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‘I knew you in this dark’: Wilfred Owen’s Encounter with the Enemy

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Abstract

War has captured the human imagination since time immemorial. The most powerful proof thereof is war poetry, a genre of literature that helped to promote as well as sustain the motives for warfare. That phase is commonly designated the heroic or chivalric tradition of bellicose versification, and met its end during the Great War on account of litterateurs like Wilfred Owen. The poet undercut the powerful concepts that underlay the genre as well as extended the archaic trope of the brotherhood of fighting men to include the enemy from the opposite trenches, problematizing the entire heroic bellicose exercise to the point of collapse, thus heralding the end of that tradition.

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Whenever war is spoken of

I find

The war that was called Great invades the mind. (Scannell 2014: 245)

‘I knew you in this dark’: Wilfred Owen’s Encounter with the Enemy

And ever since historian writ,
And ever since a bard could sing,
Doth each exalt with all his wit
The noble art of murdering. (Thackeray, qtd. in van Wyk Smith 1978: 1)

I. Introduction: The Poetry of War

War has been part of the human condition since time immemorial—a fact well reflected in artistic traditions around the world. Whether warfare constitutes an ingrained facet of mankind's character or, instead, a cultural innovation, an issue which continues to be the topic of some debate (Romm 2016), its representation is around “12,000 years old, dating from at least the Mesolithic period (10,000-5,000 BCE) in the form of rock-paintings of battle scenes found in the Spanish Levant” (McLoughlin 2011: 7). The earliest surviving canonized written works, arising in the neighborhood of 2,000 to 1,200 years before the Common Era, ranging from the *Mahabharata* to the *Iliad*, were concerned with the subject (Giddings 1992: viii; Rodman 1974: xvii). Indeed, evincing literature's notable aptitude for the illustration of the more pugnacious truths of life, Rodman remarks that these antique epics “were always *war* poems” (emphasis added, 1974: xvii). From that time forth, over the course of human history, novel and groundbreaking artful ways of depicting armed strife progressively emerged; varying from investigative journalistic pieces in magazines through photography to films and television series, prolifically permeating artwork of all categories, “the father and king of all” (“Heraclitus”) positively suffuses our consciousness. Serving as a historically popular instance of these “multifarious” (McLoughlin 2011: 7) creative articulations on martial conflict, poetry in particular found powerful subject matter in the latter. The peculiar quality of versification, Longley argues, primarily addressing bellicose verses, namely allows for a “symbolic and mnemonic force [that] reaches where prose cannot touch” (2005: 60).

According to Winn, this poetic potency, in addition to helping create them, sustained the ideological motives for warfare, which, consequently, gave rise to precarious discrepancies between, on the one hand, the abhorrent actualities of combat as well as, on the other hand, their oftentimes apocryphally beautified literary simulacra (2008: 8). This type of extenuating obfuscation, then, is the staple of what war poetry scholarship has designated the “heroic” and “chivalric” (Stallworthy 2014: xxi) first phase of the genre, operating in stark contrast to its second, anti-heroic stage. For the sake of completeness, it, nonetheless, should be added that critics like Winn (2008) have pointed to the existence of poignant counterexamples to a generalized, bipartite classification. Noting that certain bellicose litterateurs wrote anti-heroically in spite of the dominant

cultural tendencies of their age does not seem controversial, for truly great authors have always, I would say, been ahead of their times, but sometimes Winn's arguments verge on the excessively optimistic or moderately anachronistic. Similarly, Goldensohn glimpses “the occasional rebel” in what she more subtly calls the “tidal argument” between the two sides (2003: 5). Bergonzi, in the same vein, posits that the two opposing attitudes towards martiality, the heroic-chivalric angle and its antipode, have existed simultaneously: the former view, illustrated by the Shakespearian character Hotspur, versus the biologically intuitive, perhaps more 'cowardly', yet altogether virtuous position assumed by Falstaff (1965: 11-19). He does, however, along with granting that the latter was a minority standpoint up until the Great War like Goldensohn, confirm the majority consensus in proclaiming that the advent of that engagement meant “that the traditional mythology of heroism and the hero . . . had ceased to be viable” (1965: 17).

Before arriving at that juncture, war poetry—for most of its history—“generally [boasted] exhortations to action, or celebrations of action” (Stallworthy 2014: xxi). An epic poem in which Winn cognizes a degree of nuanced moral judgment, the *Iliad*, notwithstanding reveres the “brain-spattering, windpipe-splitting art” (Byron, qtd. in *ibid.*) showcased by Achilles and his belligerent cohort, as well as the honorable dutifulness with which the Trojan Hector fatalistically faces the surety of his impending, though ultimately avoidable death at the hands of that Greek warrior, so as not to shame his people (Winn 2008: 39). Roman bellicose writing especially attached gravity to this unassailable kind of national obligation. Even if it tapped into an, in part, understandable preoccupation, because of the actual importance of the role played by the army in safeguarding the realm (Ferguson 1972: 20), it was, as Horace's famous dictum affirms, seen as delightfully worth it *an sich* to perish for the glory of the beloved state (Winn 2008: 71; *cfr. infra*). Much as the “cost of warfare” was never, howbeit, conclusively consigned to oblivion, it constituted a “necessary price” (Stallworthy 2014: xxii) that heroic poetry verses aided in inveigling soldiers to pay. Aside from promisingly ensuring fighters' renown in life, the militaristic bards belletristically pledged that they would look after the cultural immortality of those who would find themselves deceased when the conflict was over (*ibid.*). Ergo, the appeal of that commitment unsurprisingly had a relatively long and successful lifespan compared to its more pessimistic later antithesis.

During the Middle Ages, these euphemistic pagan notions took on further embellishment as they acquired additional, religious connotations. The romanticized idea of the chivalric knight, decidedly alike his heathen forebears but Christianized, usurped the tradition entirely to become the ideal paragon of war poetry (Winn 2008: 106). Coated in an extra layer of piousness, the pugnacious talents of fighting men were afterwards, over the centuries, increasingly watered-down to the equivalent of gentle virtues. In their distorted capacity, they could thus serve as encouragements of violence without, as it were, sounding profanely barbaric (*ibid.* 112). In no way

did the old values taper off, remaining compelling through the Renaissance as well as the Enlightenment periods. Nelson, for instance, propitiously asking his outmatched fleet to abide at the Napoleonic Trafalgar sea battle, utilized the no doubt forcibly resonating command: “England expects that every man will do his duty” (“England expects”). The quintessential Victorian gentleman, too, constituting a “nineteenth-century mutation of the medieval knight” (Stallworthy 2008: 28), still made his offspring absorb the Classics (Stallworthy 2014: xxix); accordingly, chivalry, having, moreover, been transformed into a feature of nobility and respectability (Winn 2008: 60), found its way into the British public-school system, which sought to turn the common people into decorous Christian men of honor (Stallworthy 2014: xxvi). As such, ideologies that essentially originated in the base impulses of primal human bloodshed, came to be taught in the guise of being the principled trappings of good citizenship.

Although concluding that the First World War definitely marked a watershed moment in war poetry, literary scholars contend the change was not instantaneous. Acting as the products of their education, which had instilled into them a customary 'Hotspurian' outlook, Georgian youths were all too eager to prove themselves courageous, chivalrous and duteously honorable in combat, as evidenced by the pervasive heroic sentiment in the initial soldier versification from the armed conflict (Rodman 1974: xxv). Excellent emblems of this prevailing attitude may be located in Asquith's 'The Volunteer', in which he contrasts the drabness of existence in times of peace to the excitement of warfare:

Here lies a clerk who half his life had spent
Toiling at ledgers in a city grey,
Thinking that so his days would drift away
With no lance broken in life's tournament
Yet ever 'twixt the books and his bright eyes
The gleaming eagles of the legions came,
And horsemen, charging under phantom skies,
Went thundering past beneath the oriflamme.

And now those waiting dreams are satisfied
From twilight to the halls of dawn he went;
His lance is broken; but he lies content
With that high hour, in which he lived and died.
And falling thus, he wants no recompense,
Who found his battle in the last resort

Nor needs he any hearse to bear him hence,
Who goes to join the men of Agincourt. (Asquith 2014: 166)

Indeed, spilling over into the Great War, the archaic vocabulary, the nostalgic temperament and the self-deluded enthusiasm are prime indicators of the first phase of martial composition.

Supposedly, it is only after the stark reality—the wholesale, mechanized extermination—of trench warfare had reared its ugly head in prolonged engagements like the Battle of the Somme, that the tune could shift (Bergonzi 1965: 17; Ferguson 1972: 23). To Welland, the Great War certainly also operated as a turning point, but he identifies a three-step development instead of a two-pronged transition. Firstly, he pinpoints “bardic poetry”, represented by poets like Rupert Brooke and Asquith, which falsified itself by “the hollowness of [its] pseudo-Romantic rhetoric” (1978: 16) (with the added caveat that this bellicose tradition, as I have shown and will resubmit later on, predates Romanticism). Secondly, the critic delineates the “personal phase of war poetry”, characterized by “a personal impetus, because war is incidental to [it] rather than integral” (1978: 20). Importantly, this subsequent type of writing still regards death, to some extent, as heroically pleasing, though less abstractly and a great deal more realistically (Welland 1978: 21). The culmination of the transitional process Welland calls “protest poetry”; like most scholars, he attributes its emergence to disasters like the one mentioned above. As the name suggests, disillusion as well as opposition had taken over: memorable poets now unapologetically objected to the conflict's continuance (1978: 26). It should, nevertheless, necessarily be noted here that the poets who held this 'Falstaffian' point of view were in the minority, and their output was until 1920, consequently, less popular than the poetry penned by lyricists the likes of Asquith, which was more in line with the train of thought to which the civilian homefront had become accustomed (Featherstone 1995: 15).

The litterateurs from the protest stage of First World War poetry (notwithstanding that many among them first wrote verses in the vein of the previous periods) are the ones who have most readily withstood the test of time: Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Isaac Rosenberg, Ivor Gurney, and the subject of the present study—Wilfred Owen (Welland 1978: 27). Given that he is considered, by popular belief, to be the finest poet from that particular martial struggle (Bergonzi 1965: 122), proving Newbolt's 1924 assertion wrong: “I don't think these shell-shocked war poems will move our grandchildren greatly” (qtd. in *ibid.*), it comes as no surprise that, befitting his station, an abundance of exceptional scholarly literature, as will be demonstrated, has been produced on his life and the magnitude of his achievement. Despite the indisputable quality of the available body of academic criticism, I would argue it chiefly follows fixed, overarching bearings. Recent points of observation have, by the same token, opened up new avenues for research, one of

which, pertaining to the genre of war poetry, and Owen's relationship to the collapse of its heroic tradition, I will go down. Before setting up this untried approach, I will first start off by examining as well as comprehensively providing an overview of the good work done so far, all the while opposing and evaluating diverging opinions. To examine each of the readings of all the poems, comparing the critics' respective interpretations, would be ponderously unhelpful; instead, I have elected to identify the important main trends. If supplementation of individual pieces is required, appropriate reference will be made in the analysis proper. The status quaestionis then will be followed up by a chapter that delves into the path to be walked down next, which, in turn, leads into my estimations of Owen's output.

Welland, writing some forty-two years after his death, constitutes the first scholar to dedicate an entire book to the litterateur; so my foray, first and foremost, commences with him, together with the reactions to his perspective. Subsequently, I will investigate the primary thematic currents in the expertise on the subject of Owen's poetics, beginning at the outset with the latter's juvenilia, as critical estimations see them, in some measure, anticipating his bellicose verses. The key characteristics of the poet's juvenilia congregate, on the one hand, around his time spent at a vicarage in Dunsden, the place where he, purportedly, experienced a first serious personal predicament; and, on the other hand, his maturation in France, which is where, as we will see, he found himself when the First World War broke out, and where he met the, to him, influential homosexual French author Laurent Tailhade. Eventually, Owen would take arms against the sea of troubles and would, in the manner of the early lyricists of the Great War, not altogether mind it at first. The reason for his swift change of heart as well as his sojourn in Craiglockhart Hospital, on the heels of his second anxious quandary, comprise the next step; there he would encounter several people, like fellow martial versifier Sassoon, who would, as critics frequently contend, guide the direction of his best poetry. In this respect, I will, moreover, look at what the experts reckon makes his war output uniquely potent in order to, finally, conclude where one might still fill in gaps in the accumulated knowledge.

II. Status Quaestionis: Wilfred Owen

By virtue of being the first, as I have said, full-length monograph on the subject of Wilfred Owen('s poetry), Welland's *Critical Study* (1960; first edition) functions as both the interpretive basis from which much criticism proceeds and, conversely, the standard repudiated in later, contrary scholarly work. Due to its comparatively closest chronological proximity to the poet's death in 1918, the seminal study enjoys subsequently unparalleled access to a wealth of first-hand information from Owen's family, friends and contemporaries. Although clearly marked by polite deference, the critic's propinquity to his contributors never incontrovertibly succumbs to bias (save for, arguably, matters

pertaining to allegations of homosexuality, cfr. *infra*), but does evince a strong reliance on biographical criticism to explain the poet's verse—a unifying thread running through the academic literature on the topic. This characteristic emphasis of Owen scholarship finds telling illustration in Welland's postscript supplement to the monograph's 1978 edition: "Owen's . . . literary aims and tastes are still, to a disappointing extent, matters of speculation" (1978: 153). As if heeding the call, Hibberd confidently proclaimed in *Owen the Poet* (1986; first edition) that, in the wake of "[t]he publication of almost all his verse and letters [in addition to] the release of his surviving books and papers", Owen's "work as a whole" could finally be examined, with the help of his biography where needed (1989: ix). Similarly, the (at the time of writing) most recent dedicated exposition on the poet's output excogitates the "communities" which formed Owen's "voice" (Kerr 1993: 1-4), thus also partaking in the trend that originated in the *Critical Study*.

In terms of lasting influence, Welland did more than just anticipate the nature of later inquiries into Owen's poetry. As befits "pioneering" research (Hibberd 1989: xi; Kerr 1993: 268), he, moreover, succeeds in establishing unambiguous readings as well as deducing definite composition dates for the poet's hitherto temporally contested manuscripts—merely four poems of his were published during his lifetime (Johnston 1964: 166)—rendering the exercise noteworthy. Speaking to their success, these decisions have largely endured up to the (2013) reprint of Stallworthy's now authoritative *Complete Poems and Fragments* (1983). Welland's foundational impact in this respect can representatively be exemplified by his settling on a learned interpretation, based on biographical, textual and poetic evidence, of the poet's oft-referenced, unpublished draft preface to the collection he had been putting together in the latter months of his life; the critic's choice for Blunden's comprehension of an important, disputed phrase therein as, "these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory", instead of its erstwhile rival formulation by Day Lewis (which had been gaining traction), "these elegies are not to this generation. This is in no sense consolatory" (qtd. in Welland 1978: 53), is upheld by subsequent criticism. That being stated, matters concerning textual accuracy and manuscript dating (though certainly a substantial subset of Owen scholarship) are, aside from amply showcasing Welland's abiding pertinence, ultimately less relevant in the present paper. Therefore, the focus will henceforth primarily lie on the exegetic side of the scholarly debate: along with discussions on Owen's poetics and aesthetics, the hypothesized aims of his work, rather than problems vis-à-vis its formal or sequential definiteness, will be reviewed. In keeping with the scholarly pattern, this will be conducted more or less chronologically.

II.I. Juvenilia: 1893-1915

Before turning to commentary regarding the highlighted preface to Owen's planned yet unfinished verse publication or the well-known war poems this volume would have contained, an examination

of the critical attitudes towards the relatively obscure pre-war juvenilia he began to write around his early teenage years appears to be pertinent. On one end of the scholarly spectrum, these are namely argued to anticipate his bellicose output, constituting the start of an “unbroken continuity” which eventually leads Owen thither, operating as “the foundation for his mature work” (Hibberd 1989: ix); as such, it should not be “impl[ied] that it was only the war that made him a poet” (Welland 1978: 14). On the other extreme end, we are even warned “not to see experience of combat as utterly decisive in the poetry” (Fenton 2003: 27), suggesting a nigh independent lyrical strength on the part of the poet, though the vast majority of critics at least believe, like Bäckman, in the ineludible, transformative poetic influence of the conflict (1979: 65). It is, at any rate, evident that the most assuredly “inferior” (Welland 1978: 33) juvenilia cannot be discounted, whatever the extent of the war's final effect might be surmised to be. Indeed, many of Owen's images as well as attitudes seem to have had their genesis in this period of his life, in spite of their provinciality (Bergonzi 1965: 121).

Hibberd takes this determination the furthest, soundly pinpointing an unfinished epic called “Perseus”, an adolescent project comprising manuscript fragments of ostensibly unrelated material purportedly showcasing the poet already “feeling his way towards a myth of his own life and identity, giving it shape in a pattern . . . strangely close to that of his war poetry” (1989: 43). This conjectured constellation of motifs in Owen's early work, reputedly echoed in parts in some of his renowned 1917-1918 verse, commences with the “hope for an ideally beautiful but human . . . lover”, who, when found, remains “sexually unawakened”, rendering the poet impotent or unwilling to kiss them awake. His desire is frustrated, causing it to grow until “Eros or Zeus descends in sunlight, fire or lightning”: “sexual fulfilment” and the formulation of “beauty-poetry” is now achievable in view of this “awakening”. Thereupon, “the poet sees a beautiful youth of ambiguous status . . . a spiritual symbol of physical sensation”, a divine creature made manifest in human trappings. The poet then “sacrifices to Eros” in hopes of finally being capable of loving his worldly beloved in all respects. Offering up either “friends, family, reputation [or] creed” to this end, hand contact (with the deity), a recurring image throughout all of Owen's work, finishes the ritual (Hibberd 1989: 50-1). Nevertheless, the new connection fails on account of a personal mistake, making the poet face abandonment by his lover as well as the god, which in turn engenders the sun's angry withdrawal. Thus deserted, he discovers himself in the underworld, corpse-like, “with sensations of paralysis [and] drowning” plaguing him ('Dulce et Decorum Est', 'Mental Cases'). Finally, the poet encounters the inhabitants of this Hell, who present him with his possible future ('Strange Meeting') (Hibberd 1989: 51). These are the major junctures of the skeletal structure underpinning the poet's work as envisioned by the critic, which, it bears repeating, “underli[e] . . . Owen's subsequent poems” (ibid. 52).

Characteristic of analyses on the topic, Hibberd's hermeneutic suppositions—linking the two major stages of his peacetime background, the “Dunsden torments” and “his explorations . . . in France” with his bellicose experiences (ibid. 53)—are, in addition to incorporating clues from Owen's letters and literary tastes, based on biographical information from the poet's life alongside, in some cases, even his reported dreams. A noteworthy aspect of the Perseus myth, although never literally adapted by the just outlined eponymous poem, but exceptionally resonant with (his) poetry in general, can, to wit, be first traced, the critic contends, to horrors in the stressful nightmares of Owen's adolescence at Dunsden (Hibberd 1989: 14). Phantasms within those supposedly prefigure the vital “Gorgon's Head” image, the deathly face of his wartime reveries that in the poet's output carries with it the connotation of “unspoken urges . . . guilt, fear and helplessness” (ibid. 18). Nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite painting and Romantic literature, which, according to Hibberd, Owen would have known, had lent a dangerous beauty to the hitherto terrible face, allowing for its transformation into a Decadent symbol “by which the male artist allows himself to be tortured and consumed” (1989: 52-53).

Besides this type of manifestation of the mythological motif in the poet's work, the original, darker version of a tremor-inducing, petrifying visage is also present (Hibberd 1989: 52-3). Owen himself was often reduced to bouts of sickly shaking during his time at as a lay assistant at Dunsden as a result of mental dissatisfaction, giving the Gorgon stare's effect an intimate inception as well as showing how the poet's personal experience feeds into his poetry (ibid. 53). More (albeit probably fallout thereof) happened at the Dunsden vicarage than spells of illness or night terrors, however; his “first crisis” there (ibid. 9) provoked the emergence of other principle drives of Owen's verse withal (ibid. 13). In the critical estimation of the period at least two major poetic developments in this respect are identified: the poet's assumption of the pleader's role together with his distancing from orthodox Christianity.

Growing up in a deeply religious home (Johnston 1964: 157), Owen was expected to one day take the cloth. An assistant position at a small-town religious post would, consequently, have seemed a fitting preparation for his inevitable calling (Hibberd 1989: 9). To his Evangelical mother's disappointment, as she had raised him in the faith (ibid. 5), the poet's environment did not suit him, prompting him to frequently complain about “the Wasted Hours” (Owen, qtd. in Hibberd 9). Whereas Welland, to a certain extent because of her instrumentality in preserving many of her son's manuscripts, deferentially designates Mrs. Owen as someone deeply concerned with his improvement (1978: 35), Hibberd describes her as “(s)mothering”, using her religion as a way of possessing him: a potential source for the pervasive suffocation image (1989: 7-8) already referenced in the aforementioned early Perseus fragments (Welland finds such judgments too harsh [1978: 155]). Furthermore, another element allegedly stemming from the poet's malaise with

Christianity, loneliness, also constitutes a “dominant motif” (Welland 1978: 37). Brought about by a “deep-seated [sexual] disorientation” (Owen's homosexuality will be treated in II.II.) rooted in a disconnect from the prevailing religious attitudes (Hibberd 1989: 20), in addition to being spurred on by the vicar's rebuke regarding the poet's affectionate relationship with the parish children (ibid. 21), this isolation finds poetic expression, for instance, in an iterated ghost metaphor ('The Kind Ghosts') linked to the solitude of the “frustrated lover” (Welland 1978: 40), or in godly ordained deprivation (cfr. 'Perseus'). While a “clandestine friendship” with the village youths (Hibberd 1989: 21-22), might to contemporary readers quite problematically intimate pedophilia, moral objections can be assuaged by Hibberd's declaration that such matters had more to do with a sensuous poet's chaste, Decadent appreciation of youthful beauty and suffering, nevertheless incompatible with Evangelicalism, rather than veritable carnal desire (1989: 22).

In the same way, Owen's lonesomeness should, to some degree, be read as a Romantic pose; poets, to him, were meant to “become alienated from society . . . the high price they had to pay for their refined sensibility” (Bäckman 1979: 25). His own “capacity for exquisite physical sensation”, too, including the bouts of illness as well as nightmares, made him feel attuned to that tradition (Bäckman 1979: 44; Hibberd 1989: 3). Indeed, he was positively enamored by the Romantic poets, like Keats, most of his juvenilia ergo being “sub-Keatsian confectionery” (Bergonzi 1965: 125); he went so far as to copy their lifestyle choices, in the manner of writing letters in imitation of Keats, and emulating Shelley habit of visiting the poor, because he had read about such endeavors in their biographies (Hibberd 1989: 6). The latter's influence has, moreover, often been unfairly downplayed according to Hibberd, in favor of an uneven fixation on Keats's importance (1989: 4). Fundamentally, the combination of Keatsian sentiments, along with, crucially, Shelleyan empathy, and actual first-hand observation of others' (encompassing children's) adversity as a lay assistant in Dunsden, alerted Owen's conscience (Bäckman 1979: 49), planting the seeds for the “pity and indignation” of his war poetry (Silkin 1998: 197). Although the poet accordingly deserves to be called “bookish” (Hibberd 1989: 1), he cannot be considered “an intellectual poet” (Welland 1978: 33). Captivated by a derivative, “emotional rather than philosophical Romanticism” (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson and Arnold he apparently knew only superficially), Owen was likewise drawn to the passionate poetry of Swinburne as well as Wilde, which espouses an “aestheticism that sees beauty as an end in itself” (ibid. 33-44).

The sultry, exotic nature of his Juvenilia, then, provides an extra context for the poet's separation from orthodox Christianity, aside from private incongruities. “The Christian life,” Owen wrote in the outline of a letter to the vicar containing grievances, “affords no imagination, physical sensation, aesthetic philosophy” (qtd. in Hibberd 1989: 12), elements he obviously required. A clear sign of the enduring significance attached to this ideology surfaces in a verse transcript the poet sent

to his cousin in 1917, in which he calls it “almost his gospel” (qtd. in Welland 1978: 44). Conversely, the for the poet's output vital “culture and language of Evangelical piety” (Kerr 1993: 68) never quite vanishes; he clings to, in addition to maintaining an array of Christian principles, biblical language and allusion (Hibberd 1998: 13). The majority of Owen's poems, lamentably, never entirely bridge this (to Welland) artificial gap between religion and aestheticism, diminishing their literary quality for lack of synthesis (1978: 43). In his view, Owen regularly subordinates one part of his personality when writing a lot of his work, producing poetry like 'Maundy Thursday', which closes with:

Young children came, with eager lips and glad.
(These kissed a silver doll, immensely bright.)
Then I, too, knelt before that acolyte.
Above the crucifix I bent my head:
The Christ was thin, and cold, and very dead:
And yet I bowed, yea, kissed—my lips did cling
(I kissed the warm live hand that held the thing.) (qtd. in *ibid.* 44)

Plainly preferred here is the sensuous, fleshly side of the equation. 'Strange Meeting' would come nearest to a meaningful merger (Welland 1978: 45). Upon leaving Dunsden in 1913, the poet, notwithstanding, spoke of “murder[ing] [his] false [Evangelical] creed” (qtd. in Silkin 1998: 198), and abandoned the vicarage.

Having uncovered themes for his future output, Owen, at this point, turned to the bolstering of his “aesthetic philosophy” by working out his own approach, an effort more handily achievable within the context of a domestic independence only sojourning overseas could guarantee (Hibberd 1989: 28). During holiday excursions to Brittany, Owen had gained an interest in French culture (Johnston 1964: 158), so when an opportunity arose to teach at the Berlitz language school in Bordeaux besides serving as a tutor to children of families based around the city, he eagerly moved to France (Hibberd 1989: 29). Enamored with the late-Romantic French Decadents, proponents of the aestheticism he espoused, the poet honed his craft as well as brushed up on his reading (“Flaubert has my vote for novel-writing!” [Owen, qtd. in Kerr 1993: 266]) during this Gallic period (*ibid.* 30). Especially pivotal was the close friendship Owen cultivated with fellow poet Laurent Tailhade, a man with whom he shared a “kinship”, as Tailhade had also seemed destined for priesthood before rejecting it (Silkin 1998: 198). Critics generally agree on the fact that the latter's writings “must have been read and remembered by Owen, whose later ideas about war follow the French poet's too closely to be a coincidence” (Johnston 1964: 158). Hibberd thus rather

erroneously suggests that Owen's indebtedness to Tailhade has for the most part avoided inquiry, but is right in claiming that when it is examined, the French poet's pacifism takes center stage (cfr. Johnston 1964: 158), which loses sight of some of his more violent convictions (Hibberd 1989: 36-7).

Indeed, the bloodshed Tailhade, a fervent duelist himself, railed against predominantly concerned the kind caused by "bourgeois philistinism" (Kerr 1993: 266), which inveigles young working class men into butchering each other. However, *an sich*, there is nothing wrong with death and destruction from a Decadent point of view; that is to say: "[q]u'important les victimes si le geste est beau?" (Tailhade, qtd. in Hibberd 1989: 30). Aesthetic attitudes namely connect suffering with delight (ibid. 32), which, as we have seen, resonated with Owen at the vicarage, the ramifications of his time in France hence serving to "confirm and consolidate the process which had begun at Dunsden" (White 1969: 26). Concordantly, the (carnal) deviance exhibited by the Decadent litterateurs, seeing themselves as a select few, reinforced the lyrical exclusiveness the poet fancied—"épater le bourgeois", regarded as an appropriate response to the societal moral decay, had become their design. Being away from a pious household had undeniably allowed for Owen's overdue sexual maturation (he accosted his mother in letters home for not being forthright hereof with him), yet his literary adoration of children remained characteristically pure (Hibberd 1989: 34-37). In 'The One Remains', a juvenile piece ascertained to inspired by meeting Henriette, the daughter of a friendly family (ibid. 34), the poet longs to find "all beauty, once for ever [sic], in one [pale] face", which is "lost as soon as seen" (emphasis added, qtd. in ibid. 35), again utilizing the typical Owen image of a desired, melancholy visage, and reaffirming his belletristic posturing as blameless.

Tailhade was less platonic in his fascination with strapping young lyricists, so he might have instructed Owen in more than verse-writing (ibid. 38), but he chiefly exerted an aesthetic ideological power over the prospective war poet, causing the latter's reaction to the outbreak of the conflict to be one quite unlike his later viewpoints: "the guns", though perpetrating the "deflowering of Europe" will, nevertheless, "effect a little useful weeding [sic]" (qtd. in Silkin 1998: 199). This perhaps to the highly impressionable Owen (Bäckman 1979: 38) unnatural attitude tapers off following a visit to soldiers at the Bordeaux hospital. There it was not Decadent, cultural judgments that moved the poet; instead, the moving human cost was laid bare. Revisiting a "didactic impulse" that had emerged in the course of his spell as a lay assistant, Owen writes to his brother Harold in detailed fashion on the injuries he observed, professedly to "educate him to the actualities of the war" (qtd. in Silkin 1998: 199). Another recurrent balancing act throughout the poet's output seemingly lies at the crux of this shift: although his "aesthetic idealism . . . never disappears completely", Owen's eventual "emphasis on direct experience as the true source of

poetry, and his propensity to empathize with his subjects” (Bäckman 1979: 36) required it to be retooled. Still, the above deflowering quote commences with the poet's declaration that he “feel[s] [his] own life all the more precious and more dear” because of it (qtd. in Silkin 1998: 199), which signals the enduring conception of the poet as a singular seer, a notion that would partially be responsible for Owen's enlistment, as well as his return to the front after being treated for shellshock (cfr. *infra*).

Videlicet, under war's duress, the naive lyricist would come to decry jejune (late-) Romanticism as:

. . . fooling over clouds,
Following gleams unsafe, untrue,
And tiring after beauty through star-crowds (qtd. in Bäckman 1979: 36),

all the while never quite expunging it wholly, for he primarily adjusted the themes of the “conventional decadence of the juvenilia . . . loneliness, love, and beauty” (Welland 1978: 47). The first of these, referring to the special condition of the litterateur, grew into participatory witnessing (Johnston 1964: 155), pleading with a sufficient amount of detachment so as not to stray into mawkish self-pity. The other two can be coalesced: beauty constitutes, to the poet, a different title for love (White 1969: 43); whereas before they were disheartening as well as elusive, they would become the 'Greater Love' among soldiers, and in their “fusion with pity [found and recorded] the tragic beauty of human suffering” (Welland 1978: 47). Cogently indicative of this transformation is Owen's use of pararhyme, a device “invented for musical effect in love lyrics” with which he saw Tailhade work, in both Bordeaux and the trenches (Hibberd 1989: 34). Clearly, scholars concur that drawing too rigid a distinction between the poet's pre- and post-bellicose Romantic production, solely reading a “bitter contrast” into the way they interact (like Johnston 1964: 207 does), amounts to simplification; he came equipped with an adequate apparatus to at least begin to confront unfamiliar challenges (Hibberd 1989: 55-6).

II.II. War Poetry: 1916-18

The assertion that Owen never “entertained . . . innocently heroic expectations” (Welland 1978: 48) equally paints his wartime ideas with broad brush strokes, no matter how understandable the misconception might appear in view of his later stature. As has been broached, biographical evidence (such is the scholarship) suggests that the poet if nothing else felt a tremor of excitement at the onset of the Great War; in fact, he seemed enamored by the thought of signing up for the Italian cavalry (Hibberd 1989: 58). The fragmentary draft of the 'Ballad of Peace and War', written

before seeing combat, mirrors this aspect poet's mindset in verse. Intended to be integrated into a portion of the 'Perseus' epic complete with a valiant battles against a German dragon, zeppelins as well as the evil Huns themselves, the poem, in addition to unabashedly subscribing to the fashionable Franco-British perspective on the conflict (ibid. 49), thus romanticizes war; in light of its postliminary cousin, 'Dulce et Decorum Est' (but not 'Greater Love' [cfr. III.III]), its lines appear especially peculiar:

Oh meet it is and passing sweet
To live at peace with others,
But sweeter still and far more meet
To die in war for brothers. (qtd. in ibid. 59)

Aside from flights of fancy tempting Owen, his pacifist mentor Tailhade came close to “shouldering a rifle” himself, and a more unsophisticated concern was the possibility of his favorite poetic language—his mother tongue—English, diminishing in prominence. Harold, his brother, namely held that Wilfred tended to react anxiously when something endangered his preoccupation with poetry. Likewise, Owen's self-important sense of lyrical duty practically mandated he enlist; otherwise, without suffering the realities of warfare first hand, he could not keep speaking upon them (Silkin 1998: 199-200). Remarkably unlike his contemporaries, Harold continues, the poet never showed “patriotic ardor”, nor did he see war as a “personal challenge” (qtd. in ibid. 200). For his part, Hibberd meets Harold halfway, alluding to indications in Owen's private letters that the British casualties in Gallipoli pushed him over the edge (1989: 58).

Ultimately, whatever single issue or combination of factors made Owen take up arms and join the Artists Rifles as an officer, the “fine heroic feeling” Owen initially perceived in France (Silkin 1998: 200) would rapidly dissipate. Writing from Beaumont Hamel to his mother in England, he stated plainly: “I can see no excuse for deceiving you . . . I have suffered seventh hell” (qtd. in Hibberd 1989: 72). Fighting for a stretch of land along a heavily contested area of the front line, the Poet's company had for days sustained heavy shelling in an inundated dug-out. Surrounded by the corpses of his men, he finally confronted the eyes from night terrors directly (ibid. 71). The “innately gentle artist” (Welland 1978: 48) now encountered “the universal pervasion of Ugliness”; bodies of dead soldiers revealing themselves to be “the most execrable sights on earth . . . in poetry we call them the most glorious”, a wrong he wished to right (Owen, qtd. in Hibberd 1989: 71-2). Similarly, on another occasion he came close to the to him familiar sensation of choking in the wake of a roof collapse, which would find expression in several (post-)Craiglockhart pieces, too. Before

long, Owen lost morale entirely, and so as “the strain of events had led to Owen's [first crisis], so his trench duty . . . ended in 'neurasthenia' or shellshock” (ibid. 71).

This aftermath of the poet's second crisis, scilicet, his convalescence at Craiglockhart hospital, is critically regarded as the period during and after which he began to write his celebrated poems. A great deal of Owen's changed attitudes to war turned up in his letters home immediately before that, but he then still lacked the Wordsworthian tranquility as well as the theoretical foundation necessary for protesting it (Silkin 1998: 202). First and foremost, the commonplace imagery of the poet's verses resembled shellshock to begin with, since “common symptoms which would have been familiar to him” included “a sense of suffocation or “terrifying dreams” (Hibberd 1989: 77); they first had to be worked through, especially since the neurasthenia would have worsened them (ibid. 77-8). In order for a lyricist, whose understanding of war stemmed from traumatic personal experiences, to transpose such horrors into poetry, his overextended receptive imagination had to be brought back under control. According to Dr. Arthur J. Brock, a distinguished psychiatrist at the hospital, ergotherapy (occupational therapy), could mend the severed connection between the individual and his habitat (ibid. 83-4), supposedly the root cause of shellshock. Outdated as some of the specialist's overarching convictions in this regard might prove, Owen's healing was altogether successful; he managed to face his mental pains to overcome them, filling him with a new “Greek feeling of energy and elemental life” (qtd. in Hibberd 1989: 86). Each course of treatment, then, was made to measure vis-à-vis a specific patient's desiderata, for the poet it thus centered on verse-writing. However, the kind he had been putting out did not live up to the standards espoused by the doctors, which prompted the poet to change course (ibid. 88).

The assertion that Owen's work does not come across as “traumatized by experience” owes something to his stalwart imagination, since, in furtherance of his poetry, he began to look his disturbing nightmares squarely in the eye without going mad (Silkin 1998: ix). At the behest of Dr. Brock, who averred the inadequacy of the Decadent art for art's sake philosophy, preferring “art . . . serve the community”, a dictum that found great resonance with Owen's pleading nature, as evinced by its thenceforth application: he started using his own wartime experiences to warn against conflict. Certainly employing them as editor of the hospital magazine, *Hydra* (Hibberd 1989: 88), the poet, moreover, sought out the cooperation as well as advice from a fellow, more established litterateur at Craiglockhart, Siegfried Sassoon. Estimations of the gravity of the latter's influence are the matter of some debate in the scholarship; some critics view him as playing a pivotal part in Owen's evolution, while others see him as a helpful yet mere waymarker on the path of his primarily independent development. A staunch proponent of this second line of thinking, Bergonzi, suggests a budding, self-sufficient maturity (1965: 127); correspondingly, Johnston refers to Owen's own words, “you have fixed my life . . . you did not light me: I was always a mad comet” (qtd in

Johnston 1964: 157) to emphasize the confidence Sassoon imbued him with, if not much else. Hibberd, designating their relationship as imbalanced, puts forth that the younger lyricist did benefit a lot from the friendship. Apart from reprimanding Owen for the lavishness of his juvenilia, driving him to a more realistic approach, Sassoon provided him with an intellectual foundation from which to proceed (1989: 103-105).

In combination with the “truth to experience” the poet had always possessed in his bellicose letters but before Craiglockhart had not been fit to translate into poetry, for the risk of it being too traumatic, the “reasoned opposition” preached by Sassoon forms the basis of his most successful war poems (ibid. 103). Initially, he, impressionable as he we have seen he could be, Owen composed pieces analogous to his mentor's output, such as 'Dulce et Decorum Est', a negativist (Johnston 1964: 155), philippically angry condemnation of the civilian propaganda urging young boys to die terrible deaths. Though before long, his natural and Romantic need to “plead for the inarticulate” transformed his resentment into pity, beseeching a “mature sense of responsibility” (Welland 1978: 57); this is, altogether, not an illogical next step, since exasperation at the sight of destruction implies an affiliation with what is being destroyed (Silkin 1998: 209). Countering Yeats's allegations of mawkish, “passive suffering” not being appropriate (qtd. in 1978: 61), Welland stresses that Owen's pity is always directed outward, attempting to elicit a response in dispassionate readers. Fiercely personal as the poet's poetry might appear, it constitutes a universalizing compassionate element in the same the battlefield photographs he purportedly carried do (1978: 80); despite the fact that this belief later proved false, the metaphor stands on its own (Hibberd 1989: 128). “All a poet can do today is warn”, Owen thus aptly states in the preface to the book of verses he hoped to publish (qtd. in Bergonzi 1965: 121). The claim, then, “not [to be] concerned with Poetry” with a capital P in the same draft (qtd. in ibid 124), should be understood as a rejection of what the poet believed the dominant contemporary strain of poetry to be, namely Decadent beauty-poetry, the kind Dr. Brock had decried at Craiglockhart.

The litterateur, as mentioned, had, by relating it to death, developed a more sophisticated conceptualization of beauty on the battlefield far deeper than “the conventional decadence of his juvenilia” (Welland 1978: 46):

A shrapnel ball -

Just where the wet skin glistened when he swam -

Like a fully-opened sea-anemone.

We both said 'What a beauty! What a beauty, lad'

I knew that in that flower he saw a hope

Of living on, and seeing again the roses of his home. (Owen, qtd. in ibid. 46-7)

What is more, suffering and dying alongside each other became a beautiful, bloody bond (Hibberd 1989: 159), prompting biographer scholars to associate these sentiments with Owen's own urges. In addition to Tailhade, Sassoon probably talked to the poet about homosexuality, and introduced him to a circle of acquaintances, including Uranian artists like Robert Ross as well as Osbert Sitwell (ibid. 117), strengthening the reading. In defiance of such attitudes, Welland puts forth, admitting all the same that out of deference to Owen's family (and the times), he had for the most part omitted discussion on the subject, that the supposedly homo-erotic character of the poet's production should not be exaggerated (1978: 165). He suggests that Owen's love for his men stems just as well from, in addition to his calling as a pleading poet, his duties as an officer. In fact, the responsibility he felt for his men, like the desire to write truthful poetry from experience, is the main reason for his return to the front following his recovery from shellshock (ibid. 63).

It should be noted that in doing so, Owen was actively sharing in the blame for the malevolence against which he was so vehemently railing. This did not escape the poet, who saw himself as a "conscientious objector with a very seared conscience" (qtd. in Welland 1978: 84) denying Christ's command of "passivity at any price" (qtd. in Johnston 1964: 160). Out of this struggle with himself emerged, to Silkin, his greatest poetry, as he struggled to reconcile that as a leader, he both crucified and gave voice to his men, "inarticulate" Christ-soldiers (1998: 210). Ultimately, Owen's "almost Messianic belief" in the power of poetry (Welland 1978: 94) won out, as in his estimation, the best manner to help the sufferers was to truthfully report on their experiences, in order to rouse the public so as to force them to act, and the only way to accomplish that, lay in accompanying them. Consequently, Silkin detects political aspirations in Owen's verses prefiguring the leftist, pacifist and anarchist movements that would be emboldened by poetry like Owen's (1998: 229). Conversely, Welland rebukes such ideas, proclaiming that his ambitions were never greater than the simple desire to bring an end to the destructive conflict "on humanitarian grounds" (1978: 169). Whatever Owen's (political) goals are conjectured to be, he would not see them come to fruition, for he tragically died but mere days before war's end.

II.III. Pensées

Critics agree that the poet never reached his full potential, and that, given his hasty yet impressive development, his eventual achievements were somewhat uneven (Bergonzi 1965: 124). Nevertheless, most experts credit him for his ability to, in the short span of a few years, reappraise various "accepted poetic values" within his own output, like the transformation of his initial beauty-poetry (Johnston 1964: 156). Owen, indeed, ostensibly recycled as well as reshaped his older images constantly (White 1969: 49), spurred on by his chronic book learning, encounters with new acquaintances, and fluctuating personal experiences, whether or not of a tragic nature. The

litterateur's sentiments might have been seeded in earlier struggles, too, in such a style that they handily can be said to foreshadow them. Of course, by this logic, these self-contained precepts would, evidently, seem to support the need for a meticulous inspection of all of the facets of the poet's life, ranging from a voice he purportedly acquired as a child due to his mother's belonging to the Temperance Society (Caesar 1993: 118; Kerr 1993: 87) to the gravity of inspiration supposedly wrought from once having chanced upon a winsome young man in the streets of London (Hibberd 1989: 54). Not only do I find this needlessly limiting on an interpretative level, it also precludes, barring the discovery of additional documents, the occasion for further research since, as I have endeavored to show, a great deal of, notwithstanding, praiseworthy work has already been conducted in this particular way.

Impressively thorough as the Owen form of it may be, biographism, at intervals, errs on the side of exaggerated reaching. To persistently regard or trace poems as reflections of the poet's private feelings or stated intentions risks turning overly reductive. Subscribing to Proust's dictum that artistic creation constitutes an instance of "self-enacted transformation" (Marcus), I hold that there is ever an element of becoming, a distinct "self create[d] in [one's] own writing" (ibid.), not just the author's actual self; taking that to its furthest extreme, one could maintain that person emerging at the end of a composition might not be the one who started it (ibid.). Suffice it to say, not all of the disparate aspects comprising the complexity of someone's psyche can be detected outwardly or neatly dissected. Neither should a litterateur's established aims be automatically accepted; from the poetry itself might arise an altogether different, unintended picture. At any rate, if one is looking for a specific character trait in the output of a writer, they are sure to find it withal. This certainly does not entail that I wish to discard the entire body of Owen scholarship. Many of the images critics have chronicled exist independently of their perceived biographical sources. The figure of the Gorgon's face, for example, serves as one I will return to, as does the problematic conceptualization of soldiers as Christs. So do pity and compassion occur, in addition, without the extra requirement of tracking them down to childhood dispositions, and can I safely say, as will be shown, that literary homo-eroticism does not demand a homosexual poet.

After a fashion, the character of Owen criticism could be said to be tailored to the genre in which he wrote, at least during his war poetry phase, for which he is mostly known. To grasp this, we must scan the inception of the generic classification. Roy, ascertaining its historical roots, proclaims that the denomination was coined "as late as the period of the First World War" (2010: 18). Before that, there does not appear to have existed, in the belletristic past, a theoretical grouping that considered the topic *sui generis*. As a consequence, this new arrangement initially just encompassed the output of the lyricists from that conflict; the prototypical application of common, contemporary notions like "soldier-poets and "soldier-poetry" for the species of versification is a

product of that reality (ibid. 19). Albeit a minority opinion, some critics, like Featherstone, declare that, in fact, the verses from that period constitute the only real form of martial poetry to boot (1995: 13). Similar in tone, but, by and large, more historically inclusive, the to van Wyk Smith false assertion that “only verse written by soldiers can count as war poetry” (1978: 2) should be placed alongside that presupposition. Building on that conviction yet universalizing it withal, Stallworthy, in general, strongly favors “battlefield poems” as the ultimate, most memorable manifestation of the genre, while, nevertheless, taking the arrangement to mean “any poem about any aspect of war” (2008: 178). Symons concurs, granting the incorporation of the perspicacity of all those afflicted by the horrors of conflict into the classification (qtd. in van Wyk Smith 1978: 2).

The next step of its evolution was, therefore, the anthologization of such compositions, which, harkening back to pre-Great War thought, sparked a neoteric kind of objection, exemplified here by Longley: “War poetry should not be half-delegated to specialist anthologies” (qtd. in Silkin 1998: vii). The issue with that line of thinking, according to Silkin, is that “war is qualitatively different from peace as an activity” (1998: vii); relegating martial verses to a broader scope of literature pretends “as though its supreme and supervening category were *poetry*”. Indeed, designating armed strife a genre constitutes, he contends, a less arbitrary exercise than calling a brand of versification ‘English’ (ibid.). By labeling it a distinct actuality vis-à-vis normal life, Silkin, moreover, seeks to defend the reading of bellicose pieces as dependent on the singular, personal experience of war (1998: viii). This explains exactly what engendered the aforementioned compulsion to carefully scrutinize every possible nook and cranny of a particular litterateur’s being. It follows logically that, if Owen’s wartime output is predicated upon his juvenilia, they first have to be examined; provided that his demeanor predates the conflict, it requires ascertainment. Silkin opposes this approach to the view that the text by itself must be “the principal touchstone”, one he laments having gained prominence (1998: ix). Nonetheless, a lot of recent scholarship has, on the whole, doubtless moved away from overwhelmingly biographical interpretations. Contemporaneously as well as analogously to that development, the war poetry grouping, in the main, enjoys a more entrenched form of scholarly support, too.

To the strand of criticism that has cogitated warfare to be a definite heading belong two seminal works. In Winn’s (2008) *Poetry of War*, to which I have already referred in the introduction to this paper, the genre receives its most encompassing treatment to date. Starting at the very outset of the literature molded by the subject, analyzing lyricists “from Homer to Bruce Springsteen” (2008: v), he compiles a comprehensive collection of the poetic *topoi*, themes, attitudes, devices, metaphors and images that have accompanied bellicose versification since its inception together with, backed up by myriad examples, offering up a detailed apprehension of how these gradually came about and evolved. Complementarily, he lays bare by what means they feed into the

philosophical mechanisms that helped forge the motivations for military struggle, revealing just how incongruous they come across in the real world, as well as to what degree they operate unlike actual martial conflict. McLoughlin's (2011) *Authoring War* expands the conceptualization of strictly pugnacious belles-lettres even further to include all shapes and sizes of creative production, reaffirming that a "shared set of challenges" makes war a worthy literary class of its own (2011: 12). She does, however, instead of engaging with notions like the heroic and anti-heroic traditions, more abstractly tackle generalized representational issues in a formalist light. For this reason, and because she, therefore, does not delineate between poetry and other textual styles, her monograph, though striking, will presently prove less useful (yet still practicable, to some extent); ergo, Winn's study will leadingly provide the groundwork for my inquiries.

Before turning to them, it would be remiss of me not to, for the sake of completion, also elucidatingly point out influential and, in my opinion, interesting new research featuring Owen that bucks the genre trend in terms of approach or vantage point. Hipp's interesting (2005) project, *The Poetry of Shell Shock: Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon*, for instance, which, admittedly biographically, picks up on the recommended remedy, in Owen's case, prescribed by Dr. Brock (cfr. supra): to deal with neuroses via the composition of verses, to examine the poet's output. Gender and sexuality, in line with the overall direction of intersectional academia, headline prominently as well; Meyer's in this regard pertinent (2009) *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* again employs diaries and letters to demonstrate its poetic theses. Postcolonial studies, furthermore, has a methodical foundation in the (2011) volume, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, edited by Das. Aside from furnishing alternative avenues for literary investigations, they serve to accentuate that their common denominators, the Great War and its bellicose litterateurs, are oftentimes still pondered *an sich* in their proper, complicated historical context. The contrast is usually drawn, if at all, with the preceding Georgian era (Johnston 1964: 8-9) or the Romantic period (Sherry 2005: 1). Of course, this does not pose an ontological problem *per se*, but it does signal the prospect of a fresh look that allows for the reexamination of the conflict's output and its lyricists in a larger diachronic as well as generic framework.

III. Methodology

Indeed, there has been, to my knowledge, until now, no critical analysis that has meticulously reviewed the nature of Wilfred Owen's place in the preponderant practices of war poetry; that is to say, in connection with genre criticism. The heroic tradition, as I have exhibited, finally met its Waterloo in Flanders fields. The why and wherefore given for the paradigmatic shift is, nonetheless, reductively ascribed to the abundant horrors in the trenches. Yet, as van Wyk Smith astutely

indicates, “all wars must seem equally cruel to the people involved in them” (1978: 3); an obvious question thus asserts itself: how come it is different this time around? With the help of Winn's neoteric theoretical insight, I aim to build on established scholarship and arrive at innovating conclusions. The critic, to be sure, cursorily examines Owen, but only as an instance of a greater progression. To add to his preparatory labor, entering all the while dialogue with auxiliary scholars and philosophers to deepen the argument, I will perform close-readings of (fragments of) Owen's bellicose verses (collected in the [2013] Jon Stallworthy edition), paying attention to the thematic as well as ideological tendencies outlined by Winn therein. These pieces will not be pored over chronologically for the simple reason that, although composition dates have been, after a fashion, determined (cfr. *supra*), there ultimately exists no way of ascertaining their veracity beyond a shadow of a doubt. As the poems I wish to discuss will be grouped topically, it would, at any rate, prove to be a moot exercise. The characteristics of the piece, 'Strange Meeting', then, where I hypothesize the denouement lies, will especially be contemplated thoroughly. As such, my research questions can be phrased as follows: how and why does Wilfred Owen's poetry change what came before—especially upon encountering the enemy in 'Strange Meeting'? Does his work purely constitute an anti-heroic critique, or is there also a tangible sense of continuity with regard to older war poetry?

The first part of the two-pronged investigation that will seek to critically answer these queries, 'The Old Lies', will primarily focus on the 'how' part of the equation. Positively epitomizing it, the eponymous notions of the heroic-chivalric phase Winn theorizes all, in some form or another, pervasively penetrate the whole of Owen's martial output. The thereout resultant poetic interactions and subversions will be highlighted, and their origins described in more exhaustive terms than the historic overview in the introductory chapter. The opening subsection, 'Sweet and Proper', delves into the animadverted pulling force of glory, honor, and shame when they are discerned to constitute stimuli for willingly dying as well as into the effects they are reconnoitered to have on the longevity of armed struggles. Next, 'Sins of the Fatherland' locates a lot of the heroic blame in the motherland, which functions, in Owen's verses, as a powerful scapegoat; its stereotyped inhabitants, both male and female, too, are held to account, often resulting in a biting denouncement in the compositions that borders on misogyny and misanthropy. Between the troops, avowedly the denizens of a separate nation abroad, however, there is an unparalleled deal of warm feeling, as the final subchapter, 'Miles Christi', will divulge, amid introducing a, for my theses, crucially important heroic trope to boot. Despite rendering some of Owen's other exasperations ironical, through the comradery of soldiers' infusion with the religious overtones of the Christ figure, as seen above, they might conceivably be redeemed.

Insofar as the 'how' of the matter by and large pertains to the moribund, passive aspects of the heroic tradition, potentially at the risk of verging on literary self-pity, the second part of my sweeping analysis is predominantly concerned with the ambiguities of being a bringer of death oneself, as fighters invariably are. To that end, 'Thy Enemy as Thyself' scrutinizes the destructive relationship between friend and foe in Owen's pieces. The inauguratory subsection of the chapter, 'Guilty Conscience', reappraises poems germane to remorse that are frequently underestimated in that respect. Four varying outlets, in which the cost of killing faces a reckoning, are identified in a series of verses and lined up in such a way that in each subsequent one the perceived degree of personal responsibility is escalated; a fifth one, incorporated by the composition, 'Strange Meeting', follows in the consecutive subchapter. 'Crucifixion' explores the consequences of a radical expansion of the heroic comrades in arms theme to include the enemy as well as what this ethically entails when he is thereupon murdered. In the same vein, the ensuing 'Strange Bedfellows', with the aid of an in-depth application of the subtle *topoi* of homo-eroticism, problematizes the act all the more, shaking the foundations of the erstwhile precepts of war poetry to the core. Finally, the inquiry will be rounded off in a concluding chapter that, along with giving rise to new probings, productively ties loose ends together while concurrently addressing some objections.

Ahead of commencing properly, I should, nonetheless, first rebut a criticism that is, at this point, by virtue of my research questions, easy to level. Any poetic evolution may, at first glance, namely be put down to the progression of the prevailing flow of literature. Even though it constitutes, as thoroughly argued, a distinct genre, First World War poetry could, in theory, be equally perceptible to the overall direction, like other styles of versification. Welland contends, conversely, that the ramifications of the Great War proved to be belletristically of nominal significance, the transformation of mainstream writing having more to do with the modern inroads made into our psychological understanding of human thinking (1978: 12). In like manner, Featherstone, who needlessly limits the definition of the genre, rightfully proclaims, howbeit, that

[t]he place of war writing in literary studies has always been problematic. Much of the material that is designated war poetry doesn't fit with the dominant version of early-twentieth-century literary history and its emphasis on the modernism of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and their successors. The major poets of the First World War seem peripheral to such a movement. . . (Featherstone 1995: 18)

I have had occasion to repeat this, but bellicose lyricism manifestly operates on a divergent frequency, one so engulfed by its monumental subject, warfare, that it becomes incongruous to

outside belletristic currents. How the litterateur Wilfred Owen innovatingly navigated these waters will hereafter gain in clarity.

IV. The Old Lies

War poetry, like the sort written by the celebrated seventeenth-century litterateur Lovelace or his aforementioned twentieth-century colleague, Asquith, in a bid to avoid the uncomfortable present, has often used archaic language to describe contemporary conflict, thereby effectively “effac[ing] the bloody truths of war” (Winn 2008: 104). Lovelace's persona, leaving his beloved to move on to greener pastures, writes in 'To Lucaste':

. . . a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field;
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield (qtd. in Winn 2008: 24)

By imagining soldiers as chivalric, storybook knights clad in medieval armor, which on a modern battlefield would have come across as farcical as well as been needlessly cumbersome, increasing the chance of the “mechanized slaughter” of already very real cannon claiming more victims (ibid. 22), the actual realities of battle were avoided. In his nowadays infamous criticism of Owen's poetry, Yeats basically accuses him of the same, overlooking the vast majority of the poet's wartime output or the context that engendered it. Unfairly considering him “unworthy of the poets' corner of a country newspaper” for designating lyricists “bards, a girl a maid” and remonstrating “Titanic wars” (qtd. in Bergonzi 1965: 125), he excluded him from the Oxford Book of Modern Verse during his stint as its editor. While it is doubtless the case that Owen's early, pre-war work fell victim to the heroic habit of using hackneyed images, the aforementioned 'Ballad of Peace and War' serving as an example in this respect (in it, he employs the Victorian word 'waif'), the poet typically subverts it with irony or decries it outright.

It bears repeating that for most of history, however, balladists, like the warriors whose exploits they beautified, embodied the “values and skills . . . of a world apart, a very ancient world, which exists in parallel with the everyday world but does not belong to it” (Keegan qtd. in Winn 2008: 2); in fact, it continuously lags a few steps behind. Bellicose verses have, moreover, in addition to articulating private reasons for heading into battle: “glory, honor, shame, comradeship”, classically aided the creation and preservation of the preponderant excuses that societies and cultures call upon as sufficient impetuses for warfare: “patriotism, religion, empire, chivalry, freedom” (ibid. 8). These, too, Owen principally undercut bitingly, all but deconstructing them

entirely (by no means just by himself, though he constituted an influential part of that process) so subsequent generations could no longer engage the poetic rigidities without sounding suspect. Be that as it may, they have not completely vanished; periodically, twenty-first-century politicians will still make use of them (ibid. 19), evincing their particular imaginative tenacity even to this day. Nor can it be said unequivocally that Owen simply resisted the outdated axioms: some notions the poet incorporated into his work, enriching them by applying them counterintuitively—most notably certain aspects of the religion and companionship motifs. What follows now is an examination the latter as well as other conflict rationales alongside Owen's responses to them. First and foremost, the applauded dying at the nation's behest will be unpacked. Secondly, the origins and potency of the related concepts of honor and shame will be investigated. From there on out, the homefront will be examined vis-à-vis the battlefield, until finally, a critical, scrutinous look at male bonding during war rounds out the chapter.

IV.I. Sweet and Proper

Despite ultimately not brightening our path, whistling in the dark, Freud teaches us, helps us assuage our fears (2013: 19). If this metaphor is applied ontologically, a lot of cultural activity in general, as contended by proponents of the terror management theory, can be said to serve to divert mankind's attention from its own mortality (Pyszczynski 1996 et al.). This holds particularly true for artistic expression dealing with death itself, for which self-deluding courage seems needed most; accordingly, it should come as no surprise that such inclinations could be construed to unconsciously underpin a lot of the (aforestated) characteristics of conflict writing, a genre in which the demise of loved ones or oneself (at any rate of the implied author) oftentimes conspicuously moves to the forefront (Winn 2008: 27). The urgency to exorcise timidity, then, goes a long way towards expounding the tendency in heroic war poetry to cognize the places where dead soldiers lie as rich(er) spots of soil, an effort to emphasize that their annihilation was worthwhile and that it constitutes some measure of immortality. Caringly lamenting the death of a young Boer War drummer in a foreign veldt, Thomas Hardy's poem hence comforts the reader by suggesting that though the loss is tragic,

. . . portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge for ever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow to some Southern tree. (Hardy 2014: 154)

In the same vein, later Great War poet Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier' imagines the British fighter's final resting place as a

. . . corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed. (Brooke 2014: 169)

Owen thwarts this conceit in his work; his casualties of war are far worse off than even the lowliest bacteria, utterly divorced from nature. The crippled veteran figure in 'A Terre', a husk of his former self, being only one part human "and three parts shell", cynically mocks the heroic notion that bellicose death entails a kind of special transcendence:

Dead men may envy living mites in cheese,
Or good germs even. Microbes have their joys,
And subdivide, and never come to death.
Certainly flowers have the easiest time on earth.
"I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,"
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:
The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.
"Pushing up daisies," is their creed, you know. (Owen 2013: 178)

On the contrary, generally nature punishes the destruction wrought by man (Silkin 1998: 83). Silkin rightfully rebukes Welland's view of the poet's handling of landscapes as if they were imbued with "life-giving significance" (1978: 65), asserting rather that they are unusually hostile. Surely, the uncompassionate "stark, blank sky" of 'Spring Offensive', accompanied by a field of flowers first leaving the soldiers "[e]xposed" (Owen 2013: 192), then, like, I would posit, vampiric, not "friendly" (Welland 1978: 82), chalices, opening their "soft sudden cups . . . in thousands for their blood", with the erstwhile indifferent sky all the while "burn[ing] in fury against them" (Owen 2013: 192), cannot be described as invigorative. At best, if the men are lucky, nature seems merely mercifully indifferent. Whereas the sun stirred the 'Futility' infantryman once "[a]t home, whispering of fields half-sown", "limbs, so dear-achieved . . . sides [f]ull-nerved, still warm" are abandoned in the trenches of France (Owen 2013: 158), but at least he had the fortune of having died sleeping.

Opposed to ones in previous earlier war poetry, Owen's fighters thus gain nothing in death, save for the sweet release of oblivion. The benefactors of their sacrifice in the poem 'Miners', in

which Owen compares likens casualties of war to underground laborers and their adversity to the extraction of coal (Kerr 1993: 127), are instead the civilians unaware or uncaring of their plight (Silkin 1998: 217), whose lives will continue for a long while as they spent their “comforted years”

. . . sit[ting] soft-chaired,
in rooms of amber;
The years will stretch their hands, well-cheered
By our life's ember
The centuries will burn rich loads
With which we groaned,
Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,
While songs are crooned;
But they will not dream of us poor lads,
Left in the ground. (Owen 135)

Therefore, it is them to whom the brunt of the ire in Owen's protest output is directed most angrily, opening up a rift between the men doing the fighting and the noncombatants reaping the fruits (cfr. *infra*). The missing element in Owen's poetry, an ideology by which both Hardy and Brooke could still disregardfully operate, features as the ending line to the poet's literary response to 'The Soldier'. 'An Imperial Elegy', correcting the dictum “one corner of a foreign field” with the magnified “a [roadlike] span as wide as Europe”, ridicules the final, consolatory voice with a pronouncement intended to sound ironic (Welland 1978: 65): “this is the Path of Glory” (Owen 2013: 446).

Strictly speaking, glory does lead one there, for the desire of acquiring it made people enlist. In granting warfare death a degree of honorability in his verses, the upper-class Brooke gave the common, proletarian soldier the ability to claim the chivalric nobility that would under normal circumstances have been denied to him. Brooke patronizingly yet to some extent accurately calls lower-class troopers destitute and impoverished, at any rate before having given their lives, but views their demise in war as opulently glorious and honorable on a national level; echoing Shakespeare's Henry V, he, like many of his fellow litterateurs, subscribed to the idea that “warfare . . . transform[s] the vile condition of the ordinary soldier, making him a gentleman” (Winn 2008: 15-16). Consequently, poetry does not just support this enticing perception of honor; it also advances violence on large scale when such notions are picked up by nations (*ibid.* 20). If we, moreover, bring that line of thinking to its logical conclusion, refusing to fight as well as settling for anything less than victory results in an act of dishonor. Illustrative of the bellicose principle that “the dead demand more deaths” is Owen's 'The Show' (Silkin 1998: 214), in which a top-down perspective

reveals the variedly uniformed soldiers to be unsettlingly close to maggots of different shades, “ramp[ing] on the rest and ate them and were eaten” (Owen 2013: 155). 'Smile, Smile, Smile', too, sardonically broaches the same topic, exposing how the unfair onus placed on the fighters often derives from external societal expectations:

Peace would do wrong to our undying dead,—
The sons we offered might regret they died
If we got nothing lasting in their stead. (ibid. 190)

Long before honor subsisted as a national pastime, it was a personal virtue akin to respect gained through combat; more specifically, through the prizes one brought back from it, in effect representatively showcasing one's martial skill. To honor, as such, meant the giving of gifts; to take them away, like what Agamemnon did to Achilles in the *Iliad* by taking away Chryseis, incurring his wrath, was a sign of shaming (Winn 2008: 40-41). The ancient Greeks, however, lived in a “shame culture”, they “care[d] deeply about what others [saw] them do and [said] about them” (ibid. 43). They did not feel compelled not to flee from a losing battle if they were not spotted in the act, for instance. Later Christian translators failed to pick up on the nuance, construing the struggles faced by the *Iliad*'s warrior in terms of Christian guilt culture, which emphasizes the avoidance of internal shortcomings, in addition to the virtue of a clean conscience (ibid. 44). Gradually, because of a want to see the epic heroes as Christian paragons, a task only feasible via slight mistranslation, since some barbaric values were deemed irreconcilable, the concept of shame was transferred from the individual soldier to increasingly larger groups, and eventually entire nations (ibid. 46). Ultimately, preventing this dark antithesis of honor would become a more urgent drive than increasing honor itself when converted into remorse: men would rather “die than die of embarrassment”; national humiliation in particular can be extremely patriotically distressing (ibid 46-48).

As almost certain death in battle is a reality they are (un)consciously motivated to avoid facing, heroic poetry aids fighters in whistling past the graveyard. Should they expire, myriad verses reassure them, in addition, that it will have meant something, even if it transpires during a botched attack, the kind celebrated in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade':

Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
Someone had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,

Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
.....
When can their glory fade?
.....

Honour the charge they made! (Tennyson 2014: 119)

In Owen's poetry, the chivalric axioms still credible to Tennyson, in this case, “the glory of obedient sacrifice” (Reed 2009: 138), will not do. A literary utterance by Horace epitomizing them, which many Victorian pupils had committed to memory (Winn 2008: 63), finds abject rejection in one of the poet's most famous pieces, fittingly boasting it as its title: 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. In the aftermath of observing a fellow infantryman perish appallingly, Owen's persona squarely notes, rebukingly refuting an imagined (although based in fact) poetic recruiter back home (Bäckman 1979: 89) whom he caustically labels “my friend”, that, had the latter witnessed the terrible sight himself, he or she

. . . would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. (Owen 2013: 140)

In other words, not only did the civilians benefit exclusively from the troops' unnecessary anguish, as we saw in 'Miners', they also blindly ordained it, spurred on by cultural, heroic assumptions utterly divorced from the real world. This maligned homefront, to which I will now turn, principally wears a paternal or feminine face in Owen's work.

IV.II. Sins of the Fatherland

The poet describes the conflicting pressures brought about by the concept of national duty as well as the power they exert in a composition called 'S. I. W.' (self-inflicted wound). He “pictures his soldier as a youth from the working class, subject to the stock beliefs and imperatives of his culture” (Winn 2008: 59) whose “[f]ather would sooner him dead than in disgrace, for “[d]eath sooner than dishonour, that's the style!” (Owen 2013: 160). The boy, pulled apart by, on the one hand, the Falstaffian (cfr. supra) compulsion to stay alive in a context where oblivion hides around every corner, the yearning to escape the war, and on the other hand, the societal pressure that kept him involved in it. Eventually settling on the latter, the tranquility of non-existence is achieved through

suicide. To safeguard his standing, all the while incidentally sparing his parents considerable embarrassment, his colleagues obfuscate the real cause of death by burying the gun that took his life with him, though need not lie as to how he went: “Tim died smiling” (ibid.). Parental complicity in this respect occurs several times throughout Owen's output, most famously in his reimagining of the biblical 'Parable of the Old Man and the Young. Identical to the original, God the Father halts Abraham before he can do the deed; the children of chivalric Europe are, nevertheless, granted no clemency from their biological fathers:

Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one. (ibid. 174)

Such poems dumbfounded the targeted generation, betraying how deeply chivalric notions had penetrated the culture. Henry Newbolt, as an example, mourned the poets' sufferings in any event, yet added that they arose from weakened nerves and were not heartfelt expressions of torment, since the remonstrating litterateurs supposedly lacked the maturity or insight required for that. After all, he uncomprehendingly put forth, “what Englishman of fifty wouldn't far rather stop the shot himself than see the boys do it for him?” (qtd. in Bergonzi 1965: 122). Beyond a shadow of a doubt, myriad older men would not have hesitated to fight in lieu of their brave scions if they had been capable, nor can one describe the loss of one's (or the nation's) children as anything less than a (personal) catastrophe; still and all, Bergonzi holds, governing Newbolt's comments is the implied as well as unquestioned hypothesis that the homefront blindly trusted, and the spokesmen of the soldiers overseas came progressively to renounce: the conflict had to be maintained, for peace was offensive to the fallen (1965: 123). Furthermore, many of the members of the heroically-minded generation that shared Newbolt's outlook, like Robert Graves, viewed war as an inescapable “epiphenomenon” of the human condition during which the bellicose actors are expected to submissively go out in a blaze of glory. To bemoan that fact was, to them, a useless, even counterproductive endeavor, considering war would continue to take place regardless (Goldensohn 2003: 73-74). Consequently, those who could not bear that epic burden, men who did not have the nerves, as Newbolt expressed it, were recurrently met with disdain.

Quite regrettably, the impaired living were indeed in many ways obviously held in lower esteem than the dead, above all those who could not stomach combat, as Owen parodies in 'The

Dead-Beat', a piece with an instructive title pertaining to a fighter who collapses during battle; howbeit, not due to visible, physical wounds, but from shellshock, an at that point in time widely misunderstood condition mocked in the poem as "his pluck's all gone" (Owen 2013: 144). Hard-hearted, shamefully indifferent father-figures (Kerr 1993: 35), pictured as "[b]old uncles", are "smiling ministerially", and the soldier's unfaithful "brave young wife" appears to have been "getting her fun [i]n some new home, improv[ing] materially" (Owen 2013: 144) while he languished at the front. Disregarding the trooper's breakdown biting as well as accusing him of abrogating out of cowardice, his superiors

sent him down at last, out of the way.

Unwounded;---stout lad, too, before that strafe.

Malingering? Stretcher-bearers winked, 'Not half!' (ibid.)

Subsequently, another personification of the heroic point of view (a physician, ironically) cynically welcomes his passing with jubilation:

Next day I heard the Doc's well-whiskied laugh:

'That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray!' (Owen ibid.)

The clear moral repugnancy hinted at by the doctor's alcoholism notwithstanding, perhaps he also feels a tinge of guilty regret, if Newbolt's purported sympathy is to be believed, the kind only strong liquor like whisky can flush down.

Aside from chivalric patriarchs representing the state, the second type of the detestable civilian in Owen's work has decidedly got the trappings of femininity, to which the negative connotations surrounding homefront wives in the previous composition have already attested. On the one hand, an assumed connection between women and mother country has the appearance of a fundamentally stereotypical yet oft-made, straightforward linguistic one; on the other hand, the dominant heroic ideology did explicitly ensconce women and mothers within a safe, homely setting, endowing them with the elementary task of begetting children or delivering compliant lovers to the war machine (Goldensohn 2003: 46). What is more, women historically did not frequently take on combat roles until the latter half of the twentieth century (not to diminish their significance in wartime as nurses, et cetera [McLoughlin 2011: 32]), which, as we will see, automatically excluded them from Owen's poetic expressions of pity, for that seems to have been his ultimate requirement (Goldensohn 2003: 48). Because he, to a certain extent, wrote in the Decadent tradition, the presence of the "femme fatale" motif (Hibberd 1989: 112), in addition to features of the Gorgon's

head image, an Owen favorite (cfr. supra), all the more so strengthens the misogynistic undertones ostensibly on hand. For these reasons, Hibberd is right to see ominous hints of danger lurking in the well-known elegiac piece, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'; "Music, beauty and love have [therein] become deadly mockeries of themselves", and the women figured, their faces in particular, constitute the force guiding the youths to their inevitable demise (1989: 112): "[t]he pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall" (Owen 2013: 99).

'Disabled' at first glance takes this distrust further, turning it into palpable antipathy, even apparently ascribing, on top of a prodigious amount of blame for male participation in the conflict, cruel insensitivity to members of the opposite sex. The speaker namely chronicles a maimed soldier in the evening, now confined to a wheelchair, imagining how in the past

[a]bout this time Town used to swing so gay
When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees,
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,—
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,
All of them touch him like some queer disease.
.....
Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come? (Owen 2013: 175)

Before the war, the youthful, virile subject had the love of women, who were, again, in his wide-eyed estimation, an influential part of the justification for why he enlisted. Naively thinking it, moreover, a simple extension of a regular sporting game, as many of his contemporaries did (Stallworthy 2014: xxviii), or, according to some critics, a test of manhood (Goldensohn 2003: 8), he came in unprepared and ended up losing his potency as a result, ergo tragically becoming undesirable:

One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
After the matches carried shoulder-high.
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
He thought he'd better join. He wonders why.

Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts.
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts,
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.
Germans he scarcely thought of, all their guilt,
And Austria's, did not move him. (Owen 2013: 175)

One could interpret the poem as a mere “bitter comment on the role of women in wartime” (Hibberd 1989: 113-114), yet other factors are arguably at play. Indeed, I would posit that the characters slightly come off as overstated caricatures. Similar to the beguiling lovers one would actually find on them, the 'girls' act like propagandic recruitment posters promising nobility (Goldensohn 2003: 30; Winn 2008: 127); the veteran's gullibility, too, almost becomes unsympathetic to the point of disesteem, were it not for the repeated, hauntingly desperate cry at the end (“Why don't they come?”), making us, in typically ingenious Owen fashion, pity as well as pardon him. The real, more serious, underlying culprit, I submit, should be identified as the heroic-chivalric tradition (of war poetry), a persuasive cultural energy that via the roles assigned to women can, as stated above, seduce impressionable young men. The poet's criticism therefore becomes less about issues regarding the gender itself, for matrons and spouses are essentially also acted upon, than about what they personify, like the aforementioned fathers in a sense standing in for the state.

Furthermore, both of Owen's civilian archetypes, the paternal progenitors, inveigling their offspring into going to war, and the nonmilitary women, tricking their sweethearts into fighting, may likewise be combined to form a strong, martial female symbol. To understand their synergy, we must briefly delve into the origins of the myth of chivalry, “which has always been a fraud, a system of polite and honorable ideals masking shameful and violent acts” (Winn 2008: 104). The original, medieval poetic simulacrum of the knight, entirely dissimilar to his murderous, real-life counterpart, finds courtly affection for women often more powerful than the fear of emasculating shame. Subsequently, “the next logical step” during the Renaissance, introduced belletristic female knights, even capable of beating their male analogues in battle, as objects of devotion. Since the military ability of these ladylike warriors allegorically symbolized chastity as well as the righteous strength of virtue, their victories served as “the defeat of [masculine] shame, revenge, greed, and violence by [feminine] politeness, civility, restraint” (ibid. 139). These metaphors continued to be developed in poetry until protective devotion to women (which includes avowedly honorable combat) and the implicit moral integrity that it, as such, entails established itself as a principle staple of chivalrous behavior, thereby making this abstract version of celibate, heterosexual adoration constitute a

“fundamental motive for military violence” (ibid. 143). By the same token, when the figure of the pugnacious, virginal woman is attached to the nation state, in a British context thus to Lady Britannia, that love becomes patriotic (ibid. 86); when associated with the goddess Libertas, it matures into the noble defense of freedom (ibid. 188). Hence, I resubmit that a substantial amount of the purportedly misogynistic imagery in Owen's verses hence issues forth from his repudiation of these ideologically embedded chivalric suppositions.

This perspective on Owen's work expressly allows for a more useful reading of 'The Kind Ghosts', a short piece that has traditionally not been examined as a bellicose poem, since the litterateur's resourcefulness supposedly “not [being] involved with its major subject, the war”, rendered it too Decadently sentimental (Bergonzi 1965: 125). Upon closer inspection, by now familiar themes begin to emerge withal:

She sleeps on soft, last breaths; but no ghost looms
Out of the stillness of her palace wall,
Her wall of boys on boys and dooms on dooms.

She dreams of golden gardens and sweet glooms,
Not marvelling why her roses never fall
Nor what red mouths were torn to make their blooms.

The shades keep down which well might roam her hall.
Quiet their blood lies in her crimson rooms
And she is not afraid of their footfall.

They move not from her tapestries, their pall,
Nor pace her terraces, their hecatombs,
Lest aught she be disturbed, or grieved at all. (Owen 2013: 181)

Clearly, the female figure represents a Britannia-like personification of the state in the same vein of John Dryden's estimation of London as a “Maiden Queen”, collecting tribute, “Incense . . . Gold”, from imperial “Suppliants”, who in return are to “receive her Doom” (qtd. in Winn 2008: 84). Britannia's petitioners in Owen's poem are not oppressed imperial subjects; instead, the ghosts epitomize her drained, dead countrymen who have gifted her their lives during wartime service ('pall' is utilized again), a bounty with which she has built as well as adorned her palace, yet which has not bettered them or even made them gain honor. She seems blissfully unaware of the

magnitude of their sacrifices, and the slain idiotically do not want to reverse that course out of fear of perhaps indecorously upsetting her. The one hopeful note in the poem, heralding the end of this deplorable tradition, is her approaching demise.

IV.III. Miles Christi

Having shown that Owen's problematic literary denouncements of women should not be attributed to mere misogyny, as they often are (cfr. Campbell 1997: 823), but at most be deemed concurrent products of his poetry's skepticism with regard to the heroic-chivalric attitudes, it, nevertheless, falls to me to point out that the poet did not demonstrate compassion for suffering, blameless widows either (Day Lewis, qtd. in Bergonzi 1965: 131). The judgments leveled at the opposite sex in the unfinished 'Beauty'-fragment, drawing a contrast between the two genders, provide an explanation as to why he refused to do so. The composition alleges that

[m]en seldom speak of beauty, beauty as such,
Not even lovers think about it much.
Women of course consider it for hours
In mirrors; (Owen 2013: 489)

Fighting far away from home, men lived in a different world altogether, the only one worthy of versification. Forasmuch as Owen's work assumed that divide, it trended towards the "idea of the army itself as . . . an alternative nation with its own different and superior sensibility, experience and language" (Kerr 1993: 265), apparently indebted to the poet's transformation of the Decadent idea of torturous beauty (cfr. supra), because as the poem continues

[a] shrapnel ball -
Just where the wet skin glistened when he swam -
Like a fully-opened sea-anemone.
We both said 'What a beauty! What a beauty, lad'
I knew that in that flower he saw a hope
Of living on, and seeing again the roses of his home. (Owen 2013: 489)

The appeal of superficial wounds understandably invites soldiers' adoration, as they hold the promise of an escape homeward. Unfortunately, like the flowers in 'Spring Offensive' it becomes malignant, claiming the infantryman's life before he will arrive:

But later on I heard
A canker worked into that crimson flower
And that he sank with it (ibid.)

Underlying the repudiation of “feminine values” exhibiting the “uncomprehending civilian ethos” (Bergonzi 1965: 130) in favor of the masculine comradeship of the trenches, which in Owen's poetry appears to have taken on national proportions, there lies a potent manifestation of an attitude that has its origins in heroic war poetry. Although, on the surface, male bonding under extreme duress might seem praiseworthy, its poetic history reveals darker uses. One example of a myth of love between two men that has had a long afterlife can be found in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Nisus and Euryalus, paragons of idealized military homosexuality who are part of Aeneas' army, attempt a nightly foray into enemy territory in a vainglorious attempt to collect spoils, the ancient form of honor. At the beginning, they are successful, yet when they try to leave the foe's encampment a glistening helm they stole betrays Euryalus' presence. Nisus, the older man, is too slow to keep them from killing his lover and, in a fit of sorrow, chooses to perish on top of him (Winn 2008: 164). Over time as well as after over manifold rewritings and translations, the myth lost its overtly sexual character so that even the Victorians, notoriously unsympathetic to homosexuality, could come to appreciate the sentimentality expressed in the epic (ibid. 168). As, besides their comradeship, the link to the founding of Rome, and their honor-seeking qualities were emphasized, though the sexuality of their love obfuscated, the scene of concurrent, brotherly death became a beautiful deed for the benefit of the empire (ibid.170).

As such, the inherently homo-erotic elements present in poems on male battlefield affection need not homosexual poets to include them. When Owen scholars thus endeavor to observe the poet's alleged sexual identity in his output, or infer from it that it must have been written by someone whose desires can probably best be positioned on the same-sex side of the spectrum, they not only overlook that these themes do not require gay artists, but also that they do not necessarily call for a conscious effort in (bellicose) literature (Woods 1989: 4). The main point here is made by Winn, who asserts that a “dark connection exists between violence and erotic desire” (Winn 2008: 2). As long as this relationship remains safe from forces that would see it used in their service, this does not become dangerous. In 'Greater Love', however, the speaker of Owen's piece suggests in quasi-Shakespearian terms that

[r]ed lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
Kindness of wooed and wooer

Seems shame to their love pure.

O Love, your eyes lose lure

When I behold eyes blinded in my stead! (Owen 2013: 166)

Deceased as well as injured soldiers are beautified when juxtaposed with the civilian beauty of women, problematically insinuating that peacetime loveliness pales in comparison with the grace of death in service of others in combat, and by extension essentially, albeit perchance unintentionally, implying that living one's life constitutes a lesser virtue than surrendering it to one's country, an idea which rankled Owen's poems outside of the current context:

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. (ibid.)

When contrasted with other verses describing fighting men dying, the most notable of which being 'Dulce et Decorum Est', a poem that, as we have seen, censures the chivalric lie as well as the people telling it, goading youths into perishing terribly while having

. . . at every jolt, the[ir] blood

Come gargling from the[ir] froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, (ibid. 140)

the praise of a different pathway, basically leading to the same end, seems highly ironic. As if anticipating this criticism, the composition 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo' (in defense of my poetry), explains the intimacy of martial relationships in more detail, perhaps so as to justify them:

I have made fellowships –

Untold of happy lovers in old song.

For love is not the binding of fair lips

With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips, -
But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong. (Owen 2013: 124)

“Untold” is the operative word here, as it invokes the “unspeakable” nature of homo-erotic pronouncements in literature (Woods 1989: 2). Coupled with the provisional character of wartime companionship, the alleged “reticence” (Winn 2008: 146) to announce the externally oft-unpopular truth of same-sex affections for fear of discovery thus engenders an intensification of said love: articulating it means employing creative metaphors while at the same time realizing that military fellowships are fraught with danger, rendering them all the more precious. In other words, the infrequent flashes of amiability men are granted during conflicts find memorable expression in poetry because they are by definition wicked, delicate, short-lived, and hence, a fortiori, worthwhile (Winn 2008: 147).

From this frame of reference, it is only a short logical leap to adoring friendly corpses, finding them more desirable still than the civilian simulacra indirectly held responsible for their deaths. Nonetheless, the otherwise objectionable connotations remain, and in a subsequent stanza of 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo' the beauty afforded to the dead soldiers even extends to the imperial myth that eventually overtook the sensuousness of male bonding as exemplified by Nisus and Euryalus:

I have perceived much beauty
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
Heard music in the silentness of duty;
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate. (Owen 2013: 124)

The rituals that are so comforting to the speaker betray their allegiance to the same ideology that shamed young men into picking up arms or promised them an artificial nobility in death; only now that they are coated in the language of companionship—they maintain 'our' courage—do these values acquire a noble grandeur beyond reproach in Owen's work, making his soldiers, leastwise in this context, ideal servants of the state; even if they did consider themselves, to a certain extent, as I have alluded to, a separate nation abroad (of their own).

The Bible passage explicitly conjured up by the title of the comparable piece, 'Greater Love', when studied in its entirety, states that “greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (*King James Version*, John 15:13), invoking the topos of Jesus' positive

propitiation often used for the fighting men in the Great War. On the one hand, the comparison worked because of their similar vulnerability (Winn 2008: 149), on the other hand, it can be regarded as serving as the only “spiritual and poetic truth” that could moderately “redeem” their universal hardship (Johnston 1964: 205). Owen makes the connection between the greater love practiced by those who die fighting and “the gentle Christ” in 'At a Calvary near the Ancre':

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.
The scribes on all the people shove
And bawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate. (Owen 2013: 134)

Making a distinction between the corrupted representatives of the Church and the Savior, the poem detaches the virtues of the Christ figure from the institution. The latter becomes suspect, as revealed by the recurrence of the 'Parable' vice, “pride”, effectively associating the “pulpit professionals” (Owen, qtd. in Welland 1978: 86) with the ideologies that initiated as well as keep the war going; indeed, the chivalric sense of obligation boasts an institutionally Christian component, too (Winn 2008: 133). In an unintended ironic gesture, however, lamenting the act of “bawl[ing] allegiance to the state” then reveals, in my opinion, the hypocrisy in praising the “hoarse oaths” from the previous piece. Correspondingly, the putative absence of hate rings hollow in light of the lethal actualities of a fighter's task.

At any rate, an elucidating poetic argument accumulates in Owen's output that pits the personal, sympathetic (Soldier-)Jesus against unfeeling officials (Bäckman 1979: 49), as in 'Le Christianisme':

So the church Christ was hit and buried
Under its rubbish and its rubble.
In cellars, packed-up saints long serried,
Well out of hearing of our trouble (Owen 2013: 126)

The last line unequivocally identifies soldiers as Christ in its use of “our trouble” and the close-packed religious agents of chivalry are unaware of their sufferings, their compounded crime lying in

their failure to live up to the “universal principle” of Christianity (Johnston 1964: 178). Like the old paternalistic men or the fatal, civilian women, all they are capable of is instigating violence, not stopping it. Another poem, also featuring that other Father figure, gives Christ an active role in bringing about exactly that:

I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;
And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;
And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts;
And rusted every bayonet with His tears.

And there were no more bombs, of ours or Theirs,
Not even an old flint-lock, not even a pikel.
But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;
And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs. (Owen 2013: 182)

Consequently, 'Soldier's Dream' again exposes the incongruity of the Christlike soldier, but this time while simultaneously supplying a feeble pretext; the martial Jaweh, emblematic of the omnipotent heroic state, namely overrides the wishes of Christ. If he could realize his dream, that is to say, if he had the power to act out against the state, and escape his conditioning, the fighter in the Great War would not kill. Yet, as the slain enemy in 'Strange Meeting' affirms (cfr. *infra*), bayonets kill, no matter the possible reluctance of the jab.

The aspects of Owen's bellicose output I have reviewed so far have, in point of fact, though not altogether surprisingly, not explicitly broached the subject of guilt. Principally, his work is, to wit, studied as a powerful, embellishing conceptualization of “soldiers as hapless sacrificial victims” (Goldensohn 2003: 18), for its main apprehension purportedly concerns the “slaughter, or maiming, apparently endless, of young men” (Hibberd 1989: 128). Throughout this chapter, I argued that the forces engendering the troops' ordeals, generally represented by their surrogates, harsh men and cold women, issue forth, part and parcel, from the precepts espoused by the heroic tradition of war poetry. Demonstrably baring as well as undercutting most, the poems, nevertheless, fall prey to one of those easily manipulable tendencies: the notion of fighting men constituting a cherished 'band of brothers' for which it is worth dying, and imbue it with the Christ-image. Solely ascribing negativity to the archaic cultural presuppositions of the civilian homefront on account of its (to return to an expression I previously employed) whistling in the dark (the second definition of which reads: “trying to show . . . that you know about something when you do not” [“Be whisteling”]) apropos of the realities of armed conflict, Owen's verses would thus ostensibly seem

not to impute the fighters at the battlefield. To be sure, many scholars, like Caesar, stress that he focused on victimhood, refusing to ever starkly acknowledge the violence that the soldiers themselves purposefully perpetrated (1993: 166); however, in the next part of my analysis, I aim to amend that standpoint. Along with providing new interpretative readings, I will endeavor to showcase Owen's innovative transformation of the comradeship trope with regard to the enemy, to contend that a reckoning of the cost of killing does take place in plenty of his pieces.

V. Thy Enemy as Thyself

In remarking that “a reliable guide to war poetry could be written in terms of changes in poetic attitudes to death” Welland is right, although he neglected to include the death of the enemy (1978: 21). The foe, as we have seen, does not feature prominently in the reasons for fighting in Owen's poetry: “Germans he scarcely thought of, all their guilt, [a]nd Austria's, did not move him” (Owen 2013: 175), the narrating voice in 'Disabled' exemplifyingly asserts. Despite the fact that propaganda posters as well as heroic verses (the poet's pre-combat output fell into slightly this trap) regularly demonized “the Hun” (Hibberd 1989: 49), the Central Powers customarily never emerged as the targets of blame in anti-heroic versification (Rowland 2014: 22). At any rate, in the view of Owen's compositions, those who stayed at home were more responsible for their own side's fighters getting killed (Bergonzi 1965: 18). Hatred for the battlefield adversaries operates on a less potent level than even self-hatred; indeed, 'all their guilt' pales in comparison to the remorse articulated by the friendly troops in the poet's work. The present chapter constitutes, as it centers around the analysis of the, in my opinion, five Owen approaches to writing guilt, and how they pertain to the undercutting of the heroic-chivalric phase of bellicose versification, a detailed exploration of the myriad forces driving that calculation.

The first avenue lays bare how certain physical effects weigh on the perpetrators. These consequences take the form of actual natural degeneration, for as conflict has the capacity to literally alter the landscape (McLoughlin 2011: 83) through indiosyncrasies like endless bombardment or, in the First World War, the digging of trenches, so, too, does immoral human action in Owen's verses. Subsequently, one of the purest of heroic literary archetypes will be tested for moral degeneracy when inserted into a modern pugnacious setting. Psychologically, the price of warfare, then, stands as a dear one, evinced by the bedeviled features of neurasthenic ex-combative soldiers atrophying in a hell partly of their own making. In avoidance of that bleak future, though it might still transpire regardless, fighting men often choose as well as are compelled to become stupefied. Following up this initial group of four is an in-depth look at 'Strange Meeting' and how it reconfigures existing martial relationships. In addition to and because of serving as the only in-

person appearance of the enemy throughout all of Owen's work, the poem will be shown to have important problematizing ramifications for the ascertainment of the old poetic customs; notably significant, in this respect, are the philosophy of Levinas concerning murder, literary occasions of homo-eroticism, and the motif of military male companionship.

V. I. Guilty Conscience

The Great War, it bears repeating, accommodated “[c]ountless representations of the infantryman as Christ laying down his life for his friends” (Stallworthy 2008: 63). Far from discouraging enlistment, this religiously reinforced, immanently chivalric belief, glorifying unflinching bellicose devotion to compatriots, persisted as arguably the most potent heroic impulse due to its being more intimate than cogitations like empire or freedom as well as a considerably more profound when compared to honor or shame (Winn 2008: 145). Although Owen's poetry hence, as elaborated, fell victim to a comparable literary yet emotionally more recognizable justification analogous in outcome to the act of gloriously sacrificing oneself for the state, which he condemned in pieces such as 'An Imperial Elegy'—rendering his brotherly compassion, to that extent that it appears to advocate it, dangerously persuasive (Silkin 1998: 236)—the poet radically calls its ethical implications into question at the same time. It would not have been difficult for Owen to totally exonerate his warriors: in a context where it comes down to either killing or being killed, an argument can be made in support of the combatant's inability to affect the result (Silkin 1998: 220), especially since the unacceptable alternative, passivity, would, it follows, amount to the fatal abandoning of one's friends. Giving one's life for an amical fellow human being is, moreover, morally easier to embellish and laud in verse than the breaking of Christ's fundamental mandate of nonviolence (Johnston 1964: 177), but enemy soldiers, too, shared a bond “[b]ound with the bandage of the arm that drips” (Owen 2013: 124) with one another; ergo, they were men similar to the English Christlike killers who had to, contrariwise, be sacrificed on the altar of the latter's victory.

Instead of ignoring this ambivalence, the poet endeavors, per contra, to problematize it in five ways, as stated above. An aforementioned composition like 'Spring Offensive', for openers, suggests primal human complicity in the criminal deterioration of nature, an evil precipitating the wrath of the landscape and the sky together with expediting the slaughter of those responsible. Bäckman reduces the poem to a rumination on militaristic mankind's severed Romantic relationship with nature (1979: 84), vistas of which are certainly there, yet I would aver that the characterization of the smattering of fighting men who were fortunate enough not to be obliterated during the spurt to the enemy position as

[t]he few who rushed in the body to enter hell,
And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames
With superhuman inhumanities,
Long-famous glories, immemorial shames (Owen 2013: 192)

lends ample evidence, particularly the juxtaposition of 'glories', highly maligned in Owen's output, and 'shames', to the idea that wrongs demanding punishment are transpiring. 'The Show', congruently describing fighters as anthropophagous maggots in "a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth, [g]ray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe", likewise signals that they are constituent of an unnatural cycle of degeneration. I have touched on Silkin's commentary of the poem already (cfr. supra) though would also supplement it by specifying that the decay is predicated upon the unscrupulous infraction perpetrated by the soldiers, for, as becomes fulsomely clear, "where they writhed and shrivelled, [they] killed" (ibid. 155).

A second variant on the culpability theme, which investigates the tainting moral price of warfare in a less abstract fashion, may be found in 'Arms and the Boy', a meditation on the corruptibility of the innocence of those engaged or contemplating partaking in martial behavior:

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

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads,
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.

There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls (Owen 2013: 154).

Having the armaments take on all of the destructive attributes might lead a cursory interpretation to come the problematic conclusion that the murderous onus as well as intention lies squarely with the weapon used to commit the bloodshed. Proceeding to the point of inquiring whether even this Decadent paragon of beauty could be debased constitutes in itself already a “statement of fear” withal (Johnston 1964: 190), since the rebuffed transformation is conjured up too forcefully to repudiate the probability (Silkin 1998: 231). One need neither turn into a satyr nor a demon to be capable of butchery, however; nor does so, for that matter, after it, so the speaker may just as well be attempting to placatingly delude himself in the main.

Setting this disposition in opposition to the well-known Victorian piece, 'Casabianca', by Hemans, highlights Owen's departure from the heroic tradition anew. In lieu of poring over the turpitude conflict foments in its innocent devotees, in this incident the (French Revolutionary War) Battle of the Nile (Turner 1992: 155) courage and obedience are predictably praised:

The boy stood on the burning deck,
Whence all but he had fled;
The flame that lit the battle's wreck,
Shone round him o'er the dead. (Hemans 1992: 154)

Wholly unlike the mutinous adults selfishly abandoning ship, the child awaits the order that will never come from his dead father: “say [i]f yet my task is done?”, all the while weathering his “still yet brave despair”, in the same vein of 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' but intensified by the youth's pulchritudinous qualities, which we apparently must extol:

Yet beautiful and bright he stood,
As born to rule the storm;
A creature of heroic blood,
A proud, though childlike form.
.....
With mast, and helm, and pennon fair,
That well had borne their part,

But the noblest thing which perished there,
Was that young faithful heart. (Hemans 1992: 154-155)

If casting a boy in this type of sacrificial role, the apotheosis of heroism, potentially heightens its beneficial meaning, then Owen's choice to inversely utilize one, assigning his head (potential) horns, underscores, I would affirm, the wickedness all the more.

Nonetheless, throughout the vast majority of the poet's work, guilt(iness) does come equipped with an actual, clear-cut terrifying face, usually as variation on the Gorgon's head motif (cfr. supra). In want of consideration, in this respect, are the powerful images from 'Mental Cases':

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain, — but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hand palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish? (Owen 2013: 169)

Concurrently to observing details of their countenances, prompting him to remark on their sad state in fearful, repellent thoroughness, a visitor to what is doubtless an asylum poses a series of questions pertaining to the plight of its petrifying, locked away patients, which, as Johnston rightfully holds, occurs in the rhetorical manner of Dante's persona (1964: 185). The orderly, ergo functioning in the character of underworld guide, formulates foreboding replies, indicating the source of their distress:

— These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.

Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication. (Owen 2013: 169)

The attendant's speech makes obvious that in place of finding "[i]n dead men, breath", as Graves does (qtd. in Winn 2008: 3), the survivors undergo psychological depletion. The shell-shocked recollections afflicting them, again undercutting the lie that a bellicose demise is beautiful or enriching, force them to relive abhorrent sights and eventually even manifest themselves physically:

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh
— Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
— Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness. (Owen 2013: 169)

It comes as no surprise that the haunting visage, an Owen favorite, the third element in the poet's output associated with noxious guilt, should be encountered as faces in the purgatory-like setting of a mental ward, implying the patients share a degree of blame for the murders they have witnessed (Silkin 1998: 227). They have seen, to be sure, yet also committed atrocities, unsettling violations for which they are doing penance. The poet's typical externalization to the homefront civilians

("who dealt them war"), moreover, does not absolve the fighters: the prisoners in the *Divina Comedia* circles of hell, to which the poetic backdrop owes a debt (Hibberd 1989: 169), have certainly sinned. Owing to the torturous horrors of their reduced state, contrasting their current circumstances to what they have lost, the veteran soldiers are, nevertheless, by no means beyond pity, nor is empathy kept back (ibid. 228), for they comprise Owen's primary subject, as demonstrated.

Fourthly, so as to avoid going mad like the poor souls interned in psychiatric hospitals, fighting men often resort to an entirely antithetical response to combat, one which Owen efficaciously describes in 'Insensibility'. Bäckman points out that, complementary to anti-heroic 'Dulce et Decorum Est', another one of Horace's phrases therein finds scornful, ironic application. In the piece, the traditional "beatus ille" formula" or "happy is the man", generally employed to convey an animated celebration of the quiet pastoral way of living (1979: 89), mutates the poem into the antipode to that sentiment:

Happy are men who yet before they are killed
Can let their veins run cold.
Whom no compassion fleers
Or makes their feet
Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers (Owen 2013: 145).

As the self-explanatory title betrays, the fighters are compelled to retreat into callousness, presumably in a bid to retain their sanity in face of friends' deaths as well as fend off the untenable hyper-vigilance of conflict effected by their own constantly endangered existence (McLoughlin 2011: 92). At any rate, too much contemplation would fatally hinder the precarious task at hand (Bäckman 1979: 90). As such, it is required that

. . . some cease feeling
Even themselves or for themselves.
Dullness best solves
The tease and doubt of shelling,
And Chance's strange arithmetic

Comes simpler than the reckoning of their shilling.

They keep no check on armies' decimation.

Happy are these who lose imagination:

They have enough to carry with ammunition.

Their spirit drags no pack.

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

Having seen all things red.

Their eyes are rid

Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever. (Owen 2013: 145)

If like Fussell claims, “recourse to the pastoral” in bellicose poetry constitutes one of the attempts of measuring warfare comprehensively without being adversely affected (1975: 235-6)—videlicet akin to whistling in the dark (cfr. *supra*), then Owen's rescindment of it necessarily lays war's woes bare. In view of the resultant unheroic, realistic despair, the urgency for a defense mechanism becomes intelligible. When personal accountability for the martial carnage is adjacently invoked, the want increases, numbing the offenders in such wise that the first person perspective exhaustingly dissipates:

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? (Owen 2013: 145)

Be that as it may, this does not serve as an extenuation on grounds of their no longer being their old selves, but as an identification with the outlined “happy men”; the next lines reveal that it is to his own chagrin the speaker fears having turned indifferent to conflict, thereby more or less joining the ranks of the chivalric progenitors, for example the parents of 'S. I. W.', who sent him to war:

Alive, he is not vital overmuch;

Dying, not mortal overmuch;

Nor sad, nor proud,

Nor curious at all.

He cannot tell

Old men's placidity from his. (Owen 2013: 145)

Especially important to note in this regard, I would argue, alongside the tacit admission and recognition, having acquired a blood-stained conscience by the repeated act of killing, that the resultant attitude matches the iniquity of the homefront in kind, is the hence greatest curtailment of the exteriorization of culpability vis-à-vis the other poems discussed in this chapter. The fifth and clearest independent instance of soldierly self-indictment, present in 'Strange Meeting', though, will subsequently be elucidated.

V. II. Crucifixion

The poems cited so far, when examined anew in the context of the larger cultural practice in conjunction with recurrent Owen themes, and sans resorting to befuddling biographism, thus go some way to disprove Goldensohn's simplistic assertion that, out of all his works, really only 'Strange Meeting' has any halfway meaningful comment on the moral consequences slaying the enemy (2003: 19). Rather than merely mourning the passive lot of the fighters from one's own army, the poet also canvasses the cost of killing on several (subtle) levels; ranging from the disarraying materialization in nature, through the recognition of the feasible corruptibility of innocence, to the extraneous revelation of internal turmoil as well as the lamented insensibility protectively erected against it, Owen's "perpetrator aesthetics" do not come over, I submit, as clumsy or as embryonic as Rowland deems them (2014: 26). In all fairness, reading his guilt-themed output in light of its positions inasmuch as those form discrepancies when set side by side to the ideologies of the heroic war poetry tradition, does bring, notwithstanding, out into the open that compositions not featuring the enemy in person distinctly center on the detrimental ramifications the fighting men's immoral actions have on themselves, both directly and indirectly. The poet did definitely make them his main concern, yet it would be false, as we will see, to reduce this observation to signifying that "Owen's inclusiveness", did not take in the soldiers on the other side" (Goldensohn 2003: 19).

Goldensohn, while underestimating its significance, does accurately reveal where Owen's most considerable accomplishment lies, in the darkness of an underground tunnel, a hellish place where the persona of the piece reconciles with the foe he himself killed the day before; 'Strange Meeting' namely productively extends the Great War addition to the, in many ways, questionable chivalric metaphor of the comrade in arms, scilicet the Christlike figure, to the people in the opposite trenches, allowing the poet, in combination with his own motifs, to problematize their deaths to such a degree that exposes the utter impudence of the heroic phase of bellicose versification. Goldensohn, all the while missing the larger conclusion, has a point when she says that later writers, Keith Douglas's 'Vergissmeinnicht' comes to her mind (cfr. *infra*), pay greater heed to the side of conflict writing that focuses on the opponent's loss in comparison to their forbears (2003: 19-20). I hold that it is precisely because of the preparatory labor of litterateurs such as Owen, that their emphases were able to shift. Of course, heroic authors did not shy away from reflecting on the death of the enemy either. They, however, softened the magnitude of the crime by imbuing it with what Goldensohn designates an "comfortably ironic, ruefully gentle equality" (*ibid.* 2003: 20), like Hardy's 'The Man He Killed':

"I shot him dead because —
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although
.....
"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown." (Hardy 2014: 155)

In order to earnestly bewail the demise of the other side, the lives of friendly soldiers first have to be charged with greater value. A continuous thread running through this paper has put forth exactly that: the reclamation of human existence from the estimation of it as useful, glorious currency in a so-called inevitable epiphenomenon of mankind. Barring dying for martial colleagues, in myriad respects equally injurious, the troops constitute Christ figures being, it follows, crucified by the whims of the armchair civilians representing the chivalric homefront as well as its by its

loyal products abroad. 'Inspection', with its imbrued “sacrificial overtones” (Welland 1978: 62), once again drives the argument home properly as it elevates decorum above suffering:

Some days 'confined to camp' he got,
For being 'dirty on parade'.
He told me, afterwards, the damnèd spot
Was blood, his own. 'Well, blood is dirt,' I said.

'Blood's dirt,' he laughed, looking away,
Far off to where his wound had bled
And almost merged for ever into clay.
'The world is washing out its stains,' he said.

'It doesn't like our cheeks so red:

Young blood's its great objection. (Owen 2013: 95)

In spite of the telltale signs, Owen critics have, oddly, for the most part neglected putting too much stock in the dead enemy in 'Strange Meeting' leastwise sharing multiple characteristics with, if not standing in for the Son of God as much as the English fighters in Owen's work do. Moreover, the blame for the death of the deceased foe encountered therein can, interestingly, this time not be externalized, but just be assigned to his actual murderer, ironically also a Christ, turning the latter into the maligned crucifying party.

Whereas Campbell (2003: 72) and Welland do pick up on an allusion to Jesus in the lifeless opponent's assertion that “[f]oreheads of men [that] have bled where no wounds were” (Owen qtd. in 1978: 67) without developing it further, and Kerr tentatively calls him a saint, “perhaps a Christ” (1993: 266), both of them exclusively grasp disparate inferences owing to the “biblical language” of the piece (Hibberd 1989: 176), not one overarching metaphor, although the parallels appear to be obvious. The verses, to wit, recall the “Harrowing of Hell”, during which a combative Christ, between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, sojourned in purgatory and preached to its inhabitants; Cavill and Ward, while recognizing that the composition echoes the episode in their monograph on the Christian Tradition in English Literature, do not delve into the poem with a lot of profundity either, nor do they assert the deceased foe embodies Jesus, only noting his visitor as the

latter (2007: 370). Behooving the poem's mirroring effect (cfr. *infra*) as well as the co-occurrence of the Christlike killer and the Christlike victim, this also holds true, yet the “strange friend” (Owen 2013: 148) he finds there is, importantly, likewise a Christ, haunting Hades, moralizingly addressing him, a sinner. Additionally, the inquisitive visual “prob[ing]” of the “encumbered sleepers” in the tunnel by the visitant, together with his pronouncement that “here is no cause to mourn” (*ibid.*), invokes a second biblical reference, strengthening the allegory supplementarily: the phrase “[w]hy seek ye the living among the dead?” uttered by well-dressed men to the frightened women upon their discovery of the empty tomb (*King James Version*, Luke 24:5).

On top of that, Owen's piece construes the raising of the undead infantryman's hands “as if to bless”, reminiscent of the pious clemency of the Beautitudes; conceivably, they are showing to a doubting Thomas the markings of stigmata, like the foreheads of Christ-Soldiers that “have bled where no wounds were” (Owen 2013: 148). In the same conciliatory vein as the washing he undertook in the past “from sweet wells” (*ibid.*) (cfr. the washing of feet in *King James Version*, John 13:1), the figure humbly does not retaliate, choosing instead to forgive his murderer, who might now himself have been killed, too, with whom he is still on amicable terms—they belong to the same brotherhood—movingly inviting him to rest alongside him at the end of the poem:

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . . (Owen 2013: 148)

On a macro level, the greater evil of war crucified him, as the poet's 'At a Calvary near the Ancre' proposes: “[o]ne ever hangs where shelled [cross]roads part. In this war He too lost a limb” (*ibid.* 134), but wars are never waged sans soldiers, one of which, following the biblical example of his Roman military ancestor, “pierced” (*King James Version*, John 19:34) the martial Son of God, who, as if hanging on the cross, was unable to stop him. Ergo, including the adversary in the Christ-themed 'Greater Love' continuum he espouses in his poetry, Owen deepens the immorality of the act of killing tremendously.

The extent of the moral dereliction inherent in the killing of the enemy increases when the most potent image in the poet's work, to which I have returned several times already, undergoes

consideration in conjunction with the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. The similarities in 'Strange Meeting' between the Gorgon's head image and the Other's face are definitely striking, for its terrifying yet scared, guilt-ridden stare (Hibberd 1989: 18) forcefully reveals, by the “piteous recognition in [its] fixed eyes“ (Owen 2013; 148), also the “absolute resistance of [the] defenseless eyes [with which] the Other manifests itself” (Levinas 1969: 294). Being the most articulate features of the Other's presence, they accuse the speaker of the poem as “murderous and usurpatory” (ibid.), which, of course, he has been. Initially, the Other seems understandably afraid upon meeting his destroyer again: “[w]ith a thousand fears that vision's face was grained”, until it becomes clear that “no blood reached there from the upper ground” (Owen 2013: 148), implying they were no longer in a warzone, thus, together with his religious forgiveness, enabling reconciliation. According to Silkin, the conflict rages on through words like “thumped”, “flues” or “jabbed” (1998: 238); Evans, for his part, objects to the battle being over in any capacity, reading the doubt from the poem's first line, “It seemed that out of battle I escaped”, as an indication of the meeting being combative (Owen, qtd. in 185). In lieu thereof, I subscribe to the notion that “seemed” communicates the dreamlike (Bergonzi 1965: 133) quality of the poem, or, at most, seeks to infer that war comparably is Hell(ish). If the encounter in 'Strange Meeting' were to constitute a mere symbolic battlefield clash, the speaker would still show traces of the cruel frown, which appears to have stimulated (Hibberd 1989: 176) the murder: “for so you frowned . . . as you killed” (Owen 2013: 148).

The uncanny concentration, showcasing the “inhumanity of war” (ibid. 177), with which the killer apparently committed the act, as he was able to ignore the Other's face “forbid[ding] us to kill” (Levinas 1995: 85-86) during it, intimates a high degree of moral degradation that is a far cry from the flimsy ethical externalization of a composition like 'Soldier's Dream' (cfr. supra). Ironically, a previous draft version of the piece included a comparable extenuating circumstance to 'Mental Cases', the “murderer's hand [being] pushed by an Emperor or King's” (Hibberd 1989: 171); the poem becomes richer in meaning without it. Moreover, the motif of the facial expression intertextually associates 'Strange Meeting' with Wilde's 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'; considering the follow lines renders this unmistakable:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,

The coward does it with a kiss,

The brave man with a sword! (qtd. in Hibberd 1989: 171)

Evidently, the visiting Christ-turned-slayer employed two weapons from that list, the inhuman look as well as an armament that tellingly approximates a chivalric sword, instead of operating a more modern alternative like bullets or grenades, a detail to which I will return. For now, what matters most is the envisaging of the martial victim as an object of desire, the natural extrapolation of the homo-erotic comradeship trope, which exposes another aggravating moral factor extant in the composition under examination.

V. III. Strange Bedfellows

However, even sans taking into account the unequivocal reference to Wilde, the theme of the lover asserts itself from the very start, as the poem opens with an Orpheus-like descent into the underworld (a compound of several mythological Hells, it intrinsically allows for different concurrent readings [Hibberd 1989: 166]): “It seemed that out of battle I escaped, *down* some profound dull tunnel” (emphasis added, Owen). There, a Levinasian face with a Gorgonite stare meets the visitor, who, in the same vein as Orpheus, having looked back, will not be able to escort his beloved back to the surface. Yet unlike the hero from myth, he chooses to linger. The enemy, incidentally, also embodies what Woods has designated the Orpheus motif. The critic affirms that in homo-erotic literature, same-sex affections often find lascivious articulation via the male body (1989: 1), which manifests itself poetically in a variety of ways. “[L]ooking at and making love to a person”, he explains, “may be deeds of dismemberment” (1989: 30), much like warfare sunders men (Winn 2008: 1), making the dispersed form of the masculine frame, Orpheus, particularly apt for bellicose versification. “The scattered fragments of the body of Orpheus [relocate] their erotic characteristics [to the environment]” (Woods 1989: 37), revealing why the “tunnel” entered in ‘Strange Meeting’ should be described with the ambiguous word “groined” (Owen 2013: 148). This originally visual ascertainment of the parts, the looking, then cardinally requires the pursuance of actual physical fulfillment, the love making (Woods 1989: 40): “[I]et us sleep now... “(Owen 2013: 148).

On top of that, the figure of Orpheus does not constitute the sole homo-erotic paragon in ‘Strange Meeting’; the murdered soldier owes something to the masochistic passivity of Saint Sebastian withal, who does not arrest his attackers, thereby being regularly pictured in paintings as riddled with projectiles (Woods 1989: 29). The cognate presence of a desired, symbolic Savior heightens the suggestive tension further, of course, for “[d]ivine love was always an alternative to

sexual love” (Young, qtd. in *ibid.* 42). Formally, the composition's inherent sensuousness, steeped in this type of imagery, is easily accommodated, too, since pararhyme was a staple of the technique first employed in (Owen's) attempts at a Decadent, erotic style of love poetry (Hibberd 1989: 90). Finally, “I *knew* you in this dark” (emphasis added, Owen 2013: 148), read in the biblical sense: “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived” (*King James Version*, Genesis 4), avouches that the lethal misdeed itself was carnally laden, as martial violence typically is (Woods 1989: 51), making the uninvited phallic insertion of the bayonet, I contend, tantamount to rape. Clearly, the piece operates on multifarious levels of meaning, with each subsequent layer exacerbating the magnitude of the crime carried out. Although the cold annihilation of an opponent might exculpatingly be put down to the cruel circumstances of war, the unflinching killing of a friend can only be called treacherous, the violating destruction of a swain exclusively depraved.

This does not entail that the victim escapes moral judgment, for both men are being punished in a Hell of their own making, commensurate to the agonized patients in 'Mental Cases', in an approximation of Dante's *Inferno*. On the battlefield, the slain enemy probably echoed the sentiments from 'Insensibility' or 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo', unthinkingly feeling the same exultations when he

. . . perceived much beauty
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
Heard music in the silentness of duty;
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate. (Owen 2013: 124)

By virtue of both remaining nameless (Christlike) soldiers, the two men in the piece are essentially “*Doppelgänger*” (Hibberd 1989: 177) sharing the same attitudes (“Whatever hope is yours, Was my life also” [Owen 2013: 148]). Being a bellicose poet, like his visitor, as becomes apparent from his depiction of what their similar aspirations were, the deceased foe maintains that

. . . when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war. (Owen 2013: 148)

Having lived through and died in war, the dead enemy realizes that coating the ugly deeds of conflict with chivalric language as well as heroic notions, previously thought to be incorruptible

axioms, has become a perverse activity unfit for war poetry, for which the quasi-heroic bayonet, the killer's weapon, counts as a stark reminder. In light of “the undone years” and “[t]he hopelessness”, he and others like him have wrought on cherished soldiers decidedly identical to themselves, (war) poets are called upon to “moc[k] the steady [heroic] running of the hour” (ibid.); otherwise nothing will change as

. . . men will go content with what we spoiled.

Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.

They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.

None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress. (ibid.)

What with the poet having perished, the piece itself seems formally decaying, the pararhyme's haunting cadence as well as the unfinished character of the last line accurately showcasing its collapse. Indeed, the overall sentiment of poetic impotence has prompted some scholars to look at the poem as a pronouncement on the “death of poetry” (Campbell 2003: 72), thus proposing that martial experiences are “incommunicable”, which would make Owen's work, to a certain extent, prefigure the incapability or problematality of literary Holocaust witness, a view that Rowland rightfully discredits (2014: 26). Rather, it is solely one generic impulse of versification that becomes unconvincing, the sort of compositions that used outdated terms like “chariot” or “citadels” (Owen 2013: 148) and idyllically beautified war's most unpalatable aspects. Another similar scholarly comment on the communicability of 'Strange Meeting' concerns the supposed disappearance of the constructive knowledge the foe has gained on account of his demise: “I mean the truth untold, [t]he pity of war, the pity war distilled” (ibid.), which rests on the assumption that the tragedy lies in the fact that the litterateurs capable of gaining newfound acumen, in death, possess no way of transmitting it (Welland 1978: 102). I would argue that the wisdom from the verses, in reality, abides alongside them; the poem itself ensures its content's enduring survival, the poet's death in it but constitutes its powerful vehicle.

The use of “truth untold”, with all its charged homo-erotic connotations intact (cfr. supra), confirms that the killing of a desired fellow soldier, or a beloved enemy, is among the most pitiable aspects of conflict that have to be disseminated. The occurrence of the *Doppelgänger* motif, however, adds an extra, potentially problematic carnal dimension. A symbol of self-absorption, Narcissus is amorously affected by his mirror-image (Woods 1989: 22); applying this logic to 'Strange Meeting', in which pity depends on there also being a homo-erotic connection of comradeship, this might reduce the piece to an episode of a self-pitying poetic persona mourning his own lot, as well as validate Yeats's criticism of Owen's output, as we have seen, because “passive

suffering”, according to him, “is no theme for poetry” (qtd. in Silkin 1998: 227). Woods explains, per contra, that Narcissus’ “passion for his own reflection can be employed as a symbolic portrayal of the love of one male for another (1989: 19)”. In this way, the composition is deepened by yet another layer of affection in addition to stemming from the murderer’s personal identification with his victim, evincing a new capacity for emphatic imagination. Nevertheless, the theme of the double is first and foremost suited for the “dichotomy” of being a single soldier constituting both Christ and killer (Welland 1978: 85). Oddly, Welland, in this regard, insists that the “imaginative force resides . . . in that it is not a friend or an enemy that the soldier meets so much as an *alter ego*” (1978: 100); I contend that it is precisely the self-identification and recognition of an exemplar of the adversary as amicably alike that produces the lasting richness.

In keeping with the other draft alteration to 'Strange Meeting' I have already mentioned, the ending lines used to be more explicitly national. Instead of the victim introducing himself as “the enemy”, he went by “German conscript” (Hibberd 1989: 177). Getting rid of its governmental particularity increased its applicability to include all fighters (Johnston 1964: 192), transforming the elegiac poem into a type of textual Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and, considering its impressive afterlife, confirming Sassoon’s prediction that it would be seen as Owen’s “passport to the ages” (Welland 1978: 99); Eliot, for example, is said to have valued it greatly (Bergonzi 1965: 132) (though, allegedly, was not influenced by it, cfr. *supra*). Furthermore, this again invalidates the fear that the dead speaker’s insight will be forgotten; whereas he had the “courage . . . mystery . . . wisdom [and] mastery” [t]o miss the march of this retreating world [i]nto vain citadels that are not walled” (Owen 2013: 148), profoundly resisting chivalric platitudes, but perished, the next generations of poets had the piece’s cultivated foresight to count on. Douglas’s 'Vergissmeinnicht', for instance, builds on its precepts, extending Owen’s protracted pity all the more. A soldier, musing in the aftermath of destroying a German foe, peruses the latter’s belongings to tragically find

. . . in the gunpit spoil
the dishonoured picture of his girl
 who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht.
 in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content,
abased, and seeming to have paid
and mocked at by his own equipment
that’s hard and good when he’s decayed. (Douglas 2014: 299)

As has been made abundantly clear in the course of this paper, the civilian homefront receives no quarter in Owen's output. Seen as purveyors of heroic ideology, its religious, female and paternal agents inveigle soldiers into expiring savagely as well as uselessly. Whatever thenceforth may be glorious about war finds, somewhat ironically, recuperation by membership to the comrades in arms, the "united brotherhood of sons displacing daughters, sisters, wives and mothers as people whom one should [chivalrously] die to defend" (Goldensohn 2003: 44). Yet this scaled down creed is, in like manner, undercut when it proves to be injurious to dead ringers for the compatriots on the opposite side of the trenches. Picking up where Owen left off, bringing the process full circle, Douglas's persona ruminates not only the damage done to one such as himself, but also its collateral effects. If the Great War poet can be said to violate the adored enemy, so does the Second World War litterateur metaphorically dishonor his loved ones back home. His sweetheart, after all,

. . . would weep to see today
how on his skin the swart flies move;
the dust upon the paper eye
and the burst stomach like a cave.

For here the lover and killer are mingled
who had one body and one heart.
And death who had the soldier singled
has done the lover mortal hurt. (Douglas 2014: 299)

Spurred on by, in addition to the death of the heroic tradition, the historically real danger the later conflict posed to the nationals back home (McLoughlin 2011: 43), civilian and soldier may anew become one united front. In the pioneering 'Strange Meeting', then, lover and killer are mingled, too; and the demise of the foe has equally done his murderer mortal hurt. They collapse, like Nisus and Euryalus—the death of one engendering the death of the other—reconciliatorily alongside similar pairs of "encumbered sleepers": "Let us sleep now . . ." (Owen 2013: 148).

VI. Conclusion

The off-hand comment with which Graves once candidly pricked the homosexual Sassoon, namely that to the latter, a battleground covered in fallen men was as horrifying as one covered in dead women would be to him, thus explaining the latter's exaggerated compassion (Stallworthy 2008: 67), can, after a fashion, be applied to Owen's anti-heroic attitude, too. This should not just be taken to mean that the poet was homosexual, though he probably was, but rather enlargedly call attention

to the utter impossibility, in light of a participatory blame for such sights, of continuing the archaic trend of describing it gloriously. Portraying these terrible actualities of warfare, Goldensohn argues, neither brings strife to a halt nor does it constitute veritably taking charge in attempting to stop armed conflict altogether, however (2003: 41). For his part, Stallworthy agrees in the short term: Great War litterateurs did not prevent the Second World War or those that have since transpired; in the long term, he holds, more optimistically, that they did, entering in the public consciousness through their poetry, help alter prevailing attitudes to where the advent of new wars is met with increasing scepticism (2013: xxxix). Goldensohn, nonetheless, has a point in warning against readily dismissing the sporadic resurgence of that “aberrant pathology” with the power numb strongly held peaceful objections, as something that has nowadays been wholly eradicated (2003: 38; 41). At the very least, one can safely say that it will not emerge on the heels of convincing heroic bellicose versification.

According to Caesar, writing this type of authentic disapproval is inherently paradoxical withal, for it depends upon endorsingly taking part (1993: 145). In the strict sense, this assertion does not hold water. While personal experience, or the appearance of it, has some bearing on the believability of a martial account (McLoughlin 2011: 42; Stallworthy 2008: 186), one need not be a soldier to compose verses, as per the modern definition of war poetry; even so, I do not wish to dispel the argument on the basis of semantics. Of course, Owen did operate as a fighter himself, but one might maintain, at the risk of lapsing into biographism, that that makes the recognition of guilt in 'Strange Meeting' all the more potent. Besides, the chief profundity of the piece, regardless of whether it comprises an actual, heartfelt testimonial or a poetic simulacrum, lies with the tacit admission of private wrongdoing, not with a railing against the perceived calamities of one's own lot, to which Owen's output in general seldom succumbs. A related issue, formulated by Campbell, concerns the communication of that acquired pugnacious knowledge, which he designates “combat Gnosticism”. Supposedly, to understand it, one must have lived it; ergo, excluding the homefront from comprehension (1999: 204). I would propose that from the more inclusive, generic point of view of war poetry, civilians during the Great War were axiomatically presumed to be steeped in the heroic cultural tradition, too, making them doubtless receptive to the language as well as anti-language Owen disseminated in his work. Speaking to his success is its enduring popularity to this day.

Literarily, given his role in the transformation of the genre, Owen's poetic tenets, as we have seen, also had an influential afterlife. Douglas's persona in 'Aristocrats' could, in a Falstaffian era, finally “recogniz[e] the folly and obsolescence of [chivalric] attitudes” (Winn 2008: 124) upon gazing at a tank imagined as a

. . . noble horse with courage in his eye,
clean in the bone, looks up at a shellburst:
away fly the images of the shires
but he puts the pipe back in his mouth.
Peter was unfortunately killed by an 88;
it took his leg away, he died in the ambulance.
I saw him crawling on the sand, he said
It's most unfair, they've shot my foot off.

How can I live among this gentle
obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?
Unicorns, almost,
for they are fading into two legends
in which their stupidity and chivalry
are celebrated. (qtd. in Winn 2008: 124)

The values that would have inveigled him into doing battle a few decennia earlier are now quaint reminders of a farcical age. The Don Quixotesque soldier, notwithstanding, does evoke, to a certain extent, the speaker's nostalgic sympathies, tellingly making him, for old times' sake, employ the archaic 'weeping'. As if assuring the reader of his modern sentiments, lest his empathy be misconstrued as advocacy, he juxtaposes 'chivalry' with 'stupidity'.

Not just Owen undermined the Hotspurian phase of bellicose versification. Far from being a coordinated a group effort, like-minded individuals, nevertheless, held similar views. One of these litterateurs, whom I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Sassoon, corresponds to Owen in myriad ways, including in the usage of the Christlike soldiers as well as comradeship tropes (Stallworthy 2008: 64). In 'Glory of Women', yet in an, I would say, extra belligerent, misogynistic tone vis-à-vis Owen, he ascribes equal or more measures of blame for perpetrating chivalry to civilian women (ibid. 64-65) than the latter does. Curiously, Sassoon even goes one step beyond Owen; inversely mirroring Douglas's 'Vergissmeinnicht' in both intent and sympathy, his persona condemns the British matron as well as the enemy's oblivious mother for the same crime (ibid.):

You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.

You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.
You can't believe that British troops "retire"
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.
O German Mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud (Sassoon, qtd. in Stallworthy 2008: 65-66)

Owing to the parallels and subtle differences, a contrastive study of Sassoon and Owen, against the intricate backdrop of the genre, would prove thought-provoking; additionally, so would a concentrated treatment of the former akin to the one given to the latter in the present paper.

Indeed, the modern conceptualization of war poetry still boasts myriad avenues for further research. Aside from Great War lyricists, the writers of later or earlier hostilities may be explored, perhaps in how far they either conform or subvert the established standards. The genre could, furthermore, be applied to postcolonial and feminist contexts, calling into question thematic constructions like 'comrades in arms' as well as ideological categories such as 'freedom' and 'empire'. Presumably, from a female vantage point, the civilian homefront will not acquire such negative connotations as it does in Owen's work. In the poet, however, the generic classification clearly also encountered an agent of change, one that would help shepherd conflict versification through its anti-heroic, paradigmatic shift. McLoughlin notes that armed struggles themselves are constantly adapting, too, all the while exercising pressure on both the trepidation with regard to the form of their heirs, and the retrospective understanding of their forebears, thereby comprising a "bellicose canon" that accommodates the erstwhile statement on the literary tradition, dictating that "the past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (Eliot, qtd. in McLoughlin 2011: 14). As has become evident throughout, the straggling, heroic martial verses have oftentimes followed a disparate path, for "poems on war engage not only the historical past but the poetic past, with consequences that are not merely literary" (Win 2008: 74); these ramifications were felt by Owen, who thereupon upped the belletristic tempo to a forced march.

It is sweet and proper, therefore, that 'Strange Meeting' should essentially be homologous to the original species of idealized combat in heroic war poetry, which was characterized by "monomachy, the clash between two warriors" (McLoughlin 2011: 78). Constituting a clear-cut occasion of a synecdoche, a representational technique used in bellicose writing to scale down the incomprehensible immensity that is warfare, the lethal encounter stands *pars pro toto* for the surrounding battle in its entirety (ibid.). Fittingly, stallworthy holds that "[s]o long as warrior met

warrior in equal combat with sword and lance, poets could celebrate their courage and chivalry” (2008: 1), which Winn teaches us amounts to oversimplification, since storybook knights never really existed, and chivalry as well as bravery lasted far longer; nevertheless, the allegory stands on its own merits. The two to one another enemy soldiers in the piece, to wit, scuffled with bayonets, modern mockeries of blades, much like Hotspurian conceits are in actuality counterfeit belletristic perversions. No honorable melee, moreover, took place, only “the noble art of murdering” (Thackeray, qtd. in van Wyk Smith 1978: 1). This darkly revisited antithesis of heroism, thus synecdochically depictive of the Great War in the main, or perchance so much as armed strife as a whole, incorporates an exhortatory monument committed to verse, akin to the Menin Gate in Ypres, by Sassoon declared to be a “sepulchre of crime”, the inceptive circumstances of which, we should, in like manner to Sassoon's poetic command, “rise [to] deride” (“On Passing”).

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