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“OUR OLD FRIEND ACROSS THE HILL YONDER”:
PERCEPTIONS OF THE ENEMY
IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

A British soldier named Harry was captured in the Third Battle of Ypres. In August 1917, now a prisoner of war in Germany, he wrote to his wife in a cheerful manner, narrating his latest misadventures. He ended the letter on a reassuring note: “Our friend the enemy have been very good to us up to now, quite like our own men are with the prisoners” (Imperial War Museum 1978).

Paul Fussell’s notion of the “gross dichotomizing” between “the enemy” and “we” in the First World War (Fussell 1975: 75) certainly holds true for civilians and eager and yet inexperienced soldiers, but that is challenged by veterans’ remarks such as the one just mentioned and by large-scale events like the famous Christmas Truce. How did the soldier really regard those men on the other side whom it was his duty to kill?

In this article, we will analyse a sample of texts which may be deemed representative of the different perceptions of the enemy during the Great War, with a particular focus on wartime poetry and on the veterans’ post-war prose.

The Enemy as the Other

The influence of the inflammatory rhetoric used before and during the war is so obvious and well-known that it is often taken for granted, but it is still important to take a moment to address the issue of propaganda and its lasting effects.

Due to pre-existing social conditions the British propaganda was set to thrive. There was already an “anti-alien mentality,” which planted the seeds for the so-called “spy-fever” (Panayi 1991: 27). Interestingly, many of the British government’s official measures against enemy aliens were made stricter in reaction to the people’s outrage at the government’s leniency (Panayi 1991: 75–76).

This and many other events (the promulgation of the Aliens Restriction Act, the dissemination of the theory of the “Hidden Hand,” the witch-hunts, the boycotts, the anti-German riots) show that the hatred of everything German was alive and well in Britain throughout the war. And it goes without saying that the opposite was

true as well. In Germany, the moral imperative of ending the British dominance of the seas was the word of order (Welch 2000: 58–59).

The “Germanophobia” that took Britain by storm, far from subsiding, continued into 1919 and beyond. Likewise, Germany, as the following decades would show, still held an intense grudge against her enemies after the war. This, however, is in conspicuous contrast with the more brotherly sentiments towards the enemy expressed by the disillusioned, war-weary soldiers and poets.

The Enemy as a Brother

The phrase “the enemy as a brother” is perhaps irremediably associated with the Christmas Truce of 1914, when, quite spontaneously, “Tommys” and “Fritzes” met in No Man’s Land unarmed, shook hands, conversed amiably, traded gifts, took photographs of mixed groups, played football and kept the unofficial truce going for days, at times weeks and even months (see: Brown and Seaton 2001).

While one of the reasons for the truce was the burial of the dead, another decisive factor was that, as the invading army lost momentum and the infamous deadlock set in, there was a shift of perception of the enemy. He was no longer a “vague if dangerous threat,” a faceless fighter charging angrily in one’s direction, and more of a “near and, at times, visible neighbour” (Brown and Seaton 2001: 12). Slowly a growing affection for “those over there” began to surface, and minor instances of fraternisation had been occurring even before December: breakfast truces, remote communal activities such as singing and shooting matches (Brown and Seaton 2001: 28, 30, 31). Soldiers from both sides were beginning to realise that, having been cast into the same surreal world of trench life, they had much more in common than they had ever supposed—much more, in fact, than with those who peopled the Home Front.

But let us start at the beginning. In August 1914, Alfred Lichtenstein wrote his *Gebet vor der Schlacht* (Bridgwater 1985: 174), essentially a mock-prayer full of irony and irreverence (Bridgwater 1985: 66–67). Yet the lines that read “Don’t let those bastards, our enemies, / Catch me or shoot me” accurately reflect how the majority of the soldiers actually felt towards the enemy at the time. Patriotism was at its height,¹ trench warfare was a distant yet looming reality, and in Germany as in England victory before Christmas was almost taken for granted.

In a matter of months, however, came the stalemate which would last for the better part of four years. The soldier, whose heroism had partly depended on his role as an intrepid agent, was now confronted with inertia and helplessness. Disil-

¹ Karl Bröger’s verse “That no foreign foot may tread our native land” (Bridgwater 1985: 194–195) succinctly illustrates the early attitude towards the “vague if dangerous threat.”

lusionment and bitterness were becoming widespread as nearly every attack proved to be as fruitless as it was suicidal. Aware that the other side was going through the same ordeal of futile sacrifice, hatred began to give way to empathy: in many German wartime poems “the enemy is not an opponent but a brother-fighter, a fellow-sufferer” (Peacock 1934: 225).

Consider Hugo Ball’s *Totentanz 1916*, a ferocious indictment of the authorities responsible for the war. The third stanza reads:

And so we murder, and so we murder
 Every day we murder
 Our partners in this dance of death.
 Brother, straighten up in front of me!
 Brother, your breast!
 Brother, you who must fall and die. (Bridgwater 1985: 176)

Dance is a fitting metaphor for war: the tune is imposed on the dancers, and they must abide by it. When reading in German one might interpret the object as being the friendly troops (since “partners” is actually translating *Kameraden*, or “comrades”), the “murder” being sending them to war.²

However, the object could also be the enemy, and the murder a literal one. This seems to be the translator’s reading. Not least because it is in keeping with the dance theme, the choice of translating *Kameraden* with “partners” is bold yet most appropriate, since a partner in a dance is the compulsory other participant but not an adversary. The enemy, then, is merely an unfortunate “comrade” also caught up in this gruesome dance of death, and the anaphoric “brother” adds tragic poignancy to the inevitable slaughter.

This subtle use of the words “brother” and “comrade” appears also in Heinrich Lersch’s poem *Brüder* (“Brothers”—notice the plural), where the speaker sees a dead “unknown comrade” (*ein fremder Kamerad*) and takes him to be his brother (Bridgwater 1985: 191–192). Here too is *Kamerad* an affectionate epithet for the enemy; one hint is the most intriguing adjective *fremd*, which does mean “unknown” but also “foreign.” Again, as in Hugo Ball’s poem, is the affinity present but mostly hinted at.

The idea of the brotherhood of men is also present in a less literal way, but by no means less explicitly, in the most renowned war poetry written in English. In Isaac Rosenberg’s *Break of Day in the Trenches* (Silkin 1981: 218–219) a “queer sardonic rat” is free to interact with both English and German soldiers. The rat, with all its freedom, becomes the unlikely link between two sides that are akin to each other

² Cf. the last stanza:

We thank you, we thank you,
Herr Kaiser, for your kindness
 In choosing us to die. (Bridgwater 1985: 176)

though separated by an arbitrary convention, nationality: “war is a man-made irrational activity which brings with it absurd, irrational restrictions—national boundaries demarcated with hatred and death” (Silkin 1987: 277). The poppies, another of Nature’s agents, also play a role in the attempt at reunion. As they feed off the dead, both Allied and German, tucking one behind one’s ear, as the lyrical subject does, is in itself a gesture of reconciliation.

Wilfred Owen’s *Strange Meeting* (Taylor 1989: 168–169) actually enacts a meeting between the soldier and his enemy, thus united more than symbolically. Significantly, the enemy’s moving speech takes up more than half of the poem. Lines such as “Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also” highlight the similarities between the two, thereby suggesting that distinctions between soldiers are unwarranted—and tragic, since they cause so much death. They are “classless and nationless individuals” who can “confront each other only perhaps in a visionary ‘otherworld,’ in the nether world of death” (Silkin 1987: 238).

This becomes most apparent when the confrontation reaches its climax with a dramatic revelation: the famous line “I am the enemy you killed, my friend.” It has often been analysed together with its preceding version, “I was a German conscript, and your friend.” The most obvious difference is the line’s specificity: “enemy” is more general, which reflects the nationless, universally wretched condition of the Great War soldier. The irony of juxtaposing “enemy” and “friend” is of a bitter sort, and it goes to the core of the lyrical subject’s remorse, channelling his guilt and anger into a protest against the perversity of war.

This also happens in Siegfried Sassoon’s war poems. In *Remorse* (Sassoon 2012: 100), the lyrical subject expresses his sympathy for the German soldiers whom he saw being attacked; when he unexpectedly uses the line “Our chaps were sticking ‘em like pigs,” it is very clear that he is being sarcastic, condemning that sort of patriotic zeal with his usual mordancy. Though Sassoon himself is said to have been not only brave but also ruthless and even bloodthirsty when in battle, in his later wartime poetry the soldiers, regardless of their nationalities, are mostly presented as victims of the hateful ethos imposed by the “brass hats” and espoused by the Home Front.

For instance, in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (published in 1916) enemies come in many guises: he criticises higher ranks (in *The General*); civilians (in *The Fathers*); politicians (in *Fight to a Finish*); the press (in *Editorial Impressions*); women (in *Their Frailty*); war itself (in *The Dream*); and even future civilians (in *Song-Books of the War*). The German soldier, however, is absent from this curious list. Indeed, in the poem *Reconciliation* (Sassoon 2012: 99), written the year after the war ended, the grieving mother of an English soldier is told to remember and mourn the “loyal and brave” German soldier as well.

In the war poems that have made it to the canon, as it were, the poets would either rely on ambiguity to obliterate distinctions between the soldier and his assigned enemy (as in the German poems mentioned earlier) or openly manifest their

contempt for that sort of binary opposition (as in Owen’s and Sassoon’s poems). But a decade later the articulation of a different attitude towards the enemy began to surface—or rather, resurface.

The Enemy as an Other

It could reasonably be expected that a decade after the Armistice, with the benefit of hindsight and a clearer understanding of the war’s universal devastation, the veterans’ writings would show an even greater awareness of the enemy’s equally tragic predicament. Yet almost the opposite seems to have been the case. As Arnold Harvey has observed, after the war the best writing about it consisted of “detailed, rather detached prose accounts” (Harvey 1998: 124).

Siegfried Sassoon is the writer who perhaps best illustrates this point. He is almost unique in that he is well-known for both his wartime poetry and his post-war prose. In his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (published in 1930) he revisits his war years under the guise of George Sherston. Gone is the explicit empathy and all traces of sentimentalism present in his poetry; instead, the tone of his *Memoirs* is consistently cool and detached.

For instance, when he first sees “newly dead Germans” he likens one of them to a “ghastly doll, grotesque and undignified”; Sherston goes on to say that “These dead were unlike our own; perhaps it was the strange uniform, perhaps their look of butchered hostility” (Sassoon 1997: 52). Later, though, he passes right next to a dead German soldier of “good-looking youth”: “his blond face was undisfigured, except by the mud which I wiped from his eyes and mouth with my coat sleeve” (Sassoon 1997: 57). This touching incident would inspire at least one of his more rueful poems. Yet, in a moment characteristic of much post-war prose, when he comes across the body again, he dryly notes that “his body had now lost all touch with life and was part of the wastage of the war” (Sassoon 1997: 60).

The biting criticism of the higher ranks, the clergy and the civilians is present in this book as in his poetry (Sassoon 1997: e.g., 42, 88, 164). Yet while his antipathy towards them is relentless, his sympathy for the German soldiers wanes considerably. After raiding an enemy trench with bombs, Sherston confesses his disappointment at not finding any dead bodies, though he admits that “the discovery of a dead or wounded enemy might have caused a revival of human emotion” (Sassoon 1997: 59).

Indeed, even when his bloodthirst begins to be replaced by pacifism, this happens mainly for the sake of the men of his company; he has to make a conscious effort to think “how the poor old Boches must be hating it just as much as we did” (Sassoon 1997: 192). Yet his thoughts on the enemy are best summed up not by what he remembers, but by what he forgets: faced with the question: “Don’t you still

dislike the Germans?," he tellingly admits: "I have forgotten how I answered that conundrum" (Sassoon 1997: 224).

The difference between these views on the enemy and the ones expressed in his earlier poems is obvious enough. In fact, and for the purposes of this presentation, Sassoon's post-war musings have less in common with his own wartime poetry than with other notable prose accounts of the Great War, such as *In Stahlgewittern*, by Ernst Jünger (published in 1920), and *Goodbye to All That* (published in 1929), by his friend Robert Graves.

Even though Graves had an undeniable connection with Germany (having visited the country, having family there, having a German surname, and even knowing the language), he is almost aggressively matter-of-fact when writing about the enemy. For instance, he never expresses any qualms about killing enemy soldiers (even mentioning that only once did he refrain from shooting a German he saw, because he was naked and having a bath, but even then simply delegated the killing to someone else), and he describes his battalion's participation in the Christmas Truce as having been utterly devoid of emotion (Graves 1980: 132, 137).

Yet he had no lack of respect for the German soldiers. He reports that he and his men considered them to be among the cleanest troops in the trenches; they didn't believe in the state-sponsored atrocity propaganda; they assumed that English POWs were treated as fairly as they treated the German ones; and they "never underrated the German as a soldier. Newspaper libels on Fritz's courage and efficiency were resented by all trench-soldiers of experience" (Graves 1980: 182, 183, 184 and 188, respectively). Graves evidently was not ill-disposed towards his assigned enemy, but neither did he ever show any sign of questioning that arbitrary distinction, and his resolutely pragmatic worldview informs every moment of his narrative.

In this sense, Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* is a kindred spirit, though his glorification of warfare is a far cry from Graves's almost complacent attitude towards it. The pre-war trope of comparing war to sports, which would later fall into disuse as a result of the ensuing carnage, finds sanctuary in Jünger's account (Jünger 2016: 57). The enemy is less of an abstraction to be an object of hate or pity, and more of a respected adversary whom you should outwit, outmanoeuvre and outlive in a deadly game. His neat little summary of his overall attitude towards his foes is worth quoting at length:

Throughout the war, it was always my endeavour to view my opponent without animus, and to form an opinion of him as a man on the basis of the courage he showed. I would always try and seek him out in combat and kill him, and I expected nothing else from him. But never did I entertain mean thoughts of him (Jünger 2016: 58).

Like Graves, Jünger is keen on carrying out his assigned duty. This is not to say he is a killing machine entirely devoid of compassion. Words like "sorrow," "regret"

and “remorse” occasionally creep into his narrative: he reports feeling several pangs of conscience, sometimes mid-battle, and he tells of how he spared his enemy more than once (Jünger 2016: 240). But while he feebly acknowledges the humanity of his enemy, nowhere does he seem to fundamentally challenge what almost amounts to a moral imperative to kill him.

On the whole, however, Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (published in 1929), is probably the most representative of the changing perceptions of the enemy. Like in Sassoon’s work, in Remarque’s novel the enemies range from rats and lice to civilians, propaganda and military authorities (Remarque 2005: 73, 199, 118, 146, 198 and 16, respectively), and little mention is made of the Allied soldiers. Ultimately, as Brian Murdoch wrote in the afterword of an English translation, “the real enemy is death. We hardly ever see the other side, and the very word ‘enemy’ is rare” (Remarque 2005: 212).

It is important to stress that this is not the starting position: early on, Paul Bäumer, the protagonist, learns about some gruesome acts reportedly perpetrated by the enemy, and takes refuge in seeing the enemy soldiers not as human beings but “Death himself” (Remarque 2005: 74, 81). Yet this attitude starts to change when he sees and fraternises with Russian prisoners of war. Bäumer meditates upon the absurdity underlying their status as enemies, which is determined by “an order,” “a document [which] is signed by some people that none of us knows,” going as far as saying that “Any drill-corporal is a worse enemy to the recruits, any schoolmaster a worse enemy to his pupils than they are to us” (Remarque 2005: 135–137).

This strand of anti-authority sentiment is recurrent in Remarque’s novel.³ However, the immediate suppression of insubordinate thoughts is also recorded: “Suddenly I’m frightened: I mustn’t think along those lines any more. That path leads to the abyss” (Remarque 2005: 137). Such restraint is evoked not by fear of reprimand nor, one could argue, by a keen sense of duty, but rather by an instinct of self-preservation: “the abyss” could easily be a nervous breakdown.

This is even more evident in the incident with the enemy soldier. Bäumer, trapped in a shell-hole during a patrol, is surprised by a French soldier, whom he instinctively stabs. After a while he tries to dress the wounds of the frightened Frenchman, but some hours later he dies. Bäumer, guilt-ridden, begs for the dead soldier’s forgiveness: “Forgive me, *camarade!* How could you be my enemy? (...) you were just an idea to me, a concept in my mind (...) it was that concept that I stabbed. It is only now that I can see that you are a human being like me” (Remarque 2005: 157–158).

The deconstruction of the enemy identity continues as Bäumer promises to write to the dead soldier’s wife. After much hesitation, he learns his name. The dead soldier is thus no longer part of the “mere collective entity” (Fussell 1975: 75) but an

³ See the treatment of the characters Himmelstoß and Kantorek.

individual with a personal identity. However, of equal interest to us is the fact that later we learn that Bäumer backs down on his promise and minimises the relevance of the incident. This was surely a very common kind of reaction, a clear instance of the self-defence mechanism mentioned earlier.

Final Thoughts

There is a noticeable pattern, and a change (and partial reversal) in the way the enemy was perceived (or, perhaps more accurately said, in the way the soldiers' perception of the enemy is remembered). But what can explain this? Anyone hailing from literary studies will quickly point to the difference in medium. The poem, due to its immediacy and intimacy—and, as Harvey points out, its trench-friendly length (Harvey 1998: 126)—would seem to be inherently suitable for the expression of feelings of compassion for his fellow man and rage against the instigators of hate.

But the medium alone can account for this change of perspective. As the young veterans looked back on their still raw traumatic experiences, they surely felt the need to rationalise many things about them—and it is not hard to understand how a soldier's self-reported affinity with the very people he was supposed to kill could have caused a serious case of cognitive dissonance. So neither should it come as a shock that, as Harvey notes, “some war reminiscences seem to be more an exercise in forgetting than remembering” (Harvey 1998: 129).

This sharpens rather than blunts the post-war writings' anti-war edge: the fact that the soldier was forced to ignore his brotherly feelings towards his “enemy” and go on killing him adds much dramatic force to the soldiers' bitter predicament. Despite the feelings of kinship, then, there was a need for dissociation from the enemy. British soldiers could circumvent these difficulties by referring to the Germans in a more familiar variation of a standard epithet, as in “brother Bosche” (Brown and Seaton 2001: 30) or “old Fritz” (Imperial War Museum 1980), thus both conveying sincere affinity and still keeping the necessary ironic distance.

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