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A COMPARISON OF SOME FRENCH AND ENGLISH
LITERARY RESPONSES TO THE 1914-1918 WAR

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SUMMARY

This thesis proposes a comparative study of some imaginative responses to the Great War in English and French writing. The principal works discussed range from Péguy's anticipation of the war in his poem Eve (1913) to David Jones's recreative memory of it in his poem In Parenthesis (1937). The survey is limited to British and French works, and does not include American and colonial contributions, or the war-writings of other combatant countries.

The thesis examines the various ways in which twelve authors - six English and six French - developed and expressed their individual response to the Great War. It is not based on an imaginary anthology of the dozen best war-writings. The twelve examples have been chosen to illustrate and cover as wide a range as possible of the ways the historical experience could be met and interpreted in literature. They include writings by civilians, and by commissioned and non-commissioned soldiers; narrative and discursive prose, essays, letters, and verse.

The first chapter considers the war-writings of Rupert Brooke, H.G. Wells and T.E. Hulme; and the second chapter discusses the work of Charles Péguy, Henri Barbusse and Jacques Vaché. Chapter 3 is concerned with three novels, by Jean Cocteau, Richard Aldington, and Proust. In the second half of the work, a chapter each is given to Wilfred Owen, Guillaume Apollinaire and David Jones.

War-writings by definition include history, and even those most innocent of a propaganda intention are likely to betray an interpretation of history, as well as having some documentary value and, at a less visible level, enacting a private drama. The literature of the Great War, considered as a sub-genre, is the product both of shared and of individual, intimate experience. The purpose of this study has been to suggest the variety of possible literary responses to the Great War; to discover what these responses are likely to have in common, and thus to offer a sketch-map of the topography of the 1914-1918 war in English and French writing; and, by locating these works in a context of European literature as well as of world history, to allow each text discussed reciprocally to illuminate and criticise the others.

PREFACE

Beird byt barnant wyr o gallon.

(The bards of the world assess the men of valour.)

This is a comparative study of some imaginative responses to the Great War in English and French writing. To illustrate ways in which writers tried to describe and understand the European war of 1914 - the first great historical crisis of this century - I have chosen twelve examples of war-writing to examine, ranging in time from Péguy's Eve, which was published in the year before the war began, to David Jones's In Parenthesis, published nineteen years after it ended. I have not attempted any account of the literature of the other combatant countries. But even in only two languages - and ignoring the colonial and American contributions - so wide is the area to be prospected that this study can be only a series of soundings, which suggest rather than quantify the resources of the field of investigation.

The twelve examples - six English and six French - have been chosen to illustrate and cover as wide a range as possible of English and French war-writing. They include writings by civilians, and by commissioned and non-commissioned soldiers; narrative and discursive prose, essays, letters, and verse, written by the apologists of pacifism and militarism and by those - the majority - who, with various degrees of discomfort, were neither. The twelve differ almost as much in literary competence as they do in tone and politics. The main purpose of this study, then, is to suggest the variety of possible literary responses to the Great War, and by so doing, to offer a sketch-map of the topography of the war in English and French literature.

Insofar as it originates in a shared historical experience, and in various ways celebrates that experience, war-writing may be classified as a kind of occasional literature. But those who wrote about that occasion interpreted it in such different ways that it is sometimes difficult to remember that they were writing about the same historical event. In a way, of course, they were not; and this study is an account of twelve different Great Wars.

The subjects have been selected in the belief that each casts an interesting light on the work of all the others. The choice certainly does not represent an imaginary anthology of the dozen best war-writings. No account of the literature of the Great War which does not deal directly with - to choose almost at random - Giono, Rosenberg, Dorgelès and Ford Madox Ford (not to mention writers of other than British and French nationality) could lay even the most eccentric claim to such canonicism. Partly for that reason, this study is principally descriptive, and is not primarily concerned with comparative literary evaluation; although an examination of David Jones's In Parenthesis is set as the conclusion of the survey, in the belief that that poem is the most valuable as well as the most inclusive of war-writings in either language.

The authors whose war-writings are considered here are: Rupert Brooke, H.G. Wells, T.E. Hulme; Charles Péguy, Henri Barbusse, Jacques Vaché; Jean Cocteau, Richard Aldington, Marcel Proust; Wilfred Owen; Guillaume Apollinaire; David Jones.

Chapter 1 examines three English writers, Chapter 2 three French. These two chapters are formally symmetrical. The first part of each deals with an anticipatory poetic formulation of the war. Péguy and Rupert Brooke had no means of knowing what the Great War would be like. The interest of their war-writings lies particularly in the way each adapts traditional literary resources to describe, proleptically, the war they expect to experience. The middle sections of Chapters 1 and 2 each examine a popular war-novel published in 1916 - one by H.G. Wells, one by Henri Barbusse - each in its way an interpretation of the war written from a political point of view. Both could be described as dramatised propaganda. Barbusse's international socialism and Wells's liberal ameliorism predated the war, but were both severely tested by events. These two novels are attempts to adapt and reconcile two systems of belief to an unpleasant historical fact. Like so many writings of the Great War, both attempt to juggle with documentary, propaganda and aesthetic intentions. The final parts of the first two chapters deal with writers - T.E. Hulme and Jacques Vaché - of less intrinsic aesthetic interest, but who both played important parts in the creation of some of the main trends of postwar literature in England and France. The war-writings of Hulme and Vaché, incongruous figures, look forward to aspects of European modernism, in the shaping of which the 1914 war was such a critical element.

Chapter 3 broadens the scope of the survey by considering fictional treatments of the Great War in

works by Cocteau, Aldington and Proust. Cocteau and Aldington are especially concerned with the variations which the war brought about in sexual and generational politics. Aldington and Proust are prepared to advance bolder interpretations, and to see the war as a particularly visible and brutal dramatisation of general patterns of experience which are, however, independent of it. Proust, of course, is only a war-writer by historical accident; but in this respect his difference from other war-writers is only one of degree.

In the second half of this survey, a chapter each is devoted to three of the most important writers of the Great War - Wilfred Owen, Apollinaire, and David Jones. Superficially at least, there would seem to be a polar difference between the war-writings of Owen and Apollinaire, in almost every respect. For this reason, and because of the richness of the available evidence (particularly the two poets' letters), I have drawn on a good deal of biographical material in my attempt to understand the war-writings of these two poets. A biographical approach to David Jones's In Parenthesis would have to rely, at present, on much scantier documentation, and, because of the impersonality of the work, would not, I think, be pertinent. So the study of In Parenthesis in Chapter 6, when it does refer outwards from the text, refers mainly to Jones's other published writings, and to the war-writings of others. From a psychological, historical and literary point of view, we are fortunate in having so much information about the

war-records of Owen and Apollinaire. These records are reciprocally illuminating and reciprocally critical. If they seem antithetic, the distance between them may be measured, if not bridged, by the mediate example of In Parenthesis.

War-writings by definition include history (and aspire, perhaps, to the condition of epic), and even those most innocent of a propaganda intention are likely to betray an interpretation of history. They are bound, too, to have some documentary value, and at a less visible level to enact a private drama. (This is true of most serious literature. But the obligatory enmeshing of private and public concerns in the literature of the Great War had an obvious influence in shaping the writings of the following two decades, and of a generation who looked back to one Great War, and forward to another, with the same horrified fascination.) The literature of the First World War takes place where private and public concerns meet most intimately. It is a record of individuals living in history, and such themes as are shared by all war-writers are located at this intersection point. These include the essentially ironic helplessness of the individual in a hostile and potentially lethal world, the politics of the generations and of the sexes,¹ religion and the use of religious language, the idea of

¹For example, Brooke welcomes the monosexuality of war-service, Aldington becomes misogynist, Apollinaire indulges in sexual fantasy, Jones feminises nature.

self-sacrifice (with its Christian prototype) and the idea of service (which is the ethical basis of middle-class education in most mature imperialist societies).

A further dimension must be noted. As there would be no such thing as darkness if there were not light, so the experience of the Great War is often defined in terms of its opposite. There is in every war-writing a complex of images and value-centres to which the writer can look forward or back as a standard (normative or ideal) by which to evaluate the present tense of war-experience. This complex - which can be located in the past or the future or both, or only in fantasy - is usually composed of the consolations which the war tended to withhold: typically women, children, a known landscape, a decent relation between men and the natural world, a decent politics, cleanness, warmth, sleep, and of course peace. This complex of values and images I have called Pastoral; and any extended literary treatment of it I have called war-pastoral, whether it be simply a nostalgic memory of home or (as in the cases of Wells and Barbusse) a political projection of a utopian future to follow the war. It is possible that the Great War is best defined by what its writers considered to be its opposite. Most people find war at least unpleasant. But, as there would be no hell if there were not also paradise, so the shadow of war is defined by the light cast by the pastoral complex of what is known, loved, desired and valued. The composition of this pastoral complex varies, of course, with the experience of each writer, and indeed of each combatant (for it is not only a literary

phenomenon). Sometimes pastoral values can be discovered in war-experience itself, and even death in battle can be seen (as Brooke and Péguy see it) as desirable, pastoral and paradisaal.

War-writings, as occasional literature, seem an especially fruitful subject for an exercise in the comparative study of literature. It is difficult to imagine any other matrix which would bring together such diverse writers as Jacques Vaché and H.G. Wells, and such diverse documents as Rupert Brooke's sonnet sequence 1914 and A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. One of the best ways to begin to understand and evaluate writings is to locate them in a literary and historical context, and to allow each text silently to illuminate and criticise the others. That has been the main purpose of this study.

CHAPTER 1

Brooke, Wells, Hulme.

Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.

One may as well (in Forsterian phrase) begin with Rupert Brooke. His sonnet sequence 1914 is the first landmark that meets the eye in the topography of English war-writing, and it remains probably the best known and least understood of war-poems.¹ And the poet himself - with his reputation as a golden youth and 'the handsomest man in England', and his early death on active service in the Aegean - occupies an important place in the myth of the eponymous date of his sonnets, and in the general picture of rather neurotic glamour which the idea of prewar England evokes.²

The glamour and the neurosis of the picture seem inseparable. That long prewar summer of 1914 irresistibly (and ironically) beckons with pastoral delights. Yet the political and social insecurity of the Georgian years have been for some time an historical commonplace. Had it not been for the outbreak of war, there would certainly have been a general strike in August 1914, the culmination of an industrial unrest in England which had been increasing for some years: in 1912, 1,233,016 workers had been involved in 857 industrial disputes, and 38,142,101 working days had been lost in the process. And of course there was trouble in Ireland. Asquith's Home Rule Bill had provoked a particularly ugly crisis in Ulster, where,

¹Brooke, The Poetical Works, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, Faber & Faber, 1960, pp. 19-23.

²For Brooke's career, see Christopher Hassall, Rupert Brooke, Faber & Faber, 1964.

to oppose the separation of Ulster from the Union, Carson had amassed thirty thousand rifles, three million rounds of ammunition, a war chest of one million pounds and the support of the Tory opposition. The openly treasonable nature of Carson's action can hardly be shrugged off as an 'extremist' or 'fringe' activity; he counted among his allies Field Marshal Earl Roberts, Sir Henry Wilson (Director of Military Operations) and the leader of His Majesty's Opposition, Bonar Law. When Asquith decided Ulster should be invested by the British Army to combat the alarming threat of Carson's Ulster Volunteers, he was answered with a refusal by the Commander-in-Chief and the threatened resignation of most of the officers of the Army in Ireland. The government's response to this mutiny was peevish and ineffectual; it was powerless. And then of course there were the suffragettes. As late as July 1914, Asquith and the British public might have been forgiven for thinking, gratefully, that at least in the realm of foreign policy there was no cause for immediate alarm.

In his splendid study of the period, George Dangerfield³ suggests that prewar Britain was infected by a certain inertia at its centres of power, a fey and fatal whimsy. This insidious germ Dangerfield delightfully christens (with a glance back to the Emperor Hadrian) animula vagula blandula. Quite what status should be accorded to this trouvaille, as an historical observation,

³The Strange Death of Liberal England, Paladin, 1970.

is the historians' business. What is interesting in the immediate context is that at the end of The Strange Death of Liberal England Dangerfield chooses to trace the career of one man who seems to him to embody, with a unique completeness, the spirit of his short-lived age; and the subject he chooses is Rupert Brooke.⁴ If this was a guess, it was an inspired one: for when Brooke writes about the war in the 1914 sonnets, he betrays the very ambiguity, the elegant, whimsical deathwish which Dangerfield, later, imagined he could detect in the prewar corridors of power.

It is conventional, as well as convenient, to begin with Rupert Brooke. Most critics of English war-writing have observed that Brooke represents an aesthetic and historical attitude towards the war which the events of 1914-1918 called into question and which, finally, had to be abandoned. A favourite critical practice is to set up a sort of dialectic between Brooke and Wilfred Owen in terms of a more or less political attitude towards the war. This has the advantages and disadvantages of being part of the truth. Such an approach, coupled with Brooke's status as a sort of popular myth - the dramatisation of a certain interpretation of events - has meant that the 1914 sequence has been so trampled to and fro that its real features are not easily recognisable.

Probably the work was misunderstood right from the time of its publication in the December 1914 issue of

⁴Dangerfield, op.cit., pp.373-387.

New Numbers. When Dean Inge quoted "The Soldier" (the last sonnet in the sequence) from his pulpit on Easter Sunday 1915 - and thus precipitated the poems' extraordinary popularity - he believed, we must suppose, that they were an eloquent glorification of war. Indeed the first poem, entitled "Peace", gratefully accepts the opportunity of battle:

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
 And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
 With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
 To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
 Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
 Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
 And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
 And all the little emptiness of love!

The poem welcomes, on behalf of a generation, the purification of war with which God has been pleased to provide them.

The world from which they are to turn is "old and cold and weary": already here is a hint of the sharp generation-alignment which is to become important to later war-poetry, particularly in Wilfred Owen. The implication here is that war will give the opportunity for a different sort of life: youthful and warm and vigorous, presumably.

It will also offer the soldier escape from "all the little emptiness of love", though it is not clear - and here we approach another major topos of war-writing - whether love is to be abandoned completely, or whether it is just a question of "little", "empty" love being left behind in favour of a more surpassing kind.

The mode here is not difficult to recognise. It is one characteristic of nineteenth-century poetry; a gesture of the rejection of everyday life in favour of some heightened and more satisfactory existence. It is

to be found later - with much more subtlety and charge - in Yeats's Byzantium poems. The rejection in "Sailing to Byzantium" is proposed because "That is no country for old men"; the reverse of Brooke's position, which is that the life of youth and cleanliness and vigour cannot be led in a sick and dishonourable world. It shares in the feeling which F.R. Leavis ascribed to Victorian poetry, which is that it "admits implicitly that the actual world is alien, recalcitrant and unpoetical, and that no protest is worth making except the protest of withdrawal".⁵ The first point, then, about 1914 is that its subject is not the war, but a dissatisfaction with the real world.

"Sailing to Byzantium" begins by rejecting "sensual music" in the name of the immutable values of intellect. Unfairly but inevitably, this must be compared with Brooke's rejection of "dirty songs"; but it is more difficult at first to make out what he favours in their stead.

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,
 Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
 Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
 Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there
 But only agony, and that has ending;
 And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

Under this facility of paradox, there is a more dismaying paradox still. The poet envisages war as an anaesthetic.

The paradox deepens in the second sonnet, "Safety", and it is here that the object of Brooke's yearning, confronted

⁵F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry,
 Chatto & Windus, 1932, p.15.

in the third sonnet, is first glimpsed. The soldier is "secretly armed against all death's endeavour". The sestet maintains that his security increases in direct proportion to the certainty of his death. Although this Safety is proposed as an attribute of the fighting soldier as well as of the dead, the terms in which it is described surely apply to the dead alone. "We have gained a peace unshaken by pain forever." The soldier is "secretly armed against all death's endeavour" because he accepts and even prefers it. He thinks he wants to die.

The third ~~sonnet~~ expands upon the efficacy of being dead. It is a fine example of a third characteristic topos of war-writing - the sacrifice motif. It is also a particularly good example of the confusion of thematic feelings with which the war could be approached.

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!
 There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
 But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.⁶

But how come the dead to be rich? For, we are told, it is we who have profited from their gifts - Holiness, Love, Pain and the return of Honour and Nobleness: they, however, have laid away the world, their future, and their immortality. The dead are rich, it seems, by the same token as "we" in the previous poem "have found safety with all things undying" through embracing death. Peel off the paradox, and you find a morbid solecism underneath.

The paradox is bridged with material from a source of feeling of apparently deep psychic roots, and one

⁶Presumably the Tennysonian echoes are deliberate.

which is summoned up again and again, and not only in war-writings, to solve the problem of death. It appears here in the idea of redemption by blood, "the red sweet wine of youth". T.E. Hulme tried to explain romanticism as spilt religion. Here Brooke picks up the husk of a Christian (or earlier) idea and fills it with a strange confection. The Christian undertones are continued in the sestet, with the idea that the blood-sacrifice is a necessary prelude to the return of the King (and this is certainly Tennysonian) - in this case Honour - who will generously pay his subjects. They are to come into their heritage, which seems to consist of a return to some deeply desired previous state. "Honour has come back ... and Nobleness walks in our ways again". Brooke is proposing death itself as a desirable, pastoral state.

The feeling of the poem derives much of its force from its covert and perhaps even unconscious use of a religious theme; a Christian theme or (to put it another way) the theme of the dying god, and the topos of sacrifice. The fragments of this myth supplied abundant metaphors during the war years, though few so well-organised as Brooke's here. An unfortunately typical example appears in the "Little Mother's" famous letter to The Morning Post, quoted by Robert Graves in Goodbye to All That,⁷ which claims that "The corn that will wave over land watered by the blood of our brave lads shall testify to the future that their

⁷First published in 1929; reprinted in Penguin Books, 1960, pp.189-191.

blood was not spilt in vain".⁸ Metaphor, as Coleridge discovered, is a fragment of allegory. Symbol may be a fragment of myth (like Brooke's dead warrior; of course the wasteland too comes from a variation on the same myth).

The sentiment of this sonnet corresponds uncannily to its method of realisation. The poet seeks to persuade his reader that some new construct (undefined, except that it is "rarer ... than gold") will be built up like coral out of the dead organisms he celebrates. Similarly, the poem's language is built on shards and fragments which have ceased (or are not allowed) to function according to their own nature - a Christian fragment emptied of Christianity, a romance motif inapposite and puzzling.

The fourth sonnet in the sequence is another celebration of death. The previous poem showed that death would be of benefit to the survivors, and this one demonstrates that it is an attractive state ('splendid', to use an irresistible Georgian epithet) in itself. D.J. Enright's contention that "the sestet describes water which has frosted over, and seems to have nothing to do with the octave" is, I think, too deliberately obtuse.⁹ The octave describes the dead men's past in terms of sense and of change, and indeed the transition from the crowded activity of the octave

⁸The letter of the "Little Mother" is a crucial document for any student of Great War rhetoric. She deploys significant and typical metaphor with a profusion that puts more sophisticated writings to shame. J.G. Fraser would have found much to ponder in it; and it is scarcely less interesting as a psychological than as an anthropological document.

⁹"The Literature of the First World War", The Modern Age, Pelican Guide to English Literature, vol. 8, 1973, p.164.

to the immobility of the sestet metaphor is consonantly reflected in the poem's movement and syntax. The waters described in the sestet are no longer governed by the changing winds; the transition of death is one from "wandering loveliness" to a steady state, bound like Adonais by the frost, and become

a white
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

The frost, the transformation of "the colours of the earth" into white glory and radiance - all this bears a relationship with Shelley's "Adonais" that can hardly be accidental. Brooke's idea of the attractiveness of death has a less easily putative parentage. It may be mentioned, in passing, that Freud's discovery or invention of what may be called the Thanatos or Nirvana Principle or the deathwish was itself a wartime product. But whatever its psychological provenance, the curiously innocent morbid whimsy of 1914 has a literary, even bookish ancestry. The fascination of death, and the celebration of death as almost a value in itself, might remind us that Brooke was a keen student of Webster and the Jacobean drama; and the peculiar innocence of Brooke's rhetoric has a great deal in common with the 'decadence' of the 'nineties (which the Georgians hoped healthily to displace), and the tone - too childish to be accused of insincerity - of Swinburnian invocations to Our Lady of Pain. The gestural and complacent nature of the language of 1914 suggests to me not that Brooke does not mean what he says, but that he does not know what he is saying. I shall be examining other writers in this survey

and their attempts to arrive at some kind of understanding and definition of the experience of war. The 1914 sequence offers us nothing of the kind. It is only for convention's sake that it should be classed as 'war-poetry'. Still, it is intrinsic to the experience of 1914, and it offers a valuable glimpse of the sort of imaginative energies alive at the time, energies which went towards both creating and interpreting the experience of the historical moment.

In the fifth and last and most famous sonnet of the sequence comes the pay-off. The vaudeville metaphor is reasonably exact, for the sonnet is organised in terms of economics. In the octave the poet lists all that "England" has contributed towards the making of the now dead soldier. The sestet shows him honourably paying his debts.

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

Just how this exchange will be effected is not the poet's business (though behind the metaphor of exchange may lurk a memory of Shelley's poem "The Cloud"). Death in battle is envisaged as the vehicle of pastoral, and the sestet contains an annunciation of the pastoral values which will succeed death and spring from it - innocence, changelessness, daylight, happiness and laughter, friendship, gentleness, peace; heaven. All these bright prizes are dependent on the vexilla of "England", and the conceit that a dead body abroad is as good as a colonist. Death, then, is required to do two things in the scheme of the poem. First, it will absolve the martyred soldier of any need to concern himself

with the business of what Leavis calls "the actual world". And second, it will ensure the propagation of an amiable, English, leisured social life, where even the weather may be relied on to be clement, because heaven itself has been colonised by England.

This may seem absurd. But on the contrary Brooke is to be taken seriously, not patronised as some sort of freak. The very popularity of his sonnets suggests that they spoke to something close to the heart of the British public in the first year of the war. There is, rather, a confusion of ideas, a serious thoughtlessness about the sonnet sequence which may lead us back to Dangerfield's proposition of animula vagula blandula. Can Brooke really have meant what he says? His sonnets are an invitation to death in battle. Yet his letters¹⁰ and his biography show that to die, in 1914, was the last thing Rupert Brooke wanted to do. Like most people, he was initially dismayed by the prospect of war. On 31 July 1914, he wrote to Stanley Spencer, "At present I'm so depressed about the war, that I can't talk, think, or write coherently."¹¹ But like most people, he came to see it at first as a welcome simplification of life. In November, he told Cathleen Nesbitt, "The central purpose of my life, the aim and end of it, now, the thing God wants of me, is to get good at beating

¹⁰The Letters of Rupert Brooke, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, Faber & Faber, 1968.

¹¹Letters, p.601.

Germans. That's sure. I'm the happiest person in the world."¹² This sense of relief and even exhilaration can be detected in the sonnets.

And yet, in the 1914 sonnets, he says he thinks he wants to die. It has to be concluded that Brooke's critical intelligence was fundamentally dualist. The values (the world) of experience and of poetry were for him sufficiently far apart that their inconsistencies were not a matter for concern. The tradition of the expression of the sentiments of 1914 was to hand, and so was the occasion: so they were written. (The passive voice seems most appropriate.) It may very well be that one of the few beneficial actions of the years 1914 to 1918 was to persuade English writers that poetry should march more closely with real life. Certainly it is difficult to imagine anyone of Brooke's talent writing anything like the 1914 sonnets in 1939. But although the contortions of 1914 are bizarre, they are not uniquely acrobatic in the literature of the Great War.

Never, indeed, such innocence again. What conditions gave 1914 expression - and an enthusiastic public - in the early phase of the Great War? And what conditions made it inconceivable that anything similar could have been produced, or stomachied, in 1939? The second question involves among other things the whole huge issue of the impact of 1914-1918 (including the impact of the literature

¹²Letters, p.631. This boy-scoutish response may be compared with Apollinaire's.

of the Great War in all its forms) on the national psyche. The first question is only a little less daunting, but some answer must be attempted. In the summer of 1914, one shrewd observer addressed himself to the puzzle of the national animula.

"The psychology of all this recent insubordination and violence is - curious. Exasperating too.... I don't quite grasp it.... It's the same thing whether you look at the suffrage business or the labour people or at this Irish muddle. People may be too safe. You see we live at the end of a series of secure generations in which none of the great things of life have changed materially. We've grown up with no sense of danger - that is to say, with no sense of responsibility. None of us, none of us - for though I talk my actions believe me - really believe that life can change very fundamentally any more for ever ... And it's just because we are all convinced that we are so safe against a general breakdown that we are able to be so recklessly violent in our special cases ... We have lost any belief we ever had that fundamental things happen."¹³

There is a groping intelligence in these words which commands respect. They supply interesting secondary evidence to anyone who wonders how the poet of "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester" (1912) could be the same man as wrote the sonnets of 1914. The words are, in fact, one of the many portentous dicta of H.G. Wells's essayist, Times leader-writer, representatively intelligent and moderately eccentric Englishman, and fictional alter ego: Hugh Britling.¹⁴

The novel is "essentially the history of the opening and of the realisation of the Great War as it happened to one small group of people in Essex, and more particularly as it happened to one human brain". (p.206) Wells struggled

¹³ H.G. Wells, Mr. Britling Sees it Through, Cassell, 1916, pp.46-47.

¹⁴ Page references in the text of this section are to the 1916 edition of Mr. Britling Sees it Through.

more conscientiously than most of his contemporaries to understand the implications of war in the twentieth century. His writing about the War begins long before 1914, in that perilous and popular mode of journalistic prophecy of which he is the English master.¹⁵ Wells's pre-1914 journalism in this mode - some of it discursive, some fictional - is sometimes acute and never uninteresting. As a liberal radical, and (by 1908) a lapsed Fabian, the ideal of Progress is his work and also his faith. As a journalist and writer of romances, and a precursor of what has since been christened 'science fiction', his concern was to interpret and project the evolution of history. In the 'eighties, he had studied for a year under T.H. Huxley.

If his collection of articles called Anticipations partakes of a simplified historicism - an unavoidable condition of prophecy in any case - and although in some matters he was very wide of the mark (as in the now embarrassing thesis of the essay "The War that will End War", 1914)¹⁶ Wells's self-confidence and imaginative daring in the mode yield some penetrating as well as some extravagant results. In 1902, he tried to project the probable features of war in the twentieth century.

The great change that is working itself out in warfare is the same change that is working itself out in the substance of the social fabric. The essential change in the social fabric ... is the progressive supersession of the old broad labour base by elaborately organised mechanism, and the obsolescence of the once valid and necessary distinction of gentle and simple...

¹⁵ An anthology of these writings is made in H.G. Wells: Journalism and Prophecy 1893-1946, ed. W. Warren Wagar, Bodley Head, 1964.

¹⁶ Journalism and Prophecy, pp.55-61

Probably between contiguous nations that have mastered the art of war, instead of the pouring clouds of cavalry of the old dispensation, this will be the opening phase of the struggle, a vast duel all along the frontier between groups of skilled marksmen, continually being relieved and refreshed from the rear. For a time quite possibly there will be no definite army here or there; there will be no controllable battle; there will be no great general in the field at all. But somewhere far in the rear the central organiser will sit at the telephonic centre of his vast front, and he will strengthen here and feed there, and watch, watch perpetually, the pressure, the incessant, remorseless pressure, that is seeking to wear down his countervailing thrust.¹⁷

As a shot in the dark, this must score pretty highly. Wells has foreseen a mechanised war of attrition, and sketched out an idea of 'total warfare' - both concepts which were to become twentieth-century clichés. According to the article, the warfare of the future, like the society of the future, will be mechanised and classless. Wells's prognostications are based on some technological knowledge and the projection of his ameliorist ideas for the new society into the sphere of the new warfare. He perceived - and Attlee's administration was later to confirm - that in an atmosphere of 'total warfare', social mobilisation would become habitual; so that "a practical realisation of socialistic conceptions will quite inevitably be forced upon the fighting state".¹⁸ The tone and feeling of these prophecies, written in the early years of the century, are zestful and strangely without apprehension. Wells later confessed that he was taken by surprise by the Great War. He could not feel and believe that anyone would

¹⁷ Journalism and Prophecy, pp.24, 26.

¹⁸ Journalism and Prophecy, p.28

really let it happen. Nevertheless there is a good deal of accuracy in his description of the situation preceding the cataclysmic European conflict which he imagined in The War in the Air (1908). Writing from the imagined security of a future world-state, Wells 'looks back' at the beginning of the twentieth century, and at the insouciance and carelessness which have already been mentioned.

And now the whole fabric of civilisation was bending and giving, and dropping to pieces and melting in the furnace of the war ...

To men living in our present world state, orderly, scientific and secured, nothing seems so precarious, so giddily dangerous, as the fabric of the social order with which the men of the opening of the twentieth century were content. To us it seems that every institution and relationship was the fruit of haphazard and tradition and the manifest sport of chance, their laws each made for some separate occasion and having no relation to any future needs, their customs illogical, their education aimless and wasteful. Their method of economic exploitation indeed impresses a trained and informed mind as the most frantic and destructive scramble it is possible to conceive ... Yet they thought confidently that this was a secure and permanent progressive system, and on the strength of some three hundred years of change and irregular improvement answered the doubter with, "Things always have gone well. We'll worry through!"¹⁹

The urbane assurance of this latter-day historian presumes that such an unintelligent society deserves all it is going to get. One - perhaps the most direct - of Wells's targets here is a misconception of the idea of progress. The judgement is delivered in the voice of the imagined future; but the people in the dock are Wells's own generation.

They did not realise that this age of relative good fortune was an age of immense but temporary opportunity for their kind. They complacently assumed a necessary progress towards which they had no moral responsibility. They did not realise that this security of progress was a thing still to be won - or lost, and that the time to win it was a time that passed.²⁰

¹⁹ Journalism and Prophecy, pp.39-40.

²⁰ Journalism and Prophecy, p.41.

Mr. Britling will offer a similar critique eight years later, when he draws a distinction between "the liberalism of great aims and the liberalism of defective moral energy".(p.353)

Many of the themes of Wells's journalism and prophecy reappear in Mr. Britling Sees it Through. In the novel, Wells mimes the development of his own career, his own political and spiritual response to the Great War. The extent to which Mr. Britling is Wells is not important, though it is probably considerable. It is evident that, through him, Wells attempts to explain, if not to justify, the apparent inconsistencies of his own thoughts and to establish a decent and honest position in the face of events. It is a painful process, for Mr. Britling and for Wells. It is also an important one, because Wells, perhaps more than anyone outside the direct sphere of politics,²¹ was a voice that commanded attention in the war years.

Mr. Britling Sees it Through was published in late September 1916; by the following February it was in its sixteenth impression.

The novel describes the effect of the first two years of the War on one English household. Most of the action takes place in Essex at Mr. Britling's home near Matching's Easy - a name particularly evocative of the prewar English atmosphere Wells depicts. There are indeed several elements in the work which have this almost emblematic quality which we tend to encounter in a kind of fiction that leans towards fable or caricature. "Matching's Easy" suggests harmony, facility and indolence. Mr. Britling himself,

²¹A circle with a shadowy circumference, populated by figures like Horatio Bottomley and the Harmsworth brothers, Northcliffe and Rothermere.

as Bernard Bergonzi has remarked,²² is nominatively a little Briton. He also packs, in a Carrollian portmanteau, intimations of dispute (bristling) and vulnerability (brittle). The action begins with the arrival at Matching's Easy of Mr. Direck (direct), an earnest, good-hearted and likeable young all-American. At first the novel promises comedy as it follows Mr. Direck's bemused and appreciative progress of acquaintance with the assembled 'English characters' at Mr. Britling's house. There is something reassuring and (in a fictional way) very familiar about this picture. There is the pretty, spirited English girl called Cecily, for Mr. Direck to fall in love with. There is tea in the garden. There is a bespectacled young German tutor, interested in Esperanto, quite humourless, whom the English family find rather charming. There is an eccentric neighbour, a retired colonel obsessed with physical education. There is the cheerful and almost homicidal bonhomie of the hockey game, a Sunday afternoon tradition. There is that familiar English summer weather. Mr. Britling himself seems a domestic comic character. Mr. Britling "was always lively, sometimes spacious, and never vile. He loved to write and talk. He talked about everything, he had ideas about everything; he could no more help having ideas about everything than a dog can resist smelling at your heels." (p.10)

This brisk, amused, indulgent tone is maintained through the first section of the novel, as Mr. Britling talks brilliantly, if inconsequently, to Mr. Direck, and bustles about organising long weekends and driving his car Gladys on (and off) the

²²Heroes' Twilight, Constable, 1965, p.136.

pastoral lanes of prewar East Anglia. Direck's stay at the house is prolonged by an arm injury he sustains on one of the many occasions when Mr. Britling drives into the ditch; so he is at hand to witness the arrival of war at Matching's Easy, and the shift from comedy to another mode.

It would not be overloading the fabric of the novel to suggest that Mr. Britling's car Gladys plays a symbolic rôle in the comedy of innocence of Book I, "Matching's Easy at Ease". (It is later revealed that he bought the machine so as to be able to pursue more easily his current adultery.) At first his antics at the steering-wheel are no more serious than those of Kenneth Grahame's Toad (b.1908). Then suddenly he has smashed into a wall, and broken his guest's wrist; and the implications of his carelessness are revealed to him, in a night of remorseful insomnia, through the "vicarious factor" in his individuation - for like Wells himself he is an egoist whose element is generalisation. "Mr. Britling in Soliloquy" thinks back over the accident, guiltily. At least he has not killed any innocent passer-by. But this is only a temporary consolation.

If he had not crushed a child other people had. Such things happened. Vicariously at any rate he had crushed many children....

Why are children ever crushed?

And suddenly all the pain and destruction and remorse of all the accidents in the world descended upon Mr. Britling.

No longer did he ask why am I such a fool, but why are we all such fools? He became Man on the automobile of civilisation, crushing his thousands daily in his headlong and yet aimless career.... (p.99)

And the next chapter relates the declaration of war. This is not enormously subtle, but the motor accident can be

seen to figure that wide insouciance which ends in disaster, which was encountered in the previous section.²³

Mr. Britling had earlier spoken of the reckless violence of special cases. Not for the last time, his obiter dicta come home to roost.

The accident, and the war which it anticipates, confront Mr. Britling with the implications of irresponsibility. From this point, the narrative is largely concerned with chronicling his efforts to understand what is happening to Europe, and to himself as paterfamilias and self-appointed liberal everyman. When war breaks out, Mr. Britling is filled with "the heady draught of liberal optimism". (p.196)

"I am not sorry I have lived to see this war," he said. "It may be a tremendous catastrophe in one sense, but in another it is a huge step forward in human life. It is the end of forty years of evil suspense. It is crisis and solution ..."

Now everything becomes fluid. We can redraw the map of the world. A week ago we were all quarrelling bitterly about things too little for human impatience. Now suddenly we face an epoch. This is an epoch. The world is plastic for men to do what they will with it. This is the end and the beginning of an age. This is something far greater than the French Revolution or the Reformation... And we live in it..."

He paused impressively.

"I wonder what will happen to Albania?" said [Britling's son] Hugh, but his comment was disregarded.

"War makes men bitter and narrow," said Mr. Carmine.

"War is narrowly conceived," said Mr. Britling. "But this is an indignant and generous war." (pp.196-197)

This more or less faithfully transcribes Wells's own pronouncement in August 1914 in one of the articles called "The War That Will End War". ("This is a time of incalculable plasticity. For the men who know what they want, the moment has come. It is the supreme opportunity, the test or condemnation of constructive liberal thought in the world.")²⁴

²³The motif of reckless driving is similarly used in The Great Gatsby, ten years later. There too it is first introduced as an item of harmless comedy, but the comedy prefigures a tragic 'crash'.

²⁴Journalism and Prophecy, p.60.

The crisis is seen as an opportunity for establishing a new disposition which, without this stroke of luck, might have been decades in the gestation. (Lenin, if Mr. Britling ever reached the bookshops of Zurich, would certainly have agreed.) Britling is annoyed by the war's initial effect on the British spirit, which "became now peevish and impatient, like some ill-trained man who is sick". (p.283) "War had not been a reality of the daily life of England for more than a thousand years." (p.207) In his enthusiasm Mr. Britling decides it will be a salutary experience, and hopes it will not end too quickly.

But like almost all his contemporaries, Mr. Britling is ignorant of the most vital factor, the experiential process of war. The development of new armaments, the melancholy inflation of conscripted armies,²⁵ and corresponding shifts of strategy dictated that the Great War was to be nasty, brutish, and long - above all long. Mr. Britling has not learnt from the strategic ponderings of Mr. Wells on the prospects of war in the twentieth century. Very few people learned the lessons to be drawn from Wells's earlier essays on war. Mr. Britling was not among them, and nor, oddly enough, was Wells. In the novel, as the war progresses (if that is the right verb), a wearing anxiety descends on Matching's Easy and becomes an everyday presence, as first Teddy (Britling's secretary) and then Hugh (Britling's son) depart in uniform for Flanders.

²⁵ Even the British reluctantly introduced conscription in 1916, to compensate for the horrific casualty rate. By the end of the war, half the British infantry were younger than nineteen. (Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, Oxford University Press, 1975, p.18.)

Mr. Britling is distressed and pained by the way things are going. He prepares to eat some words.

"I was saying a month ago that this is the biggest thing that has happened in history. I said that this was the supreme call upon the will and resources of England. I said there was not a life in all our empire that would not be vitally changed by this war. I said all these things; they came through my mouth; I suppose there was a sort of thought behind them...." (p.222)

The process of war imposes itself implacably across the matrix of Mr. Britling's grand designs. ("I am the Fact," said War, 'and I stand astride the path of life.'" (p.182)) It is literally brought close to home by an air-raid on the east coast in which Mr. Britling's ridiculous aunt is mutilated, and dies painfully. This is a shock to Mr. Britling. (Interestingly, it is also a shock to the reader. We are not prepared to see dotty maiden aunts in fiction come to any serious harm. But the war has as little respect for literary convention as it has for liberal self-delusions.) Next, from Flanders comes the news that the secretary Teddy is presumed killed. Faced with the malignity of warfare, and embarrassed by his enthusiastic article "And Now War Ends" (as Wells had been by "The War That Will End War"), Britling's ponderings take an uncharacteristically theological turn. In the nocturnal wanderings he has to undertake in his capacity as special constable, Mr. Britling addresses his soul.

"Life had a wrangling birth. On the head of every one of us rests the ancestral curse of fifty million murders."

So Mr. Britling's thoughts shaped themselves in words as he prowled one night in March, chill and melancholy, across a rushy meadow under an overcast sky. The death squeal of some little beast caught suddenly in a distant copse had set loose this train of thought. "Life struggling under a birth curse?" he thought. "How

nearly I come back at times to the Christian theology! ...
And then, Redemption by the shedding of blood.

"Life, like a rebellious child, struggling out of the control of the hate which made it what it is." (pp.283-284)

Extending perhaps what the young Wells had learned from Huxley, Britling asks:

Has hate been necessary, and is it still necessary, and will it always be necessary? Is all life a war for ever? The rabbit is nimble, lives keenly, is prevented from degenerating into a diseased crawling eater of herbs by the incessant ferret. Without the ferret of war, what would life become? ... War is murder truly, but is not Peace decay? (p.284)

This is a crisis in the novel's long soliloquy, and a critical point in the history of ideas of the Great War. Britling/Wells is no longer thinking in terms of nations, but of the species. If national alignments are not considered to be of vital importance, and all flags are flags of convenience, then a nationalistic war is seriously questionable.²⁶ Loss of confidence in nationalist interest causes a shift. A horizontal, national division of interests gives place to a vertical one, the division between those who must bear the suffering of the war and those who are responsible for it, safe, and possibly making a profit from it. Elsewhere, the new division may be stated in terms of generations, as in Wilfred Owen's "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", or in terms of class, as in Barbusse. (Barbusse's formulation - "Deux armées aux prises, c'est une grande armée qui se suicide" - will be discussed later. In its own way it is, I think, unanswerable.) For all his sometimes tedious earlier chat about national

²⁶When later pressed by the United States to state their war aims, the British and French discovered, and may have believed, that they were fighting for the cause of national self-determination.

characteristics, Mr. Britling recognises that Germany's ambitions are uncomfortably closely related to those of Britain. The Germans were "prone to moral indignation"; they wanted to convince easy-going Europe - the English and the Russians, "these greater nations" - to "Forget not order and the real" - "the very justification our English poet has found for a thousand overbearing actions in the East!" (p.295) Britling's mistrust of missionary imperialism is certainly in the best liberal tradition. He recognises a community of responsibility for the war:

They [the Germans] were human; they had a case. It was a stupid case, but our case, too, was a stupid case. How stupid were all our cases! (p.297)

His son's letters from the front somewhat sustain Mr. Britling, while convincing him yet further of the folly of war, and the incompetence with which it is being prosecuted. But suddenly the letters stop, and presently the dreaded telegram arrives. The father's grief is compounded with a sense of guilty responsibility. (Wells, as the prophet of modern warfare, may have felt particularly uncomfortable when many of his prophecies were borne out. A certain guilt-inspired displacement can possibly be detected in his account of the air-raid: "The story was like a page from some fantastic romance of Jules Verne's" (p.290, my italics).)

From this bitterness, guilt and confusion, and grief for his son's death, Mr. Britling approaches what appears to be the moral conclusion of the novel. The process is mapped mostly in soliloquy, sometimes in dialogue. He reaches out from his moment of despair towards a less facile idea of evolutionary historical progress. He still

believes that men may alter anything if they have motive enough and faith enough. The only rational course left, then, is to work for the abolition of the nationalism he has recognised to be redundant and vicious, and towards establishing "the great republic of the United States of the World". (p.395) His resolution is pathetic as well as determined.

"In the end this world-republic, this sane government of the world, is as certain as the sunset. Only ..."
 He sighed, and turned over a page of his atlas blindly.
 "Only we want it soon. The world is weary of this bloodshed; weary of all this weeping, of this wasting of substance and this killing of sons and lovers. We want it soon, and to have it soon we must work to bring it about. We must give our lives. What is left of our lives...." (pp.395-396)

In mentioning sons and lovers, Mr. Britling is not just demonstrating an acquaintance with recent English fiction. It is a specific point. He himself has recently lost his son. His words are addressed to his secretary's wife Letty, who has only just, and at last, accepted for a fact that her husband must have been killed. The scene between these two mourners is an interesting one. It seems an error of tact for Mr. Britling to offer the distraught widow the prospect of a future world-government as consolation. Besides, Letty thinks he is deluding himself in his hopefulness. The war has led her to draw her own theological conclusions (with verbal glances at Macbeth and Gloucester).

"The world is cruel. It is just cruel. So it will always be ... It is full of diseases and accidents. As for God - either there is no God or he is an idiot. He is a slobbering idiot. He is like some idiot who pulls off the wings of flies."

"No," said Mr. Britling. (p.396)

The need to rebut this terminal hopelessness leads Mr. Britling to the most extraordinary of his ideations. He

creates God in his own image. The deity in which he invites Letty to believe bears a suspicious resemblance to Hugh Britling; and both have been much misunderstood.

"The theologians have been extravagant about God. They have had silly absolute ideas - that he is all powerful. That he's omni-everything. But the common sense of men knows better. Every real religious thought denies it. After all, the real God of the Christians is Christ, not God Almighty; a poor mocked and wounded God nailed on a cross of matter.... Some day he will triumph.... But it is not fair to say that he causes all things now. It is not fair to make out a case against him. You have been misled. It is a theologian's folly. God is not absolute; God is finite.... A finite God who struggles in his great and comprehensive way as we struggle in our weak and silly way - who is with us - that is the essence of all real religion.... I agree with you so - Why! if I thought there was an omnipotent God who looked down on battles and deaths and all the waste and horror of this war - able to prevent these things - doing them to amuse himself - I would spit in his empty face...." (p.397)

This "God who struggles" is a finite being with finite powers, operating within nature and necessity. He is agonised, abused, "human like ourselves" (p.399), brotherly, stoical, limited, progressive; and in the end his struggles will be rewarded and his aims achieved. Wells's liberalism creates for itself a remarkable apotheosis.

Letty considered these strange ideas.

"I never thought of him like that," she said at last. "It makes it all seem different."²⁷

There is a sense in which this revelation not only "makes it all seem different" for the bereaved Letty, but also makes it all be different. She is at least a little

²⁷ This "curious spirit of religious sentiment" (Bergonzi, op.cit., p.137.) did not last Wells very long, and "in later years he regarded this 'religious' phase with some embarrassment." (ibid.) But Mr. Britling's adumbration of his struggling God is of especial interest for the features it shares with Wilfred Owen's mature treatment of religious themes - rejection of God the Almighty Father as a spiteful warmonger, and devotion to a suffering brotherly Christ, quite closely identified with the writer himself.

consoled by this vision of a struggling God. It seems some sort of recovery has been achieved, some sort of victory won. The tide of her despair has turned. And as if as a reward for the new understanding Mr. Britling has given her, who should be awaiting her when she returns to her cottage but her husband Teddy, who is manifestly not dead at all. He has miraculously survived injury and capture to return to Matching's Easy. Wells's recourse to the novelists's licence of suggesting the metaphysically causal by means of the narrative consecutive - a variation of 'poetic justice' - is not a very worthy subterfuge. The implication is that Mr. Britling's God, once revealed to Letty, immediately cancels her suffering. (We have seen earlier the implication that Mr. Britling's shortcomings as a motorist had something to do with precipitating a European war; but that instance was less bare-faced.) Mr. Direck meanwhile, through his efforts in searching for the missing Teddy, and his eventual enlistment (with the Canadian Army) in the righteous cause, may be understood to be set fair for winning his (English) girl.²⁸ No such romance reversal lies in store for Mr. Britling himself, but at least a purpose in life has been restored to him. He has lost his son, but he has found his God in the process ("Our sons who have shown us God" (p.432)). Henceforth he will devote himself to making straight the way for the great

²⁸The Direck theme of Mr. Britling Sees it Through, which I have hardly touched on here, is as much an appeal for help to a neutral but friendly nation as Apollinaire's hortatory poem "A l'Italie" (1915). Mr. Direck is a cunningly flattering exemplum, an encouragement to America to do the right thing by Europe.

republic of the United States of the World. (Wells was to follow his example honourably.) At the very end of the book, "From away towards the church came the sound of some early worker whetting a scythe." (p.433)

In concentrating mostly on the 'argument' of Mr. Britling Sees it Through, I have not attempted anything like a complete account of the book. Formally it is a sort of essay, somewhat dramatised. Its characters, apart from the hero, are slight; and such plot as there is has been more or less submerged in Mr. Britling's ceaseless self-testings. Its merits are not so much literary as documentary: but they are worth attention. The novel offers an unusually complete, honest and visible account of the growth and change of one man's understanding of the world under the impact of the Great War. It is a document of some humour, considerable pathos and (today) a dismaying irony. It also marks a significant stage in Wells's development along the path from The Discovery of the Future (1902) to his last book, Mind at the End of its Tether.²⁹ In the last-named work, written at the close of a second Great War, Wells not only buries the hopefulness of Mr. Britling but also performs a danse macabre over the grave.

For their own reasons and in their own terms it is likely that both Rupert Brooke and H.G. Wells would have found the label 'revolutionary' rather a gratifying one.

²⁹ 1945; reprinted by Millet Books, San Francisco, 1973.

From a distance, any such condemnation (or approval) can be seen to be inappropriate. Each rippled, in his own way, the surface of the mainstream of English intellectual and artistic life, but with no radical suggestion that it was flowing in the wrong direction. In 1914 the mainstream of English civilisation - in so far as something so abstract can be described at all - might be called liberal, romantic, tolerant and humanistic. It was against this central current, stated in more or less these terms, that T.E. Hulme, the third subject of this chapter, set his face. It is very difficult to assess the status of Hulme in literary history. All his writings are jejune in the sense that they are incomplete and disappointing. But he was (although in a more limited way than Apollinaire) the publicist, friend, and self-appointed theorist of the conglomerate which we are obliged to call Modernism. Like Jacques Vaché, whom I shall discuss later, his influence on his contemporaries was considerable, but out of proportion with his achievements in print. T.S. Eliot's obituary assessment of him in 1924 is given with a characteristic generosity which does nothing to conceal a characteristic caution.

When Hulme was killed in Flanders in 1917, he was known to a few people as a brilliant talker, a brilliant amateur of metaphysics, and the author of two or three of the most beautiful short poems in the language.³⁰

Alun R. Jones is rather more bold in his judgement.

Whether by genius or happy accident, he is related to the achievement of the first half of the century in much the same way as Coleridge is related to the first half of the nineteenth.³¹

³⁰ Article in The Criterion, II, 7 April 1924, pp.231-232: quoted in Alun R. Jones, The Life and Opinions of T.E. Hulme, Gollancz, 1960, p.14.

³¹ The Life and Opinions of T.E. Hulme, p.13.

Jones's valuation may well prove to be tenable. (Certainly it cannot be disproved.) Hulme's contribution to modernism is in some ways analogous to Apollinaire's apologetics in the interests of cubism; the judgements of both are fitfully intuitive, amateur, and usually sound. But like Apollinaire, Hulme was not only a publicist, but also a creator, of modernism; and as such it may be interesting to observe how he reacted to the event which, it is generally agreed, inaugurated and established the new epoch.

"I am a heavy philosopher," Hulme was fond of saying (with perhaps an intentional pun, since he weighed two hundred pounds); "I shall write nothing until I am forty."³²

He was killed near Nieuport in Belgium in September 1917, soon after his thirty-fourth birthday. There survive only more or less incoherent fragments of the proposed philosophical allegory which was to have been the grand exposition of his Weltanschauung, and his great work.³³

The main body of his work, collected and published posthumously in Speculations and Further Speculations, consists of a series of pamphlets, lectures, articles and notes on philosophy, aesthetics and criticism. There is also a handful of Imagist poems, though Hulme seems to have abandoned the writing of verse by 1912.

The "speculative" nature of Hulme's writings is everywhere apparent, and their mode is usually one of adversary dogmatics. The targets of his antagonistic polemics

³²Sam Hynes, Introduction to Further Speculations of T.E. Hulme, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1955, p.vii.

³³These fragments are published in T.E. Hulme, Speculations, ed. Herbert Read (Foreword by Jacob Epstein), Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924.

are easily identified, but his own ethical premises remain curiously undefined. He is a reactionary iconoclast of a particularly shifty kind. Hulme's quarrel with modern (i.e. post-Renaissance) philosophy is set out in what he calls "A Critique of Satisfaction".³⁴ And he argues that philosophy sets out to answer the question "What is finally satisfying?", and that it took a wrong turning at the Renaissance by locating the answer within the sphere of human life. Hulme calls this Vitalism; and deplores its ill effects. "The fundamental error is that of placing Perfection in humanity, thus giving rise to that bastard thing Personality, and all the bunkum that follows from it."³⁵ He insists that the Renaissance was not "a discovery, like that of gravitation", but "a change from one possible attitude to another";³⁶ if we realise this we can also realise the possibility of a change in the contrary direction, and Hulme clearly looks forward to such a change.³⁷

³⁴ Speculations, pp. 12-23.

³⁵ Speculations, p.33.

³⁶ ibid, p.25.

³⁷ Hulme, of course, was writing in a pre-Relativity era. Nowadays, the distinction between "discovery" and "change from one possible attitude to another" could not be so casually made; and the Theory of Gravitation, for example, is more likely to be viewed as an invention (rather than a discovery) which was generally agreed to be a fruitful and expedient way of explaining some aspects of the world, for the time being - much like Hulme's interpretation of the phenomenon of "the Renaissance".

Hulme's critique of satisfaction is not obviously empirical. "To illustrate the position, imagine a man situated at a point in a plane, from which roads radiate in various directions. Let this be the plane of actual existence."³⁸ The roads are possible answers to the question "What is finally satisfying?" Hulme does not hesitate to dismiss them all as unsatisfying (peremptorily, and without even saying where these imaginary roads lead). "The mind is forced back along every line in the plane, back on the centre", and "the result is that which follows the snake eating its own tail [sic], an infinite straight line perpendicular to the plane". This is what Hulme calls the Religious Attitude. "It is the closing of all the roads, this realization of the tragic significance of life, which makes it legitimate to call all other attitudes shallow."³⁹ Humanism is an arrogant solecism, and has got to go.

Hulme imagines himself as the witness and agent of a seismic upheaval in Western thought, parallel (and in reaction) to the Renaissance. His real targets are the materialism and ameliorism of nineteenth-century philosophy. Since he traces these trends back to the Renaissance, he attacks them in the interest of what he sees as the essential medieval Weltanschauung which preceded them, and whose time has now come round again. This world view is based on the Religious Attitude. The Religious Attitude is founded on "the sane classical dogma of Original Sin",⁴⁰ and a

³⁸Speculations, p.33.

³⁹ibid, p.34.

⁴⁰ibid, p.117.

recognition of the discontinuity between the organic world in which we live and the world of ethical or religious values, which contain an "anti-vital" element. The religious attitude sees the archetypal symbol of human existence in the Wheel, one of the central elements of medieval iconography. Existence, it is implied, is cyclical; things cannot get much better or worse than they have always been. Vitalist humanism, however, has distorted this view, and pretends that change for the better (progress) is not only possible but inevitable, and in the nature of things. Goethe suggested that a better analogy for human activity was the Spiral. Hulme dismisses this as "a lasting and devastating stupidity": "you disguise the wheel by making it run up an inclined plane; then it becomes 'Progress', which is the modern substitute for religion."⁴¹

In Hulme's critique, Goethe is a spokesman of the humanist-romantic Weltanschauung which has prevailed in Europe since the Renaissance. Hulme suggests this is all wrong.

The attempt to explain the absolute of religious and ethical values in terms of the categories appropriate to the essentially relative and non-absolute vital zone, leads to the entire misunderstanding of these values, and to the creation of a series of mixed or bastard phenomena, which will be the subject of these notes. (C.f. Romanticism in literature, Relativism in ethics, Idealism in philosophy, and Modernism in religion.)⁴²

He sets up the doctrine of Original Sin, and the idea of Progress, as the bases of two opposed and irreconcilable ways of looking at the world. Such ideas or assumptions are

⁴¹ ibid, p.35.

⁴² ibid, p.10.

important not merely to an élite of intellectuals and artists. Their operation is instinct in every stratum of a culture, for they are "doctrines felt as facts, which are the source of all the other more material characteristics of a period".⁴³

For the Middle Ages these "facts" were the belief in the subordination of man to certain absolute values, the radical imperfection of man, the doctrine of original sin. Everyone would assent to the assertion that these beliefs were held by the men of the Middle Ages. But that is not enough. It is necessary to realize that these beliefs were the centre of their whole civilization, and that even the character of their economic life was regulated by them - in particular by the kind of ethics which springs from the acceptance of Sin as a fact.⁴⁴

The humanist and romantic attitude upset this medieval Weltanschauung, and this led to a complete change in all values.

The problem of evil disappears, the conception of sin loses all meaning. Man may be that bastard thing, "a harmonious character" ... Progress is thus possible, and order is a merely negative conception ... The true nature both of the human and of the divine is falsified.⁴⁵

Hulme sees no point in arguing out the respective cases.

"I regard the difference between the two attitudes as simply the difference between true and false."⁴⁶ The triumph of the anthropocentric doctrine of progress was, in Hulme's view, a disaster.

You get a change from a certain profundity and intensity to that flat and insipid optimism which, passing through its first stage of decay in Rousseau, has finally culminated in the state of slush in which we have the misfortune to live.⁴⁷

⁴³ ibid, p.51. In some ways this formulation anticipates Eliot's desideratum of the Unified Sensibility.

⁴⁴ ibid.

⁴⁵ ibid, p.48.

⁴⁶ ibid, p.55.

⁴⁷ ibid, p.80.

Hulme's arguments are consistent, not to say repetitive. This binary opposition between classical/religious and romantic/humanist - two categories separated, as Hulme disarmingly put it, by "the difference between true and false" - is elaborated, or at least restated, in his now famous essay on "Romanticism and Classicism".⁴⁸ It may be noted that, in attacking Romanticism, Hulme aligns himself with Maurras, Lasserre, and the Action Française. "I make no apology," he says,⁴⁹ "for dragging in politics here; romanticism both in England and France is associated with certain political views" - in France particularly with the Revolution; and the generative force of that revolution was the idea of Liberty. The revolutionaries "had been taught by Rousseau that man was by nature good, that it was only bad laws and customs that had suppressed him. Remove all these and the infinite possibilities of man would have a chance."⁵⁰ Romanticism followed Rousseau in believing man to be an infinite reservoir of possibilities, innately good.

One can define the classical quite clearly as the exact opposite to this. Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organization that anything decent can be got out of him.⁵¹

Hulme is forced to admit that this view was "a little shaken" by Darwinism, which "seems to admit the possibility of future progress". But "today the contrary

⁴⁸ ibid, pp.111-140.

⁴⁹ ibid, p.115.

⁵⁰ ibid, p.116.

⁵¹ ibid. We have already seen Wells's Mr. Britling considering a similar view of human nature.

hypothesis makes headway in the shape of de Vries' mutation theory, that each new species comes into existence not gradually by the accumulation of small steps, but suddenly in a jump, a kind of sport, and that once in existence it remains absolutely fixed."⁵² This piece of luck enabled Hulme to adumbrate the 'classical' view with an appearance of scientific backing. For institutional backing, he need not look very far.

One may note here that the Church has always taken the classical view since the defeat of the Pelagian heresy and the adoption of the same classical dogma of original sin.⁵³

Furthermore, classicism

is absolutely identical with the normal religious attitude. I should put it this way: That part of the fixed nature of man is the belief in the Deity. This should be as fixed and true for every man as belief in the existence of matter and in the objective world.⁵⁴

Sometimes, however, these instincts are suppressed or displaced. They must find an outlet.

You don't believe in a God, so you begin to believe that man is a god. You don't believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth. In other words, you get Romanticism. The concepts that are right and

⁵² ibid, pp.116-117. But see J.A. Mazzeo, The Design of Life, Macdonald, 1967, pp.160-161: "De Vries, along with others, rediscovered Mendel's laws and suggested mutation as the mechanism of evolutionary change. Yet ... only two of the eight thousand cases he cited [in his account of an experiment undertaken to support his theory] were mutations. Most of the rest were reversions to parental types in unusual hybrids ... Mutations are, in fact, the ultimate source of genetic change, but they do not work in the way De Vries thought ... Any mutations which are random and not related in some way to the environment of the organism at the time they occur simply cannot explain adaptation. Moreover, most true mutations are disadvantageous and even lethal."

⁵³ Speculations, p.117.

⁵⁴ ibid.

proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. It is like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table. Romanticism then, and this is the best definition I can give it, is spilt religion.⁵⁵

The targets of Hulme's polemics - romanticism, liberalism, humanism, "slush" - are suspiciously interchangeable, and they are all castigated, above all, for their falsity. His own values, and the attitudes he champions, are unfalsifiable because he fails to define them. His polemic is adversary and invariable. The villain of the piece is attacked with vigour and scorn, whatever costume he happens to be wearing at the moment (romanticism, etc.). This impostor has stalked the stage of history since the end of the middle ages, but Hulme is confident that the time is approaching when he shall be played out, in all his guises, and his usurpation of the older, more renunciative values shall be annulled.

What has all this to do with the literature of the Great War? The influence of Hulme's prewar writings is not calculable. However locally intense it may have been, it certainly did not operate in anything but a very limited sphere. The same must, obviously, be said of his personal influence on the intellectual and artistic life of prewar London (although it should be added that the scope of his acquaintance was hardly less remarkable than - and indeed largely overlapped - that of the egregious Ezra Pound). Aside from these imponderables, Hulme's frontal assault on such values as are associated with

⁵⁵ ibid. The simile is not a very considered one, but it accounts happily for the viscosity of Brooke's 1914, for example.

liberalism, humanism, and romanticism, is worth remarking. Such reaction against what must be recognised as the prevailing current of English culture is usually thought of as subsequent to, or resultant from, the experience of the Great War and the loss of confidence in that culture - traditions, institutions, habits - which the war provoked. The case of Hulme, among others, shows this to be a simplification. And when the war came in 1914, Hulme was not exultant (in the manner, say, of the Italian Futurists) but nor was he surprised. It seemed to confirm his belief that the idea of progress was a delusion, and also that the Weltanschauung of western European civilisation was on the point of a radical change. "I admit that the new [postwar] order of society will be different from the old," he wrote at the end of 1915. "The old was breaking up before; the war did not cause the decay, it merely announced the fact on a hoarding."⁵⁶

With the outbreak of war, Hulme joined the Honourable Artillery Company as a private. (The Honourable Artillery Company, after the inscrutable manner of army nomenclature, was an infantry unit.) His Diary from the Trenches⁵⁷ is a cool and very observant document. He was wounded in France in April 1915. When he returned to the front, it was (through the almost godly machinations of Edward Marsh) as an officer with the Royal Marine Artillery. While on convalescent leave in England, Hulme contributed a series

⁵⁶ Further Speculations, p.179.

⁵⁷ Further Speculations, pp.147-169.

of articles about the war for The New Age, and later for The Cambridge Magazine, under the nom de guerre of "North Staffs". In these seven essays,⁵⁸ as Herbert Read explains,

he gave an intellectual defence of the militarist ideology that caused surprise not only to the militarists, to whom it was as strange as it might be deemed unnecessary, but also to the pacifists, who had been regarded as constituting a close corporation of the intelligentsia.⁵⁹

A certain carelessness of presentation and argument suggests that Hulme was (as he may very well have been) in a hurry when he wrote these articles. Nevertheless, his attack on the pacifists - and particularly on the "faded Rousseauism"⁶⁰ with which he mischievously accuses Bertrand Russell (of all people) - has all his familiar vigour. It also has all his familiar arguments. Pacificism is confronted, challenged and routed in exactly the same terms and for the same reasons as Hulme had used to belabour romanticism, and the rest. His consistency is remarkable, and clearly "This hammering home of unpopular ideas is the technique of the propagandist, not of the philosopher".⁶¹ Like a referee (not unbiased) Hulme introduces the two compound contestants, and sets up a dialectic between two

⁵⁸Further Speculations, pp.170-205.

⁵⁹Introduction to Speculations, p.xi.

⁶⁰Further Speculations, p.181.

⁶¹Hynes, Introduction to Further Speculations, p.xv.

opposed ethics. There is the familiar polarisation.⁶²

1) Rationalist, humanitarian; the fundamental values as Life and Personality, and everything has reference to that. It is almost universally but, I suppose, not essentially, connected with the optimistic conception of human nature. Mr. Russell talks of "ever widening horizons ... shining vision of the future ... life and hope and joy" ... As life is its Fundamental value, it leads naturally to pacifism, and tends to regard conceptions like Honour, etc., as empty words, which cannot deceive the emancipated.

2) The more heroic or tragic system of human values. - Values are not relative only to life, but are objective and absolute, and many of them are above life. This ethic is not, therefore, bound to condemn all sacrifice of life ... It is generally associated with a more pessimistic conception of the nature of man.⁶³

(Reasonably enough, Bertrand Russell complained: "I wish North Staffs would tell us explicitly what are the things which he values; for so long as he keeps silence about this, the controversy remains indefinite.")⁶⁴

Hulme maintains that the pacifists cannot conceive that liberty might be endangered by the German army because they take liberty for granted as a fact of life, immune to accident. They believe it to be "grounded on the nature of things", like the balance of power. "Being assumed,

⁶²For what it is worth, it has been suggested that the prewar vogue among artists for drawing up adversary lists, instigated by the first Futurist manifesto, and copied in Apollinaire's "L'Antitradition Futuriste" and in the first number of Blast, betokens a certain fatal bellicosity in the prevailing Zeitgeist. This may be true. It must also be admitted that Paul Fussell's theory that such "gross dichotomising", in its postwar manifestations, is a result of the experience and memory of the war, is to the same degree convincing. See Fussell, op.cit., pp.75-113 and passim.

⁶³Further Speculations, pp.199-200.

⁶⁴Letter to The Cambridge Magazine, vol. V, no. 17, reprinted in Further Speculations, p.213.

like democracy, to be of the nature of the law of gravitation, it would be absurd to fight for it."⁶⁵ He cites Russell's view - expounded in Principles of Social Reconstruction - that "the only things worth fighting for are the things of the spirit, but these things are not subject to force";⁶⁶ and demonstrates briskly that this is true of the principle of such things as freedom, but not of the fact. A man's principles may or may not be inviolate, but he can still always be locked up, or killed, by force majeure. In the same essay, "Inevitability Inapplicable", Hulme goes again for what, with some accuracy, he believed to be the jugular vein of romantic liberalism.

There are certain habits of thought, which make a realization of the actual nature of Force, very difficult... [Here Hulme digresses to take a swipe at H.G. Wells's early confused enthusiasm for the war] ... Perhaps, the one that has the most unfortunate influences is the belief in inevitable progress. If the world is making for good, then good can never be in serious danger.⁶⁷

We have already seen how, embarrassed and frightened by the cynical shadows which the war cast across the assumptions of liberal culture, Wells's Mr. Britling reached for his prayerbook and his atlas.

The naked presence of Force as a political factor is one of the problems most germane to a good deal of twentieth-century thought,⁶⁸ and one which, according to Hulme, liberalism could not cope with. To him, however, it was the outward and visible form of a fact of spiritual life.

⁶⁵ ibid, p.171.

⁶⁶ Russell abandoned this view in the 'thirties.

⁶⁷ Further Speculations, pp.174-175.

⁶⁸ Which is not to say that it did not exist as a factor in previous centuries, but merely that it did not exist so prominently as a problem.

The evil of the world is not merely due to the existence of oppression. It is part of the nature of things and just as man is not naturally good and has only achieved anything as the result of a certain discipline, the "good" here does not preserve itself, but is also preserved by discipline.⁶⁹

And this incidentally leads to an idea of sacrifice rather more mature than that of Rupert Brooke.

These sacrifices are as negative, barren, and as necessary as the work of those who repair sea-walls.⁷⁰

The trouble with Hulme's essays on war, as Russell complained, is the lack of any positive ethical standpoint. "The more heroic or tragic system of values", like the "religious attitude" of the earlier essays, goes almost completely undefined. There is an interesting, tantalising hint, in the last of his essays for The Cambridge Magazine, in which Hulme denies Bertrand Russell's contention (the controversy was now in full swing) that war encourages and releases regressive and atavistic tendencies, such as "the blindness of inherited instinct

⁶⁹ Further Speculations, p.184.

⁷⁰ ibid. A remarkably similar analogy - to be discussed later - occurred to David Jones, who wrote: "Two armies face and hold their crumbling limites intact. They're worthy of an intelligent song for all the stupidity of their contest. A boast for the dyke keepers, for the march wardens." The equation of the Great War soldiers with boundary-keepers between two warring elements would be familiar to anyone who had even heard of the western front. The specifically aqueous metaphor is likely to have been suggested by the practical experience of private soldiers who had had to live in the front line trenches and for whom, as Barbusse recorded, "l'enfer, c'est l'eau". Hulme, Jones and Barbusse had all shared this experience at different times.

and the sinister influence of anti-social interests ... the lust for blood." Hulme maintains that, on the contrary, war may have an opposite and salutary effect, forcing men to recognise and act on "the Heroic values (thus using the word in the widest possible sense)".⁷¹

What might these values be? Unfortunately, Hulme does not say, except to insist, familiarly, that they are "absolute" and "superior to values based on life and personality".⁷² The anti-vitalism which leads Hulme to accept, if not to welcome, the war, remains vague; a vagueness it shares, ironically enough, with the anti-vitalism of the 1914 sonnets, which had seemed its polar opposite.

Even drums [Hulme wrote in his last essay on war in The Cambridge Magazine⁷³] may not blind a man's eyes by rousing forgotten animal instincts, but rather enable him to see the real nature of ethical values by breaking up the habits which hinder his perception of such facts in a calmer rational life.

He was killed on 28 September 1917. He had nearly completed a book on the art of Jacob Epstein, and was said to have been writing a book on gunnery, at the time of his death. Both perished with him.

⁷¹ibid, p.201.

⁷²ibid.

⁷³ibid.

CHAPTER 2

Péguy, Barbusse, Vaché.

Deux armées aux prises, c'est une grande armée qui se suicide.

Charles Pierre Péguy, like Rupert Brooke in this respect if in no other, belongs to the myth of 1914. He was killed, at the age of forty-one, in the second month of the war. His career, in literature and politics, seems an intractable tangle of contradictions. He was a mystical poet who, as publisher, performed the economic miracle of keeping the Cahiers de la Quinzaine afloat for fourteen years. He was a Catholic convert, and an anti-clericalist; and a dedicated internationalist who spent nine years preparing for an international war in which he was more than prepared to fight. He excoriated the present in terms of a utopian future which often sounds like a utopian view of the past. He was a socialist, nationalist, Dreyfusard, Catholic, controversialist, and a sort of saint. And he was a prophet and early victim of the Great War.

L'homme se consoleraît aisément de vieillir, et de passer, et de disparaître, puisque telle est sa nature, et que telle est sa destinée, s'il avait au moins cette consolation que les générations passent et que l'humanité demeure. Nous n'avons malheureusement plus cette consolation même; et même nous avons la certitude contraire, que l'humanité ne demeure pas. Les générations passent, et l'humanité ne passe pas moins.¹

The expression of such a sentiment would not be unusual after 1946, or even after 1945, or possibly even after 1918. But this was written, in an essay called "Les Suppliants Parallèles", in the Cahiers de la Quinzaine in December 1905. It may be surprising that Péguy, a

¹ Charles Péguy, Oeuvres en Prose, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, 1959, Vol. I, p.932.

Frenchman of the Third Republic, and a Parisian of what has been called the belle époque should have insisted so vehemently on the mortality of civilisations, and of the species itself. But even in 1905 such intimations were not so far to seek. Russian Jewry had recently been assassinated or dispersed. The Turks had massacred three hundred thousand Armenians. Péguy was admirably, and unusually, alert to such disgraces. He was a committed internationalist, although the nearest he came to setting foot outside France in his lifetime was when he boarded a train for the front, optimistically destined for Berlin, in August 1914.

But Péguy's concern, in 1905, was not only for foreign affairs. "Notre Patrie", a very long and desultory essay for the Cahiers de la Quinzaine, deals with the spirit of the people of Paris, as Péguy observed them during the state visit of King Alfonso of Spain in May and June of that year. He notes that the citizens of the republic - this sovereign people, "peuple de rois, peuple roi"² - cannot resist a sovereign. He pretends to be shocked that these people, so loath to turn out after work and improve themselves at the Universités Populaires provided by their enlightened government, will enthusiastically down tools in the middle of the working day, and line the streets to enjoy a military, royal procession. The pomp of the celebrations recalls Victor Hugo's funeral, exactly twenty years before; and Péguy

² ibid., I, p.814.

goes on to reflect how precisely the spirit of his contemporary Parisians - "peuple antithétique, déjà prêt pour Hugo"³ - was embodied in the politics and character of the great poet of the city.

Péguy sketches a Hugo of many contradictions, "un Hugo cérémoniel et cérémonieux, le véritable Hugo enfin ... un Hugo pacifiste sans doute, comme le peuple, dans le peuple, mais, comme le peuple, pacifiste de grande armée; un vieil Hugo populaire militaire; un Hugo de parades et de défilés ..." ⁴ He finds a radical inconsistency in Hugo's professed pacifism, and points out, at length, that the language of much of Hugo's greatest verse draws directly (and without irony) on the idiom of heroic warfare. The poet of peace never ceases to dream of war. And in this he accurately embodies the duplicity of contemporary Frenchmen towards war, and towards their army:

la situation du peuple, situation fausse, double, triple, comme la plupart des situations populaires modernes; le peuple veut: s'amuser de l'armée; insulter, injurier l'armée, ce qui est bien encore, si l'on veut, un moyen de s'en amuser; rêver de guerres.

The people are, in fact, armchair militarists:

[le peuple] aime autant que jamais les guerres, pourvu qu'elles soient faites par d'autres, par d'autres peuples ... Le peuple est beaucoup plus lâche qu'autrefois, pour faire la guerre. Mais il est toujours aussi violent, qu'autrefois.⁵

Like Victor Hugo, they too are "pacifistes de grande armée". Their pacifism issues more from cowardice than conviction.

³ ibid., I, p. 818.

⁴ ibid., I, p. 820.

⁵ ibid.

Péguy next turns his attention to Hugo's grand gesture - his stand against Napoleon III in the name of the freedom of the people. He argues (convincingly, I think) that the vehemence of Hugo's scorn for the usurping 'little Napoleon' is energised by the poet's submerged worship of the first emperor. Louis-Napoleon was certainly a tyrant; but, more unforgiveably, he was an ersatz Bonaparte. He earned the poet's contempt by failing to measure up to the heroic standard of Napoleon I, whom Hugo indiscreetly admired, and with whom he almost obsessively identified; for "Victor Hugo poète ne sortit jamais du culte napoléonien".⁶

This long digression on Hugo's napoleonics seems to have brought Péguy some way from the streets of Paris in June 1905. But as it finishes, we are shown that in fact we have never left those streets, the starting-place of "Notre Patrie". In the serpentine coils of Péguy's discourse, we are apt from time to time to lose sight of the head, the controlling idea. In fact, "Notre Patrie" has a single theme, announced in the title - the state of the nation. Its different subjects, pursued in a manner which seems sometimes random, even perverse, are subject to a certain unity; they stand in metaphoric relation to one another, and to the theme of the essay. Victor Hugo's career is a symbolic metaphor, and the events of May and June 1905 (including the attempted assassination of the Spanish king) a dramatic metaphor for the spirit of the people

⁶ibid., I, p. 837.

of Paris - and Paris itself of course stands for France and (as we shall see in Péguy's poem Eve) also acts as a reciprocal metaphor for the Harmonious City, the poet's Utopia.

Thus: while Victor Hugo was, by persuasion, pacifist and republican, much of his creative energy was fuelled from resources of a latent militarism and imperialism which for obvious reasons could find no outlet in action. And although the people of Paris in 1905 would probably describe themselves as pacifists and republicans, they respond immediately and fervently to the ceremony of royalty and militarism, while affecting to have outgrown both. Péguy finds this disturbing.

"Notre Patrie" also considers another and more important contemporary event in its final pages. It appears to be a coda, but emerges as the underlying theme, suggested in the first paragraphs but here for the first time stated. Péguy describes his Parisians waking up, after the Spanish king's visit, to rumours of war. For at the same time as the celebrations for Alfonso were taking place in Paris, a more serious drama was being enacted in Morocco. The Third Republic's rapid improvement in its international position was finally being challenged by the German Empire. France had been taking an interest in Morocco (with British connivance) which was deemed, in Berlin, to be rather more than avuncular.

To the German government it seemed that the time had come to put a limit to the rapid improvement in France's international position. The defeat of France's ally Russia in the Far East, and the unrest produced in the French Army by the policy of the Combes government, apparently provided a favourable

moment for intervention. The Emperor Wilhelm II was therefore sent to Tangier, where he insisted, in a speech that was calculated to resound through Europe, on the independence of the Sultan and the maintenance of German interests in Morocco. This was in effect a demand that France should repudiate the policy of Delcassé [the foreign secretary], who was prepared to accept the challenge by a formal rejection of the German démarche. The Chamber was less bellicose and did not support his demand for an uncompromising reply. Moreover his influence in parliament, which he had almost totally abandoned for work in his bureau, had greatly diminished. The German government therefore had the satisfaction of having forced his resignation.⁷

To the French people, who could not (and would not) forget 1870, this German challenge and their subsequent diplomatic humiliation seemed an affront, if not a deliberate provocation to war. In this matter, Péguy was in little doubt. In a later article for the Cahiers, "Les Suppliants Parallèles" of December 1905, he spelt out his view of Germany's intentions.

Car il ne suffit plus de dire que nous sommes sous la menace militaire allemande. Il faut dire aujourd'hui que nous sommes sous la préparation militaire allemande. Et même il faut dire que nous sommes aujourd'hui sous la promesse ferme militaire allemande.⁸

Whether or not a European war was as imminent in 1905 as Péguy believed, it did not happen. The Tangier crisis passed; but it had given the French a taste of what was to come nine years later, and, if Péguy's observation was correct, that taste was neither wholly disagreeable nor wholly unfamiliar. There is something a little uncanny in his description (or imagination) of the manner in which the Parisians received the news of the possibility

⁷ Alfred Cobban, A History of Modern France, Volume 3, Penguin Books, 1965, pp.97-98. Cobban adds: "It was a Pyrrhic victory, for an international conference, held at Algeçiras in 1906, recognized, as well as the general international interest in Morocco, the primary role of France there." (p.98)

⁸ Oeuvres en Prose, I, p.923.

of war. It comes to them, he says, as "une nouvelle venue de l'intérieur". In the closing paragraphs of "Notre Patrie", the prospect of reaping the whirlwind reaches the French in a manner much more intimate than a press bulletin.

Tout le monde ... en même temps connut que la menace d'une invasion allemande est présente, qu'elle était là, que l'imminence était réelle.

Ce n'était pas une nouvelle qui se communiquât de bouche en bouche, que l'on se communiquât, latéralement, comme les nouvelles ordinaires; ce que les gens qui se rencontraient se communiquaient, ce n'était pas la nouvelle, ce n'était que la confirmation, pour chacun d'eux, d'une nouvelle venue de l'intérieur; la connaissance de cette réalité se répandait bien de proche en proche; mais elle se répandait de l'un à l'autre comme une contagion de vie intérieure, de connaissance intérieure, de reconnaissance, presque de réminiscence platonicienne, de certitude intérieure, non comme une communication verbale ordinaire; en réalité c'était en lui-même que chacun de nous trouvait, recevait, retrouvait la connaissance totale, immédiate, prête, sourde, immobile et toute faite de la menace qui était présente ... à la première intonation, tout homme entendait en lui, retrouvait, écoutait, comme familière et connue, cette résonance profonde, cette voix qui n'était pas une voix du dehors, cette voix de mémoire engloutie là et comme amoncelée on ne savait depuis quand ni pour quoi.⁹

It becomes clear that the whole essay has been a preparation for the inexorable sonorities of this conclusion. Its three subjects - Hugo and the Napoleons, Paris and royalism, France and international war - are shown to have a formal congruence, and to illustrate a single theme. In a series of modulations - "contagion de vie intérieure, de connaissance intérieure, de reconnaissance, presque de réminiscence platonicienne, de certitude intérieure" - Péguy suggests that intimations

⁹ ibid., I, pp. 852-853.

of violence come home to the French, to be greeted with an inward re-cognition.¹⁰ In other words, the perennial claim of pacifism to represent the inner desires of the people is misguided. Péguy does not develop the idea in "Notre Patrie", nor does he seem to pass judgement. But the long quarrel with his former ally Jaurès was in large measure due to the latter's stubborn belief in pacifism (Jaurès was to be assassinated by a fanatic just before the outbreak of war); and it was at the time of the Tangier crisis that Péguy hurried along to the Bon Marché to buy a pair of boots for the march on Berlin.

Henceforth, the promise of war with Germany was to become one of Péguy's central preoccupations, as the Dreyfus Affair had earlier been. As R. Gibson says, "the realization that war was inevitable provided Péguy with the crusade he had been seeking ever since the Dreyfus Affair had degenerated from a campaign for absolute justice into a squalid political struggle".¹¹ The 1905 Cahiers are of considerable importance in terms of Péguy's development as apocalyptic socialist and anarcho-Christian. His early Catholicism had lapsed and he did not rediscover his faith until his serious illness of 1908. But throughout his period of atheism, and not just in the idiom of his dream of the Harmonious City,

¹⁰ It is interesting that Georges Sorel, whose Réflexions sur la Violence (1908) was to find an English translator in T.E. Hulme, was a friend of Péguy and a contributor to the Cahiers.

¹¹ R. Gibson, "The First World War and the Literary Consciousness", in French Literature and its Background, Vol.6, ed. John Cruickshank, Oxford University Press, 1970, p.56.

his damaged Christianity is impacted into his fervent socialism. One of the fundamental questions addressed in Péguy's work can be represented as this: Is the impulse towards war an innate human quality?¹² It may be remembered that H.G. Wells, who belongs, as I have suggested, in the centre of the liberal and romantic tradition, at one time considered war to be an aberration which the species could outgrow, much as Freud considered religion as a neurosis which could be cured. The counter-argument to this, which has already been glimpsed in T.E. Hulme's militarist writings, maintains that the war-instinct exists in steady state in the psyche, and indeed defines our condition as homo pugnans; that making war is intrinsic to human nature. As a socialist, and so by definition an ameliorist, Péguy was bound to believe that war could be outgrown. As a Catholic, and so a believer in original sin and human imperfectibility, he was bound to think otherwise. And as an observer of the international scene he was convinced, from 1905 or before, that war was bound to come. These tensions reach some sort of solution in his long poem Eve, published in 1913.

Socialism carries on its back the myth of perfectibility, and so contains the possibility of the abolition of war. But Christianity implies a human nature radically flawed, and beyond redemption from its own self-harm except by grace. The question of war then

¹²Much of Freud's work after 1914 can be seen as a search for the answer to the same question. See especially the selection in Sigmund Freud, Civilisation, War and Death, ed. John Rickman, Hogarth Press, 1968.

becomes a crucial testing-ground for the compatibility of the two poles of socialism and Christianity - and the apparently contradictory implications of each - between which the field of Péguy's intellectual life was disposed. He had been brought up as a Catholic. His early espousal of socialism necessarily included an element of anti-clericalism, though he did not whole-heartedly endorse the anti-clerical legislation of 1900 and subsequent years, and was hostile to the arrogantly scientiste secularism behind it. The implications of Christianity and socialism are deployed, if not exactly confronted, in the Eve, especially in the prayer of intercession, for dead warriors, at its centre.

In January 1910, Péguy had published Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc (called 'the Christian Joan' to distinguish it from 'the socialist Joan', Jeanne d'Arc of 1897). The Christian Joan announced Péguy's re-espousal of the Catholic faith, and was greeted with amusement by the remnants of the anti-Dreyfusards, who considered it as the document of Péguy's defection from the anarcho-socialism which had committed him, and the Cahiers de la Quinzaine, to the front rank of the Dreyfusards. Péguy replied in "Notre Jeunesse" (Cahiers, July 1910) that the Dreyfusards had fought a heroic battle for truth, but that their ideals had subsequently been compromised and betrayed - "tout commence en mystique et finit en politique". Dreyfusism is seen as a kind of vocation: "Et notre affaire Dreyfus aura été la dernière des opérations de la mystique républicaine."¹³

¹³Oeuvres en Prose, II, p.506.

The passionate "mystique" of Dreyfusism gave birth to its "politique", but then the ungrateful child devoured the parent. "Elle fut, comme toute affaire qui se respecte, une affaire essentiellement mystique. Elle vivait de sa mystique. Elle est morte de sa politique."¹⁴ Péguy announces with pride that he, and the Cahiers, have almost alone remained faithful to the ideals of Dreyfusism. His rediscovered Catholicism can only strengthen that faith.

However, there can be no doubt that Péguy experienced a strain at this time between the demands of the radical socialism of his youth, to which he remained loyal, and the religion of his childhood, now rediscovered, to which he owed a debt of loyalty. Yeats suggested that we make rhetoric from the quarrel with others, and poetry from the quarrel with ourselves. Péguy had published no verse since the socialist Joan of 1897: after his return to his early faith he wrote the Christian Joan and, three years later, his Eve was published.

It is most difficult to give a brief account of the one thousand nine hundred and three quatrains of alexandrines which make up Péguy's Eve.¹⁵ In fact the

¹⁴ ibid., p.536.

¹⁵ One critic, at least, has exemplarily shipwrecked in his attempt to describe Péguy's style. "Péguy lui-même est ce chrétien. Cela transparaît dans son style; ce grand style bronzé, ensoleillé, qui fait crânement ses marches quotidiennes; toujours ferme, toujours debout; toujours adéquat; bourré de vie; gavé de vitamines; musclé, nerveux, pétulant; ce style qui ne cesse jamais de plaisanter; ce style qui rigole sans cesse; ce style si intelligent, ce style qui laisse venir l'idée pour la saisir au passage, lui ouvrir le ventre et l'explorer jusqu'au fond des entrailles; ce style qui ne reconnaît nulle part de noeuds, ce style qui dénoue tout, qui ouvre tout, qui délivre tout." P.L. Borel, De Péguy à Sartre, Editions H. Messeiller, Neuchâtel, 1964, p.12.

poem is huge, portentous, turgid, mesmeric, dignified, soporific, liturgical and strangely alluring. It must be described as a sort of spiritual epic. It is not a narrative poem, although based on certain events in the Christian story - Paradise, the Fall, the Incarnation and Passion, the Judgement (although in the linear sequence of Péguy's poem, the Passion precedes the Nativity and both are preceded by the Resurrection of the dead; there is no Creation and there is no Hell). It is a dramatic poem, a monologue spoken by Christ, and addressed to a silent Eve.

The poem begins with Christ reminding Eve of the paradise garden of the childhood of man, which is described in the colours and shapes of the Orléans countryside where Péguy's own childhood had been spent. The verse here moves slowly, a procession of natural pomp - fish, flesh, fowl and fruit are evoked in a nostalgic memory of content. Christ salutes Eve as the anima of mankind, with love and with respect, although not without irony. She is exalted for her experience; she has foresuffered all, but she is unique in having seen better days, and having herself fallen and created misery. Postlapsarian Eve has metamorphosed into a French housewife. Her activities are now concerned with arranging, budgeting, and tidying up. The psychology of the fallen, as Péguy describes it, is one which has acquired formulae and calculation, with a consequent loss of spontaneous life. His Eve, the archetypal mother, would have behaved in character at Cana of Galilee, but would have reached for her broom at the time of the Annunciation.

O femme qui rangez les palais et les tours,
 Et les retournements et les iniquités,
 Et la jeune détresse et les antiquités,
 Et la vieille tendresse et les nouveaux amours,

Femmes, je vous le dis, vous rangeriez Dieu même,
 S'il descendait un jour dedans votre maison ...¹⁶

Ranger, compter, ramasser; these are the key words of this section, repeated again and again in a kind of litany as if to insist on an adaptation of Péguy's famous dictum - 'tout commence en mystique et finit en économique'. What will become of this mankind, Christ asks, when the dead awake? The resurrection of the dead, a very moving passage, graphically evokes the bewilderment and anguish of the refugee column; and Christ's exhortation to faith, which follows, takes the form of a simple economic metaphor:

Vous le savez assez, ô mon âme, ô ma mère,
 Maîtresse de mesure et d'un sort opportun,
 Maîtresse du décompte et du large sommaire:
 Que nous n'avons que Dieu qui rende cent pour un. (p.989)

Then follows the central movement or climate of the poem, the Prayer for the Carnal, beginning with a hymn to the dead in battle ("Heureux ceux qui sont morts ..." - the leitmotif carries associations from the formula of the Beatitudes, and the 'Beatus ille' of traditional pastoral). Christ intercedes on behalf of the dead warriors with his Father at the Judgement. Their spilt blood is also the blood of the Passion, for through their death they participate in Christ, and He in them.

¹⁶ Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, 1962, p.954. Subsequent page references in this section of the text are to this edition.

C'étaient les mêmes pleurs et c'est la même race.
 C'était le même sang, le sang héréditaire.
 C'étaient les mêmes pas suivant la même trace.
 C'était le même corps fait de la même terre.(p.1039.)

A long account of the physical pain of Christ's Passion - a theme which haunts the Christian Joan - then gives place to the softer colours and comic mode of the Nativity. At this stage, Christ and Eve have changed places. The poem had begun with Christ contemplating the earthly activity of Eve: now Eve is the spectator and Christ an active participant in earthly affairs, and a human being. A panorama of the earth he is to inherit is followed by a satiric catalogue of what we shall not need on the day of judgement, the satire being directed largely against the germanic intellectualism of the Sorbonne, which Péguy considered arid and reductionist and altogether beside the point.¹⁷

Et ce ne sera pas ces amateurs de mots
 Qui nous remplaceront l'auguste parabole.
 Et ce ne sera pas leur comice agricole
 Qui nous remplacera notre jour des Rameaux. (p.1137.)

Secular or religious clerics will be equally at a loss on the Last Day. Péguy's Parisian Christ - for he unguardedly refers to "nous autres Français" (p.1157 and passim) - says that then they, with the rest, must follow the two tutelars of France, St. Joan of Orleans and St. Genevieve of Paris, both liberating warrior-descendants of Eve and protectresses of the French people, on the road to the City of God. And with their celebration, the poem ends.

¹⁷ At about this time Henri Bergson, Péguy's former master, was being suspected by the intellectual party of imprecision, and by the Church of subversion. His work was put on the Index in June 1914.

This hardly adequate sketch of Péguy's Eve may at least, I hope, give some idea of the context of the section of the poem most relevant to Great War writing, the hymn to the dead warriors which begins "Heureux ceux qui sont morts".¹⁸

The hymn to the dead grows out of Christ's reminding Eve of the poor partiality of man's offering to God.

Nous n'apportons jamais sur la table d'offrandes
Que les restes des coeurs que nous avons prêtés. (p.1022.)

Because we are of the earth, says Péguy's Christ, our loyalty to earthly things is bound to interfere with our loyalty to God. Man's loyalty to the earth, and his carnal imperfection, are both insisted on by Christ through the idiom of war: war become a general metaphor for life. Warfare is our nature and is the natural result of our feeling for the "terre charnelle" of which we are made. As with David Jones's adumbration of 'knownsite', what is involved here is a local and purely defensive type of loyalty. Even so, it distracts men from their obligation to God.

Vous nous voyez debout parmi les nations.
Nous battons-nous toujours pour la terre charnelle.
Ne déposerons-nous sur la table éternelle
Que des coeurs pleins de guerre et de séditions. (p.1027.)

¹⁸I have seen this section printed as a separate piece. It should be emphasised that there are no divisions in the Eve other than the regular quatrain stanzas. And the difficulty of abstracting a single passage is exacerbated by Péguy's style; the key epithets here - charnelle, solenelle, terrestre - not only carry theological resonances but are also charged with the accumulation of their frequent earlier appearances in the work.

It is vital to remember that these words are supposed to be spoken by Christ himself, and that war is here ratified or at least excused by the participation of the Christ-speaker in that first person plural. The ambiguities of Christian doctrine when confronted by the possibility of war, which were later so to distress Wilfred Owen, would have been difficult to negotiate in a prose polemic, but in Péguy's poem a different kind of responsibility and a different kind of authorial integrity are at work. The scrupulous editor of the Cahiers - "un journal vrai" - disappears in the Eve behind a speaker who is the son of God. Whose words are these? The single stage-direction has told us: "Jésus parle". The idea that warfare is a condition and definition of life itself, and that men are de facto warriors (an idea explored, in a later phase of Great War writings, in Apollinaire's Le Couleur du Temps, and by Wilfred Owen), gives war the sanction of being natural: and the fact that Christ intercedes for all men/warriors, as one of them himself, gives it also a divine ratification. There cannot be much wrong with warfare if Christ, too, was an enlisted man.

His commitment to socialism, Christianity, nationalism, and his conviction that a European war was imminent - these must all have created a situation of spiritual distress for Péguy in 1913. It may be suggested that his conflicting doubts and misgivings could only have been resolved in a poem and, furthermore, in a poem in which the speaker is God himself. In these terms

the Eve is a poem of convenience, by which the poet in Péguy was able to reconcile the anxieties of the polemicist. To say this is, I think, not to suggest that the purpose of the Eve is to justify the coming war, nor to question the poem's sincerity.

Our identity as war-makers, Péguy's Christ continues, dictates the insufficiency of our offering to God. But it is also in every way a felix culpa, and offers us a chance of salvation.

Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour des cités charnelles.
Car elles sont le corps de la cité de Dieu.
Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour leur âtre et leur feu,
Et les pauvres honneurs des maisons paternelles. (p.1028.)

The loyalty and love of the warriors for their homeland is "le commencement/Et le premier essai" (p.1028.) of their loyalty and love for God. The carnal cities for which they have died are the body of the city of God. And this is not all. Their spilt blood is one with the spilt blood of Christ's Passion: and for this reason at least the warriors deserve redemption.

C'est le sang de la veine et le sang de l'artère,
Et le sang de ces corps misérables et nus.

Et moi-même le sang que j'ai versé pour eux,
C'était leur propre sang et du sang de la terre.
Du sang du même coeur et de la même artère.
Du sang du même peuple et des mêmes Hébreux. (p.1035.)

The carnality of the human condition is emphasised by the war/life metaphor. The literal consequence of the war/life metaphor is the inevitable shedding of blood; and the bloodshed is a sacrifice of love, and a mimesis or anamnesis of Christ's own Passion, and so deserves to be redeemed. It would be not so much incorrect as irrelevant to say that here Péguy produces, as from a

conjuror's hat, a justification for warfare in the face of God. It is true that the metaphoric consequence of the series mankind/warfare - warfare/bloodshed - bloodshed/the Passion - the Passion/redemption, produces a metaphoric justification or ratification of war, which must have come as a comfort to Péguy in 1913. It is worth observing another way in which, in the hymn to the dead warriors, death in battle is given divine ratification (as Brooke tried to give it in 1914). Here again, the political reality is slipped into the gear of metaphor and therein (or thereby) obtains the divine signature. The first instance had been warfare/passion/redemption: this one is built around the series burial/earth/paradise.

By dying, and being buried, the warriors "sont retournés/Dans la première argile et la première terre". (p.1028.) In a beautiful metaphor, Christ intercedes for them at the judgement. "Paix aux hommes de guerre".

Que Dieu mette avec eux dans le juste plateau
Ce qu'ils ont tant aimé, quelques grammes de terre.
Un peu de cette vigne, un peu de ce coteau,
Un peu de ce ravin sauvage et solitaire. (p.1030.)

The earth for which they died will tip the scales of judgement in their favour. But the earth was the underlying rhythm of the first climate of the poem, the climate of Paradise. So its metaphoric resonances, in itself and from its use elsewhere in the poem, return the buried dead to Paradise.

Et qu'ils soient reposés dans leur jeune saison.
Et qu'ils soient rétablis dans leur jeune printemps.
Et que sur leur épaule une blanche toison
Les refasse pasteurs des troupeaux importants.

Et qu'ils soient replacés dans le premier village.
 Et qu'ils soient reposés dans l'antique chaumière.
 Et qu'ils soient restaurés dans la splendeur première.¹⁹
 Et qu'ils soient remontés dans leur premier jeune âge.

By means of the pastoral metaphor, the dead warriors become assured of a place in Paradise, through the intercession of a Christ whom, as speaker, Péguy controls.²⁰ This also reconciles the Christian and the socialist in Péguy. War is indeed a condition of life; but forgiveness is available to all warriors (all men) through the intercession of the socialist Christ. The Eve distinctly illustrates the reconciling and ratifying functions which Empson, in the 'thirties, identified as the business of the pastoral mode.²¹ As a Christian socialist poem, the Eve celebrates a marriage of necessity, and through it Péguy marshals his disparate beliefs to face the war which he knew was coming.

This is all very well. But of course at the very beginning of his prayer for the dead warriors, Péguy had inserted a vital qualification:

Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour la terre charnelle,
 Mais pourvu que ce fût dans une juste guerre (p.1028.)

- which seems to beg the political question entirely.

What is a just war? To Péguy in 1913, "sous la promesse ferme militaire allemande" since 1905 or before, a just

¹⁹This passage, with its connotations of youth, the garden of Eden, springtime, return, purity, simplicity, atavism and repose, is (besides being explicitly shepherdly) a most inclusive version of pastoral.

²⁰Early in the poem, Paradise is identified as a sort of Gandhian utopia, based on love and work, and without property, overseen by a benign deity. "Dieu lui-même penché sur l'amour éternel/La revoyait fleurir dans de pauvres hameaux." (p.941.)

²¹William Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral, Chatto & Windus, 1935.

war was one fought in the defence of "quatre coins de terre" - in other words, the war France was bound soon to fight against German aggression. One cannot overestimate the importance of the historical and geographic facts in shaping the literature of the Great War in different countries. In 1914, Great Britain entered an expensive war overseas because the neutrality of a European ally had been violated. France fought, on her own soil, to repel an invasion. These were the public facts of 1914. For obvious reasons, participation in the war must, to a Frenchman, have been much less potentially problematic an action - though not necessarily less distressing - than to his British counterpart. However selfish and muddled the real motives of each belligerent in the conflict, the French, with the invader's troops on their soil from 1914 (indeed, from 1870) to 1918, enjoyed a kind of moral initiative which the British, fighting a war of intervention, did not share. (The British of course could designate their action as a kind of crusade. They did so. If the history of the Crusades had been more thoroughly investigated, however, the precedent would not have seemed so reassuring.) It must be remembered that when Péguy speaks of war, as he does in Eve, he is speaking of a morally justifiable war of self-defence.

Péguy had been convinced, since 1905, that the coming war would be the result of German aggression, a policy towards France which had been clear for all to see since Sedan and the siege of Paris, a generation before. His Eve is not primarily a poem about war (still

less about The War), but it includes a sort of preparation for war, Péguy's reconciliation of his political and spiritual principles with the prospect of participating in the conflict which he foresaw. It is like the ceremony of absolution before battle (as, in a different way, Jones's In Parenthesis is a sort of absolution after battle). The strength of this extraordinary and bizarre poem comes from Péguy's commitment to France and his rediscovered faith, and to the "première terre et la première argile" to which, in the autumn of 1914 at the first Battle of the Marne, he went down. He was forty-one years old.

During his lifetime, Péguy's readership had always been scant. His fellow-socialist Henri Barbusse, on the other hand, became a best-seller, and one of the first authors to be designated a 'war-writer'. His novel Le Feu was one of the most influential of war-writings, and remains one of the most curious. Barbusse completed it in hospital early in 1916. It appeared serially in L'Oeuvre, and was published in book form at the end of the year, when it was awarded the Prix Goncourt (the 1914 prize, which had been held over) and started to sell fast. Its success coincided with the scattered mutinies and widespread demoralisation of the French armies in

1917, and there were some who said this was more than a coincidence. Wilfred Owen read it in Edinburgh. Lenin read it in Zurich. By the end of the war, nearly a quarter of a million copies had been sold.²²

The fascination of the novel is largely a question of texture, and this is difficult to demonstrate without lengthy quotation. Two illustrations may help to show the range of effects of which Barbusse was capable. The first is part of an exchange between soldiers in an underground casualty station. They are discussing belief in God.

- Moi, fit un nouvel interlocuteur, si je n'y crois pas, c'est...

Une quinte de toux terrible continua affreusement la phrase. Quand il s'arrêta de tousser, les joues violettes, mouillé de larmes, oppressé, on lui demanda:

- Par où c' que t'es blessé, toi?

- J' suis pas blessé, j' suis malade.

- Oh alors! dit-on, d'un accent qui signifiait: tu n'es pas intéressant.

Il le comprit et fit valoir sa maladie:

- J' suis foutu. J' crache le sang. J'ai pas d' forces et, tu sais, ça r'vient pas quand ça s'en va par là.

- Ah, ah, murmurèrent les camarades, indécis, mais convaincus malgré tout de l'infériorité des maladies civiles sur les blessures.

Résigné, il baissa la tête et répéta tout bas, pour lui-même:

-J' peux pus marcher, où veux-tu qu' j'aille? (p.236)²³

There is a kind of ironical poignancy there which is often to be found in Wilfred Owen. Le Feu is full of similar small observations, discreetly rendered and often moving. But they exist side by side with passages like this, which occurs in a brief lull following an attack.

²²Frank Field, Three French Writers and the Great War, Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp.38-39.

²³Page references in the text are to Le Feu, suivi du Carnet de Guerre, Flammarion, Paris, 1965.

A corporal is speaking.

J'en ai eu trois sur les bras. J'ai frappé comme un fou. Ah! nous étions tous comme des bêtes quand nous sommes arrivés ici!

Sa voix s'élevait avec un tremblement contenu.

- Il le fallait, dit-il. Il le fallait - pour l'avenir
Il croisa les bras, hocha la tête.

- L'avenir! s'écria-t-il tout d'un coup comme un prophète. De quels yeux ceux qui vivront après nous et dont le progrès - qui vient comme la fatalité - aura enfin équilibré les consciences, regarderont-ils ces tueries et ces exploits dont nous ne savons pas même, nous qui les commettons, s'il faut les comparer à ceux des héros de Plutarque et de Corneille, ou à des exploits d'apaches!

«Et pourtant, continua Bertrand, regarde! Il y a une figure qui s'est élevée au-dessus de la guerre et qui brillera pour la beauté et l'importance de son courage...»

J'écoutais, appuyé sur un baton, penché sur lui, recueillant cette voix qui sortait, dans le silence du crépuscule, d'une bouche presque toujours silencieuse. Il cria d'une voix claire:

- Liebknecht! (p.213.)

Karl Liebknecht's admirer is Corporal Bertrand, a factory foreman in civilian life and a man of some education. He is soon to be killed. Apart from the narrator himself, all the other characters are ill-educated and largely inarticulate peasants and artisans. There are no officers, and no members of the professions libérales. (Norton Cru complains that this is dishonest of Barbusse, and even produces statistics to show that, proportionately, more members of the professions libérales were killed in the war than of any other class.)²⁴ Barbusse is single-mindedly determined to show the war as a brutal extension of the victimization of the proletariat. If members of the exploiting classes were to be shown sharing that victimization, the issue might become confused; and

²⁴J. Norton Cru, Du Témoignage, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Collection Libertés, Utrecht, 1966, p.32.

this means the humble and politically unaware soldiers must realise themselves what is being done to them, with no help from outside (except, as we shall see, from the narrator). If Barbusse's pacifist rhetoric sounds incongruous on the lips of his soldiers, and his polemic often jars unfortunately with his naturalistic narrative, this is a price which he seems to have been prepared to pay.

Le Feu is formally simple, an episodic account of the fortunes of one squad of soldiers over a period of months. It is a first person narrative, but almost entirely first person plural; the unnamed narrator shares the sufferings and confidences of his comrades but intrudes very little, his rôle being almost entirely that of an observer. He is, however, quite integrated into the group. The dozen or so named members of the squad are briefly characterised by appearance and provenance, and sometimes by a 'signature', like Marthereau with his tiresome tautologies ("C'est vrai et véritable" (p.15) etc.) or Cocon with his fund of statistics. Barbusse is seldom much concerned to differentiate them further. The squad is an early example of the collective hero in war writing. (There is something of this in Manning's Her Privates We and Jones's In Parenthesis but English war writing is more often dominated by the complicated perspective of the junior officer.) There is a great deal of dialogue in Le Feu, much of it unattributed; often Barbusse does not think it necessary to tell his reader who is speaking. The result is a steady choric effect of commentary, gossip, humour, anecdote and grumbling,

which quite properly takes up more space than anything else in the novel. Barbusse's war notebooks, appended to the 1965 edition of Le Feu, show that he took careful notes of the argot of the fighting soldiers, and incidentally suggest that several of the episodes of the novel are transcribed almost unaltered from his own experience.

In spite of Barbusse's use of certain structuring devices, to be discussed later, the danger with this sort of narrative is that it will seem amorphous, although Barbusse might legitimately claim that this is nothing but an accurate reflection of the apparent aimlessness of the fighting soldier's experience. There is a crisis in the central chapter describing the great attack, and a climax in the nightmare confusion which precedes the ponderously symbolic dawn of the last chapter. But the novel cannot really be said to develop. Certain structural ironies are at work - the chapter "La Virée" for example, describing the soldiers briefly on leave in the garishness of Paris, is flanked by the dark and underground horrors of "Le Poste de Secours" and "La Corvée"- but it might have functioned as ironically almost anywhere in the book. Indeed, apart from the first two and the last, the chapters might be shuffled without doing much damage to the book as a whole, and almost any of them might be lifted from its context to stand on its own as a short story.²⁵

²⁵This has happened to at least one: "La Permission" appears as "On Leave" in Great Short Stories of the War, with an Introduction by Edmund Blunden, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1930. It will also be remembered that Le Feu was first published in serial form.

The narrative shows the soldiers in support trenches, billeted behind the lines, on leave, at the front and in attack, and gives glimpses of their civilian prehistory. Barbusse insists as clearly as David Jones that the men he writes about are not soldiers, but more or less reluctant civilians in uniform. (Modern war-literature begins with the supersession of the mercenary volunteer by the conscript.) These glimpses of their civilian life provide a set of standards or values against which the senselessness and waste of their wartime life is weighed in the balance. This kind of juxtaposition, a very familiar one in war-writings of all kinds, is no less effective for being simple. Barbusse brings the same approach to his landscapes as to the figures in his landscapes. To describe a man's peacetime occupations, and contrast them with what he is required to do as a soldier, makes the same point as a description of what war does to a natural landscape. The strategy is the same - a demonstration that war is against nature, and therefore wrong. One example of many in Le Feu is the chapter "Le Chien", which begins by showing the southerner Fouillade attempting to have a wash in the open air, in foul weather, in front of the farmhouse where the squad is billeted during a rest period. The rest of the chapter follows him through a miserable day of acute discomfort, boredom, poverty and loneliness, made more miserable by his memories of the warm and spacious south which the war has forced him to abandon, for he is, like every soldier, a displaced person.

Il songe, les yeux clos sous ses paupières bleutées. Il revoit. C'est un de ces moments où le pays dont on est séparé prend, dans le lointain, des douceurs de créature... En haut du chemin qui sent le thym et l'immortelle si fort que cette odeur vient dans la bouche et est presque un goût, au milieu du soleil, dans une bonne brise tout parfumée et chauffée, qui n'est que le coup d'aile des rayons, sur le mont Saint-Clair, fleurit et verdoie la baraquette des siens. De là, on voit en même temps, se rejoignant, l'étang de Thau, qui est vert bouteille, et la mer Méditerranée, qui est bleu ciel, et on aperçoit aussi quelquefois, au fond du ciel indigo, le fantôme découpé des Pyrénées.

C'est là qu'il est né, qu'il a grandi, heureux, libre...
(pp.116-117)

and so on. It is not perhaps a particularly distinguished passage, and the notations of Fouillade's memory-fantasy have a suspiciously literary flavour; still, passages like this are almost de rigueur in war-writing. Retrospective pastoral is a sort of convention; in its northward-looking form it is to be found in nearly all English literature of the war. Fouillade's nostalgia is directed towards everything of which he has been dispossessed - warmth, women, money, a home. He has been reduced to mournful fellowship with Labri, the ailing farmyard dog adopted by the squad and plainly dying. There is a fundamentally conservative notion here in the way Barbusse links the idea of separation from home with the idea of a debasement in nature. The simple and inconsequential account of Fouillade's degradation illustrates, as well as Barbusse's pacifist sermons, the main point of the novel's critique of the war. It shows how war robs people of their natural rights, and makes them less than human. Whether or not it kills them as well, the damage is done in any case.

Fouillade's enforced exile is an experience shared by the rest of the squad. Poterloo, an Alsace Frenchman who is fighting on his home ground, suffers this exile most

brutally. He invites the narrator to come with him to visit his home, a mile or so away from their trenches, but on arrival they discover that the village where Poterloo lived has simply disappeared, annihilated by the artillery. The narrator watches him search hopelessly for traces of his house. This chapter, "Le Portique", is based closely on a visit Barbusse made to what remained of Souchez on 14 October 1915, and recorded in his carnet de guerre (pp.289-291). Curiously, there is no indication in the diary that his companion on that day, one Momial, was a native of Souchez. Many of Barbusse's documentary details enter the novel unchanged. (He took a camera with him, and photographed rotting German corpses, and some abandoned trenches: "J'ai choisi un endroit qui m'a paru particulièrement déchiré et bouleversé." (p.290)) Yet when Momial enters the fiction as Poterloo, he becomes a native of the destroyed village. This adjustment into fiction casts an interesting light on Barbusse's method. The background detail of the chapter is a more or less photographic reproduction (an enlargement, rather) of what Barbusse saw on that October day in Souchez. But in the interests of the moral intention of the book, he introduces a fictional element which makes the destruction of the village not just dismaying, but ironically so. We are guided through the ruins by a man who remembers them as familiar houses and inns, fine roads and a church. And because the annihilated village represents a loss which belongs so intimately to Poterloo, his determination to return and rebuild, once the war is over, has a poignancy and a moral

authority which seems to have been endorsed by his suffering. (H.G. Wells uses this trick with his Mr. Britling.)

What happens, in effect, is that Poterloo becomes symbolic; and Barbusse's naturalism is pressed into the service of a symbolic mode. As the two soldiers return to their unit, the sun comes out. Birds sing; flowers are noticed. (Contrast this with Owen's "Spring Offensive", where the natural world is at first loving, then suddenly hostile.) There is no doubt that this vernal renewal is due to a change in Poterloo. He has become the embodiment of longsuffering and hope; indeed it is not an exaggeration to suggest that Barbusse has made him saintly. (Corporal Bertrand will suffer a similar transfiguration followed by martyrdom.) Poterloo is now not just another soldier, but a vessel containing the hope that the war really will end, and spring really will return - a seasonal equation notably worked, and questioned, in "Exposure" and other poems by Wilfred Owen. That night, the squad is relieved and makes its way down from the front line under cover of darkness. The narrator follows Poterloo, sustained by his encouragement and guided by his voice. Here their literal position in the stumbling file, making its way to safety through the dark, doubles as a symbolic disposition. The narrative is still naturalistic, but every term is morally weighted.

Encore une fois, remous violent. On stoppe brusquement et comme tout à l'heure je suis jeté sur Poterloo et m'appuie sur son dos, son dos fort, solide comme une colonne d'arbre, comme la santé et l'espoir. Il me crie:
- Courage, vieux, on arrive!
On s'immobilise. Il faut reculer... Nom de Dieu!...
Non, on avance à nouveau!...

A moment later, a shell explodes.

Je me sens soulevé et jeté de côté, plié, étouffé et aveuglé à demi dans cet éclair de tonnerre... Je me souviens bien pourtant: pendant cette seconde où, instinctivement, je cherchais, éperdu, hagard, mon frère d'armes, j'ai vu son corps monter, debout, noir, les deux bras étendus de toute leur envergure, et une flamme à la place de la tête! (p.140)

This apocalyptic moment, with its glimpse of the crucifixion, ends the chapter. There is no narrative run-on to the next chapter, which is a short piece about the writer's problems in trying to render faithfully the coarse speech of the soldiers without getting into trouble with his publisher.

I have drawn attention to "Le Portique" because it is an example of the hazardous blend of naturalism, symbolic and apocalyptic writing which is the currency of the whole novel. This mixture is responsible for most of the brilliant effects of Le Feu and for almost all of its faults. In an excellent essay on "Henri Barbusse: Le Feu and the Crisis of Social Realism",²⁶ Jonathan King argues convincingly that the novel of social realism, from Zola onwards, necessarily involved a combination of documentary and prophetic modes.

Realism had at some stage to bring within its orbit the masses as well as the individual, just as it had to take account of suggestions emanating from the world of science that some kind of blind, but not necessarily malevolent, force was at work in human history. Realism was forced to be increasingly close to documentary journalism at the same time as being forced in the direction of prophecy and vision, allegory and symbol. It acquired the subject matter associated with Naturalism together with the methods of Symbolism. This is one way, I believe, of seeing the development of social realist fiction from Zola to its sad apotheosis in the seven brave tractor drivers.²⁷

²⁶ The First World War in Fiction, ed. Holger Klein, Macmillan, 1976, pp.43-52.

²⁷ *ibid*, pp.45-46.

Barbusse, according to King, occupies a critical place in this development, or decline; and the Great War, as a subject for realist fiction, almost demands treatment in this mixed method. The social realist, very briefly, wants to give an accurate picture of the everyday lives of ordinary people, while at the same time suggesting the large historical processes in which they are unwittingly engaged. The Great War seemed almost deliberately designed for this kind of fictional treatment.

The masses were now present in vast numbers as protagonists in the outcome of history. The worker, the peasant, the bureaucrat was lifted out of his normal environment and made the lynchpin of the various armies. Not so much tactical brilliance or technological superiority, but the sheer weight of numbers would largely determine the outcome of this war. On the other hand, this most plebeian and democratic of wars was also the most obviously apocalyptic, representing, in both its material and spiritual aspects, a genuine crisis of civilisation, not just another shifting of pieces in the diplomatic chess game of Europe. The "sense of an ending", prefigured in so much fin de siècle art and literature, was written into every action of the war, every new episode of mass slaughter, every new scar on the landscape of the Western Front. Furthermore, the writer - novelist or poet - found himself, due to the sociological promiscuity implicit in a mass conscript army, at very close quarters with representatives of those strata of society which previously may have formed the object of rather more detached "research". His record of the war would tend simultaneously toward documentary and toward epic, his style oscillate between the demotic and the matter-of-fact required by documentary, and the symbolic and visionary required by his sense of proximity to the apocalypse. If the surface reality of life in the trenches could be captured by recording objectively the ordinary soldier's habits of speech and behaviour, the significance of the war could most obviously be perceived by turning one's eyes away from the trenches themselves, on to the landscape separating the two armies.²⁸

This is a most valuable insight into war-writings as a whole, as well as a most useful gloss on Barbusse's constant tendency away from description towards symbolism, and

²⁸ *ibid*, p.46.

particularly on the war-landscapes which occupy so much of the novel. The descriptive detail and apocalyptic symbolism of these remarkable paysages moralisés may be exactly described, in Wilfred Owen's phrase, as "the topography of Golgotha".²⁹

In Barbusse, the ravaged landscape of war is the inanimate extension, the outward and visible form of the war's effect on men. They too are uprooted, dislocated out of their proper occupations (as husbands, lovers, parents, workers) and finally sacrificed and destroyed. The war-landscape must have brought to more minds than Barbusse's the memory of the place of a skull, and Golgotha is never far from Barbusse's mind. Although he was no Christian, he makes considerable use of the literary resources of the Passion, and it would be interesting to know how conscious a process this is. Barbusse's deep sense of the betrayal and sacrifice of the soldiers would be bound to bring the Christian prototype to mind; and Paul Fussell, incidentally, has observed that the number of wayside calvaries visible at French and Belgian crossroads must have ensured that the image of crucifixion was always accessible at the front.³⁰ In this connection I will cite one of Barbusse's characteristic 'glimpses', which is as shocking an image as Owen's blinded sentry or the dying man in Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump". It is notable that this passage immediately follows a memory of the cruciform

²⁹ Letter to Osbert Sitwell, July 1918; Collected Letters; ed. Harold Owen and John Bell, Oxford University Press, 1967, p.562.

³⁰ The Great War and Modern Memory, Oxford University Press, 1975, p.118.

dismemberment of Poterloo, cited above.

Et nous parvenons enfin sur la hauteur que marque, comme un signal, un blessé effarant: il est là, debout dans le vent; secoué mais debout, enraciné là; dans son capuchon tout relevé qui bat l'air, on voit sa figure convulsée et hurlante, et on passe devant cette espèce d'arbre qui crie. (p.227)

A novelist can't describe a tree on a hilltop as the context for agony, without arousing obvious associations in the mind of the reader. Christ, however, was both author and victim of his own Passion, which is why he appeals so powerfully to the imagination of the junior officer in his position of intermediary authority. In Le Feu, the only figure of authority is Corporal Bertrand, the taciturn and courageous admirer of Liebknecht, for whom the narrator has an unqualified admiration approaching worship. It is therefore especially interesting that when Bertrand is killed after the big attack, his corpse is a horrible parody of the crucifixion.

Il est abominable à voir. La mort a donné l'air et le geste d'un grotesque à cet homme qui fut si beau et si calme. Les cheveux éparpillés sur les yeux, la moustache bavant dans la bouche, la figure bouffie, il rit. Il a un oeil grand ouvert, l'autre fermé, et tire la langue. Les bras sont étendus en croix, les mains ouvertes, les doigts écartés. Sa jambe droite se tend d'un côté; la gauche, qui est cassée par un éclat et d'où est sortie l'hémorragie qui l'a fait mourir, est tournée toute en cercle, disloquée, molle, sans charpente. Une lugubre ironie a donné aux derniers sursauts de cette agonie l'allure d'une gesticulation de pailleasse. (p.222)

Later, when the narrator and his surviving friends are on leave in Paris, their inarticulacy and a kind of overawed politeness prevent them from telling the truth about war in the front line to an elegant lady who innocently imagines it to be glamorous; "et ce fut, ce jour-là, leur première

parole de reniement" (p.246). They go on, of course, to repeat the denial twice.

Such an equation between the passion of the sacrificed soldiers and that of Christ involves, however, certain complications. The development of the metaphor, as Péguy realised perfectly well, tends to ratify and make acceptable the sacrifice of the soldiers; for if they are identified with Christ, then their deaths too must be not only predestined (and therefore inevitable) but also ultimately beneficial. This will not do for Barbusse. Although his soldiers, for the most part, accept their victimization with patience and even humility, as if it were the working of an inevitable destiny or, in their case, some natural law, the strategy of the novel is directed towards showing that it is the opposite of natural. It is a vicious exploitation, and there are people to blame. The whole novel, in fact, is organised around the theme of alienation, which Barbusse explores under many forms.³¹ I strongly suspect that behind Barbusse's novel looms the multi-layered exposition of misère in Les Misérables. The hovels and sewers of Hugo's novel become the miserable billets and trenches of Le Feu, and both books deal with a destitution which can be spiritual as well as material. It is further interesting to note that Barbusse's poste de secours, like the sewers in Les Misérables, is described with a documentary realism

³¹ I use the word alienation to describe Barbusse's main theme since it implies a dispossession both politico-economic and theological, material and spiritual. Its history is summarised in Raymond Williams' Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Fontana, 1976, pp.29-32.

which, under only a slightly different light, reads like a fable.³²

Geographical displacement is the most obvious example of the alienation inflicted by the war on Barbusse's soldiers, and the novel conveys a strong sense of the hopeless homesickness of an exploited class, which is one of several points it has in common with some American negro blues. Closely allied to this is an underlying theme of muted sexual frustration. Soldiers at war are men without women, and Barbusse shows, through his character Poterloo (pp.131-134), how painful a soldier finds it to understand that his wife's domestic life goes on, as it must, while he is away. The carnet de guerre notes "la chasteté terrible de la vie du soldat" (p.308), and this is explored in two of the most decent, dignified, and tender episodes in the novel - the story of Paradis and the boots in "Idylle", and Eudore's account of his unhappy leave in "La Permission". Both chapters have a highly charged simplicity and a kind of literary tact which, in any judgement of Le Feu, must be weighed against the awful invocation of Liebknecht and its like.

Alienation operates in other ways as well. Barbusse understood war as a process of production, which produces waste; and soldiers as workers who have no control over their labour. If the Great War was in some sense the

³² Barbusse and Hugo actually met once, but their respective ages make it unlikely that this meeting was in any way decisive. See Annette Vidal, Henri Barbusse, Soldat de la Paix, Les Editeurs Français Réunis, Paris, 1953, p.28.

crisis of industrial capitalism, in its methods it was capitalism gone mad. (Vice versa, in Céline's Voyage au Bout de la Nuit it is industry which imitates war.) In Le Feu the dismal occupations of the soldiers are a perversion of the idea of work - for Barbusse is always mindful, in a sometimes vague and sentimental way, of what work ought decently to mean - and the huge gulf between the soldiers and those who direct their work, and profit from it, is a mirthless travesty of industrial relations. Barbusse emphasises this gap by concentrating rigorously on his squad. Corporal Bertrand is the only character of any rank at all. This gives a certain intensity to the novel's examination of the plight of the ordinary soldier, but it means that Barbusse has to resort to his apocalyptic mode when he wants to unmask the villains of his piece; which he does, with due attention to what is proper in melodrama, in the final chapter.

This last chapter, "L'Aube", modulates from Barbusse's naturalistic to his prophetic mode, from the strongly visual to the visionary. The eponymous dawn breaks to reveal a ravaged and hellish landscape. A fatigue party of the night before, detailed for an operation which ended in panic and stampede, lost its bearings in the darkness and a torrential downpour which literally obliterated the trenches and left the landscape of the combat zone unrecognisable. Dawn discovers the remnants of the squad lying around, half-dead with exhaustion, in a featureless no-man's-land. (There is a rather similar awakening in Hell in Paradise Lost.) About them are other recumbent figures,

so plastered with mud that until they speak it is impossible to tell whether they are French or German, or indeed whether they are alive or dead. So far so good; in the elements of this tableau - the diluvian landscape, the obliteration of distinctions between friend and foe, the uncertain dawn - naturalism and apocalypse go hand in hand. But the marriage of the two modes is soon to come under stress, for here at last Barbusse is determined to spell out his views about the war.

The rest of the chapter is largely composed of a conversation among the exhausted and half-drowned soldiers. The subject is, in Owen's phrase, War, and the pity of War. Barbusse's fondness for unattributed or anonymous dialogue explains itself here, for these exchanges are the choric pronouncements of the common soldier on his own agon. The need to represent this carries Barbusse into dangerous stylistic waters, for he must deliver an articulate and convincing analysis of the war, without betraying his hitherto demotic characterisation and language. It can't really be done, and he is forced to adopt tactics which are at odds with his naturalistic strategy. Ideas begin to be expressed with a cogency which is surprising in the hitherto barely articulate soldiers, and the argot of their speech suffers a dilution in the service of clarity. Here, indeed, the demotic dialogue which has been such a strong feature of Le Feu is becoming an embarrassment to its author, who now succumbs several times to the temptation to carry the argument over into indirect speech. And the self-effacing narrator himself at last becomes assertive

in a pedagogic way, correcting, clarifying and encouraging the advance of the argument. He drops his mask of anonymity to reveal what has always been behind the work, the uneasy status of the intellectual making common cause with the masses. To close the ranks of this alliance, Barbusse produces - at the right moment and with a just perceptible sense of embarrassment - a whole cohort of gods from the machine.

Les voici... Il semble qu'on la voie se silhouetter au ciel sur les crêtes de l'orage qui endeuille le monde, la cavalcade des batailleurs, caracolants et éblouissants, - des chevaux de bataille porteurs d'armures, de galons, de panaches, de couronnes et d'épées... Ils roulent, distincts, somptueux, lançant des éclairs, embarrassés d'armes. Cette chevauchée belliqueuse, aux gestes surannés, découpe les nuages plantés dans le ciel comme un farouche décor théâtral.

Et bien au-dessus des regards enfiévrés qui sont à terre, des corps sur qui s'étage la boue des bas-fonds terrestres et des champs gaspillés, tout cela afflue des quatre coins de l'horizon, et refoule l'infini du ciel et cache les profondeurs bleues.

Et ils sont légion... (p.282)

These apocalyptic horsemen are easily enough identified (pp.282-284). They are the barons of industry and commerce who have a vested interest in the continuation of the war, the ignorant civilians (especially women) who believe war is glamorous and anyway inevitable, the reactionaries (especially the Church) who stand in the way of progress, and the secular priesthood of intellectuals who peddle adversary patriotism. These groups are identified as the culprits of war, who have pitched the soldiers into its misery and suffering, depriving them of their natural rights (for "Nous ne sommes pas des soldats, nous, nous sommes des hommes" (p.42, echoed on p.201)), and forcing them to inflict injury upon themselves (for "Deux armées aux prises, c'est une grande armée qui se suicide" (p.8, echoed on p.275)).

Having been vouchsafed this vision and understanding, the soldiers disperse into the hesitant (and, in retrospect, desperately ironic) dawn, convinced that there must be no more wars after this one. Barbusse's polemic is simple enough. He turns the axis of the war through ninety degrees, showing it not as a conflict between nations but as a violence perpetrated by one class upon another. In "L'Aube", a uniform of mud is the literal demonstration of the equality of all soldiers - workers and intellectual-worker, Frenchmen and Germans. And the uniformity of evil-doing unites the warmongers, whatever their nationality. "Ce sont vos ennemis, quel que soit l'endroit où ils sont nés et la façon dont se prononce leur nom et la langue dans laquelle ils mentent." (p.284).

The alienation effected when people are forced to change from men into soldiers - "Nous ne sommes pas des soldats, nous, nous sommes des hommes" - is not only a question of their being dispossessed of their work and homes and, in many cases, their actual lives. For there is also (and the soldiers themselves are ruefully aware of this) a brutalising effect in war, which forces men to behave like animals. It robs them, in fact, of their better nature, stifling their better instincts and exaggerating their worse; "la méchanceté jusqu'au sadisme, l'égoïsme jusqu'à la férocité, le besoin de jouir jusqu'à la folie" (p.275). Like animals or primitive men (a similarity variously observed by Apollinaire and David Jones), they live in holes in the earth, and by the end of the novel they have almost been swallowed by it. Just as their engagement in the war as

private soldiers has quite dispossessed these people of the exercise of choice in their actions, so an enforced regression threatens to reduce them to subhuman uniformity, where they share "les mêmes moeurs, les mêmes habitudes, le même caractère simplifié d'hommes revenus à l'état primitif" (p.21). Barbusse is as convinced as Corporal Bertrand of the inevitability of Progress, "qui vient comme la fatalité" (p.213), and the other soldiers seem to share this faith. If Progress is the natural course of history, then the war is particularly criminal in that it arrests and even unnaturally perverts that course, forcing men back into barbarism, and further back into bestiality. This is as much a violation of nature as is the laying waste of the war-landscape.

But if progress is as sure as fate, how to reconcile the war to the progressive scheme of things, when it seems to be precisely a denial and reversal of progress? Barbusse is faced with the same question as H.G. Wells's Mr. Britling, and produces the same answer. The war has been a terrible lesson which must be learnt, and if it is learnt, it may yet be turned to good. "Si la guerre actuelle a fait avancer le progrès d'un pas, ses malheurs et ses tueries compteront pour peu." (p.286) These are the last words spoken in Le Feu. Barbusse's postwar career, in some ways disastrously ill-judged, was his attempt to realise this hope.³³

Lenin must have read with approval this account of the war as the continuation of industrial capitalism by

³³See Field, op.cit., and Vidal, op.cit.

other means, with its plea on behalf of the "pauvres ouvriers innombrables des batailles, vous qui aurez fait toute la grande guerre avec vos mains, toute-puissance qui ne sert pas encore à faire le bien, foule terrestre dont chaque face est un monde de douleurs" (p.283). But propaganda has little durable value, and if anyone reads the novel now it is more likely to be for its stark landscapes and for the petits faits vrais by which Barbusse records the life of the fighting soldier during the first half of the war. In this, wittingly or not, Barbusse made an important discovery: that a photographic record (insofar as that is possible in literature) can be much more persuasive than a sermon.³⁴ Le Feu illustrates this clearly, since it uses both means, and the sermonising comes off badly in the contrast.

I believe there are two reasons for the persuasiveness of literal description in Le Feu, and that a division must be drawn between the more or less epic and the more or less domestic dimensions of the novel - Barbusse's high and low styles. When he is treating the epic dimension, in his account of battlefields and battles, Barbusse slips easily, as I have shown, into the vocabulary of Golgotha and the apocalypse. It is fact, not literary convention, that brings the Inferno to mind in the chapter "Le Poste de Secours". (The author of "Strange Meeting" was certainly

³⁴Owen was certainly aware of this when, home on leave, he carried with him a wallet of photographs of mutilated soldiers, to show to amateur warmongers on the home front. Ted Hughes finds an analogy for this in his poem "Wilfred Owen's Photographs".

aware of this.) And it is fact that makes Barbusse's landscapes and his descriptions of combat hellish. That is to say; the figurative language traditionally used to describe hell seems often, on the western front, to have been made literal. "Hell on earth" is no longer just a figure of speech. There is something curiously, almost retributively, literary about the experience of the Great War.³⁵ George Steiner, indeed, suggests that the twentieth century has seen a compulsive and certainly parodic attempt to make real the apocalyptic imaginings of the past. This culminates, if it is a culmination, in the death-camps of the following war.³⁶ Without following Steiner very far, it can certainly be agreed that a great deal of the literal facts about the war carry an apocalyptic charge. (For example, life in the front line was subterranean, apparently interminable, and teased with a torment of fire - these are all elements from the traditional glossary of hell.) In this respect, and rendered with such detachment as is possible, they speak for themselves; so that the poste de secours, for example, is a kind of inferno, without ceasing to be a poste de secours. The literal doubles as the eschatological. Further, the sheer force which threatens each soldier - "He thought it disproportionate in its violence considering the fragility of us", as David Jones bitterly understates³⁷ -

³⁵ Paul Fussell discusses this fascinating and disturbing point in The Great War and Modern Memory, passim.

³⁶ George Steiner, In Bluebeard's Castle, Faber & Faber, 1971, pp.31-48 and passim.

³⁷ In Parenthesis, Faber & Faber, 1963, p.183.

brings the experience, almost in spite of itself, close to epic. And Barbusse's squad is matched against an antagonist largely invisible, of a more than human strength and malignity. Indeed they seem to be wrestling not against flesh and blood, but against the elements themselves - water ("l'enfer, c'est l'eau" (p.269)), the earth which threatens to bury them, the cold ("S'il y avait un Dieu de bonté, il y aurait pas le froid" (p.236)), and the eponymous fire.

The reason for the persuasiveness of Barbusse's domestic notations springs directly from what I have just discussed. It is entirely contextual, and works by ironic juxtaposition. In a context of destitution and misery (in the short chapter "L'Oeuf") the gift of an egg, even though it is probably a stolen egg, becomes an act of almost saintly charity, like the offering of the widow's mites. In the preceding chapter, "Le Barda", the members of the squad are shown packing up their belongings, ready for their march up the line the following day. The narrator watches them comparing their miserable luggage with that of their fellows, each pathetically convinced that his own hoard of odds and ends is the most judiciously selected. This is a comic scene, but it is no exaggeration to add that it is also powerful pacifist propaganda. In the harsh glare of possible death the next day, the resourcefulness and proprietorial pride (very bourgeois qualities, incidentally) exhibited by the squad in this chapter are thrown into relief as really valuable virtues, which deserve not to be squandered. Similarly, the trivial but fine gesture of Paradis in "Idylle" is elevated to the status of real charity

by its context. This chapter, and "La Permission" which is very similar, are, I think, the best in the novel. In both, Barbusse reasserts the survival of a quality of unselfishness through, and in spite of the war (and the war, of course, is sustained by selfish interests, as the last chapter shows). Indeed both chapters are an affirmation of pastoral values in the context of the anti-pastoral of the war. That these values should survive, and that they should be forced to survive in so debased a form as that in which they appear comically in "La Barda", is a powerful point of propaganda. The pathetic attempts of the soldiers to foster fundamental decencies in surroundings inimical to them, the ingenious improvisations by which individuality is reasserted in spite of the uniform, the care for each other, the pride in their few and shabby possessions - Barbusse's patient notations of these things is more persuasive in his pacifist cause than the polemic of his last chapter.

It should however be added that Barbusse's group-portrait of the squad is an idealised one. Although they are often foul-mouthed and ignorant, nobody utters an unkind word in earnest, nobody is disloyal or cowardly. The corporate hero is as admirable as Barbusse wants him to be, and this is better propaganda than fiction. But such underlying sentimentality is not readily noticeable through the layers of Barbusse's demotic naturalism. It is his inability to dramatise convincingly those judged culpable in his verdict on the war, and the unfortunate jarring of his mixture of styles (which is probably, as Jonathan King

argues, not so much Barbusse's particular fault as a hazard of social realism in this phase), which justifies Frank Field's opinion that "Le Feu now seems to be of mainly historical interest".³⁸ That interest is in itself considerable; and if the novel fails, it is an honourable failure.

Two years after Péguy's death, and in the year that Le Feu was published, a young man of twenty-one broke the surface of the literary world at a military hospital at Nantes. If Péguy was a prophet of the Great War, and Barbusse one of its interpreters, Jacques Vaché was in a sense one of its products. He served in the war and died, in 1919 at the age of twenty-three, of an overdose of opium. His literary remains consist of a handful of letters written between 1916 and the end of 1918, when he was in the army, and later edited by his friend and admirer André Breton.³⁹ The two men met early in 1916 at the hospital in Nantes where Breton was working as a nurse; and where Vaché was sent to recover after being wounded in action at the front. After Vaché's return to the front in May of that year, they were to meet again only five or six times before Vaché's death. It was time enough for Vaché to come to occupy a

³⁸ op.cit., p.38.

³⁹ Jacques Vaché, Lettres de Guerre, précédées de quatre essais d'André Breton, Eric Losfeld, Paris, 1970.

position of supreme importance for Breton, and to take his place in the pantheon of surrealism and the postwar avant-garde in France. In 1924, Breton wrote:

Je n'ai pas l'habitude de saluer les morts, mais cette existence que je me suis plu et déplu à retracer ici est, qu'on s'en persuade, presque tout ce qui m'attache encore à une vie faiblement imprévue et à de menus problèmes. Tous les cas littéraires et artistiques qu'il faut bien que je soumette passent après et encore ne me retiennent-ils qu'autant que je puis les évaluer, en signification humaine, à cette mesure infinie. (André Breton, "La Confession Dédaigneuse", Les Pas Perdus, twelfth ed., Gallimard, Paris, 1949, p.24.)

Breton's own stringent critique of satisfaction, inspired by Vaché, seems to have been shared by others. He claims that some of his friends knew some of Vaché's letters by heart. The paragraph quoted above is immediately followed by an explanation of the nature of Vaché's influence.

C'est pourquoi tout ce qui se peut réaliser dans le domaine intellectuel me paraîtra toujours témoigner de la pire servilité ou de la plus entière mauvaise foi. Je n'aime, bien entendu, que les choses inaccomplies, je ne me propose rien tant que de trop embrasser. L'étreinte, la domination seules sont des leurres. Et c'est assez, pour l'instant, qu'une si jolie ombre danse au bord de la fenêtre par laquelle je vais recommencer chaque jour à me jeter.⁴⁰

The syntactic link ("C'est pourquoi") suggests a consequence which is rather hard to follow. All realised intellectual achievements, it seems, appear servile and in bad faith when confronted with the "mesure infinie" of Vaché's career. From him, Breton claims to have learnt that value resides only in the incomplete, and that the only valid proposition is to undertake too much ("trop embrasser"), deliberately. We have to search hard through Vaché's Lettres de Guerre for evidence that Vaché undertook anything

⁴⁰ibid.

at all; and in doing so we are bound to encounter the first of the many parodic equations out of which the figure of Vaché is built, by his own mythopeia or by Breton's haruspicy - the negation of achievement, and the achievement of negation.

It is clear that Breton seized on Vaché as a protosurrealist, protodada exemplum, a hero of his time. Vaché, indeed, may almost be considered as a fictional character, created by Breton. Breton depicts him (rather as Gide depicted Lafcadio) as having achieved the grand negation. Convinced of "l'inutilité théâtrale (et sans joie) de tout",⁴¹ Vaché declines to come out to play. In an essay of 1940, Breton recalls his appearance: "Les cheveux rouges, les yeux 'flamme morte' et le papillon glacial du monocle parfont la dissonance voulue continuelle et l'isolement".⁴² He compares Vaché's deliberate isolation with a more literal kind of wartime desertion:

A la désertion à l'extérieur en temps de guerre ... Vaché oppose une autre forme d'insoumission qu'on pourrait appeler la désertion à l'intérieur de soi-même. Ce n'est même plus le défaitisme rimbaldien de 1870-71, c'est un parti-pris d'indifférence totale, au souci près de ne servir à rien ou plus exactement de desservir avec application. Attitude individualiste s'il en fut. Elle nous apparaît comme le produit même, le produit le plus évolué à cette date, de l'ambivalence affective qui veut qu'en temps de guerre, la mort d'autrui soit considérée beaucoup plus librement qu'en temps de paix et que la vie de l'être devienne d'autant plus intéressante que celle de l'ensemble est moins généralement épargnée.⁴³

Wartime obviously strengthens the grip of institutions on the life of the individual, and Vaché's "désertion

⁴¹ Jacques Vaché, Lettres de Guerre, p.45.

⁴² André Breton, Anthologie de l'Humour Noir, Editions du Sagittaire, Paris, 1950, p.295.

⁴³ ibid, pp.295-296.

à l'intérieur" seems to have been a reaction generated by the ego against the forcefield of outside wartime pressures which threatened it. The "ambivalence affective" of wartime is characterised, by Breton, as involving jeopardy to the individual, in the interests of the presumed safety of the group. It requires, in other words, a return or regression to a primitive state of selfless heroism to which Breton, characteristically, gives a Freudian gloss - "le surmoi chauffé à blanc parvenant à obtenir du moi son désistement, le consentement à sa perte".⁴⁴ Vaché acted as an anti-hero to this movement d'esprit and therein (says Breton) lies his importance. War is the ramp of the superego - which Freud defined as introjected paternal authority (c.f. fatherland, patrie etc.) - at the expense of the ego, whose principal concern is self-preservation. In the face of this, Breton tells us, Jacques Vaché retained the superego only as an ornament, a parure.⁴⁵ His life's ambition, and the accomplishment of his death, was to consummate irresponsibility. It is an especially apt part of the myth of Jacques Vaché that he survived the period from 1914 to 1918, including his service in the Great War, and then perversely died, at the age of twenty-three and by his own hand, the year after the war ended.

The nature of Dada, and not just the slightness of its achievement, forbids a critical separation of the life and the work. Breton insisted (1919) on the importance of Vaché as a forerunner of what was not so much an aesthetic

⁴⁴ ibid, p.296.

⁴⁵ ibid.

as a behavioural phenomenon.

"Dada" n'existait pas encore, et Jacques Vaché l'ignora toute sa vie. Le premier, par conséquent, il insista sur l'importance des gestes, chère à M. André Gide.⁴⁶

"Le geste" is certainly the dominant motif of Dada, but its attraction grows out of the decade preceding the war; whose artistic life, as Roger Shattuck has shown,⁴⁷ was incorrigibly theatrical. Jarry is very much a creature of this time, and his career as Ubu, whose day-to-day identity he seems to have assumed with some success,⁴⁸ suggests that Vaché's insistence on "le geste" was not quite as original as Breton would have us think. One is reminded, too, of Wilfred Owen's acquaintance, the poet and polemic critic Laurent Tailhade. When the anarchist Vaillant tossed a nailbomb into the Chamber of Deputies from the visitors' gallery, Tailhade grandly claimed, in an interview shortly afterwards, that danger to human life was of no importance "si le geste est beau".⁴⁹ The gestural element of conduct had an importance of its own, and Tailhade's opinion would certainly have been endorsed by Vaché when, in 1919, he administered to two unwitting friends the same lethal dose of opium as he took himself. (Vaché "ne fut pas un fumeur expérimenté", wrote Breton, rather ingenuously, in 1924;

⁴⁶ Les Pas Perdus, p.18.

⁴⁷ Roger Shattuck, The Banquet Years, Jonathan Cape, 1969.

⁴⁸ ibid, pp.187-222.

⁴⁹ ibid, pp.20-21. Shattuck adds: "Two years later [1894], [Tailhade] lost an eye when a bomb exploded in the restaurant where he was eating, and the next morning's paper chastised him with his own Nietzschean sentiments." These two incidents would have appealed to Vaché, and his sense of amour.

so it is likely that the circumstances of his death were "une dernière fourberie drôle" - although, like other masterpieces of Dada, "sa mort eut ceci d'admirable qu'elle peut passer pour accidentelle".⁵⁰ Appended to the Lettres de Guerre, as to a futurist collage, is the newspaper article which describes his death.

Vaché's conception of l'umour,⁵¹ which so impressed the young Breton, is an inverted species of egoism and (again according to Breton) is directly attributable to the war, and Vaché's experience of army service.

Cette condition de soldat dispose particulièrement bien à l'égard de l'expansion individuelle. Ceux qui n'ont pas été mis au garde-à-vous ne savent pas ce qu'est, à certains moments, l'envie de bouger les talons. Jacques Vaché était passé maître dans l'art d' "attacher très peu d'importance à toute chose". Il comprenait que la sentimentalité n'était plus de mise et que le souci même de sa dignité ... commandait de ne pas s'attendrir.⁵²

Whether or not the idiosyncracies of l'umour were a compensatory response to the restrictions of wartime, Vaché was reluctant to define it. When Breton, in a letter, pressed him for a definition, Vaché protested that l'umour is a way of looking at things. It will not do to enquire into it too closely, for "il est dans l'essence des symboles d'être symboliques". Its very existence, he says, is its own explanation - like an alarm-clock -

pourquoi donc a-t-il tant d'umour, pourquoi donc? - Mais voilà: c'est ainsi et non autrement - il y a beaucoup de formidable UBIQUE aussi dans l'umour⁵³ - comme vous verrez -

⁵⁰ Breton, Les Pas Perdus, pp.23-24.

⁵¹ Variouslly spelt 'l'umore' by Vaché. Both words are of his own coinage.

⁵² Les Pas Perdus, p.18.

⁵³ UBIQUE here is probably Vaché's coinage of an adjective from the proper name Ubu. Since he was serving at the time as an interpreter in liaison with the British army, the word may have been happily suggested to him by the motto of the Royal Artillery.

Mais ceci n'est naturellement - définitif, et l'umour dérive trop d'une sensation pour ne pas être très difficilement exprimable - Je crois que c'est une sensation - J'allais presque dire un SENS - aussi - de l'inutilité théâtrale (et sans joie) de tout.

QUAND ON SAIT.

Et c'est pourquoi alors les enthousiasmes - (d'abord c'est bruyant) - des autres sont haïssables - Car - n'est-ce pas - Nous avons le Génie - puisque nous savons l'UMOUR - Et donc tout - vous n'en aviez d'ailleurs jamais douté? - nous est permis - Tout ça est bien ennuyeux, d'ailleurs. (Lettres de Guerre, p.45.)

It is the privilege of those who have realised the pointlessness of everything (and this was written in April 1917) to discard any responsibility - "Et donc tout ... nous est permis". Anything now goes. This response to the futility of war is directly opposite to that of the English officer-poets, most notably Wilfred Owen, who seemed to demand, after what they had seen, that the world should be at a sort of moral attention for ever. The urgency of Owen's work stems precisely from a sense of responsibility and of participation in both suffering and guilt. The closest correlation to Vaché's nihilism, in war-literature, is to be found in Céline's Voyage au Bout de la Nuit, where war renders life irreparably meaningless. Vaché's letters from the front, extraordinarily enough, almost completely ignore the war which is going on around him. The apologist of l'umour is not responsible to his surroundings, and is not responsible for them. By virtue of his fastidiousness he is free.

But he is free in a meaningless world. Vaché makes his existential choice, and deliberately chooses a blind alley. He frees himself of any responsibility for his actions, but with the same gesture he admits that no action is worth the undertaking. The Lettres de Guerre demonstrate

how hard Vaché had to work at remembering not to take himself seriously. His youthful enthusiasm as an aspiring painter and writer, and self-appointed modernist,⁵⁴ sometimes gets the better of him. A few days after Apollinaire's death, Vaché wrote to Breton:

Apollinaire a fait beaucoup pour nous et n'est certes pas mort; il a, d'ailleurs, bien fait de s'arrêter à temps - C'est déjà dit, mais il faut répéter: IL MARQUE UNE ÉPOQUE. Les belles choses que nous allons pouvoir faire; - MAINTENANT!⁵⁵

But usually he remembers he disbelieves in achievement.

"L'umore ne devrait pas produire - mais qu'y faire?"⁵⁶

Abdication of responsibility is, after all, freedom from the future; and that implies exile from the future. Perhaps after all there is a certain perverse logic to Vaché's career. A. Alvarez discusses Vaché in his book The Savage God, in a chapter entitled "Dada: Suicide as an Art". He argues that:

⁵⁴ "Modernité aussi donc constante, et tuée chaque nuit - nous ignorons MALLARMÉ, sans haine - mais il est mort - Mais nous ne connaissons plus Apollinaire, ni Cocteau - CAR - Nous les soupçonnons de faire de l'art trop sciemment, de rafistoler du romantisme avec du fil téléphonique et de ne pas savoir les dynamos. LES ASTRES encore décrochés! - c'est ennuyeux - et puis parfois ne parlent-ils pas sérieusement!" Letter to Breton, 18 August 1917, Lettres de Guerre, p.57.

⁵⁵ Letter to Breton, 14 November 1918, Lettres de Guerre, p.69.

⁵⁶ Letter to Breton, 18 August 1917, Lettres de Guerre, p.58.

...when art is against itself, destructive and self-defeating, it follows that suicide is a matter of course. Doubly so, since when art is confused with gesture, then the life or, at least, the behaviour of the artist is his work.⁵⁷

In the later letters, it is perhaps possible to see Vaché planning the ultimate masterpiece in this mode.

Que tout est amusant - très amusant, c'est un fait - comme tout est amusant! - (et si l'on se tuait aussi, au lieu de s'en aller?)⁵⁸

Alvarez sees Vaché's career, and the whole phenomenon of Dada, as a response to a widespread sense of chaos for which (like Breton) he believes the Great War was largely responsible.

In other words, that sense of chaos which ... is the driving force behind the restless experimentalism of the twentieth-century arts has two sources - one developing directly from the period before 1914, the other emerging for the first time during the First World War and growing increasingly stronger and more unavoidable as the century has gone on. Both, perhaps, are consequences of industrialism: the first is connected with the destruction of the old social relationships and the related structures of belief during the Industrial Revolution; the second is produced by the technology itself which, in the process of creating the wherewithal

⁵⁷ A. Alvarez, The Savage God: a Study of Suicide, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971, p.189.

⁵⁸ Letter to Breton, 9 May 1918, Lettres de Guerre, p.60. And underneath Vaché's comical attempts to evade the attentions of the censoring officer, there is a hint that he had considered the scenario of his suicide in the autumn of 1918: "Je prends des forces et me réserve pour des choses futures. Quel beau pêle-mêle, voyez-vous, sera ces à-venir et comme l'on pourra tuer du monde!!!... J'expérimente aussi pour ne pas en perdre la coutume, n'est-ce pas? - mais dois garder mes jublations intimes, car les émissaires du Cardinal de Richelieu...". Letter to Aragon, undated, October or November 1918, Lettres de Guerre, p.64.

to make life easier than ever before, has perfected, as a kind of lunatic spin-off, instruments to destroy life completely. More simply, just as the decay of religious authority in the nineteenth century made life seem absurd by depriving it of any ultimate coherence, so the growth of modern technology has made death itself absurd by reducing it to a random happening totally unconnected with the inner rhythms and logic of the lives destroyed.⁵⁹

The sardonic nihilism of the Lettres de Guerre may indeed be attributable to the experience of the war, as Breton suggested; and it may be a symptom of the sort of cultural-historical phenomena which Alvarez postulates. But it is not necessarily so. The Great War could hardly be ignored. All those who lived through it, or through part of it, found their lives radically altered. But, as I hope to have shown by now, the war, individually interpreted, was just as likely to be seen as a confirmation of prevailing beliefs and philosophies, as to seem to represent a threat to them. For example, 1914 did nothing to change the political thought of Hulme, Péguy or Barbusse, except to strengthen it. It is probably because, in English, Wilfred Owen is our prime example of a Great War writer, that we tend to assume that for any writer the war must necessarily have caused a spiritual upheaval, and forced a reassessment of all received values. (I shall attempt to show later that the discontinuity between Owen's work and ideas, before and after January 1917, may have been overestimated. In some important respects, for him the war was a continuation of hostilities.) This was by no means always the case. Apollinaire, for example, accepted the war with what often looks like placidity, at least in the early years. Until his transfer into the infantry, he welcomed it as an exciting

⁵⁹ Alvarez, op.cit., p.203.

extension of experience, but was not significantly changed by it. Against such a background, it is worth remembering that there is not really any evidence to link Vaché's nihilism directly to the experience of war. Breton maintains that that is the case, and it may be so, but it is also by no means impossible that Breton may be talking about himself. In Vaché's letters, there is little about the war except the title, supplied by Breton.

Whether or not the umour of the Lettres de Guerre actually was a by-product of the Great War, it is certain that the bizarre growth found a congenial soil in the everyday absurdities and menace of war. But the letters show that, as a rule, l'umour does not absorb experience, but as far as possible ignores it. Although Vaché expounded l'umour to Breton, it was at the latter's insistence and, as we have seen, with some reluctance. It is a phenomenon difficult to separate from the parent ego. And yet it is true that, largely through Breton and Aragon, Vaché exercised a considerable if imponderable influence on the contemporaries who survived him. He has even been called "the man who contributed more than anyone else to uncover the latent aspirations of the youth of his time".⁶⁰ Vaché's following can probably tell us more than his letters can about one of the effects of the Great War in France, and the author of the Lettres de Guerre is of less interest than Breton's Jacques Vaché, who stands like a sinister and arresting landmark on the frontier of war-literature.

⁶⁰ Georges Lemaître, From Cubism to Surrealism in French Literature, Russell & Russell, New York, 1941, p.161.

CHAPTER 3

Cocteau, Aldington, Proust.

De temps en temps, je ne savais d'où, une balle, comme ça, à travers le soleil et l'air me cherchait, guillerette, entêtée à me tuer, dans cette solitude, moi. Pourquoi? Jamais plus, même si je vivais encore cent ans; je ne me promènerais à la campagne.

The six authors I have discussed above show how diversely the Great War could be thought about and treated in literature, and may suggest that, as a sub-genre, war-writing is a more complex and richer business than might be supposed. In this chapter I shall attend to three novels, by Cocteau, Richard Aldington and Proust, which will further complicate that diversity, but will also share with the works previously discussed some of those preoccupations and strategies which become familiar in the typology of war-literature. I do not of course suggest that these three novels are of equal literary or even documentary value. I have grouped them together not because they are alike, but because they are so various. It will sometimes be difficult to remember that all three novelists are writing about the same historical event, the European war of 1914-1918. Cocteau, Aldington and Proust all lived through the Great War, and all three used it as material for fiction. But to what extent can the war be described as a shared experience, on the evidence of these three novels? There seem to have been as many wars as people to experience them (perhaps more; Sassoon himself can be said to have lived through at least three). Like Céline's military policeman in Voyage au Bout de la Nuit, everyone lived through "sa petite guerre à lui, la profonde, la vraie de vraie". And to what extent can any experience be said to be shared? Before this Proustian question becomes overwhelming, it must be said that no literary treatment of the war is quite unique, in its literary resources. And each of the three novels to be discussed in this chapter directs its attention particularly

to the way the war affected the relation between the present and its parent past. All three fictions - Thomas l'Imposteur, Death of a Hero, and the wartime section of Le Temps Retrouvé - share an interest in the relation between the adult and the child, between the past and the present; in other words, each is in its way a novel of historical intention. Further, all three authors recognise that the circumstances of modern warfare, which so limit the possibility of choiced action on the part of the individual, inexorably clamp ironic inverted commas round the word 'hero'. And lastly, Cocteau's scapegrace hero, Aldington's anti-heroic martyr, the heroism of comprehension in Proust's narrator - each in its way is a portrait of the artist in wartime.

I shall begin with Jean Cocteau, an artist who worked with facility in many forms, but who called all his work poetry. It was "poésie de roman", "poésie graphique", "poésie cinématographique", or whatever. This was an attempt to emancipate the word "poetry" from the accrued restrictions which limit its application, in modern times, to verse-literature. It is also an implicit - and dubious - claim that a unity of purpose should be recognised in all Cocteau's creations. Whether or not that claim is justified, there is certainly a thematic unity in all his work, and it is a fairly simple one. Between the prosaic world and the infinite recession of fate which is the machine infernale, exists a stratum populated by the persons, or states of mind, to whom Cocteau's attention returns obsessively. These privileged and usually doomed beings can pass from

one world to another, like Orphée through the mirror. They mediate between two elements, as aviators or angels (two of his most persistent motifs). These privileged characters are quickly recognisable, as they all participate in several elements of the complex which encloses them. Fantasists, liars, adventurers, of a beauty which is, strictly speaking, angelic; set apart and recognisably different from their fellows - many are orphans (this includes, in a sense, Oedipe in La Machine Infernale); acrobatically balanced between two worlds, or inhabiting a third, of their own invention (the parallel between the "game" played in Les Enfants Terribles, and opium-smoking, need not be emphasised), these figures are always childlike and always glamorous. They usually inspire devotion in others but, like spoilt children, rarely return it. Clearly they are projections of Jean Cocteau the child and Jean Cocteau the poet, whether largely in terms of wish-fulfilment or as a kind of exorcism. The encounter of such figures with the world is the dominant signature of Cocteau's work, and the basis of the Coctelian style.

It is no surprise to find it operating in his war-writings. In examining Cocteau's literary response to the war I want to show how carefully the idea of the war as a 'shared experience' must be qualified. Like everyone else Cocteau regarded the events of 1914-1918, but the act of regarding made them his own. He is perhaps one of the most pronounced cases. But for all the other subjects of this study, the experience of the war is inseparable from mythopoeia.

Cocteau's own war-experience began when he joined the ambulance service which, organised by the formidable

Misia Sert, used to leave Paris in a convoy (some of whose vehicles were couturiers' delivery vans) and collect any available wounded behind the lines to take them back to be nursed in the capital.¹ Cocteau undertook the work with enthusiasm and courage. His uniform, it was rumoured, had been designed by the dressmaker Paul Poiret. By December 1914 he was going on flights over Paris with his friend the aviator Roland Garros, who was later shot down in combat and captured. Towards the end of 1915 Cocteau joined Etienne de Beaumont's ambulance convoy and went to Flanders, to the extreme north of the Western Front, where he spent the first half of 1916. By the first week of July of that year he was helping to care for the first wounded in the battle of the Somme. He was there for a few weeks only. The circumstances of his departure from the front - and effectively from further direct participation in the war - are not clear.² Probably he suffered some kind of breakdown in health. He was formally released from the ambulance service in November. His poem Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance was finished by the end of 1917.³

Le Cap is primarily a celebration of Roland Garros (to whom, "prisonnier en Allemagne", it is dedicated), and a meditation on the function of the poet. A metaphoric

¹For Cocteau's war career see Frederick Brown, An Impersonation of Angels, Longmans, 1968, and Francis Steegmuller, Cocteau, Macmillan, 1970.

²See Steegmuller, op.cit., pp.159-161.

³Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance; suivi du Discours du Grand Sommeil, Préface de Jacques Brosse, Gallimard, Paris 1967.

connection, aviator-poet-angel, is explored; indeed the poem itself is conceived as a sort of flight or series of flights, ending in a return to earth. Garros had taken Cocteau up in his aeroplane: now the poet returns the favour.

Je t'emporte à mon tour
 aviateur de l'encre
 moi

et voici mes loopings
 et mes records d'altitude

There is a good deal in this flashy but quite engaging vein, as Cocteau works the connection between poetry and flight (the isolation, the glamour, the comprehensive vision, the technical skill, the danger; the angelism). His aerobatics take him over the war-zone in the section "Géor-giques Funèbres", in a series of vivid, disconnected impressions, memories and fantasies. There is a certain hesitancy here, and considerable thematic confusion. In spite of the metaphor of flight, Cocteau does not feel sufficiently au-dessus de la mêlée to attempt a hawk's or airman's eye picture of the war. Rather he offers a series of very rapid sketches ("ébauche" is a notably recurrent word all through Le Cap) towards "la grande épopée" of the conflict. The feeling is that this epic can only be written after victory has been achieved, when a true perspective will at last be possible. The epic remains potential.

Un jour peut-être ayant reculé
 on chantera la grande guerre

This formula ("on chantera", "on racontera") qualifies all Le Cap's sketches of war experience. At present (1917) they are unorganised and, strictly speaking, inconsequential; but it is to be hoped that the events of the war will prove later to have a pattern and a consistency.

on chantera la grande victoire de la Marne
 la Meuse l'Yser
 la grande misère fameuse
 qui n'était pas un miracle
 qui n'était pas un hasard
 mais bien possible
 bien logique
 bien en règle
 avec l'histoire de France
 Perrault
 et la Bible⁴

The military victory which is to make this perspective possible is also, then, to be a victory of understanding and an aesthetic victory. (At the end of the section, David is pictured as putting away his sling and taking up his lute - a surprising solecism.) Cocteau makes it clear that it is to be enjoyed by the individual at the expense of the institutions, authorities and forces of order in general, which sustain the war and are sustained by it. This is where the confusion lies. The French victory will be achieved by individualism (everyone in France and Britain knew the German army was not composed of individuals). The war is a threat to the individual and a curb on his freedom, and is yet envisaged as the means to his triumph. Victory, which will be gained thanks to his individuality, will also be his chance to reassert it after being constrained and, as it were, grounded for the duration.

Une victoire
 sur le meilleur de l'Allemagne
 et sur les moins bons de la France
 la grande victoire anarchiste
 ses ailes jeunes
 contre le vent

⁴This passage is fairly typical, with its Apollinorean typography, the neat internal rhymes and assonance of the third line, and the whimsicality of the last three. It is a very smart poem.

This victory (whether or not Samothracian) is, like the poet and the aviator, winged. And when it arrives, the "anarchisme gai" of the ordinary soldier - "bien à l'aise dans l'indiscipline/bien d'aplomb dans l'indépendance" - will be able to take off, to the confusion of the politicians and strategists. This is the proleptic nostalgia familiar in war-pastoral. Cocteau offers no clue as to how this fantasy may be realised. It is as if the melodramatic tableau which closes Barbusse's Le Feu had been translated into whimsy.

Individual enterprise and individual freedom are the themes which the poem principally explores, and their exemplum is the pioneering (prewar) flight which Garros made from Fréjus across the Mediterranean to Tunis. Cocteau celebrates this exploit rather ambiguously in the closing section of Le Cap. In "Géorgiques Funèbres", the poet's flight had seemed to have been hindered by the gravitational pull of the war: the aviator too has gravity to contend with and his enterprise is a flight in both senses. He is likened to the prodigal son audaciously cutting loose from his parents, and he resists for as long as he can the pull of his mother earth - for he is "fils de la terre/toujours aimante et toujours grosse". (Michel in Les Parents Terribles and of course Oédipe in La Machine Infernale will encounter a similar umbilical compulsion; in his Lettre à Jacques Maritain,⁵ Cocteau noted that

⁵ Quoted in Claude Mauriac, Jean Cocteau ou la Vérité du Mensonge, Odette Lieutier, Paris, 1945.

"La terre est une mère exigeante; elle déteste qu'on s'éloigne. Elle essaie de nous reprendre coûte que coûte...".) When at last Garros lands at Tunis, it is a kind of defeat for him. His flight has been a temporary escape, a truancy. Since the poem has been organised around an identification of poetry with flying, this is a conclusion of some interest. Poem and flying-machine come back to earth together; and for all his triumph the hero seems strangely like a recaptured fugitive.

il dit: je suis prêt à vous suivre
 et il pleura dans ses mains lourdes
 Alors
 ils suivirent le chemin
 qui mène aux villes.

In his next sequence, the Discours du Grand Sommeil, the poet is commanded, by an angel, to go and report on the war.

Cet ange me dit:
 Pars.
 Que fais-tu entre les remparts
 de ta ville?
 Tu as chanté le Cap du triste effort.
 Va et raconte
 l'homme tout nu,
 tout vêtu de ce qu'il trouve
 dans sa caverne,
 contre le mammoth et le plésiosaure.

The result, an evocation of Cocteau's experiences at the front in Flanders, is better work than Le Cap but, for the purposes of this study, less interesting. The formal and typographical experiments of Le Cap, with their clear debt to Apollinaire, settle here to a loose stanzaic arrangement, adequate to carry either episodic narrative or fanciful atmospherics; and Cocteau does some good work

in both. "Tour du secteur calme" is an impressive piece, and the prose-poem "Visite", spoken by one of the dead, an early sounding of several of Cocteau's abiding preoccupations. The sequence as a whole, published in 1923 but written over some years, heralds the rappel à l'ordre and the new classicism which he hoped to instigate in alliance with Radiguet, and which coincides - as did Le Diable au Corps (1923) - with his novel Thomas l'Imposteur.⁶

Thomas unites the main themes of Le Cap with the topography of the Discours du Grand Sommeil. Its hero Guillaume Thomas is an adolescent who steals the name of the fashionable General Fontenoy, whose nephew he claims to be. With this passepartout he glides easily into the Princesse de Bormes' ambulance convoy, and later into the affections of her daughter Henriette. The cachet of Guillaume's assumed name is invaluable to the convoy: also the princess recognises in him a kindred spirit. Cocteau's account of the first convoy mixes farce with a sense of the muddle and squalor of the back areas - the latter evoked with a peculiar fastidiousness. The convoy's visit to the shattered town of Reims (Cocteau had been there with Misia Sert in 1914) is no longer comic, but just as grim.

La cathédrale était une montagne de vieilles dentelles.
Les médecins militaires, que le bombardement intense mettait dans l'incapacité d'agir, attendaient une accalmie dans la cave du LION D'OR. Trois cents blessés remplissaient l'hospice et l'hôpital. Reims se trouvant, en cas de guerre, sous la protection d'une ville qui ne

⁶Gallimard, Paris, 1923. Page references in the text are to this edition.

s'en souciait pas, ne pouvait ni évacuer, ni nourrir personne. Les blessés mourraient de leurs blessures, de la faim, de la soif, du tétanos, du tir. La veille, à l'hôpital, on venait d'apprendre à un artilleur qu'il fallait lui couper la jambe sans chloroforme, que c'était la seule chance de le sauver, et il fumait, blême, une dernière cigarette avant le supplice, lorsqu'un obus réduisit le matériel chirurgical en poudre, et tua deux aides-majors. Personne n'osa reparaître devant l'artilleur. On dut laisser la gangrène l'envahir comme le lierre une statue.

Ces scènes se répétaient dix fois par jour. Chez les Soeurs, on avait, pour cent cinquante blessés, une tasse de lait rance et une moitié de saucisson. Un prêtre, dans la longue salle trouée, administrait de paille en paille et, pour mettre l'hostie dans les bouches, desserrait les dents avec une lame de couteau. (pp.61-2)

This - the surprising metaphor, the anecdotal snapshots - is the technique of much of the Discours du Grand Sommeil. After his set-piece, Cocteau concentrates on the reactions of Guillaume and the princess under fire. "Guillaume admirait la bravoure de Clémence de Bormes, laquelle admirait la sienne. Or, la bravoure de Guillaume était de l'enfantillage et celle de la princesse de l'inconscience." (p.64)

After some time with the convoy, Guillaume begins to become restless. He is troubled by his relationship with Henriette, and believes himself to be bored. So he arranges to be sent to the Belgian front.

Le front belge, c'étaient les Belges, les zouaves, les tirailleurs, les Anglais, les fusiliers marins. Un vaste champ d'entreprise. Guillaume rayonnait. (p.94)

His vague and certainly untaxing duties leave him plenty of time to explore this playground. He is adopted by a group of fusiliers marins (celebrated in the Discours du Grand Sommeil), and initiated as a sort of mascot into a community of daring, gay, doomed warriors. Forgetting

his civilian commitments, Guillaume settles on the periphery of this glamorous and surrealistic existence with real enthusiasm. (Like almost every other writer under survey, Cocteau presents the comradeship of men in action as the supreme value discovered by the war.) After a brief visit from the princess and Henriette, Guillaume stays with the marines on the Belgian front until he is killed there. When the news reaches Paris, Henriette concludes, mistakenly, that he has exposed himself to needless risk out of his desperate love for her. And the novel ends cinematically, focussing on a grave in the marines' cemetery at Nieuport, with its inscription:

"G.-T. de Fontenoy. Mort pour nous."

Cocteau lets this stand without comment. Is it a kind of apotheosis, or a kind of irony? Guillaume Thomas has no right to the name of Fontenoy - does he have any right to the epitaph? On the evidence of the way Cocteau has prepared his readers to make a judgement, I suspect that he did intend Guillaume to appear heroic, if not in the conventional mode of the war-hero. By involving others in his fantasy, he has won a sort of game played against the adult world. (Something similar happens in Les Enfants Terribles.) Under the conditions of the war as Cocteau envisages it in the novel, Guillaume is proposed as an acceptable, even a logical candidate for heroism.

In the first chapter, Cocteau describes the battle of the Marne.

Cette victoire, mise sur le compte du miracle, s'explique à merveille. Il suffit d'avoir été en classe. Les polissons l'emportent toujours sur les forts en thème,

pour peu qu'une circonstance empêche ces derniers de suivre aveuglément le plan qu'ils se sont fait. Toujours est-il que le désordre vivace, vainqueur de l'ordre massif, n'en était pas moins du désordre. Il favorisa l'extravagance. (p.8)

This childish simplification can be presumed to refer to Galliéni's sortie from Paris and such phenomena as "the famous if legend-encrusted episode" of the Paris taxi-cabs.⁷ That the "victory" of the Marne owed little to polissonerie is not the point, though it had better be made. What is intriguing is that Cocteau is here laying down the axes for his account of the events to follow, and that he is laying them down in childish terms. From the outset, "désordre vivace" is engaged in conflict with "ordre massif", which is to come to include more than just the German army.

We are dealing with a kind of picaresque. Guillaume Thomas is certainly a pícáro. So is the princess. (The title is hers by marriage. She is illegitimate and foreign. "Sa santé, son goût de vivre, la singularité de ses modes et de son mouvement lui valaient une réputation épouvantable." (p.13).) So are the marines, with their boyish and undisciplined bravery, and their tendency to announce the score in a card-game with a salvo of rifle fire. In the sixteen-year-old Guillaume we are invited to view the naughty, gifted child - the truant - as hero; "la condition même de l'héroïsme étant le libre arbitre, la désobéissance, l'absurde, l'exceptionnel". (p.162) He is another enfant terrible.

⁷ See B.H. Liddell Hart, History of the First World War (enlarged edition), Cassell, 1970, p.121 & ff.

It is often difficult to establish what Guillaume Thomas actually does. His assumed name secures for the ambulance convoy a long-awaited travel permit; later he uses it to obtain much-needed petrol which has been refused by an obdurate bishop. On the convoy's expeditions he is to be glimpsed collecting souvenirs. At the front, his duties with the cantine are vague, and when the rest of the team are ordered to the Somme, Guillaume is left behind to look after some equipment (it is at this point that he is adopted by the marines). With the convoy as with the marines, he exists almost wholly as a presence, a mascot, a pet. And yet Cocteau insists that he is perfectly suited to this theatre of war, indeed he is an essential part of it.

A ce vaste mensonge de sable et de feuilles, il ne manquait que Guillaume de Fontenoy. (p.105)

The explanation lies in the ambiguity of that phrase "theatre of war". Guillaume Thomas is a liar, and a performer. There is little indication that he has an existence outside the rôles he assumes. He has no past. He is another orphan, and he lives with a senile aunt. The war gives him a chance to come into his own as a performer. In wartime people dress up in costumes, and assume unexpected rôles.

All the war is, for Cocteau's people, a stage. Indeed they are 'characters' in both senses of the English word. Dr. Verne is more interested in his hobby - he practices hypnosis on his unwitting staff - than in his medical work. The princess, whose flamboyant originality has frightened off all but the best in society, realises the

histrionic possibilities of the war - "La guerre lui apparut tout de suite comme le théâtre de la guerre" (p.18) - and cannot bear to remain in the audience. Mme. Valiche joins the ambulance convoy because she too is "éprise de drame" (p.24), although Cocteau is careful to tell us that, since she is a vulgar woman, her motives are less selfless than those of the princess. She brings along her lover, Dr. Gentil (a free-thinker - "Je crois aux vibrations de l'éther" (p.41)), a "mauvais dentiste" who finds in the war an excellent opportunity to pose as a hospital surgeon.

In this stagestruck caravan, Guillaume takes his rightful place. But he is even more at home when he goes to the Belgian front, for here even the topography suits him. The northern extremity of the front is a place of dramatic conjunctions - land and sea, Allies and Germans, Belgians and zouaves and French marines and English. Everyday objects are put to sinister use, and the junctions of the trench system, "cette ville creuse serpentant d'un bout à l'autre de la France" (p.99), bear the familiar names of métro stations. It is almost surreal, and certainly theatrical. "Les dessous de Nieuport ressemblaient à ceux du théâtre du Châtelet" (p.101). In this theatre of war where nothing is as it seems, the sand dunes themselves are the chef-d'oeuvre.

On se trouvait ému devant ce paysage féminin, lisse, cambré, hanché, couché, rempli d'hommes. Car ces dunes n'étaient désertes qu'en apparence. En réalité, elles n'étaient que trucs, décors, trompe-l'oeil, trappes et artifices. (p.102)

The theatricality of Cocteau's war-topography is certainly an extreme case, but there is no doubt that the experience

of war helped to create, simply, a sense of sheer unreality which was to play some part in shaping the postwar arts.

Guillaume Thomas de Fontenoy is an anti-hero partly in the sense that no such person exists. He is delighted to find, in the company of the fusiliers marins, that the fact that he bears a false name is entirely consistent with the natural history of a community which is itself in essence pseudonymous.

Il ne trompe personne. Ce n'était pas un nom de général qui influençait ces âmes nobles. Du reste, ce nom qui perdait en ce lieu son sens pratique, ne devenait-il pas un simple nom de guerre? Ils en portaient tous. Guillaume Thomas était Fontenoy, comme Roy: Fantomas, Pajot: Cou de Girafe, Combescure: Mort subite, Breuil de la Payotte, fils de l'amiral: l'Amiral, Le Gannec: Gordon Pym. (p.121)

The princess and her daughter come on a visit to the front with a theatrical troupe, and after the performance Guillaume proudly takes them on a tour of the trenches. By this time the trompe-l'oeil is so complete that it is impossible to tell which are the actors and which the spectators.

With this transformation of the war into a play (or child's play), some coup de théâtre is obviously required, and it comes in a typically Coctelian fashion. Carrying a message for his captain one night, Guillaume Thomas is surprised by an enemy patrol.

-Fontenoy! cria-t-il à tue-tête, transformant son imposture en cri de guerre. Et il ajouta, pour faire une farce, en se sauvant à toutes jambes: Guillaume II.

Guillaume volait, bondissait, dévalait comme un lièvre.

N'entendant pas de fusillade, il s'arrêta, se retourna, hors d'haleine.

Alors, il sentit un atroce coup de bâton sur la poitrine. Il tomba. Il devenait sourd, aveugle.

- Une balle, se dit-il. Je suis perdu si je ne fais pas semblant d'être mort.
 Mais en lui, la fiction et la réalité ne formaient qu'un.
 Guillaume Thomas était mort. (p.173)

This chapter is called "Le rendez-vous des anges".

It may be that, if the war itself is an imposture and a lie, it gets the hero it deserves in Guillaume Thomas. Cocteau has ingeniously notated the theatricality of war, but his story is theatrical - gestural - rather than dramatic. (His works for the stage also invite this distinction.) One of the most engaging and adroit novels to treat of the Great War, Thomas is too much of a special case - finally not interesting enough - to engage the attention for very long.

I think this has to do with what I have called the childishness of the book. It sometimes seems that the war is envisaged as an opportunity for some gifted and attractive people to have fun in a sort of charade. There is perhaps an indoor correspondence to the idea of war as sport sometimes encountered among the privileged classes in Britain. In the end the curtain comes down, as it must. Guillaume Thomas - like Garros, a performer and a fugitive - comes to earth. He dies, upstage. The two women hear the news of his death ("Madame de Bormes et sa fille hurlaient, arrachaient leurs robes" (p.177) - this is pure Grand Guignol). None of Guillaume's comrades in the fusiliers marins survives him long. Henriette goes into a decline; dies: indeed none of the young characters survives. The princess becomes "une femme âgée" overnight. All this is curiously unaffecting; and it is the innocence of the novel (for all its wit) that makes it so.

The chronology of the narrative is, as usual, important. Cocteau is not specific but it seems likely that the entire action takes place in the first year of the war. In this brief space the drama of Guillaume's innocence has time to be performed. "Tué au nord," thinks Pesquel-Dupont (p.175), "il mérite l'épithète de l'enfant Septentrion: Dansa deux jours et plut." I doubt if such a story could have been located two years or even a year later. (The date of composition is irrelevant. What matters is the historical context of the story.) Thomas l'Imposteur may be considered as a sort of sketch (another ébauche) for the epic to celebrate the victory of anarchic individualism, which was anticipated in Le Cap and which will not be written since that victory never happened. The war gave Cocteau's Thomas the opportunity for a grand truancy, and then killed him. It is interesting that Thomas coincides intimately with Le Diable au Corps, whose narrator, embarking on a quite different drama, announces on the first page:

Que ceux déjà qui m'en veulent se représentent ce que fut la guerre pour tant de très jeunes garçons: quatre ans de grandes vacances.⁸

At this point, a tricky question of valuation imposes itself if we set the apparent innocence of Thomas l'Imposteur alongside the apparent innocence of much of Apollinaire's Calligrammes. There are certainly moments in Apollinaire's war-poetry in which the war is treated as a kind of holiday, and I find it difficult to explain why

⁸Raymond Radiguet, Le Diable au Corps, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1923.

Apollinaire's work cannot often be reproached with the charge of irresponsibility, or at least whimsy, which can legitimately be brought against Thomas l'Imposteur. It is certain, although almost certainly unfortunate, that biographical knowledge intrudes on literary judgement here. As readers we are inclined to look favourably on those writers who had a 'good war' (and how we interpret that phrase depends on many things, including politics and simpler forms of prejudice). This had better be admitted. However, the relative valuation of Cocteau and Apollinaire turns, I think, on a question of tone. Cocteau is childish, Apollinaire childlike. I mean, paradoxically perhaps, that Cocteau is more self-conscious and sophisticated than Apollinaire. He presents a child's response to the experience of the war as though it were smart and rather clever, and also exclusive. It will be remembered that, under the bombardment at Reims, "Guillaume admirait la bravoure de Clémence de Bormes, laquelle admirait la sienne" (p.64). His celebration of "le désordre vivace, vainqueur de l'ordre massif" is the formulation for a kind of snobbery which is misplaced and not adequate to its occasion.

The contrast between Cocteau's novel and Aldington's Death of a Hero can scarcely be exaggerated. There is a polar difference in tone. Cocteau is ingratiating; he cajoles his reader. Aldington is hysterically aggressive; his novel is an act of assault and battery. Cocteau's

Thomas is intended to be seductive. Aldington's George Winterbourne is embattled and alone. Everyone persecutes him, but we may suspect that no one is really thought worthy enough to be invited to sympathise with him. Death of a Hero is an exceedingly petulant novel. Written in 1929, it has some of the characteristic features of the writing of the following decade (another sub-genre), but none of the boyish quality which so often accompanies the aggressiveness of much of the literature of the 'thirties. Its nearest analogue, in tone, is the chapter "The Nightmare" in Lawrence's Kangaroo (1923), which is also an exile's novel.

Death of a Hero presents itself as the epitaph, or medical report, of a generation, the generation that went too young to the Great War, and returned from it too old. The novel is introduced with an epigraph from Horace Walpole.

See how we trifle! but one can't pass one's youth too amusingly; for one must grow old, and that in England; two most serious circumstances, either of which makes people grey in the twinkling of a bedstaff; for you know, there is not a country upon earth where there are so many old fools and so few young ones.

Having thus cut his contemporaries off from the older generation, Aldington goes on almost immediately to dissociate them from the postwar generation, the young for whom, he says in his dedicatory letter to Halcott Glover, "Sincerity is superannuated". (p.8)⁹ Occupying an awkward salient threatened on two sides by the hypocrisy of the passing

⁹Richard Aldington's Death of a Hero was first published by Chatto & Windus in 1929, in a slightly bowdlerised form. The full text is printed in an edition by Sphere Books, 1968; and page references in the text of this section are to this later edition.

generation and the insincerity of the arrivistes, Aldington's generational loyalties are narrow and clear. The war-generation - his own - is in a special and indeed unique position, having the experience and the responsibility to speak the truth; and in this spirit he pursues his "seriously tragic" theme. And the theme is the story of his generation - "those who spent their childhood and adolescence struggling, like young Samsons, in the toils of the Victorians; and whose early manhood coincided with the European War". (p.7)¹⁰

The semi-colon there is only a concession to chronology. Aldington sets out to show that there is no essential difference between the two struggles - the struggle against the Victorians, and the struggle of the war. The factor common to both conflicts is that the hero's personal fulfilment is balked, and his freedom interfered with, by the oppressive selfishness and spiteful stupidity of others. Aldington's George Winterbourne is, chronically, an example of what Northrop Frye has called the eiron type, a self-deprecating and rarely vocal hero, in an ironic mode. The name, like that of Wells's Britling, hints at a quasi-allegoric intention: George, the chivalric hero and patron saint of England, born in an ungrateful season, or (homophonously) on the frontier of winter. George's behaviour is rarely choiced; it issues in increasingly cramped reaction to an outside and usually vicious pressure. Character is

¹⁰In view of his subsequent career, this may seem a surprising choice of heroic prototype. But, like George Winterbourne, Samson was betrayed by two women. His enemies were Philistines.

action, and as George's possibilities of action are, one after the other, closed off to him, his character too disintegrates. He will be a convenient test case for Yeats's dictum that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry".¹¹

The case, however, is complicated by narratorial intervention. The narrator, Winterbourne's ex-confidant and executor, is scarcely involved in the plot itself, but is always ready to step in on George's behalf, with a sarcastic epigram, or a dissertation on anything from birth-control to artistic fashions. Neither dissociated from the story nor quite involved in it, he seems to represent and pre-empt most of the reacting and judging part of the hero's psyche, as if a cutting had been taken from George's character and nourished with ten years' hindsight. There is a kind of partnership; George suffers, the narrator recollects and reacts. The narratorial part is the most vigorous feature of the novel, but its success is accomplished at the cost of considerable damage to the interest of the central character. The narrator, in a way, is as responsible as anyone for the Death of the Hero.

The stations of George Winterbourne's passion are divided into a prologue and three parts. The prologue, "Mort d'un Eröe" relates the announcement of his death in action, and its consequences. (It also quite intentionally gives away all the main features of the plot to come. What follows is not to be a murder story, but an autopsy.)

¹¹ Preface to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1936, p. xxxiv.

The three parts which are the body of the work correspond to the three stages of George's career - his early life at home and school, his struggles as an aspiring artist in prewar London, and the part he plays in the war. And the divisions of the novel also correspond particularly luminously to George's relations with the stock villains of the war-generation: insensitive and smug Victorian parents; selfish and faithless women (his wife and mistress), who in Part Three represent the 'nation at home'; and the brutality of the war-machine.

Each section is given a musical notation, but these, insofar as they have any function, are indications not of pace but of tone. The Prologue is notated "allegretto", and the tone establishes itself from the first page as an easy cynicism, rather self-consciously hard-bitten.

I suppose Winterbourne's name does appear on some War Memorial, probably in the Chapel of his Public School; and, of course, he's got his neat ration of headstone in France. But that's about all. (pp.11-12)

When George's death is announced (at the time of the Armistice, like Wilfred Owen's), the reactions of his father and mother to the news are variously grotesque. The father falls to his ineffectual and complacent beads; the mother, after a moment of highly enjoyable plangency, falls (back) into the arms of her twenty-second lover. This is the occasion for one of the first of many narratorial interventions.

Mrs. Winterbourne played up at first... But the effect of George's death on her temperament was, strangely enough, almost wholly erotic. The war did that to lots of women. All the dying and wounds and mud and bloodiness - at a safe distance - gave them a great kick, and excited them to an almost unbearable pitch of amorousness. Of course, in that

eternity of 1914-18 they must have come to feel that men alone were mortal, and they immortals; wherefore they tried to behave like houris with all available sheiks - hence the lure of "war work" with its unbounded opportunities. And then there was the deep primitive physiological instinct - men to kill and be killed; women to produce more men to continue the process. (pp.18-19)¹²

There is genuine indignation behind the tough, throwaway cynicism of this passage. And there is a suspiciously firm syntactic transition from the rehearsed particular to the speculative generalisation: "strangely enough" - "of course" - "wherefore" - "hence" - "And then": all this is done in a vocabulary which is informal and (in the idiom of the day) 'jazzy'. "The war did that to lots of women"; and then the uneven rhythm of the following phrase is licked up by the curt parenthesis. This style of prose is, I think, effective in spite of its suspicious facility. And there is something rather bullying about it. Earlier, the narrator describes George's mother as "as sordid, avaricious, conventional, and spiteful a middle-class woman as you could dread to meet. Like all her class, she toadied to her betters and bullied her inferiors. But, with her conventionality, she was, of course, a hypocrite."(p.17) This sort of characterisation undoubtedly has its charms, but many readers will find it unpleasantly dictatorial.

¹² Compare the Little Mother's letter, mentioned above: "... There is only one temperature for the women of the British race, and that is white heat ... Our ears are not deaf to the cry that is ever ascending from the battlefield from men of flesh and blood whose indomitable courage is borne to us, so to speak, on every blast of wind. We women pass on the human ammunition of 'only sons' to fill up the gaps ... Women are created for the purpose of giving life, and men to take it..." (quoted in Graves, Goodbye to All That, pp.189-190.)

Mrs. Winterbourne is clearly a proscribed character, and she cannot be separated from the narrator's ready-made condemnation of her. If you accept the name, you must accept the judging adjectives that go with it. One implies the others. This is lent a sort of spurious inevitability by the placing of "middle-class woman" after that string of pejoratives, by "like all her class" and "she was, of course, a hypocrite". The reader is forbidden the chance of making up his mind about Mrs. Winterbourne, or even to attempt to find her interesting. That would be as unthinkable as audience-participation in a Punch and Judy show. This totalitarian characterisation would not necessarily be annoying if it were consistent in the novel. As it is, it must be compared, to its disadvantage, with Ford Madox Ford's presentation of a much more horrible female, Sylvia Teitjens, in that far finer war-novel, Parade's End. (Ford, ironically, is caricatured in Death of a Hero, as Mr. Shobbe.)

It may be worth dwelling for a moment on what Aldington saw as the historical context of Death of a Hero. In the prefatory letter, he explains that he began his book immediately after the Armistice. This is of extraordinary interest.

Then came demobilization, and the effort of readjustment cost my manuscript its life. I threw it aside, and never picked it up again. The attempt was premature. Then, ten years later, almost day for day, I felt the impulse return, and began this book.(p.7)

It is significant that much of the best war-literature in prose in English appeared ten years or so after the end

of the war.¹³ The "effort of readjustment" for those returning from war was indeed great. Chapter 26 of Graves's Goodbye to All That (1929) has an interesting account of the confusion and anxiety which the abrupt change to civilian life - and to adult civilian life, something quite unknown to many returning soldiers - caused for one "still mentally and nervously organized for war".¹⁴ Almost all the evidence suggests that those who returned found that what they had experienced was, radically, incommunicable. Like the trauma of the psychoanalysts, the war remains surrounded by an uneasy silence, a repository of guilt and pain; and, as in the process of analysis, the traumatic experience only ceases to be a source of pain when it has been recreated, realised, and mapped out. It would be crass to suggest that the recreation of war-experience in fiction and memoirs should be regarded as a sort of literary therapy. But there is, undoubtedly, an element of exorcism in the process.

Another reason for the efflorescence of war-literature at the end of the 'twenties may have been the realisation that European war was no longer a dead issue. 1928/1929 celebrated the tenth anniversary of peace in Europe, but, to the less sanguine, the future seemed to hold a less than irenic promise. In 1918 - even, with rather more effort, in 1919 - it was possible to believe what the politicians and journalists had said about 'the war that

¹³See the "Chronology of Publications" in Bergonzi's Heroes' Twilight, pp.225-227.

¹⁴Graves, op.cit., p.235.

will end war'. Ten years later, the trek from progress had to be viewed in a different light. The earliest use I have found of the phrase 'the First World War' (as opposed to 'the Great war') occurs in Aldington's novel, in 1929.¹⁵ Aldington's narrator is already, proleptically, a veteran of the Second World War. He is doubly embittered.

He uses a physiological metaphor to explain his need to tell George's story. "Something is unfulfilled, and that is poisoning us."(p.35) The slow working of this poison is illustrated by the invisibility of George as a character in the Prologue, and the narrator's own cynical allegretto tone. It is only ten years after George's death that it begins to be significant for his friend and executor, with the terrible significance of Owen's "Parable of the Old Man and the Young" - an unnecessary and meaningless sacrifice. It may be that it took the passage of time in the 'twenties for the dust to settle and the degree of mental prostration induced in some of the survivors to relax, and, above all, for some kind of historical judgement to be made. What had the Great War achieved? In 1929, Aldington's narrator has little doubt. "George's death is a symbol to me of the whole sickening bloody waste of it, the damnable stupid waste and torture of it."(p.35) His use of the motif of sacrifice includes an element which Brooke, in "The Dead", had found it convenient to ignore: the element of atonement.

¹⁵"Already one foresees the creation of Chairs in the History of the First World War, to be set up in whatever civilized countries remain in existence after the next one."(p.198)

Somehow or other we have to make these dead acceptable, we have to atone for them, we have to appease them. How, I don't quite know ... Somehow we must atone to the dead - the dead, murdered, violently-dead soldiers. The reproach is not from them, but in ourselves. Most of us don't know it, but it is there, and poisons us. It is the poison that makes us heartless and hopeless and lifeless - us the war generation, and the new generation too. The whole world is blood-guilty, cursed like Orestes, and mad, and destroying itself, as if pursued by an infinite legion of Eumenides.
(p.35)¹⁶

Aldington's atonement takes the form of an attempt to make good the claim of heroic status in the title of the novel. This involves a complete reversal of the traditional equipment of the heroic. Yeats was to deny Owen a place in his Oxford Book of Modern Verse largely on the grounds that Owen's war-poems lacked this traditional literary heroism, the heroism of "swashbucklers, horsemen, swift indifferent men",¹⁷ a heroism defined by action. Owen's people were too passive, and passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. Yeats quite rightly realised that modern warfare had little enough room for swashbucklers, or even horsemen, and that its crippling abridgement of individual choice forced the heroes of war-writing, if heroes there were, to plumb new depths of the ironic mode. This is what happens to Aldington's Winterbourne. He is proposed as a hero, sardonically but perhaps seriously, because he so thoroughly lacks any of the trappings of heroism. This parodic travesty of heroism is an almost totally passive quality.

¹⁶In The Oresteia, it will be remembered, Orestes is finally acquitted on the grounds that, really, it was his mother who was to blame. When this is established, the Eumenides are called off.

¹⁷Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p.xv.

Shakespearean heroes tend to become victims - often their own victims - because they are heroic. George Winterbourne becomes heroic because he is a victim. His status as hero and victim is tautological.

George is a born victim. His first victimisation is at the hands of his parents and teachers, representatives of "an England morally buried in great foggy wrappings of hypocrisy and prosperity and cheapness".(p.39) By the use of 'Victorian' as a pejorative - a usage substantiated in the years after 1918, and another of Aldington's totalitarian devices whereby description is the same thing as condemnation - the parental generation is placed: hypocritical, sentimental, wielding an unmerited and stifling authority. In Part One of the novel, "vivace", Aldington chronicles, with the relish of an English émigré, the education which George seems lucky to have survived. (It is interesting that Death of a Hero is both a portrait of the artist as a young man, and a goodbye to all that.) His reading and painting is discouraged. "Wasn't he old enough to have a gun licence and learn to kill things?" (p.78) Like Stephen Dedalus, he is given apocalyptic lectures on Smut and Sin. Education makes a mess of him, leaving him feeling "immeasurably guilty, but immeasurably repelled".(p.79) In response to his public school's attempts to make a man of him, he develops in defence the characteristic strategy which he will bring to all his later conflicts, and to the war itself.

He just went hate-obstinate, and obeyed with sullen, hate-obstinate docility. He didn't disobey, but he didn't really obey, not with anything inside him. He was just passive, and they could do nothing with him.(p.80)

This invulnerability au fond is the last stronghold of the romantic and the liberal (for George is both). In his inarticulate way he is the artist as hero, and the hero as angry young man; and the prize for which opposing forces in the novel do battle - and which, in the end, he surrenders - is his individuality.

By the beginning of Part Two, George has escaped from his parents and come to London to be a painter. The tone - "andante cantabile" - is somewhat relaxed here. Part One was grotesque; Part Two is satiric. Part One had proposed a simple polarity, between George the individual and his education by the procrustean method. In the follies of prewar arty London, George is himself somewhat implicated, and a legitimate target for Aldington's satire. He and his friends share and flaunt a fragile emancipation of youth, and draw up what Aldington mockingly calls "The Triumphal Scheme of the Perfect Sex Relationship", (p.174) assuring each other of the unimportance of fidelity and the need and good sense of sexual freedom. It is suggested, though, that George's education has ensured that his ideations always look better in theory than they perform in practice; and even in bohemian Soho his dreams of individual freedom are threatened, for his contemporaries, like the caricatures who haunt Mr. Shobbe's literary soirées, are infected with the hypocrisy of the parental generation. In the panic of an imaginary pregnancy, George's emancipated mistress loses no time in becoming his lamia-like wife, quite abandoning the Triumphal Scheme of the Perfect Sex Relationship. And later his disinterested friend becomes

his lamia-like mistress. When the two women quarrel, it is over possession of George. Neither feels much more than affection for him, but self-esteem will allow neither to cede him to the other as a possession. As the unwilling apex of this triangle, George feels increasingly diffident and wretched. War is announced. Straining at domestic intransigence, he swallows the camel of military service, and enlists as a private.

If George was hoping for escape, or at least change, when he joined the army, he is soon to be disabused. His life continues to be a pattern of persecutions. The hero is still a victim ex officio, only the instruments of persecution are less subtle now that he has gone to war. Although he recognises this continuity - "He was living in a sort of double nightmare - the nightmare of the War and the nightmare of his own life. Each seemed inextricably interwoven"(p.226) - it is to the narrator that we must look for any judgements of the public events of this final phase of the hero's life. Aldington's narrator is a gifted journalist. From the grotesque forms of George's childhood, through the satire of Part Two and finally in the everyday life (for thus it must have seemed) of the fighting soldier, the narrator excels in social atmospherics. Through him we can read off, as it were barometrically, the growing pressure on George Winterbourne's individuality. But he does not scrupulously confine himself to George's own case. Sometimes his own retrospections take on the substantiality of a sub-plot. His own preoccupations stick out through the narrative like bone-structure, and his reflections on

the war and its aftermath have the character of unrelieved pain. "George Winterbourne" sometimes proves insufficient as an objective correlative, and Aldington's spleen then brims over into the narratorial part. The result can be dismaying.

What right have I to live? It is dreadful to have outlived your life, to have shirked your fate, to have overspent your welcome. There is nobody upon earth who cares whether I live or die, and I am glad of it, so glad of it. To be alone, icily alone. You, the war dead, I think you died in vain, I think you died for nothing, for a blast of wind, a blather, a humbug, a newspaper stunt, a politician's ramp. But at least you died... What right have we to live? And the women? Oh don't let's talk about the women. They were splendid, wonderful. Such devotion, such devotion! How they comforted the troops! Oh, wonderful, beyond all praise! They got the vote for it, you know... On Sundays the Union Jack flies over the cemetery at Etaples. It's not so big as it was in the old wooden-cross days, but it's still quite large. Acres and acres. Yes, acres and acres. And it's too late to get one's little lot in the acres. Too late, too late....(pp.201-202)¹⁸

Winterbourne's war-career is a chronicle of steady decline. His drawn-out passion visits all the formulaic stations of war-writing: the insolence of officers, the numbing boredom of army life, the smug incomprehension of the nation at home, the wearing anxiety of continual bombardment (which Aldington renders superbly), the catalepsy of history's victims. At first, it had seemed that war-

¹⁸The passage raises an interesting question of literary manners. These maunderings might be quite acceptable if attributed to a fictional character. But spoken by a narrator who has no active part in the novel, they are embarrassing. This can only be because they exceed the bounds of what we expect to encounter when we read a work of fiction. Some sort of contract, implied in the act of reading, has been violated. The author has broken fictional common law.

service might be a new beginning. After the boredom and humiliations of his period of training in England, Winterbourne gets his first glimpse of 'real' soldiers - seasoned veterans, returning to the front on the boat which is taking him to France - and is filled with sudden admiration, and the stirrings of a new loyalty.

These men were men. There was something intensely masculine about them, something very pure and immensely friendly and stimulating. They had been where no woman and no half-man had ever been, could endure to be. (p.253)¹⁹

This sentimental masculinity of heroism, accompanied by various degrees of professed contempt for women, is a theme which links Brooke with Owen and many points between. George Winterbourne is impressed by what he sees.

"By God!" he said to himself, "you're men, not boudoir rabbits and lounge lizards. I don't care a damn what your cause is - it's almost certainly a foully rotten one. But I do know you're the first real men I've looked upon. I swear you're better than the women and the half-men, and by God! I swear I'll die with you rather than live in a world without you." (pp.253-254)

But there is little scope for classical heroics in George's war. The invisibility of the enemy, the anonymity and sheer number of the soldiers, the anonymity and range of the weaponry involved - all these factors gave little chance to most of the traditional values of heroism, which are values of individual action. Swash-buckling became superannuated in the Great War, and the

¹⁹This rejection of women and half-men, repeated in the next quotation, finds an interesting parallel in Brooke's 1914 sonnet "Peace", where "we" are glad of the opportunity to "Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,/ And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,/ And all the little emptiness of love!".

central virtue of the soldier became a dogged resilience, the skill of survival. The main function of the infantryman was to be shelled; and his most valuable quality, ironically enough, was passive resistance. At best - except for isolated moments - heroism was possible not in the active but in the passive voice, a heroism without choice, the heroics of conscription. Through four years of war, George Winterbourne carries this heroism of survival as an increasingly intolerable burden. The war section of the novel, culminating in the death of the hero (which is probably suicide) irresistibly recalls Owen's poem about a suicide, "S.I.W."

It was the reasoned crisis of his soul
 Against more days of inescapable thrall,
 Against infrangibly wired and blind trench wall
 Curtained with fire, roofed in with creeping fire,
 Slow grazing fire, that would not burn him whole
 But kept him for death's promises and scoff,
 And life's half-promising, and both their riling.

Winterbourne suffers all the imposed degradations of the soldier at war; the torments of frost and cold, of mud, gas, incessant artillery, fatigue and lack of sleep, and loneliness. His life in England becomes unreal and is almost forgotten. As a character (an active participant in a narrative), he begins to disappear, and he becomes merely a register of suffering, increasingly silent. His life's struggle against the pressure of outside forces is confirmed in the process of war and undergoes a sort of grotesque dramatisation. And the most powerful element - at once literal and metaphoric, as in Barbusse and "S.I.W." - in his abridgement of choice is the ceaseless and intolerable artillery barrage, from which there is no escape. In war,

George's extraneity and isolation are completed; yet he cannot be left alone.

Towards the end of the novel, the narrative spirals down in continually smaller and more hopeless units. It begins to break up, like George's personality; and like himself, his sufferings seem to be without issue. Aldington insists - and he has this in common with most war-writers - on the fundamental incommunicability of war-experience. Accompanying the fervent sense of comradeship between soldiers, to which all war-writers testify, is a corresponding gulf between those who had served at the front and those who had not: the Staff, parents, women (Death of a Hero is certainly a misogynist document), and the 'nation at home'. Graves's and Sassoon's accounts of home leave illustrate this gulf very forcibly. George Winterbourne's final contact with the figures of his former life, during which he experiences this alienation in a ludicrous and pathetic way, takes place when he is on leave in London before being posted to officers' training school. (For Aldington, the gap between the fighting soldiers and the rest is not only a fact, but one consistent with the rest of Winterbourne's story. It accords with the thematic lines of polarity in Death of a Hero, a polarity basically between the honest and the dishonest. "It was the regime of Cant before the War which made the Cant during the War so damnably possible and easy" - and those who were responsible for the perpetration of Cant were "the 'Victorians of all nations". (p.222)) Winterbourne's decision to become an officer²⁰ is, like Hamlet's decision to fight the

²⁰A similar temptation is offered to Bourne in Manning's Her Privates We.

duel, a curiously moving gesture. Like Hamlet's, it is a gesture of exhaustion and acceptance, the gesture by which the hero finally, for the first time, and fatally, agrees to abide by the rules of those ranged against him: George Winterbourne returns to the front and, soon after, he is killed. Murder, suicide, or accident, Aldington leaves us in no doubt as to who is responsible.

A novel that includes history must also include some sort of interpretation of history. The structure of Death of a Hero is instructive in this respect. It offers a hero who is a passive victim; and it begins with the announcement of his death in action, and then gives an account of his antecedents (going back two generations) and his own sentimental education, from about 1890 to his death in 1918. When the Great War enters the story, it does nothing to change the narrative's pattern of persecution. It only confirms and dramatises (as we shall see it do in Proust) what has come before. It administers the coup de grâce in the death of the hero, but without disturbing the parabola of his decline, for all his life he has been under fire in every sense except the literal. Here, the periodisation of the plot gives the game away. For Winterbourne, 1918 is only the last of an intolerable load of straws. It is the final blow struck by a hostile and unfair world at the sensitive or artistic or rebellious (or whatever we may find sympathetic in the character of the hero). This may be contrasted with the periodisation of Céline's Voyage au Bout de la Nuit, where the beginning of the narrative coincides precisely with the outbreak of

war ("Ça a débuté comme ça" - the first line), and the story continues into the beginning of the 'thirties. Here the war is envisaged not as an end but as a beginning, which sets the standard for what is to follow. Céline's Ferdinand Bardamu enlists in 1914 and soon discovers that the war is ridiculous, pointless and extremely dangerous. When he tries to publish this discovery (at the top of his voice, in the foyer of a Paris hotel, to the alarm of the civilians), he is quickly put away as a neurasthenic and quite possibly a spy. But once the war is over, his alarm is justified. In the postwar world, life is still ridiculous, pointless and dangerous. You can be as bludgeoned, humiliated and threatened in a Detroit factory as you ever might have been at the front, under fire. Céline's novel sees the war as the beginning of bondage, the entrance to a long tunnel in Bardamu's journey to the end of darkness, while Aldington's book presents it as the last act of a long persecution, the death of the hero after a lifetime's illness.

At this point, it will be instructive to look at the way the Great War is treated in a much larger fiction, whose narrative spans the prewar, wartime and postwar world. To approach Le Temps Retrouvé as though it were, generically, a war-novel, is of course to miss most of the point. But this part of Proust's novel, while it pursues its own unique purposes, is at the same time a major document of war-literature. It is worth examining in this context, even at the risk of overemphasising the importance of the

wartime section of Le Temps Retrouvé in the overall scheme of the work.

Proust, who had been a soldier, was a keen amateur of military history, and in A la Recherche du Temps Perdu Marcel and his friend Robert de Saint-Loup spend a lot of time talking about the strategy and tactics of war. It is Saint-Loup the soldier, and not Marcel the aspiring writer, who gives what may be a hint at the roots of this interest when he observes, in the course of a conversation about Hindenburg,

Un général est comme un écrivain qui veut faire une certaine pièce, un certain livre, et que le livre lui-même, avec les ressources inattendues qu'il révèle ici, l'impasse qu'il présente là, fait dévier extrêmement du plan préconçu.²¹

This is a structural irony which must have amused Proust. The extreme deviations from the "plan préconçu" of A la Recherche are well known. But one in particular was dictated not by the unexpected resources of the book itself, but by historical fact. The composition of the novel preceded and survived the war. Proust could have ignored the war in A la Recherche, but instead he chose to use it. And so pertinently is it assimilated into the overall design of the work that it is difficult to believe that it cannot have been part of the novel's

²¹ A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Paris, 1954, 3 vols; vol. III, p.760. Page references in the text are to this edition.

preconceived plan or that, if it had not happened, Proust would not have been obliged to invent it.

Proust's final volume, Le Temps Retrouvé, is a three-part structure, each part representing a return. The first is Marcel's return to the topography of his childhood, when he goes to stay with Gilberte (now married to Robert de Saint-Loup) at Tansonville. (Appended to this is the pastiche of the Goncourt journal which describes an evening with the Verdurins. This too is a kind of return to a place which has become unrecognisable.) The middle section deals with Marcel's return to wartime Paris, describes the activities of M. de Charlus during the war, and ends (or peters out: this part of the novel is far from finished) with the death in combat of Saint-Loup. The final section, placed "many years" later (III, 854), presents Marcel's last foray into society, the dotage of Charlus, the danse macabre of the Princess de Guermantes' matinée, and Marcel's discovery of his vocation. I am concerned here mostly with the central, wartime section (III, 723-854), but as all three parts are in some way congruent, something must first be said of the opening section, set in Tansonville among the familiar topography of "Combray" in Du Côté de chez Swann.

Marcel has come to stay at Tansonville at the invitation of Swann's daughter Gilberte, his first love, now married to his best friend. Two of the principal themes of Le Temps Retrouvé, loss of time and loss of direction, are announced on the first page.

Je recommençais chaque soir, dans un autre sens, les promenades que nous faisons à Combray, l'après-midi, quand nous allions du côté de Méséglise. (III, 691)

These childhood walks, invested with such importance in the Combray passages and indeed in the structure of the novel, are now undertaken in an opposite direction, and at a later hour, "la nuit venue" (III, 691). As always in Proust, this disruption of habit contains a potential discovery: "...et je m'avançais, laissant mon ombre derrière moi, comme une barque qui poursuit sa navigation à travers des étendues enchantées" (III,691); but it is a discovery whose meaning eludes Marcel. He can only feel dispirited that he is incapable of recreating the time of his childhood. "J'étais désolé de voir combien peu je revivais mes années d'autrefois" (III,692). Combray leaves him indifferent, because he does not recognise it. Somehow he has been separated from his past, and robbed of it.

These notations, at the beginning of Le Temps Retrouvé, of the idea of separation from the past, have a relevance for the wartime section which will emerge later. Proust is, supremely, an accumulative writer. After the disorientations of Marcel's return to the scenes of his childhood, further disquieting surprises follow. The "côté de chez Swann" and the "côté de Guermantes" are discovered to be after all not separate. For the first time, he visits the springs of the river Vivonne, "que je me représentais comme quelque chose d' aussi extra-terrestre que l'Entrée des Enfers, et qui n'étaient qu'une espèce de lavoir carré où montaient des bulles" (III,693). Marcel's personal relations suffer a similar demythologising. There is a certain brutality in the way the narrator judges his hosts - of Saint-Loup, "il ne faisait presque plus preuve,

vis-à-vis de ses amis, par exemple vis-à-vis de moi, d'aucune sensibilité. Et en revanche il avait avec Gilberte des affectations de sensiblerie poussées jusqu'à la comédie, qui déplaisaient" (III, 699); of Gilberte, "Et elle-même avait tant changé que je ne la trouvais plus belle, qu'elle ne l'était plus du tout" (III,692). Intimately connected with this is the sexual ambiguity of both Robert and Gilberte. Robert's inversion is brought fully to light, and it is notable that what most interests the narrator in Robert's behaviour is that it is an abuse of the truth (III,699). Gilberte's "geste" in the gardens of Tansonville, which so puzzled the child Marcel years ago, is revealed to have been a precocious sexual invitation which quite contradicts his former idea of her. Furthermore her relations with Albertine, Léa²² and Andrée (who is to become her best friend (III,983)), suggest other disorienting ambiguities.

It seems almost nothing can be relied upon to survive the transformations of time in any recognisable form. From his bedroom window at Tansonville, Marcel can see in the blue distance the church of Combray. He does not bother to go and visit it.

Je me disais: "Tant pis, ce sera pour une autre année, si je ne meurs pas d'ici là", ne voyant pas d'autre obstacle que ma mort et n'imaginant pas celle de l'église qui me semblait devoir durer longtemps après ma mort comme elle avait duré longtemps avant ma naissance. (III,707)

Proust is nothing if not thorough. Marcel is to learn later from Charlus (III,795) that the church has been

²²This seems to have been a late addition to the text; see the note to III,695.

destroyed in the war (and not by the Germans, but by the British and French).²³ In this case the war simply dramatizes and accelerates the work of time the destroyer.

As if Marcel's loss had to be complete before the revelations (ambiguous as they are) of the final part of the novel could become available to him, it is on the last evening of his depressing stay at Tansonville that he reads the fragment of the "Goncourt Journal" which describes an evening spent with the Verdurins. (Proust, who cannot be accused of lack of humour, composed this pastiche after being awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1919.) This is one of Proust's most solemn jokes. R.A. Sayce, in a splendid article on "The Goncourt Pastiche in Le Temps Retrouvé", claims that "there is perhaps no point in the whole novel where the interplay of fiction and reality is so complex and so surprising".²⁴ If the people "Goncourt" portrays so enthusiastically are really the mediocrities Marcel knows them to be, may not all literature be nothing but "une magie illusoire"? Or is Marcel so dully unobservant that, "par une infirmité de ma nature", he is incapable of recognising people for what they are? And finally he is convinced that if this is literature, he himself has no gift for it. These reflections (III,717-723) so bewilder

²³It is notable, however, that Marcel tells Charlus he believes that the destruction of certain churches during the war - and the cathedral of Rheims is predictably mentioned - should not be lamented. He says they must be sacrificed to preserve the spirit which they symbolise. Charlus is not convinced. (III,795-796).

²⁴Larkin B. Price, ed. Marcel Proust: A Critical Panorama, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1973, pp.102-123.

him that during the following years, which he spends in a maison de santé, "j'avais tout à fait renoncé au projet d'écrire" (III,723).²⁵

When he leaves Tansonville, Marcel has already in effect lost Combray. It remains for the war to emphasise that loss cruelly and dramatically. The only retrospective change that Proust made to the substance of the novel, in a material sense, when he decided to incorporate the war into the narrative, was a vital one. The Pléïade editors, MM Clarac and Ferré, state that "Jusqu'en 1913...Proust a situé Combray dans la région de Chartres, à l'emplacement même d'Illiers. C'est seulement après 1914, lorsqu'il a décidé de faire entrer la guerre dans son oeuvre, qu'il a placé Combray sur le front, entre Laon et Reims" (III.1292n. Evidently Proust decided that the disappointments of the Tansonville section, discussed above, should be only the front wheel of the steamroller. The childhood garden had to be more literally lost.

The process is an interesting one. Nowhere in the wartime section (and unusually) does Marcel dwell on his own feelings about Combray, except once to hope earnestly that Charlus has not discovered his relatively humble status there (III,794). Gilberte's two letters from Tansonville are recorded with little comment. The first, written in September 1914, tells how she fled to the country, terrified by the Taube raids on Paris, only to find Tansonville almost immediately occupied by the advancing Germans. Fortunately

²⁵Of course, his reaction to "Goncourt" helps him towards a definition, by contrast, of what will become his own style. But this is of no immediate comfort.

however, these are better behaved than the retreating French forces (III,751). In her second letter, written in 1916, she has evidently had second thoughts about her motives for leaving Paris for Tansonville. Now she represents her panic as heroic resolution - "Mais que voulez-vous, je n'ai qu'une seule qualité, je ne suis pas lâche, ou, si vous aimez mieux, je suis fidèle, et quand j'ai su mon cher Tansonville menacé..." (III,755) - and congratulates herself on having courageously saved the house and her father's precious art collections. The letter ends with one of the most dismaying passages in the novel.

La fin de sa lettre était entièrement exacte.
 "Vous n'avez pas idée de ce que c'est que cette guerre, mon cher ami, et de l'importance qu'y prend une route, un pont, une hauteur. Que de fois j'ai pensé à vous, aux promenades, grâce à vous rendues délicieuses, que nous faisons ensemble dans tout ce pays aujourd'hui ravagé, alors que d'immenses combats se livrent pour la possession de tel chemin, de tel coteau que vous aimiez, où nous sommes allés si souvent ensemble! Probablement vous comme moi, vous ne vous imaginiez pas que l'obscur Roussainville et l'assommant Méséglise, d'où on nous portait nos lettres, et où on était allé chercher le docteur quand vous avez été souffrant, seraient jamais des endroits célèbres. Hé bien, mon cher ami, ils sont à jamais entrés dans la gloire au même titre qu' Austerlitz ou Valmy. La bataille de Méséglise a duré plus de huit mois, les Allemands y ont perdu plus de six cent mille hommes, ils ont détruit Méséglise, mais ils ne l'ont pas pris. Le petit chemin que vous aimiez tant, que nous appelions le raidillon aux aubépines et où vous prétendez que vous êtes tombé dans votre enfance amoureux de moi, alors que je vous assure en toute vérité que c'était moi qui étais amoureuse de vous, je ne peux pas vous dire l'importance qu'il a prise. L'immense champ de blé auquel il aboutit, c'est la fameuse cote 307 dont vous avez dû voir le nom revenir si souvent dans les communiqués. Les Français ont fait sauter le petit pont sur la Vivonne qui, disiez-vous, ne vous rappelait pas votre enfance autant que vous l'auriez voulu, les Allemands en ont jeté d'autres; pendant un an et demi ils ont eu une moitié de Combray et les Français l'autre moitié." (III,755-756)

Notably, the first two phases of the novel's consciousness - the character Marcel, and the narrator - do not intervene at all here, apart from the ambiguous "La fin de sa lettre était entièrement exacte". The passage is moving because the places named are far from being mere names in a communiqué, but have earlier been invested with a value which seems to be destroyed with them; because of the beautifully observed tone of the letter - unfeeling, self-regarding, smug - so exasperatingly at odds with the news it contains; and because of the way the winsome reproach ("Vous n'avez pas idée, etc.") - a conventional formulation, a mere cliché - seems to be so strangely endorsed by the sentence which precedes it. Certainly it is almost comic for Gilberte to be lecturing Marcel, of all people, on the importance of places. But the reproach is, in a way, justified. Marcel, the aspiring writer, has been forestalled. Combray, Méséglise, and the hawthorn path have already been immortalised, by the war. The visit to Tansonville had left Marcel separated from the landscape of childhood, and despairing of his plans to write. When the war comes to Combray, it dramatises and confirms this loss. All the large Proustian themes are similarly affected, for Proust envisages the war as time dramatised. Except for the important cases of the destruction of Combray and the death of Saint-Loup, the war does not effect traumatic transformations on the narrative, but does make its large processes more visible. Its function is analogous to the function of time itself, as Jean-Francois Revel describes it:

Le temps proustien n'est pas créateur. Son rôle est, tout en apportant des changements dans les situations sociales, changements minimes mais qui paraissent capitaux aux intéressés et sont toujours constatés avec surprise par le narrateur, de révéler la vérité des caractères, de dévoiler ce que les hommes étaient déjà à notre insu.²⁶

Paris suffers from the war less drastically than Combray, but no less significantly. The large social process of the novel - the rise of Mme Verdurin, and the parallel decline of Charlus - is accelerated. Charlus' homosexuality becomes more indiscreet in wartime (conditions provoke this, and the narrator calls war "le roman passionné des homosexuels" (III,746)), and this involves a social as well as sexual promiscuity. Meanwhile, Mme Verdurin's enhanced status is directly due to the war, which she uses as a social weapon as she had previously used the Dreyfus affair and Morel's talent (III,730). Duchesses flock to hear the latest news from her. Socially, she is a war-profiteer. She is also an expert strategist, and patriotism offers her a ready-made language into which she can easily translate her grudges. Thus, the Queen of Naples and Charlus are obviously spies: furthermore, Charlus is Prussian (III,765). Mme Verdurin's behaviour is certainly comic, but it would be incautious to call it caricature. It occupies a place in the general social dislocation released by the war. Charlus complains that he has had to stop writing to his cousin Francis-Joseph of Austria (III,785): Marcel's butler has learnt to refer to the King of Greece as "Tino", as familiarly as the Kaiser (III,729).

²⁶ Jean-François Revel, Sur Proust, René Julliard, Paris, 1960; p.51.

Perhaps the masterstroke of the new social order, and one that has the unmistakeable signature of Mme Verdurin, is to dismiss Charlus as "avant-guerre" (III,766). This apparently meaningless classification, by suggesting a great gulf between prewar and wartime society and placing Charlus on the far side of it, effectively abolishes him. It is a kind of social assassination, and depends for its effect on the superstition that 1914 was so drastic an event as to separate French society neatly from its past. Of course in a sense this is true.

The wartime section opens with some deft satire on the hypocrisies of the home front. Pleasure is pursued as ruthlessly as ever, but now as though it were a contribution to the war effort. Fashions are "très 'guerre'". The bereaved spend little time in mourning - "c'est encore parce qu'elles y pensaient sans cesse, disaient-elles, qu'elles en portaient, quand l'un des leurs tombait, à peine le deuil, sous le prétexte qu'il était 'mêlé de fierté'" (III,724) - a sardonic variation on the theme of the mortality of memory. Indeed the transformations of Paris in wartime are consonant with the transformations of the novel; character is mutable, memory fictive, and language pursues a union with reality as ambiguous as the union between Marcel and Albertine.

The first ten pages or so of the wartime section (III,723 ff.) contain some of Proust's most pungent satire. (It is notable that it is largely aimed at women. For obvious reasons, women are among the principal targets of war-satire. Proust, however, does not approach the nasty

misogyny of Richard Aldington's Death of a Hero, or the complicated hostilities of Wilfred Owen.) The rest of the wartime section is very uneven, and it must be admitted that it contains some of the most boring pages in A la Recherche. It is possible that if Proust had lived to revise this section, he might have improved it. As it is, he does not seem to have known, or decided, where to stop. The war is so well assimilated into the design of the work that the more Proust talks about it, the more it seems to confirm the general schemes which underlie the novel.

An example is the way that the war affects time and memory. When Proust discusses the rapid rise of Albertine's uncle, M. Bontemps, during the war, he draws attention to the political amnesia which has made it possible.

On aurait détesté autrefois M. Bontemps, parce que les antipatriotes avaient alors le nom de dreyfusards. Mais bientôt ce nom avait été oublié et remplacé par celui d'adversaire de la loi de trois ans. M. Bontemps était au contraire un des auteurs de cette loi, c'était donc un patriote. (III,727)

The war is time dramatised, and society finds it convenient to regard it as so traumatic that it invalidates the past. Proust notices that this amnesia is a matter of fashion, "car c'était une des idées les plus à la mode de dire que l'avant-guerre était séparé de la guerre par quelque chose d'aussi profond, simulant autant de durée, qu'une période géologique" (III,728). Even Charlus, unaware that he has been written off as "avant-guerre", speaks sardonically of the time of the Dreyfus affair as being "une époque dont il est convenu de dire que nous sommes séparés par des siècles, car les philosophes de la guerre ont accrédité que tout lien

est rompu avec le passé" (III,785). Thus the war is engaged in the central preoccupation of the novel, being, as the destruction of Combray demonstrated, a dramatic way of separating people from the past. Apart from Charlus and Saint-Loup (both suspected of germanophilia), the narrator is the only person to keep his head and his balance.

Tout en bas, les purs sots, les purs gens de plaisir, ne s'occupaient pas qu'il y eût la guerre. Mais tout en haut, ceux qui se sont fait une vie intérieure ambiante ont peu égard à l'importance des événements. (III,728)

This detachment enables him to judge events sensibly.

Les mots de dreyfusard et d'antidreyfusard n'avaient plus de sens, disaient les mêmes gens qui eussent été stupéfaits et révoltés si on leur avait dit que probablement dans quelques siècles, et peut-être moins, celui de boche n'aurait plus que la valeur de curiosité des mots sans-culotte ou chouan ou bleu. (III,728)

The narrator is particularly attentive to the unhappy effect the war has on language. Apart, again, from Charlus and Saint-Loup, everyone speaks of events in the second-hand language of semi-official propaganda, bourrage de crâne, and the portentous inanities of patriotic journalism, manufactured by the likes of Norpois, Legrandin and Brichot and tellingly ridiculed by Charlus. Odette's silly anglicisms are now accompanied by opinions solemnly voiced as if they were her own ("ce que je ne voudrais pas, c'est une paix boiteuse", and the like (III,788-789)). Contingently, Françoise's speech - "le français le plus pur" (III,749) - becomes corrupted in wartime. A general decline in the use of language accompanies the inevitable mendacity of the state at war. Marcel is alarmed at the speed with

which the French 'victories', reported in the official communiqués of 1914, are drawing ever closer to Paris (III,750).²⁷ As for the self-justifications of the antagonists, "C'est du reste ce qui est exaspérant et navrant, c'est que chaque pays dit la même chose", as Charlus complains (III;796).

The narrator is neither deceived nor surprised by these mendacities. He recognises in them the gap between language and intention, appearance and fact, which is inevitable in any relationship under stress. (He is reminded of Albertine.) He has frequent recourse to his own domestic and social experience when he meditates on the war, which he sees as a personal conflict enlarged to international proportions, between "l'individu-France" and "l'individu-Allemagne" (III,773). This unpromising reading of the war is never satisfactorily applied. It is a feature of the concentricity which is the principle of the novel's design, and which demonstrates the workings of Proust's famous and sometimes exasperating 'laws'. Leo Bersani has analysed Proust's effort to make every aspect of the narrator's experience enter into a metaphorical relation with every other aspect.

What Marcel discovers...is that his most personal memories help him to understand aristocratic society and international politics, and, conversely, that the vocabularies of snobbery,

²⁷ Paul Fussell produces evidence to suggest that the euphemisms of the daily communiqués published in Britain had precise meanings. A report that "sharp" or "brisk" fighting had taken place, for example, "meant that about fifty per cent of a company had been killed or wounded in a raid". (Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, Oxford University Press, 1975, p.176).

diplomacy, and military tactics give him a deeper understanding of, for example, his own behaviour when he has been in love.²⁸

Proust suggests that the strategies of war reflect the stratagems of social and private life, but this aspect of the novel remains more than a little confused.

If one function of the war is to dramatise time and make its processes more visible, another is to reduce in scale the participants in the story. Dwarfed by the events which surround them, most of Proust's characters behave as stupidly here as anywhere else in the novel (except perhaps in the final third of Le Temps Retrouvé). Although, as Proust mentions, the front was at one time only an hour's drive from the capital, it is the war in the air that most directly affects civilian Paris. Proust is acutely aware that the drama of war is being enacted, in a literal sense, above the heads of his Parisians. In contrast with this conflict of Wagnerian proportions and splendour, the activities of the civilians at ground level - and underground, in the libidinous blackout - seem very small. The equalising effect of shared danger complements a general social levelling which the war accelerates. This can be used to comic effect, as when the narrator and Saint-Loup make sport of the Guermantes' scramble for shelter during a night raid, in the manner of a fait-divers:

"Reconnu: la duchesse de Guermantes superbe en chemise de nuit, le duc de Guermantes inénarrable en pyjama rose et peignoir de bain, etc., etc." (III,759).

If Wagner is being performed in the air above Paris, the ground level is vaudeville.

²⁸ Leo Bersani, Marcel Proust: the Fictions of Life and of Art, Oxford University Press, New York, 1965, p.165.

Disproportion is the stuff of comedy, especially when the persons involved are unaware of it. The people who come off worst are those who pretend to have some control over these momentous events. M. Bontemps, for example, receives summary treatment.

Après le diner on montait dans les salons de la Patronne, puis les téléphonages commençaient. Mais beaucoup de grands hôtels étaient à cette époque peuplés d'espions qui notaient les nouvelles téléphonées par Bontemps avec une indiscretion que corrigeait seulement, par bonheur, le manque de sûreté de ses informations, toujours démenties par l'événement. (III,734)

(That "par bonheur" tips the sentence beautifully.) And Mme Verdurin, who has acquired the habit of announcing the initiatives of the French government in the first person plural (III,729), is the victim of a similar disproportion. At one point Proust shows her vacillating for a moment - but only for a moment - between shock at the sinking of the Lusitania, and pleasure at the resumption of her morning croissant. Food restrictions have made this very difficult to obtain - "presque aussi difficile à obtenir des pouvoirs publics que la nomination d'un général" (III,772) - and it is terribly good for her migraine. Proust mocks the pretensions of his characters to have any control over the war, but more striking than this is the way he shows that, in a sense, they are really unaware of it. They have not the imagination to comprehend it, any more than they can comprehend the less violent transformations of time. The bell may toll, but Mme Verdurin is not listening. In this way Proust registers discreetly what Siegfried Sassoon had condemned in his courageous public protest of 1917 - "the callous complacency with which the majority of

those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize".

It is interesting that the two people who talk sense about the war do not survive it. Saint-Loup and Charlus both descend to the social and moral depths of Jupien's brothel. Saint-Loup, the war-hero, loses his croix de guerre there, and he loses his life in battle soon after. Charlus suffers the further humiliation of arrest after being denounced by Morel; later he breaks down in health, and survives into the final part of the novel only as a sort of immobile emblem, a death's head, intoning "Hannibal de Bréauté, mort! Antoine de Mouchy, mort! Charles Swann, mort!..." (III,862). (And the narrator, whose attitude to the war has been patriotic but sober, re-enters the postwar world as a figure similarly isolated and ghostly.) The most important function of the wartime section is to prepare for the final scene, the Princess de Guermantes' matinée. And one aspect of this preparation is the way the section modulates from satire and social comedy into an atmosphere of dream, which will carry over into the last scene of the novel.

The transformations and displacements of Paris under the blackout provide the setting for this dream. There is one descriptive passage (III,734-737) in which Proust evokes the city in terms which are regressive, dark and elemental. In its unfamiliar darkness Paris seems rural, and it becomes for a moment the Combray of Marcel's childhood. Then sometimes, on winter nights, "je me croyais bien plus au bord de la mer furieuse dont j'avais jadis

tant rêvé, que je ne m'y étais senti à Balbec" (III,736). (This is surely an application, in reverse, of the method of Elstir's seascape.) Then, most remarkably, wartime Paris is suddenly seen as Edenic pastoral:

Les silhouettes des arbres se reflétaient nettes et pures sur cette neige d'or bleuté, avec la délicatesse qu'elles ont dans certaines peintures japonaises ou dans certains fonds de Raphaël; elles étaient allongées à terre au pied de l'arbre lui-même, comme on les voit souvent dans la nature au soleil couchant, quand celui-ci inonde et rend réfléchissantes les prairies où des arbres s'élèvent à intervalles réguliers. Mais, par un raffinement d'une délicatesse délicate, la prairie sur laquelle se développaient ces ombres d'arbres, légères comme des âmes, était une prairie paradisiaque, non pas verte mais d'un blanc si éclatant à cause du clair de lune qui rayonnait sur la neige de jade, qu'on aurait dit que cette prairie était tissée seulement avec des pétales de poiriers en fleurs. (III,736)

This remarkable passage, almost over-rich in metaphor, illustrates a remarkable discovery. Paris in daylight has nothing new to offer the narrator. (There is nothing new under the sun, strictly speaking.) But the unaccustomed darkness of the blackout, by making the familiar strange, releases a flood of metaphoric correspondences in his mind. It is as though the shock of the war had opened up a fissure in the lives of those who experience it. This chasm is accepted by most people as a convenient separation from the past. But to the narrator it reveals, fleetingly, the geological layers of past experience - personal and mythic - which underlie the present and make it intelligible, and the seams of metaphor which relate every part of his experience to every other part. Metaphorically, wartime Paris is Combray, and Balbec, and the paradise garden. In the blackout it is the Bosphorus, the Orient, Baghdad of the

Thousand and One Nights (which is also, by extension, a Combray association) (III,809). Under bombardment it is Pompeii and Herculaneum, and Sodom and Gomorrah, as Charlus fancies so indiscreetly (III,806-807) and later demonstrates. This idea of the war as an agent which destroys the past but can also recreate it, brings Proust, surprisingly, close to David Jones's In Parenthesis.

The war then, like time itself, performs a paradoxical role in Proust's work. The characters of his social comedy are attentive only to the opportunities it offers for accelerated social advancement and new pleasures. They are largely unaware of the destructive processes of time which it dramatises so clearly, or at least they imagine themselves unaffected by them. (The Duchess de Guermantes is upset for a whole week by the death of her nephew Saint-Loup. The narrator sees this as matter for surprise and congratulation (III,852).) The narrator himself, already dispossessed of his past, sees this dispossession confirmed and made literal by the destruction of Combray and the death of Saint-Loup, and reinforced by the vitiation of almost everything from Françoise's vocabulary to the once inaccessible glamour of the Guermantes. He seems to have reached the heart of loss. And yet it is at this nadir of the novel, in a threatened and black city, that he catches glimpses of the kind of vision which will make possible the discoveries of the final part of Le Temps Retrouvé, and his work itself.

CHAPTER 4

Owen.

Les Vieux ont Soif.
(René Dalize, title of an article, 1914.)

Wilfred Owen, virtually unknown in his lifetime, has become, for better or worse, a sort of popular type of the English War Poet. It is neither impertinent nor cynical to suggest that his death in action, a week before the Armistice, had something to do with his subsequent apotheosis. The popular myth of Wilfred Owen, offering as it does both a critique and a new formulation of the topos of heroic sacrifice, balances and qualifies the popular myth of Rupert Brooke with a neatness which is difficult to resist. For the literary historian, there is a seductive balance between the almost culpable innocence of one of these victims of the war, and the guilt-ridden integrity of the other. 'Look here, upon this picture, and on this.' Such a polarisation is not quite fair to Rupert Brooke, and not very helpful to an understanding of Wilfred Owen. The worth of several of Owen's poems is in any case generally recognised, and it is not my particular intention, in this chapter, to tilt at that reputation or to bring it extra grist.

Owen's poems and letters (like those of Apollinaire) constitute a unique document of literary, psychological and historical interest. They chronicle the growth of a poet's mind, and the evolution of an interpretation of human experience which stems from, but also transcends, what Owen witnessed and suffered in the war. Not the least of the many ironies which surround Owen's achievement is the fact that, for all his real hatred of human divisions and divisiveness, he is one of the most provincial of English poets. Perhaps in this context, between the urbanity of

Proust and the cosmopolitanism of Apollinaire, he may be more freshly appraised.

Owen, ignored during his lifetime, has been fortunate in the executors of his fame. The first edition of his poems was made by Siegfried Sassoon (with the help of Edith Sitwell) in 1920, the second by Edmund Blunden in 1931, and the third by Cecil Day Lewis in 1962.¹ The poet was especially fortunate in his brother, Harold Owen, whose memoir of his family is of much more than merely documentary interest.² Harold Owen also co-edited his brother's correspondence³ and is the dedicatee of the official biography.⁴ The above-mentioned documents, and D.S.R. Welland's monograph Wilfred Owen: a Critical Study,⁵ make up the basic material for a study of Owen's work, and few poets' memory has been better served.

¹ The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, edited with an Introduction and Notes by C. Day Lewis, with a Memoir by Edmund Blunden, Chatto & Windus, 1963. Quotations from Owen's poetry in this chapter are taken from the Day Lewis edition. Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Dominic Hibberd, Chatto & Windus, 1973, presents the poems chronologically, interspersed with selected passages from the poet's letters. Jon Stallworthy, Owen's biographer, is engaged on an edition of the Complete Poems of Wilfred Owen.

² Harold Owen, Journey from Obscurity: Memoirs of the Owen Family, 3 vols., Oxford University Press, 1963, 1964, 1965.

³ Wilfred Owen, Collected Letters, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell, Oxford University Press, 1967.

⁴ Jon Stallworthy, Wilfred Owen: a Biography, Oxford University Press, 1974.

⁵ Chatto & Windus, 1960.

There remain, of course, some textual uncertainties, and a couple of important biographical lacunae.⁶ But on the whole we are fortunate to be able to follow in such detail the growth of the poet's mind, from the time of his first Keatsian effusions to the short, magnificent flowering of his last two years. It is possible now to assess not only Wilfred Owen's poetic achievement, but also the process of its evolution. In retrospect, there seems to be a fateful convergence in Wilfred Owen's collision with the Great War. If the war made Owen, as a poet, the memory of it now, a lifetime later, is to some degree his own creation. There is an almost ponderable precision in the meeting of the man and the event. And of course this is dramatised in Owen's best-known poem, in which, descending into hell, the poet finds a man who speaks with his own voice.

The journey to that strange meeting began on 18 March 1893, and can be followed in Harold Owen's Journey from Obscurity and the poet's own letters. Some account of Owen's youth is necessary to an understanding of his war-poetry because, as I hope to show, the preoccupations and themes of his writings are essentially familial. Wilfred was the eldest child of Tom Owen and Susan, née Shaw. Tom Owen had gone to India at the age of eighteen

⁶Outside his own writings, there is no published account of Owen's treatment for shell-shock, or indeed - apart from his citation for the Military Cross (quoted by Stallworthy, op.cit., p.279,n.) - of his conduct at the front.

to work on the Peninsular Railway. Returning to England four years later he married and took a job with the Great Western and London and North Eastern Railways. He stayed with the GW and LNER for the rest of his working life; he was Acting Chief Superintendent of the Western Region when he retired. The job seems not to have been in any sense rewarding. Tom Owen was impatient with it and, it seems, embarrassed that he had not done better; particularly so, because of the youthful promise and excitement of his early imperial adventure. His own disappointment is evident in his relations with his sons.

Susan Owen, the most important single figure in the poet's life, remains, even in Journey from Obscurity, an indistinct figure in a sort of indoor twilight. Her background was Calvinistic, Victorian and genteel. Her family had had some capital, but there was none left when it came to educating her own children. She was a woman of "gentleness, conventionality, and a deeply religious disposition".⁷ With only her husband's meagre salary to rely on, it was difficult to bring up her four children into the right end of the middle class. Her health was delicate; she was often ill in bed, and she came to rely on Wilfred, the eldest child and her favourite, for his help in running the household and supervising his brothers and sister. From the mutual dependence of mother and son grew "the unconfined sympathy that exists between

⁷ Day Lewis, Introduction to The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.12.

us".⁸ The intensity of this fierce love, between two people so undemonstrative by character, is the most important single factor in Owen's development as a man and as a writer. Three months before his death, he wrote to her: "Taking the world as it really is, not everybody of my years can boast, (or as many would say, confess) that their Mother is absolute in their affections. But I believe it will always be so with me, always."⁹ Owen's mother seems to have been quiet, conventionally maternal, and not very extraordinary. Her son's devotion to her makes her a remarkable figure.

As a boy still, the young Wilfred Owen came to assume a parental rôle vis-à-vis his brothers and sister. This was accompanied, perhaps inevitably, by a certain sense of hostility towards his father. Encouraged by his mother, who recognised his promise, he soon became bookish. His attitude to the younger children was that of an authoritative though junior paternalism, a rather solemn concern unpredictably punctuated by moments of complicity and fun, and self-doubt. (From his earliest years he was, as it were, in training for the short career of a subaltern in the Great War.) The occasional severity of the eldest child was sometimes overbearing and spiteful, especially towards Harold, the second son, who was rebellious and resentful of Wilfred's preferred authority. (They were

⁸Letter to Susan Owen, 2 November 1913, Collected Letters, p.204. Henceforward Owen's Collected Letters will here be abbreviated to CL, and the recipient designated by initials, as follows: Susan Owen, SO; Tom Owen, TO; Mary Owen, MO; Harold Owen, HO; Colin Owen, CO; Leslie Gunston, LG; Siegfried Sassoon, SS; Osbert Sitwell, OS.

⁹SO, 19 August 1918, CL p.569.

not to become friends until the War.) Owen's early domestic life followed a not unusual pattern. As the eldest son, he was his mother's ally ex officio; and she in turn insisted on his having the best education, because she was convinced that he would go far. During his school-days he was a swot and something of a prig. (Because of the family's straitened circumstances, the education of Harold, who showed less early promise, had to be stinted.) The poet's father, irritated perhaps by this complicity, seems to have passed over Wilfred and fixed particularly on Harold his expectations and his own deferred ambitions. Harold was to be an adventurer, a man of action, a sailor (and so he became).¹⁰ The existence of such tensions in a family is in no way remarkable; but Journey from Obscurity shows that the Owens, so apparently undemonstrative, were capable of feeling very fiercely. The household seems to have been a sort of generator of emotions, which sprang from the fact of the family felt as a kind of conviction.¹¹ They participate in the exclusiveness common to emotions with a short range (certain kinds of both love and anger - as Proust was to suggest - being a species of jealousy). Although Wilfred Owen may properly be called a poet of international sympathies, his interpretation of events is nearly always conditioned by the household in which he grew up.

¹⁰When Harold Owen left Shrewsbury to go to sea, Wilfred told him: "If I can't please Father, and I never seem to be able to - at least I should think you must be doing so now." Journey from Obscurity, vol. 2, p. 61.

¹¹Harold Owen refers, curiously and poignantly, to "the song of the family", a kind of psychic bond which sustained him in times of crisis. See Journey from Obscurity, passim, but especially vol. 3, chapter 2, "The Dream".

A great reader, though without much intellectually stimulating company except for his cousin Leslie Gunston, Wilfred Owen pursued his provincial education. His interests included archaeology and botany. The first reference to Keats in the surviving letters occurs soon after Owen's eighteenth birthday, and suggests already a considerable knowledge and greater enthusiasm.¹² But poetry had been his passion from an early age. Although his ideas on its nature and function were to change, he always retained an almost mystical reverence for the estate of "poethood".¹³ Owen's debt to Keats is obvious enough, and it is clear from the letters that he decided quite early that he should be a poet in the Keatsian mould. (Adoption of this prototype included, of course, the idea of a romantic early death.) In the young Owen, these aesthetic aspirations were accompanied by some leanings towards the ministry - an ambition carefully nursed, and possibly engendered, by his mother. Both projects, although he often despaired of the first and deliberately renounced the second, were in some way to be fulfilled in his war-writings.

¹²SO, 2 April 1911, CL p.68.

¹³See, for example, his pride at being "introduced as 'Mr. Owen, Poet' or even 'Owen, the poet'." (LG, 26 January 1918, CL p.529.) Osbert Sitwell testifies to "the immense esteem in which he held literature and all those who practiced the profession of author", and suggests that "His residence in France may have deepened this attitude of respect, and almost awe, which had in it nothing of the Englishman's casual approach to books. To him they were all-important, while poetry was the very crown of life, and constituted its meaning." (Osbert Sitwell, Noble Essences, Macmillan, 1950, p.104.) But Owen had shown signs of this respect and esteem years before he went to France.

After leaving school, Owen went at the age of eighteen to live at the vicarage at Dunsden, Berkshire, to work as lay assistant and pupil of the Reverend Herbert Wigan. The move was prompted by the idea or hope that Owen might be destined for the Church; and it got him off the family's hands, financially, to the extent that his board and lodging at the vicarage were to be free. Otherwise he was unpaid. The junior father-figure took immediately to community service, especially with the young. He was a born teacher, and had a gift and disposition for friendship with children. But the young poet came to have less patience with his employer himself, who, it seemed to him, exploited him as an inexpensive worker in God's vineyard. The atmosphere was ponderous amid "the Silence, the State, and the Stiffness" of the vicarage.¹⁴

His stay at Dunsden from 1911 to 1913 - characterised as Owen put it later, by "bouts of religion"¹⁵ - was also important as his first period of relative independence from his family. His parish visiting brought to his sight a new world of suffering for which neither Shrewsbury nor Birkenhead (where the family had lived between the winter of 1897 and the winter of 1906) can have prepared him. This he met, at first, with his received interpretative equipment. He wrote sententiously to his sister of the solace which Christianity affords to the poor in their adversity.

¹⁴SO, 29 December 1911, CL p.104.

¹⁵SO, 31 December 1917, CL p.521.

Those who have within them the Hope of a Future World are content, and their old faces are bright with the white radiance of eternity. Those who, like the beasts, have no such Hope, pass their old age shrouded with an inward gloom, which the reverses of their history have stamped upon their worn-out memories, deadening them to all thoughts of delight.¹⁶

The literariness and the complacent tone seen above are not absent from the following passage from a letter written some six months later. But Owen's own chosen position au-dessus de la mêlée has changed, and, significantly, the change is prompted by a reaction against a figure of authority. This pattern was to be repeated in 1917.

I am increasingly liberalising and liberating my thought, spite of the Vicar's strong Conservatism ... From what I hear straight from the tight-pursed lips of wolfish ploughmen in their cottages, I might say there is material ready for another revolution. Perhaps men will strike, not with absence from work; but with arms at work. Am I for or against upheaval? I know not; I am not happy in these thoughts; yet they press upon me.¹⁷

His experience in the parish led Owen to question the nature and necessity of suffering, and increasingly to inveigh against the moral paucity of "rigid, frigid professionalism".¹⁸ Both were to become important themes in

¹⁶MO, 7 November 1911, CL p.95. It had better be noted here - and the problem becomes an acute one with Owen's letters from the front, particularly those addressed to his mother - that any letter-writer will be influenced by what he thinks his recipient wants or expects to read. The question of sincerity, seldom relevant to the public utterance of a poem, must be a consideration, however imponderable, where a private utterance (such as a letter) is concerned. It is not possible to judge the extent to which Owen, in this letter, is putting on a performance.

¹⁷SO, 23 April 1912, CL p.131. Owen's current enthusiasm for Shelley may be behind this shyly reported self-questioning. Note the incongruous echo of "Adonais" in the preceding quotation.

¹⁸SO, 23 March 1912, CL p.126.

his later work. These stirrings of conscience were accompanied, if not caused, by his own religious self-questionings. Again, it is interesting that these first come to light, in the letters, in the context of Owen's own responsibility, as the vicar's suffragan. (At this stage, some similarity with Gerard Manley Hopkins must be proposed, albeit with caution.) In March 1912, a young parishioner came to Owen for spiritual advice. "If others knew the fog, fog fog which rolled in my mind," Owen complained, "they would wonder that I should try to lighten another being." It appears the boy had a problem of self-discipline:

His chief difficulty is Language. So is mine. In his case, Bad Language though one would never have thought it. He hates it, and he cannot escape it.

In my case, Fine Language, to yield wholly to the glammers of which would be accounted 'of this world' by those who aver they are not of this world.

I love it, and I cannot escape it.

More, I dare not say now. You will think I have been 'in the clouds'. Nay, I have been in my Cor Cordium, my heart of hearts.¹⁹

No doubt much of this can be discounted as youthful posturing. But it is significant that the first signs of the collapse of Owen's faith are here presented in terms of a dichotomy between the worldly "glammers" of poetry and the unworldly pursuit of the life of the spirit. "Maundy Thursday", a sonnet which Day Lewis tentatively attributes to the end of Owen's Dunsden period,²⁰ shows the poet contemplating a choice between the dead images of the Church and the vital (indeed erotic) alternative of the world outside. Its description of the Maundy ritual ends:

¹⁹SO, 11 March 1912, CL p.123.

²⁰Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.136n.

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.)

From here, a radical revision of Owen's conception of both poetry and Christianity plays a central part in his development. Not until he was able to unite the two in the same function did he discover a style. (Here again, Hopkins comes to mind.) The famous draft Preface²¹ shows him groping towards a fusion of this sort. Religion (understood as prophecy and witness) and poetry (disembarrassed of the need to be pretty or sententious) might turn out to be the same thing.

So apparently frank and self-revealing in other respects in his letters to his mother, Owen was not unnaturally reticent about the crisis of faith which preoccupied him during his latter time at Dunsden. In his last week there, he wrote to his mother: "I don't want to communicate my calm frenzy to anybody - let alone you."²² He had, in December 1912, been interviewed for an alternative post in a new parish in Birmingham. "But I told Mr. Morgan plainly that I did not consider myself a fit person to dare to undertake such work, and revealed to him my state of mind."²³ This encounter seems to have convinced him finally that his spiritual misgivings were not merely the result of his local disaffection with Dunsden and the vicarage. Further, and ominously, his

²¹ Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.31.

²² SO, 4 February 1913, CL p.181.

²³ SO, 29 December 1912, CL p.174.

anxieties had begun to affect his health and his nerves. The next month, his decision was made, and announced to his mother.

Murder will out, and I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it. If not, adieu to the still falser creeds that hold the hearts of nearly all my fellow men.

Escape from this hotbed of religion I now long for more than I could ever have conceived a year and three months ago.²⁴

Again, it is not possible to judge the emotional cost of this confession, or profession. Harold Owen believed that Wilfred was very close to a nervous breakdown when he came home from Dunsden.²⁵

Owen's break from the Church and his "flight ... from overbearing elders"²⁶ seemed likely to benefit his writing, which both, he thought, had impeded. "For the first time in life, I feel I could fill volumes; if I once started to write."²⁷ This increase in self-confidence was premature. Owen's nerves were strained, and his return to Shrewsbury coincided with a breakdown in health. Journey from Obscurity records his depression at this period.

His decision to leave the vicarage was not to be lightly taken, or suddenly come to, and the turmoil of his indecisive thinking about it had enlarged his perplexity and added to his state of over-anxiety. Having contemplated this step, it was not now the thought of his future which was bringing him so much despondency but that being at home once more, he felt he was back again to where he was when he went away. His obsession with time was extraordinary; the morbid thought of the lack of it possessed his mind until it became a monstrous threat; he was shaken with panic

²⁴SO, 4 January 1913, CL p.175.

²⁵Journey from Obscurity, vol 2, p.263.

²⁶SO, 4 January 1913, CL p.175.

²⁷SO, 24 January 1913, CL p.178.

and fear that he would not have time, time, TIME. How greedily he wanted and demanded this. And how desperately he disbelieved that it would ever be his to take and use.²⁸

1913 to 1916 were to be lean years for Owen's writing. When he left Dunsden he was rising twenty. In July he heard that he had failed the scholarship for University College, Reading, for which he had entered. He more than shared his parents' disappointment in him. He seemed to have failed already - or worse, he had not even made a start. In September 1913, for want of anything better, he sailed for France, to take up a post as a teacher of English at the Berlitz School of Languages in Bordeaux.

During the two years of his residence in France between September 1913 and September 1915, Wilfred Owen continued to be a prolific correspondent, writing filial letters to his mother and fatherly letters to his brothers and sister. And he continued the education which, from childhood, he had always had to direct and plan and pursue alone. "I prosecute my Enquiries in Human Nature, and learn Philosophy," he wrote cheerfully, "as I teach Speech, by the Direct Method."²⁹ Owen's time in Bordeaux, at least to begin with, was not an easy one. For the first time in his life he was beyond the reach of the security of his family. He had very little money (his father had to supplement his miserable earnings) and he was often, by his own account, in poor health. Still, there were moments when the adversity of his Bordeaux days seemed not

²⁸ Journey from Obscurity, vol.2, pp.262-3.

²⁹ SO, 18 January 1914, CL p.227. James Joyce, in Trieste, might very well have endorsed these sentiments. But both of them found it desperately difficult to survive on the notorious emoluments offered by the Berlitz schools.

to be without glamour. In 1914 Harold Owen received a letter from Wilfred which reported "with as I thought at the time unnecessary pride - that he himself was almost starving in a French garret and near to grave illness".³⁰ In its own way there is a Miltonic thoroughness in the young poet's pursuit of his calling by the following of precedents.

Balzac - not always himself a good example of rigorous self-preparation - suggests that some years of deliberate thought must precede action in the life of genius. Owen's years in France, as is evident from the letters, were a period of rapid intellectual maturing, but it is a development which seems to have borne very little fruit in verse. He appears to have been more concerned with sculpting his artistic stance than with fashioning a style. Owen was nothing if not deliberate, and what seems to have held him back, in this generative phase of his career, was a radical uncertainty as to what poetry is for. At times, though, the obstacle seemed to be only laziness.

As for Poetry, I have let the cares of this life, Indolence, Time, and 'No-Time' do their worst. All winter, all last year and longer I have read no poetry, nor thought poetically (at least not by act of will). Neither have I reasoned seriously, or felt deeply on 'matters of faith'. Thus have I sown my wild oats, that my harvest of poppies may be the more abundant, poppies wherewith many dreams may be fed, and many sores be medicined...³¹

By attributing medicinal as well as narcotic properties to the "poppies" he expects to harvest (and of course there is a respectable folkloric precedent for this), Owen is already

³⁰ Journey from Obscurity, vol 2, p.289. The letter has not survived. Harold Owen was exasperated by its tutorial tone and tore it up.

³¹ SO, 18 February 1915, CL p.322.

projecting his art as a kind of ministry. This is a constant theme, expressed in a bizarrely prophetic metaphor here. In "On My Songs", an early sonnet,³² his poetry is advertised as likely to be comforting and consoling. Later he was to change his mind, as the draft Preface indicates. His poetry could be to this generation in no sense consolatory. It had to be truthful: it could only warn. "Strange Meeting" suggests, without very much conviction, that perhaps, when the fighting was over, the poet's ministry of comfort might be resumed:

Then, 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.

The contents of these wells, sanitary or lubric, are not further specified in this unfinished poem. But the implication is clear enough. If Rupert Brooke envisaged the Great War as a possible anaesthetic, Owen was to come to see it as the disease itself - and his own function (a healer, but himself infected) was to question the distempered part.

In France in 1913 to 1915, Owen continued at his own pace to prepare himself. Although always acutely aware of the passage of time, and that he had as yet achieved nothing, he began to gain from the independence of his life in Bordeaux a growing self-assurance and faith in his ability to write poetry, given a chance.

Yet wait, wait, O impatient world, give me two years,
give me two free months, before it be said that I have
Nothing to Show for my temperament. Let me now,

³²MS dated 4 January 1913; Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.119n.

seriously and shamelessly, work out a Poem. Then shall be seen whether the Executive Power needful for at least one Fine Art, be present in me, or be missing.

My Temperament I have now no right to doubt. That I believe infallible; though it remains to know which, if any, Music, Painting, Sculpture, or Verse, is the most possible.³³

The events of August 1914 proved to be a rude interruption at a time when the apprentice-poet's fortunes had taken a turn for the better. A newly-acquired tutorship with the Léger family enabled him to get away from the ill-paid and demanding work at the Berlitz school, which he quitted on 25 July, and the rest of the summer he spent with the Légers at Bagnères-de-Bigorre. In the third week of the war, he wrote to his sister: "I can tell you from the bottom of my heart that these weeks are passing like Elysian time."³⁴ The Légers were cultivated and stimulating company. (Perhaps unwisely, Owen was not able to resist the temptation to relay to his mother some instances of Mme Léger's coquetterie. The maternal reaction must have been one of alarm, for subsequent letters are full of protestations, from Wilfred, that he regards his hostess's flirtatious behaviour with a sort of stern amusement. Whether or not Mme Léger really did show an interest of this sort in the young Englishman, this trivial incident is of some psychological interest. Susan Owen seems to have assumed, ominously, that Mme Léger had been an actress in her youth: not so, Wilfred assured her, twice.³⁵ And as for the daughter, Nénette: "this child

³³SO, 24 May 1914, CL pp.255-256.

³⁴MO, 20 August 1914, CL p.278.

³⁵CL pp.278,279.

naturally occupies a good deal of room in my thoughts; but I am - alas or happily, who shall say? - too old to be in love, as you predicted."³⁶ Nénette Léger was eleven years old.) Through the family, Owen at last began to form friendships which he valued, and in their house he found some leisure to write, which he had never had in Bordeaux.

Up to August 1914, there is no reference at all in the letters to international affairs, or to domestic English or French politics. The outbreak of war, when it came, seemed to have nothing to do with Wilfred Owen. "I escaped from Bordeaux in the nick of time. Here I am in the hands of most amiable friends, away from danger to life, and sure enough of food."³⁷ In Bagnères, which was more or less as far from the fighting as it was possible to be in France, the Léger household was inconvenienced, but little affected by the war. Owen himself does not seem to have been much interested: certainly it did not occur to him to take part. A letter (if we assume it is honest) sets out his feelings towards the end of August 1914.

Quite apart from the prospect of this Friendship [with the poet Laurent Tailhade, whom Owen had recently met], I am, for quite an appreciable length of time, imbued with sensations of happiness. The war affects me less than it ought. But I can do no service to anybody by agitating for news or making dole over the slaughter. On the contrary I adopt the perfect English custom of dealing with an offender: a Frenchman duels with him;

³⁶SO, 24 August 1914, CL p.280.

³⁷SO, 1 August 1914, CL p.272. Great Britain did not enter the war until 4 August.

an Englishman ignores him. I feel my own life all the more precious and more dear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe. While it is true that the guns will effect a little useful weeding, I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds which were to have excelled the civilization of ten thousand years, are being annihilated - and bodies, the product of aeons of Natural Selection, melted down³⁸ to pay for political statues. I regret the mortality of the English regulars less than that of the French, Belgian, or even Russian or German armies: because the former are all Tommy Atkins, poor fellows, while the continental armies are inclusive of the finest brains and temperaments of the land.³⁹

One or two things can be deduced from this revolting passage. The tone is calm and distant. Owen's geographical position at the outbreak of war immunised him from the kind of hysteria which was soon to grip his compatriots at home. It is important to remember this, and to bear in mind that Owen's subsequent response to the war was never hysterical, but throughout considered. The alternatives of action which he here considers do not at this stage admit the possibility of participation - only "agitating for news" and "making dole over the slaughter", from Bordeaux. It did not occur to him to return to England. The war as Owen seems to see it here is an interruption of a Progress otherwise inevitable ("Minds which were to have excelled, etc."). He blames the vanity of the politicians for bringing it about. The war is seen as the result of a human agency's interfering with a natural process. We

³⁸In 1914, this was only a metaphorical figure.

³⁹SO, 28 August 1914, CL p.282. Owen, far away in France, was a little out of date in voicing the traditional contempt of the English middle classes for their army. In August 1914, the patterns of Kipling's fine polemic poem "Tommy" were hurriedly and exactly enacted in England. As Kipling had observed, "It's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Chuck him out, the brute!' / But it's 'Saviour of 'is country' when the guns begin to shoot."

can glimpse here the embryonic elements of Owen's later attitude towards the war, though sometimes - as in "Futility" - he was to come to question the natural process itself. Finally, it is interesting to note his posture of complete unconcern for the British soldiers - "all Tommy Atkins, poor fellows" - who were to become the subjects and, ideally, the readers of his work.⁴⁰

In mid-September Owen was taken by an acquaintance, Doctor Sauvaître, to visit some French and German war-wounded in a military hospital improvised in the lycée building in Bordeaux. He wrote of this visit in a letter to his brother Harold,⁴¹ which describes some of the operations (no anaesthetics) and some of the injuries in considerable detail. ("Sometimes the feet were covered with a brown, scaly, crust - dried blood.") The letter is illustrated with pen-and-ink sketches of wounds, and Owen concludes his gruesome account by saying "I deliberately tell you all this to educate you in the actualities of the war."⁴² It is difficult to decide which is the more unpleasant, the letter's prurient morbidity or its advertised didacticism. But it is worth pondering that these two qualities are both linked to two of the great strengths of the war-poems that

⁴⁰The part-draft of "Spring Offensive", which Owen sent Sassoon in September 1918, has a footnote asking "Is this worth going on with? I don't want to write anything to which a soldier would say No Compris!" See Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.53n.

⁴¹HO, 23 September 1914, CL pp.283-286.

⁴²CL p.285. An editorial footnote mentions, with commendable restraint, that Harold Owen was sailing in submarine waters at this time. As a birthday greeting, the letter lacks tact.

were to come - Owen's realism and his zealous compassion. Both can be detected, in rather grotesque embryo, in this letter.

Apart from a month's holiday in England in May-June, Owen stayed in France for another full year; and when he returned to England in September 1915, it was to enlist with the Artists' Rifles. The decision cannot have been an easy one. He had many more friends in France than in England. His teaching was going well: he was now (from December 1914) tutoring the de la Touche boys, while retaining the private pupils he had accumulated in Bordeaux. In the early summer of 1915 he had even, improbably, been offered a job as agent for a Bordeaux scent-manufacturer; this would have entailed travelling in the Middle East, "but not until the campaign of the Dardanelles be finished."⁴³ Meanwhile, he was comfortable and happy in France. But there were other pressures at work. In December 1914 he admitted to suffering a good deal of shame when reading, in the Daily Mail about the "duties shirked" by young Englishmen who had not joined Kitchener's Army: but his growing confidence in his vocation as a writer encouraged him to stick to what he called "my little axiom: - that my life is worth more than my death to Englishmen."⁴⁴ In any case, he continued, the only particular loyalty he felt towards England was to its language. "I do not know what else in England is greatly superior, or dearer to me, than another land and people."⁴⁵

⁴³SO, [c.20] June 1915, CL p.340.

⁴⁴SO, 2 December 1914, CL p.300.

⁴⁵ibid.

No doubt his visit to England in the summer of 1915 helped to make up his mind. England was awash with propaganda and bouillage de crâne, in the wake of events at 'Second Ypres', Gallipoli, Neuve Chapelle and Festubert, earlier in the year. Although there was no conscription in any form until early in 1916, it must have been uncomfortable to be an able-bodied young civilian, not engaged in war-work, in the summer of 1915. Less than a week after his return to Bordeaux, Owen wrote:

Still more Frenchmen have been mobilised since I left France; and the outlook is not one shade brighter. I don't want the bore of training, I don't want to wear khaki; nor yet to save my honour before inquisitive grand-children fifty years hence. But I do now most intensely want to fight.⁴⁶

Why did Owen want to fight? The war was not a conflict in which he felt himself to be an interested party. He once echoed the journalists' sentiment, "I like to think this the last War of the World!";⁴⁷ but this was in a letter written in the first week of the war, to his fourteen-year-old brother Colin. (All the letters addressed to Colin Owen display great affection and a very avuncular tone. This one ends: "Now, do write something for me: and say that you continue to feel my affection and respect my influence."⁴⁸) Owen never again expressed the idea that the war, of itself, would achieve anything. He was neither particularly patriotic nor anti-German, nor did he have any of the crusading zeal with which many people went to war, on both sides. His own spirit was diffident and calm. "... I don't imagine that the German War will be affected by my joining in, but

⁴⁶SO, [c.20] June 1915, CL p.341.

⁴⁷CO, 10 August 1914, CL p.274.

⁴⁸CL p.275

I know my own future Peace will be.⁴⁹

A clue to Owen's decision to go to war may be found in the general patterns of his work. One fruitful approach to his poetry is to view it in terms of a sort of social dynamics - that is, its main themes grow from a concern with the relation of the individual (not always the poet himself) and a group: alienation and community, reciprocity and insensibility. The patterns of the work suggest the preoccupations of the life, and a dominant theme of Owen's early work is exclusion and loneliness. Probably the reason that Owen decided to join the army was, depressingly, that he could not bear to be left out of the war. This was probably (and again depressingly) the most usual motive of all for enlisting. Certainly it was much exploited by the recruiting propaganda. Owen's decision, however, was taken with open eyes. He had no illusions, for example, about the duration of the war, unlike the many thousands who had joined up in the belief that it would all be over by Christmas 1914. "I don't see how it can end, I don't see. I only feel traitorously idle: if not to England then to France."⁵⁰

I have dwelt on the deliberateness of Owen's decision because it was to become an important shaping factor in his later verse - responsibility and choice, and their opposites, looming largely as themes. Owen was neither a conscript of the latter days, nor an innocent and ignorant

⁴⁹LG, 25 July 1915, CL p.349.

⁵⁰SO, 5 July 1915, CL p.345.

volunteer of the early levies, nor a career soldier. He went to the war by choice, and after long consideration. One consideration that played a part in that choice was the possible effect of war-service on his poetry. In a letter asking his mother to send him the address of the Artists' Rifles, he quotes Vigny with approval: "If any man despairs of becoming a poet, let him carry his pack and march in the ranks."⁵¹ And he adds immediately: "Now I don't despair of becoming a poet:" - the implication being, as far as I can see, that war-service might be a challenge and stimulus to his writing. Later he was to become conscious of a special position vis-à-vis the war, which was not shared by those who had taken part under less considered assumptions; a position which gave him the right and the duty to speak of it. Harold Owen recalls both the agonised self-questionings which preceded Wilfred's decision, and his later grim satisfaction that it had been a deliberately premeditated step. He remembers, in Journey from Obscurity, one of his last meetings with his brother.

He was, I could see, savagely depressed over the fearful waste and futility of the violence of which he was a part. It was then that he told me, not fluently but in disjointed sentences often barely audible, of the relief he felt that he had not been coerced, that what he was doing had at least come from reasoned thinking and not from patriotic hysteria. "Sometimes when I think too much this does make it worse, I cannot claim the excuse of being caught ... I alone must be responsible for myself ... But I would rather have it so ... I can think more clearly ... and later ... if there is time ... time to do it ... speak more clearly ... I must always remember it is my war ... I am acting from

⁵¹SO, 30 June 1915, CL p.342.

my own volition ... but others are not ... perhaps I can speak for them ... can my poetry do this? ... I do not know ... I must do this ... but shall I have time or will my poetry - not yet born - be killed with me?"⁵²

(In a vastly more general sense, it may perhaps be said that of all the combatants only Britain and the United States, whose frontiers were never seriously threatened and who had no standing army of any size, actually chose to go to war. But the question of freedom of choice in this matter is as complex as its theological relative.)

Owen was attracted to the Artists' Rifles partly, no doubt, because of the name, and because Lord Leighton, Millais and the actor-manager Forbes-Robertson had served with them, but largely because they offered commissions to "gentlemen returning from abroad".⁵³ After initial training, which he disliked, he found himself gazetted Second Lieutenant to the 5th Battalion, Manchester Regiment, and "marooned on a Crag of Superiority in an ocean of Soldiers".⁵⁴

The generality of men are hard-handed, hard-headed miners, dogged, loutish, ugly. (But I would trust them to advance under fire and to hold their trench;) blond, coarse, ungainly, strong, 'unfatigueable', unlovely, Lancashire soldiers, Saxons to the bone. But I don't know the individuals of my platoon. Some are overseas men who have seen fighting.⁵⁵

A slowly growing familiarity with his soldiers was to change this somewhat uneasy respect to a warm affection. It was an affection felt in the way Owen was most apt to feel it;

⁵² Journey from Obscurity, vol 3, p.122.

⁵³ SO, 30 June 1915, CL p.342.

⁵⁴ SO, 19 June 1916, CL p.395.

⁵⁵ ibid.

a fiercely protective, paternal concern. In this way the infantry officer's unique position of participation and complicity with both figures of higher authority and the fighting soldiers, was exactly congruent with the position in which, by temperament as much as by accident, he had constantly found himself in civilian life - the position of a rather uneasy surrogate: for his father, in the domestic situation described so acutely in Journey from Obscurity; for the vicar at Dunsden, who, Owen thought, was not sufficiently aware of the sufferings of his poorer parishioners; as tutor to the de la Touche boys at Mérygnac, where Owen was closer in age and interests to his temporarily fatherless charges than to their aunt his employer. Housmanesque references to the men under his command as 'lads' and 'boys', though many of them were veterans, are of course only common parlance.⁵⁶ But certainly Owen's feeling for his men, and for the common soldier in general, follows the recurring pattern of many relationships in which he acted as part-father, part-brother - with Colin Owen, with the boys of his Sunday-school class at Dunsden, with his pupils in France, with the boy-scouts he befriended when training at Romford⁵⁷ and, later, with the Newbould children in Edinburgh.⁵⁸ His equivocal position as a junior officer in some way conformed to this pattern. Owen's boldest poetic interpretation of it is in

⁵⁶ See the chapter "Soldier Boys", in Paul Fussell's The Great War and Modern Memory, pp.270-309.

⁵⁷ CL pp.369-370.

⁵⁸ CL, Appendix B, p.594.

his analogy between the officer-poet and Christ, at once father and brother of suffering mankind.

In the same week he joined the Army, Owen also enlisted as a poet, by going to that Georgian recruiting office, the Poetry Bookshop, where he met Harold Monro. He was growing in self-confidence, although as yet he had little to show for it. Some of his work cannot be dated with any certainty,⁵⁹ but it seems likely that none of the poems for which he is remembered was written before his embarkation for France at the end of December 1916. ("Greater Love" is a possible exception. "One draft of this is written on the reverse of an unpublished poem dated 10 May 1916; though this is insufficient justification for assigning a date to 'Greater Love', its personal note and its preoccupation with death in war as a holy sacrifice might support this inference."⁶⁰ Jon Stallworthy believes it may have been written in October 1917.)⁶¹ Owen arrived on the Somme on the first day of 1917. He was sent back to England on 16 June, suffering from shell-shock neurasthenia. All his war-poems, with the exception of "Smile, Smile, Smile" and (just possibly: see above) "Greater Love", are the harvest of these harrowing six months, and their memory. On his second tour of duty in France, between 31 August and his death on 4 November 1918, he wrote three poems; but two of these hark back to the experiences of the first half of 1917.

⁵⁹ See the valuable Appendix A, "Dates of Composition of Owen's Poems", in Welland, Wilfred Owen: a Critical Study.

⁶⁰ Wilfred Owen: a Critical Study, p.151.

⁶¹ Wilfred Owen: a Biography, p.230.

Owen's transformation, in those early months of 1917, was rapid and momentous. There is nothing quite like it in the history of English writing; and its cost to the poet, in personal, intimate terms, can only be guessed at. It is remarkable how quickly some of the targets of his later philippics become established. In his first two months of active service, he already displays his resentment towards the home politicians,⁶² the established Church,⁶³ and the popular press.⁶⁴ Such resentments were already widespread in the British Army at the beginning of 1917. When Owen had undergone his baptism of fire from 9 to 16 January - including the incident which was to become the subject of "The Sentry"⁶⁵ - he wrote to his mother: "The people of England needn't hope. They must agitate. But they are not yet agitated even. Let them imagine 50 strong men trembling as with ague for 50 hours!"⁶⁶ The referential response with which, in the same letter, he begins to get his bearings on No Man's Land, has already fixed various of the metaphoric sources which mark his mature style - Old Testament and Apocalypse; degenerative disease; grotesque unearthliness; counterpoint with the devalued pastoral of England; savage indignation.

⁶²CL p.428.

⁶³CL p.435.

⁶⁴CL p.436.

⁶⁵SO, 16 January 1917, CL pp.427-428.

⁶⁶SO, 19 January 1917, CL p.429.

They want to call No Man's Land 'England' because we keep supremacy there.

It is like the eternal place of gnashing of teeth; the Slough of Despond could be contained in one of its crater-holes; the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah could not light a candle to it - to find the way to Babylon the Fallen.

It is pock-marked like a body of foulest disease and its odour is the breath of cancer.

I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have perceived it, and in the darkness, felt. Those 'Somme Pictures' are the laughing stock of the army - like the trenches on exhibition in Kensington.⁶⁷

No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.

To call it 'England'!

I would as soon call my House (!) Krupp Villa, or my child Chlorina-Phosgena.⁶⁸

If, as he claimed, he was "a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience",⁶⁹ Owen was a Christian in the same terms. The question of faith had not been solved after Dunsden: it submerged for a while, but remained deeply problematic. (There is something Arnoldian in Owen's pursuit of poetry as a substitute for religion, or the continuation of religion by other means.) He reacted violently when the creed which he had "murdered" in himself in 1913⁷⁰ was discovered by the Church of England to be in favour of British war-policy. Owen had deserted Christianity partly because of his dissatisfaction with its established practitioners; in 1917 he could not leave

⁶⁷ I have not been able to identify these "Somme Pictures", which were, presumably, like the neat and healthy trenches exhibited in Kensington, reassuring bourrage de crâne for consumption on the home front.

⁶⁸ ibid.

⁶⁹ CL p.461.

⁷⁰ CL p.175.

it alone, for the same reasons. "I am more and more Christian as I walk the unchristian ways of Christendom."⁷¹ He is already becoming a partisan for the second person of the Trinity.

Already I have comprehended a light which never will filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace; but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. It may be a chimerical and an ignominious principle, but there it is. It can only be ignored: and I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skilfully and successfully indeed.⁷²

Owen realised that the war was being fought on national lines, but these divisions Christianity does not recognise. The boundary between nationalism and internationalism - which divides the combatants of western Europe from Wilson and Lenin, as it divides Jünger and Brooke from Owen and Barbusse - is one of the central features of the cartography of responses to the Great War. Owen's Christ is no one's national asset. He is to be found "in no man's land", in both senses: "Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism."⁷³ Owen speaks here with the deliberate authority of his admonitory style.

This practice of selective ignorance is, as I have pointed out, one cause of the War. Christians have deliberately cut some of the main teachings of their code.⁷⁴

The belligerents' conscription of the deity had, incidentally, been summarily dealt with in a quatrain by J.C. Squire:

⁷¹SO, 16 May 1917, CL p.461.

⁷²ibid.

⁷³ibid.

⁷⁴ibid.

God heard the embattled nations sing and shout:
 "Gott strafe England" - "God save the King" -
 "God this" - "God that" - and "God the other thing".
 "My God", said God, "I've got my work cut out."⁷⁵

The important letter quoted in the paragraph above was written from hospital after a particularly terrible tour of duty at Savy Wood near St. Quentin on the Western Front. Owen's battalion had spent twelve days in the line under the most intense bombardment. One large shell exploded only two yards from his head - he was blown into the air but, apparently, uninjured. Most of the following days, still under continuous bombardment, he had spent pinned down in a shallow hole in a railway cutting, unable to move. Opposite him was the mutilated body of one of his friends "who lay", as Owen put it, "not only near by, but in various places around and about, if you understand."⁷⁶ The Medical Officer would not allow Owen to return to the front line with his battalion. Labelled 'Neurasthenia', he was sent down to the Casualty Clearing Station at Gailly and from there, through a series of military hospitals, made his slow way to the Craiglockhart War Hospital for neurasthenic officers, on the outskirts of Edinburgh, where he arrived on 25 June. It was another serious reversal, but different this time from the vacuous collapse of 1913, after Dunsden.

'Neurasthenia' (nerves-without-strength) first appears as a term in English in the eighteen-fifties, and

⁷⁵ Quoted in A.J.P. Taylor, The First World War: an Illustrated History, Penguin Books, 1966, p.65.

⁷⁶ MO, 8 May 1917, CL p.456.

is apparently no more precise a term than the more fashionable 'nervous breakdown'. Shellshock neurasthenia seems to have meant a nervous disorganisation - or, in extreme cases, mental prostration - induced by unbearable exposure to artillery fire. Like the victim of a Freudian trauma, the shellshock neurasthenic had suffered a sort of failure of mental digestion and was not able to assimilate a particular painful experience. He ceased to be able to cope. (All this is relative, of course. Sassoon, Graves and Aldington all attest to having been mentally damaged by the war.) Although a good deal of the shock itself might be physiological,⁷⁷ the condition of shellshock neurasthenia was the result, presumably, of cumulative mental pressure. Mental injury was one of the saddest products of the war.⁷⁸ Many war-writers, Owen among them, testify to the importance of sealing off various compartments of the mind, in order to be able to cope with combat experience. In a letter written to Sassoon shortly before his death, Owen outlines his mental economics in what is perhaps the most dismaying passage of all his writing.

The Batt. had a sheer time last week. I can find no better epithet: because I cannot say I suffered anything; having let my brain grow dull: That is to say my nerves are in perfect order.⁷⁹

Shellshock neurasthenia was the result of the failure of such mental organisation.

⁷⁷In Owen's case, the shock may be pinpointed in the incident mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

⁷⁸Owen was quite aware of this, judging by his poems "Mental Cases" and "The Chances".

⁷⁹SS, 10 October 1918, CL p.581.

The method of treatment to restore the neurasthenic's nerves to order included encouraging him to assimilate and accept the trauma, and the interpretation of patients' dreams played an important part in the process of the treatment, initially in diagnosis and later as an index of the success of the cure. Disastrous dreams were indeed a feature of life at Craiglockhart. Sassoon's Sherston describes night in the war-hospital:

One lay awake and listened to feet padding along passages which smelt of stale cigarette smoke; for the nurses couldn't prevent insomnia-ridden officers from smoking half the night in their bedrooms, though the locks had been removed from all doors. One became conscious that the place was full of men whose slumbers were morbid and terrifying - men muttering uneasily or suddenly crying out in their sleep. Around me was that underworld of dreams haunted by submerged memories of warfare and its intolerable shocks and self-lacerating failures to achieve the impossible. By daylight each mind was a sort of aquarium for the psychopath to study ... But by night each man was back in his doomed sector of a horror-stricken front line, where the panic and stampede of some ghastly experience was re-enacted among the living faces of the dead. No doctor could save him then, when he became the lonely victim of his dream disasters and delusions.⁸⁰

It was at the Craiglockhart War Hospital, in August 1917, that Owen met Siegfried Sassoon, a fellow-patient.

A medical digression must be undertaken at this point. At Craiglockhart, Wilfred Owen was in the capable hands of one Dr. Brock. The physician whose embarrassing duty it was to 'cure' Sassoon at the War Hospital was W.H.R. Rivers. Rivers was a versatile and dedicated scientist. He had attained high distinction in clinical

⁸⁰ Siegfried Sassoon, Sherston's Progress, Faber & Faber, 1936, pp.87-88.

neurology, in the physiology of the sense organs and in experimental psychology, before turning to ethnology and anthropology. His work in the treatment of war-neuroses, first at the Maghull Hospital for private soldiers and later at the officers' hospital at Craiglockhart, led him particularly to question Freud's theory of dreams, set out in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900). Rivers's own contribution to dream-theory, Conflict and Dream, is manifestly the fruit of his experience in the treatment of war-neurasthenics, and is illustrated with some of their dreams.⁸¹

Rivers takes issue with Freud on two important points. While agreeing that the dream is essentially a mode of regressive mental functioning, he maintains that the experience embodied in a dream is derived from the recent experiences of the dreamer. Secondly, he adapts or enlarges Freud's theory of wish-fulfilment, and suggests that the dream is the solution or attempted solution of a conflict, expressed in a regressive mental vocabulary. Thus, according to G. Elliott Smith, "it is possible to speak of a dream as determined either by a wish or a conflict, and Dr. Rivers's objection to Freud is not so much to his expression of the purpose of a dream in terms of desire as to his view that dreams are necessarily the fulfilment of desire."⁸² It will be obvious that both

⁸¹W.H.R. Rivers, Conflict and Dream, With a Preface by G. Elliott Smith, Kegan Paul, 1923. The book was published posthumously, Rivers having died in 1922.

⁸²Conflict and Dream, Preface, p.vi.

these conclusions were likely to present themselves from Rivers's clinical experience of the nightmares of war-neurosis.

Rivers illustrated his theory partly with dreams of his own, and partly with examples of "the so-called night-terror" of war-dreams. "Everyone who had to do with war-neurosis became very familiar with this form as a characteristic example of the nightmare."⁸³ Every dream, he says, grows out of conflict; and the source of the war-dream is simple enough. "The conflict is one between a process in which an experience tends to recur to memory and a desire that the experience shall not recur."⁸⁴ Rivers explained that the basic battle-dream, with which he became familiar at Maghull and Craiglockhart, is a recreation of some terrifying combat experience.

The nightmare of war-neurosis generally occurred at first as a faithful reproduction of some scene of warfare, usually some experience of a particularly horrible kind or some dangerous event, such as a crash from an aeroplane ...⁸⁵

Formally, the war-dream is characterised by naturalism, subjectivity and naïve narration. Furthermore its character is one of unrelieved pain, and its desperately unsuccessful attempt to solve the conflict tends to result in unpleasant affect.

I suggest that when a dream provides a satisfactory solution of a conflict ... there is no affect, or one of a slight kind, but that when the dream wholly fails to solve the situation, or still more when the solution it provides is contrary to the deepest desire of the dreamer, there is affect, and affect of a painful kind.⁸⁶

⁸³ Conflict and Dream, p.66.

⁸⁴ Conflict and Dream, p.68. Nightmares, as a contemporary poem demonstrated, mix memory and desire.

⁸⁵ Conflict and Dream, p.66.

⁸⁶ Conflict and Dream, p.39.

According to Rivers, the battle-dream is a response to the experience of war which the waking mind has tried to banish, and its violence is in part due to the attempted repression of that experience. In his nightmare the dreamer attempts to organise, solve, and absorb his cognisance of war into the rest of his experience. It will be evident what bearing this has on war-literature in general. An experience no longer repressed, but expressed and thus formalised, is an experience mastered. There is an interesting corollary in the process of the neurasthenic's recovery -

Moreover, it is often in my experience one of the first signs of improvement that some amount of transformation appears; the events of the actual experience are replaced in the dream by incidents of other kinds, such as the appearance of terrifying animals, which stand in no direct relation to the actual war-experience of the dreamer ...⁸⁷

which, I think, affords an intriguing gloss on contemporary propositions of objective correlatives and the 'escape from emotion'.

In his letters Wilfred Owen was naturally diffident about his illness. But it is interesting to view certain more or less casual remarks in the light of the neurasthenic's progress, as outlined by Rivers.

Got up rather late this morning, having had some rather bellicose dreams of late.⁸⁸

I'm well enough by day, and generally so by night.⁸⁹

Keeping very well, and generally sleeping well. The Barrage'd Nights are quite the exception.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Conflict and Dream, p.67.

⁸⁸ SO, 15 August 1917, CL p.484.

⁸⁹ LG, 22 August 1917, CL p.487.

⁹⁰ SO, 22 August 1917, CL p.488.

And finally the chillingly laconic information:

I still have disastrous dreams, but they are taking on a more civilian character, motor accidents and so on.⁹¹

A letter written some months later, from Scarborough, gives some suggestion of the part that war-dreams played in Owen's poetic method. Again, it is addressed to his mother.

I am sorry you have disturbing and daylight-lingering dreams. It is possible to avoid them: by proper thinking before sleep. I confess I bring on what few war dreams I now have, entirely by willingly considering war of an evening. I do so because I have my duty to perform towards War.⁹²

Certain images in the poems, such as the blinded man in "The Sentry",

Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids',
Watch my dreams still,

and the gas victim in "Dulce et Decorum Est",

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning,

are recognisably images of nightmare. But I think that the importance of war-dreams - neurasthenic or otherwise - to Owen's compositions is more than incidental. His naturalism has tended to obscure the fact that he is a lower-case surrealist of considerable power, as is evident in "The Show", "Spring Offensive", "Mental Cases", "Strange Meeting" and other poems. "Strange Meeting" is particularly interesting in this context, because it contains a familiar dreamwork technique of transformation,

⁹¹S0, 2 September 1917, CL p.490.

⁹²S0, 18 February 1918, CL pp.533-534.

that of 'splitting'. The identity of the dreamer-poet is split into that of the narrator and his Doppelgänger and victim. In Conflict and Dream, Rivers relates at length a neuros-thenic dream in which the dreamer, an officer in the R.A.M.C. with suicidal tendencies, felt himself compelled to shoot a blond stranger who was staring at him (almost literally "with piteous recognition in fixed eyes") and who, the dreamer could feel, was suffering unbearable anguish. In the course of subsequent analysis Rivers became sure that the 'stranger' was an image of the dreamer himself.⁹³

The help which Owen received at Craiglockhart was not only medical. Siegfried Sassoon arrived there at the beginning of August. Owen introduced himself on 21 August. It is probable that the meeting and subsequent friendship with Sassoon was more important to Owen's poetry than any direct influence exercised upon it by Sassoon's own work. In August 1917 Owen was extremely diffident and retiring in his rôle as an artist. Although privately he had been dedicated for years to what he called 'poethood', his status was still amateur and obscure. Through his friendship with Sassoon, Owen was received - in effect, and, more importantly, in his own mind - into the community of letters. His ambition to be 'among the Poets' was fulfilled.⁹⁴ "Oh! world you

⁹³ Conflict and Dream, pp.22-25 and passim. The dreamer himself had not suspected that the 'stranger' might be an alter ego.

⁹⁴ "The chance that gave Owen the friendship of Mr. Sassoon, then endeavouring in all ways open to him, but above all by poetical challenge, to shed light on the futile ugliness of the War, was a good one. It supplied the answer to the petition for a poet's companionship which ... Owen uttered in his verses years before." Edmund Blunden, "Memoir (1931)", The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.169.

are making for me, Sassoon!"⁹⁵ The change was momentous, a step out of Owen's provincial middle-class milieu. Sassoon was able to give Owen the confidence of his own talent and the authority without which his mature style might seem peevish and hysterical. Owen's view of his own function as a writer settled, about this time, into the lineaments of a ministering dedication. This fixing⁹⁶ is due less to Sassoon than to Owen's own situation, character and past, from which it can be seen to be a natural growth. And with this increased conviction, Owen came into his powers. It is evident, from a moving letter written to his mother on the last day of 1917 - so evident, indeed, as to be disturbing - that Owen was well aware of what was happening to him.

I go out of this year a Poet, my dear Mother, as which I did not enter it. I am held peer by the Georgians;⁹⁷ I am a poet's poet.

I am started. The tugs have left me; I feel the great swelling of the open sea taking my galleon.⁹⁸

Of the destination of this voyage there could be no doubt.

The letter continues:

Last year, at this time, (it is just midnight, and now is the intolerable instant of the Change) last year I lay awake in a windy tent in the middle of a vast, dreadful encampment. It seemed neither France nor England, but a kind of paddock where the beasts are kept a few days before the shambles. I heard the

⁹⁵SS, 27 November 1917, CL p.511.

⁹⁶"And you have fixed my Life - however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me." SS, 5 November 1917, CL p.505.

⁹⁷He may be presumed to be referring to Sassoon and Robert Graves. See the preceding letter, LG, 30 December 1917, CL p.520. Both Sassoon and Graves had featured in Edward Marsh's Georgian Poetry 1916-1917, published in November 1917.

⁹⁸SO, 31 December 1917, CL p.521.

revelling of the Scotch troops, who are now dead, and who knew they would be dead. I thought of this present night, and whether I should indeed - whether we should indeed - whether you would indeed - but I thought neither long nor deeply, for I am a master of elision.

But chiefly I thought of the very strange look on all faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England, though wars should be in England; nor can it be seen in any battle. But only in Etaples.

It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's.

It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.⁹⁹

In parenthesis between the largely biographical prelude outlined above (which is an attempt to give some account of the growth of the poet's mind) and a discussion of the poems as a whole, I propose now to look at one poem in particular, which I hope will help to illustrate what comes before and what follows. "Dulce et Decorum Est" is not Owen's best poem, but it is remarkably inclusive of the salient features of his mature style. The poem is in four sections, of eight, six, two and twelve lines. Owen's early training in the sonnet form is evident here, as elsewhere in the longer poems; there are concealed sonnets too in "S.I.W." and "Spring Offensive". "Dulce et Decorum Est" divides clearly into two units of fourteen lines each.

⁹⁹ ibid.

naturalistic; but it casts a sinister metaphoric shadow compounded of images of nightmare which are, I think, recognisably childlike. From 'distant rest', the suggestion of dream comes closer with the incidence of "Men marched asleep", which is followed by the series of epithets in which, to achieve the nightmare vision, the men's waking faculties drop away like scales from their eyes - they become lame, blind, drunk, deaf. Clearly this series is neither only literal nor only metaphoric. It announces the transition from one mode of seeing to another, and anticipates a sentence Owen was to write a year later: "I lost all my earthly faculties, and fought like an angel."¹⁰⁰ Forced by violence out of a natural, earthly mode, he enters an apocalyptic mode, like the attackers in "Spring Offensive"; and a similar transition is taking place here, in language. It is not surprising to find, instrumental in the transition, the word 'ecstasy', a familiar mystic clearing-house between one world and another.

The unnaturalness of the action having been established in the octave, Owen can afford to emphasise the gulf in the sestet by referring back the victim's agony to natural hazards - he is "flound'ring like a man in fire or lime". The modes of naturalistic experience and apocalyptic dream have changed places; the one has become the other. And this is emphasised by the naturalistic description of the vision through a gas-mask,

¹⁰⁰SO, 4 or 5 October 1918, CL p.580.

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
and confirmed by the nightmare subaqueous simile which
arises (one could almost say) naturally from it:

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

The scene, naturalistically given at first, is
discovered to be apocalyptic in fact, and not only by
analogy; and once that has been established, the soldier-
victim is recognised to be, literally, a haunting visitation:

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning:

and he is placed at the centre of the experience. (The
dramatic parallel with "Strange Meeting" will be clear.)
It is at this point that the corporate 'we' is distilled into
the intimate experience of the first person singular, and -
most interesting - it is from this point that the poem
becomes vocative. The speaker is no longer overheard;
he apostrophises, stepping out of the experience to ensure
that we shall not miss the meaning.

If in some	smothering
dreams you too could pace	
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,	
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,	
His hanging face,	like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood	
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs	
	(corrupted)
Obscene	as cancer,
bitter	as the cud
	Of yile, incurable sores on
	innocent tongues, -
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest	
To children ardent for some desperate glory,	
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est	
Pro patria mori.	

The first section of fourteen lines could stand
as a powerful and complete piece. The second half - a
single sentence - has as much power, but suffers from a lack

of control which may be attributed to its being both more personal and apostrophic. It is crammed and tumbling in movement, and has risen in pitch to accommodate the public voice. Consequently the last four lines are a little flat. Compared with the first half, the metaphoric reference here is more remote. The analogy between the victim's hanging face and "a devil's sick of sin" is arresting but incongruous. (One MS gives "His hanging face, tortured for your own sin", which is revealing, though less satisfactory.)¹⁰¹ I think it is not just the proximity of 'gargling' that suggests the image of a gargoyle. Like the following image, this seems to me iconic and contrived.

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues.

It seems that these lines were substituted, at a late stage of composition, for:

And think how, once, his head was like a bud,
Fresh as a country rose, and keen, and young ...¹⁰²

These two versions, set together, are curiously reminiscent of Hamlet's indignation at

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love
And sets a blister there ...¹⁰³

Given the context of Hamlet's words, the similarity is even more fascinating if it is not a coincidence.

The second section is as naturalistic as the first, the difference being that the metaphoric reference seems

¹⁰¹Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.56n.

¹⁰²ibid.

¹⁰³Hamlet, Act III Scene iv, ll.40-45.

here to be placed alongside, not inside, the literal discourse, and arrives already equipped with moral ballast, whereas in the first section it is at once more anarchic and more integral, and simpler. Owen has gone further for his images in the second section, and this has something to do with the fact that it is a direct address - he is conscious of his audience. The second section has much more than the first to do with the upper-case Poetry with which he was later (in the draft Preface) to claim he was not concerned; and this is curious, because it has also much more to do with propaganda. He was confronted, in fact, with exactly the same problem as faced the author of Le Feu. If, like Owen's hero Keats, we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us, it is at least partly because it tends to be less good than poetry that does not. Owen never quite solved the problem, though he was increasingly aware of it.

The Great War made Owen a poet. The experience of it was a sufficient if not a necessary condition for the realisation of his talent, and a study of his poems shows that, like a catalytic agent, the war reorganised the elements of his poetic imagination without greatly adding to them. The elements of Owen's imaginative universe do not come from nowhere. They coalesce around certain value-centres early established in the poet's mind, these value-centres constituting the dramatis personae of his work, and being related to certain figures of his past. In other words, his war-poetry deploys familial archetypes.

In trying to organise the experience of war, he mythologises certain landmarks of his familial (peacetime) life into the hostile and unfamiliar landscape of war. One such value-centre, to which so many images in the poems adhere, is the father-figure.

I have already suggested that Wilfred Owen's relations with his own father were delicate and ambivalent, the eldest son being at the same time both the antagonist and representative of his parent. The Owens' familial politics are discussed with sensitivity by Harold Owen in Journey from Obscurity and by Jon Stallworthy in Wilfred Owen: a Biography. The father-figures in Owen's war-poems are compounds of age and authority. They are generally pictured as responsible for the war and the suffering it causes. Abram in "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" is a simple example, explicitly patriarchal, of the malevolent father-figure, here seen as going against the divine command to "offer the Ram of Pride", and, instead, murdering his helpless son. In this shocking revision of the Old Testament myth, Abram's action is unnatural, unnecessary and ungodly. (And by standing the familiar story on its head, Owen ensures that the shock is aesthetic as well. Unusually, the poem is a very 'modernist' one.)

There is another simple and again biblical example of the malevolent father-figure in "Soldier's Dream". The soldier dreams that, overnight, Christ's compassion destroys the instruments of war.

And there were no more bombs, of ours or Theirs,
 Not even an old flint-lock, nor even a pikel.
 But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;
 And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.

Although God was a compassionate power in the first poem and a malevolent one in the second, the structure of the two poems - the instruments of suffering; a divine plea for mercy; stubborn confirmation of the suffering by the father - is identical; and Abram in the first and God the Father in the second poem clearly issue from the same negative value-centre. (It is interesting that in "Soldier's Dream" the executive culprit is the father's surrogate.) Both fathers are insensible and unheeding of the agony for which they are responsible. Abram, who would slay his son sooner than give up his pride, is again incarnate in the father of the young volunteer in "S.I.W."

Father would sooner him dead than in disgrace, -
Was proud to see him going, aye, and glad ...
"Death sooner than dishonour, that's the style!"
So father said.

The identifying feature of these fathers is their insensibility. Their unwillingness to understand and share (or even notice) suffering is an abuse of the responsibility they are all in a position, through authority, to exercise. This identifies the doctor in "The Dead-Beat" as one of them.

Next day I heard the Doc.'s well-whiskied laugh:
"That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray."

God the Father is the ideal or apotheosis of this species, but Owen is cautious about His participation in their lack of feeling. "God seems not to care" in "Greater Love", and, in "Exposure", "love of God seems dying". One early draft of "Apologia pro Poemate Meo" contains the more direct "For God forgets Christ then, and blesses murder"; but this line does not appear in later versions.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.40n.

But it is worth remarking that the second person of the Trinity, the Son, is never guilty of the absent-mindedness which "seems" sometimes to afflict the Father.

One of Owen's highest achievements, the poem "Insensibility", shows that "old men's placidity" is not to be confused with the numbed placidity of the young soldier, just as the (shellshocked?) insensibility of the hardened soldier, who can "laugh among the dying, unconcerned", differs from the insensibility of those dullards who are unfeeling "by choice", not from necessity. No one should be unmoved by suffering because no one is altogether innocent of it. The generative sun in "Futility" also belongs among the discredited father-figures. It has awoken life on the planet, but it will not awaken the dead soldier; and so it undergoes a dramatic reversal - the "kind old sun" of the first stanza becomes the "fatuous sunbeams" of the second, and its very generation of life becomes a cruel mockery.

All the fighting soldiers in Owen's war-verse are young men. It seems there are no old soldiers (except perhaps the writer of "The Letter"), though the young men in "Disabled", "S.I.W." and "Mental Cases" grow old by the unnatural process of intense suffering. And nowhere in the war-verse is there any indication that older men have any sympathy, understanding or compassion for the fighting soldiers, or deserve any themselves. This unflinching hostility dismayed the anonymous writer who reviewed Sassoon's edition of Owen's Poems¹⁰⁵ in the Times Literary Supplement of 6 January 1921.

¹⁰⁵ Chatto & Windus, 1920.

And what shall we say finally of the strange intimation that the old men sacrifice the young? As if any father would not face death sooner than send his boy to face it for him.

This leads the reviewer to conclude that "Wilfred Owen's poetical gesture springs in part from an error of judgement", and that "his moral revolt is largely misplaced". Henry Newbolt later echoed this judgement:

Owen and the rest of the broken men rail at the Old Men who sent the young to die: they have suffered cruelly, but in the nerves but not the heart - they haven't the experience or the imagination to know the extreme human agony - "Who giveth me to die for thee, Absalom my son, my son". Paternity apart, what Englishman of fifty wouldn't far rather stop the shot himself than see the boys do it for him?¹⁰⁶

The question is an unreal one. That is not what happened. But Newbolt is justified in the complaint that Owen displays no sympathy for his elders, and this partiality should probably be deplored. But the draft Preface and "Apologia pro Poemate Meo" explain what Owen was about. If the poems are to warn, there must be no distractions.

Owen's own domestic history explains, I think, why the paternal figures in his work are subjected to such steady hostility. The old friction between him and his father is diverted very naturally towards those forces which he saw as being responsible for the war: the complacent nation at home, the politicians, the journalists, all those "dullards whom no cannon stuns" ("Insensibility") and who will not share the reciprocity of tears. (It is not often noticed that there are no senior officers in Owen's verse,

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight, p.122. Newbolt also says, rather extraordinarily: "When I looked into Douglas Haig I saw what is really great, - perfect acceptance, which means perfect faith."

unless we count "Field-Marshal God" in the poem "Inspection".) Tom Owen himself seems to have disappointed his son in his own attitude to the war. On leave at home, Owen wrote to Siegfried Sassoon:

I am spending happy enough days with my Mother, but I can't get sociable with my Father without going back on myself over ten years of thought.¹⁰⁷

Tom Owen seemed to his son to be infected with the upturning of values which the war had brought about. Owen told Osbert Sitwell:

This is the beginning of decadence. As is proved by my Father's message on hearing I was G.S.:¹⁰⁸ "gratified to know you are normal again."¹⁰⁹

And in a letter to his mother a month before the Armistice, he is unpleasantly scornful of his father's concern for a civilian colleague who had recently undergone an operation.

It is amusing to think of anyone being upset by a friend's arm-amputation in hospital ...
How would Father like - No, I will spare you.¹¹⁰

This is a disagreeable echo of the tone of the September 1914 letter about the Bordeaux war-hospital. But it should be remembered that, in this latter case, Owen was back at the front.

It seems clear that a good deal of the energy which propels the war-poems (and the others) has an oedipal origin. And in this aspect too: that it seems it is to his mother that most of Owen's poems are directed. It is his mother that he has to convince. Dominic Hibberd's

¹⁰⁷SS, 5 November 1917, CL p.506.

¹⁰⁸G.S. means fit for General Service.

¹⁰⁹OS, July 1918, CL p.562.

¹¹⁰SO, 10 October 1918, CL p.583.

chronological arrangement of poems and selected letters, in Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others, is especially useful in illustrating the course of this weird and fruitful relationship. Being, as Owen claimed in August 1918,¹¹¹ "absolute" in her son's affections, it was imperative that Susan Owen should be brought to share his understanding of the war. She was his ideal audience and his ally, as she had probably always been. In another late letter¹¹² Owen speaks of his and his fellow-officers' disgust with "England's indifference to the real meaning of the war as we understand it"; and at this stage Susan Owen is probably included in the pronoun. She seems to have begun openly to question the prosecution of the war.

I am glad you are finding courage to speak. In a previous letter you said you kept quiet. I was not proud of that. The 4th Army General has had to issue an Order:

"Peace Talk must cease in the Fourth Army."¹¹³

Certainly Owen sent his poems to his mother for her comments, none of which, unfortunately, seem to have survived. I think it may be of help in understanding the tone of some of them to imagine Susan Owen as their invisible audience. The sometimes unpleasant desire to shock, which is related to exacting demands for attention and sympathy, alongside a feeling of guilt and an insistence that sympathy is impossible; the queasy and startling working of sexual themes and images in the interpretation of war-experience,

¹¹¹SO, 19 August 1918, CL p.569.

¹¹²SO, 15 October 1918, CL p.585.

¹¹³SO, 12 October 1918, CL pp.584-585. Although officers' correspondence was only rarely censored, Owen was taking a definite risk here.

as well as in contrast to it; hostility towards the authoritative father-figure, and a jealous ambivalence towards women - all these aspects of Owen's work can be seen more clearly, and I dare say more sympathetically, in the light of his private, familial drama. No doubt such information would illuminate the war-writings of anyone else: Owen's case is unusual in being so well documented.

Women are contemplated throughout Owen's verse with an awed fascination, and from a distance. Here is the first stanza of "Long Ages Past", whose one surviving draft is dated 31 October 1914.¹¹⁴

Long ages past in Egypt thou wert worshipped
 And thou wert wrought from ivory and beryl.
 They brought thee jewels and they brought their slain,
 Thy feet were dark with blood of sacrifice.
 From dawn to midnight, O my painted idol,
 Thou satest smiling, and the noise of killing
 Was harp and timbrel in thy pale jade ears:
 The livid dead were given thee for toys.

This "painted idol" shares certain habits - she drinks blood, for example, and seduces kings - with the Scarlet Woman of Revelation. She is also no doubt related to Keats's *Iamiae*, various Romantic and pre-Raphaelite succubae and vampires, and the femmes fatales of the Romantic Agony. (It should be noted, however, that nowhere in the poem is she/he sexually identified. The assumption that she is female can be confidently made, but remains an assumption.) She is erotically exciting, but dangerous, indeed fatal, to know. Owen endorses here the strange and uncomfortable connection between eros and death, so prevalent in Romantic (and not only Romantic) art, and which is often to be glimpsed

¹¹⁴ Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.134n.

in his war-poetry. ("Greater Love" is the most obvious example.) "Long Ages Past" also contains an early use of an image obsessive with Owen, which combines two classic erotic and deathly elements, lips and blood:

And on thy lips the stain of crimson blood,
And on thy brow the pallor of their death.

Bloodstained mouths, or lips, are also to be found in "Has your Soul Sipped?", "Greater Love", "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Fragment: I Saw his Round Mouth's Crimson", "The Kind Ghosts" and "S.I.W.". Although, at least in the case of "Long Ages Past", the image was probably directly suggested by Revelation XVII, Owen's obsession with it (and with pallor, another of his favourites, which also has both sexual and morbid undertones) should be remarked. Literary precedents apart, Owen would have had all too many opportunities, at the front, to observe bloody mouths and pale brows; but "Long Ages Past" seems to have been written more than two years before his first battle experience.

The lamia of October 1914 might just be a lady of fashion. If so, she is a persistent one. The intricately rhymed "The Kind Ghosts" is dated 30 July 1918.¹¹⁵

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 ...

There is bitterness in this poem, even sarcasm; but the destroyer of doomed youth, though manifestly guilty, is nonetheless contemplated with lyric awe, even by her victims.

¹¹⁵ Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.102.

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 hetacombs,
 Lest aught she be disturbed, or grieved at all.

No doubt Owen wrote this poem, principally, as an exercise in rhyming technique, and not too much importance should be attached to it. I find it impossible to understand. Owen seems to suggest (ironically?) some sort of complicity between the unidentified sleeping woman, in her fairytale palace, and the boys on whose death, literally, she lives in peace. Her domestic economy depends on death. Her pillow seems to be inflated with dying breaths; her walls (like the occasional trench-parapet) built out of corpses; her flowers fertilised by wounded mouths; her rooms carpeted with blood, and so on. And yet the ghosts of her victims do not haunt her. The only explanation I can suggest is that the sleeping woman may represent England, whose eyes are closed to the sacrifices of youth which allow her to rest sheltered and undisturbed. It is interesting that the completed version of this freakish and obscure poem belongs to what Welland calls "Owen's greatest creative phase [which] was complete by the end of July 1918 when he was preparing to go overseas".¹¹⁶

The guilt of women is explored more explicitly in the war-poems. The "giddy jilts" in "Disabled", with their "subtle hands", are condemned as responsible for persuading the young hero to go to war, and then abandoning

¹¹⁶Wilfred Owen: a Critical Study, p.133.

him when the war has destroyed him.¹¹⁷ They have the characteristics of belles dames sans merci, leading the young man to destroy himself, and then deserting him (the pattern is identical in the early allegorical sonnet "To Eros"). The same is true of the young wife in "The Dead-Beat", "getting her fun" on the proceeds of her husband's anguish, and indirectly responsible for his final collapse. The faithlessness of women is yet more forcefully proposed in "Apologia pro Poemate Meo", where Owen juxtaposes romantic diction (with which he was so familiar) with the harsher and more vigorous sounds of a language more urgent and an emotion, presumably, more deeply felt.

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.

The relationship between the love of women and men's comradeship (which, as in most war-writings, has homoerotic elements) becomes one of reciprocal mockery. (The sexual politics of Aldington's Death of a Hero were to be rather similar.) This may be the most distressing irony in Owen's work. The mockery of women, like those who sent the soldier in "Disabled" to war, is expected to be returned by the survivors of the draft in "The Send-Off", who will "mock what women meant/Who gave them flowers". The flowers

¹¹⁷ Can there be a horrible echo, in "Disabled", of Thomas Hood's "Faithless Nelly Gray"?

which the women offered in this case were white - again women are associated with the idea of pallor, as in "Anthem for Doomed Youth", and in "Disabled" where the soldier, betrayed by women, has "lost his colour very far from here". Just like the Poetry with which, in the draft Preface, Owen claimed not to be concerned, the love of women comes to be seen as an activity not only made redundant by the war, but, more importantly, compromised and in bad faith. It pales to valuelessness, beside the greater love which passes or surpasses it.

Owen's verse can be seen as the drama of the individual struggling for birth or survival, threatened by atavistic figures of authority on the one hand and by predatory women on the other (a drama which might be seen as confirming his affinity with Keats). Sometimes, as in "Spring Offensive" and "Exposure" and "Futility", the antagonist is nature itself.

The first person, the central character of this drama, is doomed youth. Boys or young men are the only figures of innocence in Owen's world. They are innocent by nature, and their innocence is holy. (In "Arms and the Boy" the paradisaical fruit is, specifically, a laughing matter for the boy.) Owen, like Robert Graves, grouped his pastoral values around the idea of the innocence of youth. To his youngest brother Colin, then aged sixteen, Owen wrote:

Of the last Draught [sic] that went out, men I had helped to train, some are already fallen. Your tender age is a thing to be valued and gloried in, more than many wounds.

Not only because it puts you among the Elders and the gods, high witnesses of the general slaughter,

being one of those for whom every soldier fights, if he knew it; your Youth is to be prized not because your blood will not be drained, but because it is blood; and Time dare not yet mix into it his abominable physic.¹¹⁸

This was written four months or so before Owen went to fight in France. It is of course a little pompous, but there are already sproutings of some of his later themes - the boy, who belongs "among the Elders", is like the young Christ; and blood is a value in itself, synonymous with youth, but threatened with draining. In "Anthem for Doomed Youth", boys and their (pale) child-sisters are thought of as having an elegiac, commemorative duty to perform towards the fallen. The same is true of "To a Comrade in Flanders". But this pastoral, ritualistic innocence is threatened by the creeping cess of war. There is real horror, in Owen's letters, at the inexorable approach of the time when Colin Owen himself, and Owen's sometime pupils, would be sucked into the war. In a letter of March 1918, this anxiety is followed by indignation directed in a pattern which must by now be familiar:

I wonder how many a frau, fraulein, knabe und madchen [sic] Colin will kill in his time?

Johnny de la Touche leaves school this term, I hear, and goes to prepare for the Indian Army.

He must be a creature of killable age by now.

God so hated the world that He gave several millions of English-begotten sons, that whosoever believeth in them should not perish, but have a comfortable life.¹¹⁹

As I mentioned above, experience - war-experience - involves Owen's doomed youth in a cruel, accelerated and

¹¹⁸CO, 23 August 1916, CL pp.406-407.

¹¹⁹SO, Easter Sunday 1918, CL p.544. The last sentence quoted shows the increasing boldness of Owen's letters to his mother in this year, and the date is of an obvious significance.

unnatural process of ageing, and not only because it brings them prematurely close to death. In "Arms and the Boy" and elsewhere, the sentimentalist and the satirist in Owen combine in the idea that youth (the boy) exists in a state of prelapsarian innocence - apples being associated at first only with laughter - but is woefully unprepared for the battles to come.

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.

The boy must be dressed up for the unnatural passion for which his natural innocence is unprepared. And then, thrust in among the "superhuman inhumanities" ("Spring Offensive") of war - and wearing, perhaps, "a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's"¹²⁰ - his uncomprehending and dumb figure becomes, for the poet, a categorical imperative to speak. And perhaps the most striking thing about Owen's advocacy is that it is also a confession of guilt. He pleads, certainly, but he pleads from the dock. As a junior officer, he addresses himself to the war in the rôle of both criminal and victim.

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?
 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. ("Insensibility")

¹²⁰CL p.521.

Although Owen's physical descriptions of young men are often remarkably conventional, this picture of the common soldier is far from idealised. He has no freedom, little understanding, and no voice of his own. "His days are worth forgetting more than not." There is even (as occasionally in Sassoon's work) a sense that the officer-poet - privileged, middle-class, aware, responsible, guilty - feels a certain envy, as well as compassion, for his inarticulate subordinates, who thereby become a final and unlikely transformation of the Noble Savage, naturally innocent and inevitably doomed.

For the doom of youth is not only cruel, it also goes fundamentally against the process of nature. Owen's young men have been untimely ripped from their natural function. They are, in "Exposure", excluded from the pastoral home ("Shutters and doors, all closed"): and the motif of the frustration of sexual fulfilment, hinted at in the "fields unsown" of "Futility" (in a typically, even conventionally rural metaphor), is explicit in the theme of impotence in "Disabled". Where the pastoral/home complex - once emptied by war of the young men who ought, naturally, to grace and sustain it - retains a value, it tends to be value of a negative kind, such as the sterile rituals of "Anthem for Doomed Youth", in which compassion from home is necessary but insufficient, as in "Greater Love":

Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.

It is much to Owen's credit that these songs of innocence defiled are not often sentimental; and this is

largely because of the positive values that he is able to discover in the experience of war, and which are made to confront, dialectically, war's suffering. These are the values set out in "Apologia pro Poemate Meo" and elsewhere - humour, courage, exultation, fellowship and compassion; love, of a unique kind; urgency, a tragic resignation, anger (which can be a value) and vision. Those who survive grow old beyond their years ("Disabled", "Mental Cases", "S.I.W.", "Dulce et Decorum Est"), and may come through to exultation ("Apologia pro Poemate Meo") and be numbered among the guilty as "we wise" ("Insensibility") and, having seen the unsurpassable ("Spring Offensive", "Mental Cases"), they have a duty to speak. Like Barbusse before him and David Jones after him, Owen discovered that the proper language in which to speak of the war would have to accomplish a satisfactory fusion between the colloquial and the grandiloquent. This problem may indeed be considered the main stylistic issue of Great War writing as a sub-genre, and it is visible in almost every line of Owen's war-verse. The last stanza of "Spring Offensive", for example, modulates from the archaism of "drave" to the wry colloquialism of "went under" - a casual euphemism which, in context, recovers for a moment its apocalyptic exactitude.

But what say such as from existence' brink
 Ventured but drave too swift to sink,
 The 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 -
 And crawling slowly back, have by degrees
 Regained cool peaceful air in wonder -
 Why speak not they of comrades that went under?

The choice and positioning of "went under" is one further example of the way the everyday language of the war, like its everyday incidents, often contains in itself a force which needs no rhetorical embroidery at all.

The cast of characters in Owen's drama is, however, not yet complete. As I have suggested, what prevents Owen's revolt against authority from becoming melodramatic or peevish is that he himself is part of that authority, and shares its guilt. As God was a benevolent figure in "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" and malevolent in "Soldier's Dream", so the speaking voice of the poems is sometimes one with the sufferings of the drama's protagonist, and sometimes among the executioners. His function in "Inspection", for example, is authoritative, as a delegate (unwittingly perhaps) of "Field-Marshal God", and carries a good deal of guilt, a guilt which is elsewhere betrayed in apparently casual phrases - as the speaker stalks "behind the wagon that we flung him in", in "Dulce et Decorum Est"; confronts the eponymous dead-beat who "just blinked at my revolver, blearily" and "didn't appear to know a war was on"; and is watched in his dreams by the blinded sentry (again eponymous) whom he "forgot". What prevents Owen's moral revolt from being misplaced is the fact that, as an officer, he is implicated in what he condemns. Owen was, of course, acutely aware of the quasi-paternal role of the junior officer. In the letters, he twice refers to the men under his command as his "little family".¹²¹ Nor indeed was such a posture at all new to him. The old

¹²¹ CL p.403, p.414.

ambivalence of his childhood rôle was reborn on the Western Front, and found its way into the centre of his poetry.

I have noticed how Owen's devalued pastoral resources are frequently used as a tawdry foil in which the intensity of combat experience is set. And the pastoral alternative is increasingly undermined - betrayed in "Disabled", sterile in "Anthem for Doomed Youth", and reduced to a final negative in the invitation to sleep which closes "Strange Meeting". In "Spring Offensive", one of Owen's last poems, the soldiers themselves assault the pastoral, natural world, which has been kind to them, and of which they have been a part, in the happy valley which they have left behind.

In the earlier "Exposure", the soldiers had to face a hostile Nature - winds that knife, a dawn that attacks, an air more deadly than bullets. They seemed to be prepared to endure this as the price of a new regeneration, and to ensure the continuance of the process of nature, the inevitable cycle of the seasons -

For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here

- however far-off

and equivocal that vernal renewal may be, and although they may not be there to share it. In offering themselves and their suffering to ensure the return of "God's invincible spring", they are of course performing the classic drama or rite of the sacrifice, a drama earlier and perhaps less thoughtfully intimated in Owen's poem "1914":

But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.

It may have annoyed the author of The Golden Bough to discover that his researches looked forward, as well as backward, in time. The seasonal metaphor - a particular favourite with Owen - is especially familiar in the interpretation of war-experience. As it is deployed in this poem, it suggests that 1914 is the beginning of a "wild Winter"; but, as even those of us who have never read Shelley or Swinburne know, spring inevitably follows winter: so the assumption half-buried in the metaphor is that the "wild Winter" of war will inevitably be followed by a new, springtime age, perhaps like that spring which had "bloomed in early Greece". And this means Progress, which, as Wells's Mr. Britling was made aware, is the fetish of liberalism. The fertility and richness of the new spring is to be ensured by the sacrificial "blood for seed", on the liberal assumption that, although you never get something for nothing, you always get something for something.

The same metaphoric nexus - winter, sacrifice, spring - is deployed in "Exposure", which was written probably some two and a half years after "1914"; but the assumption of an inevitable sequence has worn thin, and, indeed, has worn away. This is not the Shelleyan "winter of the world", but a desperately miserable fact, experienced in the bones as much as in the brain. The soldiers are presented as being "not loath" to suffer this misery in the cause of the return of "God's invincible spring". But there is no sign of the spring: and how invincible can it be when God's own love "seems dying"? (The idea of taking over the administration of progress or at least survival from a

moribund God, in whom it is no longer possible to believe, is also consistent with liberalism, and is one of the things that T.E. Hulme found so insufferable in what he called Romanticism. But what remains of the idea in "Exposure" is a reminder of the Augustinian definition of hell as absence from God.) The recurring motif "But nothing happens" is true not only of the tediousness of everyday trench warfare but also of the interminability of the winter of war itself. "I don't see how it can end, I don't see," Owen had written almost two years before.¹²² For the soldiers in "Exposure", summer and warmth exist only in the beautifully engineered pastoral fantasy of the middle section, which is already becoming unreal even as a memory. (It is, incidentally, one of the very few occasions in his poems in which Owen draws a direct contrast between the pastoral of home and the nightmare of overseas.) It is as if, time having stopped, Owen's soldiers have been facing the winter for ever.¹²³ Remarkably, there is no direct expression of feeling at all in "Exposure". If the poetry is in the pity, the pity is in the fact, which can be left to speak for itself. In the last year of his life, Owen seems to have believed, perhaps rightly, that the best answer to armchair belligerents was to carry in his wallet photographs of mutilés de guerre.

¹²²CL p.345.

¹²³It may be worth noting that there is a theme of magical enchantment in Owen's verse which, I suppose, can be traced to his early enthusiasm for fairy tales.

When Owen came to write "Spring Offensive" in the autumn of 1918 - it may be his last poem - he presented in it a picture of men at war with nature which differs from that of "Exposure", but can be seen as embryonic in the earlier poem. "Spring Offensive" has many of the familiar ingredients - glimpses of Keats in the language of natural description, biblical echoes, and Owen's peculiar brand of impersonality. It also has an inner tension of dramatic movement which is Owen at his very best. It is his masterpiece, the achievement of his long apprenticeship; and compared with it, "Strange Meeting" has the unevenness and radical incoherence of fragments put together, which I suspect it is.

("Strange Meeting" is certainly a poem of great power, a power notably translated by Benjamin Britten in his War Requiem; but it is not finished. There may be a simple compositional explanation for some of its obscurities. There seem to be moments in which the pararhyme wags the poem. Welland observes that "the manuscripts show that at times his method was to jot down, marginally, lists of possible pairs of words and then build the poem round them."¹²⁴ Parts of "Strange Meeting" - and I am thinking particularly of lines 26 to 39 - prove upon investigation to have a good deal more sonority than sense, and this may be due to the dictatorship of the requirements of the pararhyme in the early stages of composition. It may confidently be said that Owen would have improved the poem, had he had time. As it is, however, it remains a brilliant failure.)

¹²⁴Wilfred Owen: a Critical Study, p.114.

In one of the early drafts, the second speaker of "Strange Meeting" identifies himself to the first by saying: "I was a German conscript, and your friend".¹²⁵ Owen seems later to have preferred the less localised "I am the enemy you killed, my friend", which offers a more universal irony. A similar distancing from the particular is to be found in "Spring Offensive". The protagonists of the later poem are as mysterious as the ghostly vision of "Strange Meeting". We are not told their number or condition or status. They are as anonymous as the draft which is the subject of "The Send-Off". They have no nationality, and no memory beyond the day. The landscape through which they move is vividly realised, down to the details of the buttercup petals and the little brambles which clutch and cling to the passing soldiers "like sorrowing hands"; but with its "last hill", threatening sky, and the happy valley left behind, it is both accurately observed and potentially allegorical, like a Bunyan landscape. And the soldiers' condition being thus (politically) unspecific, Owen is able to concentrate the tragic significance of war in them. Further, the suffering they undergo is not something external to them, determined by an identifiable cause and effect beyond them. Perhaps the oddest thing about the poem is that there might as well be no enemy waiting for the soldiers beyond the ridge, and no hierarchy of command and responsibility behind them. In "Spring Offensive" the war is not viewed as a horrible historical aberration but as a general metaphor for the human condition and for man's

¹²⁵ Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p.36n.

relation with nature - in the senses both of the natural world and of human nature. In the next two chapters I shall be discussing how this metaphoric generalisation is deployed, in very different ways, in Apollinaire's play Couleur du Temps and David Jones's poem In Parenthesis.

Although it would be difficult to group together three works as disparate as these - including, it must be said, in terms of literary competence - all three share an interpretation of war as essentially ironic tragedy. Owen had already broached this mixture of irony and tragedy in the splendid final couplet of "The Sentry", another late poem:

Through the dense din, I say, we heard him shout
"I see your lights!" But ours had long died out.

Like the speaker in "The Sentry", the soldiers in "Spring Offensive" are aware of the war as the manifestation or dramatisation of an essentially inward infirmity, and some of them at least (can this only be the officers among them?) are well aware of what they are doing, "Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world". There is no equivocation as to what they are about: they are about "in the body to enter hell".

As they stand and ponder the warm field, nature surrounds them as a healing, benedictory and protective agency, and they participate in this natural power as they "breathe like trees unstirred". Here, they are in pastoral safety (though the sun threatens); but beyond the ridge lies hell. The poem does not question, as "Exposure" does, their presence or purpose, or why, before the attack, their eyes challenge the sun "like a friend with whom their love

is done". They have no history and no being beyond "the far valley behind". Anything secondary to the concentrated moment itself has been pared away. Furthermore, there is a kind of parataxis of action at work here: the episodes are defined but not causally connected. And then, at the moment of the attack comes (as we saw in "Dulce et Decorum Est") the transition from one mode of vision to another. The pastoral vision is behind them, and they step into the landscape of apocalypse.

So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together
 Over an open stretch of herb and heather
 Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned
 With fury against them; earth set sudden cups
 In thousands for their blood; and the green slope
 Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.

It was Owen's own experience of action in the fighting of May 1917 and September-October 1918 that, as his letters show, provided the terms of this evocation. With the moment of their attack, the natural elements suddenly turn in fury against the soldiers. The idea of a sudden change of elevation is suggested naturally enough by the idiom ("going over the top", "going under") as well as the literal facts of an infantry assault; but here, as often in the best war-writing, the literal doubles as the apocalyptic without abandoning its literality. The metamorphosis of the green slope here is reminiscent of the image of "one of many mouths of Hell" which Owen evoked in the fragment called "Cramped in that Funnelled Hole"; and the last section of "Spring Offensive" confirms that, when the attackers plunge over that literal slope,

they are taking an apocalyptic plunge into hell.¹²⁶

It is of course fruitless to wonder whether the extraordinary flourishing of Owen's genius would ever have happened had there been no war. But it can be said, and I have tried to show, that that transformation was an organic one. There is not much promise in Owen's prewar career of the great poems of 1917 and 1918. But the voice of his mature style is detectably the same as the voice of the younger Owen, the Sunday-school teacher, the worshipper of Keats, the junior paternalist, the Shropshire lad - the same voice, extraordinarily modulated to meet the great challenge of his life, and of his generation's. The Great War was, in its larger outlines, a shared European experience; and to that extent war-writing is in the species of occasional literature. But on another level every writer, except perhaps the most dispassionate documentarist, is bound to meet the event with an adaptation of a much more private drama.

¹²⁶It may not be too fanciful to suspect that there may also be a Gadarene association in this last section. If there is, it is certainly not developed; though it might offer an interesting gloss on the idea of delegated guilt, a theme to be found elsewhere in Owen's war-verse.

CHAPTER 5

Apollinaire.

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

It is probably both inevitable and unfortunate that Apollinaire criticism has always tended to have a heavily biographical basis. This has made it difficult to dissociate his life from his work, so that even now no settled evaluation of Apollinaire's place in French literature has been reached. He may be regarded with respect or even reverence as the godfather of modernism, or dismissed as an amiable fraud; but in either case the glamour of his career - from the exotic mystery surrounding his birth, to the serious wound he sustained as a soldier in the Great War, and his subsequent death two days before the Armistice - is likely to get in the way of any critical judgement of what he actually wrote. In this respect, he resembles Wilfred Owen.

This chapter is an examination of Apollinaire's war-writings. Two important points must be made at the outset. First, I believe that most of Apollinaire's work which will continue to be considered valuable had already been completed before the outbreak of war. But although there is little in them to rival the best of Alcools (his collection of poems published in 1913), the war-writings constitute an absorbing and unique document of literary, historical and psychological interest. They offer, to the literary critic, a constant temptation to a sort of special pleading (it is extraordinary, in the first place, that Apollinaire was able to write at all about his war-experience, considering its unpropitious and exacting conditions); and this temptation cannot always be avoided. The second point

follows from the first. Not without misgivings, I have decided that Apollinaire's war-writings cannot here be isolated from some account of his biography. There are two reasons for this. First, a partly biographical treatment may offer a sort of balance to the similar account of Owen's developing reaction to the Great War, offered in the preceding chapter. It is difficult to imagine two men more different in background and temperament, but any account of Great War writings in French and English must try to explain how a single historical event could have produced the war-poetry of Owen's Collected Poems and Apollinaire's Calligrammes (and the letters of both). Secondly, an English reader acquainted with the work of Wilfred Owen may find much of Apollinaire's war-writing both incomprehensible and culpably jejune. Some understanding of its provenance may render it at least a little more comprehensible, and after that it may be left to speak for itself.

Everybody knows that although Apollinaire was a French poet he was not a Frenchman. His response to the European war is that of a man who was European, certainly, but not very definitely anything else. If his birth allocated him to any country, it was to Poland. He never went there.

The poet's mother, Olga de Kostrowitzky, was from a family "de petite mais ancienne noblesse polonaise".¹ Her parents had fled from Poland to Italy in 1865, after a romantic but disastrous participation in the nationalist

¹ Marcel Adéma, Guillaume Apollinaire le Mal-Aimé, Librairie Plon, Paris, 1952, p.2.

uprising against Russian occupation. Olga was educated in Rome, where her father had been given a position at the Papal court; and it was in Rome that the poet was born in 1880. His mother was unmarried. His father was probably Francesco Flugi d'Aspermont (although Anatol Stern suggested that a mysterious son of the Duke of Reichstadt might have been responsible; this attractive and highly improbable theory would make Apollinaire the great-grandson of Napoleon I).²

When it suited his purpose, Apollinaire could draw on the romantic sympathy which the Poles had commanded since Chopin. "Sommes la race la plus noble et la plus malheureuse du monde. Il faut pas mentir à son sang," Apollinaire wrote, to a countess, on his way to the front in 1915.³ But Poland was not much more than a name to him. He had been given a French education at the Marianist Collège Saint-Charles in cosmopolitan Monaco, while his mother pursued her career as "entraîneuse" at the casino; and his schooling was completed at the Collège Stanislas in Cannes and the secular Lycée in Nice, which he left in 1897. His movements during the next two years are obscure, but certainly he was in Belgium from July to October 1899, for the first indication that the Kostrowitzky ménage had come to Paris is a record that Olga and her two sons were summoned to appear before an investigating magistrate there

²Apollinaire's mysterious and exotic parentage is discussed by Adéma op.cit., and by Francis Steegmuller in Apollinaire: Poet among the Painters, Hart Davis, 1963, Ch.1.

³Lettres à Lou, Gallimard, Paris, 1969, p.243.

in November, a charge of fraud having been brought against the boys by a Belgian court. They had left the Hôtel Constant in Stavelot "à la cloche de bois" one October night, without paying the bill for three months' residence there. The Kostrowitzkys seem to have been able to brazen out this incident (the charges were eventually dropped in January of the following year). But it is of interest that the poet's very first relations with Paris were characterised by the suspicion and (on his part) the anxiety which were to continue intermittently until his last years.⁴

In 1901 and 1902, when he was tutor to the daughter of the Vicomtesse de Milhau, Apollinaire managed to travel a good deal in Germany and in central Europe, as far as Vienna and Prague. The range of reference he gained from these travels is abundantly evident in L'Hérésiarque et Cie and Alcools. (Roger Shattuck has called him "probably the first truly European poet since Goethe".⁵ I think the association with Goethe can't do Apollinaire much good; Apollinaire's interests were in diversity, in folklore - he is a great collector of the bizarre, the colourful, the curious and the particular.) Certainly he was culturally mobile. He knew French, German, English and Italian, although he wrote only in French; and from the school in Monaco, to Montmartre and Montparnasse,

⁴ Adéma and Steegmuller both give accounts of the Stavelot incident; and Steegmuller (op.cit., p.209) suggests that the severity of his treatment by the police over the Mona Lisa theft in 1911 may have been due to the fact that his involvement with Pieret was a putative second offence.

⁵ In his Introduction to Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire, Harvill Press, 1950, p.47.

his friends and associates had always been of many different nationalities. Apollinaire's Wanderjahr was of lasting benefit - a good deal of Alcools was written at that time, or evokes it - but it was an interlude only. He had already made the most important choice of his life, he had already adopted a city. In Germany he wrote:

Ah! la charmante chose
 Quitter un pays morose
 Pour Paris...⁶

He had adopted Paris, but his adoptive parent did not immediately recognise him. (Apollinaire's infiltration of the life of the city has been finely related by Marcel Adéma, Francis Steegmuller and Roger Shattuck.)⁷ His commitment to the city and to France had been symbolised by his decision, taken in Germany in 1902, to abandon his Polish name - under which his first articles and poems had been published - and adhere to the nom de plume Guillaume Apollinaire.⁸ The years

⁶"Voyage à Paris", Oeuvres Complètes de Guillaume Apollinaire, ed. André Ballard et Jacques Lecat, Paris, 1965-1966, Vol.III, p.525. (Abbreviated as O.C.)

⁷In Adéma, op.cit., Steegmuller, op.cit., and Roger Shattuck, The Banquet Years, rev.ed., Jonathan Cape, 1969. Shattuck gives a brilliant account of the avant-garde in France from 1885 to the Great War; but notice the disguised gradient of verifiability in a sentence like the following: "Three permanent circuses and a new Hippodrome fringed Montmartre along the boulevards. The clown, the horse and the acrobat here earned their place in modern art; the Dégas ballet-dancer became the Toulouse-Lautrec cabaret entertainer, and then became the Picasso harlequin." (The Banquet Years, p.9.)

⁸"Avant j'avais écrit sous le nom de Kostrow. plusieurs art. sur l'Allemagne dans La Gde. France. Je reprends mon nom de Guillaume Apollinaire définitivement." (Letter to James Onimus, July 1902, O.C. IV, p.714.) Apollinaire's first three published poems, in La Grande France, September 1901, were also over the name Kostrowitzky (Steegmuller, op.cit., p.59.)

1902 - 1911 saw the gradual definition of this new persona through a series of odd jobs, ghost writings, pornographic compilations, poems, stories, gossip columns, art criticisms. In 1911 Apollinaire was riding high in Paris. He was beginning to be known. L'Hérésiarque et Cie, published in 1910, had been a serious candidate for the Prix Goncourt. L'Enchanteur Pourrissant⁹ had preceded it in 1909. Le Bestiaire¹⁰ (perhaps his most unflawed book) appeared in 1911. On 7 September 1911 Apollinaire was arrested in connection with the recent theft of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre.

He had been obscurely associated with a Belgian, Géry Pieret. Pieret had, a few years before, stolen several exhibits from the Louvre (but not the Mona Lisa), including two Iberian statuettes which he subsequently sold to Picasso. Picasso and Apollinaire were in possession of goods stolen from the Louvre; and in the hue and cry which followed the theft of the Mona Lisa, they panicked, decided to destroy the statuettes, changed their minds, and finally handed them in, anonymously, to the offices of the Paris-Journal, whence they were returned to the Louvre, where in fact their four-year absence had gone unnoticed. The incident only ceased to be pure farce when Apollinaire was arrested on 7 September and imprisoned for five days, then granted a provisional release.

Five days is probably a long time in prison. Certainly the event assumed the proportions of a trauma for the poet; and, to understand why, I think it must be

⁹With woodcuts by Derain.

¹⁰With woodcuts by Dufy.

seen as a jarring échec in his relations with Paris and with his adoptive country. His conquest of Paris had suddenly met with disaster.

Dès que la lourde porte de la Santé se fut fermée
derrière moi, j'eus une impression de mort.¹¹

He was being punished, as a child for misbehaviour. The last of the six short lyrics which are the record of Apollinaire's imprisonment, "A la Santé" (in Alcools), may illustrate the part the episode played in the drama of his struggle to acquire, or deserve, a nationality. In a precarious balance of irony and pathos, the prisoner "without horizons" invokes the classical French virtues.

J'écoute les bruits de la ville
Et prisonnier sans horizon
Je ne vois rien qu'un ciel hostile
Et les murs nus de ma prison

Le jour s'en va voici que brûle
Une lampe dans la prison
Nous sommes seuls dans ma cellule
Belle clarté chère raison

The humiliation and distress of the poet's imprisonment was increased by a supplementary malice in certain quarters. Apollinaire was a bohemian, a foreigner, a pornographer; in all likelihood he was a Jew. He recalled these attacks four years later.

L'affaire fit à l'époque un bruit énorme. Tous les journaux donnèrent mon portrait. Mais je me serais bien passé de cette publicité. Car si je fus passionnément défundé par la plupart des journaux, je fus dans le début attaqué et parfois ignoblement par les antisémites qui ne peuvent se figurer qu'un Polonais ne soit pas juif: Léon Daudet alla jusqu'à nier avoir voté pour moi au Prix Goncourt...¹²

Apollinaire's gloom at this time had a real, legal basis. If it was decided that he was an undesirable alien, he might be liable to deportation. He was provisionally

¹¹ "Mes Prisons", 14 September 1911, article for Paris-Journal; O.C. II, p.682.

¹² Letter to Madeleine Pagès, 30 July 1915; O.C. IV, p.490.

released, on 12 September 1911, without having been formally cleared of the charges against him. The indictment was finally dismissed (through the good offices of the painter Gleizes, who had a friend in the Justice Department) in January of the following year.¹³ In the interim, Apollinaire had had plenty of time to worry. He wrote to his childhood friend, the lawyer Toussaint Luca:

Je ne suis pas encore remis de mon affaire. Toujours inquiet j'en attends la solution. L'Oeuvre, par la plume de Gohier m'attaque comme étranger et comme auteur des anthologies de l'Arétin, de Sade, etc. Si bien que je suis épouvanté, espérant cependant qu'on ne me poursuivra pour cela. Ne parle de cette lettre à personne. Les indiscretions sont si vite faites et par les mieux intentionnés.

Renseigne-toi pour savoir où, comment et dans quelles conditions je pourrais me faire naturaliser. Que deviendrai-je au cas où l'on m'expulserait de France? Ces doutes m'enlèvent toute tranquillité pour travailler. Je ne demande que l'obscurité et la paix et constamment je suis en butte aux persécutions.¹⁴

In fact Apollinaire did not apply for naturalisation until January 1915. A month before, he had enlisted, as a foreigner, in the French army. His civil status was complex. He was considered by the French to be of Russian nationality because of his mother; Italy considered him Italian because of his birth in Rome. Not unnaturally, there was some administrative delay, and he was finally granted French citizenship on 9 March 1916. Although the

¹³By this time Apollinaire had further cause for anxiety. "No sooner was Gleizes successful, in January 1912, than Apollinaire was threatened again: the police seemed to be about to prosecute, on grounds of immorality, the publisher Briffault and everyone else connected with the series Les Maîtres de l'Amour, for which Apollinaire had long been doing translations and prefaces. Gleizes's friend the assistant prosecutor had to bring his influence to bear once more." (Steegmuller, op.cit., p.223.)

¹⁴Letter to Toussaint Luca, 9 December 1911; O.C. IV, pp.699-700.

news did not reach him until later, it was as a French citizen that the poet was wounded in the head by a shell explosion, in the Bois des Buttes, 17 March 1916.

The corollary to French patriotism during the war years was a dislike of Germany. Apollinaire did not find this too much of an effort: although by birth at least half Slav, his temperament was mediterranean. When the war came, he was able to appeal to 'neutral' Italy on behalf of France, in terms of mediterranean solidarity, in the poem "A l'Italie", written for his friend the futurist Soffici and published in La Voce in Milan. In 1902 Apollinaire had declared his complete lack of interest in politics - "je tiens la politique pour haïssable, mensongère, stérile et néfaste";¹⁵ the correct attitude for a fin de siècle poet. In 1915, he considered the kind of pacifism preached by Rolland to be beside the point.

Il se peut même qu'il [Rolland] ait raison, mais la raison serait ici la déraison même, parce que quand quelqu'un vous donne un gifle et qu'il est votre ennemi, on serait bien fou d'aller voir s'il a raison ou tort: on se bat avec lui et on tâche de le rosser.¹⁶

His visit to Germany as a young man had not left much of a residue of affection. In his second month of artillery training, he wrote in a letter:

Je vous donne ma parole que si je mesure des angles et fais du cheval tous le jour [sic] c'est dans l'espoir de diriger des tirs vraiment efficaces contre ces ânes d'Allemands.¹⁷

¹⁵ Letter to Karl Boès, from Munich, 27 April 1902: O.C. IV, p.712.

¹⁶ 14 August 1915, Tendre comme le Souvenir: O.C. IV, p.509.

¹⁷ Letter to J.E. Laboureur, 15 February 1915: O.C. IV, p.785.

Apollinaire's public and private attitude towards France, after his wound and subsequent trepanation, wears the slightly eccentric colouring of the last two years of his life. Even after he had been awarded the Croix de Guerre, his Frenchness remained a touchy subject. At the beginning of 1918, Tristan Tzara wrote to him, asking him to contribute something to Dada. Apollinaire's reply, while not exactly paranoiac, is not exactly even-minded either. He will not contribute, he says, because the review's attitude to Germany seems to him "pas assez nette".

Notez que je n'incrimine nullement l'attitude même de la revue. Je ne me le permettrai pas, outre que la tendance générale me paraît conforme aux vues et au patriotisme des Roumains et justement vous êtes roumain, vos vues et votre patriotisme sont ceux de l'Entente. Et d'autre part je n'ai pas de leçon à vous donner. Mais pour ce qui me concerne, je suis quoique soldat et blessé, quoique volontaire, un naturalisé, tenu par conséquent à une très grande circonspection. Je crois qu'il pourrait être compromettant pour moi, surtout au point où nous en sommes de cette guerre multiforme de collaborer à une revue si bon que puisse être son esprit, qui a pour collaborateurs des Allemands, si Ententophiles qu'ils soient.¹⁸

Some kind of anxiety is at work beneath this unusually strangulated prose; but it may just be that Apollinaire thought that continued association with Dada would not help his aspirations to the Legion of Honour, which he was fishing for in the early months of 1918. And there were other sources of uneasiness. He was worried that the "excessive notoriété" of his artistic squabbles might come to the attention of his chief at the Ministry

¹⁸Letter to Tristan Tzara, 6 February 1918; O.C. IV, p.885.

of Colonies; and Apollinaire was afraid of being sent away from Paris to rejoin his regiment at Béziers as an instructor.¹⁹ He remained in Paris; but he was on his best behaviour.

Certainly, before and after his naturalisation, he did his best to earn the favour of his adoptive parent. His military service was exemplary and his patriotism scrupulous.²⁰ Returning to Parisian life after his convalescence, he was soon urging his countrymen, and women, to propagate.

Ecoutez ô Français la leçon de la guerre
Et faites des enfants vous qui n'en faisiez guère

These hortatory alexandrines are delivered in the prologue of his "drame surréaliste", which was given one performance in June 1917. "Je viens de scandaliser Paris avec Les Mamelles de Tirésias. Qu'y faire? Je voulais amener les Français à faire des enfants. L'avenir dira si j'ai réussi."²¹ Since 1914 Apollinaire had begun to write a more public kind of poetry; and this development

¹⁹Letter to Jacques Doucet, 7 July 1918; O.C. IV, p.893.

²⁰It seems to have extended to disapproval of his former love Marie Laurencin, now living in Spain with her German husband. "Je voudrais aussi les deux aquarelles de M.L. que je veux renvoyer car des gens qui sont revenus d'Espagne lui attribuent des sentiments que je ne puis admettre et je préfère renvoyer cela." (The last letter, 16 September 1916, to Madeleine Pagès in Tendre comme le Souvenir; O.C. IV, p.666.) It is not impossible that this indignation is just an excuse to get his pictures back from Madeleine, whom he was about to abandon. It becomes increasingly difficult to read the poet's motives after his brain operation in May 1916.

²¹Letter to Gustave Kahn, June 1917; O.C. IV, pp.725-6.

embraces his interest in the civic or community function of the theatre. "J'ai écrit mon drame surréaliste avant tout pour les Français comme Aristophane composait ses comédies pour les Athéniens."²² Calligrammes, published by Gallimard in April 1918, gave further proof of his devotion to France, and looked forward to French victory in the war. And L'Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes, a lecture given in 1917, says as much about the supreme virtues of French writing, past and present, as it does about any new aesthetic. It is a very respectable document. "La France répugne au désordre", he says; and "l'esprit nouveau se réclame avant tout de l'ordre et du devoir qui sont les grands qualités classiques par quoi se manifeste le plus hautement l'esprit français."²³ The 'cubist' poet disapproves of the idea of "paroles en liberté", practised by the Italian and Russian futurists: this practice of Italy and Russia (his own ancestors) appears unruly and rather vulgar beside Apollinaire's own fastidious Frenchness, as though becoming French were the same thing as growing up.

I have dwelt on Apollinaire's relationship with France, and particularly Paris, because I do not think his war-writings can be justly understood without taking it into account. It helps to illuminate his eagerness to please (this sometimes makes him facile), and his need to be recognised and included; and also his

²²Preface to Les Mamelles de Tirésias; O.C. III, p.611.

²³L'Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes; O.C. III, pp.900-909. The lecture was given on 26 December 1917. Apollinaire would have been in uniform.

habitual anxiety, the fear - ill-founded or not - of rejection, and his fondness of complaint (this sometimes makes him peevish). His greatest need was to feel accepted and (as often happens) one of his most urgent pleasures was to believe himself ill-loved. These are themes present in Alcools as much as in the later Calligrammes; perhaps more. Apollinaire's status in France was the outward and visible sign - a kind of metaphor - of both the independence and the insecurity of his illegitimate birth. He was convivial, cosmopolitan, polyglot, and established in the vanguard of an exciting modernism. But he was also a displaced person of uncertain civil status, the son of a father whose identity he cannot have known for sure, and the citizen of a country he had never seen.

Apollinaire's verse can often be related to the themes of community and isolation; its metaphors are predominantly those of ingestion and rejection. And it is an instance of his "heroic and fabulous greed"²⁴ that, in "La Petite Auto", the poet greets the outbreak of war by commandeering the entire European experience as his own.

Les chiens aboyaient vers là-bas où étaient les
frontières
Je m'en allais portant en moi toutes ces armées qui
se battaient
Je les sentais monter en moi et s'étaler les contrées
où elles serpentaient...

²⁴ Introduction to Choix de Poesies, ed. Bowra, Horizon, 1945, p.vii.

Apollinaire, and particularly his war-writings, are initially puzzling to the reader who takes his bearings from the English poetic and critical tradition. How different from us. He was not transplanted to this country until 1945, when Horizon published a Choix de Poésies, edited by C.M. Bowra. The following year it was reviewed in Scrutiny.²⁵

Bowra's business had been to introduce Apollinaire to the English public for the first time, and so his introduction to the Choix de Poésies was a commendatory rather than a critical piece. At one point he grouped Apollinaire with Rilke, Eliot and Pasternak. The scent of trespass raised the hackles on Scrutiny; and the review, by G.D. Klingopulos, demonstrated very thoroughly that Apollinaire had no business in such company.²⁶ Apollinaire is no Eliot; and the review argues particularly that his use and advocacy of deliberately surprising imagery results in a poetry which is superficial and jejune.

A surprising image justifies itself only if it immediately fixes and makes accessible a state of thought and feeling, and discloses more and more meaning as it is contemplated and accepted. The simile "like a patient etherized upon a table" is acceptable because it has this complexity, relevant to the ironic intention of the poem. The image suggests the sprawled glow of evening, the tiredness, the quality of mental activity at the end of the day,

²⁵"Guillaume Apollinaire", by G.D. Klingopulos, Scrutiny, vol.XIV, December 1946, pp.149-154.

²⁶What Bowra had actually written was "Apollinaire, like Rilke and Eliot and Pasternak, does not accept any conventional notion of the beautiful or believe that some images and subjects are fit for poetry while others are not." (Choix de Poésies, p.xiii); which seems harmless enough.

a suffused fading pinkness underlined by the horizon, resembling the misty but luminous unconsciousness of ether, combined with the pungency and the orange flavour of the liquid, and the impression of surgical analysis in what is to follow...²⁷

And all this is contrasted with the "simple-minded pointlessness" of some of Apollinaire's imagery. The discrimination is certainly valid, but the attendant value-assumption deserves questioning. Apollinaire was not T.S. Eliot. His method and, generally speaking, his matter are at once more commonplace and more immediate than Eliot's. And if he is read as if he were (or was meant to be) Eliot, he is bound to disappoint. There are as many styles of reading as there are of writing. Compare Eliot's etherized patient with one of Apollinaire's surprising images, from "Zone",

Bergère ô tour Eiffel le troupeau des ponts bête
ce matin,

and I think it is clear that they work in a different way. And it would be a pity to have to imagine the two poets tossing their images into some Aristophanic scale of merit, whose eventual bias will consign the loser to deserved oblivion. We are dealing with a difference of quality - there will always be that - but more importantly, with a difference of kind.

While Eliot is onstage with Apollinaire, it is interesting to compare two extended metaphors where each poet speaks about the business of writing. Here is Eliot, in "East Coker" (1940):

²⁷Scrutiny, vol.cit., pp.150-151.

And so each venture
 Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
 With shabby equipment always deteriorating
 In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
 Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is
 to conquer
 By strength and submission, has already been discovered
 Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one
 cannot hope
 To emulate - but there is no competition -
 There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
 And found and lost again and again: and now, under
 conditions
 That seem unpropitious.

And now Apollinaire, in "La Jolie Rousse" (1918):

Nous qui quêtions partout l'aventure
 Nous ne sommes pas vos ennemis
 Nous voulons vous donner de vastes et d'étranges
 domaines
 Où le mystère en fleurs s'offre à qui veut le cueillir
 Il y a là des feux nouveaux des couleurs jamais vues
 Mille phantasmes impondérables
 Auxquels il faut donner de la réalité
 Nous voulons explorer la bonté contrée énorme où
 tout se tait
 Il y a aussi le temps qu'on peut chasser ou faire
 revenir
 Pitié pour nous qui combattons toujours aux frontières
 De l'illimité et de l'avenir...

The parallel is revealing, although inexact. Apollinaire is facile where Eliot is fatigued. Apollinaire's prize "offers itself": Eliot emphasises the effort of what can only be a partial achievement. Apollinaire sees himself as a member of a group, a kind of expeditionary force. Eliot is alone, and has only his own less than satisfactory resources to command. Apollinaire is an explorer, a pioneer and a conquistador; Eliot seems to be defending the disputed frontier of a threatened empire, in an indifferent age. Now both passages illustrate what it meant to the two poets to be writers of poetry in their time; and behind the particular choice of metaphor is an implicit historical judgement. What I mean is simple.

Apollinaire has the initiative; time is on his side. It is not on Eliot's: the past dwarfs him, and the future seems unpropitious; he is a poet of the ebb-tide. Both passages are about poetry but they are also criticism of life, and a barometric reading of history.²⁸

The purpose of Apollinaire's voyage of discovery had been indicated in Méditations Esthétiques: Les Peintres Cubistes (1912).

Les grands poètes et les grands artistes ont pour fonction sociale de renouveler sans cesse l'apparence que revêt la nature aux yeux des hommes. Sans les poètes, sans les artistes, les hommes s'ennuieraient vite de la monotonie naturelle.²⁹

More ambitious claims than this have been made for the function of art. Apollinaire was content to present his own work as a stimulant. Eau de Vie, one of the projected titles for his first verse-collection, was changed to the even more prosaic Alcools; and the stories of L'Hérésiarque et Cie are offered, in the dedication to Thadée Natanson, as "ces philtres de phantase". This idea of the function of his art helps to explain Apollinaire's insistence - which the surrealists were to adopt - on the virtue of surprise, in L'Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes; and also his prewar flirtation with Italian futurism; the predominance

²⁸It is interesting that David Jones, too, often had recourse to military metaphor when describing the business of the artist in his time. This will be discussed in the following chapter. But see, for a very fine instance, the extended metaphor deployed in Jones's 1953 essay "Past and Present" (David Jones, Epoch and Artist, Faber and Faber, 1959, pp.141-142.)

²⁹O.C. IV, p.21.

of fancy in his metaphors and fantasy in his narratives; the ad hoc composition of, particularly, his war-poems. It was his intention, in a good deal of his poetry, to try to place or fix a moment in time rather than emancipate it from time by making it part of a pattern (of, for example, timeless moments). Hence his formal preference for synchronistic juxtaposition rather than sequential development, a preference which produced the poème-conversation like the fine "Lundi Rue Christine" and parts of "Zone" (in a sense, many of his poems are poèmes-conversation), the long lists of names and things scattered among his poems, and the ludicrous but attractive "simultaneism" of "Les Fenêtres". "Les poètes modernes", he wrote, "sont avant tout les poètes de la vérité toujours nouvelle."³⁰

Bound up with Apollinaire's attitude to his own time is his conception of a public.

Moi je n'espère pas plus de 7 amateurs de mon oeuvre mais je les souhaite de sexe et de nationalité différents et aussi bien d'état: je voudrais qu'aimassent mes vers un boxeur nègre et américain, une impératrice de Chine, un journaliste boche, un peintre espagnol, une jeune femme de bonne race française, une jeune paysanne italienne et un officier anglais des Indes.³¹

He addressed himself to no particular group; the only common factor in the kind of public he wanted was synchronistic. He was suspicious, too, of poetry which did not bear the stamp of its own present moment. Such works, he thought, "s'éloignent trop de l'humanité pour n'être plus après tout que des jeux d'érudits ou même de gens de goût, personnages de bien peu d'importance".³² L'Esprit

³⁰ L'Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes, O.C. III, p.908.

³¹ Lettres à sa Marraine, 19 November 1915, O.C. IV, pp.680-681.

³² ibid.

Nouveau et les Poètes demonstrates his conviction that poets have a duty to perform towards their own time; and it is interesting that Apollinaire tried to fulfil this duty, in his poetry and prose fiction, by a method which mixed "persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic" with attempts "to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us".³³

Mille phantasmes impondérables
Auxquels il faut donner de la réalité...

Apollinaire's work sets out to make the familiar new and the new familiar: and his poetry shows a loyalty to the life-forms of his own time which is not unlike loyalty to a patron (but it is, fortunately, unlike the crazy neophilia of Marinetti's The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909).³⁴ Apollinaire greets the new century with excitement - like the Incarnation, it is seen as a miracle, a revelation and a challenge,

Vingtième pupille des siècles il sait y faire
Et changé en oiseau ce siècle comme Jésus monte dans
l'air ("Zone"),

and the poet speaks as one of its people - "J'aimais

³³ Thus Coleridge described the design of Lyrical Ballads (Biographia Literaria, Vol. II, p.5; ed. J. Shawcross, Oxford, 1907). The analogy goes a little further: the discussion of poetry's relation with science (which I suppose we should call technology) in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802 variant) can be usefully compared with Apollinaire's views on the subject in L'Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes.

³⁴ See Futurist Manifestos, ed. Umberto Apollonio, Thames and Hudson, 1973.

j'aimais le peuple habile des machines" ("1909"). No one could be further removed from Axel's castle. This is one reason why Apollinaire - frequently jejune and slapdash, and always uneven though he may be - is an important and valuable figure in a century, much of whose best verse can find only a small public outside the classroom. He believed that the poets can and ought to help to humanise social and technological change - to humanise history. They can help to make us at home in our world; this is the aim of "l'esprit nouveau".

Describing his search for a style adequate for the modern world, Apollinaire wrote: "Je ne cherche qu'un lyrisme neuf et humaniste à la fois".³⁵ And in the course of time he was to try to humanise modern war. He immediately recognised that August 1914 was the threshold of a new age. It must be crossed, and the new territory beyond it must be colonised by the poets. So he joined the army, as a volunteer, and wrote about his experiences in a generous flood of poems and letters. As a modernist, he could no more resist the prospect of the new experience that the war offered him than, as an outsider, he could resist the opportunity of community ratification that it presented. He went gaily to war. What, it may be asked, could be more different from Wilfred Owen?

An interesting comparison may be made, literally at first sight, between Wilfred Owen's Collected Poems and

³⁵Letter to Toussaint Luca, 11 May 1908; O.C. IV, p.697.

Apollinaire's Calligrammes.³⁶ Most obviously, they look different: and the two poets' respective methods of composition have a bearing on this. It seems that the bulk of Owen's war-poetry was written or at least substantially revised in this country, between his evacuation to England with shell-shock in June 1917, and his return to the front on the last day of August 1918. His poems are written largely in the framework of received lyric and dramatic-lyric form. Of course part of the excitement of his verse comes from the strain imposed on the form by the content, an experience alien to the self with which it has not been designed to deal. Naturalistic abruptness embarrasses the lyric fluency; half-rhyme grinds away inside it like a broken bone. But in its construction it does not differ substantially from the constructions of Tennyson. Now compare this formal conservatism with Calligrammes - it can be done by just flicking through the pages.

Here we may discover calligrams in the form of a boot, a shower of rain, the Eiffel tower. Tiny lyrics, the occasional scrawl, and great wedges of free verse which are divided by units of sense with little regard for rhythm.³⁷ A profusion of proper names, of friends and places. (Owen had made a point, in his Preface, of naming none.) Rambling lists of things, gnomic declarations,

³⁶ Calligrammes: Poèmes de la Paix et de la Guerre (1913-1916), Gallimard, Paris, 1925. First published in 1918.

³⁷ The poem "La Maison des Morts", in Alcools, actually began life as a short story, "L'Obituaire" (published 1907), which Apollinaire subsequently presented as a poem "sans qu'il en change un mot, le découpant seulement en vers libres". (Adéma, op.cit., p.55).

ribald jokes, exotic associations. It all seems very makeshift, ad hoc, and unordered. Apollinaire was a great collector, and was fond of the fortuitous trouvaille - a notorious instance is the composition of the "simultaneist" poem "Les Fenêtres", for which, according to André Billy, his drinking companions were invited to contribute random lines.³⁸ Every poem that he wrote commemorated a moment of his life, he said:³⁹ and the war-poems tend to record his war-experience as it happened, and often take the form of bulletins or communiqués, addressed to particular people. Roger Shattuck writes of Apollinaire's poetry that "It is all one letter to the world, never detached from a date line and salutation at the top and a signature at the bottom".⁴⁰ In 1911, Apollinaire had had an amusing encounter:

Hier je me trouve chez Delaunay. Il y a là un ménage ami. Le mari doit être dans les assurances. Il demande à Madame Delaunay: "Que fait donc votre spirituel ami?" (Le spirituel ami, c'est moi. Vous le devinez sans peine). Delaunay intervient: "M. Guillaume Apollinaire écrit." Le monsieur des assurances me regarde avec intérêt. "Il écrit... Mais à qui donc?"⁴¹

The question was not as philistine as it seemed. The war-poems at least are as much an announcement of identity as the boggling amount of correspondence - "à tuer les postes" - with which the poet reminded the

³⁸See Steegmuller, op.cit., pp. 236-239.

³⁹Letter to Henri Martineau, 19 July 1913: O.C. IV, p.768.

⁴⁰The Banquet Years, p.300.

⁴¹Letter to Sylvain Bonmariage, 1911 (undated): O.C. IV, p.914.

outside world of his existence "du temps qu'il était militaire".

When Apollinaire became a soldier at the end of 1914 - which he did of his own free will: as a foreigner he was under no obligation to France - his first reaction was a growth of pride and self-respect. He delighted in the skills of horsemanship and gunnery which he learned in artillery training at Nîmes. Probably he had been embarrassed by his own lack of apparent skills, particularly perhaps among his friends the painters ("Les Fiançailles", the poem in Alcools which contains the line "Pardonnez-moi de ne plus connaître l'ancien jeu des vers", is addressed to Picasso). But now as a soldier, the uniform invested him with a sure self-respect, and with high spirits.

As-tu connu Guy au galop
 Du temps qu'il était militaire
 As-tu connu Guy au galop
 Du temps qu'il était artiflot
 A la guerre ("Les Saisons")

"Il me semble que le métier de soldat était mon vrai métier", he decided;⁴² and devoted his considerable energies to achieving his rapid promotion. In April 1915 he was appointed agent de liaison (N.C.O. in charge of communications).

J'étais rudement fier. Quatre mois de service et se rendre déjà utile même dans un poste subalterne mais dangereux et de confiance, ça a de quoi donner une belle idée de soi-même à un poète dont le métier ressemble en somme assez à celui des putains, puisque comme celles-ci nous prostituons nos sentiments au public.⁴³

⁴²Letter to Serge Férat, 4 January 1915: O.C. IV, p.781.

⁴³11 April 1915, Lettres à Lou, Gallimard, Paris, 1969, p.278.

It was all very grand. And Apollinaire - "le mal-aimé" as Adéma entitles him - was particularly grateful for the comradeship of arms. The poem "2e Canonnier Conducteur" begins:

Me voici libre et fier parmi mes compagnons:

and in July he wrote to Madeleine Pagès, "Comme amis, j'ai tous mes compagnons d'armes";⁴⁴ though clearly he felt the lack of any real intimacy during his army service. His loyalty and admiration for his comrades-in-arms, and his pride in them, is everywhere apparent in the letters and poems; and distress for them overwhelms the final letter to Madeleine in Tendre comme le Souvenir, written from hospital where Apollinaire was recovering from his head wound.

...Mon régiment a été à la peine et à l'honneur. Je crois qu'il n'en reste plus guère. Mais le drapeau a été décoré. Mes compagnons de guerre sont presque tous morts. Je n'ose même pas écrire au colonel pr lui demander des détails. Il a été blessé lui-même m'a-t-on dit.

Le frère de mon ami Berthier a été tué quelques jours après avoir été nommé sous-lieutenant.

Tout cela est assez macabre et devant une aussi horrible évocation je ne sais qu'ajouter.

Je t'embrasse. Gui.⁴⁵

His admiration was particularly for the fantassins, the infantry, whom he joined from the artillery in November 1915. In February of the following year he could write from the front, in an article for the Mercure de France:

L'héroïsme du fantassin français de 1915 surpasse tout ce qu'on connaissait jusqu'aujourd'hui en fait d'héroïsme.⁴⁶

Observing his companions on the march (as Rosenberg was to do in his poem, "Marching", and see them

⁴⁴22 July 1915, Tendre comme le Souvenir: O.C. IV, p.481.

⁴⁵16 September 1916, Tendre comme le Souvenir: IV, p.667.

⁴⁶"Aphorismes touchant le fantassin du front", Mercure de France 16 February 1916: O.C. II, p.474.

husbanding the ancient glory), Apollinaire saw in them a mysterious and magic vitality:

Voici des fantassins aux pas pesants aux pieds boueux
 La pluie les pique de ses aiguilles le sac les suit
 Fantassins
 Marchantes mottes de terre
 Vous êtes la puissance
 Du sol qui vous a faits . ("2e Canonnier Conducteur")

The identity of the soldiers with the earth they are defending - an idea not unusual in war-writings - is further suggested when the geographical animism Apollinaire used in "Vendémiaire" (the last poem in Alcools) is applied to wartime France -

Entends crier Louvain vois Reims tordre ses bras
 Et ce soldat blessé toujours debout Arras ("A l'Italie")

- and in a curious and again magical way, in the imagery of "Le Vigneron Champenois".

What Apollinaire most admired in the army, and what most delighted him in his own participation in it, was the creative self-reliance of the soldiers. Here was something else to be proud about.

C'est la nuit je suis dans le gourbi où j'habite seul
 3 mètres sous terre, couvert en rondins de sapins
 et terre par-dessus, une bonne table, lit de paille.
 Tout cela a été fait par moi.⁴⁷

The destructive function of the soldier, and indeed the homicidal nature of war, are largely ignored, at least in the 'artillery period', which in Calligrammes corresponds roughly to the four central sections of the collection - Etendards, Case d'Armons, Lueurs des Tirs, Obus Couleur de Lune. (Once he had joined the infantry it was less possible to ignore them, however wilfully.) In the earlier

⁴⁷ 10 July 1915, Tendre comme le Souvenir: O.C. IV, p.481.

poems the soldiers are celebrated as makers.⁴⁸ There is a good example of this celebration in the poem "Le Palais du Tonnerre", which mixes a precise naturalism with sudden 'animations' - a favourite device with Apollinaire - so that the detailed description of the dug-out (the "palace of thunder") is interspersed with dashes of anthropomorphism.

Le plafond est fait de traverses de chemin de fer
 Entre lesquelles il y a des morceaux de craie et des
 touffes d'aiguilles de sapin
 Et de temps en temps des débris de craie tombent
 comme des morceaux de vieillesse
 A côté de l'issue que ferme un tissu lâche d'une
 espèce qui sert généralement aux emballages
 Il y a un trou qui tient lieu d'âtre et ce qui y
 brûle est un feu semblable à l'âme

Through the long and affectionate description the dug-out emerges as a monument to human characteristics, imposed on the white (because chalky) and inhuman terrain of wartime Champagne. Now clearly "le palais bien nouveau et qui paraît ancien" is an utterly modern dwelling - "petit palais où tout est neuf rien rien d'ancien". - but also represents a regression to a very primitive state, troglodytic, "le temps des cavernes". By innocently uniting primitivism and modernity, the dug-out creates an effect which would have been much admired by Apollinaire's cubist friends. The little dwelling, as he describes it, is a creation entirely in l'esprit nouveau. And the

⁴⁸ Apollinaire joined in the custom, among the artillery, of making and sending to his lady friends "des bagues faites avec l'aluminium des fusées de l'obus boche du 77"; probably the same rings that Proust noted as being fashionable in wartime Paris, and an interesting variation on the motif of 'swords into ploughshares'.

palais du tonnerre is inhabited by the soldiers who built it, who, if not precisely artists-as-heroes, certainly share some heroic trappings: the place is after all a "palais", the beds in it are "couverts de riches manteaux bleus"; "tout le monde est vêtu comme un roi".

Here as elsewhere, Apollinaire goes some way towards creating a new heroism of the low style: a heroism for "le peuple habile des machines", based on the virtues of courage, skill, simplicity, humour and loyalty. "Que j'aime cette petite élite de ceux qui ont été à la guerre et qui ont pu la voir sans mauvaise humeur," he wrote in 1918.⁴⁹ It is an attitude which has a good deal to recommend it, and in his case it certainly is not based on ignorance. But how does it measure up to the "mauvaise humeur" of Owen, or Barbusse?

However, Apollinaire was not unconcerned with the pressures which the war could bring to bear on the individual. In May 1915, he had protested that the pressures of modern warfare were not in essence much different from those of peacetime urban life:

Mais, j'ai nullement souffert l'angoisse du danger... Je crois que peu de soldats la connaissent dans cette guerre. Je suis venu ici avec l'inquiétude, sans songer que la vie des grandes villes modernes, les trams, les autobus, les autos simples etc., tous ces engins de notre civilisation nous avaient habitués au danger et la venue d'un obus ne me paraît guère plus dangereuse - bien qu'elle le soit - que l'arrivée d'une auto lancée à toute vitesse.⁵⁰

This thoroughly modern bravura may seem to be lacking in conviction. The poem "Désir", which describes a night

⁴⁹"Ouvrages sur la guerre actuelle", Mercure de France, 1 May 1918: O.C. II, p.550.

⁵⁰25 May 1915, Tendre comme le Souvenir: O.C. IV, p.464.

of bombardment before a French attack, demonstrates, in its form as much as in its substance, the disintegrating power of mechanised warfare on the individual consciousness - its unspeakable obtrusiveness. The poem begins like a romantic lyric, with the individual consciousness contemplating its surroundings in its own terms:

Mon désir est la région qui est devant moi.
Derrière les lignes boches
Mon désir est aussi derrière moi
Après la zone des armées

There is a parallel in a letter to Lou; a similar state of fanciful reverie:

Mon Lou exquis [sic] pas à moi, la batterie dort dans l'heure trouble de midi. Les nuées de mouches verdâtres bourdonnent sur le mystère des terres remuées, inquiétant et malsain, et ma lucide indifférence parcourt comme un coup d'oeil de fantôme les âges et les âges ou sombres ou splendides...⁵¹

This self-centred "lucide indifférence" is the starting-point. But under the pressure of the bombardment, the tidy little quatrains, with which the poem begins, start to spread and sprawl. There is a lessening of control. Syntactic concentration is abandoned, whimsy and nervous apprehension take over:

Le boyau Goethe où j'ai tiré
J'ai tiré même sur le boyau Nietzsche
Décidément je ne respecte aucune gloire
Nuit violente et violette et sombre et pleine d'or
à moments
Nuit des hommes seulement

Noun clauses seem to break loose and drift free from the shipwrecked design. It is as if "Désir" is progressing towards the surreal chaos of a later bombardment-poem, "Du Coton dans les Oreilles". "Désir" shows how in effect "l'épouvantable cri profond" of the artillery

⁵¹ 30 July 1915, Lettres à Lou, p.473.

drowns individual desire and extinguishes the active personality. The event consumes its participants, so that only it remains:

Nuit du 24 septembre
 Demain l'assaut
 Nuit violente ô nuit dont l'épouvantable cri profond
 devenait plus intense de minute en minute
 Nuit qui criait comme une femme qui accouche
 Nuit des hommes seulement

- the irony of course being that the night's labour -
 "comme une femme qui accouche" - is towards death, not
 birth.

"Nuit des hommes seulement": Apollinaire took an interest in the unnatural monosexuality of military service. (He reported to Lou that many of his fellow-soldiers had incestuous dreams; adding, in the kind of generalisation he could seldom resist, "Et il est bien curieux de remarquer que l'inceste apparaît toujours en maître aux époques troublées.")⁵² Its particular effect on him was to inflate the erotic fantasy which bears up the letters to Lou and Madeleine; though there were times when he liked to regard his enforced chastity as a sort of mystical effective virtue, like Galahad's - it was to be part of his testing. "On ne peut être vaincu quand on sait demeurer chaste."⁵³ On 4 June 1915 he confessed in a letter to Eugène Montfort, "Les femmes sont jolies, je n'y touche point - conséquence d'un voeu - aussi désiré-je la fin de la guerre à cause tout simplement de mon violent désir de faire l'amour."⁵⁴

⁵² 15 April 1915, Lettres à Lou, p.291.

⁵³ 14 July 1915, Lettres à Lou, p.460. This superstition was shared by Robert Graves. See Goodbye to All That, passim,

⁵⁴ O.C. IV, pp.798-799.

Apollinaire stayed with the artillery until November 1915. During that time it seems he never saw a living German, apart from a handful of prisoners, and though he had visited the infantry in the front line many times as agent de liaison, he had never seen infantry action at first hand. At the end of August 1915 he was promoted maréchal des logis, a senior N.C.O. He was delighted.

Son avancement [writes Adéma] réveille en lui le désir du galon d'officier dont il avait rêvé à Nîmes. Les pertes, dans l'infanterie décimée par les attaques successives, sont comblées par des mutations d'autres armes. Sous-officier d'artillerie il peut passer officier dans la ligne, et à cet effet signe une demande d'affectation dans l'infanterie. Elle aboutit bientôt.⁵⁵

The poet joined his new regiment, the 69th Infantry, on 22 November 1915. He became an infantryman and an officer at the same time, so it is difficult to tell whether the sombre development in his attitude to the war, which dates from this time, is due to his assumption of direct responsibility for other soldiers, or to his introduction to warfare in the front line. The change involves an extension of imagery: the dangers of battle, previously apprehended only at a distance, now come to occupy the foreground. For example, images of a malicious earth intent on devouring life, and the metaphor of bullets as an angry swarm of bees, occur in "Chant de l'Honneur", and are remarkably congruent with the "Maniac Earth" and "the swift iron burning bee" of Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump". The letters at this time

⁵⁵ Adéma, op.cit., p.210.

contain some powerful evocations of the wilderness of the front line. Of course Apollinaire had seen the front line before, but only as it were as a tourist from the artillery. There is a long description, for example, in a letter to Lou on 23 July 1915, but its attention is mostly drawn to the monuments at the front: the graveyards, the ruined church which had been famous for its bas-reliefs.⁵⁶ There was to be no opportunity for such leisurely (though dangerous) observations in the infantry. The letters in Tendre comme le Souvenir record the shock of the change.

D'ailleurs mon amour réelement, c'est l'infanterie qui est l'arme méritante. Le reste...popotte bourgeoise ...mais l'infanterie!!! C'est inouïe. (28 November)

La tranchée de craie est très mauvaise et s'éboule souvent, il faut tout le temps consolider au moyen de sacs à terre. Le quart qui se répète de 6h. en 6h. est très embêtant mais très nécessaire sans quoi les hommes s'endormiraient aux créneaux par la grande fatigue. Moi qui dors peu, je n'ai qu'à m'étendre sur le sol comme font ces pauvres enfants que je commande et je m'endors aussitôt. (30 November)

Ah! quelle autre vie celle des fantassins que celle des artilleurs. Ceux-ci font à peine la guerre. Une vraie idylle à côté du drame nu et profondément fatal de la guerre de première ligne. Ah, mon amour, comme je t'aurai gagnée! (1 December)

Je sens vivement maintenant toute l'horreur de cette guerre sans stratégie mais dont les stratagèmes sont épouvantables et atroces. (2 December)⁵⁷

All this is indeed a long way from the notorious sentiment expressed in his earlier little ballad, "L'Adieu du Cavalier":

Ah Dieu! que la guerre est jolie
Avec ses chants ses longs loisirs
Cette bague je l'ai polie
Le vent se mêle à vos soupirs

⁵⁶Lettres à Lou, pp.465-468.

⁵⁷Tendre comme le Souvenir: O.C. IV, pp.616, 618, 619, 622.

The absence of punctuation may obscure the fact that this is reported speech, but should not obscure its irony.

The poem goes on:

Adieu! voici le boute-selle
 Il disparut dans un tournant
 Et mourut là-bas tandis qu'elle
 Riait au destin surprenant

This lightness of touch all but disappears as images of death and danger intrude into the later poems of Calligrammes (the series is arranged more or less chronologically).

In the surreal "Souvenirs", for example, which seems to be a series of free-floating mental pictures, the fanciful images are interrupted by the abrupt line

Mais le rat pénètre dans le cadavre et y demeure.

As his own situation became more threatened, the wish-dream of the pastoral alternative - represented for Apollinaire by the promise of his love for Madeleine - became more tense and menaced. The pastoral experience, or imagination, is the opposite magnetic pole to the sufferings of wartime: in Apollinaire as in other war-writers, they are often seen as competitors:

Oiseau bleu comme le coeur bleu
 De mon amour au coeur céleste
 Ton chant si doux répète-le
 A la mitrailleuse funeste ("Un Oiseau Chante")

Love and war, the two themes of Calligrammes and of the letters in Tendre comme le Souvenir and Lettres à Lou, seem often to have been dramatised by Apollinaire into a romance process of testing in which, by going through a trial of renunciation and danger, the soldier/poet/hero will earn his promised reward. It is one of the most understandable war-responses of all, to see the discomfort

and suffering of the war as the necessary price to pay for a golden, ideal future in a land fit for heroes to live in. This consolatory idea is present throughout Calligrammes, from "Guerre" in Case d'Armons to "La Victoire" in La Tête Etoilée. But war-service was also a testing on a more personal level - the trial in which the soldier-poet will deserve the love of his lady - "Ah, mon amour, comme je t'aurai gagnée!"⁵⁸; an attitude congruent, perhaps, in political terms, with Apollinaire's attempt to earn by war-service the French nationality for which he had applied in 1914.

In "Oracles" (Case d'Armons), he grandly apostrophised the conflict:

O Guerre
Multiplication de l'amour

If this means anything, it seems just to be that war multiplies love in the same sense that absence is said to make the heart grow fonder. But soon Apollinaire began to discover correspondences between war and sexual love. The proximity of love and violence, like that of mysticism and eroticism, was a favourite theme of his and seems to have been suggested by the sexual tastes which apparently characterised his relations with Lou.⁵⁹ The metaphor of war and love works reciprocally: he makes frequent and often amusing use of the military undertones of sexual 'conquest' in his erotic poems: and the phallic symbolism of the artillery interests him too. Later on, he widened

⁵⁸ 1 December 1915, Tendre comme le Souvenir: O.C. IV, p.619.

⁵⁹ See for example the letter of 14 January 1915, Lettres à Lou, p.105.

the metaphor: war became a function of love performed by "Le tonnerre des artilleries qui accomplissent le terrible amour des peuples" ("Le Chant d'Amour"). Latterly in Calligrammes images of love become entangled with images of death. Norma Rinsler has pointed out that in the poem "Chef de Section", "the soldier's act of war becomes the poet's act of love: the awaited climax comes at zero hour".⁶⁰ And in "Chant de l'Honneur", the trench itself is a kind of succuba:

O jeunes gens je m'offre à vous comme une épouse
 Mon amour est puissant j'aime jusqu'à la mort
 Tapie au fond du sol je vous guette jalouse
 Et mon coeur n'est en tout qu'un long baiser qui mord

The same poem illustrates the pessimism which follows the apprehensive gaiety of the artillery period, and seems to be due in part to Apollinaire's new responsibility as an officer.

J'ai plus que les trois coeurs des poulpes pour souffrir
 Vos coeurs sont tous en moi je sens chaque blessure
 O mes soldats souffrants o blessés à mourir

In this poem we can see the trauma of war effecting a revaluation or re-interpretation of experience beyond the war itself; an extrapolation which might be overlooked in Apollinaire.

Le Christ n'est donc venu qu'en vain parmi les hommes
 Si des fleuves de sang limitent les royaumes
 Et même de l'Amour on sait la cruauté...

Apollinaire did not take the war in his stride; though he was concerned that it should not be overdramatised or incorrectly simplified. In "Apologia pro Poemate Meo", Wilfred Owen deliberately refused to speak of the war's heroism or its humour. In contrast, Apollinaire refused

⁶⁰In "The War Poems of Apollinaire", French Studies, Vol. XXV, 1971, pp.169-186.

to overlook them. Reviewing in 1918 a book called Petits Aspects Sentimentaux du Front Anglais, he wrote admiringly:

Cet album fait partie du petit nombre d'ouvrages où la guerre n'est pas envisagée sous l'angle d'une implacable tristesse. Il s'agit cependant d'un témoin.⁶¹

- which could fairly describe Calligrammes.

Apollinaire was not guilty of insensibility. He himself had suffered considerably, and many of his friends were dead. The war was bound to modify his sensibility. And this modification is apparent in Couleur du Temps,⁶² a play which he worked on in the last year of his life, 1918, and which was performed a fortnight after his death and the Armistice. It is a fable about war and peace, in which three men set out on a quest for peace which can end only in death. Van Diemen is a rich man, who represents past experience. Ansaldin de Roulpe is a scientist, who represents the present. Nyctor is a poet, who stands for the future. All this is pretty explicitly stated: Couleur du Temps is a fable more than a symbolist drama. The action begins with the three men setting out to flee towards the west, away from the horrors of war. Ansaldin urges the others:

Venez vite Au sud à l'est au nord
Coule le sang des antagonistes

But on their way to seek "le pays divin de la paix", they come upon two women weeping at a graveside. Madame Giraume's son, Mavise's fiancé, has been killed in battle; and after mourning for him, the two women accept

⁶¹"Ouvrages sur la guerre actuelle", Mercure de France, 1 May 1918: O.C. II, p.550.

⁶²O.C. III, pp.650-696.

the fugitives' offer and agree to go with them to find peace. Their aeroplane, now carrying all five of them, eventually lands on some equatorial desert island far out of the reach of war, where they decide to stay. However, Mavise has misgivings, and soon demands to return to do her duty in the continuing war:

Nous n'avons pas le droit
D'abandonner ainsi
Les morts et les vivants

But the scientist Ansaladin, who loves her, urges her to stay and help to build the new order of things:

Il naît un Etat un grand Etat
La nation de ceux qui ne veulent
Plus de mots souverains plus de gloire
Et comme les premiers chrétiens
Ils sont tous prêts dans la douleur
Prêts à devenir universels

Eventually Mavise agrees to stay with them, though largely because she is by now in love with the poet Nyctor. However, the island turns out not to be the domain of peace after all. The travellers meet a penitential hermit, who warns them that the island's volcano is on the point of erupting; so together they all climb aboard their miraculous aeroplane and set out again, their spirits flagging by now, and journey on, "entre ciel et terre", until they reach the South Pole.

But in this frigid symbolist Nirvana their troubles are not over. Improbably deep frozen in an ice floe, Nyctor and Ansaladin de Roulpe come upon the immobile female form of ideal beauty. Poet and scientist dispute over ownership of this paragon:

Nyctor: Moi je l'adore et elle est à moi
 A moi seul qui l'ai vue le premier:

Ansaladin: Mais qu'importe elle n'est qu'à moi seul
Puisque seul je puis la conserver
Je suis seul à pouvoir assurer
La perpétuité de sa beauté

Nyctor: Et moi je l'idéaliserai

Ansaladin: Et moi je la sauvegarderai

Nyctor: c'est l'Idéal

Ansaladin: Non c'est la science...

And so on: until they are interrupted by the arrival on the scene of their senior partner, the rich man Van Diemen. Clearly each man sees in the frozen body what he most desires. Van Diemen recognises her as Peace:

La voilà la paix la belle paix
L'immobile paix de nos souhaits
Elle est à moi partez mais partez

And finally the hermit arrives too, and also claims her:

J'ai été longtemps seul laissez-moi
Avec elle je veux vivre ici...
Laissez cette femme solitaire
Au solitaire que j'ai été

The four men quarrel and come to blows; and in the fight that follows, they are all killed. It is left to the women to point the moral:

Mavise: Voilà cette paix si blanche et belle
Si immobile et si morte enfin
La voilà cette paix homicide
Pour laquelle les hommes se battent
Et pour laquelle les hommes meurent

Mme Giraume: O mon fils je t'avais oublié
Tu mourus en faveur de la vie
Nous mourons d'une paix qui ressemble à
la mort

And offstage, the "Voix des Morts et des Vivants" has the final word:

Adieu Adieu il faut que tout meure.

Although it is strangely moving, there is little point in making any large claim for the dramatic merit of

Couleur du Temps; but it deserves attention and, I think, respect, as Apollinaire's most sustained literary treatment of war. Written in 1918, it is full of the distress and, particularly, the weariness of the War in that year, and informed by a profoundly pessimistic view of the chances of escape from it. (In this respect, as in its lack of specificity and its use of a dramatic medium, a medium to which Apollinaire seems to have been temperamentally unsuited, it is oddly untypical of his work.) For all five men, war is intrinsic and inward; they carry it with them like a germ for all their good intentions, and however far they go. Couleur du Temps is in the species of poésie du départ. It presents the potential pastoral escape, a familiar theme in war-writings. But in fact the refugees escape first to a desert island which is about to destroy itself, then to the lifeless icecap where they finally batter each other to death. For them, escape from the war is as impossible as escape from themselves, because they are the same thing. The point is brought home by the concealed pairing of nouns in Madame Giraume's speech quoted above:

(guerre) - vie
paix - mort

Life is overwhelmed by war, and Apollinaire's interpretation of the historical event acquires a tragic significance when life and war can no longer be distinguished.

An interesting feature of the play is the continual sense of the presence of a character who never actually appears - the dead soldier, lover of one of the women and son of the other. The immanent warrior is frequently

invoked. Like Apollinaire, "il a tombé frappé à la tête".

A ton front une bouche nouvelle
Rit de tout ce que ce soir j'endure
Parle sous terre bouche nouvelle

- cries the weeping mother at his graveside, using a metaphor which may recall the miraculous properties Apollinaire attributed to his own head wound in La Tête Etoilée, the final section of Calligrammes:

Une belle Minerve est l'enfant de ma tête
Une étoile de sang me couronne à jamais
La raison est au fond et le ciel est au faite
Du chef où dès longtemps Déesse tu t'armais

("Tristesse d'une Etoile")

Both instances suggest the possibility that the efficacy of having suffered may engender a new voice. (But in "Tristesse d'une Etoile", and in "La Victoire" which follows it, there seems to be a partly-concealed anxiety - probably justified - that his wound had done some damage to Apollinaire's creative powers.)

Couleur du Temps is no masterwork but it is an instance of the variety of Apollinaire's response to the war. It presents a world which has been swallowed up (a suitably Apollinairean metaphor) by war; a world in which life takes place inside the context of war, which bounds and defines it. More generally to be seen, in the poems, is the impulse in the opposite direction - Apollinaire's attempts to humanise and make acceptable the experience of mechanised and remote mass-warfare. This impulse to conquer or colonise an uncharted and alien experience has striking similarities, as I have suggested above, with one of the professed aims of poetry as formulated in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Wars differ only in their forms: and if we find it convenient to regard 1914 as a date which signifies the end of one age and the beginning of another, fundamentally we owe this convenience to the chemist and the engineer. The problem of the technological character of the Great War was one which disturbed David Jones, and he writes about it in the Preface to In Parenthesis:

...That our culture has accelerated every line of advance into the territory of physical science is well appreciated - but not so well understood are the unforeseen, subsidiary effects of this achievement. We stroke cats, pluck flowers, tie ribands, assist at the manual acts of religion, make some kind of love, write poems, paint pictures, are generally at one with that creaturely world inherited from our remote beginnings. Our perception of many things is heightened and clarified. Yet must we do gas-drill, be attuned to many new-fangled technicalities, respond to increasingly exacting mechanical devices; some fascinating and compelling, others sinister in the extreme; all requiring a new and strange direction of the mind, a new sensitivity certainly, but at a considerable cost.

We who are of the same world of sense with hairy ass and furry wolf and presume to other and more radiant affinities, are finding it difficult, as yet, to recognise these creatures of chemicals as true extensions of ourselves, that we may feel for them a native affection, which alone can make them magical for us. It would be interesting to know how we shall ennoble our new media as we have already ennobled and made significant our old - candle-light, fire-light, Cups, Wands and Swords, to choose at random.⁶³

Apollinaire sets about his conquest of the "new media" by investing them with his own protean personality, in a kind of childlike animism. Just as, on the first day of the war, he commandeered the entire war-experience in the poem "La Petite Auto" - "Je m'en allais portant en moi toutes ces armées qui se battaient" - so in the later

⁶³ David Jones, In Parenthesis, Faber & Faber, 1963, p.xiv. But how "random" is this choice of the old media?

poems he embraces his surroundings and puts his name to them; the name which also, as Guglielmo or Wilhelm de Kostrowitzky, he had appropriated.

"Merveille de la Guerre" shows this process most visibly. The poet is watching the hyperbolic fireworks of the brilliant night artillery - "Il me semble assister à un grand festin éclairé a giorno" - an entertainment which he describes appreciatively. Then the detached spectator abruptly invests the scene with his own personality. He becomes what he sees:

Mais j'ai coulé dans la douceur de cette guerre
 avec toute ma compagnie au long des longs boyaux
 Quelques cris de flammes annoncent sans cesse ma présence
 J'ai creusé le lit où je coule en me ramifiant en
 mille petits fleuves qui vont partout
 Je suis dans la tranchée de première ligne et cependant
 je suis partout ou plutôt je commence à être partout
 C'est moi qui commence ces choses des siècles à venir
 Ce sera plus long à réaliser que non la fable d'Icare
 volant

Ubiquitous in time as well as in space, the poet solves the problem of alien experience by consuming it; as if a personality were being defined not by its separation from what it is not, but by its success in enveloping it:

Je lègue à l'avenir l'histoire de Guillaume Apollinaire
 Qui fut à la guerre et sut être partout
 Dans les villes heureuses de l'arrière
 Dans tout le reste de l'univers
 Dans ceux qui meurent en piétinant dans le barbelé
 Dans les femmes dans les canons dans les chevaux
 Au zénith au nadir aux 4 points cardinaux
 Et dans l'unique ardeur de cette veille d'armes

It is a fantastic psychological oddity, admirable and grotesque. (There is essential similarity with "Cortège", another 'naming' poem, and with "Vendémiaire"; both in Alcools.) The conclusion of "Merveille de la Guerre" demonstrates, however, that this omnivorous appropriation

is not enough:

Et ce serait sans doute bien plus beau
 Si je pouvais supposer que toutes ces choses dans
 lesquelles je suis partout
 Pouvaient m'occuper aussi
 Mais dans ce sens il n'y a rien de fait
 Car si je suis partout à cette heure il n'y a
 cependant que moi qui suis en moi

"Merveille de la Guerre" is an extreme example, but throws some light on the poetic and psychological intention behind much of Apollinaire's war-verse; that if the experience can be sufficiently stamped with his own vision of it, it may become part of himself and can be a source of delight rather than anxiety. As the experience becomes grimmer, the need to transfigure it becomes more urgent:

Le Christ n'est donc venu qu'en vain parmi les hommes
 Si des fleuves de sang limitent les royaumes
 Et même de l'Amour on sait la cruauté
 C'est pourquoi faut au moins penser à la Beauté
 Seule chose ici-bas qui jamais n'est mauvaise

("Chant de l'Honneur")

"Chevaux de Frise", a poem sent to Madeleine Pagès on 18 November 1915,⁶⁴ and included in La Tête Etoilée in Calligrammes, is one of the happiest results of this process. It is a love poem and a poem of war, and it is built on the tension between the poet's menacing surroundings - winter in the inhuman and unnatural landscape of war - and his imaginative creation of a pastoral alternative, embodied by his love for Madeleine. (A cheval de frise is "a large joist, with six sides, traversed with iron-pointed spikes above six feet long, and crossing one another;

⁶⁴Tendre comme le Souvenir: O.C. IV, p.610.

used to check cavalry charges and stop breaches"⁶⁵ -
 a particularly unpleasant piece of military ingenuity.)

The poem begins:

Pendant le blanc et nocturne novembre
 Alors que les arbres déchiquetés par l'artillerie
 Vieillissaient encore sous la neige
 Et semblaient à peine des chevaux de frise
 Entourés de vagues de fils de fer
 Mon coeur renaissait comme un arbre au printemps
 Un arbre fruitier sur lequel s'épanouissaient
 Les fleurs de l'amour

Various signs are decipherable from this first stanza. The trees "déchiquetés par l'artillerie" are no longer natural; they have grown old and appear to have turned into chevaux de frise, that is, unnatural, disfiguring and harmful engines of war. Now in contrast, or more accurately in opposition, the poet's heart is reborn through love (it is a process, "renaissait" being in apposition to "vieillissaient", as spring to winter), in terms of the natural function which the trees themselves cannot perform in their present condition of winter and war. This stanza establishes the pattern of the poem, which is the interplay between the immediate grim facts of winter, war, and the abuse of nature which present themselves before the poet's eyes, and his imaginative ability to create or recognise an alternative or potential mode composed of natural and peaceful images - a pastoral mode.

The argument continues, like a contest between two sorcerers:

⁶⁵ Oxford English Dictionary. This point seems to have been missed by Roger Shattuck in his translation of the poem, "Horses on a Frieze", in Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire, p.189.

Pendant le blanc et nocturne novembre
 Tandis que chantaient épouvantablement les obus
 Et que les fleurs mortes de la terre exhalaient
 Leurs mortelles odeurs
 Moi je décrivais tous les jours mon amour à Madeleine
 La neige met de pâles fleurs sur les arbres
 Et toisonne d'hermine les chevaux de frise
 Que l'on voit partout

The shells parody and thereby degrade song, and the flowers die; but the poet celebrates his love and, with the implied consequence of the change of tense, the trees are flowered with snow and the chevaux de frise fleeced with ermine. Song too (another positive value-sign, obviously enough, for the poet) is later redeemed through love:

Tous les lys montent en toi comme des cantiques
 d'amour et d'allégresse
 Et ces chants qui s'envolent vers toi
 M'emportent à ton côté

The liturgical "cantiques" suggests that Apollinaire is drawing on religious as well as natural repositories of value to supply his pastoral; and sure enough, with a lightness of touch which adds humour to the positive values of the poem, he had, some lines before, enlisted the Holy Spirit on the side of the angels:

Si je songe à tes yeux je songe aux sources fraîches
 Si je pense à ta bouche les roses m'apparaissent
 Si je songe à tes seins le Paraclet descend
 O double colombe de ta poitrine
 Et vient délier ma langue de poète

Like many of Apollinaire's other poems, "Chevaux de Frise" is a kind of incantation; it charms in a literal sense. If it does not envisage the war "sous l'angle d'une implacable tristesse", this should not be taken as evidence of a kind of trahison des clercs. And like so much in Calligrammes, it has a simplicity which is childlike but

only occasionally simplistic or naïve. In an article for the Mercure de France in February 1916, Apollinaire wrote from the front:

Celui qui n'a pas vécu en hiver dans une tranchée où ça barde ne sait pas combien la vie peut être une chose simple ...

Celui qui n'a pas vu des musettes suspendues au pied d'un cadavre qui pourrit sur le parapet de la tranchée ne sait pas combien la mort peut être une chose simple.⁶⁶

Most of Apollinaire's war-writings - and perhaps all his work - may best be interpreted as a sort of whistling in the dark.⁶⁷ Or might such an interpretation merely be an instance of the kind of special pleading whose temptation and dangers I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter? The question can only be answered if the Calligrammes are seen in the context of other war-writings; and in that context, the poetry of Wilfred Owen offers a most striking contrast. I have juxtaposed Owen and Apollinaire here in the belief that the work of each represents a criticism of the work of the other. Both men died in the same week of November 1918, at the bitter end of the Great War. It is possible, but very unlikely, that Owen may have come across some of Apollinaire's poetry. It is certain that Apollinaire never heard of Owen. Considered together, each response to the war, shifting and complex as they both are, may illuminate

⁶⁶"Aphorismes touchant le fantassin du front", Mercure de France, 16 February 1916: O.C. II, p.474.

⁶⁷As Roger Little suggests succinctly: "Attitudinising for Proteus is a form of protection." Roger Little, Guillaume Apollinaire, Athlone Press, 1976, p.115.

some of the values and shortcomings of the other. Come to him after reading Apollinaire, and Owen may sometimes seem excessively puritan, formally unexciting, humourless, provincial, self-righteous and morally hysterical. Come to him after reading Owen, and Apollinaire may sometimes seem excessively hedonistic, flashy, frivolous, shallow-rooted, self-indulgent and morally cataleptic. These strictures are the pejorative obverse of virtues - Apollinaire, for example, could justly be called sensual, innovatory, humorous, truly European, individualistic and stoical - which comparison also helps to highlight. It has been the purpose of this study to propose such reciprocal criticism between war-writings themselves; and I hope that this method, in the following chapter, may help to illuminate the work of David Jones.

CHAPTER 6

Jones.

Tilly-vally Mr. Pistol that's a petty tale of y'r Gallia wars. Gauffer it well and troupe it fine, pad it out to impressive proportions, grace it from the ancients.

In Parenthesis was begun in 1928. It was virtually finished by 1934; but an oblique reference to the abdication of Edward VIII shows that it was not completed until after November 1936.¹ It appeared, therefore, several years after War-Writing had become established as a sort of sub-genre (a process more or less complete by 1930); and yet there seems to be very little awareness of previous war-literature in Jones's poem. I believe there is only one verbal echo of the war-canon in In Parenthesis - "the dull toil of The Salient - troubling - like somebody else's war" (p.77)² seems to remember the second stanza of Wilfred Owen's poem "Exposure" - but it appears this is just a coincidence.³ Indeed Jones went so far as to declare in his Preface (p.xii) that the poem was not intended as a "War Book" (although sixteen years later, in the letter to Watkins just quoted, he seems to have conceded the term). So the first point to be made about In Parenthesis is that it is a remarkably singular work. The second point, which I hope this chapter will

¹ See a letter from David Jones (September 1974) quoted by René Hague, A Commentary on The Anathemata of David Jones, Skelton's Press, Wellingborough, 1977, p.170.

² Page references in the text are to David Jones, In Parenthesis, Faber & Faber, 1963.

³ "Curiously enough I was looking in a back copy of Wales ... & saw yr notice of my war-book where you draw a startling comparison between some lines of Owen's Exposure with some lines of In Paren. about the Ypres salient. I'd never read Owen's poem, which makes the similarity extraordinary. And indeed in the world of literary criticism no one would believe that the one wasn't pinched fm the other." David Jones: Letters to Vernon Watkins, ed. Ruth Pryor, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1976, p.20.

make, is that it is the masterpiece of war-literature.

The poem is a seven-part narrative in prose and verse, which tells the story of a company of British soldiers from the day of their embarkation for France in December 1915 - "late in the second year" (p.7) - to that of their disastrous participation in the Somme attack of July 1916. The last words of the poem, a quotation from René Hague's translation of the Chanson de Roland, seem to identify the author with the central character, John Ball. "The geste says this and the man who was on the field... and who wrote the book... the man who does not know this has not understood anything." (p.187) Although Private Ball may be called the principal mediator, In Parenthesis is a poem of many voices and deals with the inner life, as well as the speech and actions, of some dozen or more British soldiers. It is a dramatic poem; the author's own voice is almost never heard except through his characters. And from time to time, as in Barbusse's Le Feu, it is difficult to tell (and unnecessary to know) who is speaking, or observing; for this too is a "journal d'une escouade", with the chorus as hero.⁴

The story which Jones has to tell is a very simple one. Parts 1 to 4 cover the events of December 1915, with the battalion's journey to the front and their

⁴Barbusse's choric unit is the escouade, Jones's is the company. Both terms have a strict military numerical value, but can also more generally be taken to mean a group of soldiers of unspecified numbers. Certainly Barbusse mentions by name more soldiers than could realistically belong to a single escouade in the space of a few months, unless the casualty rate was notably severe.

initiation into the life of the trenches.⁵ After Christmas 1915 there is a gap; and the narrative is resumed in June of the following year, with the preparations for the ill-fated climax described in Part 7, the attack on Biez Wood in which Ball is wounded and most of his friends are killed. It is natural enough that the story should end there, with the destruction of the company of soldiers which is its corporate hero. But there is a particular reason why it does not go beyond July 1916. (The battle of the Somme began on the first day of that month.) For the survivors, that July seemed to mark a turning point. In the opening of his Preface, David Jones explains why July 1916 seemed, in some sense, a terminal date.

This writing has to do with some of the things I saw, felt, & was part of. The period covered begins early in December 1915 and ends early in July 1916. The first date corresponds to my going to France. The latter roughly marks a change in the character of our lives in the Infantry on the West Front. From then onward things hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair, took on a more sinister aspect. The wholesale slaughter of the later years, the conscripted levies filling the gaps in every file of four, knocked the bottom out of the intimate, continuing, domestic life of small contingents of men, within whose structure Roland could find, and, for a reasonable while, enjoy, his Oliver. In the earlier months there

⁵The theme of Initiation in Jones's poetry, with its major symbol of the cave-labyrinth which is so prominent in "Starlight Order", Part 3 of In Parenthesis, can only be touched on here. It is brilliantly investigated by Jeremy Hooker in his David Jones: An Exploratory Study, Enitharmon Press, 1975; to which I am much indebted. But while Jones freely and gratefully acknowledged, in the Preface to The Anathemata, his own debt to W.F. Jackson Knight's examination of Initiation patterns in Vergil, I think Hooker is right to be very cautious (David Jones, pp.21-22) about the degree of deliberation with which the theme is deployed in In Parenthesis. Jackson Knight's Vergil's Troy was not published (by Basil Blackwell, Oxford) until 1932, when Jones's poem had been four years in the writing; Cumaean Gates (Basil Blackwell, Oxford) followed four years later, the year the poem was completed.

was a certain attractive amateurishness, and elbow-room for idiosyncrasy that connected one with a less exacting past. The period of the individual rifle-man, of the "old sweat" of the Boer campaign, the "Bairnsfather" war, seemed to terminate with the Somme battle. There were, of course, glimpses of it long after - all through in fact - but it seemed never quite the same. The We've Lived and Loved Together of the Devons was well enough for the Peninsula, but became meaningless when companion lives were at such short purchase. Just as now there are glimpses in our ways of another England - yet we know the truth. Even while we watch the boatman mending his sail, the petroleum is hurting the sea. So did we in 1916 sense a change. (p.ix)

The horrible arithmetic of the casualty figures would seem to support a view of July 1916 as, for the British at least, the critical locus of the war - a 'point of instability' inviting, perhaps, the application of the (so-called) Catastrophe Theory. Sixty thousand casualties were sustained by the British army in the spring offensive ('Second Ypres') of 1915. A further sixty thousand were lost in the autumn offensive at Loos that year. Neatly enough, another sixty thousand were killed or wounded on the first day of the Somme battle, 1 July 1916. "From then onward things ... took on a more sinister aspect" indeed. In five months (July to November) the British lost four hundred and twenty thousand men on the Somme front. There were one hundred and sixty thousand losses in five days' fighting in the Ypres salient in April 1917: three hundred thousand in one week of March 1918, at the beginning of the Ludendorff offensive. (A large number of these, of course, were taken prisoner. But these are only the British figures.) The record probably must go to General Plumer's attack on Messines Ridge. At 3.10 on the morning of 7 June 1917 the British detonated one million

tons of explosive under the enemy lines, and ten thousand Germans were immediately and permanently entombed. This was "a more relentless, mechanical affair", and with a vengeance.

However, in the passage quoted above, David Jones is not attempting the military historian's overview, but recording the 1916 change as it affected "the character of our lives in the Infantry on the West Front". The "intimate, continuing, domestic life" of the soldiers at the battlefield seemed to him to possess a more humane, less impersonal quality in the first half of the war, the phase he has chosen to write about. "We find ourselves privates in foot regiments. We search how we may see formal goodness in a life singularly inimical, hateful to us." (p.xiii) Jones makes it clear that such formal goodness, so often evident or at least glimpsed in his poem, was less easily visible after the Somme battle. It will be worthwhile to dwell a little on the implications of the passage quoted above. Its last three sentences suggest that Jones had in mind a change which was to have a wider and more lasting effect than a local transformation of the character of the war as experienced by the fighting infantryman. It was not only on the western front that things "hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair"; and not only for the duration of the war. The introduction in 1916 of the steel helmet - "that harbinger of their anabasis, of these latter days, of a more purposed hate, and the establishment of unquestioned ascendancy in no-man's-land" (p.114) - was a sign of the encroachment

of a more sinister, modern world, which Jones was later to call "the world of utility and technics",⁶ and which he considered forgetful of its origins, destructive of local variety, and inimical to the making and celebration of signs and sacrament. The more brutal aspect which the war assumed in the summer of 1916 signalled the approach of what he would call, in "A, a, a, Domine Deus",⁷ "the turn of a civilisation", and, in The Anathemata,⁸ "the sagging end and chapter's close". The holocaust described in Part 7 causes the loss not only of John Ball's company but of a way of life, a culture. This local disaster figures, in little, "the decline of the west".

There is, indeed, a strong Spenglerian strain in In Parenthesis, as in all of Jones's writings, however difficult it is to assess with any accuracy the extent of the influence. René Hague, for example, writing on "Myth and Mystery in the Poetry of David Jones",⁹ says that "David freely acknowledged his debt to Spengler, who confirmed rather than formed his notion of myth". And Spengler's name crops up frequently in A Commentary on The Anamathemata, rather (it sometimes seems) to the embarrassment of the commentator. Certainly a good deal of the crisis of In Parenthesis - the fatal impact of that "more purposed hate" on the "attractive amateurishness" of the early phase of the war; or of the war itself on civilians obliged to pretend to be soldiers; or, more simply still, of harsh experience on innocence - is

⁶In "Religion and the Muses" (1941), Epoch and Artist, Faber & Faber, 1959, p.100.

⁷The Sleeping Lord, Faber & Faber, 1974, p.9.

⁸Faber and Faber, 1952, p.49.

⁹Agenda vol 15, 1977, pp.37-79; p.40.

illuminated by the thesis of The Decline of the West.¹⁰ The fate of John Ball's company mimes, in little, the process whereby "cultures" develop, or decay, into "civilisations". Spengler describes the symptoms with something approaching glee: the subordination of cultural forms to the requirements of technics and utility - "Pure Civilisation, as a historical process, consists in a progressive taking-down of forms that have become inorganic or dead";¹¹ a ruthless centralisation of command, with its consequent damage to the freedom of the individual - "Imperialism is Civilisation unadulterated";¹² intolerance of local variety and of those who are "obsessed with the idealism of a provincial and would pursue the ways of life of past ages";¹³ "the incomprehension of old symbols" in an increasingly megalopolitan society populated by urban nomads;¹⁴ and so on. All these are vital themes in Jones's later work, especially in the Roman poems collected in The Sleeping Lord,¹⁵ but they are no less present in In Parenthesis. Indeed they can all be detected in the passage from the first page of the Preface, quoted above.

Jones would certainly not have endorsed the historicism of The Decline of the West, at the end of which Spengler offers mankind "the freedom to do the necessary

¹⁰ Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, trans. C.F. Atkinson, George Allen & Unwin, vol. 1 1926, vol. 2 1928.

¹¹ ibid. vol. 1, p. 32.

¹² ibid. vol. 1, p. 36.

¹³ ibid. vol. 1, p. 38.

¹⁴ ibid. vol. 2, p. 398.

¹⁵ See particularly the Spenglerian apologetics of the speaker in "The Tribune's Visitation".

or to do nothing".¹⁶ Nor would he have been enthusiastic about "the return of the pristine facts of the blood eternal that is one and the same as the ever-circling cosmic flow",¹⁷ which was well received in some quarters in Germany in the years between the wars. But the dynamics of the threat of "civilisation" to "culture" represent a central preoccupation in all of Jones's work, and in In Parenthesis the war itself may be seen as the affirmation of Spengler's "civilisation" by extreme means. As I have suggested, this conflict may be legitimately reduced to the simple drama of innocence and experience which is the one radical theme of all war-literature. But it is important to keep Spengler's terms in mind, because it is in these terms that Jones located what he considered to be the function of the artist in his own time. This is set out in detail in the Preface to The Anamathemata: but it is also defined concisely and revealingly in a 1941 essay, an obituary appreciation of one of the poet's friends and masters, Eric Gill.

Of any modern artist it may be said that he is an oddity. Our culture-situation is such that any practitioner of the "fine arts" is, today, an agreeable extra. Such a person is not knit with, has no necessary part in, exists by sufferance of, our civilisation... One need not necessarily subscribe to Spengler's whole thesis to admit that in his "technics instead of lyrics" theme he shows us through which door the wind blows, and that steel wind gathers weight as these unkindly decades proceed. I find it impossible to consider the work of Mr. Gill without keeping in mind this situation, because he sought to work as though a culture of some sort existed or, at all events, he worked as

¹⁶ ibid. vol.2, p.507.

¹⁷ ibid. vol.2, p.507.

though one should, and could make a culture exist. Because of his singular qualities as a man he sometimes achieved carvings that looked something like the products of a true culture.¹⁸

It is with the Spenglerian scheme in mind that we might return briefly to the first page of the Preface of In Parenthesis, and note the antithesis between "relentless, mechanical... sinister" and "intimate, continuing, domestic... small", grouped epithets which incidentally exactly characterise the antagonists in "The Tutelar of the Place";¹⁹ note also the apparently innocent economic metaphors of "wholesale" slaughter and companion lives at "short purchase" (and of course the figure "to knock the bottom" out of something is also used as a market term); and note, finally, the entirely characteristic and cunning opposition between "mending" and "hurting". These considerations may begin to suggest why In Parenthesis is not to be considered just as a "War Book".

In Parenthesis, then, can first be considered as a poem about "culture" - specifically, an account of the climax (in the dramatic sense) in which a "culture" is overwhelmed. John Ball survives the catastrophe, although wounded; but irreparable damage has been done to the way

¹⁸"Eric Gill as Sculptor", Epoch and Artist, Faber & Faber, 1959, pp.288ff. Jones adds, in a footnote (p.288), "I have, in this article, used the word "culture" in Spengler's sense, as opposed to "civilisation". I do so because I think it a most useful distinction and a valid one."

¹⁹The Sleeping Lord, pp.59-64.

of life which has nurtured him.²⁰ Jones shows himself to be more inclusive, or less single-minded, than Wilfred Owen, in his insistence that the familiar culture which the soldiers leave behind in Part 1 of the poem is reassembled, ad hoc, and more or less sustained at the front; so that the company's arrival there includes a kind of recognition:

Until dim flickerings light across; to fade where the
revetment changes direction, and overhead wire catches
oblique ray cast up, and you know the homing perfume
of wood burned, at the termination of ways; and sense
here near habitation, a folk-life here, a people, a
culture already developed, already venerable and rooted.
(p.49)

But this kindness does not survive the catastrophe of Part 7.

The Spenglerian dynamics of this agon are already stated, comically, on the first page of the poem, which describes John Ball's late arrival on parade.

He settles between numbers 4 and 5 of the rear rank.
It is as ineffectual as the ostrich in her sand.
Captain Gwynn does not turn or move or give any sign.
Have that man's name taken if you please, Mr. Jenkins.
Take that man's name, Sergeant Snell.
Take his name, corporal.
Take his name take his number - charge him - late
on parade - the Battalion being paraded for overseas -
warn him for Company Office.
Have you got his name Corporal Quilter.

²⁰ John Ball, a common enough name, is also a homophonic pun on the name John Bull. Jones invites a comparison between his antihero and the portly English everyman of journalistic folklore; and there may also be a glance at Horatio Bottomley's warmongering newspaper of the same name. John Ball is also the namesake of the populist priest who was one of the heroes, and one of the casualties, of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and the central figure of William Morris's poem "The Dream of John Ball". Finally, there may just possibly be a hint of bawdy in the fact that the singular Ball is a private.

Temporary unpaid Lance-Corporal Aneirin Merddyn Lewis had somewhere in his Welsh depths a remembrance of the nature of man, of how a lance-corporal's stripe is but held vicariously and from on high, is of one texture with an eternal economy. He brings in a manner, baptism, and metaphysical order to the bankruptcy of the occasion.

'Ol Ball it is - there was a man in Bethesda late for the last bloody judgment.

Corporal Quilter on the other hand knew nothing of these things. (pp.1-2)

The terms of the conflict are already visible there - on one side an unseeing (blind) retribution, a discourse of mechanical repetition designed for the management of large groups, and the general "bankruptcy of the occasion"; on the other a helpless individualism, a remembrance of the nature of man, humour, and an awareness of "an eternal economy". (The feminisation of the ostrich is certainly no accident; and the balance of "baptism" and "bankruptcy" is also typical.) From the beginning of the poem there is no doubt as to the outcome of the clash between these two systems, which is one of the central themes of In Parenthesis. Under a later and more deadly threat, John Ball is to be seen "pressing his body to the earth and the white chalk womb to mother him", (p.154) but that too is to be as ineffectual as the ostrich in her sand.

For the soldiers, the journey to war is one from the known to the unknown. It is appropriate that the two crucial stages in that journey - the Channel crossing and the march up the line - take place under cover of darkness; but the darkness does nothing to mask from the men themselves the sinister nature of their quest, and still "you feel exposed and apprehensive in this new world" (p.9).

(According to Désirée Hirst,²¹ Jones suffered considerably from agoraphobia. Hints of this can be detected in most of his writings - most notably in "The Tutelar of the Place" - and perhaps in some of his landscape paintings. In some notes written for an exhibition in 1935, Jones said of his painting "I always work from the window of a house if it is at all possible. I like looking out on the world from a reasonably sheltered position... A man should be in a house; a beast should be in a field, and all that".²² The condition must have been caused, or aggravated, by the poet's war-experience.) As they leave home further and further behind, John Ball and his friends become increasingly anxious to clutch at the familiar, or at least the recognisable, in the wasted land.

The full day was clear after the early rain. The great flats, under the vacant sky, spread very far. It was not that the look of the place was unfamiliar to you. It was at one to all appearances with what you knew already. The sodden hedgeless fields - the dykes so full to overflowing to bound these furrows from these, ran narrow glassy demarkations. The firm, straight-thrust, plumb-forward way, to march upon; the black bundles labouring, bent to the turnips for each wide plot; the same astonishing expanse of sky. Truly the unseen wind had little but your nice body for its teeth - and '02 Weavel's snuffle would depress anyone - but what was the matter with that quite ordinary tree. That's a very usual looking farmhouse. The road was as Napoleon had left it. The day itself was what you'd expect of December. (p.18-19)

Of course these reassurances do not convince. The latent menace of their journey increases, and not long afterwards,

²¹ "Fragility and Force: a theme in the later poems of David Jones", printed in David Jones: Eight Essays on his Work as Writer and Artist, ed. Roland Mathias, Gomer Press, Gomer Press, Llandysul, Dyfed, 1976, pp.101-102.

²² Quoted in the catalogue of the David Jones memorial exhibition at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 1975.

the soldiers - still at this stage miles from the front - are given a fearful annunciation of the real nature of the world they have entered.

Out of the vortex, rifling the air it came - bright, brass-shod, Pandoran; with all-filling screaming the howling crescendo's up-piling snapt. The universal world, breath held, one half second, a bludgeoned stillness. Then the pent violence released a consummation of all burstings out; all sudden up-rendings and rivings-through - all taking-out of vents - all barrier-breaking - all unmaking. Pernitric begetting - the dissolving and splitting of solid things. In which unearthing aftermath, John Ball picked up his mess-tin and hurried within; ashen, huddled, waited in the dismal straw. (p.24)

The negative, passive character of Jones's adjectives and gerunds here is evident enough. This is the language of dislocation and disorientation. To discover what is the target of this destructiveness, we must turn back a page, where the victim is identified through a finely observed detail. (The platoon have broken their march for a few hours' rest in some farm buildings. Lieutenant Jenkins asks John Ball for a light.)

Confusedly he put his mess-tin down, to search his pockets. Mr. Jenkins tapped the end of a cigarette on the broken gate-post, his head turned away and toward the lane, toward the shielded batteries, toward the sagging camouflage. The jaunty bombardier had come again for water - his tunic on, the day was getting colder. His chill fingers clumsy at full trouser pocket, scattered on the stones: one flattened candle-end, two centime pieces, pallid silver sixpence, a length of pink Orderly Room tape, a latch-key. The two young men together glanced where it lay incongruous, bright between the sets. Keys of Stondon Park. His father has its twin in his office in Knightryder Street. Keys of Stondon Park in French farmyard. Stupid Ball, it's no use here, so far from its complying lock. Locks for shining doors for plaster porches, gentlemen of the 6.18, each with a shining key, like this strayed one in the wilderness. They yawn into their news sheets - the communiqué is much as yesterday. (p.23)

Ball's latch-key is a device used to open out, suddenly, the presented world of the poem. This is a favourite method in In Parenthesis: the experience of war is confronted with its opposite, which helps to define it. While Jones insists steadily on the ordinariness of the participants in his narrative, and on the way they respond to their situation with the same equipment of perception and understanding that they would bring to bear on their civilian lives (Jones's soldiers, unlike Owen's, are not much changed by the war), this passage is a reminder of how singularly novel and sinister that situation is. So the spilling of the latch-key, a symbol (or talisman, or fetish) of the humdrum civilian world, is an indication that both Private Ball and the subaltern - "the two young men together", the distinction of rank being temporarily abolished - have strayed on some obscure quest into an unmapped "wilderness". The backward glance is nostalgic, though the indifference of the commuting "gentlemen of the 6.18" makes it bitter too. Nostalgia and bitterness bring the two young men further together. They are both alienated from their home - The Anathemata and the later work show how important, and charged, the theme of native locality, "knownsite", is for David Jones - and by the same token they are more permanently alienated from the 'nation at home' by the experience these others cannot share. Jones can be a most complex writer, but the skill of this passage is all in its simplicity. Exclusion is a familiar topos in modern writing. (Joyce, Kafka and Eliot furnish ready examples.) Ball is unusual, and still

at this stage comic, in that he has his key, but he has lost the door.

Such a loss is no less serious for being, here, comic. One striking difference between the British and the French account of the war is explained by the fact that for the British the engagement was an expeditionary war, prosecuted overseas. From Blunden's Undertones of War to Owen's great poem "Exposure", we can encounter the idea - often supported by material drawn from a pastoral tradition - that the war is a deeply unnatural event, in that it uproots people from their native soil. The idea - a familiar one, which the spectacle of the war's effect on the landscape of France and Belgium must have made almost irresistible - is that war is, in any case, war against nature. (There is something of this in Shakespeare's Henry V (V.ii); but there the emphasis is on the neglect, rather than the deracination, of growing things. Images of the destruction of landscape on a grand scale would not have been available to Shakespeare outside the pages of the Bible; the Great War and subsequent events - the so-called 'defoliation' practised in Vietnam, for example - have made them almost commonplace.) There is an acute awareness in In Parenthesis that the real victim of war is nature itself - the natural world, and human nature. After the description of the bursting of the shell, quoted above, comes this sardonic coda:

Behind "E" Battery, fifty yards down the road, a great many mangolds, uprooted, pulped, congealed with chemical earth, spattered and made slippery the rigid boards leading to the emplacement. The sap of vegetables slobbered the spotless breech-block of No. 3 gun. (p.24)

Ball's separation from London, his own "knownsite", is equally an assault on nature. Expeditionary war - urged by "the lord Agravaine" in the Boast of Dai Greatcoat in Part 4 - puts people where they do not belong. There is a deep, conservative conviction in the poem that this is unnatural and wrong. (The refrain of the Boast is a prayer to the blessed head of Brân to "hold the striplings from the narrow sea" (pp.82-83).) This dislocation of the soldiers' lives is a dislocation of nature, and the violence of the war is a violence perpetrated on nature. This becomes a more urgent concern, the nearer the troops approach to the line.

Field-battery flashing showed the nature of the place the kindlier night had hid: the tufted avenue denuded, lopt, deprived of height; stripped stumps for flowering limbs - this discontent makes winter's rasure creaturely and kind. (p.30)

The coupling of "winter" and "discontent" serves to draw attention to the Shakespearean (and earlier English) undertones of "kindlier" and "kind". There may also be a half-punning reference to the hymn "Lead, Kindly Light"; here it is the darkness that is kindly. "Winter's rasure" is borrowed from Malory. (In this case, Jones does not acknowledge the borrowing; but, as always in his work, it is worthwhile to follow up the reference. Here we find Malory's "for we may se all day, for a lytyll blaste of wyntres rasure, anone we shall deface and lay aparte trew love, for lytyll or nowght, that coste mucche thyng".²³

²³Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.649.

Here and throughout In Parenthesis Jones voices the conviction underlying (to choose two works already discussed) "Spring Offensive" and "Chevaux de Frise", of the unnaturalness of war.

It is not really surprising, given the character of the infantryman's war, that the enemy is rarely described or characterised in the poem. Throughout, the Germans are referred to as "he". In a note, Jones glosses this usage: "He, him, his - used by us of the enemy at all times. Cf. Tolstoy, Tales of Army Life, 'The Raid', ch.x, footnote: 'He is a collective noun by which soldiers indicate the enemy.'" (p.196). They are never spoken of with any dislike (except by one character) - strangely enough this too is not unusual in war-writings - and they even have a share in the poem's dedication, where Jones (borrowing again from Malory) addresses them as "the enemy front-fighters who shared our pains against whom we found ourselves by misadventure". If we discount occasional grouses against military authority, particularly "that shit Major Lillywhite" (a martinet who is never in fact onstage, alive, in the poem), the only people treated as inimical with any real bitterness are, significantly enough, the agents of technics. These, not the Germans, are the real villains of the piece. The shell which nearly killed John Ball in Part 2 is "some mean chemists's contrivance, a stinking physicist's destroying toy". (p.24) There is a similar bitterness in the account of the death of Aneirin Lewis -

more shaved he is to the bare bone than
 Yspaddadan Penkawr.
 Properly organised chemists can let make more riving
 power than ever Twrch Trwyth;
 more blistered he is than painted Troy Towers
 and unwholer, limb from limb, than any of them fallen
 at Catraeth
 or on the seaboard-down, by Salisbury,
 and no maker to contrive his funerary song (p.155)

- and when Jones describes the technicians' means of
 disinfecting the battlefield - of disposing of the war's
 effects, as it were, after proposing its instruments - the
 classic formula for hypocrisy comes obviously to mind:

Each night freshly degraded like traitor-corpse, where
 his heavies flog and violate; each day unfathoms
 yesterday unkindness; dung-making Holy Ghost temples.
 They bright-whiten all this sepulchre with powdered
 chloride of lime. It's a perfectly sanitary war. (p.43)

The war, in In Parenthesis, is seen as an essen-
 tially masculine assault on nature and on what Bernard Bergonzi
 has called "the pieties of an agrarian order".²⁴ A glance
 back to Spengler may be in order at this stage. In
The Decline of the West the historical process, which in
 its present phase is seen as the triumph of "civilisation"
 over "culture", is considered as something which goes
 against the grain of nature. (A similar conviction is to
 be found in Totem and Taboo and Civilisation and its
Discontents, but the analogy does not admit of close
 inspection.) Spengler speaks of "the opposition of
 history and nature" in The Decline of the West.²⁵ But
 this theme is most concisely summarised in Man and Technics,
 which appeared in English in 1932, and may or may not have
 been read by Jones during the composition of In Parenthesis.

²⁴ in Heroes' Twilight, Constable, 1965, p.204.

²⁵ I, p.48, and passim.

Creative man has stepped outside the bounds of Nature, and with every fresh creation he departs further and further from her, becomes more and more her enemy. That is his "world-history", the history of a steadily increasing, fateful rift between man's world and the universe - the history of a rebel that grows up to raise his hand against his mother.²⁶

The soldiers' world is, obviously enough, mono-sexual and male. In Jones's poem the damage they have to do is inflicted on a natural world which is predominantly female, and yet to which they owe a filial, umbilical allegiance. Jeremy Hooker has noted this dichotomy in In Parenthesis, in his monograph on Jones's work:

the juxtaposition of rural detail and occupations with military equipment and activity is ... marked. The men have affinities with the "kindly" animals and with the natural world through which their "conditioned" steps are guided. The animals are invariably referred to in the feminine gender, as is the moon. Earth, too, is often described in feminine images. "Creaturely" "kind", "kindly", and "kindred" are all key-words - all related to the female principle active in nature and no less part of the men themselves.²⁷

The dynamics of what may in a sense be considered Jones's one theme are stated under many forms: the clash of the individual with the collective, of the natural with the mechanical, demarcation with standardisation, knownsite with megalopolis, shelter with exposure, the arts with

²⁶ Oswald Spengler, Man and Technics, trans. C.F. Atkinson, George Allen & Unwin, 1932, pp.44-45. Notably, Totem and Taboo postulates a revolt against the male parent.

²⁷ David Jones: an Exploratory Study, pp.19-20. In her essay mentioned above, Désirée Hirst interestingly sets Jones's devotion to this "female principle" in the context of the pronounced masculinism of Eric Gill's Ditchling community, with which - first at Ditchling, then in Wales, and later at Piggots near High Wycombe - the poet was closely associated during the 'twenties and 'thirties, and where, it seems, the women of the Community "were indignant that while the men were continually in chapel saying the Office.. the women were left to scrub the pigs. (It is a tradition, by the way, within the Cistercian order, that pigs, when kept, must always be scrupulously clean and the Community evidently maintained this monastic custom also.)" (David Jones: Eight Essays on his Work, p.110.)

technics, hope with necessity, innocence with experience, variety with the uniform. These oppositions are by no means as facile, or as easily divisible into binary terms of good and bad, as this rather crude listing may suggest. But the drama, in In Parenthesis, is clearly enough one enacted between pastoral and anti-pastoral elements, as is almost always the case in war-writing. In Part 5, for example, the point is made specifically - rather too specifically perhaps - in part of an account of the ordinance whose administration is the work of "Private 21679, Map. 6 pla. "B" Coy. temp. att. H.Q.Coy. (office) pending present operations" (p.125). Under the typist's fingers, individuality is crammed into a procrustean uniformity, and it is almost possible to see the lettering being transformed into typescript.

And then there are these other:
 the rifle strength
 the essential foot-mob, the platoon wallahs, the small men who permanently are with their sections, who have no qualifications, who look out surprisedly from a confusion of gear, who endure all things...
 The pallid under-aged from Mare Street, East 8, with these sheep-keepers from the Gwentian hinterland, who heard the deacon's word, who come to the Lord's battle;²⁸ these can delve out the broken men, who know so well the careful salvaging of this year's young of the flock, when white March piles on Daren yr Esgob,
 (the helpless wethers will only stand by, agape at you, like an awkward squad; barge in under, to avoid the worst of it)
 but they all will carry
 250 rds. S.A.A.
 with
 all available picks and shovels to those
 not allotted other accessories.

²⁸ It was one of Lloyd George's triumphs to persuade the Church in Wales to endorse the government's war-policy.

His fingers moved rapidly - after all, it's better than the Company.

He nearly overlooked the rescript from Thursday's orders, in his desire to satisfy. N.B. Uniformity of practice re groundsheets with F.O.; these will be folded on top of the haversack, not underneath, the over-lap will not exceed two inches. (p.126)

Under this deadly ordinance there can be no exemption (not even for "a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat", as Blunden sees himself in Undertones of War); though John Ball, under bombardment, remembers the Psalmist and hopes against hope for some special dispensation - "It just can't happen in our family / even though a thousand / and ten thousand at thy right hand" (p.158). Like John Barleycorn, in this anti-pastoral harvest "the gentleman must be mowed" (p.182). Processes of an agrarian order are often, curiously, invoked in the context of war. (The "Little Mother's" gruesome agricultural metaphor has already been mentioned, and Owen's line about "sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed"; and Péguy had the whole complex satisfactorily worked out in Eve before the war had even begun.) Although a kind of fatalism may sometimes be detected in Jones, he is never tempted to treat the war, in any terms, as a natural process. On the contrary, as his evocation of what the war-landscape looked like is unsurpassed in English writing, it is inevitable that almost every page should bear witness to the damage war inflicts on the natural world. It is not only the human world that is so desperately wounded in the poem's magnificent climax. The wood itself, celebrated and universalised in Part 4 (pp.65-66), is at the mercy of the gunners.

from digged-pits and chosen embushments
 they could quite easily train dark muzzles
 to fiery circuit
 and run with flame stabs to and fro among
 stammer a level traversing
 and get a woeful cross-section on
 stamen-twined and bruised pistilline
 steel-shorn of style and ovary
 leaf and blossoming
 with flora-spangled khaki pelvises
 and where rustling, where limbs thrust -
 from nurturing sun hidden,
 late-flowering dog-rose spray let fly like bowyer's ash,
 disturbed for the movement
 for the pressing forward, bodies in the bower
 where adolescence walks the shrieking wood. (pp.170-171)

At the close of the poem, the dead soldiers and
 the ruined trees have become almost indistinguishable
 in the darkness (an identification reinforced by the
 Queen of the Woods, who crowns the dead with garlands
 in John Ball's hallucination). This destruction is tho-
 rough and final. Any sort of survival can only be
 imagined in a limbo of bitterness and mutilation - as for
 "the blinded one with the artificial guts - his morbid
 neurosis retards the treatment, otherwise he's bonza -
 and will learn a handicraft" (p.176) - perhaps not unlike
 the context of fixation, as if time had stopped, which
 characterises the conversation of the veteran in the
 fragment "From The Book of Balaam's Ass" (printed in The
Sleeping Lord as a link between In Parenthesis and
The Anathemata),²⁹ or the sad twilight of "The Tutelar of
 the Place", where some sort of culture is precariously
 sustained in a corner of a world which has almost wholly
 surrendered to the centralised tyranny of technics

²⁹ It seems that other substantial fragments of The Book
of Balaam's Ass survive in MS. See René Hague's
A Commentary on the Anathemata, passim.

("just as now there are glimpses in our ways of another England - yet we know the truth"). The catastrophe of In Parenthesis seems to be a terminal one. There is a sense that it ends where it does simply because there is nothing to follow; and this is a quality it shares with other epics of defeat to which Jones makes reference - Y Goddodin, the Chanson de Roland and the Morte d'Arthur, all of them concerned less with the death of individual heroes than with the breaking up of a fellowship, or community, and the dissolution of the values by which it has lived. Spengler, whose Decline of the West is itself a "War Book" in the sense that it was composed during the war years,³⁰ would certainly have seen in In Parenthesis an account of the crisis point in the decline of Europe, the catastrophe of what in The Anathemata (p.115) Jones - writing during a second war between "the fratricides of the latter-day" - called "the last phase / of our dear West".

This treatment of the war as, historically, a terminal experience, has some affinity with Owen's "Strange Meeting", especially in its tragic resignation: and as an historical interpretation, it is one which almost everyone would endorse in some terms or other. (For example: it

³⁰ A list of European "war books" in this sense would be impressive, including, substantially, Ulysses, The Magic Mountain, the second edition of Campos de Castilla, La Jeune Parque, Freud's Introductory Lectures and a good deal of Proust.

comes as no surprise to the student of war-writings that George Steiner finds himself irresistibly drawn to seasonal and agricultural metaphor when he speaks of the destruction of "the imagined garden of liberal culture".³¹ "Our sensibility" he continues, "locates that garden in England and western Europe between c. the 1820s and 1915. The initial date has a conventional indistinction, but the end of the long summer is apocalyptically exact." I dare say that, had Professor Steiner's own background been insular and English, he would have placed the terminal date a year later.) In any case we are accustomed, rightly, to think of the war as a shared trauma which invalidated a whole system of interpreting experience and history. A reading of In Parenthesis yields much to support this interpretation. But the most remarkable quality of the poem is its inclusiveness (undoubtedly its distance in time from the events it describes has a great deal to do with this): and I want now to propose a second reading of the work, perhaps apparently contradictory to the first. This is Jones's interpretation of the war as parenthesis.

The choice of title is explained in the poem's Preface.

This writing is called In Parenthesis because I have written it in a kind of space between - I don't know between quite what - but as you turn aside to do something; and because for us amateur soldiers (and especially for the writer, who was not only amateur, but grotesquely incompetent, a knocker-over of piles, a parade's despair) the war itself was a parenthesis - how glad we thought we were to step outside its brackets

³¹ In Bluebeard's Castle, Faber & Faber, 1971, p.14.

at the end of '18 - and also because our curious type of existence here is altogether in parenthesis. (p.xv)

To view the war as a parenthetical rather than a terminal experience (despite the disconcerting inner parenthesis, "how glad we thought we were to step outside its brackets at the end of '18") seems to deny the historical interpretation set out above. Yet for the survivors at least - and this includes John Ball and of course David Jones - parenthesis is what it seemed simply to be. Few of the characters in In Parenthesis are regular soldiers.³² They are mostly the volunteers, "rash levied" (p.160), of Kitchener's army. We are constantly reminded of their civilian pre-existence, and their expectation of a civilian afterlife. Enclosed in the parenthesis of war (and Jones does not shirk its boredom or horror), they seek to humanise it by such means as are available to them. They carry through it the customs and affections - mutatis mutandis - of the life which preceded it and, for the survivors, will presumably follow it. In the interest of their own morale, and often attended by an uncomfortable irony ("what was the matter with that quite ordinary tree" (p.19)), they share a need to believe that the war is no more than an accidental break, a parenthesis in their familiar way of life. And in the unfamiliar and baleful wasteland, they try (to employ an analogy

³² Frank Richards, author of Old Soldiers Never Die (Faber & Faber, 1964), was a regular private soldier in Jones's regiment, the Royal Welch Fusiliers, in which Lieutenants Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves also served. There is no evidence that Jones came across any of them during the war, but the concentration of talents is worth remarking.

Jones more than once found useful) to keep open the lines of communication with what is known and loved.

There is a marked contrast, here, with Wilfred Owen. The programmatic "Apologia pro Poemate Meo" shows that Owen was aware that there was much to value in the soldiers' life. Indeed his heavily religious language there suggests that the experience - particularly in battle - can be apocalyptic in the revelatory sense, affording visions of glory, power, the release of the spirit, angelic exultation, beauty, and even peace. But Owen ends the poem by saying that he will refuse to celebrate any consoling "mirth" in the war, for fear that it may comfort the complacent. His purpose as a propagandist could admit no such distraction, and he was determined that his elegies should be "in no sense consolatory". The channel of Owen's verse is perhaps as narrow as it is deep, for this reason. (A swathe less narrow and less deep is cut by Apollinaire, who was in his own way something of a propagandist, seeking to convince himself.) Ten years and more distant from the event, Jones is under no such constraint, and can afford to give due weight to the misery of the war and to the soldiers' attempt to sustain a more or less humane culture in unpromising surroundings, and to discover value there.

Such value as is discovered is, of course, brought into sharper relief by the irony of the situation, and our knowledge (even during a first reading) that it is very unlikely to survive. (A similar contextual irony, working in reverse, is deployed in "The Wall", "The Tribune's

Visitation", and "The Fatigue",³³ where the apparently complete triumph of Roman imperialism - locus classicus of Spenglerian "civilisation" - proclaims itself in the context of Jerusalem in the thirties A.D., at the moment when it is about to be superseded by a new order, whose unwitting instrument it is.) In spite of their probable fate, or because of it, the soldiers' efforts to make their particular wasteland habitable, and as far as possible decent, is particularly moving. "We find ourselves privates in foot regiments. We search how we may see formal goodness in a life singularly inimical, hateful, to us." (Preface, p.xiii) In their state of wretchedness, anything cheering - even the doling out of a meagre ration of rum and unappetising food, on the morning after their nightmare march up the line - is the more welcome when it had seemed almost too much to ask. A particular kind of "formal goodness" is discovered here in the eucharistic undertones of "the spirit's potency" and "daily bread":

Each one in turn, and humbly, receives his meagre benefit. This lance-jack sustains them from his iron spoon; and this is thank-worthy.

Some of them croak involuntary as the spirit's potency gets the throat at unawares.

Each one turns silently, carrying with careful fingers his own daily bread. They go, as good as gold, into the recesses of the place and eat what to each would seem appropriate to breakfast; for that dealing must suffice till tomorrow at this time.

You could eat out of their hands. (pp.73-74)

Jones does this with some delicacy. "The spirit" is no more than an accurate notation of the rum; "daily bread" could be faintly jocular, as well as being a legitimately

³³All poems printed in The Sleeping Lord.

literal description of the food ration. The context of misery and danger does most of the work in this passage. Jones only adds the sacramental undertones, without forcing them, and leaves the scene to speak for itself.

In discussing Barbusse I have tried to show how, frequently, trivial incidents in war-narrative can be moving, and even effective as disguised propaganda, if the author resists the temptation to draw too much attention to them (in which case the result is likely to be bathetic). The context, handled tactfully, speaks for itself. (The Poetry, in other words, is in the pity. Owen's latter recourse to photographs is related to this considerable discovery.) Barbusse understood that the economics of scarcity gave the most pathetic currency of goodness an especial value. In Le Feu, in the chapter "L'Oeuf", he speaks of the gift of a single egg as, in context, an act of almost heroic charity. Something similar happens to John Ball when, on his first grey and bewildered morning in the trenches, he has a piece of luck.

He stumbles his path left round traverse and turn.

At the head of the communication trench, by the white board with the map-reference, the corporal of a Vickers team bent over his brazier of charcoal. He offers an enamelled cup, steaming. Private Ball drank intemperately, as a home animal laps its food, not thanking the kind agent of this proffered thing, but in an eager manner of receiving.

After a while he said: Thank you sergeant - sorry, corporal - very much - sorry - thanks, corporal.

He did not reach the Lewis-gunners nor his friend, for while he yet shared the corporal's tea he heard them calling down the trench.

All of No. 1 section - R.E. fatigue.

He thanked these round their brazier and turned back heavy-hearted to leave that fire so soon, for it is difficult to tell of the great joy he had of that ruddy-bright, that flameless fire of coals within

its pierced basket, white-glowed, and very powerfully hot, where the soldiers sat and warmed themselves and waited to see what the new day might bring for them and him, for he too was one of them, shivering and wretched at the cock-crow.

Give the poor little sod some char - that's what the corporal had said. (pp.74-75)

Juxtaposition of the Malory pastiche with the corporal's demotic is a comic device, but makes neither of them look ridiculous.

For Jones, as a deeply conservative writer, there is an underlying equation between what is loved and what is known; and what is known is what can be recognised. The initiation which his amateur soldiers undergo is certainly fraught with physical danger, but an almost deeper anxiety stems from their realisation that they are proceeding from the known to the unknown, descending into a region of sinister unfamiliarity. They are "appointed scape-beasts come to the waste-lands, to grope; to stumble at the margin of familiar things - at the place of separation". (p.70) Their lines of communication - to return to the metaphor - are desperately stretched and likely to break down. So anything familiar that can be discovered in this wasteland ("King Pellam's Launde", the title of Part 4) is a comfort - almost a triumph, because the features of that landscape are so forbidding - and a reassurance that this skeletal world can actually live. One small, finely wrought incident may demonstrate this. On their first day in the trenches, Ball's section is detailed to collect picks and shovels for a digging fatigue. First, the engineers' work in the waterlogged trenches

stirs up historical associations in the mind of Corporal Lewis - "It may be remembered Seithenin and the desolated cantrefs, the sixteen fortified places, the great cry of the sea..." (p.89) Aneirin Lewis (namesake of the poet of Y Goddodin), "for whom Troy still burned", is the only figure in the squad who is aware of the Matter of Britain and the Celtic heritage which Jones sees as radical to the identity of the British. He is a sort of counterpart to John Ball, representing Jones's affinity with Wales and his passion for history, whereas Ball, who seems to have been an art student (pp.32-33), is a Londoner. Aneirin Lewis's musings here are a singularly ambitious attempt to assimilate the unfamiliar to the known world and, as he admits to himself, would mean little to his friends, like Private Watcyn who "was innocent of his descent from Aeneas, was unaware of Geoffrey Arthur and his cooked histories, or of Twm Shon Catti for the matter of that". (p.89) But this brief insight into Lewis's mind - like the latch-key earlier - serves to open out the poem's world in space and time, so that we glimpse the possibility of worlds elsewhere. Almost immediately the narrative is recomposed, and returns to the present and the specific.

Corporal Quilter made investigation round and about the lean-to. No human being was visible in the trench or on the open track. A man, seemingly native to the place, a little thick man, swathed with sacking, a limp, saturated bandolier thrown over one shoulder and with no other accoutrements, gorgeted in woollen Balaclava, groped out from between two tottering corrugated uprights, his great moustaches beaded with condensation under his nose. Thickly greaved with mud so that his boots and puttees and sandbag tie-ons

were become one whole of trickling ochre. His minute pipe had its smoking bowl turned inversely. He spoke slowly. He told the corporal that this was where shovels were usually drawn for any fatigue in the supports. He slipped back quickly, with a certain animal caution, into his hole; to almost immediately poke out his wool-work head, to ask if anyone had the time of day or could spare him some dark shag or a picture-paper. Further, should they meet a white dog in the trench her name was Belle, and he would like to catch any bastard giving this Belle the boot.

John Ball told him the time of day.

No one had any dark shag.

No one had a picture paper.

They certainly would be kind to the bitch, Belle. They'd give her half their iron rations - Jesus - they'd let her bite their backsides without a murmur.

He draws-to the sacking curtain over his lair. (pp.89-90)

The syntax here is odd. It is curious that there is no conjunction between the two sentences "No human being was visible in the trench or on the open track. A man... groped out". Some conjunctive adverb of time (then, until) would have cancelled out the assertion of the first sentence that there was "no human being" about: but the absence of any such conjunction puts the nature of the man, and his humanity, in doubt. Also unusual is the suspension of the main verb, "groped out", from the subject by a sequence of adjectival phrases. The first thing noted is that he is "seemingly native to the place", and considering the nature of the place this is far from encouraging; then his appearance is described in gradually smaller detail, down to the condensation on his great moustaches. He does not at first seem a hearteningly human being.³⁴ He is more like some solitary animal,

³⁴The poet's disturbing self-portrait in oils, 1931 (reproduced in Agenda, vol.5, nos.1-3, 1967), is entitled Human Being.

displaying "a certain animal caution" when strangers approach "his hole", "his lair" (later "they watched him vanish, mandrill fashion, into his enclosure" (p.91)). In his damp, anonymous and underground existence, he has perhaps begun to suffer some fantastic osmosis, his lower legs "become one whole of trickling ochre". Earthy and waterlogged, he is the spirit of this muddy place, a compound of the two lower elements. Further, there is certainly an atavistic quality about him - he is "swathed", "gorgeted" and "greaved" - and some suggestion of Arthurian encounters with creatures which are malevolent, archaic, mysterious, magical, and local.

Thus far, the strangeness and menace of this figure have been stressed. But if at first he does appear sinister, this impression begins to be dispelled by the reappearance of "his wool-work head" (someone after all must have knitted his Balaclava, which has now shed its bellicose associations), and his reassuringly harmless enquiry "if anyone had the time of day or could spare him some dark shag or a picture-paper", and his pathetic and comic concern for the animal (female) he has adopted - a comedy delightfully created in the indirect speech of his warning and the soldiers' reply, and a pathos that escapes sentimentality by the aggression of the warning and the mockery of the answer. Only a few hours after the nightmare of the novices' journey up the line, it is a discovery of some worth that an "intimate, continuing, domestic life" is sustained in the waste land. The storeman, despite atavistic appearances, is merely bored,

lonely and rather ridiculous. Even the "trove" which he guards, full of jumbled engineering tools and old weapons, is not entirely unfamiliar, for "you must have a lumber room where you have habitation" (p.90). An umbilical relation with the world elsewhere is never severed in Jones; whereas such a severance - a separation, as it were, of the present from the past and the past conditional - is one of the dominant themes in Owen's later verse. Domestic military life in In Parenthesis is always recognisably domestic civilian life in reluctant disguise. Quartermaster-Sergeant Hughes, who waters down the rum ration, "is a Holloway tradesman still" (p.73). Of course the metamorphoses of war cannot be escaped. But for the most part Jones's soldiers endure the parenthesis with patience, in the belief that "it were best to take no particular notice, to let the stuff go over you, how it were wise to lie doggo and to wait the end" (p.140).

Unusually little bitterness is directed, in the poem, towards the 'nation at home'. This particular impulse seems to have suggested itself much more readily to the officers, predominantly of the governing classes, who felt themselves to be closely identified with those sections of society who were administering the war and sometimes even seemed to be profiting from it. Officer writers tended to feel a consequent bitterness, not unmingled with guilt. This is especially well recorded, and with careful irony, in Sassoon's Sherston trilogy. Such problems are not of much concern to Jones's soldiers, among whom there seems to be a general agreement that

"stripes, stars, chevrons, specialisations, jobs away from the battalion, and all distinguishing marks were better resisted for as long as possible ... it were best to take no particular notice, to let the stuff go over you, how it were wise to lie doggo and to wait the end" (p.140). The subaltern Jenkins is the highest-ranking character of any importance in In Parenthesis; and we are never given access to the processes of his mind. The author treats him with sympathy, but always from the outside. The other characters are all proleterian or petit-bourgeois. Whenever they think of home, it is with affection. Their strategy for survival in the battle zone takes the form of an attempt to recreate there the civility (for the Londoners among them) or culture (for the rural Welsh) from which they have come. And this, under appalling conditions, they intermittently and more or less manage to do. Jeremy Hooker makes an enviably bold suggestion in his monograph on Jones:

This is the terrible irony disclosed by so much of the literature of the First World War: apart from a few novels concerned with working-class life, in English the only images of a properly human community in the twentieth century are found in the literature of the trenches.³⁵

This begs a handful of questions, but it is well worth pondering. I think Jeremy Hooker would not disagree that "a properly human community" is only visible in glimpses in In Parenthesis. Conditions are certainly unpropitious; and sometimes a vision of a properly human community can only be conjured in the imagination by

³⁵Jeremy Hooker, op.cit., p.25.

an obstinate and powerful effort of will. The anonymous "man from Rotherhithe", for example, makes such an effort of will as he sits in the estaminet, drinking diluted beer at inflated prices. His own war-pastoral takes the form of pub nostalgia, surely still part of the stock-in-trade of Englishmen abroad. The riverside pub he is thinking about has an interesting name, for a pastoral setting.

The man from Rotherhithe sipped very gravely, his abominable beer; sometimes he held his slowly emptying glass to the light; when he replaced it on the marble, he did so without the faintest audibility. He looked straight-eyed and levelly; through bunched heads, through the Sacred Heart, done in wools, through the wall, through the Traffic Control notice, on the board, outside, opposite; through all barriers, making as though they are not, all things foreign and unloved; through all things other and separate; through all other things to where the mahogany cornices of The Paradise - to the sawdust thinly spread ... the turned spirals that support the frosted panes they call through, half-open, from the other bar, is a good job o' work ... Nat West put that in when they enlarged the house; he got the wood cheap when they broke up The Golden Vanity - at the Royal Albert, in the cholera year ... Surrey Commercial stevedores call drinks for the Reykjavik mate ... she's lying across the water and goes out tonight ... she's bound for the Skagerrak with plant from Ravenhills. (pp.112-113)

This prosaic and urban glimpse of a properly ordered community can be contrasted with the war-pastorals of the English officer class which are, typically, more lyrical, rural, and solitary; or with Apollinaire's libidinous compensatory fancies. (Ominously, there is almost no proleptic war-pastoral in In Parenthesis. It was enough of an effort - as the syntax of this passage shows - to imagine the past.) The man from Rotherhithe manages briefly to conjure up the memory of what is loved, just as the soldiers in general do their best to preserve

the familiar decencies in foul conditions, and continue to exercise, as best they can, the peculiar virtues of the oppressed. These virtues, as John H. Johnston acutely noticed, are Christian ones.

Positive, aggressive heroism of the epic character is seldom possible in modern war; a man may perform valiantly in action, but for every valiant moment there are weeks of inactivity, boredom, suffering, and fear. Thus the virtues of the modern infantryman are Christian virtues - patience, endurance, hope, love - rather than the naturalistic virtues of the epic hero.³⁶

This is the equipment the soldiers bring to their task of humanising the waste land, and finding "formal goodness" in it. And these values are the values of the poem itself, and play a large part in its triumph, a triumph which cannot be separated from (indeed depends on) its irony. "They would make order, for however brief a time, and in whatever wilderness." (p.22)

So far I have discussed two interpretations of the war - the terminal and the parenthetical - which are to be discovered in In Parenthesis; and I have noted that when the war is viewed as a parenthesis in the lives of his.

³⁶ John H. Johnston, English Poetry of the First World War, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1964, p.334. A sort of stoical humility is worth emphasising. Jones is aware that his soldiers are the war's proletariat. "You know no more than do those hands who squirt cement till siren screams, who are indifferent that they rear an architect's folly; read in the press perhaps the grandeur of the scheme." (p.87) They are ignorant of what they do. There is an obvious link here with the soldiers of the Roman poems, for whom forgiveness was asked on Calvary.

soldiers, Jones is apt to stress the continuities whereby the forms and values of civilian life are sustained, albeit in somewhat grotesque form, through combat experience. Such notations of continuity as I have mentioned have been largely domestic ones; but the notion of continuity can be extended to form the basis for an examination of a third historical interpretation in the poem - the most striking of the three (because so apparently at odds with most war-literature) and probably the underlying one - in which the war is regarded not as the end and beginning of an epoch, nor as an anxious interruption of the familiar rhythm of life, but as the repetition or re-enactment of primal patterns of action in myth and history. This is reinforced by the strange rhyming of military with liturgical ritual (ritual being a means of connecting the present to the past), and the poem's "flexible, recessive temporal dimension".³⁷ In Parenthesis is not only about British soldiers in 1915-1916. Its characters are individually realised for the most part, but they are also inhabited, consciously or not, by the ghosts of the men who marched to Catraeth and Camlann and Troy.. Their condition is proposed as archetypal, as is their fate. In the set-piece boast of Dai Greatcoat, for example, (pp.79-84) Jones is asking his reader to accept that the old soldier not only resembles the men who took their orders from Samson and Caesar and Arthur and (of course) Longinus, and the rest,

³⁷ Hooker, op.cit., p.22.

but actually embodies them, and so is them. This mythic, post-Waste Land mode of writing is pitted and snared with all sorts of temptation to facility; but, as I have tried to show, In Parenthesis is quite strong enough in its realism and immediacy to prevent Jones's allusiveness from being merely quaint.

This allusiveness is the stylistic form of a habit of mind which Jones brings to all his observations, verbal or plastic. It is legitimate, if not very adequate, to call this style geological.³⁸ As in Proust, beneath the literal level of action or image lie strata of significance - some of archaeological value, some fossil-bearing, some striated with faults, and all impacted - which connect it to deeper and intimate levels of being.³⁹ It is part of the business of the artist, as Jones saw it, to explore and celebrate these connections, or (again the wartime idiom) to keep open the lines of communication. Very little sense can be made of the present tense of existence (as Owen was tragically aware in his later poems) unless it can be seen in a grammatical context which includes the past. Jones makes the point in a short essay (1953) called "Past and Present".⁴⁰ He has mentioned

³⁸The first section of The Anathemata, with its largely geological subject matter, is stylistically self-referential

³⁹To some extent, Jones's style as a painter can be approached in much the same way as his style as a poet. See especially the chapter on his visual art in David Blamires, David Jones: Artist and Writer, Manchester University Press, 1971, pp.35-73. One of Blamires's comments on Vexilla Regis (op.cit., p.69) will do very well for In Parenthesis: "It is a landscape of symbols that David Jones portrays, but it never loses touch with the primary reality of nature."

⁴⁰Epoch and Artist, pp.138-142.

Psalm 137; and continues: "By a coincidence that famous psalm of exile provides also a clue: 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem: let my right hand forget her cunning.' That is to say our making is dependent on a remembering of some sort." The context of the war, which struck so keenly at the roots connecting the present and the past of individuals and nations, made it seem all the more urgent that that connection should be affirmed, or bound up. (It is right, at least in an etymological sense, to describe Jones as a "religious" poet.) The alternative is the world of Voyage au Bout de la Nuit, in which the past is invalidated, and so the present is rendered meaningless. Jones attempts to invest Kitchener's Army with some of the numen of earlier soldiers, historical, literary and mythic. He is interested in the process, as well as (qua artist) in the method, by which the literal becomes mythic and numinous. A case in point is the fascination which the figure of King Arthur always held for him. "The Myth of Arthur", an essay of the early 'forties, unmistakably looks back to In Parenthesis, and forward to The Anathemata.

How came this ruling-class Romano-Briton (at least, his name, Artorius, makes this status most likely) to be the focal point of medieval romance in Britain, France, Germany, indeed all the West? And still more significant, how came he to be identified with the cult-heroes of a mythology, already venerable and decaying when he himself was living? How came this probably methodical, prosaic, civilized soldier of the status quo, with a grasp of the new continental cavalry tactic, who, no doubt with Churchillian "blood sweat and tears" pulled together, for half a life-time a situation very much out of hand in this island, to be the star figure in a vast body of literature spreading over many countries and centuries? This question must intrigue anyone. It is as though the organizer of the Home Guard became, in a thousand years' time,

identified with Britannia and Poseidon, and further became the focal point of a romance-cycle, or as though General Wavell were to become confused with both Horus and Scipio Africanus, and Cyrus the Younger, too, by a desert-association, then for there to gather round his name a film-romance sequence in the biggest Anglo-American racket of A.D.2741; for it is an equivalent space of years that separates Arthur the man, from Arthur the hero of a full-fledged romance development.⁴¹

Of course John Ball is no Arthur. Nor, even, is Aneirin Lewis. But the condition of the platoon as soldiers (so to speak) of misfortune enables Jones to present them as participants in a sort of archetype of all men under arms. Further, the simple elements of Jones's story - initiation, service, anabasis, immolation - extend their symbolic significance beyond its immediate military context.

Part 4 begins:

So thus he sorrowed till it was day and heard the foules sing, then somewhat he was comforted. (p.59)

At first sight this might seem merely the whimsical purloining of an attractive sentence from Malory.⁴² But in fact the linking of John Ball and Launcelot works in a number of ways. There is a wry comedy in the difference in stature between the first knight in Christendom and this timorous incompetent. But this works both ways; for all Launcelot's heroic qualities, he is no more proof against cold and damp and hunger than is John Ball. (Joyce, of

⁴¹ Epoch and Artist, p.214. "The Myth of Arthur", as it stands in Epoch and Artist, is "a much corrected and largely re-written essay, an earlier version of which was written under somewhat unsatisfactory conditions in 1940-41, for For Hilaire Belloc, Sheed and Ward, 1942". (Epoch and Artist, p.212.)

⁴² Malory, Works, p.538.

course, had made the point that even the mighty Odysseus must have had a digestive system, and worried about money.) And the discovery that Ball is not uniquely miserable is, in a small way, both ennobling and reassuring (ennobling because he has something in common with the hero Launcelot, and reassuring because his predicament, although miserable, is not unfamiliar). Investigation of the Malory context shows that the reference is far from accidental. For here Launcelot, like Ball, is at a very low ebb in his anabasis on a fruitless quest, and is trying to gather his wits after an experience of extreme powerlessness and misery in the dark. Like Ball, he "sett hym up and bethought hym what he had sene there and whether hit were dremys or nat".⁴³ He has been robbed of his helmet, sword and horse, all things that invest the profession of arms with its glory. He is unaccommodated man, abject, "overtakyn with synne".⁴⁴ But he is shortly to make some sort of recovery, when he is absolved by the priest; just as John Ball, more humbly, will feel better after his breakfast, with its "daily bread" and "the spirit's potency" of the rum ration.

Apart from a small handful of painterly references, Jones's apparatus of allusion is literary, even bookish. But it is not so esoteric as to confuse or irritate the reader as Pound's Cantos often risk doing. Jones draws on Arthurian legends, British folklore, the liturgy and the

⁴³Malory, Works, p.537.

⁴⁴ibid.

Bible, and Shakespeare. His allusions to English poetry would present little difficulty to anyone acquainted with Quiller-Couch's 1900 Oxford Book of English Verse (with the important exceptions of his use of Hopkins and, less directly, Eliot). Still, his attempt to place the action of his poem in a cultural tradition causes some unease in as discerning a critic as Paul Fussell. Fussell's attack on In Parenthesis raises several crucial questions, so it is worth devoting some considerable space to it. Fussell finds much to praise in the poem:

But by placing the suffering of ordinary modern British soldiers in [such contexts as I have outlined above], Jones produces a document which is curiously ambiguous and indecisive. For all the criticism of modern war which it implies, In Parenthesis at the same time can't keep its allusions from suggesting that the war, if ghastly, is firmly "in the tradition". It even implies that, once conceived to be in the tradition, the war can be understood... The effect of the poem, for all its horrors, is to rationalize and even to validate the war by implying that it somehow recovers many of the motifs and values of medieval chivalric romance. And yet, as Jones re-lives the experience of his actual characters, he is fully sympathetic with their daily painful predicament of isolation from home, from the past, and from values that could honestly be reported as heroic. The trouble is that the meddling intellect, taking the form this time of a sentimental Victorian literary Arthurianism after Tennyson and Morris, has romanticized the war.⁴⁵

The reproof of Tennysonianism, with its assumption that the reader will recognise it as a kind of slur, is certainly a post-1914 phenomenon, as Paul Fussell would be sure to agree.⁴⁶ But I think in Jones's case the charge is unfair. Indeed there is a striking similarity

⁴⁵Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp.146-147.

⁴⁶One of the many fascinations of The Great War and Modern Memory is that it is not only the investigation of a phenomenon, but also a symptom of it.

between Wilfred Owen's rejection of Tennyson, in a letter of August 1917 -

Tennyson, it seems, was always a great child.
So should I have been, but for Beaumont Hamel.⁴⁷

- and Jones's conviction that the modern reader will find Tennyson jejune because "we have been forced to live history as Tennyson's generation was not".⁴⁸ There is little in In Parenthesis to support a charge of sentimentality. Perhaps its most vulnerable point in this respect is the lyric interlude in Part 7 in which "the Queen of the Woods" is imagined crowning the dead with garlands. But there is no attempt to disguise the fact that this short passage (one page) is the hallucination of a badly wounded man; or that the dead are dead, and most of them horribly mutilated; or that after this brief fantasy, a return to reality is the more painful. John Ball's fevered epiphany has little of the accent of Tennyson.

The Queen of the Woods has cut bright boughs of various
flowering...
Fatty wears sweet-briar,
he will reign with her for a thousand years.
For Balder she reaches high to fetch his.
Ulrich smiles for his myrtle wand.
That swine Lillywhite has daisies to his chain - you'd
hardly credit it.
She plaits torques of equal splendour for Mr. Jenkins
and Billy Crower.
Hansel with Gronwy share dog-violets for a palm, where
they lie in serious embrace beneath the twisted tripod.
Siôn gets St. John's Wort - that's fair enough. (pp.185-186)

⁴⁷Owen, Collected Letters, Oxford University Press, 1967, p.482.

⁴⁸Epoch and Artist, p.205.

Paul Fussell suggests that In Parenthesis is an ambiguous and indecisive document. Ambiguous it certainly is, but its ambiguity proceeds not so much from indecision as from a profound irony. Fussell sees Jones's use of the past, of "tradition", as flawed by a conflict between his intention to "shame" the present, and his less conscious compulsion to "ennoble" it.⁴⁹ The dichotomy, I think, is not a real one.

Since I have already touched on Jones's use of the Morte d'Arthur, let me give another example, this time from Part 6 of In Parenthesis.

Joe Donkin, that never had spoken to anyone since he joined the Battalion at Divisional Rest in April except to pass the time of day a grave and solitary man whose civvy occupation no one seemed to know about but old Craddock his most near associate - they always managed to get on the same Fatigue and used to sit silent together in the boozier - this Craddock said he knew but wouldn't divulge but said it was a job no decent man need be ashamed on anyway. Joe looked more set up than ever previous and said outright and before them all that this was what he had 'listed for and how he would most certainly avenge his five brethren from the same womb as himself on these miscreant bastard square-heads and sons of bitches who in a '15 show in these parts so he declared had shamefully done four of them to death in some Jock reg'ment it seemed and the youngest of all six was at this same hour when he Joe Donkin sat and spoke with them going near skelington in Jerry concentration camp back there. Private Float joking and unadvised and because of his inherent inability to get the hang of this man's sensitivity said it serves them right for 'listing in a crush like that and how the kilties always got it in the neck if they didn't beat it soon enough which they more generally did and got his arse kicked by this Joe who was in no jocund mood but singly resolved and fore-arming himself in the inward man to be the better and more wholly addressed toward this enterprise of making expiation life for life if by any means he might for the gassing

⁴⁹Fussell, op.cit., p.147.

before Fricourt on the same day of the four brothers Donkin all good men of their hands. He said as how blood was thicker nor water three times and went off with Private Craddock and no other word to his bothy at the furthest end of the lines. (pp.144-145)

In this magnificent passage, Malorian rhythms mingle with demotic cockney. Does the admixture shame the present, or ennoble it? Surely neither; or (which is not quite the same thing) both. By wedding the two elements, Jones creates a comic disparity. Private Donkin would be ridiculous in the pages of Malory, and Malory's heroes would be equally uncomfortable in the trenches of 1916; and yet there is an essential similarity between them, which transcends the difference of historical context. Such disparities are not always comic. The same method is at work in the remarkable passage (p.54) in which Jones sets side by side the birds of prey of classical battlefields and the squalid rats which were an inescapable feature of life in the trenches. There is no humour there, but there is a similar insistence that the difference between the archaic and the modern symbol (as between Launcelot and John Ball) is only contextual, the result of an allotropic or evolutionary change. It would be foolish to suggest that, in mentioning them in the same breath as "the speckled kite of Maldon", Jones has any intention to ennoble these loathsome creatures which "with festered spines, arched under the moon; furrit with whiskered snouts the secret parts of us". (p.54) But where there is carrion, there will always be something to eat it; so by a necessary metamorphosis or haphazard evolution, the birds of prey become the rats of the Somme trenches. Like the soldiers, they suffer a declension into an ironic

mode. "These too have shed their fine feathers; these too have slimed their dark-bright coats; these too have condescended to dig in." (p.54)

"For all the criticism of modern war which it implies," Paul Fussell complains, "In Parenthesis at the same time can't keep its allusions from suggesting that the war, if ghastly, is firmly 'in the tradition'. It even implies that, once conceived to be in the tradition, the war can be understood."⁵⁰ This puzzling stricture, again, is not altogether fair on David Jones's poem. Anyone who writes about it is, by tautology, one who hopes the war can be somehow understood. But to stigmatise Jones as a traditionalist is to give too little attention to the form of In Parenthesis. Certainly the poet relies heavily on material drawn from the past, from the "deposits". But on the other hand his poem is not only formally "modernist" in the sense that it belongs (as Eliot noticed in his Introduction (pp.vii-viii.)) to the same literary-historical context as the work of Joyce and Pound and Eliot himself. It is, particularly, refreshing in the context of other English war-verse, the bulk of which is formally very much "in the tradition". There is little in Blunden and Sassoon, and little enough in Owen, that is technically innovatory. All three insist that the war is unprecedented, and invalidates old forms of understanding; yet this insistence is made in verse which would hold few technical surprises for Tennyson or Morris. Jones is in the opposite case. His war is not entirely unprecedented. Beneath it you can

⁵⁰Fussell, op.cit., p.146.

glimpse the features, here and there, of a very old story indeed. But to realise this he had to find a style and discover a form which is highly individual and certainly unprecedented in prewar English writing. Here again, Jones's distance in time from the war must have been of great advantage. And it must be mentioned that no doubt, for all Eliot's dismissal of possible influence as being "slight and of no importance" (p.viii), The Waste Land helped Jones towards a use of language adequate to convey his own impressions of war-experience.⁵¹

In the scheme of Jones's narrative, the soldier-archetype is linked with that of the passion of the sacrificial victim, the azazel or scapegoat of Leviticus XVI and of course the New Testament (and The Golden Bough). Jones does not forget that the unseen enemy is acting out the very same part. Christ, as Wilfred Owen discovered, is literally in No Man's Land.

Across a hundred yards or so, where no thing stirred at all above the tangled grass, wind ruffled, sometimes, ever so little, the others too; he stands vicariously, stands aware, stands tensioned within his own place.

And with the night sometimes the dark meeting of these by lot chosen - each the Azazel to each, other daemon drawn to other... (p.70)

⁵¹ Eliot's London wasteland, of course, mixes among other things the topography of Baudelaire's Paris (most notably in the "Tableaux Parisiens" section of Les Fleurs du Mal, and in Le Spleen de Paris) with several features of the generic "war-landscape". Among the "très 'guerre'" elements of Eliot's landscape, Paul Fussell notes the cold, the death of multitudes, insensate marching in files, and corpses too shallowly interred. (Fussell, op.cit., p.63.)

The soldier, then, is his own executioner and his own victim, and military service is seen as a metaphor for the human predicament. There is certainly a kind of fatalism (although quite different in quality from Arnold's) about Jones's account of the clash of these ignorant armies in the dark; and I suspect it is this that led Paul Fussell to his suspicion that Jones is trying in some way to ratify or endorse the whole business of war.

But the problem is, if soldiering is universal, what's wrong with it? And if there is nothing in the special conditions of the Great War to alter cases drastically, what's so terrible about it? Why the shock?⁵²

I have tried to argue that Jones's apparatus of allusion, and his trafficking between the particular and the archetypal, is instinct with irony, and a rather more complicated business than Fussell seems to suggest. (By analogy; is Leopold Bloom "ennobled", or Eliot's typist?) Following Fussell's argument to its logical conclusion, it might be considered an act of bad faith to attempt to write a 'work of literature' about the Great War at all. The best answer to Fussell's attack - although, it must be stressed, the answer cannot be dismissive - is to be found in the Preface to In Parenthesis.

I did not intend this as a "War Book" - it happens to be concerned with war. I should prefer it to be about a good kind of peace - but as Mandeville says, "Of Paradys ne can I not speken propurly I was not there; it is fer beyonde and that for thinketh me. And also I was not worthi." We find ourselves privates in foot regiments. We search how we may see formal goodness in a life singularly inimical, hateful to us. (p.xiii.)

Things being as they are, war-service - demonstrably not the same thing as the Heroic Life - is a convenient metaphor

⁵²Fussell, op.cit., p.150.

for the human condition. This tragic realisation is, I would suggest, one of Jones's great discoveries, and in the later work he returns to it again and again. His latter concern with the "rash levied" soldiery of the Roman empire is only the most obvious example. Impressive too, and perhaps pathetic, is his constant recourse to the idiom of infantry life in all sorts of disparate contexts. A sample of one hundred pages (200-300) of Epoch and Artist, chosen at random, reveals that Jones has recourse to the idiom of contemporary army parlance, as illustration or metaphor, on pp.219, 232-233, 236, 249, 256 and 293 - and this is probably not an exhaustive list. Yet on none of these pages is war, still less "the War", his direct subject. For Jones, the war did not end with the concluding bracket of November 1918. Instead, he believed that "our curious type of existence here is altogether in parenthesis". (p.xv)

For a brief examination of how Jones's referential apparatus actually works, the case of John Ball's rifle will serve as an example. (pp.183-184) We are told of only one occasion (p.53) on which Ball actually fires this weapon before the attack described in Part 7, "The Five Unmistakable Marks"; mostly it is an encumbrance, an incongruous nuisance whose importance is largely symbolic, "and we ourselves as those small / cherubs, who trail awkwardly the weapons of the God in Fine Art works". (p.156)⁵³

⁵³ Musketry, in which the 1914 British Expeditionary Force had excelled, became of relatively small tactical importance after the first few months of the war. Of course snipers were useful, but the larger issues were decided by the machine-gunners and the engineers and the artillerymen.

Partly because of a sort of mystical reverence for the weapon encouraged by instructors in musketry, the wounded John Ball cannot at first bring himself to abandon his rifle, however much it impedes him in his painful crawl back to safety through the dark. All sorts of significance adhere to it and make it precious.

It's difficult with the weight of the rifle.
 Leave it - under the oak.
 Leave it for a salvage-bloke
 let it lie bruised for a monument
 dispense the authenticated fragments to the faithful.
 It's the thunder-besom for us
 it's the bright bough borne ... (p.183)

With the mention of "authenticated fragments", we approach a real puzzle at the centre of In Parenthesis. Jones makes great use of the complex of the theme of sacrifice in his poem. In this he follows a path well-trodden by Owen and Péguy and even Rupert Brooke and the "Little Mother". Central to the sacrifice-complex is the figure of Christ, peculiarly appropriate (as well as mythically potent) as a type of the sacrificed soldier, in that Christ was both victim and victor, the immolated sacrifice and the restorer of order, and a perfect paradoxical conjunction of the volunteer by choice and the conscript of necessity. By such means as his use of The Golden Bough, references to Odin - "The hanged, the offerant: / himself to himself / on the tree" (p.67) - and Peredur, the Percival of the Grail legend, proclaimed by Jessie Weston as another Christ-type, and accepted as such by Eliot; and the epigraph, "The Five Unmistakable Marks", to Part 7, in which the words taken from The Hunting of the Snark daringly but clearly indicate the Stigmata,⁵⁴ Jones skirts around an

⁵⁴ pace Blamires, op.cit., pp.88-89.

identification between the suffering of his soldiers and the Passion of the Christian prototype. The fantasy of the dispensation of authenticated fragments of John Ball's rifle is bound, and surely intended, to introduce a fleeting identification between the weapon and the True Cross, and so between John Ball and Christ.⁵⁵ Beneath such an identification lies the great submerged metaphor of In Parenthesis. I think the reason that the Christian identification remains submerged in the poem was a certain characteristic modesty on the part of the poet, coupled with a reservation of a theological nature. The poet's friend René Hague provides a clue to this. In 1973 he quoted, in a letter to Jones, Owen's famous letter to Osbert Sitwell in which he compares his soldiers, by an extended analogy, to Christ.⁵⁶ Jones's response was very cautious.

You quote a piece from a Wilfred Owen letter. What astonished me about Owen, whose poems I have been familiar with only in recent years [this was written in 1973] is how on earth he was able to write them while he was actually in the trenches, it was an astonishing achievement - I can't imagine how it was done - a unique and marvellous detachment⁵⁷ - but I don't like his identification of the grimly circumstances and maims and "dole and tray and tene" with the Passion of the Incarnate Logos - yes, the bit you quote from the letter is an astonishing tour de force and, as you say, "terrific". But none the less don't like the analogy - the very consciously stated analogy. Its brilliant artistry and skill and plain stated factualness right down to the right way to tie the tongs [sic; presumably a hasty misspelling of "thongs"] of Field Service boots - do not, for me at all events, justify what I think is the unfortunate theology implied, well, more than implied,

⁵⁵ An interesting comparison may be made with Sassoon's poem "The Redeemer".

⁵⁶ Owen, Collected Letters, p.562.

⁵⁷ In fact Owen was out of the line between May 1917 and September 1918.

but quite explicit.⁵⁸

Jones's theology must of course be respected. But for all his wariness of an explicit identification, the Christ-prototype looms at the back of his narrative from the opening pages of In Parenthesis, when John Ball sets off, like Christ or Bunyan's Christian, on the stations of his passion, with a burden on his back.

The "thunder-besom" beckons to the reader from a more obscure avenue. Jones does not gloss it in a note; but its origin is clearly in The Golden Bough, as the line following might confirm. "Thunder-besom", according to Frazer, is the epithet given to mistletoe by certain Swiss peasants, and is connected with the widespread superstition that mistletoe is "a protection against harm in general and conflagration in particular".

For a thunder-besom is a shaggy, bushy excrescence on branches of trees, which is popularly believed to be produced by a flash of lightning: hence in Bohemia a thunder-besom burnt in the fire protects the house against being struck by a thunder-bolt. Being itself a product of lightning it naturally serves, on homoeopathic principles, as a protection against lightning, in fact as a kind of lightning-conductor.⁵⁹

This seems to have taken us very far from the Somme in July 1916. But earlier in Part 7, Jones had compared the enemy gunfire to the activity of the thunder-god, and now the likeness between Ball's rifle and the mistletoe/thunder-besom suggests that the rifle is both "a product of lightning" (war's destructiveness) and a defence or

⁵⁸Quoted by René Hague, "Myth and Mystery in the Poetry of David Jones", Agenda Vol.15, Nos 2-3, 1977, p.62.

⁵⁹J.G. Frazer, The Golden Bough (abridged edition), Macmillan, 1957, p.867.

talisman against it. The analogy is not merely quaintly allusive, but the product of the exact imagination. The allusion also illuminates the importance of the repeated phrase "under the oak"; and this has been prepared by Jones's earlier reference (p.177) to the Balder myth. Later we will learn that one of the dead German soldiers, crowned by the Queen of the Woods, is called Balder. We are not told, but can easily guess, what his particular garland is to be - "For Balder she reaches high to fetch his" (p.185). The thunder-besom takes Jones on naturally to "the bright bough borne", for Frazer⁶⁰ identifies as mistletoe his eponymous golden bough, the talisman which enabled Aeneas to pass unscathed through the territory of death. (No wonder Ball is reluctant to leave his rifle.) The "bright bough borne" is also the property of the poet, and so is a preparation for the identification of Ball, at the end of the poem, with "the man ... who wrote the book", (p.187) and thus in some sense with David Jones himself.

I think that we are not being asked to believe that John Ball has read The Golden Bough, any more than that he is aware of his participation in the Christian prototype. It is the generalised consciousness of the poem that is at work here. The collective awareness of the chorus-as-hero, as the Boast in Part 4 indicated, is capable of wider associations than any of its individuals might realistically be expected to command.

⁶⁰op.cit., pp.917-925.

The metaphor of the bright bough has opened up the idea of John Ball's rifle to wide and powerful mythic and magical resonances. Now, characteristically, the writing closes in, and Jones reverts to prose. The weapon is the witness and instrument of various triumphs and disgraces, from Majuba to Sydney Street. Next it reminds Ball of his hours of musketry training, and there follows a weird hallucinatory memory of scraps of advice in the form of speech affected by instructors in musketry. The rifle is characterised in feminine terms - "you would choose her among many", etc. (p.184) - as a bride inspiring real affection and loyalty. But this too is ambivalent, for the rifle is also a killer. It will be remembered that the soldiers awaiting the command to attack have already been likened to apprehensive bridegrooms, (p.159) and the subsequent carnage to a rape perpetrated on them by "sweet sister death". (p.162) The feminisation of the weapon is double-edged.

In the absence of any visible enemy, the dramatic anticlimax of Private Ball's war takes the form of a sort of recognition scene between him and his own rifle. Clearly he has been conditioned by the exhortations of his instructors to enter into the most intimate association with the thing - "Marry it man! Marry it!". (p.183) In his reluctance to abandon it, there is a sense that Ball is aware that the weapon has somehow become a part of him. (The rifle gives him his identity as a soldier.) This leads him, or rather Jones, to enlist another association, which deepens the ambivalence of the rifle as a symbol.

Slung so, it swings its full weight. With you going blindly on all paws, it slews its whole length, to hang at your bowed neck like the Mariner's white oblation. (p.184)⁶¹

The Mariner's bird first brought him and his fellows good luck and protection; but slung about his neck, "instead of the cross", it becomes both the symbol and the punishment of his guilt. Here is another exact equivalence with John Ball's rifle. No association could better illustrate Jones's conviction that the essential condition of the human spirit is an embattled one, a condition that echoes Frederick Manning's words in the Preface to his novel Her Privates We:⁶² "[War] is a peculiarly human activity. To call it a crime against mankind is to miss at least half its significance; it is also the punishment of a crime."

⁶¹ Note the elegant proportion of swings/weight and slews/length. the assonance, and the witty elision of "all paws". It is rather a thankless task to try to distinguish between Jones's "verse" and his "prose".

⁶² Peter Davies, 1930; first published under the nom de guerre "Private 19022". Simultaneously, Manning's novel was published under the different but cognate title of The Middle Parts of Fortune, in an expensive limited edition, and therefore free from prevailing lexical constraints. Manning was not the only war-writer to have to consider the laws of obscenity in publishing. Aldington's Death of a Hero had appeared in 1929 with certain passages prudently omitted (these omissions being designated in the text by lines of indignant asterisks). As William Blissett notes, in his essay "The Efficacious Word" (David Jones: Eight Essays, p.46), "Eric Partridge in the latest revision of his Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English (1961) reminds us that ... the word 'bugger' was actionable if printed and only ceased to be so in 1934."

In Parenthesis, like The Anathemata, resists generic classification. It is unique and unrepeatable. But there is general agreement that it has some of the qualities of epic. John H. Johnston lists some of these credentials.

The heroic narrative is objective, impersonal, and absolutely faithful to human nature and experience. Indeed, the objectivity of the epic poet is such that he may be said to have no attitudes; he allows his story to tell itself without commentary or interpretation. There is no anger, no grief, no condemnation, no condonation, and no pity. These the poet must evoke, if he is true to his art, in the imagination of his reader. He must also evoke a sense of particularized time and place; he must create a meaningful historical or racial perspective for the action in which his hero is engaged; his representation must be comprehensive yet accurate, with parts justly proportioned to the whole; above all, his poem must embody a scale of values against which the efforts and aims of his characters must be measured.⁶³

Can In Parenthesis properly be called an epic? Certainly it is a long narrative poem containing history; but, as Johnston's words indicate, more difficult issues are involved. Bernard Bergonzi addresses himself to the question in Heroes' Twilight.

Undoubtedly Jones does move towards the level of epic, in that he reproduces a sense of shared experience and transcends the limitations of the purely individual standpoint. But true epic, I take it, reaches out beyond the personal to appeal to a system of public and communal values which are ultimately collective, national, and even cosmic. And this Jones does not do; he may feel that Celtic myth is central and not peripheral to his understanding of British tradition, and he may have some success in persuading a discerning reader that this is so. Nevertheless, such knowledge will not already be there to provide a ready response in the consciousness of most of his readers. Quite apart from an author's subject-matter and treatment,

⁶³ Johnston, English Poetry of the First World War, p.329. Roland Bouyssou, more cautious, is content to call the poem "une geste sans héros". (Les Poètes-Combattants Anglais de la Grande Guerre, Université de Toulouse - Le Mirail, 1974, p.292 and passim.)

the question of epic involves the author's relation with his audience. Jones, in this respect, was no differently placed from other twentieth-century avant-garde artists with a strictly minority appeal. Although he aspires towards the impersonality of epic, his perceptions remain individual, rooted in the accidents of his own experience and reading. One can reasonably doubt whether the conditions for epic - the existence of a shared scheme of communal values and assumptions - are ever likely to be fulfilled in modern society.⁶⁴

There is no quarrelling with this. But it seems to contain an assumption (shared by Fussell) that Jones was not aware of the difficulties; that he set out, in his innocence, to make a work of a kind that historical circumstance had already doomed to failure. On the contrary, he was perfectly aware of how he was placed. There is an inescapably wry note, for example, in his assessment (quoted above) of the achievement of Eric Gill, who "sought to work as though a culture of some sort existed or, at all events, he worked as though one should, and could make a culture exist".⁶⁵ Jones knew the value of such an effort, but he also knew what were its chances of success. It is such ironic self-awareness that makes In Parenthesis so intelligent a work.

Two separate issues seem to be involved in the "epic" question. First, that the writer of epic appeals to a system of public and communal values, and secondly that he uses and celebrates and (theoretically) perpetuates a system of shared recognitions. My belief is that probably, if it ever existed at all, the value of epic as a social or even class adhesive had vanished some time before the publication of Paradise Lost. But what is the

⁶⁴Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight, p.203.

⁶⁵Epoch and Artist, p.289.

system of shared values to which In Parenthesis appeals? It can roughly be subsumed under the titles of charity, workmanship, loyalty and a good memory. The list is not long, but it is probably adequate to its context, and few readers would be likely to quarrel with it. The question of a system of shared cultural recognitions is perhaps a more difficult one. If the reader has never set foot in any part of Jones's imaginary and very eclectic museum, and so never heard of Uccello or Trwch Trwyth or Spengler or Hopkins, then his reading of the poem will be the poorer. Of course he will find the notes to the poem useful. But he still may wonder why the sergeant threatens Private 01549 Wyatt with the curious words "I'll stalk within yer chamber", (p.1) and he may be innocent of the relevance to Jones's phrase about "sweet princes by malignant interests deprived" (p.66) of its date of composition, 1936. I believe this does not matter in any radical way. Eliot said of In Parenthesis - and an element of self-consciousness can perhaps be detected in his words - "Understanding begins in the sensibility: we must have the experience before we attempt to explore the sources of the work itself." (p.viii) It is always illuminating but never essential to have the sources of the poem at one's fingertips.

A vital qualification must be made to the question of the epic status of In Parenthesis. Jones gets closer than any other war-writer to epic form. The poem may be called, not too cynically, the best Great War epic we have. But the poem is, in design as well as in detail, instinct with irony. Epic is the instrument and

monument of a culture, and so "the author's relation with his audience" is of the essence. But Jones was fully aware that, while employing some of the traditional tools of epic, he was writing about an historical event which finally destroyed the system of shared values and recognitions which might have made epic possible. The soldier of 1915 is placed in the front rank of a long file stretching back to the levies of Henry V and the drunken soldiery of Y Gododdin and beyond: and inevitably the reader's attention is drawn not only to the correspondences, but also to the gaps between them. Jones's epic, like Malory's romance, was valetudinarian, and he knew it. But it is still epic; ironic epic, the only sort that the Great War made possible, and the only one it produced. Jones was able to celebrate (but not glorify) his soldiers in the terms of a rich cultural tradition to which they belonged, although he showed in his celebration that that culture was threatened, and although he believed it was probably doomed, by the historical process of which his subject, the Great War, was a symptom and a part. The inclusiveness of In.Parenthesis uniquely combines the detachment of the historical novel with the immediacy of a first-hand notation of experience, and its richness, as far as I know, is unrivalled by any other Great War writing in English or French. Jones was fond of a line in Aneirin's Y Gododdin which he rendered as "The bards of the world appraise [or 'assess'] the men of valour".⁶⁶ His own appraisal of those who fought with him

⁶⁶Epoch and Artist, p.57. It also appears in the inscription to that volume.

and against him in the Great War is a decent and seemly epitaph.

It was a bad country to contend in, when such contention most required a way of life below the ground ... Two armies face and hold their crumbling limites intact. They're worthy of an intelligent song for all the stupidity of their contest. A boast for the dyke keepers, for the march wardens. (pp.88-89)

(The above was written before the appearance in print of Jones's essay, "Art in Relation to War". This essay was written in 1942-1943, revised and corrected by the author, but remained unpublished until 1978.⁶⁷ I hope that this essay 'illustrates' - in the sense that David Jones understood that term⁶⁸ - much of what I have tried to set out in the above chapter.)

⁶⁷ David Jones, The Dying Gaul and Other Writings, ed. with an Introduction by Harman Grisewood, Faber & Faber, 1978, pp.123-166.

⁶⁸ The Dying Gaul, p.137.

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