WILFRED OWEN AND THE SOLDIER POETS

By Paul Norgate

The front line withers,
But they are troops who fade, not flowers,
For poets' tearful fooling.1

During 1917–18, in the brief year of convalescence that also produced all his major poems, Wilfred Owen read perhaps more extensively and purposefully than he had ever done before. His letters of the period are full of references to writers and writings on war and war-related topics; he made lists of the books he had read.2 He also took full advantage of the entry into wider literary circles that resulted from his new friendships with Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves. Throughout this time Owen was testing and sharpening the expression of his own response to war, his poetry shaping itself in contrast to the pervading popular sentiment.

That popular sentiment readily found expression in verse in the years 1914–18. The Times noted that: 'In a time of stress like this, poetry's ancient claim to be the great consoler, the great lifegiver, justifies itself. And any poetry which has something to say, and says it truly and finely, is more read now than it has been for a long time.'3 'Thousands', commented the Poetry Review (of which Owen was a regular reader) '... have changed their attitude towards poetry and been impelled by the war to seek expression in verse.'4 Newspapers, magazines, and periodicals were correspondingly full of 'war verses'—at first mostly by civilians, and many of them, showing scant regard for The Times's strictures concerning truth and fineness. Numerous collections and anthologies of verse were made and sold during the war years: some were aimed at raising funds for patriotic and charitable causes; some, recruitment; some, memorials to the fallen; some, morale. Few raised any question about the essential

1 Wilfred Owen, 'Insensibility', in The Complete Poems and Fragments, ed. J. Stallworthy (1983) (hereafter CPF), no. 147. (As CPF contains variant MSS readings, I cite Stallworthy's poem numbers, as well as relevant pagination.)
4 PR 8 (July–Aug. 1917), 245. There are several references to PR in Owen's letters—see CL, pp. 442, 453, 466—and an early edn. survives in Owen's library, which is now housed in the English Faculty Library, Oxford.
'rightness' of the war, or doubted the wisdom of its continued prosecution.

As the war dragged into its third year, however, it was poetry written by serving soldiers which increasingly began to attract attention: the work not just of such established, heroic figures as Rupert Brooke and Charles Sorley (who in any case wrote little or nothing directly from the front line), but from a wider cross-section of the men actually fighting in Flanders. Galloway Kyle, who had taken over the editorship of the Poetry Review at the beginning of 1916, clearly sensed the shift of popular interest, and forwarded immediately the Review's intention 'to make a more definite and regular feature of contributions from men on active service'. Drawing from this 'greatly appreciated feature' and elsewhere, Kyle went on to produce two successful anthologies which he himself then published under the pseudonym of 'Erskine Macdonald'. Songs of the Fighting Men by 'The Soldier Poets' (Kyle neatly inverting the 'poet-soldier' nomenclature employed previously in the Review) went twice into reprint within three months of its publication in September 1916, and More Songs by the Fighting Men followed in the next year. Both volumes received rousing and emphatic popular acclaim: 'a wonderful volume', enthused the Daily Chronicle, of Songs of the Fighting Men; and 'a little volume to treasure ... contains poems that will become classics', asserted the Daily Mail.

Clearly, in producing these anthologies Galloway Kyle touched adroitly on a nerve-ending of public feeling. With perhaps an occasional gesture at the undesirability of War in the abstract, the verses of the Soldier Poets everywhere endorse an unquestioning acceptance of the necessity for continued prosecution of this war and of all the sacrifices entailed—including the grim conditions of the Western Front. Individual poems articulate this with varying degrees of success, some of the best managing a simple directness that requires our respect even as it intensifies the bitter ironies of hindsight, but the worst at a level which makes it difficult to see how anyone could ever have taken them seriously:

5 Owen was certainly interested in Brooke (in his library is a copy of 1914 and Other Poems, containing a press cutting about Brooke's grave), and would have seen work by both writers—if only what had appeared posthumously in PR during 1915–16. However, apart from one clear allusion to Brooke in his fragment 'An Imperial Elegy' (CPF, no. 69)—'Not one corner of a foreign field! But a span as wide as Europe'—Owen's writing shows no obvious debt to either of these.

6 PR 7 (Jan.–Feb. 1916), 37.


8 Quoted in Kyle's Introduction to the reprinted editions of Songs.
Not till thousands have been slain
Shall the green wood be green again,
Not till men shall fall and bleed
Can brown ale taste like ale indeed.

(Lt. G. Howard, 'Without Shedding of Blood')

Throughout the two volumes of Songs and More Songs the verses of the Soldier Poets complement each other to articulate a ‘voice’ which is remarkably consistent. The burden of it is an essentially self-renewing refrain which may be summarized briefly (though not unfairly) along these lines: ‘If I should die, you will know that I have sacrificed my Youth in the fight for Liberty and Right. I recall the beauties of England and I know that our struggle is part of God’s plan. Our spirit and our memory will be sweet comfort to our mothers, wives and sisters, and glorious’ inspiration to our brothers.’ That this proposition—or series of propositions—is not to be found in its entirety in each individual poem further illustrates just how well-rehearsed and self-referential was the sentiment: any part may be taken to represent the whole, and key ‘motifs’—Courage, England, Home, God, Victory, Mother, etc.—need only be deployed, not explored or explained. The circle of meaning may be entered at any point, since the centre is constant: an assertion of the significance of the part played in the war by every individual soldier. Significant action guarantees a meaningful death which inspires others to significant action.

A persistent—almost wilful—idealization is at work here: the questions being raised by the mechanized mass-slaughter in the trenches are simply not admitted to the Songs of the Soldier Poets. The ‘moment’ of the appearance of anthologies such as these, in the aftermath of the Somme, is surely significant. There is a striking congruence of sentiment in the poems themselves and in their audience (expressed through sales as well as in popular-press reviews), which suggests that this sort of verse was not merely approved of but actively sought, desired. In a time of bitter uncertainties the voice of

\[9\] Songs, p. 45.

\[10\] Conscious allusion to Brooke is characteristic of Songs and More Songs: e.g. ‘If I should fall, grieve not . . .' (S. D. Cox, 'To My Mother', Songs, p. 22); ‘If I should die while I am yet in France . . .' (Lt. C. Carstairs, 'Death in France', More Songs, p. 19). One of the Soldier Poets, Cpl. J. W. Streets, epitomized the general sentiment in a letter to PR enclosing some of his work: ‘We try to convey something [in our poems] of what we feel in this great conflict, to those who think of us and sometimes, alas! mourn our loss. We desire to let them know that in the midst of our keenest sadness for the joy of life we leave behind, we go to meet death grim-lipped, clear-eyed and resolute hearted.’ (Quoted in PR 7 (July–Aug. 1916), 243. Streets himself was mortally wounded on the Somme on 1 July 1916.)
the Soldier Poets, speaking from the front itself, sanctioned the continuation of the war.

However, if Galloway Kyle’s anthologies of Soldier Poetry represent ‘war poetry’ as it was generally accepted and understood in 1916–17, it is hardly surprising that Wilfred Owen did not at first see in such poetry any means of approach to his own war experience. In a letter home from the front he had described ‘everything unnatural, broken, blasted . . . the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious.’ That ‘we’ records Owen’s continuing literary aspirations, but the acutely felt disparity between the actuality of war and what passed for the poetry of war helps account for the indeterminate nature of his own writing during the first half of 1917. It was the shock of a different literary encounter, later that summer, with Siegfried Sassoon, and the caustic satire of his ‘trench life sketches’, which provided the turning-point for Owen, releasing into his own writing energies which were not only creative but also critical. During the twelve months’ convalescence that led to his eventual decision to return to France, Owen’s developing notions of his own poetic role were distilled as much from his perception of how others thought and wrote about the war as from his own first-hand experiences.

A copy of *More Songs* survives in Owen’s library; this was inscribed and presented to him by a contributing Soldier Poet, 2nd Lt. Murray McClymont, whom Owen met at base camp in France, early in September 1918. However, Owen must have already read several of the poems anthologized in *Songs* and *More Songs* when they had first appeared in the *Poetry Review* during 1916–17. References in his letters do not indicate a very high opinion of either McClymont’s poems or the Soldier Poets as a whole; he refers to them as ‘these amalgamations’, and the implication is that Owen has for some time shared with Sassoon a dismissive familiarity with their writings. This is a familiarity which is also inscribed in Owen’s own poetry.

It is of course almost a critical commonplace that Wilfred Owen’s poetry is full of echoes—he was, as he described himself, ‘a poet’s poet’.

Innumerable allusions bear witness to his wide reading in the Romantic/Victorian tradition, and the influence of Georgian contemporaries is also evident—Monro, Gibson, and Graves, as well as
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(Obviously and pre-eminently) Sassoon. Similar uses and transformations have been observed of material from classical literature and from the Bible. In Owen’s war poetry, reference and allusion has almost always an ironizing function. The primary thrust of this irony is generally in one of two directions—towards the situation of war itself, or towards the source of the allusion. In the first, more frequently recognized, usage, Owen’s source material is employed as it were approvingly, unequivocally: adding depth and resonance as a means of exposing the horror or futility of present circumstances. Of this kind are, for instance, the allusions to Dante in ‘Mental Cases’ or to Shelley in ‘Strange Meeting’.

On the other hand, the allusion itself may be deployed ironically by Owen, in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of his ‘original’ as a source of understanding, of reassurance, or of values by which to interpret the war; in such cases the allusion itself becomes in effect a ‘subject’ of the poem. Irony of this kind is most typically directed by Owen at contemporary targets—at the failure of organized religion, for instance, as in ‘Parable of the Old Man and the Young’; at the pronouncements of wartime statesmen, as in ‘Smile, Smile, Smile’; or at such writings as those of the Soldier Poets.

In the drafting of one of his earliest war poems, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ (completed in October 1917), Owen had at one stage identified a specific contemporary target, subtitling the poem ‘To a Certain Poetess’. This was Miss Jessie Pope, whose jingoistic doggerel appeared frequently in newspapers and magazines; ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ is in fact generally read as an attack upon the ignorant belligerence of civilian non-combatants. In the process of rapid revision and redrafting, however, this ‘dedication’ was abandoned: in its bitter excoriation of ‘the old lie’, the energy of Owen’s poem encompasses more than a single ‘liar’, just as its barbed reference to the Horatian motto signals the rejection of something more immediate than a merely traditional philosophy of battle.

For, prior to Owen, more than one piece of Soldier Poetry retailed this same Latin tag entirely unironically, as a text of current relevance and value. (It had been inscribed above the chapel door at Sandhurst

17 CPF, nos. 166, 176.
18 CPF, no. 144.
in 1913.\textsuperscript{19} Cpl. H. J. Jarvis's 'Dulce et Decorum Est pro Patria Mori', for instance, appeared first in the \textit{Poetry Review} and then in \textit{More Songs by the Fighting Men}; a piece under the same title by Major Sydney Oswald was also published in the \textit{Review}, and reprinted in \textit{Songs of the Fighting Men}.\textsuperscript{20} Oswald celebrates deeds of combat in the line, and the impulse to invest such action with significance is clearly evident in his concluding lines:

\begin{quote}
Glory is theirs; the People's narrative  
Of fame will tell their deeds of gallantry,  
And for all time their memories will live  
Shrined in our hearts.
\end{quote}

Owen's 'narrative', by comparison, is of people who suffer and die, not 'the People' who applaud and sanctify. With persistent emphasis on its degrading, nightmarish setting, Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' images a random and futile death, far removed from any meaningful 'action' and whose memory offers no comfort or heroic reassurance.

Read thus in the context of Soldier Poetry, the emphasis in the second half of Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' may be seen to fall not merely on 'you', with the implication of ignorant non-participation, but also on those verbs which stress participation: 'if you could pace . . . and watch . . . if you could hear . . .' It is a reading which unleashes a sharper, more unexpected irony, Owen's poem now speaking also to those who \textit{have} participated, who must have watched and heard, but who apparently still do not really \textit{see}; those—such as the Soldier Poets—who, having experienced warfare in the trenches, can still (for whatever reason) 'lie' about it.

The rhetoric of Soldier Poetry, clearly, articulates a tradition in which battle can only be idealized, and the collision of Owen's first-hand experience with this heroic rhetoric—the 'execrable' as against the 'glorious'\textsuperscript{21}—may be traced in further juxtaposition:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH}

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} I am indebted to D. Hibberd and J. Onions (edd.), \textit{Poetry of the Great War} (1986), 204, for this information.


\textsuperscript{21} See n. 11 above.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.

'Anthem' was written in September 1917, and as Jon Stallworthy has observed, one stage in the crystallization of this poem was probably Owen's reading of the 'Prefatory Note' to another contemporary anthology, *Poems of Today* (1916), which speaks of 'the music of Pan's flute, and of Love's viol, and the bugle-call of Endeavour, and the passing-bells of Death'. However, for a further insight into the 'context' of Owen's poem we may turn to this—by a Soldier Poet:

**A SOLDIER'S CEMETERY**

Behind that long and lonely trenched line
To which men come and go, where brave men die,
There is a yet unmarked and unknown shrine,
A broken plot, a soldier's cemetery.
There lie the flower of youth, the men who scorned
To live (so died) when languished Liberty;
Across their graves flowerless and unadorned
Still scream the shells of each artillery.
When war shall cease, this lonely unknown spot
Of many a pilgrimage will be the end,
And flowers will shine in this now barren plot
And fame upon it through the years descend;
But many a heart upon each simple cross
Will hang the grief, the memory of its loss.

Cpl. (later Sgt.) J. W. Streets was one of the most popular of the Soldier Poets, widely anthologized and with a memorial volume of his verse published posthumously in 1917. 'A Soldier's Cemetery' is representative of both his own writing and that of the Soldier Poets generally. The poem had appeared first in the *Poetry Review* early in 1916, and later that year was reprinted in Kyle's *Songs of the Fighting*
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Men;24 one (or both) of these Wilfred Owen may well have seen before leaving for France.

Surface similarities between the two sonnets are probably no more than coincidental, but one of them provides a useful starting-point for comparison: the intersection of imagery at the centres of the poems. 'Across their graves . . . I still scream the shells of each artillery' strives merely to intensify the brave pathos of Streets's 'lonely unknown spot'; but in Owen, 'The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells' inscribes the madness of no man's land where the 'monstrous anger of the guns' and the 'wailing shells' are metonymic of a war that is become its own cause for continuing. Owen's sonnet bitterly contradicts the central premiss of 'A Soldier's Cemetery', which (for all its reiteration of 'lonely' and 'unknown') comprises a series of essentially positive statements: 'there is a shrine . . . war shall cease . . .', the cemetery will be found, 'fame [will] descend', and so on. All such consolatory possibilities are dismissed as mere 'mockeries' by the relentless sequence of questions, negatives, and quasi-negatives in 'Anthem'. Owen's comprehension of the war discovers no 'plot' (of any kind), however 'broken', to offer the reassurance of ultimate meaning or significance25—'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?' Streets's final couplet elevates 'each simple cross' into a heroic memorial to many losses, and thus effectively obscures the true implications of the disparity between the (small) number of marked graves and the (unspecifed, unimaginable) number of dead. But in 'Anthem' the enormity of the slaughter precludes any of the traditional rituals of consolation or mourning; all that remains is the suffering of unfocused grief down an endless recession of time, and 'each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds'.

An attempt to emulate Siegfried Sassoon is characteristic of many of Owen's early war poems, but 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' (although Sassoon's presence is evident in manuscript corrections26) is more usually cited as an example of Owen's debt to the Romantic tradition. However, comparison with Soldier Poetry, as exemplified in 'A Soldier's Cemetery', reveals how 'Sassoonish' 'Anthem' may in fact be, refusing not only the memorializing rituals of organized religion itself but also the rhetorical tradition which offers poetic memorials as either complementary to, or a substitute for, religion. Reaching beyond mere polemic or specific parody, Owen's poem begins to envisage the chaos of war as an unending condition of modern

24 PR 6 (July–Aug. 1916), 244; Songs, p. 99.
25 The penultimate line of one of the drafts of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' contains the variant '. . . the tenderness of broken minds'. See CPF, p. 252.
26 See CPF, pp. 249–50.
existence, every individual bearing somewhere (‘in their eyes . . . brows . . . minds’) its scars.

Siegfried Sassoon’s war poetry had already set itself in contention with Soldier Poetry; Owen, however, went on to develop a subtler, more complex response to war, incorporating dialogue with both Soldier Poetry and Sassoon. It is instructive to compare Owen, Sassoon, and Soldier Poetry at work, by drawing together three poems which—to use an apt metaphor—‘bleed into’ one another. Like ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ and various other of his poems, Owen’s ‘Conscious’ (completed early in 1918) refers to specific elements of his personal experience—here, to the several spells which he had spent in hospitals and Casualty Clearing Stations during 1917:

CONSCIOUS

His fingers wake, and flutter; up the bed.
His eyes come open with a pull of will,
Helped by the yellow may-flowers by his head.
The blind-cord drawls across the window-sill . . .
What a smooth floor the ward has! What a rug!
Who is that talking somewhere out of sight?
Why are they laughing? What’s inside that jug?
‘Nurse! Doctor!’—‘Yes, all right, all right.’
But sudden evening muddles all the air—
There seems no time to want a drink of water.
Nurse looks so far away. And here and there
Music and roses burst through crimson slaughter.
He can’t remember where he saw blue sky.
More blankets. Cold. He’s cold. And yet so hot,
And there’s no light to see the voices by;
There is no time to ask—he knows not what.

Reference to biographical detail is, however, less helpful to our understanding here than is a knowledge that the poem belongs to a popular ‘sub-genre’ of war poetry—the hospital poem. The following example is by a Soldier Poet, Lt. Gilbert Waterhouse:

THE CASUALTY CLEARING STATION

A bowl of daffodils,
A crimson quilted bed,
Sheets and pillows white as snow,
White and gold and red—
And sisters moving to and fro
With soft and silent tread.

27 CPF, no. 142.  28 Songs, p. 101.
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So all my spirit fills
With pleasure infinite
And all the feathered wings of rest
Seem flocking from the radiant West
To bear me thro' the night.

See how they close me in,
They, and the sisters' arms,
One eye is closed, the other lid
Is watching how my spirit slid
Toward some red-roofed farms,
And having crept beneath them, slept
Secure from war's alarms.

Between this and 'Conscious' there are similarities of setting and some surface detail (yellow flowers, 'crimson'), but what is thrown most sharply into focus by the juxtaposition of texts is, again, Owen's refusal to conform to the conventional responses to war as represented in Soldier Poetry. Waterhouse's casualty drifts into peaceful sleep, lulled by the soothing calm of the hospital (and incidental echoes from Wordsworth's 'Daffodils') into 'pleasure infinite'. Conflict and injury—the reasons, presumably, for being there—are reduced to mere echoes in that reassuring final phrase, 'secure from war's alarms'. 'The Casualty Clearing Station' contrives an image, virtually, of paradise regained, whether read as the prelude to safe awakening on the morrow, and the road to recovery; or, possibly, as the moment of happy release into a serene death. From its ironic title onwards, Owen's 'Conscious' comprehensively undercuts any such expressions of hope. This casualty must awake, but only to a disjointed sequence of sense-impressions: the polished silence of the hospital enforces alienation rather than comfort; his memories are of 'crimson slaughter', not 'red-roofed farms'; and he is 'Conscious' only of his inability to hold on to the world of consciousness. As becomes characteristic in Owen's war poems, the 'narrative' is unresolved; both casualty and reader are here left suspended amidst incoherence and fragmentation.

'The Death-Bed' by Siegfried Sassoon—which Owen had earlier much admired, according to his letters29—similarly describes the case of a wounded soldier in a hospital bed, but (as its title indicates) in a far less ironically ambiguous fashion than 'Conscious'. Sassoon's soldier must die, in order to provide the occasion for overt polemic, moralizing:

'Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
He's young; he hated War; how should he die
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?'

Owen's 'Conscious' thus suggests a 'reading' both of Soldier Poetry and of his mentor, Sassoon. The naïve optimism of Waterhouse is rejected in a series of negatives reminiscent of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth': 'he can't remember . . . no light . . . no time . . . he knows not what.' But significantly, the limitations of Sassoon's 'propa-
ganda' are also exposed, as Owen's poem struggles to resist the drawing of any supposed 'conclusion' from the situation of the soldier.

The need to invest every action of the ordinary soldier with positive significance is, as we have seen, characteristic of the Soldier Poets, and, not surprisingly, religious symbolism was enlisted to the cause. The identification of the soldier with Christ himself was in fact a motif so common in contemporary writing about the war as to be almost a cliché—and generally, of course, presented without the ironic perspective of Owen's 'At a Calvary Near the Ancre', which dates from late 1917/early 1918:

AT A CALVARY NEAR THE ANCRE
One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
   In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
   And now the soldiers bear with Him.
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's allusions to the crucifixion story are consistent and to the point, exposing the continuing inadequacies of organized religion: the poem is usually discussed in terms of an attack on the hypocrisy of conventional pieties. Thus, the sacrifice of 'the gentle Christ' is paralleled in war by the sacrifice of the ordinary soldier, but both are equally undervalued, misunderstood, or simply ignored. Knowledge of Wilfred Owen's religious upbringing, and of his rejection of the

30 'Remember Poetry with [Sassoon] is become a mere vehicle of propaganda'—letter to Leslie Gunston, 30 Dec. 1917, CL, p. 520.
31 CPF, no. 137. The only extant manuscript of 'At a Calvary' is in Owen's mother's autograph; the date of original composition is thus impossible to fix precisely. However, it almost certainly dates from late 1917/early 1918. See CPF, p. 134.
orthodox Christian creed, has led to a clearer understanding of the biblical allusions in 'At a Calvary', but here again reference to the work of the Soldier Poets illuminates the more specifically literary context of Owen's poem. Cpl. H. J. Jarvis's 'At a Wayside Shrine' (in More Songs by the Fighting Men) typifies the unquestioning—and selective—appropriation of the soldier/Christ analogy to blatantly patriotic purposes; there is perhaps more than a passing similarity of titles to suggest that in 'At a Calvary Near the Ancre' Owen seeks once more to fracture the conventions of popular war poetry:

AT A WAYSIDE SHRINE

The column halts before a wayside shrine
To change formation into battle line
From double file. 'Tis even, and the sun
Its daily circling race has wellnigh done.
Behind me in the West, a dying glow
Of gold still gleams, to cast a pale halo
Upon the shrine . . .

. . . And now the line will pass
The shrine—itself as steady as the mass
Of England's sons slow-moving to the fray,
Their destiny now in the hands of—say,
The dim Divinity within that shrine—
A loving God (the stricken Christ His sign
Of Love)—or what? . . .

. . . So have some died
For right—bravely as Christ Crucified
And just as sacrificially. To save
The world He died, or so the worn-out creeds
Of church would teach—but they, but men, dared deeds
And died as men . . .

Because of Greater Love—
That Love of Loves, all other loves above—
The love of Home and Friends and Native Soil.
That these might never be the Foeman's spoil,
They gave their lives, their youth, their golden dreams
And airy castles, built where Sunlight gleams,
And Roses bloom . . .

32 More Songs, p. 77. (In the interests of space, I quote only extracts from Jarvis's poem.)
33 Hibberd, Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others (1973), refers to the 'Christ' motif (and, briefly, to 'At a Wayside Shrine') in his discussion of 'At a Calvary' (pp. 36, 116). See also Spear, Remembering We Forget, ch. 3, passim. Sassoon's 'Christ and the Soldier' (War Poems, ed. Hart-Davis, p. 45) may possibly have been in Owen's mind also, although Sassoon declared 'I never showed this to anyone'.
And ere I leave the shrine
I look upon the Christ—then at the line
Of men . . .
. . .—these other Christs in thin disguise
Of Khaki-brown.

As in the previous comparisons, Owen's style is bleaker, more oblique. The terse quatrains of 'At a Calvary' point up an almost embarrassing prolixity in 'At a Wayside Shrine': from the 'dying glow
Of gold . . . a pale halo
Upon the shrine', through the shrine itself which is 'rent and drilled with bullets', to the soldiers' uniforms, a 'thin disguise
Of Khaki-brown', virtually every detail in Jarvis's poem is heavily overlaid with significance. For all the 'haloesque' rhetoric that surrounds it, however, the identification of Christ and soldiers which is central to 'At a Wayside Shrine' is circumscribed by assumptions which render it ultimately as unsatisfactory as those 'worn-out creeds
Of church' with which Jarvis—consciously daring, one feels—seeks to contrast it. Jarvis's shrine, though 'rent', is 'steady as the mass
Of England's sons slow-moving to the fray': if the soldier is Christ-like, Christ is specifically an Englishman. If the soldier acts 'because of Greater Love', it is a nationalistic 'love of Home and Friends and Native Soil'; he may love his neighbour, but he must definitely hate his 'Foeman'.

Caught between the institutionalized exhortations of Church and State and the sentimentalized patriotism of the civilian population, the soldiers in Owen's 'At a Calvary' die less for creed or nation than for comrades; they 'bear with Him' and are thereby the more truly Christ-like. While Soldier Poetry, as in 'At a Wayside Shrine', continues to further the notion of significant sacrifice, Owen implies that where it matters—in the political arena, where 'The scribes on all the people shove
And bawl allegiance to the state'—the soldiers' deaths are probably a virtual irrelevance.

The closing lines of 'At a Calvary'—

But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate

—do not signal any endorsement of the popular conception of patriotic sacrifice by the soldier/Christ, as typified in Jarvis's poem. Rather, they frame a rebuke to those who seek to replace the 'worn-out creeds' of one partial version of Christianity with the even more tendentious creed ('So have some died
For right . . .') of another. 'At a Wayside Shrine' enlists the Christ-figure as a convenient (and retrospective) justification and encouragement for men moving down
a road they have already chosen. 'At a Calvary' confronts the implications of true sacrifice and recognizes the war as continuing evidence of man's inability to comprehend 'the greater love'. The soldier-Christ, for Owen, 'ever hangs where shelled roads part', mutely symbolic of humanity forever at a crossroads amidst its own destructiveness.

Wilfred Owen's experience of war on the Somme was of conditions and circumstances which conformed to no 'meaning' or 'plot' such as might be conceived in traditional or conventional terms. It was an experience which at first all but paralysed Owen's writing of poetry and, in shell-shock, threatened his very sanity. The Soldier Poets' continuing ability to sustain their positive statements in the face of such destructive experience was managed by reference back to the terms—religion, nation, duty, sacrifice, etc.—by which earlier wars had largely been defined and given 'meaning' in a dominant social and literary culture. This circumscribing of language in First World War popular poetry effectively produced a circumscription of experience, whereby understanding of the war could be 'held in' and limited to what was acceptable or could be coped with. Siegfried Sassoon's satirical verse sought to counter this by a direct inversion of Soldier Poet rhetoric: for the motifs of religion, nation, duty, and sacrifice, Sassoon simply substituted hypocrisy, arrogance, stupidity, and futility. But the powerful initial shock effect of this tactic, when repeated, works rather to exclude than to include—you either agree with Sassoon, or you don't see his point. This in effect tends to produce its own 'closed circle' of meaning, its own kind of oppositional 'closure' which, as a minority voice in 1914-18, was too easily marginalized.

However, it was through his fortunate encounter with Sassoon's satirical polemic that Owen had gained access to perhaps the one form of discourse which could at that point contain his own sense of alienation and his impulse to bitter denunciation and rejection of war experience. In his earliest war poems from Craiglockhart Hospital, those who would falsify or misrepresent the experience of the trenches are vilified and rejected, if anything more vehemently than is the experience itself. 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' and 'Dulce et Decorum Est' exemplify this phase: written within weeks of meeting Sassoon, they clearly rehearse the Sassoonish tactic of inversion and counter-assertion.

But Owen's own writing could not rest merely in the refusal of others': 'I think every poem . . . should be a matter of experience.'\(^\text{34}\)

\(^{34}\) CL, p. 510.
His poetry must go on to seek whatever 'reality' might be found in war experience—or, if necessary, to confront the absence of it: poems such as 'Conscious' and 'At a Calvary' mark early stages in the development of a more subtly provisional discourse which might attempt this. Comparison with the writings of the Soldier Poets here highlights a characteristic which becomes increasingly important in the relatively small Owen corpus—his war poetry coming more and more to resist the 'closure' so confidently, so regularly achieved by the writings of his contemporaries. Recognizing how their language essentially pre-dates the experience of the Somme (where the values it signals are not merely under threat but now hopelessly disconnected from the conditions of existence), Owen's poetry must break out from the 'closed circle' of meaning guarded by the Soldier Poets, and confront the no man's land that lies outside it.