Oates ‘walked willingly to his death’; in ‘The Next War’, revised at Scarborough in July 1918, ‘we walked quite friendly up to Death’.

Owen had wanted to be a hero. The First World War had given him few opportunities; it had not even given him the Italian cavalry. As W. B. Yeats would later argue, this modern war had taken the heroism out of fighting. At Ripon, Owen had drafted a preface to his poems in which he argued that ‘This book is not about heroes’. But then that was only because ‘English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them’. There were heroes, and ‘Training’ is the poem of a man with a thirst for heroism, despite a hatred of war. At Craiglockhart, he had written,

I hate washy pacifists as temperamentally as I hate whiskied prussianists. Therefore I feel that I must first get some reputation of gallantry before I could successfully and usefully declare my principles.24

Owen was also responding to pressure from his father: his love–hate relationship with his father had now reached a point where he hated the fact that his father wanted him to fight, but was keen to win his father’s approval by fighting heroically. His father had been disappointed to have an ‘abnormal’ shell-shocked son at home; so Owen wrote, in June 1918, that he had been ‘Revolver Shooting’, and ‘it may be a final proof of my normality (for Father’s satisfaction) that I shot better than most’;25 and, in July, he referred to ‘my Father’s message on hearing I was G. S.: “gratified to know you are normal again”’.26 (The word ‘normal’ could be used as a synonym for heterosexual, so in Maurice, E. M. Forster’s novel about homosexuality, written in 1913–14, Clive says to Maurice, ‘I have become normal – like other men, I don’t know how, any more than I know how I was born’;27 and Sigmund Freud used the term ‘Normale’,28 although that isn’t what Tom Owen meant, of course.) In ‘The Parable of the Old Man and the Young’, written in July, Owen expresses the feeling that fathers, and especially his own, had decided to sacrifice their sons unnecessarily. The poem is more a reflection of Owen’s relationship with his father than a statement of

Owen’s attitude to the war. He uses the story of Abraham and Isaac, with Abraham being God-fearing Tom and Isaac as Wilfred – in the Bible, Isaac is the only son, but in the poem Owen makes it more autobiographical by calling Isaac ‘the first-born’:

Then Abram bound the Youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.

Owen’s poem may have been autobiographical, but the same anger was found elsewhere during the war. George Orwell noted that ‘by 1918 everyone under the age of forty was in a bad temper with his elders’.29 In 1918, Osbert Sitwell wrote ‘The Modern Abraham’ about Abraham, the patriot, who sends ten sons to the war as a sacrifice.30

Owen had become friends with Sitwell that spring. The Sitwells had a home in Scarborough, but Owen met Osbert Sitwell during a visit to London; on 20 May 1918 he announced that Osbert Sitwell, a friend of Ross’s, was invited by Ross round to Half Moon Street to meet him. Sitwell encountered a man ‘somewhat young for his age’;31 Owen encountered a young upper-class officer, born in 1892, son of a famously difficult father – a father Sitwell would later present to the world in his stylish volumes of autobiography. Osbert Sitwell’s portrait of Owen in Noble Essences is perhaps the best of the posthumous pen portraits of Owen by those who had known him. Sitwell’s book also pays loving tribute to the kindness of Ross. Not that everyone admired Sitwell or his writing: throughout his life he had his detractors, who considered him a pretentious charlatan using his wealth and connections to create a career for himself as an avant-garde gentleman of letters. For the book of the year that combined ‘the greatest pretension and the least talent’, Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis created a literary award called ‘the Osbert’. Larkin wrote, ‘I can’t remember at this date whether it ever went outside the family’.32 T. S. Eliot would refer to them as the Shirwells.33 The family included Osbert’s sister Edith, and there was also their brother Sacheverell, who, five years younger than