

⁷⁹⁴ DHANB, p.462.

⁷⁹⁵ Webb, p.178.

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid.

Betjemin's library, calling him a 'good poet' and declaring his work 'something genuine' amongst 'the usual stuff'.⁷⁹⁷ In Owen, the group found a figure to admire—he had been brave enough not only to face 'the test' of war (as Welland put it), but had also been bold and rebellious enough to rail against authority. It was perhaps ironic that as the Auden Group's work gained popularity, it eclipsed the now-dated work of Owen. Blunden was well aware of this:—

In the 1930s at Merton [College, Oxford], he saw his students neglect Owen's poems for the more overtly political works of W.H.Auden, C. Day Lewis, and Stephen Spender, and he was distressed that they would not take the same comfort the older poet continued to offer him during the decade Auden called low and dishonest.⁷⁹⁸

It was felt that in the early 1930s Day Lewis, Auden and Spender were 'three radical young poets who were turning the course of English poetry away from a decadent and dying tradition toward a new, committed, futuristic style'.⁷⁹⁹ But who represented that decadent and dying tradition? The same poets that the Georgians had attempted to leave behind? The Georgians themselves, or those who progressed beyond what the Georgians stood for? Where was Owen in this? While in rapid succession new generations of poets tried to sweep away what was stale and old-fashioned, it becomes difficult to contextualize a dead poet who wrote his best verse with a heavy Romantic and Decadent influence in 1917-1918, yet was admired as a peculiar and literary outsider for years after his death. What we know beyond any doubt is that Day Lewis, Auden and Spender all respected Owen and felt he offered something that others of his period did not. Spender's personal interest manifested in a visit to Sassoon, and Day Lewis in 1934 made the assertion that

⁷⁹⁷ Webb, p.189.

⁷⁹⁸ Mallon, p.67.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., p.17.

‘the immediate poetic ancestors of the generation of Auden and Spender were Hopkins, Owen and Eliot’,⁸⁰⁰ a sign of ‘Owen’s growing reputation’.⁸⁰¹

As Welland observed, those writing during the depression and unrest of the 1920s and 1930s ‘responded readily to the more iconoclastic elements in Owen’s poetry’:⁸⁰² it was during this period that Spender so irritated Sassoon by asking about Owen. That Sassoon was already tired of hearing enquiries about his old friend rather than about himself indicates there was already enough interest for Spender to have been far from the first, but this is hardly a reflection of a wider public reaction. Young, literary men had taken an interest in Owen where the wider public had grown indifferent, and this was precisely because he appealed to the young men eager for rebellion and for a chance to prove themselves heroic—he had died in battle, he was brave enough to confront authorities and he stepped outside the norm in every way he could, in terms of language, of views on the war, of social standing, even of sexuality. Or at least, it was possible to conceptualize him this way on the available evidence, while perhaps ignoring his warnings not to glamorize war.

Owen had influenced and affected some of the most important writers of the inter-war years, but he remained, as was appropriate for one who so prized the elevated and esoteric, a mostly obscure figure who known to and admired by only a few. To them he was fascinating, compelling in the same way those evangelical preachers who had hypnotized the young Owen had been, and where attempts had been made to present him as an ennobled everyman figure, they failed either to capture his essence or give him the truly broad appeal he would later enjoy. However, this not only reflected Owen’s divisive

⁸⁰⁰ Webb, p.189.

⁸⁰¹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.53.

⁸⁰² *Ibid.*, p.136.

attitudes, still relevant to the established figures of literature, but was contributory to the place of resonance he would achieve when the social upheavals of the 1960s came.

‘For many years Wilfred was regarded as a fairly minor poet, although his work had been appearing in anthologies since 1919. Histories of literature often ignored him altogether,’⁸⁰³ writes Hibberd. As, of course, did many other anthologies: he was absent, for example, in 1919’s *A Treasury of War Poetry*.⁸⁰⁴ And while it is true in relative terms that ‘little more [was] said about Wilfred’s life for over thirty years’,⁸⁰⁵ there are still discernable signs of both popular and academic interest in his work. When his manuscripts were acquired by the British Museum in 1934, the news was significant enough for Blunden to write a piece for *The Times*, suggesting at least a degree of public awareness,⁸⁰⁶ but these were certainly years of little development in Owen studies. Writing to Professor David Daiches in 1996 about the former’s 1936 essay in *New Literary Values*, Welland asked, ‘Am I right in my belief that the only significant reference to Owen between Blunden’s in 1931 and yours in 1936 was Day Lewis’s *A Hope for Poetry* (1934)?’⁸⁰⁷ Welland is perhaps forgetting Stephen Spender’s mention of Owen in 1935’s *The Destructive Element*, calling Owen ‘the most useful influence in modern verse’⁸⁰⁸. However, Welland does list the work in *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* when listing texts mentioning Owen in the 1930s, also including Louis MacNeice and Michael Roberts mentioning him in introductions to *Modern Poetry* and *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, respectively.

While 1932-1935 seem like relatively quiet years in the story of Owen scholarship, Edith Sitwell mentioned Owen in passing in a letter of 15 June 1935 to Ronald Bottrall, but

⁸⁰³ DHANB, pp.464-65.

⁸⁰⁴ Santanu Das, p.8.

⁸⁰⁵ DHANB, p.462.

⁸⁰⁶ Blunden, Edmund, ‘Wilfred Owen: A War Poet’s Manuscripts’, *The Times*, 16 April 1934, p.17.

⁸⁰⁷ Letter from Dennis Welland to David Daiches, 10 April 1996, Welland Archive, DSW/1/3/1/4/1.

⁸⁰⁸ Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), p.220.

only to say that Owen did not dress objectionably. Still, this innocuous mention at least shows she expected Bottrall to know who Owen was.⁸⁰⁹ The influence of *A Hope For Poetry* also ought not to be downplayed. Day Lewis praised Owen's 'deliberate, intense understatements—the brave man's only answer to a hell which no epic words could express...more poignant and more rich with poetic promise than anything else that has been done during this century'.⁸¹⁰ As his reputation grew, so did the importance of this endorsement.

1936 was a significant year for Owen's posthumous reputation. The Spanish Civil War erupted, and the new conflict brought new opportunities for the Auden Group to write on the subject of war, allowing Welland to add: 'Great as was [poets such as Cecil Day Lewis and WH Auden's] earlier enthusiasm for Owen, it is during and after the Spanish Civil War that his poetic influence on them became most important.'⁸¹¹ During this period, the conception of the 'war poets' began to be codified and simplified in what could be called the 'mythmaking process': Blunden 'worried, in letters to Sassoon, that the "war poets" were being unfairly perceived as a school instead of as individuals, and that the attitude of the public to such poetry was determined by shifts in politics'.⁸¹² Arguably these conceptions were inevitable, the poets being united by their subject matter, which was intrinsically linked to political commentary on an establishment. It is an oversimplification, but there is something resonant to Davidson's description of the generalised poet finding himself opposing 'the establishment that has placed him in a situation of war',⁸¹³ and this opposition is evident in Owen's poems critical of unsympathetic authority figures.

⁸⁰⁹ Edith Sitwell: *Selected Letters*, p.178.

⁸¹⁰ Cecil Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry* (London: Blackwell, 1934), p.17.

⁸¹¹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.140.

⁸¹² Mallon, p.67.

⁸¹³ Davidson, p.18.

1936 also saw a controversial decision on Owen, as Yeats ‘infamously excluded Owen from his 1936 edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*’,⁸¹⁴ an issue that will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter. In simple terms, however, the fact that this decision resulted in a backlash illustrates that even in the 1930s there were vocal defenders of Owen’s work, and as previously mentioned, MacNiece and Roberts both not only anthologised Owen but mentioned him in their anthologies’ introductions, which is significant for a figure who was as yet not widely known to the general public.

Yeats’ decision caused some vociferous objections, and he reacted to the backlash with surprise, writing that he did not realize he was ‘excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution’.⁸¹⁵ However, he had clearly expected a degree of controversy, having in his original introduction written, ‘I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war; they are in all anthologies.’⁸¹⁶ Yet the scale of the reaction surprised him. The ‘sandwich-board man’ comment is an attempt to belittle Owen’s importance, but even at this stage Owen was not so invisible that Yeats could exclude him without explanation, at least amongst those who were interested in poetry and followed the politics of who was deemed worthy of inclusion in anthologies. Owen was not appealing to a broad public, but those who were interested in poetry defended him.

At this stage, Owen was an outsider appealing to outsiders. To a greater civilian populace he remained enigmatic—if they had heard of him, it was as a soldier who wrote in a way that suggested civilians could not understand him, who had pushed boundaries with his strange half-rhymes and his horrific imagery, and whose verse was quite unlike the Romantic poetry his structures and diction evoked. The context of Yeats’ decision is perhaps distorted by the present-day awareness of Owen as a kind of national poet. That

⁸¹⁴ Hipp, p.192.

⁸¹⁵ Allan Wade, ed., *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p.113.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.124.

was not what he was to Yeats, nor even to the supporters who defended Owen. He remained an unusual outsider poet, and his champions—aside from those who knew him personally—were intellectuals who prized individuality, membership of peculiar coteries and stylistic innovation.

Owen's reputation in the 1930s has received little attention in historical studies, partly because it is difficult to express that while Owen was obscure and largely ignored by literary critics, he also had a sufficiently devoted following that Yeats caused outrage with his snub. Owen's reputation at this stage is neither of two extremes, with Owen well-known enough to be a heavy influence on prominent poets of the day and for Yeats' omission to indeed provoke a reaction, but also still relatively obscure. As yet, he could not be said to have enough influence to be a major force on collective memory. To support this, it is useful to turn to an article in the *Montreal Gazette* from 1937: the Canadian newspaper published an article on Owen under the headline 'Forgotten War Poet', in which after noting the fame and significance of the three best-known war poets, John McCrae ('translated to a poet's immortality by one breathless song'), Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon, Owen is described as the fourth poet to have gained 'special recognition': -

As for the fourth, far less read than any of these, apparently almost forgotten, he remains for a faithful minority of readers, who still read and remember his haunting and memorable poetry, the most authentic voice of all. His name was Wilfred Owen, and he was killed in action on the Western Front, a week before Armistice, nineteen years ago.⁸¹⁷

Similarly, in Australian newspaper *The Age*, dated November 1939, came the piece 'A War-Lost Genius', written by a journalist credited only as 'R.R.S.' and appearing in the literary section. The enthusiastic article, which lauds Owen as 'the greatest soldier-poet of

⁸¹⁷ John A.B. McLeish, 'Forgotten War Poet', *The Montreal Gazette*, 10 November 1937, p.8.

the war years', neatly indicates that Owen was well-loved indeed, yet only to a few: 'It is strange that even now the poems of this twentieth century Keats are accorded little of the recognition they so obviously deserved,' writes R.R.S.⁸¹⁸ It is also telling that Owen is framed in terms of loneliness, isolation and heightened sensitivity: on the basis of a quotation from the Blunden edition in which Susan Owen mentions her son was not very robust or keen on games, R.R.S. extrapolates, 'a boy of Owen's extreme sensitivity would not be readily welcomed by boys of his own age, and there is little doubt that in early youth he was extremely lonely.'⁸¹⁹

Indeed, it was primarily Owen's fixation upon outsiderdom that defined his place in literary history in the 1930s, before he could be said to be 'one of the most famous of English war poets'.⁸²⁰ His style and stance kept his appeal limited to a select few, who enjoyed his rebellion against authority, his strong empathy for soldiers as a group artificially divided from society and—perhaps jarringly from a modern perspective—the alternative he offered to accepted views of the war experience. The key supporters he would gain here, most particularly within the Auden group, were undoubtedly central to the continued story of his presence in the English canon as the century continued. And at every point, he endures in a way consistent with how he hoped to be perceived because the insistence on presenting himself as an elevated outsider figure endures and appeals to those with a similar outlook.

⁸¹⁸ R.R.S., p.34.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid.

⁸²⁰ Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Phaidon, 1996), p.174.

From Welland to Britten and Beyond: A Niche Expands

The poetry of the soldier-poets has coalesced, beyond literary history and cultural memory, into a recognisable structure of feeling. Here lies an undeniable part of its power and some of the larger critical problems.⁸²¹

As we have established, Owen's influence on the poetry of the Second World War was discernable but certainly not as pervasive as his current stature may suggest, considering the degree to which he is reputed to have influenced our national attitude towards war. On the other hand, he was not wholly invisible in the 1940s: in the *Manchester Evening News*, 21 Dec 1944, George Orwell acerbically wrote, 'I think it might have been better for the human race if the authorities had seen fit to exempt Wilfred Owen and conscript Horatio Bottomley',⁸²² a jibe that would be nonsensical if he did not expect his readers to recognize both names. Owen's influence on the way in which the country remembered the first of the two catastrophic wars of the century in which it played such a major part was subtle and as yet far from universal. After the Second World War, Owen's reputation continued on much the same trajectory, largely confined to 'intellectuals', but slowly growing. Dylan Thomas wrote a critical essay on him in 1946, to be included in *Quite Early One Morning*, which lauded Owen as 'a poet of all times, all places and all wars',⁸²³ and in 1947 the *Times Literary Supplement* published a letter from Harold Owen that signified his intention to keep tight control over his brother's image: 'there are aspects of Owen which [...] can only be truthfully disclosed by someone who shares his blood,' he claimed.⁸²⁴ But throughout the 1950s, little was published to advance critical opinion of him, or to question why the biographical information available on Owen was so limited.

⁸²¹ Santanu Das, p.4.

⁸²² Williams, p.125.

⁸²³ Dylan Thomas, *Quite Early One Morning* (New York: New Directions, 1954), p.126.

⁸²⁴ Joseph Cohen, 'Owen Agonistes', in *English Literature in Translation, 1880-1920*, volume 8, number 5, 1967, pp.253-68, p.253.

Owen, despite the directness of his poetry, was inaccessible as a figure, on account of being so well-guarded by his champions. His popularity did not warrant, as it soon would, the publication of every last scrap of verse he had set down in draft form, but this relatively incomplete publication history led to a continued lack of serious scholarship. To those in the know, he was either an intriguing enigma or a symbol rather than an individual—Sassoon had seen it most fitting that he be known more as a notional soldier than a person. And this, perhaps, would have suited Owen, so keen that his individuality be subordinate to the ‘spirit’ he expressed, the spirit he believed the world was not ready for at the time of writing, but it was to the detriment of his place as an authoritative historical figure. Owen had influenced the war poetry that had come after him, and some of the most important figures in English Literature, but his appeal was primarily to those who, like him, wished to be set apart and considered themselves to possess secret or elevated knowledge—the intellectuals, the literary men, the rebels against society. Yet the academic response was almost non-existent. There was an exception to this, however, and his first steps into creating an academic framework for Owen studies ought not to be underestimated.

Insight on prevalent opinions regarding Owen’s status in the middle of the 20th Century can be gleaned from the obituary written by Peter Messent for *The Guardian* upon Dennis Welland’s passing in 2002. Welland’s doctoral thesis on Owen was written between 1947 and 1951, then published as *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* in 1960; in his obituary, the work is described as ‘a landmark text in resurrecting interest in its subject’.⁸²⁵ For interest to be resurrected, it can be parsed, it must prior to that have been deceased. However, this impression is not quite accurate, for though the level of interest in Owen was low relative to the present day, in the 1930s Spender and Blunden took a keen interest, the

⁸²⁵ Peter Messent, ‘Obituary: Dennis Welland’, *The Guardian*, 26 September 2002
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2002/sep/26/guardianobituaries.obituaries>>[Accessed 16 August 2014].

British Library saw fit to purchase Owen's drafts and Yeats had to defend the act of snubbing him, while in the 1940s his presence could be observed in Orwell's mention of him and his discernible influence on the Lyric Poets of the Second World War. In the case of Welland, while he was writing on Owen in the late 1940s, to be widely published over a decade later, he had to have been exposed to Owen prior to this to have taken an interest: in his words, his 'interest in Owen [dated] from my undergraduate days and [was] intensified by my own more limited experience of war between 1939 and 1945'.⁸²⁶ He had at the end of the 1930s been an undergraduate at University College Nottingham, receiving his BA in 1940, and if he was introduced in this period to Owen, then Owen's reputation cannot have been altogether dead. However, as hyperbole, the choice of wording is not altogether unwarranted, for Owen was at the time of Welland's early work not yet a major part of a collectivized memory of the War.

Like Spender before him, Welland went to seek out Sassoon to find out more about Owen, meeting him in 1950. Sassoon spoke with him at length, though Welland's impressions are concordant with the conception of Sassoon as being in some way stuck in the early part of the century: 'Welland thought that the monologue had been drenched with sadness, his host apparently still a prisoner of the war. Sassoon also brooded on the meeting. To talk about Wilfred had lifted the deprivation briefly, even giving him a sense of Owen's presence.'⁸²⁷ Sassoon's own feelings are evident in this letter to Welland's supervisor Vivian de Sola Pinto, which can be found in the Welland Archives:—

Owen is a subject which causes me profound depression.
Apart from the loss to poetry, I have always felt that the
loss to *me* was incalculable: both as a friend and as a
stimulator of my work he would have helped me so much.
And I sometimes wonder how much interest the modern

⁸²⁶ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.9.

⁸²⁷ Egremont, p.464.

intelligentsia would show in him if he were still alive.
Probably as little as they show in me! Anyhow, the fact that
I knew him seems to be my main claim to distinction
nowadays.⁸²⁸

Sassoon's feelings on Owen are clear through all of his interactions with those who came to speak to him about his deceased friend. There was the sadness of a man who lost his friend, tinged with a petty jealousy evident in the implication that what had made Owen as celebrated as he was in 1950 was his death rather than the quality of his verse. It also seems that Sassoon felt Owen's reputation at that point outstripped his own, but that it was the 'intelligentsia' who were giving him their attention.

Owen was undoubtedly a lingering presence in Sassoon's life during this period, when perhaps he felt his own legacy fading and his relevance coming to an end. After Welland's visit, he reflected in his diary on 'the lost years—the lost work that he should have done'.⁸²⁹ These thoughts continued to recur: 'years later, in 1954, he was to dream that Owen had come back and that he was very "happy at his return and taking charge of him"',⁸³⁰ which is indicative of Sassoon's perception of his role as master to an apprentice who needed someone to take charge of him.

Owen may be almost universally known in Britain today, but Welland was pursuing a relatively obscure writer at the time. He wrote on a peculiarity, a fringe interest. Looking again at a contemporary newspaper, the *Glasgow Herald*, on the occasion of a 1953 radio reading of Owen's work, the journalist notes that he was 'the Lycidas of the First World War whose poetic impact is still remembered by his poetry-reading contemporaries'.⁸³¹ Lycidas was a councillor in ancient Athens stoned to death for attempting to bring an end to a war against the Persians through diplomatic compromise, and the subject of a pastoral

⁸²⁸ Letter from Siegfried Sassoon to Vivian de Sola Pinto, 15 May 1950, Welland archives, 1/3/3/7.

⁸²⁹ Egremont, p.464.

⁸³⁰ Moorcroft Wilson, *The Making of a War Poet*, p.409.

⁸³¹ G.M.L., 'Lycidas of the First World War', *The Glasgow Herald*, August 21, 1953, p.4.

elegy by Milton. He became ‘a useful symbol for connoting all the potentially valuable lives gone to waste’⁸³² in the war. But appending ‘of the First World War’ to this description in reference to Owen would seem not only superfluous but somewhat odd today, as his impact is known to numerous readers of all ages, if not on poetry then on our perception of war experiences. That his work was celebrated enough to warrant a radio reading indicated he was celebrated to some, but only by a few in the know, as he had hoped and as befitted his writing. However, this was also the idiomatic calm before the storm: the groundwork for Owen’s future popularity was in place.

Welland was not entirely alone in studying Owen in the 1950s. The starting point for the previous chapter’s discussion of Owen sexuality was a 1975 letter from Joseph Cohen to *The New York Review of Books*. But that letter made reference back to ‘a controversy’ between its writer and Welland ‘that erupted in the *TLS* in 1956’. The matter in question was the misleading punctuation on Owen’s epitaph,⁸³³ with the controversy being whether or not it was Susan Owen who was responsible for the change. The simple fact that not only were there scholars debating such issues in 1956 but that the *Times Literary Supplement* was willing to accommodate that debate is another clue that Owen had not vanished from the attention of those with a keen interest in literature. Beyond such discussions and scholarly preparatory work, the 1950s brought with it no major publications centred on Owen.

But in another field there was a meaningful use of his work. It is not noted in any major Owen biography or critical work, but the *War Requiem* was not the first time Britten set Owen’s verse to music. Britten was an extraordinarily literary composer—as Boris Ford put it in *Benjamin Britten’s Poets: The poetry he set to music*, ‘listeners who are familiar

⁸³² Nosheen Khan, *Women’s Poetry of the First World War* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p.65, as a reference to Helen Coale Crew’s ‘Sing, Ye Trenches!’.

⁸³³ See, for example, Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, p.8.

with Britten's well-known works know that he set poems by Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Donne, Rimbaud, Blake, Eliot and Owen. What they may not realize is that he set poems by as many as *ninety* known poets and by a great number of anonymous medieval poets.⁸³⁴ In 1958, he set Owen's 'The Kind Ghosts' to music, for a programme that included works by Wordsworth and Keats, company Owen would no doubt have enjoyed.⁸³⁵ In July of that same year, Britten had appeared on the BBC Home Service on a programme entitled 'Personal Choice', where he selected his favourite poems: in a list of mostly Romantic poets, he also selected works by Auden, Osbert Sitwell and Hardy—as well as 'Strange Meeting' by Wilfred Owen.⁸³⁶ He also corresponded with Edith Sitwell, and they spoke of Owen, Edith eager that the popular young composer know she had published Owen's poems first, before Blunden put together his 1931 volume.⁸³⁷

Aside from any personal qualities, useful political attitudes or pleasing use of sound effects in his rhyming and alliteration, Owen was a notably musical poet. Many of his titles refer to music, from 'Winter Song'⁸³⁸ to 'Anthem for Doomed Youth.' He wrote rather awkward sonnet called 'Music' that laboriously goes through a number of instruments to suggest heightened emotions that yet do not compare with full knowledge of 'life's symphony' that comes with knowledge of love.⁸³⁹

While Owen was a notably musical poet, Britten's talent developed in the company of literary men. His closest associates from the 1930s were poets, as he had met Auden in the middle of the decade and the two collaborated frequently, travelling together to America in 1939. They later became estranged, but there is a clear influence on Britten's taste in verse

⁸³⁴ Boris Ford, ed., *Benjamin Britten's Poets: The poetry he set to music* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1994), p.xii.

⁸³⁵ Ford, p.188. Ford elsewhere suggests this composition was performed in 1928 (p.184), but this is a misprint (cf. Christopher Palmer, 'Chronology', *The Britten Companion*, ed. by Christopher Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp.440-44, p.442.

⁸³⁶ Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: his life and operas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p.88. Year mistakenly given as 1957 on p.92.

⁸³⁷ *Edith Sitwell: Selected Letters*, p.455.

⁸³⁸ CWDC, p.148.

⁸³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.146.

that comes from the association. Isherwood also became close with him, and was there in 1937 to take Britten to ‘the notorious Jermyn Street Turkish Baths’ to answer the question ‘have we convinced Ben he’s queer, or haven’t we?’⁸⁴⁰ Indeed, John Evans, who edited Britten’s diaries, feels that they reveal Britten was closer to Isherwood than to Auden, Britten’s relationship with Auden being more formal and professional.⁸⁴¹ Given Isherwood’s remarkable lifelong enthusiasm for Owen, it seems entirely reasonable to postulate that he passed on a love for Owen’s work to Britten, contextualized in a specific way. After all, these men certainly formed an elitist coterie, practised homosexuality and considered themselves elevated and more sensitive than most men. They lived exactly how Owen wished to, and perhaps they sensed one who aspired to the same existence as them.

Much scholarly attention has been paid to Britten’s private life and the influence of his sexuality on his work, but the question of what drew him to Owen in particular when his poetry was, as we have seen, popular only to literary elites, is somewhat overlooked. Why did Britten not choose, for example, Sassoon or Graves, who could be consulted directly and had very similar political views of the war as Owen? Why not Rosenberg, who had also died in battle and had been lauded by Fussell? According to Pyke, it was the very obscurity that at least in part drew Britten, as he considered Owen ‘a genius unrecognized by the artistic and political establishments of his day’,⁸⁴² though it would seem it was in artistic establishments he was championed. Certainly, Owen had personal qualities that made Britten feel he had found a kindred spirit; Britten’s lifelong partner Peter Pears described in an undated programme note the ‘bewildered but gifted young of whom he was

⁸⁴⁰ Philip Hensher, “‘Love’s a Little Boy’”, *The Guardian*, 7 November 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/nov/07/britten-auden-philip-hensher>>[accessed 16 August 2014].

⁸⁴¹ John Evans, ed., *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten, 1928-1938* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), passim.

⁸⁴² Cameron Pyke, ‘Shostakovich’s Fourteenth Symphony’ in *Benjamin Britten: New Perspectives on his Life and Work*, ed. by Lucy Walker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2009), pp.27-45, p.28.

fond: “lost sheep” as he called them’, which as Palmer points out⁸⁴³ applies as much to Owen as to Rimbaud, the direct subject of the quote.

Though Owen was no pacifist and emphasized the need to continue taking part in the fighting to make valid observations, his statements appealed to one who sought to condemn it as wasteful. Britten could rely upon this authority to make the political point he wanted to make, even if it was not quite the same as Owen’s message: ‘As a lifelong pacifist [...] he saw the chance to make a public declaration of his hatred of war and the destruction it caused and to emphasize the importance of rehabilitation.’⁸⁴⁴ In all probability, Britten chose Owen firstly because of the beauty of his words, secondly for the political statements he had made, and thirdly because of his personal qualities, just as he had chosen Rimbaud. Owen promoted a philosophy of celebrating the outsider, glorifying those who stood apart with secret knowledge, disliking those who mindlessly followed what they were told and sympathising with those who suffered because they were forced outside of society rather than transcending it. Even if his biography remained somewhat obscure, this was still clear from what little information about him was available and through his work. This, rather than solely what he wrote about the war, is why Britten chose him: in Owen, Britten had found a fellow outsider figure. It is not for this thesis to go into depth on the question of how Britten considered himself such a figure, but it is certainly a question that Britten scholars have asked, for example in Nicholas Kenyon’s introduction in the collection of essays *Britten’s Century*, an introduction entitled ‘The Outsider and the Insider’: -

One issue which recurs through this book of essays: was Britten an insider or an outsider? Did he consider himself to be one or the other, yearning to be accepted into the middle classes while retaining a lifestyle that was reviled by many

⁸⁴³ Palmer, Christopher. ‘Embalmer of the Midnight: The Orchestral Song-cycles’, *The Britten Companion*, ed. by Christopher Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 308-28, p.317.

⁸⁴⁴ Michael Kennedy, *Britten*, revised edn (London: Dent, 1993), pp.73-74.

of that class, or maintaining an external pose while accepting the trappings of the establishment?⁸⁴⁵

Britten was associated with a literary elite who enjoyed defying expectations, travelled the world as self-imposed exiles, were fascinated by bravery in battle yet critical of those in command, and supported the conceptual underdog: it is small wonder that Owen appealed to him so much. Yet this link—from Owen to Blunden, Blunden to Isherwood, Isherwood to Britten—has not received the critical attention it deserves.

It is also entirely possible, though of course the evidence for it is indirect, that Owen's reported homosexuality also influenced Britten—and Isherwood. Owen, like Britten, had homosexual inclinations. Both had a great feeling of kinship with young boys that is variously interpreted: each of them very much enjoyed the company of young males in a way that if it did have an element of sexual interest was by all available evidence never acted upon.⁸⁴⁶ Owen's oblique poems about boy prostitutes were not yet widely available, and besides as Hibberd points out may have been based on hearsay and fascination rather than actual experience—'perhaps he had just heard stories at Half Moon Street and from Bainbrigge'⁸⁴⁷—so it is entirely possible that Britten saw Owen as a kind of pure-hearted homosexual youth who died before losing his innocence (though Britten also admired Rimbaud, who in no sense could be interpreted as innocent). Whether this aspect contributed to Owen's appeal or not, it is clear that Britten felt a kind of personal attraction to the poet directly derived from his outsider's stance and considered him underappreciated. Britten was instrumental in altering that perception, in 1962 setting a number of Owen's poems to music for his *War Requiem* to consecrate the new cathedral in Coventry.

⁸⁴⁵ Nicholas Kenyon, 'Introduction: The Insider and the Outsider' in *Britten's Century: Celebrating 100 Years of Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Mark Bostridge (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.ix-xvii, p.xi.

⁸⁴⁶ Cf. John Bridcut, *Britten's Children* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), passim.

⁸⁴⁷ DHANB, p.379.

The Socio-Political Atmosphere of the 1960s

Owen may have been familiar in certain circles in the years since his death, but of his relative obscurity, Hibberd writes, ‘the 1960s and Vietnam changed all that’.⁸⁴⁸ Though this is in principal correct, it lacks nuance, both in terms of the status of Owen prior to 1962 and in terms of simplifying what the 1960s were, Todman pointing out that this, too, is mythmaking: ‘we all know what the 1960s were like: a decade of free (or at least freer) love, artistic experimentation, anti-war feeling and protest against the nuclear arms race and American involvement in Vietnam, social mobility and the debunking of an established order.’⁸⁴⁹ This set of culturally agreed-upon qualities is very much like the set of agreed-upon notions of the Great War, though many historians agree that the cultural upheavals of the 1960s affected the way the Great War has been represented ever since. Bond writes of ‘the 1960s, when earlier “disenchanted” and profoundly critical views of the First World War were rediscovered and much developed,’⁸⁵⁰ and cultural shifts, while neither universally agreed-upon nor wholly unopposed, informed the changes in attitude that facilitated this revisiting of the Great War.

When considering why Owen’s posthumous reputation radically changed during the 1960s, it is worth assessing the cultural landscape. These qualities are of course generalisations: not everybody was at Woodstock, liked the Beatles or believed in peace and love. To claim the 1960s were unambiguously one thing or another is as reductive as saying the Great War was an unmitigated waste of life, or a triumph of good against evil. It is easy to reduce an entire decade, with all its diversity of experiences, to snapshots and slogans, but that creates the same historiographical problems as discussed in my first

⁸⁴⁸ DHANB, p.465.

⁸⁴⁹ Todman, *The Great War*, p.105.

⁸⁵⁰ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, p.vii.

chapter. But with these shortcomings in mind, it is worth briefly considering the socio-political landscape in which the *War Requiem* appeared.

Particularly significant to the 1960s attitude to war was the possibility of nuclear war. Nuclear weapons were never deployed against civilian populations in the 1960s, but the threat was persistent—‘The issue for the 1960s protester was stark and urgent—“the Bomb” overshadowed everything’⁸⁵¹. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, soon after the performance of the *War Requiem*, revolved around the placement of nuclear weapons. Part of Nixon’s policy as president, beginning in 1969, was to give the impression that he was volatile and unpredictable, ready to launch nuclear missiles at any moment, which he referred to as his ‘madman theory’⁸⁵². The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament had been spreading awareness of the threat of nuclear warfare since its foundation in response to an article by J.B. Priestley in the *New Statesman* in November 1957⁸⁵³. Prominent members included Bertrand Russell and *New Statesman* editor Kingsley Martin, and Benjamin Britten was listed as a sponsor in the first year.⁸⁵⁴

The Vietnam War was prominent throughout the 1960s, its start debatable but now officially recorded by the US Department of Defence as November 1st, 1955⁸⁵⁵. Protests against the conflict, aligned with the CND, grew in size and prominence during the 1960s, culminating in the ‘huge demonstrations of the Anti-Vietnam War Movement’, though faced a ‘rapid decline’ in 1968, which Taylor and Pritchard attribute at least in large part to something that not generally acknowledged in generalised depictions of the 1960: many smaller organisations prominent in the protests prioritised promoting socialism rather than

⁸⁵¹ Richard Taylor and Colin Prichard, *The Protest Makers: The British Nuclear Disarmament Movement of 1958-1965, Twenty Years On* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980), p.141.

⁸⁵² Adam Piette, ‘The Fictions of Nuclear War, Hiroshima to Vietnam’ in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 160-171, p.169.

⁸⁵³ Taylor and Prichard, p.6.

⁸⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁸⁵⁵ A.T. Lawrence, *Crucible Vietnam: Memoir of an Infantry Lieutenant* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2009) p.20.

disarmament—‘they were not centrally interested in the declared objectives of the Movement so much as in its potential for building the foundations of the socialist party’⁸⁵⁶. Disparate members and groups had their own agendas, but the core message of the group was consistent: nuclear weaponry was a significant threat and pressure needed to be put onto governments to disarm.

Some of the most horrific elements of previous wars were also becoming recognised in this period. For example, there was a ‘general trend towards heightened “holocaust awareness” starting in the 1960s’⁸⁵⁷. Popular culture also expounded peace and love, a famous iteration coming at the end of the decade when John Lennon and Yoko Ono ran a campaign in twelve major cities around the world, displaying posters that read, ‘WAR IS OVER! (If You Want It)’, followed by, ‘Happy Christmas from John & Yoko’⁸⁵⁸. These Christmas wishes suggest how late in the year these posters appeared, on 15 December 1969. Lennon’s song using the slogan as a refrain, ‘Happy Xmas (War Is Over)’ would not be released until 1972, with direct US involvement in the Vietnam War coming to an end in August 1973⁸⁵⁹. However, a song with similar anti-war sentiment, ‘Give Peace a Chance’ had been released by Lennon and Ono’s Plastic Ono Band in July 1969⁸⁶⁰, and this sentiment can be interpreted as reflective of attitudes at the end of the 1960s. The posters presented both statement and plea, empowering at first before urging the reader to action with the parenthetical addition.

The statement of two artists, even ones with as much cultural influence as Lennon and Ono, cannot be taken as representative on a basic level of widespread popular thought, and

⁸⁵⁶ Taylor and Pritchard, p.47.

⁸⁵⁷ Barry Langford, ‘Holocaust Film’ in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp.134-150, p.139.

⁸⁵⁸ Dorian Lynskey, ‘Plastic Ono Band, “Give Peace a Chance”’ in *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day* (New York: Ecco Press, 2011). pp. 126–142, p.134.

⁸⁵⁹ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p.457.

⁸⁶⁰ Lynskey, p.126.

indeed in London the posters were defaced⁸⁶¹, but certainly the couple felt the need to protest what they perceived to be a problem of paramount importance. Beseeking others for peace was relevant because war remained relevant. While citizens were not directly involved in the Vietnam War in the same way as they had been with conscription in the First World War or the Blitz in the Second World War, war increasingly inspired fear and negativity.

The 1960s saw the fiftieth anniversary of events of the Great War, inspiring historians and scholars to reassess prevailing attitudes. Reassessment was necessary because, according to Brian Bond, the more removed from direct experience historians are, the freer they are of the 'emotional hang ups or anguish of their elders or mentors'⁸⁶². The 1960s may perhaps have still been too close to events of the Great War, however. In his article, 'The Reception of *The Great War* in the 1960s', referring to the television series of that name, Todman reminds us it 'did not appear in a vacuum'⁸⁶³. At this point, interest in the war was still, on some level, personal: 'The audience sat down not just to watch history, but to find out about what dad, or granddad, had done in the war'⁸⁶⁴. Todman ultimately concludes that the audience of the 1960s were incapable of interpreting the series in a balanced manner because confirmation bias predetermined their reaction: 'in the aftermath of the Second World War, and under the shadow of the atomic bomb and the arms race, a generation had grown up whose attitudes were uniquely anti-authority and anti-war.'⁸⁶⁵

Perhaps it is a too much to characterise the reaction of an entire generation in this way, as though every viewer's experience were alike, but as a generalisation both Bond and

⁸⁶¹ Joe Goodden, 'John Lennon and Yoko Ono's 'War Is Over' poster campaign is launched', *The Beatles Bible* <

<https://www.beatlesbible.com/1969/12/15/john-lennon-yoko-ono-war-is-over-poster-campaign-launched>>[accessed 20 November 2017]

⁸⁶² Brian Bond, 'Editor's Introduction' in *The First World War and British Military History*, ed. by Brian Bond (Oxford University Press 1991), pp.1-12, p.1.

⁸⁶³ Dan Todman, 'The Reception of *The Great War* in the 1960s', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2002, pp.29-36, p.30.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Todman support this impression. Even though one of the writers for the series, John Terraine was a biographer of Haig and a ‘doughty defender of the primacy of the western Front and champion of the British performance there’⁸⁶⁶, because ‘the visual images [...] had made a vastly greater impact than the text [...] the series mainly served to confirm the myths which Terraine and some of his colleagues had hoped to demolish or modify’⁸⁶⁷ Todman concurs: ‘it did not matter what they were shown or told; their reaction to the idea of war was that it was horrific and futile’⁸⁶⁸. This was the context in which Owen was popularised—indeed, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ was read as part of the television show⁸⁶⁹.

Bond and Todman’s assertions are supported by the beliefs they encounter both in anecdotes and in later media like *Blackadder*. Their point of contention is not that the Great War produced images and accounts of suffering, futility or hopelessness, but rather the preponderance of that imagery in place of other works that give a more nuanced overview. Bond gives us one such an anecdote as the opening to his 1997 lecture, ‘A victory worse than defeat? British interpretations of the First World War’⁸⁷⁰—on a radio discussion, a novelist asserts that Britain lost the war, and Bond feels he has said something ‘politically incorrect’ when he corrects the misconception. He assures his addressees that ‘Many people do indeed apparently believe that the war had been lost, especially those influenced by the film *Oh! What a Lovely War!*’⁸⁷¹

Oh! What a Lovely War, ‘that quintessential “message for the Sixties” that wars could always happen so long as power was in the hands of upper class twits’,⁸⁷² is, perhaps, the obvious place that the satirical image of idiotic and misguided Generals gleefully sending

⁸⁶⁶ Bond, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, p.8.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁸ Todman, ‘The Reception of *The Great War* in the 1960s’, p.32.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁰ Brian Bond, ‘A victory worse than defeat? British interpretations of the First World War’, Annual Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives Lecture (King’s College, London, 20 November 1997), p.1.

⁸⁷¹ Bond, ‘A victory worse than defeat? British interpretations of the First World War’, p.1

⁸⁷² Ferguson, p.xxxii.

the troops to their deaths became common currency, with a far greater influence in that regard than anything in the works of Owen. Though very popular and highly influential, it was neither accurate nor representative: as Gary Sheffield points out, ‘like many literary portrayals of the war, it is historically highly inaccurate. It tells us more about the Cold War mentalities of the early 1960s than those of the Great War, but all too often it is treated as sober history.’⁸⁷³

As war experiences were mediated through art, television and even satire, the reaction became increasingly condemnatory: ‘around the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreaks of hostilities it was unsurprising to see a flood of books, articles, television programmes and films revisiting and reinterpreting the Great War. What was surprising was the speed with which a highly negative view came to dominate,’ writes David Taylor⁸⁷⁴. Selecting the poems Owen wrote that were the most furious and condemnatory, his words and tragic biography were a powerful emotional addition to this narrative.

⁸⁷³ Sheffield, p.71.

⁸⁷⁴ David Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and the Great War: Rifleman Patrick MacGill and the Construction of Wartime Experience* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p.28.

The Success of the *War Requiem* and Owen's most prominent poems

While the reasons behind Britten's *War Requiem* and the poems used therein becoming so popular may be somewhat more complex than an over-reaching *zeitgeist* shifting towards anti-war sentiments, it is unarguable that the *War Requiem* was a great success. 'Not since Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* in 1931 had a choral work so impressed the British public and critics. Over the next two or three years, performances were mounted by all the leading concert societies [...] when the recording was issued in May 1963 it sold over 200,000 sets in five months, an extraordinary figure for any work.'⁸⁷⁵ Where Owen's volumes of poetry had never yet sold in great number, this musical work that used his words for a libretto gained a mass audience. Owen's friends and admirers were delighted with the reception, as revealed by their letters to Welland: Sassoon wrote, 'I am rejoicing over the Britten Requiem, which is evidently a fine work, and will make the poems even better known,'⁸⁷⁶ while Day Lewis attended in person: 'We went to Coventry for the Britten Requiem: it is one of the great experiences of one's life and his use of the Owen poems is masterly.'⁸⁷⁷ If it may seem surprising Sassoon did not attend in person, by that stage he made very few public appearances, Welland writing in a letter earlier that year, 'Siegfried Sassoon is almost a recluse.'⁸⁷⁸

These, then, are probable contributory reasons Britten chose Owen: he considered him an underappreciated genius; his stance against the war may not have been pacifist—as Hibberd puts it, Owen is not 'the champion of pacifism and social reconstruction that some modern critics have described'⁸⁷⁹—but was useful for one wishing to promote pacifism; he had been portrayed as homosexual by Graves and wrote with a distinct appreciation for

⁸⁷⁵ Kennedy, p.75.

⁸⁷⁶ Letter from Siegfried Sassoon to Dennis Welland, 28 May 1962, Welland Archive, DSW/1/1/3/9/12, p.1.

⁸⁷⁷ Letter from Cecil Day Lewis to Dennis Welland, 1 June 1962, Welland Archive, DSW/1/1/3/9/9.

⁸⁷⁸ Letter from Dennis Welland to W.H. Moomaw, 23 March, 1963, Welland Archive, DSW/1/1/3/9/2.

⁸⁷⁹ DHOTP, p.ix.

young male beauty; and he had managed to find a place amongst a literary elite despite not having the privileges of the likes of Sassoon. In all these ways, he appealed to Britten on a personal level, and in all these ways he could be described as an outsider, who wished to emphasize his status as one who left behind the expectations of his social background and who was at all times drawn to social cliques that prided themselves on secret knowledge or transgression. It is no understatement to suggest that without these personal facets, Owen would not have had the same appeal to Britten and he therefore may not have used his work in the *War Requiem*, which directly led to Owen's popularity and influence expanding dramatically; without the direct link from Owen to Britten based on the emphasis on being an outsider, Owen would never have attained his eventual ubiquity. Or if he did, it would not have been in the same manner.

That said, it remains an overstatement to claim that before the *War Requiem* in 1962, Owen was a total obscurity. It should be acknowledged that he was still taken seriously in literary circles: the previous year, Philip Hobsbaum had argued that, 'English poetry had been deformed by the historical accident of Owen, Rosenberg and Edward Thomas' having been killed in battle,⁸⁸⁰ suggesting that he felt Owen would have had a demonstrable influence on the development of English literature had he survived. Nonetheless, it is unarguable that 'Benjamin Britten's use of the poems in his *War Requiem* (1962) caused a surge of interest',⁸⁸¹ and indeed, the remarkable popularity of the work was a high point not only for the wider appeal of Owen's poetry but for the composer, too: 'the unprecedented success of the *War Requiem* marked a climactic point in Britten's career.'⁸⁸²

One interesting facet of the *War Requiem* was Britten's selection of Owen's poems. Compared with the selection of Owen's poetry that has become his most well-known and

⁸⁸⁰ Philip Hobsbaum, 'The road not taken: three poets who died in the first world war', *The Listener*, 23 November 1961, p.10.

⁸⁸¹ DHANB, p.465.

⁸⁸² Kennedy, p.75.

popular, there are several omissions. Britten's introduction of Owen's work is the first solo of the first movement, based around 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. 'Futility' and 'Strange Meeting' also feature, and can be considered some of Owen's best-known work. But the likes of 'But I was Looking at the Permanent Stars' or 'At a Cavalry near the Ancre' cannot be considered well-known Owen works, especially alongside omitted works such as 'Dulce et Decorum Est' or 'Inspection'.

While it may be difficult to quantify precisely which Owen poems could be considered 'popular', one useful indicator is the BBC's 1996 poll of 'The Nation's Favourite Poems', which was a significant enough national poll for the resultant anthology to have never yet gone out of print. Owen is featured prominently in the list.⁸⁸³ 'Dulce et Decorum Est' was voted the eighth most popular poem of all that have ever been written in English, and two of Owen's other poems featured in the list of 100—'Anthem for Doomed Youth' at 49 and 'Futility' at 90. By way of contrast, only a single poem by Sassoon is included ('Everybody Sang', in 31st position), and while Rupert Brooke also has three poems included in the list, none rank so highly as 'Dulce et Decorum Est'.

This ranking is useful for establishing Owen's most popular poetry, and certainly it seems that 'Dulce et Decorum Est' resonates above the rest. When the Radio Times asked David Cameron, then British Prime Minister, for his favourite poem of all time, he chose 'Dulce et Decorum Est', citing the 'incredible power and anger' of Owen's work.⁸⁸⁴ The poem also resonates with combatants today, who are not discouraged by its popularity with civilians: when American troops training for combat in Afghanistan in 2001 were given war poetry to study, one soldier noted the particular resonance of Owen's 'Dulce et

⁸⁸³ BBC Books, *passim*.

⁸⁸⁴ Liz Thomas, 'Anti-war poem by Wilfred Owen is a favourite with David Cameron. (Wonder what Tony Blair's would have been...)', Daily Mail Online, 28 September 2010 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1315781/Wilfred-Owens-anti-war-poem-Dulce-et-Decorum-Est-David-Cameron-favourite.html>>[accessed 10 September 2014].

Decorum Est'. Ricketts, in reporting these findings, adds, 'if a single poem now defines the Great War experience for the English-speaking world—and even modern war in general—it is probably that poem of Owen's about the victim of a gas attack.'⁸⁸⁵

This poem and 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', both voted into the fifty 'Nation's Favourite Poems' in the BBC poll, are clearly far better-known than Owen's other work. Most conceptions of Owen are not informed by a complete overview of his oeuvre, and this of course affects the way he is perceived and understood. 'Dulce et Decorum Est', with its direct depiction of a man's death, and the clear anger of its closing stanza, is Owen at his most visceral and aggressive. 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' is a clear confrontation of death, demonstrable even from its title (and the original title, 'Anthem for Dead Youth', replaced at a suggestion from Sassoon). The strange optimistic feeling of the first half of 'Spring Offensive', solidarity with the enemy in 'Strange Meeting' and self-doubt of 'Inspection' may also be relatively well-known and widely anthologised, but do not achieve the same level of renown or familiarity. Poems that to some extent clarify Owen's views on matters like how his view of authority differs from that of *Oh! What a Lovely War*, like 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', seldom appear in smaller collections or anthologies. Just as the war is known in general, without nuance or balance, so are Owen's views understood through a limited selection of poems and quotation.

Nonetheless, after the *War Requiem*, Owen, through Britten, quickly became widely-recognised. While national opinion swung against war, the war poetry that presented its visceral horrors became popular, and Owen became emblematic of the justified anger and sadness of one who was involved. Through a closer inspection of the development of his posthumous reputation, this chapter has illustrated that in all probability, it was Owen's

⁸⁸⁵ Harry Ricketts, *Strange Meetings: The Poets of the Great War* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2010), p.1.

focus on outsider groups and elevated knowledge that gave him such strong appeal to others who saw themselves in a similar way. The extrapolation from this is that it is likely Owen would not have been championed through the 1930s and 1940s without having revealed this facet of himself in his work, and therefore may well have sunk into obscurity without having done so.

The next chapter will be an examination of the result of the ‘remarkable ubiquity’ of Owen, as Todman calls it⁸⁸⁶. A small group of what had been dissenters against popular opinion came to dominate representations of a period in a remarkable and ironic reversal. Thanks to the dominance of Pound, Eliot, Yeats and F.R. Leavis on English literature in the years since Owen’s death, there has been a critical culture where ‘First World War poetry is often perceived as a bend in the course of twentieth-century verse, gathering only the detritus of the trenches’.⁸⁸⁷ Thus, it becomes necessary to examine Owen’s reputation as representational of a turning point in English literature and an alternate, outsider’s canon—and how the stance of an outsider aspiring to be part of a small elite band with privileged understanding once again changes dramatically as the rebellious alternative becomes dominant and, ultimately, establishment.

⁸⁸⁶ Todman, *The Great War*, p.166.

⁸⁸⁷ Santanu Das, p.7.

Chapter 4: Myths and their Effect on the Legacy of Wilfred Owen

Owen has often been enrolled by partisan critics as one of their own, sometimes on the flimsiest evidence. Pacifists have regarded him as a pacifist, socialists as a socialist; feminists, improbably, have assumed he was a feminist; Christians, including his mother, have insisted he was always a Christian. He has been described as a practising sado-masochist, apparently on the grounds that one of his war poems mentions belts and straps; and his ready affection for children has even allowed paedophiles to claim him.⁸⁸⁸

Wilfred Owen did not immediately go from soldier-poet with only four poems published nationally—three of them in a single instance—to staple of the National Curriculum. But so it has become. *The Independent* published an article on 16 May 2010 investigating who is responsible for choosing the set texts studied by children in schools, Owen was considered a suitable example of required ‘heritage texts’ alongside Dickens.⁸⁸⁹ As we have seen, it took several decades for him to gain the renown he has today, and by no means all of the information we have today was available to scholars in the decades following the Great War. Perhaps as a result, Owen has often been misrepresented and depicted as supporting various views: in addition to those suggested in the quote from Hibberd above, McPhail writes, ‘Wilfred Owen has been claimed by many people and factions as “one of their own”—devout Christians and committed non-believers, soldiers and civilians, pacifists, hetero- and homosexuals.’⁸⁹⁰ Many of these are filtered through a prism of later 20th-century developments: as Rawlinson notes, ‘Owen’s poems have been appropriated as vehicles for familiar and anachronistic attitudes’⁸⁹¹.

⁸⁸⁸ DHANB, p.xxi.

⁸⁸⁹ Susan Elkin, ‘Who chooses the set-texts our children study?’, *The Independent*, May 16, 2010 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/who-chooses-the-settexts-our-children-study-1971975.html>>[accessed 29 September 2014].

⁸⁹⁰ McPhail, p.69.

⁸⁹¹ Rawlinson, ‘Wilfred Owen’, p.115.

While the various claims about Owen can be argued against—which, indeed, is what Hibberd goes on to do, though making the objectionable claim that Owen was ‘undoubtedly’ gay—for my argument what is key here is the word ‘partisan’. Inherently, the partisan critic feels they represent a specific niche, set apart from the rest. What all these groups have in common is their impression of being outsiders, offering a contrary view—most of them feeling in some way enlightened or elevated. Perhaps the reason so many fringe groups look to see their causes supported by Owen is his own strong sense of being outside mainstream thought.

As established in the previous chapter, Britten’s *War Requiem* was highly successful in creating a work that resonated with and helped define the prevailing attitudes of the period. Owen’s powerful statement on war—or at least, *his* war—portrayed the event as horrific and unglamorous, its soldiers deserving of remembrance and pity. This matched then-current attitudes towards armed conflict, as propounded by Britten, who himself was held up as a kind of figurehead: ‘by the time of the *War Requiem* he was seen as encapsulating a national mood and a broad appeal’.⁸⁹² The literary figures from whom Owen’s work had received support before this broadening of his appeal were able to give wider exposure to his work, and accordingly, Cecil Day Lewis was chosen to edit a new volume of Owen’s work, published in 1963.

However, Day Lewis did not attempt to interfere with the established idealized biographical image of Owen, simply reprinting Blunden’s memoir as an appendix, which was possibly to avoid upsetting Harold Owen: ‘it may have been in deference to Harold’s wishes that the 1963 edition did not go far beyond Blunden.’⁸⁹³ Day Lewis certainly found it difficult to deal with Harold and wrote to Welland to express his annoyance in 1960,

⁸⁹² Kenyon, p.xii.

⁸⁹³ DHANB, p.464.

shortly after Welland had built upon his thesis to publish *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*.

Welland replied to say that in fact, it had by this stage become easier to deal with him: -

I do appreciate the difficulties with Harold Owen, but I think they are considerably less than they would have been at any time up to a year ago. As you may know, Parsons let him read my book in typescript and he was so satisfied with it that hatchets were promptly buried, permission for the use of unpublished material given, I spent a thoroughly enjoyable day with him in January, and have just received a very enthusiastic letter from him about the book's appearance (in both senses of the word.) But he is always unpredictable.⁸⁹⁴

For all that hatchets were buried between Harold and Welland, Harold still wanted control over his brother's image and was preparing the first volume of his autobiographical *Journey from Obscurity*, which was also published in 1963 and has come to be seen as the origin of several of the most misleading misconceptions about Owen: Simcox, while praising the autobiography as 'a masterly piece of work'⁸⁹⁵ provides a list of its errors and concludes that 'the evidence within it needs to be weighed against the more implicit and essentially more substantial evidence of the poetry and the letters'.⁸⁹⁶ That said, with his characteristic caution, Simcox equally warns his readers from drawing too many conclusions from Owen's letters home, as 'regular correspondence with a person often results in the writer adopting a persona'.⁸⁹⁷

Hibberd, whose work above all else focuses on the attempt to extricate what is as far as possible a factual account of Owen's life based on extant historical evidence from the 'mythical' image, devotes considerable energy to investigating the truth behind Harold's account, from visiting the childhood homes Harold despised to uncovering the fact that

⁸⁹⁴ Letter from Dennis Welland to Cecil Day Lewis, 3 October 1960, Welland archives, DSW/1/1/3/9/50.

⁸⁹⁵ Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, p.1.

⁸⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁸⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13.

someone, very likely Harold, forged a Military Cross citation to replace the words ‘inflicted considerable losses on the enemy’ with ‘took a number of prisoners’.⁸⁹⁸ Harold was certainly not wholly honest in his dealings: his aforementioned letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1947 falsely claimed Welland had never approached the Owen family, which Welland describes as ‘perfidy’⁸⁹⁹. Harold was consciously shaping a version of his brother that matched the ideals of the time, whose origins were exaggeratedly humble and whose conduct on the battlefield was palatable to pacifists—including Britten and those who shared his philosophical outlook.⁹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, Sassoon found Harold Owen tiresome and the three-volume *Journey from Obscurity* far too long, writing 13 years before its eventual publication, ‘I dread having his 250,000 words dumped on me, & can only offend him by asking him to reduce it to reasonable size.’⁹⁰¹

Harold had been eager to control his brother’s image for many years: not long after the publication of *Good-bye to All That*, Harold would write a ‘panic-stricken’ letter to Edmund Blunden asking for him to help suppress rumours of Wilfred’s homosexuality,⁹⁰² and we have already seen that he wrote to the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1947 to claim there were certain things nobody outside the family could know. His influence has resulted in misconceptions, particularly with Stallworthy, who wrote his biography while working closely with Harold and ‘seems a little too ready to accept HO’s record’.⁹⁰³ In response to Wilfred’s fame greatly expanding, Harold was creating a sanitized myth of his brother to make him palatable to the widest possible audience.⁹⁰⁴ It was small wonder that myths formed around Owen that fit the burgeoning anti-war sentiment of the 1960s established in

⁸⁹⁸ DHANB, p.439.

⁸⁹⁹ Welland, *The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen*, p.37.

⁹⁰⁰ Kennedy, p.73.

⁹⁰¹ Letter from Siegfried Sassoon to Dennis Welland, 7th December 1950, Welland Archives, DSW/1/1/21/12.

⁹⁰² DHANB, p.393.

⁹⁰³ DHOTP, p.209.

⁹⁰⁴ Though it may not be of any great significance, this would be another parallel between Owen and Rimbaud, whose sister Isabelle did ‘much to promote his posthumous fame, though she also devoted extraordinary energy to cleaning up his image’ (White, p.11).

the previous section, as they were actively fostered not only by Harold, but by those who supported him.

‘Wilfred was becoming established as the national poet of pity in the early 1960s’, Hibberd writes,⁹⁰⁵ but immediately ties that image with ideas of misrepresentation and leaps in logic as a new audience begins to peruse what is available regarding his life and work: ‘his admirers were keen to read even his most minor verse as proof of his compassion for real people. One of his Dunsden letters happens to mention a mad girl in the village, so “The Imbecile” had to be about her. The truth is, though, that the poem is a literary exercise [...] an unfinished translation’ of a poem by Swiss poet Henri Spiess.’⁹⁰⁶ There was a sudden public appetite for more information about Owen, and few scholars in a position to provide informed counterarguments to the kind of partisans previously mentioned. This is not to say that there no specialists writing about Owen, as we saw in the previous chapter—Welland’s *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* had been published in 1960 and Joseph Cohen published his paper *Owen Agonistes* in 1965. But it would take some years for adequate material for a comprehensive overview of his life and work to be published.

Helping to fuel speculation as well as encouraging a more serious literary study of Owen’s life, his collected letters were also published in 1963 (the same year as Day Lewis’ edition of Owen’s poems and *Journey from Obscurity*), heavily edited by Harold Owen and co-edited by John Bell. Not only did Harold censor the letters in his possession after the passing of his mother Susan, but he requested that Sassoon dispose of some of the correspondence sent to him as well, and thanked him for his compliance: ‘Thank you for the burning,’ he wrote. ‘I too have done some of this here and there—I shall have more to

⁹⁰⁵ DHANB, p.142.

⁹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.142-43.

do when I get deeper into the editing.’⁹⁰⁷ Harold Owen unashamedly destroyed and otherwise censored his brother’s letters, driven, according to Hibberd, by ‘acute class-consciousness, resentment and Wilfred’s slighting references to himself, an urge to shield his brother, and a desperate anxiety to suppress anything that might assist rumours that Wilfred had been gay’.⁹⁰⁸ As early as 1947, Harold had written to Blunden saying, ‘from now on I do intend to be guarded and jealous concerning the other sides of W.O.’⁹⁰⁹ He kept his word, and these other sides are now permanently obscured. It was in the *Collected Letters* that the aforementioned falsified military cross citation appeared: though there is no conclusive evidence that Harold was responsible for the change, the number of others who would have had the opportunity to make it was very limited, and evidence suggests that Harold was prepared to go to great lengths to shape his brother’s memory.

While the letters allowed for a more comprehensive study of Owen’s life, writing style and beliefs—at least, as expressed primarily to his mother—as Sven Bäckman pointed out in 1979, even at the time of his writing there was no complete, satisfactorily edited edition of Owen’s poems and fragments. This, he speculated, was the reason that ‘the amount of scholarly work that has been devoted to his works and their background is hardly impressive’,⁹¹⁰ as well as ‘the relatively small interest that American scholars—usually so productive—have evinced in Owen’s poetry’.⁹¹¹ The lack of a *Complete Poems and Fragments*—finally published in 1983—meant that few scholars would undertake to critically evaluate Owen’s work, because future unpublished fragments could undermine their conclusions. This relative dearth of scholarly work, however, only served to make Owen’s elevated image stronger, although because he was cast as an everyman soldier, he

⁹⁰⁷ DHTLY, p.207.

⁹⁰⁸ DHANB, p.464.

⁹⁰⁹ Letter from Harold Owen to Edmund Blunden, 24 September 1947, quoted, Welland, *The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen*, p.38.

⁹¹⁰ Bäckman, p.16.

⁹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.17.

was losing all aspects of outsiderdom save that of the division between soldier and civilian in Harold Owen's sanitised version.

The letters and Harold's autobiography only brought about a public appetite for more definitive details than were then available: 'Wilfred was at last beginning to be a nationally known poet, [...so] the moment had clearly come for an "official" biography.'⁹¹² It was Jon Stallworthy who was appointed this task, and his prior interest in Owen is demonstrable—his 1968 'A Poem about Poems about Vietnam' references 'The poets of another time—| Owen with a rifle-butt | between his paper and the slime', and prefigures questions about authenticity and culpability: 'We believe them, they were there.'⁹¹³ Stallworthy's resultant 1974 biography was acclaimed, though 'came to be seen as incomplete'—its subject portrayed 'as rather innocent and still somewhat idealised, not yet quite free from the controls that had been imposed by his brother'.⁹¹⁴ Peculiarly for a writer dead for over half a century, Owen undergoes a transformation as a public figure from a somewhat mysterious soldier-poet whose biography was kept deliberately obscured to, abruptly, a figure with such extensive documentation publicly available that Kerr is quite justified in writing that 'few poets' memory has been better served'.⁹¹⁵ 'There remain, of course, some textual uncertainties, and a couple of important biographical lacunae', he adds,⁹¹⁶ but the fact is that through the letters, military documents and a careful cross-referencing of *Journey from Obscurity* with records and extant locales, it is possible to reconstruct Owen's life—at least in the superficial terms of his location and affairs—almost from day to day. Indeed, Hibberd's 2002 biography comes close to accomplishing this.

⁹¹² DHANB, p.465.

⁹¹³ Jon Stallworthy, 'A Poem about Poems about Vietnam', *Critical Quarterly*, Volume 10, Issue 1-2, June 1968, p.57.

⁹¹⁴ DHANB, p.465.

⁹¹⁵ Kerr, p.157.

⁹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.158.

While these new publications allowed Owen's reputation to swell, perhaps the single most important element to him becoming a fixture of British remembrance of the Great War was the association of Owen's work with the classroom: his work, being direct, powerful and most often short fit easily onto the National Curriculum. The newly-established 'national poet of pity' had been rapidly institutionalized; his edifying value for children once 1960s conceptions of appropriate ways to commemorate past wars were in place, in conjunction with the accessibility of his language and the convenient lengths of his major poems soon put him in the classroom. This brings us back to the quotation from Todman I used to open my first chapter: 'Whilst poetry and war remained important elements in British culture, the forms Owen chose—relatively short poems which aimed to communicate primary emotions—turned out to be useful to television producers and classroom teachers. An Owen poem could bookend an episode or be dealt with in an hour.'⁹¹⁷

With what has now been generations of British people engaging with war literature in their adolescences, encountering Owen as a kind of emblematic presence representing that particular period—as well as war in a more abstract sense—it is perhaps inevitable that simplified, near-fictionalized versions of the conflict become established as teaching tools. Owen is presented as a useful way of conveying a kind of cultural education of circumspection, of teaching children to behave with what is perceived as the appropriate sensitivity and respect in response to tragedy, with an acceptable degree of shocking, direct imagery.

In the wake of the *War Requiem*, Owen's popularity was furthered by 'two key war poetry anthologies edited by Brian Gardner and Ian Parsons,' which 'heavily featured

⁹¹⁷ Todman, *The Great War*, p.171.

Owen’,⁹¹⁸ those being *Up the Line to Death*⁹¹⁹ and *Men Who March Away*⁹²⁰ respectively. By the late 1960s and 1970s, Owen was being included in anthologies intended as teaching tools for schools, such as former grammar school English master R.P. Hewett’s 1968 collection *A Choice of Poets* and Oxford University Press’s *The Dragon Book of Verse*. This ultimately led to the contemporary situation, in which ‘The poets of the first world war are drip-fed into every kind of school across the country, and the extra-literary appeal of their writing (the courage, the suffering, the devastation it describes) makes them irresistible to pupils who are not otherwise much interested in poetry.’⁹²¹

Concurrently, the experience of discovering Owen’s work as a child is now often mentioned anecdotally by historians of the period: ‘So many people are first moved to an interest in the Great War through coming across the “war poets”—often at school’, writes Robert Giddings,⁹²² an assertion echoed in Niall Ferguson’s introduction to his *The Pity of War*: ‘like so many schoolchildren of my generation, I was introduced at an early age (fourteen) to the poetry of Wilfred Owen.’⁹²³ The experiences described have been typical for some decades—Todman goes so far as to note how ‘by the late 80s [Owen’s] work had achieved a remarkable ubiquity—with “Dulce et Decorum Est” being almost the only poem that it could be guaranteed every schoolchild had come into contact with’.⁹²⁴ Shared educational experiences of course affect collectivized memory, particularly with such strong imagery and in reference to such a specific period of time, even as the numbers of those who had personal recollections of the event dwindled.

⁹¹⁸ McMillan, web.

⁹¹⁹ Brian Gardner, ed., *Up the Line to Death: War Poets, 1914-18* (London: Methuen, 1964).

⁹²⁰ Ian M. Parsons, ed., *Men Who March Away: Poems of the First World War* (London: Chatto & Windus: 1965).

⁹²¹ Motion, ‘*The Poets of the Great War* by Harry Ricketts’, web.

⁹²² Giddings, p.172.

⁹²³ Ferguson, p.xxiii.

⁹²⁴ Todman, *The Great War*, p.166.

At the same time, the apparent contradiction between Owen's invective against hollow gestures of aggrandising wartime sacrifice and disapproval directed at civilians who have a naive and incomplete understanding of the experience of the suffering soldier and the culture of memorialization that manifests in monuments and the rituals of 'Remembrance Day' are difficult to reconcile: as Neil Ferguson observed of his own childhood: 'I found it bizarre that we should be expected to memorize [Owen's poetry criticising war] in the morning, only to don our Cadet Force uniforms and parade around the playground that same afternoon',⁹²⁵ an anecdote echoed by the similar experiences of Nicholas Murray.⁹²⁶ On a personal note, I myself took part in the 2001 Festival of Remembrance at the Albert Hall, dramatizing the 1939 Siegfried Sassoon poem 'The Child at the Window' and meeting some of the last surviving veterans of the First World War. As one of the three students charged with planning our segment, I recall the difficulty in striking the balance between solemn reflection and the anti-war invective that we as teenagers who had studied Owen and Sassoon felt expected to express—particularly mere weeks after the attack on the Twin Towers. The result was a confused initial plan that was outright rejected by the festival's organizers.

Owen becoming a staple of the British education system has in the decades since becoming established profoundly changed the way he is remembered. It is useful to remind scholars who consider his poetry simplistic, especially in light of Modernism, that Owen was considered progressive and advanced in his day, and was known only to literary enthusiasts until relatively recently. If we are considering the myths of the Great War, when we ask if the war poets are the originators of these myths, should we not also question whether the same myth-making process has been applied to them as historical figures?

⁹²⁵ Ferguson, p.xxiii.

⁹²⁶ Murray, p.1.

It is certainly true that the war poets became a fixture of the British educational system in the wake of Owen's rise to popularity, and their becoming established in that key contributor to national collective memory undeniably influenced several generations' thinking on the subject of war: 'the persistence of the idea that the war was "a bad thing" owes much to the genre known as "war poetry" (usually meaning "anti-war"), which became firmly established in British school curriculums in the 1970s,' writes Ferguson.⁹²⁷ This, with the careful wording of 'owes much', has particularly in the context of the overview of 'war myths' from historians such as Corelli Barnett and David Reynolds become the prevailing role in which we find the war poets cast in the Twenty-First Century: as figures who loom large in the British schooling system and have contributed much to anti-war sentiments. This, of course, is a simplification: anti-war pieces that perhaps have been more influential on disputed elements of collective memory such as *Oh! What a Lovely War* were being composed at a time before the war poets became school curriculum key texts; the various pacifist movements of the 1960s and 1970s happened in lieu of any schoolroom indoctrination; and indeed, I would argue that it was because the notion that war was 'a bad thing'—as Ferguson puts it—had come about in the sixties that the war poets gained unprecedented popularity, as they then became compatible with new political biases.

The problem is the conflation of war poems, memoirs, satire and popular fictionalised accounts of the conflict into a collectivised memory. It is certainly important to combat the widely-held misconceptions about the war, but this thesis argues that a detailed study of Owen indicated he is neither responsible for those misconceptions, nor does he support many of the over-generalisations that are widely held. Essentially, it was not Owen who

⁹²⁷ Ferguson, p.xxvi.

taught the nation to think of war as futile, pitiful or hellish, but the nation who had come to consider it thus who found him newly compelling, eloquently and powerfully supporting their point of view. This, of course, was neatly in-keeping with Owen's preface and its prediction about the next generation being able to appreciate his sentiments.

Once the war poets had found their place in the Nation's classrooms, certainly they exerted a profound and indeed excessive influence over successive generations' view on the conflict; that is not in question, and derives from too limited a selection of sources. What I question here is the matter of cause and effect. Public opinion facilitated their inclusion in classrooms, rather than that inclusion excessively influencing opinions. Today, reading only Owen, Sassoon and a few other canonical poets and believing their words to be the whole truth about the war or reflective of a universal experience is misleading, but exposure to more than a token handful of their poems ought to make that clear, and as the *iWonder* website mentioned in my first chapter illustrates, that limitation is becoming ever more widely-known. If the pendulum swings away from Owen as a 'truth-teller', though, it ought to be with provisos—certainly, it is necessary to acknowledge much broader range of voices, but Owen ought not to be held responsible for shortcomings in the range of teaching materials, nor considered the origin of misconceptions he never espoused.

By the 1970s, an awareness of revisionism and the creation of myths had begun to set into historical writing. John Terraine's 1970 book *Impacts of War 1914 & 1918* discusses the myths that began as soon as the war ended, especially amongst the Germans, some of whom were reported as believing they had never been defeated in the field, or that they had lost because of internal betrayals from Communists and Jews.⁹²⁸ But these myths are different from the kind Owen and the war poets are associated with: that is, myths that are

⁹²⁸ John Terraine, *Impacts of War: 1914 & 1918* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1970), p.211.

not revisionist but reductionist. The view of the war poets as originators of war myths is in itself a kind of myth: it is also an inadequate view precisely because it does not acknowledge that so many of the myths about war are also myths about Owen. As Strachan writes of a collective view that at the same time incorporates contempt for war and solemn reverence for those who die for its sake, 'Wilfred Owen himself embodied some of these paradoxes'.⁹²⁹ While there are no doubt innumerable ways to deconstruct our war myths, it is important that in the attempt we do not generalize and oversimplify to such an extent that we only create a new set of myths to replace the old. Part of that process is to examine the origins of such myths, as I have here. But just as narrative accounts of the period are examined to see whether myths are appropriate, it is important for those who played a part in the inception or popularization of such myths to be similarly examined.

⁹²⁹ Strachan, p.xvi.

All Blood, Dirt & Sucked Sugar Stick: Wilfred Owen in Opposition to Modernism

Yeats, however, simply could not accept what the poets of the Great War had to offer. His generation was quite unprepared. War had been a subject for poetry, but never like this.⁹³⁰

Owen's popularity as a poet is considerable. Yet with this popularity has come backlash: Owen is popular with the general public, but broadly speaking, he is not held in esteem by the literary establishment. His association with secondary-level education and his accessibility have often seen his work dismissed by scholars, Desmond Graham reporting that some academics 'look down on him' for being 'easy'.⁹³¹ Though this attitude has arisen in tandem with Owen's surge in popularity, once he gained popularity his work was already dated by several decades, and historically 'critics have tended to neglect those who do not conform to the literary fashion of the time.'⁹³² In his own time, Owen received favourable reviews, but as Modernism rose to become the dominant form of poetic expression, Owen did not receive critical attention, and it took an outsider to the field—Britten was a composer, albeit one with intimate personal ties to poets—to bring him to the attention of a wider public.

Though I wrote in the last chapter about the oversimplification of the story of Modernism sweeping away traditional scansion and verse-forms, there is truth in Reynolds' assertion that 'the real divide was not between Owen, a self-confessed Georgian, and Brooke [...] but between both of them and the tradition pioneered by Ezra Pound'.⁹³³ In this section, I explore the idea of a subtly different style of outsiderdom that affected how Owen has been seen in the last half-century: as an outsider to dominant poetic trends who

⁹³⁰ Giddings, p.6.

⁹³¹ Williams, p.69.

⁹³² Kenneth Millard, *Edwardian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.6.

⁹³³ Reynolds, p.195.

therefore appeals to literary figures who also wish to be considered outside such trends.

This is different from the other considerations in this thesis in that the situation has not come about as the direct result of Owen's conscious decisions, except where other general aspects of his desire to be seen as an outsider give an additional sense of affinity to readers.

In the twentieth century, Pound and Eliot's radical new literary movement that would come to be known as Modernism forever changed poetry. *Georgian Poetry*—the magazine which had published so many of Owen's circle—rapidly grew unfashionable in the inter-war period: '*Georgian Poetry* sold close to 70,000 copies across five volumes, but the poets it published began to distance themselves from it after the war. By the time the last in the series appeared in 1922 it had outstayed its welcome, and was meekly swept aside by the force of the new, modernizing literature.'⁹³⁴ As Welland wrote, 'some of the most influential poetic movements of the first quarter of the [twentieth] century owed little of their impetus to the War [...] Its direction had already been determined by the poetry of Ezra Pound.'⁹³⁵

As we have touched upon, another of the major figures of Modernism, W.B. Yeats, found little to admire in Owen's work, and did not include him in his edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, though felt the need to justify his actions in the introduction: 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'. In a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, he is contemptuous:—

My anthology continues to sell, & the critics get more & more angry. When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets' corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution & that somebody has put his worst & most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum—however if I had known it I would have

⁹³⁴ Hollis, p.337.

⁹³⁵ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.12.

excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick (look at the selection in Faber's Anthology—he calls poets 'bards,' a girl a 'maid,' & talks about 'Titanic wars'). There is every excuse for him but none for those who like him.⁹³⁶

With the ascent of the war poets to their revered position today, this contempt has come to be perceived as somewhat misguided: 'with a superior wave of his hand, Yeats dismisses such giants of 20th century literature as Owen, Graves, Sassoon, Blunden and a host of others who attempted to render the experience of 1914-18 in poetry'.⁹³⁷ However, the decision is interesting in two different ways when considering Owen's status. Firstly, as raised in the previous chapter, it illuminates that Owen was not in fact extremely obscure in the 1930s, as not only did Yeats fully understand it would be controversial to omit him and the other war poets who through appearances in other anthologies had 'sanctified Blunden's canon of Great War poetry',⁹³⁸ the scale of the backlash still surprised him. Secondly, it is of interest in the dynamic of the opposition between Modernism and more conservative verse: Yeats at this point is an authority figure and Modernism is no longer an upstart movement challenging the older tradition. If the poets Blunden championed represent what Modernism challenged, and Modernism is by that point the dominant force, have the dynamics of what is establishment and what is rebellion been inverted? Or does Blunden's influence and the fact that Yeats was confronted by such vociferous opposition mean that Modernism is still struggling against older, outmoded but still prevalent ideas?

Owen had been an admirer of Yeats' work—though of course he could only have read what Yeats had published before 1918, and 'it seems to be have been the Yeats of *The Celtic Twilight* that impressed him rather than the Yeats of *The Green Helmet* or

⁹³⁶ Wade, p.113.

⁹³⁷ Giddings, p.6.

⁹³⁸ Reynolds, p.347.

Responsibilities'.⁹³⁹ He had quoted lines from Yeats' poems to preface the poems 'The Show' and 'S.I.W.', and of course, as he considered himself to be an unorthodox poet challenging the conventions of his day, Owen would likely have been surprised by Yeats' consideration of his work. Nonetheless, it is true that 'the relationship between these two great poets was sadly one-sided',⁹⁴⁰ and in the years since, despite Owen's ever-growing reputation, Yeats is nearly universally considered to have been a poet of deeper insights. C.K. Stead's *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot*, published in 1964, discusses the war poets in light of their newfound popularity: -

The particularisation of experience in the work of the new war poets was an immense improvement over the generalizing facility of their imperialist predecessors. But their poems still fall short of the yardstick we have taken—Yeats' "Easter 1916". [...] It remained yet for other poets—or for at least one other poet—to approach what Yeats had achieved: the transformation of his personal experience into a universal image.⁹⁴¹

The truth of this claim of transformation is not for this thesis, and nor does there seem to be a methodology to quantify how effectively different poets transform the personal into the universal, but it is certainly true that much of the modern historical distaste for Owen's influence is that his poetry is too personal, limited to his immediate sphere of reference. Even though Dylan Thomas called Owen 'a poet of all times, all places and all wars',⁹⁴² undoubtedly he, more than almost any other writer, is deeply associated with one historical event and specifically wished to express that his experiences were not universal.

In general, Yeats' dismissal of the war poets has been interpreted as more a rejection of the subject matter and its manner of presentation than of technical ability: his decision to anthologise instead Julian Grenfell's 'Into Battle' informs the view that Yeats preferred to

⁹³⁹ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.34.

⁹⁴⁰ Williams, p.126.

⁹⁴¹ C.K. Stead, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (London: Continuum, 1964), p.64.

⁹⁴² Dylan Thomas, *Quite Early One Morning* (New York: New Directions, 1954), p.126.

see war ‘as a joyous and manly adventure’, and ‘could not condemn it on humanitarian grounds, like Sassoon and Owen, because the ideal of heroism made a powerful appeal to him’.⁹⁴³ If he sought heroism, the poet who insisted his work was ‘not about heroes’ was of course a poor fit.

While much is made of Yeats’ disapproval of war poetry while himself also composing ‘An Irish Airman Foresees his Death’, published in 1919,⁹⁴⁴ this interpretation of his attitude to heroism seems to elucidate the distinction he made. Giddings broaches this, though is more damning and strangely suggests that his decision was generational:—

In all charity, we may make some effort to understand why Yeats found war poetry so difficult to accommodate. He was a victim of his own period and the limitations of his reading. [...] In the present day, the poets he so peevishly and grandly dismissed from his collection are considered to be among the greatest of modern poets, and his theory of poetry, of the appropriateness of particular subjects to poetic treatment and the avoidance of others, now seems affected.⁹⁴⁵

Be this as it may, as the Modernist poetry of Eliot, Pound and Yeats gained traction, a supportive critical apparatus was constructed around it, indisputably affecting academic, then public taste. F.R. Leavis, himself a veteran of the battlefield who ‘served as a medical orderly at the front’,⁹⁴⁶ was instrumental in establishing Modernism as the dominant poetic movement of the Twentieth Century, effectively leaving Owen behind. As ‘the most influential critic of his day’, Leavis ‘in a career spanning more than forty years, from the late 1920s to the mid-1970s, [...] changed the perception of English literature and

⁹⁴³ Williams, p.128.

⁹⁴⁴ Welland seems to be mistaken in his claim that as ‘An Irish Airman Foresees his Death’ was unpublished until after his death, Yeats was ‘deliberately keeping the War out of his poetry’ (Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.12): it first appeared in the expanded, 1919 edition of *The Wild Swans at Coole*. This anthology had originally been published in 1917 without the poem. However, since the expanded edition contained the poem, it is not true that it was only published posthumously.

⁹⁴⁵ Giddings, p.6.

⁹⁴⁶ Terry Eagleton, ‘The Rise of English’ in *Falling Into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*, 2nd edn, ed. by David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), pp.48-59, p.54.

professionalized its study'.⁹⁴⁷ In 1932, he wrote *New Bearings in English Poetry*, and the bearings were in a direction that left Owen behind: 'one of the early twentieth-century poets whose image has suffered from the dominance of the Leavisite perspective is Wilfred Owen.'⁹⁴⁸ Leavis, with a glibness not dissimilar to that of Fussell, was direct in his disapproval of the war poets—Sassoon was summarily dismissed without explanation: 'Though his verse made a wholesome immediate impact it hardly calls for much attention here.'⁹⁴⁹ He had kinder words for Edward Thomas ('an original poet of rare quality, who has been associated with the Georgians by mischance'),⁹⁵⁰ but Leavis was entirely certain that none amongst the war poets were comparable to the most influential Modernists: 'Edward Thomas, Owen and Rosenberg together, even if they had been properly recognized at once, could hardly have constituted a challenge to the ruling poetic fashions.'⁹⁵¹ Though Leavis had some admiration for Blunden as a poet—feeling that only he and Thomas 'deserve to be distinguished from the group'⁹⁵²—the poets he had championed were in his esteem inferior to the most prominent figures of twentieth century poetry, centred of course on Eliot and Pound.

Though there is little in Leavis that could be characterized as justifying his standpoints or critically appraising the relative values of the poets he discussed, there is also no substantial reason to question his influential status: Leavis was part of a well-established critical system that lauded Modernism and its developments, as well as its academic sophistication, which was to the expense of the Georgians. Leavis does not use

⁹⁴⁷ Gary Day, 'F.R. Leavis: criticism and culture' in *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. by Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.130-39, p.130.

⁹⁴⁸ Bäckman, p.7.

⁹⁴⁹ Leavis, p.72.

⁹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.66.

⁹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.73.

⁹⁵² Leavis, p.66.

the word, but clearly, when compared with the Modernists, he considered Owen and his circle to be vulgar.

This certainly affects the way Owen is perceived today, both by academics and by the layman, and concordantly affects discussion of how he enters collective memory. When considering Owen as an outsider figure in the late twentieth century, there is a considerable tension between his enormous public appeal and his existence in a century dominated by a poetic movement with which he had very little connection.

After Britten, Owen was no longer an obscure writer celebrated by those in the know. Blunden had indirectly succeeded in popularising him, with the result that never again would a fellow writer consider him an oddity on the fringe of canonical English literature. Owen becomes so well-known and so emblematic of a period of time that he becomes a recognizable fictional character, featuring in such works as Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy and Peter Wolf's *Strange Meeting*, with all the simplification that goes with rendering a significant historical event in a play or novel. As Ferguson puts it, 'Nothing illustrates better the persistence of the First World War's reputation as an evil war than the recent British fiction it has inspired. The most obvious example is Pat Barker's 1990s trilogy, *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*.'⁹⁵³ Owen has become incredibly well-known, part of an apparatus of memorialization that gives rise to myths, concurrent with a conception of the 'War Poet' that goes beyond what is contained only in their work: 'First World War poetry knows no habitation or rest. Mixing cultural memory with linguistic desire, it has ranged far beyond the covers of the book.'⁹⁵⁴

And yet the existence of Modernism and Owen's apparent exclusion from it creates another dynamic of outsiderdom, in a purely critical sense. In the years since Leavis'

⁹⁵³ Ferguson, p.xxxi.

⁹⁵⁴ Santanu Das, p.4.

dominance, his critical views have in some corners been questioned in what Geoffrey Thurley calls 'Counter-Modernism'.⁹⁵⁵ The Modernists 'dominated the scene from about 1930 onwards, constituting an essentially academic critical establishment which, according to Thurley, has had a crippling and suffocating influence on the development of English Poetry'.⁹⁵⁶ This is a curious reversal of what Cecil Day-Lewis had predicted—far more divisive than could have been expected from his impression that 'the immediate poetic ancestors of the generation of Auden and Spender were Hopkins, Owen and Eliot'.⁹⁵⁷ Owen had a degree of influence on these poets, Spender in particular—'Of all the English poets of the Spanish war, Spender was most clearly indebted to the example of Owen, and he was clearly conscious of his debt. [...] In an essay published in the summer of 1937 (not long after his return from Spain), Spender called Owen the greatest English war-poet, and praised his anti-heroism and his truthfulness.'⁹⁵⁸ This was a position Spender had already made clear in *The Destructive Element* in 1935. But by the 1960s, Modernism has become dominant, and those who it had left behind grew to be considered lesser writers.

As the 1960s continued, and Owen was included in more popular anthologies, his influence on modern writers abruptly ceased to be noted. His popularity seems to have robbed him of a degree of his respectability amongst academics. His indirect influence through Auden is de-emphasized, and Auden himself was perhaps less overt in his expressions of admiration for Owen than the rest of his group. There is some evidence that he sought to express his feelings on war in a direction that departed from Owen: of 'Spain', Samuel Hynes writes:—

['Spain'] is an extraordinary war-poem—diagnostic,
abstract, detached, lacking all the particularities and

⁹⁵⁵ Geoffrey Thurley, *Counter-Modernism in Current Critical Theory* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1983), passim.

⁹⁵⁶ Bäckman, p.11.

⁹⁵⁷ Webb, p.189.

⁹⁵⁸ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: The Bodley Head, 1976), p.249.

feelings that defined the genre in the First World War and were continued by poets like Cornford and Spender. There are no battles in the poem, no dead boys or screaming women, no grisly details, and no personal voice testifying to war's hideousness. [...] It is a pitiless poem; the poetry is in the pitilessness.⁹⁵⁹

Welland has a similar impression, though it is perhaps less complimentary to Auden: he distinguishes Auden's 'mandatory tone' from Owen's persuasive voice—Owen functions as 'a pleader' rather than 'an orator', seeming to imply an appeal to emotional rather than intellectual audiences.⁹⁶⁰ But the very assertion that Auden develops Owen's mode of expression shows that it influenced him, which ought to be remembered when considering Auden's place in Modernist writing.

Following Thurley, Bäckman notes that there are 'two main strands in the development of British poetry' in the twentieth century—'One predominantly intellectualist strain, represented in England by poets such as T.S. Eliot, William Empson, W.H. Auden, Roy Fuller, and Geoffrey Hill, and by critics such as I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot, William Empson and F.R. Leavis', and opposing it, what Thurley calls 'Existential' poets including 'Hardy, Edward Thomas, D.H. Lawrence, Ted Hughes and Wilfred Owen'.⁹⁶¹ It is primarily Leavis' 'one-sided and strongly biased advocacy of the intellectualist-experimental type of poetry written by such poets as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, at the expense of equally vital but less strikingly experimental poetry written by British poets such as Hardy, Yeats, Rosenberg, Owen, and Graves'⁹⁶² that has led to the dominance of Modernism, to the detriment of a British tradition. Very probably, in reading this list of influential names, two may seem surprising in the context of what we have established: Thurley places Auden on the 'intellectualist-experimental' side and Yeats on the

⁹⁵⁹ Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, p.254.

⁹⁶⁰ Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, p.140.

⁹⁶¹ Bäckman, p.11.

⁹⁶² *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.

‘Existential’ side. The division is not as simple as Modernist/Traditional, or even Hiberno-American/British: Yeats, Hughes and Lawrence’s poetry are all deeply influenced by Modernism, often in conscious tension with the opposition of traditional forms with free verse, making it seem odd for Auden to be placed in opposition to them. Be that as it may, what is unambiguous is that a clear delineation appears between Owen and Eliot—with Owen on the side of direct, non-intellectual, ‘existential’ poetry that withers while the opposing side, experimental and intellectual, grows dominant.

Owen was always a highly receptive, imitative poet—Bäckman notes ‘his skill at adapting and using, for completely new purposes, poetic formulae drawn from an earlier poetic tradition’.⁹⁶³ And while perhaps Modernism’s assault on what his beloved Romantic poets had established and he arguably continued with his sonnets and ballads—and the affected vocabulary Yeats decried—may have made him as combative as Sassoon had he lived. Egremont describes Sassoon as holding an ‘old dream that Wilfred and he might have held the line against modernism’.⁹⁶⁴ In the draft for *The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen*, Dennis Welland wrote:—

Under Wilfred’s influence, both personal and poetic, Sassoon was convinced, his own life and career would have been radically different. Some of Wilfred’s letters to him had reinforced this belief so powerfully as to become too painful to re-read, and he had destroyed them.⁹⁶⁵

Welland continues, making reference to Sassoon’s ‘abiding, even deepening, sense of loss not only of a friend but of a poet far greater in potential than himself, and better constituted than himself to adjust to the 1920s.’ In his interpretation, Owen would have been able to adjust to changing poetic trends, and likely have influenced Sassoon to do the same. Of course, this is purely hypothetical. Perhaps Owen would have been as

⁹⁶³ Bäckman, p.14.

⁹⁶⁴ Egremont, p.502.

⁹⁶⁵ Welland, *The Posthumous Life of Wilfred Owen*, p.14.

disapproving as Graves, who considered the blank verse in *The Waste Land* the only evidence that Eliot had ‘once been, however briefly, a poet’.⁹⁶⁶

But Owen’s eagerness to experiment and imitate, and to perceive himself as like an experimental composer in the strand of Debussy or Stravinsky⁹⁶⁷, raises the possibility that had he lived, Owen might have adapted to changing tastes: Thorpe opines that the path Sassoon chose, in avoiding changing his style, was ‘far removed, one imagines, from that Owen might have pursued’.⁹⁶⁸ It is pure speculation to consider what would have happened had Owen survived. The speculation is enjoyable, however: ‘what, one wonders, would have been Wilfred Owen’s place in the post-war world? Speculation such as this is, without question, a fool’s game, but one can’t help but picture the poet as one of the century’s great men of letters; indeed, it is difficult to imagine otherwise.’⁹⁶⁹

For what it is worth, those giants of Modernism, Eliot and Pound, did not seem to disapprove of Owen as Yeats did. Eliot admired ‘Strange Meeting’, which he called ‘of permanent value’ and ‘not only one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war of 1914-18, but also a technical achievement of great originality’.⁹⁷⁰ Cole sees parallels between Owen’s ‘Smile, Smile, Smile’ and the ‘kind of distraught fraternity’ seen in Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’,⁹⁷¹ while Sasi Bhusan Das in *Wilfred Owen’s Influence on Three Generations of Poets* (1982) even speculates that Eliot may have put Owen into ‘Little Gidding’ as the ‘dead master’ or ‘familiar compound ghost’,⁹⁷² though Williams points out the various other possibilities to the figure’s identity.⁹⁷³ Williams also indicates that a passage in Ezra Pound’s ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’ (1920) seems almost an

⁹⁶⁶ Carter, p.132.

⁹⁶⁷ Bäckman, p.126.

⁹⁶⁸ Thorpe, p.258.

⁹⁶⁹ Busby: introduction (no page number).

⁹⁷⁰ Cited, Williams, p.165.

⁹⁷¹ Cole, p.196.

⁹⁷² Sasi Bhusan Das, *Wilfred Owen’s Influence on Three Generations of Poets* (Calcutta: Roy & Roy, 1982), p.58.

⁹⁷³ Williams, p.165.

acknowledgement of Owen and his ideas, presented in a very different, starker rhetorical style:—

Died some, pro patria
non 'dulce', non 'et decor'...
walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men's lies [...]

There died a myriad,
And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
For a botched civilization...⁹⁷⁴

It may be worth mentioning that this 1920 poem has far more in it of the simplified 'war myth' of lions and donkeys than even 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young'. That aside, there was much that resonated with Modernism in Owen's work despite his loyalty to rules of scansion and the obvious influence of Romanticism on even his late poetry—as Hoare puts it, 'Owen's subject matter and technique allied him to the Modernists; [...] he was a link between them and the Decadents.'⁹⁷⁵ From the perspective we have after the close of the twentieth century, however, it seems accurate that everything Modernism came to represent rejected the Georgians and particularly the Neo-Georgians.

However, because Modernism swept away many stagnant traditions from the Romantics, it does not mean that legacy is itself something somehow shameful; is it not in some way admirable that in devoting himself 'with evangelizing zeal to one immense subject, in complete confidence that a poet could and should tackle it', Owen 'took his stand with the Romantics; he was perhaps the last great heir of Wordsworth and Shelley'?⁹⁷⁶ Owen was exploring subject matter that poetry had until then never so bleakly or directly addressed, but was still penning sonnets with conventional scansion. Some have speculated that the familiar forms were a kind of coping mechanism for the difficult subject

⁹⁷⁴ Cited, Williams, p.165. Square brackets for ellipsis added by me.

⁹⁷⁵ Hoare, p.204.

⁹⁷⁶ DHTLY, p.121.

matter: ‘It was partly because the memories were so scorching that Owen found composed forms so necessary.’⁹⁷⁷ But generally he experimented with conventions by retaining and altering them rather than rejecting them outright, as was the case with pararhyme. P

ararhyme certainly garners attention from literary analysts—as Bäckman puts it, ‘there is no doubt that Wilfred Owen’s experimenting with inexact rhymes in some of his war poems is the aspect of his poetry that has attracted the greatest attention among critics and literary historians’⁹⁷⁸—but next to *The Waste Land* it cannot be called one of the greater innovations of the period. Nor, indeed, were the English war poets in a wider context particularly innovative compared with writers in other languages—Alfred Lichtenstein and Carl Zuckmayer being examples Ferguson raises of greater innovators.⁹⁷⁹ This, however, does not stop Owen’s technical accomplishments being notable. Examining ‘The Last Laugh’,⁹⁸⁰ for example, Stringer writes that Owen’s poetry is ‘remarkable for the power of its imagery and the great virtuosity of its metrical and musical effects’.⁹⁸¹ And even if Owen was not technically as innovative as the Modernists, that is precisely why he is recognized by counter-modernists. His influential place in the literary canon ought not to be called into question: Tim Kendall writes, ‘That the post-war work of writers as otherwise diverse as Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill should share a profound indebtedness to the soldier-poets points to the continuing force of the legacy.’⁹⁸²

While there are certainly traces of Owen’s writing and influence to be found in the work of Ted Hughes—not least a poem entitled ‘Wilfred Owen’s Photographs’, not directly about Owen but inspired by an anecdote that he would carry about images of war injuries to

⁹⁷⁷ Howarth, p.55.

⁹⁷⁸ Bäckman, p.168.

⁹⁷⁹ Ferguson, pp.xxvi-xxvii.

⁹⁸⁰ POWO, p.145.

⁹⁸¹ Stringer, p.519.

⁹⁸² Kendall, p.4.

edify and shock others⁹⁸³—it is perhaps in the idiosyncratic work of Philip Larkin that Owen's persistent influence can be most readily seen. *The Guardian's* obituary for Larkin suggested he 'revered' Owen,⁹⁸⁴ noting the relish with which Larkin noted that Owen's claim 'above all, I am not concerned with poetry' was a neat pre-emptive answer to Yeats' criticism 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'. Larkin seemed to prefer Owen's statement to his character, however, writing upon reading Stallworthy's biography that Owen seemed 'rather a prick, really.'⁹⁸⁵

Larkin was famously opposed to Pound—grouping him with Picasso and Charlie Parker in his introduction to *All What Jazz*⁹⁸⁶ as one of a group of Modernists who seek only to outrage and mystify. In rejecting Modernism yet gaining a position as a major figure in British poetry, Larkin perhaps embodies Thurley's alternative to the successors of Eliot and Pound. In an even more clear-cut sense of national division than Thurley espouses, Larkin felt that there was an English literary tradition 'represented by Owen and [Edward] Thomas' that was 'fatally severed by their deaths in battle',⁹⁸⁷ whereas Modernism was an incursion on British tradition: 'in his revisionist poetic history Eliot and Pound become interlopers, if not invaders; opportunist non-combatants exploiting the cultural vacuum left as the finest native writers were lost in the carnage of World War I'.⁹⁸⁸ If at the time Day-Lewis was writing *A Hope for Poetry*, Owen was largely grouped with Modernist innovators and the division between the 'Modern' and the 'English Tradition' was somewhat ill-defined, by the time Larkin was making his observations, there was a decisive split. Now Owen is undoubtedly considered non-Modernist, or as Howarth

⁹⁸³ JSWO, p.222.

⁹⁸⁴ Craig Raine, 'A tribute to the late poet Philip Larkin', *The Guardian*, 3 December 1985

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/1985/dec/03/poetry.features>>[accessed 10 September 2014].

⁹⁸⁵ Letter from Philip Larkin to Robert Conquest, 9th January 1975, Anthony Thwaite, ed., *The Letters of Philip Larkin* (London: Faber, 1992), p.519.

⁹⁸⁶ Philip Larkin, *All What Jazz: A Record Diary, 1961-1971*, revised edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p.22.

⁹⁸⁷ Clark, p.175.

⁹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

describes him, alongside other poets including Edward Thomas and Walter de la Mere, one of the ‘poets outside modernism’⁹⁸⁹.

Nonetheless, Larkin praised Owen in the same manner in which Hynes praised Auden for having transcended the war poets, with an ability to take the personal and make it universal: ‘in the end Owen’s war is not Sassoon’s war but all war; not particular suffering but all suffering.’⁹⁹⁰ This is not necessarily a contradiction to what this thesis has argued, but it is incompatible with the modern view that Owen’s war was his own war and there are myriad other interpretations from other perspectives. It is easy to forget that War Poetry, intrinsically a subgenre that emphasized a specific historical subject fixed in time, was almost incompatible with the values of New Criticism, ‘extraordinarily influential from the end of the 1930s on into the 1950s’.⁹⁹¹ New Criticism emphasises the primacy of the text, with knowledge of the writer or the situation in which the writing took place largely irrelevant. Owen’s work relies on knowledge of the circumstances of his writing and is informed by biographical information.

It ought to be noted here that the conception of ‘war poetry’ as a genre is also a strange one, with anthologies that seek to divide by theme rather than period or stylistic movement often having ‘war’ stand out as somewhat of an oddity—Andrew Motion’s 2001 anthology *Here to Eternity*, for example, contains what on the back cover are called ‘ten concentric rings’, thematic sections which are largely somewhat abstract and individualistic. ‘Self’, ‘Belief’, ‘Space’—amongst these, ‘War’ seems much more specific and grounded in individual experience.⁹⁹² War poetry in and of itself is peculiar in terms of the ways we approach categorization in English literature: ‘Larkin claimed that Owen was

⁹⁸⁹ Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*, p. 63.

⁹⁹⁰ Todman, *The Great War*, p.164.

⁹⁹¹ Matterson, p.166.

⁹⁹² Andrew Motion, ed., *Here to Eternity: An Anthology of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), *passim*.

“chained to an historical event”: this is true of canonical First World War poets more generally, but especially in terms of their literary and historical reception and their continual refashioning as national heroes in an English memorial heritage.’⁹⁹³ In a way, all war poets, in inhabiting this peculiar subcategory of poetry, can be called outsiders, but not in a sense that elevates them.

So closely are Owen’s poems and the national experience of war now connected that Owen begins to appear as a kind of cipher in numerous subsequent works, as an emblem of how war is culturally interpreted—I have already mentioned Ted Hughes’ ‘Wilfred Owen’s Photographs’ and Jon Stallworthy’s ‘A Poem About Poems About Vietnam’, but again and again Owen appears in others’ work. Taking, for example, Bloodaxe Books founder Neil Astley’s anthology *Staying Alive*, the section ‘War and Peace’ contains Kate Clanchy’s ‘War Poetry’, which tells of how shaven-headed schoolboys ‘would, they swear | enlist at once, given half a chance, | march down Owen’s darkening lanes | to join the lads and stuff the Boche’,⁹⁹⁴ while Freda Downie’s ‘For Wilfred Owen’ rails against apathy: ‘today you would find your distant sad shire | Apparently forgetful of slaughtered innocence’.⁹⁹⁵ The mad comet has become massive enough to exert its gravity on all around it.

This is a case where the consideration of ‘outsiderdom’ comes not from Owen’s decisions or actions, but from factors outside of his direct influence. Nonetheless, as an extremely popular writer whose work puts him out of favour with the prevailing academic tastes in poetry, yet resonates with such figures as Larkin who feel that a legacy outside that consensus is in fact superior, it is an important consideration. Writing on his own terms,

⁹⁹³ Mark Rawlinson, ‘Later Poets of the First World War’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, ed. by Santanu Das (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2013), pp.81-93, p.82. For Larkin, see Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London, Faber and Faber, 1983), p.159.

⁹⁹⁴ Neil Astley, ed., *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), p.345.

⁹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.347.

separated from the prevalent mode of poetic expression in the 20th Century, Owen's mode of expression is both able to appeal to a mass market and simultaneously, perhaps consequentially, it becomes unappealing to the Leavisite arbiters of poetic taste.

Drawing Inspiration from his Beautiful Face: Myths of the Homosexual Officer

Sassoon's homoerotic friendships in the Sherston memoirs, and Graves' admissions of early homosexual activity in *Good-bye To All That*, all help the assumption that many war writers were homosexual. Perhaps most importantly, the growing emphasis on Wilfred Owen's sexuality after the death of Harold Owen brought this to the forefront of critical debate surrounding the war poets.⁹⁹⁶

My second chapter contained a section on approaches to Owen's sexuality. Ultimately, I did not feel able to adequately categorise Owen in the terms familiar to a twenty-first century reader, acknowledging that 'it is not necessarily helpful to classify him by modern measures of modern sexual identity', to use Todman's words.⁹⁹⁷ Owen's poetry that does not concern the war has considerably more hints at homosexual attraction than heterosexual, but both are present, and in later work this may have had more to do with the literary circle he wished to impress, than truly revealing sexual preference. Ultimately, beyond acknowledging that all evidence suggests an unorthodox sexuality, my only conclusion is that we do not know how Owen would have defined himself in a modern context, and very likely never will.

This section is a development from that initial point of reference: in a chapter that concerns the development of myths about Owen once he became a prominent and representative figure, even the 'personification of the conflict',⁹⁹⁸ it is important to consider his being perceived as gay or bisexual affecting his legacy and the development of myths. Joseph Cohen's 'conspiracy of silence' lasted only as long as Harold Owen was alive, and having passed away in 1971, he did not live to see the publication of Paul Fussell's *The*

⁹⁹⁶ MacCallum-Stewart, p.86.

⁹⁹⁷ Todman, *The Great War, The Great War*, p.162.

⁹⁹⁸ Nigel Jones, 'Wilfred Owen by Guy Cuthbertson, review' for *The Telegraph*, 27 March 2014 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/10724083/Wilfred-Owen-by-Guy-Cuthbertson-review.html>>[accessed 10 August 2014].

Great War and Modern Memory, and the very particular place in modern memory it had for what he called ‘Front-line homoeroticism’.⁹⁹⁹

Fussell saw much that he considered ‘homoerotic’ in Owen’s war poetry, ostensibly regardless of biographical details. Fussell, like Cohen, was in favour of revealing the ‘truth’ about Owen’s sexuality, and was damning of Graves removing the line describing Owen as ‘an idealistic homosexual’ from *Good-bye to All That*: ‘just as Graves always knew they would, respectability and disingenuousness have won’.¹⁰⁰⁰ If there is irony in how the impact of Fussell’s work on the scholars that followed entirely reversed that ‘victory’, there is irony too in this desire to champion the original and unedited version of a single line of Graves’ book as the truth, while simultaneously treating the autobiography as ‘a work of dramatic confection rather than a strictly accurate memoir’.¹⁰⁰¹

Fussell’s argument that the war poets’ work is fundamentally, intrinsically homoerotic centres on their attention to the body, its beauty and how the weapons of war maiming and killing soldiers is particularly tragic—and particularly appealing—because its victims are attractive under these writers’ gaze. Certainly, some of Owen’s work uses eroticised, Decadent language to describe wounds and suffering, most obviously ‘Arms and the Boy’¹⁰⁰², which describes how ‘bullet-leads’ ‘long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads’, and how the steel of bayonets is ‘thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.’ There are hints of desire here, though equally there are numerous images in Owen that present flesh as unappealing, the Dead-Beat lying ‘stupid like a cod, heavy like meat’, or the analogy in ‘The Show’ of holes insects crawl into being as disgusting and noisome as parts of the body: ‘And smell came up from those foul openings | As out of mouths, or deep wounds

⁹⁹⁹ Fussell, p.276.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibid., p.218.

¹⁰⁰¹ Todman, *The Great War*, p.158.

¹⁰⁰² POWO, p.131.

deepening.’¹⁰⁰³ But this does not stop some imagery suggesting Decadent desire or glamour in blood and suffering, and it is to this that Fussell turns.

Fussell is purposely reductive: ‘Whether [Owen] acts to identify himself with a homogenous group of men [...] or more warmly with one single unfortunate young male [...] it is the features of the palpable body that set him off’,¹⁰⁰⁴ he writes, through innuendo equating poetic inspiration with sexual arousal. His premise is also difficult to substantiate: is the mere mention of body parts in a narrative sexual? Will identifying with an individual rather than a group not inherently be more ‘warm’, given that a group’s feelings must vary to some degree? If Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of desire is to be followed, is Owen operating in a manner compatible with their theories by treating bodies as objects to be deconstructed? They write, ‘The artist is the master of objects; he puts before us shattered, burned, broken-down objects, converting them to the regime of desiring-machines, breaking down is part of the very functioning of desire-machines.’¹⁰⁰⁵ Can we read Owen’s productivity as a result of his using the men he desires as collections of objects to be broken down? These readings work only for the poems in which Owen purposely objectifies the soldiers; differentiation ought to be made between these and poems where he is stressing the necessity of sympathy, of pity for the individual.

Owen and his fellow war poets are in Fussell’s view inspired primarily by the visual appeal of young men, and their poetry ‘seems conscious of the pathetic fate of the pretty’,¹⁰⁰⁶ implying that those boys who are not considered pretty are less worthy of sympathy, though of Owen’s poems, only ‘Disabled’ implies an additional sadness comes with the loss of physical attractiveness. Fussell’s reading of ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ is

¹⁰⁰³ CWDC, p.26.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Fussell, p.291.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, p.32.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Ibid., p.276.

primarily homoerotic, though shows a dubious interpretation of the physical elements described: Fussell draws attention to how funeral trappings are ‘made to seem supremely irrelevant next to “the hands of boys” and—most tellingly—“their eyes”’.¹⁰⁰⁷ However, these boys are not the dead soldiers—they are the boys mourning at home, and Fussell does not mention the attention also given to the ‘pallor of girl’s brows’.

Throughout his interpretation, Fussell focuses on the superficial—the sexual appeal of the appearance of the boy soldiers, as opposed to any deeper considerations of their characters or their suffering. Owen, writes Fussell, ‘harnesses his innate fondness for dwelling on the visible sensuous particulars of boys in order to promote an intimate identification with them’.¹⁰⁰⁸ Owen’s ability to create sympathetic characters is based on their visual appeal.

Fussell’s emphasis on Owen and his contemporaries’ admiration of the male form was a way to create new perspectives on their writing and to call into question suggestions of noble purpose. In actuality, this overstates the case, and if Stallworthy’s reasons for being sceptical about Owen’s sexuality may be unsatisfactory, he is not incorrect in that there is no compelling evidence Owen ever had a homosexual relationship or even a single homosexual experience. While it is reasonable to state Owen was inclined towards homosexuality, that is not reason to consider him gay, and nor should human sexuality be limited to only straight or gay, considering that he could have been bisexual like several of his peers, or have a different sexual identity altogether.

Though it is true that homosexuality, secretive and indeed criminalized in early 20th-century Britain, was sufficiently taboo that it is no surprise we find no solid evidence of it, for many of Owen’s contemporaries, in his circle and elsewhere, such evidence does indeed

¹⁰⁰⁷ Fussell, p.292.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid., p.291.

exist. That homosexuality and ‘Uranianism’ were prominent features of Ross’s circle is well-documented, not least through the court cases discussed in chapter two. It is also unarguable that meeting Robbie Ross was a key moment in Owen’s literary life. Ross’s approval spurred Owen to more individualistic and confident verse, to leave behind imitative tendencies. It could be that even had Owen never managed to meet Ross, the mere thought of writing to impress him and his circle may have been sufficient for this development to take place—and Sassoon and Graves had already done much for his reputation: at Owen’s first meeting with Ross, he also met H.G. Wells, and was surprised the novelist knew him by name, as the editor of *The Nation* had mentioned him after Sassoon sent in ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’.¹⁰⁰⁹

This helps the case of Fussell and others who cast Owen as part of a homosexual coterie, writing coded verse about beautiful men, and it is undeniable that ‘Sassoon eventually introduced [Owen] into one of the very few literary circles in which “Uranianism” was accepted and easily discussed’.¹⁰¹⁰ But the degree to which Uranianism influenced Owen’s war writing ought not to be overstated, and the focus on the male body as inspiration for the great poetry of the Great War is reductive, ignoring the complexities of Owen’s sexuality and the established methods by which he wrote about homosexual desire—that is, through coded verse heavily influenced by Decadence.

Owen’s allusive, homosexually-themed poems, including ‘I Am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair’ and ‘Who is the God of Canongate?’ are relatively little-known. They were not the first such poems Owen wrote, but Hibberd calls them the most ‘accessible’.¹⁰¹¹ As we saw previously, ‘Who is the God of Canongate?’ in particular is highly suggestive, full of allusions to acts that take place behind closed doors (‘Will you not shrink in my shut

¹⁰⁰⁹ DHANB, p.353.

¹⁰¹⁰ DHOTP, p.150.

¹⁰¹¹ DHANB, p.379.

room?') in secret locations ('Up secret stairs men mount unshod'), which inspire passion ('With laughter first, and after with sighs') and sexual appetite ('They lift their lusts and let them spill').¹⁰¹² Most tellingly, the poem hints at payment so that one character can possess the other. Of the various critics I have encountered who comment upon this poem, only Simcox—whose views on Owen's sexuality are cautious ('We have to be careful not to confuse homosexual tendencies with homosexual conduct'¹⁰¹³)—avoids mention that the figure addressed is male, and that even if the narrator could conceivably be parsed as female, those who climb the 'secret stairs' are explicitly men. Simcox may deemphasize the homoerotic in Owen's poetry and rightly warn that it is poor critical practice 'to draw more conclusions than the evidence warrants',¹⁰¹⁴ but he cannot deny the sexual element here: 'as for that curious piece of doodling of about the same time, "Who is the God of Canongate?"', here is proclaimed a hunger for sexual experience'.¹⁰¹⁵

In these poems, clearly intended for Owen's new circle of literary friends directly linked with the outsider-glamour represented by Ross, we are given something very rare—a relatively unambiguous indication of how Owen writes of the male body and homosexual desire. And the mode of delivery—esoteric, obscure, personal and yet with very few establishing, dietetic terms—is so unlike his war poetry that it is clear his intentions are fundamentally different. Owen did indeed write about homosexual desire—but not in the way Fussell put forward.

Perhaps as a writer with homosexual tendencies, it was inevitable that a degree of homoeroticism could be found in Owen's war poems, but what Fussell proposes is that had Owen been unambiguously heterosexual, or indeed had the culture been different so that he

¹⁰¹² POWO, p.109.

¹⁰¹³ Simcox, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*, p.22.

¹⁰¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19.

fought alongside women as well as men, his attitude to war and the poems he wrote would have been irrevocably different. It is a reduction of themes of loss and suffering to expressions of lust and desire, to claim Owen wrote out of the urge to ‘homoeroticize the Christ-soldier analogy’.¹⁰¹⁶ While perhaps unlikely, there is also the possibility that Owen wrote his coded, decadent poems from a stance of disapproval, even self-loathing: there is clear desire, admiration and protectiveness in ‘Who is the God of Canongate’, but the deification in the title also leaves the subject of male desire untouchable, retaining purity in a world of base desires. The subject of the poem, the little ‘God’, is unlike a prostitute, as he defies the wishes of the clients:—

What shall I pay for you, lily-lad ?
- Not all the gold King Solomon had.

How can I buy you, London flower ?
- Buy me for ever, not just for an hour.

Through this we can read Owen’s mixed feelings of intrigue and disapproval. The poems could hypothetically serve as cathartic exorcism of guilt after experiencing but resisting temptation, or as imaginative flights of fancy from one who researched a possibility but was not brave enough to act upon his knowledge. A degree of the knowledge seems genuine—of ‘I Am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair’, Hibberd writes that ‘Owen certainly seems to have known the area; there really were a waterworks and a slaughterhouse near Shadwell Dock Stair.’¹⁰¹⁷ But these poems are a nod to his new friends, an attempt at seeking the approval of the prominent gay writers to whom he had been introduced. By writing ‘in the Wilde tradition, which required initiates to come very close to revealing the truth without saying anything that would arouse more than a vague unease

¹⁰¹⁶ Fussell, p.119.

¹⁰¹⁷ DHTLY, p.90.

in the minds of people who were not in the know',¹⁰¹⁸ it was the status of enlightened outsider that Owen was reaching for—though as Hibberd goes on to state, Owen rather falls short of this standard of obscuring true meaning. Nonetheless, the question that can be raised is whether all Owen was doing was hinting in order to impress—whether like Swinburne in Wilde's famous indictment, he was merely a braggart in matters of vice.

Fussell's emphasis on Owen's sexuality was likely a response to attempts to suppress speculation about his homosexuality. Owen's sexuality was obscured, so when scholars sought to bring it to light they unduly emphasized it. The myth of the noble, heterosexual—or asexual—war poet is replaced by the myth of the man who eroticizes the mangled bodies of the battlefield.

Neither is accurate. While Owen's poetry has its suggestively lascivious moments—for example, in the fragmentary 'Page Eglantine', in which the young page is told 'I will suck no briar tonight, | Nor read no line; | An you be my quire tonight, | And you my wine'¹⁰¹⁹—in his more sincere poetry about love, what is stressed is purity, innocence and a virginal ignorance of the very existence of sexual desire. The sonnet 'To—' is an example of this, a story of three boys running through a sandy landscape, one of whom is the personification of love. Mischievous Love makes the two boys fall, but the soft ground and their youthful bodies mean it is immaterial:

We cannot help but fall;
What matter? Why, it will not hurt at all,
Our youth is supple, and the world is sand.¹⁰²⁰

It bears mentioning that Fussell's impression of front-line homoeroticism does not derive solely from a reading of Owen, but with him as part of a larger group. Of the

¹⁰¹⁸ DHTLY, p.90.

¹⁰¹⁹ WOCPE, p.130.

¹⁰²⁰ Ibid., p.91.

aforementioned image of the bullets that ‘long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads’,¹⁰²¹ he notes that the image is also in the bayonet of Sassoon’s ‘The Kiss’ and both likely derived the image from Bret Harte’s ‘What the Bullet Sang’.¹⁰²² However, as Niall Ferguson points out, ‘sex is the thing which the original war literature, because of authorial scruple as much as censorship, largely omits.’¹⁰²³ In the examination of myths regarding Owen, the homosexual element thus seems inflated.

While I feel that the matter ought not to heavily influence readings of Owen, arguably his reputation as homosexual affected on his legacy. If as I have asserted, Christopher Isherwood’s early fixation on Owen was instrumental in his poetry reaching Britten, and thereafter a far wider audience, it is worth considering that part of that appeal was a result of Owen being introduced through *Good-bye to All That* as an ‘idealistic homosexual’. While this theory cannot be proven, certainly Britten scholars have suggested that Owen’s sexuality informed Britten’s decision to set his verse to music: ‘The integrity of Britten’s homosexual politics explains a great deal [...] particularly the use of fellow pacifist and homosexual Wilfred Owen’s poetry as the means by which to transmit his very real anger about the fate of young men sent to their deaths by an unfeeling patriarchal system’, writes Philip Brett.¹⁰²⁴ If this seems speculative, it is a matter of historical record that while Britten composed his *War Requiem*, Owen was being championed amidst outsider groups of homosexuals as not only fitting well into their frame of reference, but also himself being considered attractive: when J.R. Ackerley discovered that the edition of Owen’s poems that Britten was working from had no photograph, he sent him a new copy of his *Collected Poems* that included an image of his ‘beautiful face’, because he felt that it would be an

¹⁰²¹ POWO, p.131.

¹⁰²² Fussell, p.160.

¹⁰²³ Ferguson, p.xxxi.

¹⁰²⁴ Brett, p.28.

‘inspiration’.¹⁰²⁵ Britten had already gotten hold of a volume with a photograph, however, as Isherwood himself had evidently heard of his old friend’s curiosity and in 1961 sent an ‘unidentified Sitwell volume’ with a photograph of Owen within, and received Britten’s thanks: ‘I am so involved with him at the moment, & I wanted to see what he looked like: I might have guessed, it’s just what I expected really.’¹⁰²⁶

Owen was being treated as an abstract, an ideal. Indeed, this perhaps ties with speculation that Isherwood’s choices of lovers revolved around whether they could fit with mythical ideas: the Teutonic blonde, and later the wide-eyed all-American Walt Whitman type.¹⁰²⁷ Owen fit certain archetypal expectations, though of course there was more to him than his appearance by any measure. While it may seem he was being interpreted in a reductive way, it would be remiss not to consider the possibility that Owen was championed by successive literary figures because like them, he was gay—or at least, perceived to be gay—and thus they identified with him, which logically leads to the possibility that had he not been considered a homosexual, he would never have been used in the *War Requiem* and never ironically made the transition from outsider figure to extremely well-known and representative figurehead. Possibly this sort of progression is what Fussell perceived, but to extrapolate from what is essentially the politics of outsider groups an ulterior motive to Owen’s writing is excessive.

To those who would suggest that Owen’s war poems are all about hidden sexual desire for young men, the answer is his clear, unhidden celebration of the innocent souls

¹⁰²⁵ Peter Parker, ‘Britten and the Gang’ in *Britten’s Century: Celebrating 100 Years of Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Mark Bostridge (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.48-62, p.61.

¹⁰²⁶ Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.25.

¹⁰²⁷ See Piazza, p.6. As a side note, other commentators consider the relationship with the much younger American, Don Bachardy, a sign of personal growth: ‘one evidence of Isherwood’s growing maturity is that the lasting union he finally achieves with Don Bachardy is one in which he at least initially assumes a paternal role’: Claude J. Summers, *Christopher Isherwood* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing 1980), p.159.

who 'try | To go forever children, hand in hand'.¹⁰²⁸ And if this places him outside certain expectations associated with homosexual writers, that is only another way in which Owen can be said to have been set apart, and to have defied what is expected of him.

¹⁰²⁸ POWO, p.91.

Conclusion: Outsiderdom as Counterpoint to the Mythical Wilfred Owen

Here is here neither the schoolboy idealism of one group of war poets nor the despairing and hopeless cynicism of another; for this man does not fall easily into such classifications. The strains of deep devotion to an unchanging faith in the men about him, the voice in him that calls across the tumult to the deathless voice of truth, the stark sincerity and tender strength of the thoughts expressed, and the passionate and lovely notes of the expression—these are what help to make the war poetry of Wilfred Owen something special and apart, and all the more inexplicable the comparative obscurity into which his name and work seem to have fallen.¹⁰²⁹

Owen is at times called ‘the greatest of the English war poets’,¹⁰³⁰ and the question of who the greatest war poet was is raised remarkably often,¹⁰³¹ as though there can be some sort of objective hierarchy. At the very least, he is one of the most prominent. Those who are most popular and well-known are of course also subject to the most scrutiny and, often, negative attention. But for Owen, the position of prominence he attained has made him increasingly a scapegoat for historians who feel he hinders a full understanding of such a complex and lengthy event as the Great War. As Nigel Jones put it in *The Telegraph*, ‘Thanks to his ubiquitous presence on school curriculums and in both highbrow and popular culture, the “poet of pity” is far more famous than, say, Field Marshal Douglas Haig or David Lloyd George. Historians huff and puff in vain about this, pointing out that sensitive souls like Owen and his mentor Siegfried Sassoon were untypical of the mass of their comrades.’¹⁰³² The historians are correct, as we have established, but a full understanding of a complex figure like Owen reveals why his work and beliefs show him as a figure who dispels and contradicts everything established as his negative influence, and why it ought to be self-evident that he is ‘untypical’.

¹⁰²⁹ McLeish, p.8. To remind the reader, this is from an article written in 1937.

¹⁰³⁰ Stapleton, p.664.

¹⁰³¹ Moorcroft Wilson, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p.1 is one example.

¹⁰³² Jones, web.

Through this thesis have been two strands that are closely related, yet still separate. The first is that Owen first aspired to be, then worked hard to become an elevated outsider figure—as a poet, as a soldier, as a man of particular understanding, and if not directly as a ‘Uranian’, then at least as one familiar with the associated culture. The second is that Owen has a prominent and complex place in the remembrance of the Great War, and by association in how British people generally think of those who serve and suffer in war. These two points are of course multi-faceted and the ways they can be considered critically have changed over time, but as has been touched upon all through this thesis, it is the interplay between these two elements that forms my central proposition.

I put forward that Owen, because of his identification as an outsider and his alignment with small, often elitist groups within larger societies, is a poor choice for a representative of larger movements or of broad political notions meant to encapsulate a *zeitgeist*. Owen is said to be disproportionately representative: he dominates collective memory of an era, but lacking knowledge in areas distant from what he experiences, he offers only a limited perspective. Thus, his influence is to the detriment of a more encompassing understanding of the period. This thesis agrees with this fundamental premise, but in a sense pleads the case for Owen: I argue that while his influence is disproportionate, that level of influence is clearly inappropriate for one who always aimed his message at a minority with special, elevated understanding. This should always have been clear to analysts of his work. Owen was speaking about his personal experiences to those who shared in his privileged understanding, and though he wanted to criticize widely-held misconceptions, he was not and could not offer a comprehensive alternate view that represented all soldiers. That his message does not concern the experiences of all involved in the war, or even all soldiers of his rank, ought to be self-evident from his own writing and personal philosophy.

It is also clear that Owen was not responsible for the inception of myths. Examining the discernable myths of the period, Owen's poetry cannot be said to strongly support them, and his influence when they were established was considerably less potent than it was after they were already in place from other sources. In every way in which Owen sought to be seen as the 'mad comet', the individual on the fringe of wider society who observes yet follows a separate, distinct path, he exhibits his unsuitability as spokesperson for all soldiers, for all young British men in 1918, or even for all the War Poets. He was a dominant force in the inception of collective memory when it came to images of men suffering and dying, of men losing their sanity or their hopes for their futures in the war, and of the way men are mourned on the battlefield being inadequate, but these are not the myths and misconceptions of the period.

There is no fundamental reason why an outsider figure expressing a view unpopular at the time yet later widely accepted could not be seen as a spokesperson for a cause. History is replete with those who spoke for civil rights or suffrage or emancipation who were outsiders at the time but whose views could now be considered in alignment with those of wider society, so that they are no longer outsider views. But with Owen, his conception of the suffering of the soldiers he knew was extrapolated to a comment on all soldiers. Thus Owen is still placed into roles that fit him poorly: as a spokesperson for pacifism, a soldier who condemns all war, a man who stood in direct opposition to any who would consider the possibility of glory in combat. None of these capture Owen's beliefs, and famous though his evocations of suffering, ignominy and brutality may be, these personal narratives do not create their own mythology.

The extension of my defence is that there is a subtle hypocrisy to the dismissal of Owen. Casting him in his role of simplifying spokesperson exhibits the same narrow understanding, simplification and reliance on myth he is accused of causing, applied to him

as an historical figure rather than to the period. To claim that reading Owen reduces understanding of the war is true only if the reading of Owen is itself reductive: full understanding not only introduces his personal views, and we see he quickly establishes divisions: he feels a great guilt at not being able to represent the ordinary 'Tommy' as an officer; he is adamant that the civilians cannot understand the soldiers, and that the soldiers will not share their 'secrets'; he considers the poet outside ordinary society with a unique perspective, which can be seen as a premise leading to the understanding that Owen is comfortable only as a representative of poets. He intentionally rebels against the orthodox: he aligns himself with a homosexual group, and idolizes a man who caused a storm of controversy; he considers himself spiritually a religious man but rejects the organized Church; he is also insecure about his class and for his entire life sits unsteadily on the boundary between lower- and upper-middle class, never quite belonging to either.

The fact is that Owen is championed when 'counterculture' becomes fashionable, an inversion that ought to signal his unorthodoxy, yet becomes obscured because of his understandable association with the 1914-1918 period.

The history of Owen studies is also one of misunderstandings, misrepresentations and myths. Immediately after his death, Sassoon keeps biographical details intentionally obfuscated to have Owen appear an everyman victim, making him perhaps the source of the idea Owen is more widely representative than he purports to be. Graves' mention of his being homosexual leads to a major point of contention over his legacy, which becomes overly dominant in specialized criticism. His sudden rise in popularity leads to Harold Owen consciously attempting to create a sanitized version of his brother for the tastes of the 1960s. Soon afterwards, a version of Owen suitable for classroom discussion emerges. Clearly, he is a difficult figure to understand, which perhaps makes it understandable that he is subject to myth.

But this is precisely why the charge against Owen—that he and the other war poets are the source of the popular vision of the period as so effectively captured in *Blackadder Goes Fourth*—ought to be rejected. The simplified, satirical mode of remembrance is not based on a full understanding of Owen, his life and his poetry, any more than it is based on methodological historical study. The prominent historian who acerbically told Murray that ‘Teachers of English have a lot to answer for’ almost certainly disapproved of Owen and the war poets, but perhaps the deeper implication of the ‘sardonic’ statement was that teachers have failed to teach students about the poets in sufficient depth, so that the notion that they are not making statements about a universal experience becomes clear.

Owen in particular certainly does not have a typical war experience—if such a thing ever truly existed, given the variety of fighting men and others who had a war experience that did not involve combat. Even had Owen’s experience been more ‘typical’, he would have been incapable of observing it as others would, for he was an atypical man with an atypical mind—and very keen for this to be understood. That he should be depicted as wishing to speak for all soldiers defies even his own depiction of how fragmented the opinions of soldiers were between ranks.

Owen’s fixation with the outsider figure was a meditation on belonging, and how he felt excluded. His excitement about his introduction to the literary world was one of finding a place that welcomed him, though it was soon apparent that he did not truly belong there either—though perhaps in time he would have felt accepted. He was no doubt aware of the possibility of finding a place to belong amongst fighting men, but also of how short and often painful bonds between these men were. He certainly had a peculiar inner life prior to the war in terms of his struggles with class, religion and sexuality, but he was not a man like Gurney or Wittgenstein who temporarily found himself to be less of an outsider within the rigid structure of military service.

That myths develop about a writer of the stature of Owen is perhaps inevitable, especially when a chief venue for discussion about his work is the secondary school classroom. His depiction there is coloured by didactic goals. Thus, that such a writer is questioned as an adequate source of historical information is only appropriate. But to call attention to the narrow manner in which the Great War is collectively understood and yet not to acknowledge that this influential figure is also understood in a narrow manner, or worse, to claim that he is the chief cause for narrow understanding, is to be overly selective.

The Great War is constantly reassessed by historians, and the multiple approaches provide fruitful new threads of discussion. But for all that he fits classroom teaching and can be considered ‘easy’, Owen, too, is more complex than popular myths would suggest, and it is my hope that just as with the period with which he is closely associated, myriad new ways to approach and study him will continue to provide new insights and areas of study, illustrating that less familiar angles can give fresh new insights that challenge the way we understand what seems like such a familiar cultural figure.

Undeniably, part of Owen’s initial appeal was that he had atypical qualities, that he was rebellious and individualistic, and it may be easy to forget this now that he is one of our culture’s best-known poets. It seems apt, then, to close with a recollection from Blunden, of a rhyming letter Owen wrote to him: -

Towards its close, Owen declares his longing for
a new great poet—for all of us, and himself:

*Let me attain
To talk with him, and share his confidence.*

His loneliness as a young poet breaks out; he
may read even Keats and ‘still’, he appeals, ‘I
am alone among the Unseen Voices’.¹⁰³³

¹⁰³³ WOCL, p.593.

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