

“If I Should Die”: Attitudes to the Dead Hero in British Poetry of the Great War

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In British cultural memory World War I is closely linked with the poetry of the era; no ceremony on Armistice Day (11 November) can be arranged without the recital of such texts by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, and the other war poets. Nevertheless, for all appearances, the British poetry of World War I is not political poetry—at least not in the sense that the poetry of the thirties would prove to be fifteen years later.¹ It was much more concerned with moral questions. To understand the reason for this focus one needs to recall the background of the war poets, who were practically all volunteers when they joined the army, as Britain introduced conscription only at the beginning of 1916. Most of them started writing and publishing poetry long before the war; those who were to become war poets began their careers as authors of idyllic Edwardian texts celebrating the act of retreating into private life and an intimate relationship with Nature. The war experience, however, inevitably urged them to relate themselves to a cultural convention very different from Nature poetry: the culture and cult of self-sacrificing heroism. The poets of the Great War maintained and undermined this tradition, and in the process modified their former views of Nature.

When we read these poems today, we treat them both as works of art and as historical documents. One can quickly detect a populist trend within the poetry of the Great War; its best known, even emblematic example is John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields.” On the other hand, the best war poets introduced innovations in English verse that largely determined the later history of twentieth-century British literature. (Paradoxically, these authors were also present through their absence after the war, since most of them had been killed on the battlefield.) New methods of writing poetry were applied, even though conservative tendencies also remained significant since, as Susanne Christine Puissant remarks, “the ‘modernist’ disease with which the English population was struggling was soon identified as distinctly German, so that the war against Germany also became a war against Modernism” (3). To many people, the need to fight against German politics and the urge to resist the influence of German culture (allegedly alien to British traditions) were two sides of the same coin. The poignant contrast between the two

vernacular cultures that became a stereotype largely determined British consciousness in the twentieth century and gave way to further stereotypes.

The most obvious of these is the notion that in World War I Britain lost her innocence. Most probably, this idea explains the enthusiasm with which the British spoke in defense of Belgium: this small, neutral, and powerless country became a symbol of the helpless prey. The awareness of their own innocence seemingly justifies the British enthusiasm for the war at the beginning. The consciousness that a guiltless victim had to be defended from an aggressor swept the domestic conflicts of the pre-war years under the carpet including the problem of Irish independence, the demands of the Suffragette movement, and the series of strikes after 1909. The terror of a forthcoming German attack, which was increased by the consciousness of innocence, made the Irish problem, women's right to vote, and workers' living conditions seem insignificant.

This image of the victim position is reconstructed in the most popular war poem, McCrae's "In Flanders Fields." The Canadian author,² who served as a major (later a lieutenant-colonel) in the medical corps, had tried his hand at writing poetry before the war. He wrote "In Flanders Fields" in 1915, and it is easy to observe the reason of its suddenly growing popularity. After the peaceful natural landscape depicted in stanza one, the dead speaking in the second stanza recall not only the motif of returning to Nature but also the illusion of continuity:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields. (85)

McCrae's text uses a very simple form of *prosopopeia* as defined by Paul de Man: by conferring a face or a mask on the dead he evokes them for the living (76). What we see in the poem is both personification and the resurrection of the dead. The soldiers killed in action, in turn, are reconstructed in language as the masks of the living since it is the surviving soldiers who let their own grief and war enthusiasm speak through the dead comrades. This is how the

text creates an illusion of continuity and also an icon (that of the red poppy) that has been made a symbol of remembering war heroes in Britain.

McCrae, however, fails to reflect on the problem of the dead hero. The difference between his populist text and more artistic poems can well be seen if we compare it with Charles Sorley's sonnet "When you see millions. . .":

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.
Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,
"Yet many a better one has died before."
Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
Great death has made all his for evermore. (89–90)

Instead of simply using the image of the soldier's face as a mask both for the living and the dead (as McCrae does), Sorley represents it as a "spook," that is, a ghost. A face is something we wear, since the mask is always already fixed on our head: in our social existence we cannot avoid playing roles. The dead hero is constructed in language (to be dead is "easy" in this sense, it is merely a result of a speech act), by a medium that does not exist for the dead (again, unlike in McCrae). Therefore, they are mentioned as "the mouthless dead" in the first line of the poem—an image that, if read literally, also represents the mutilated body of a mortally wounded soldier.

World War I poetry wished to open the readers' eyes to the horror that they were unable to imagine in the home country. Most poets, consciously and with a great degree of self-discipline, restricted themselves to the pure representation of war experience while refraining from moral and political judgment, leaving these to the reader. One of them, Herbert Read, remarked: "It is not my business as a poet to condemn war. . . . I only wish to present the universal aspect of a particular event. Judgement may follow, but should never precede or become embroiled with the act of poetry" (qtd. in Silkin, *Out of Battle* 186). This was a general tendency—if with many exceptions—which explains the spectacular simplicity of diction, the

provocative naturalism of image-making, and the intention to avoid political propaganda.

The first decade of the twentieth century, the age of Edward VII, was a period of cultural revolt against Victorian standards, and in poetry it was usually linked with late romantic attitudes. The poets of this period followed in the wake of their great romantic predecessors when they emphasized the importance of solitude, and they also adjusted it to their situation. Whereas Wordsworth and Coleridge needed solitude to make creation possible, Edwardian poets required it as a sign of rebellion against Victorian public morality. The individual asserted his/her own rights against a rigidly controlled community, and when s/he found his/her real home in Nature, poetry was created almost as an afterthought. War isolated them from a quiet place of existence; to many of them, what happened was horrible because it shattered the idyllic in Nature, it separated the sensitive poet from the medium that opened a door to the world of art. There developed numerous versions and meanings of contrasting the idyll in Nature with the horror of the war, such as Nature conceived as God's language as opposed to murderous human culture, or permanence as opposed to unpredictability. The implied poet frequently suffers from the thought that Mother Nature has become alien to him, since a soldier who murders is not her child any more. This notion is clearly seen in the poetry of Sorley (who was killed at the age of twenty). Nature is more powerful than man, who has become a killer, as he suggests in "All the hills and vales along":

Earth that never doubts nor fears,
Earth that knows of death, not tears,
Earth that bore with joyful ease
Hemlock for Socrates,
Earth that blossomed and was glad
'Neath the cross that Christ had,
Shall rejoice and blossom too
When the bullet reaches you. (87)

Edmund Blunden is also a case in point. In the Introduction to a collection of his poetry, Rennie Parker quotes Robyn Marsack: "[H]e seems unsure of whether the natural world is on our side or not: in 'The Kiss' he begins 'I am for the woods against the world / But are the woods for me?' He was never entirely sure. Like Robert Frost, he had 'a perception of unyielding nature that repels man's attempts at communion or description'"

(qtd. in Blunden 12). As in the works of many other war poets, the contrast between elevated style (even archaism) and the demotic, sometimes vulgar register signifies the difference between Nature (the scenery of the poet's personal past) and the horror of the war (the poet's disillusioned present).

Parallel with the antagonism of Nature and war, another poignant contrast can be discerned between the suffering of the soldiers on the one hand and civilian apathy and ignorance on the other (Silkin, *Out of Battle* 154). It reflects not only the bitter experience of seeing that the civilians in Britain are not aware of the pains and the victim position of those in the army, but also that they are reluctant to accept the poetry and art representing it. This is one major innovation of the verse written during the Great War: the terrible experience of the war can (and must) become a source of aesthetic values. The new paradigm rejects the idea of self-sacrifice as something both morally good and beautiful.

It follows that this new principle in writing poetry undermines the ideal of heroism so pathetically reflected in Tennyson's popular poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade," but the readiness for self-sacrifice as a major virtue was an important principle in the education of boys all over Europe. The title of Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est" is a quotation from a poem by Horace that was widely taught in secondary schools before the Great War. The speaker of Owen's poem, a soldier experiencing a gas attack (a new technique in warfare at that time), intends to inform the civilian reader (or listener) about the defenseless position of the fleeing soldiers stuck in the mud—which was their most threatening "enemy" on the Western fronts, as winter was on the Eastern fronts. Both are elements of Nature, which take revenge on the men who have turned their backs on her laws. In the last stanza, Owen (like Sorley in "When you see millions. . .") creates an image of a distorted face. This face, however, cannot become a sign (language ceases to exist for the dead soldier); it is only identical with its own horrifying existence:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. (193)

Rejecting the Horatian line (meaning: “it is sweet and decorous to die for the homeland”) signifies the impossibility of becoming a hero. In the mud that renders escape impossible heroes become victims. By undermining the usual political and cultural definitions (a soldier killed in action is always a war hero, a civilian is a victim) Owen subverts a long masculine tradition.

Sorley, Blunden, Owen, and the other war poets viewed the events of the war from the inside, from their position as soldiers. The question whether this position hindered or facilitated the development of their poetry is much debated. Philip Larkin sheds light on the problem in an essay on Owen as follows:

A “war” poet is not one who chooses to commemorate or celebrate a war but one who reacts against having a war thrust upon him: he is chained, that is, to a historical event, and an abnormal one at that. However well he does it, however much we agree that the war happened and ought to be written about, there is still a tendency for us to withhold our highest praise on the grounds that a poet’s choice of subject should seem an action, not a reaction. “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” we feel, would have been markedly inferior if Hopkins had been a survivor from the passenger list.
(159)

Larkin, however, finishes his essay in the defense of Owen: “His secret lies in the retort he had already written when W. B. Yeats made his fatuous condemnation ‘Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry’: ‘Above all, I am not concerned with Poetry’” (163). It is obvious and more than natural that the primary concern of the war poets was not poetry, and what Yeats said signifies the difference between them and their contemporaries who were writing poetry between 1914 and 1918 without joining the army and are, therefore, not considered to be “war poets.”

Thomas Hardy was an outstanding poet of the age (having stopped writing novels at the age of sixty, in 1900). As an old man he never became a soldier, but he commented on the war (just like he did on the Boer war fifteen years earlier). Not surprisingly, he did it with the fatalism familiar to readers from his novels, emphasizing the inevitability of the war. It is widely known that T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* also reflects on the war and the chaos of

Europe after the armistice. However, as Larkin's remark demonstrates, the closest and most controversial link is that between the war poets and Yeats.

Although Larkin eventually takes Owen's side in the debate, his reservations about the kind of poetry that is based on reaction, rather than on action, echoes Yeats's "fatuous condemnation" (163)—a remark that should be considered in the context of the Irish poet's life work and his complex poetics. As Helen Vendler contends: "Yeats deliberately refused to write directly about the War. His concise and classical epigram 'On being asked for a War Poem' claims the right, even in time of war, to direct himself to lyric and private verse" (78). This is Yeats's epigram:

I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter's night. (259)

Yes—unless you are a soldier, the war poets could have said. "But" Vendler continues, "that was when the war was England's. As soon as war moved onto Irish soil, Yeats could not keep silent" (78). The representation of fight and suffering can also be detected in "Easter 1916," where the recurrent line "A terrible beauty is born" (287), apart from representing a historical event, is rather self-reflexive: the beauty is constructed within the text. Nevertheless, the difference between Yeats and the war poets shows the plurality of English poetry during and after the war. A comparison between two poems about war heroes, namely Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" and Yeats's "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," demonstrates this.

Both texts are about a soldier at war foretelling his own death as a hero. Brooke's sonnet follows the pattern well known from his other poems: it starts with a reference to the war in the octave, and the sestet constructs an idealized image of home (today, for many readers, in a sentimental, even mawkish tone). The first eight lines are based on the biblical image of "dust to dust":

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

Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home. (81)

The body of the dead hero, in its material existence, represents England as an idealized place in a foreign land. This is what makes the killed soldier a dead hero. The sestet (although its diction appears as something equally simple) is more ambivalent:

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven. (82)

As Silkin argues, one possible meaning is that the hero's self-sacrifice serves his own satisfaction and idealization (*Out of Battle* 67–69). His whole life achieves its final goal in the death of a hero, but for this very reason the subject remains within the circle of his own existence, both life and death are parts of a private world. He chose death himself; this is the essence of his heroism, since the soldier finds satisfaction and happiness in it.

In time of war, however, the poem conveyed another meaning: the death of the individual as the example to other young men. If the speaker of this poem is ready to sacrifice himself, this should be read as a ritual to be followed by other people in the same tribe. The poet, as implied in the text, may think that his own death gains an aesthetic quality only for himself and those who mourn him, but it is probably inevitable that such a heartbreaking poem will also be used in war propaganda—the more so because Brooke's idealism and the notion of his personal satisfaction form a sharp contrast with the way most of his fellow poets, including Owen, Sorley, and Sassoon, represented the callousness of the war.

Brooke saw himself “in the romantic guise of a crusader” as a soldier in the army at Gallipoli and the Dardanelles (where he was to die as a result of an infected mosquito bite). Similarly to many other young volunteers all over Europe fighting on either side, “[h]e felt keenly the futility and frivolity of his previous life” (Holt 38). The war against Germany and Turkey gave meaning to the life of “the useless man,” since it was seen as God's will. His enthusiasm and readiness to sacrifice himself were the qualities that Winston

Churchill celebrated in him and showed as a good example to follow in April 1915:

A voice had become audible, a note had been struck, more true, more thrilling, more able to do justice to the nobility of our youth in arms engaged in this present war than any other . . . he was all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in the days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable. (qtd. in Holt 41)

Although the situation presented in Yeats's poem is the same, the two texts are entirely different. Yeats highlights that his speaker, a war pilot, is alone in the small compartment of an aircraft. Thus, he is the opposite not only of Brooke's hero but also of the soldiers stuck in the mud in Owen's poem. The place where we see the airman (who is forced to become a hero by sacrificing his life) is in the sky—a setting that, before the Great War, was usually associated with heaven. Here, however, it is a place of danger, threat, and existential solitude (Jenkins 34-61). The poem shifts into two parts. In the first two lines the airman only repeats the statement of the title in the first person singular ("I know that I shall meet my fate"). This is followed by an unasked question: why? The speaker renounces the most frequent reasons, among them, hating the enemy, conscription, the imperative voice of a charismatic political leader. In the last six lines (very much like the sestet of an elongated sonnet) he eventually offers a reply: "A lonely impulse of delight / Drove to this tumult in the clouds" (237). "Balance" is the key word of the poem (Bushrui and Prentki 138): the result of the speaker's "balancing" (that is, considering) his chances is his conclusion that his futile life can be given a meaning only by his death as a hero.

This, however, leads to an irreconcilable contradiction. If somebody's motivation to die the death of a hero is merely an "impulse of delight" and a feeling of uselessness, that can hardly be conceived as the death of a hero. What distinguishes Yeats's speaker from Brooke's is not that he takes delight in foreseeing his death (Brooke does exactly the same); it is what one can find in Brooke's soldier and cannot in Yeats's airman—passionate patriotism. Considering this, one can read the latter poem as a political statement: the Irish officer does not fight for his own people. Since the Irish Free State was established only after the end of the war, the Irish airman must be a member of the British army. This explains the much debated lines:

Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before. (237)

Only the twin poem, which precedes this text in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," helps identify the anonymous air officer: read in the context of the volume, Lady Gregory's son, who really lost his life in the war. C. K. Stead, however, rightfully comments that the ideas quoted above barely reflect the thoughts of the historical Robert Gregory, and neither should they be taken for Yeats's own feelings. The Irish poet was not indifferent to the outcome of the war, and, of course, he never wanted Germany to overcome Britain (126).

But if the fictitious speaker of the dramatic monologue does not identify with any possible goal of the war, why and how does his death give a meaning to his life? If he falls in a battle, no doubt he will be buried as a war hero, and his name will become a part of national identity, moreover, national mythology. (These are obvious in the twin poem.) He is the only person who knows that his heroism is a mere construct—and, of course, we as readers of the poem are also aware of this, since the fiction of the poem makes it possible for us to gain an insight into his most secret thoughts. According to Stead, "Gregory's nobility as an aristocrat and artist" is presented in the poem, which is eventually a manifestation of his "tragic joy" (129). As we have seen, the airman uses the word "delight," a synonym of joy, but also a noun that becomes ambivalent as a projection of his consciousness. In the context of social and cultural history, it signifies a period of decadence for European aristocracy: for the "useless man" choosing death is the only chance to become useful for other people. This is how the officer in the poem draws the conclusion from the situation that he shared with so many young people in the era. On the other hand, it can also be viewed as a snapshot of the last moments before the foundation of the Irish Free State: the aircraft is hovering in a sky of uncertainty. In both cases the reader can ask whether the airman is speaking about a symbolic suicide that is disguised as the death of a hero or a situation in which the speaker is stuck at the border between life and death.

The two Yeats poems complement each other by leading to a further controversy: "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" is a conventional elegy,

in which the work of mourning leaves no doubt about heroism, while “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death” is an enigmatic and embarrassing text representing death instinct and undermining the traditional idea of the war hero. Brooke would have been unable to write such a poem, not only because his talent was different from that of Yeats’s, but also (and mainly) because Brooke was a soldier, which Yeats was not. To write such a rich and thought-provoking text he needed the distance that Brooke did not possess. Nevertheless, whether we read their poems as historical documents or as works of art, both poems contribute to our better understanding of the complex experience that the soldiers fighting in the Great War had.

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Notes

¹ It should be noted that the Oxford poets of the Thirties filled in the gap left by the poets killed in the war.

² Canada declared war on Germany in August 1914.

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