M. A.

THESIS

WILFRED OWEN AS A PACIFIST

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ABSTRACT

Wilfred Owen's life and poetry may be divided into two phases. After his experiences in the war the shy, insecure and egotistic young Owen is turned violently into the mature man, and his early rather lush and imitative verses become brutal and realistic, expressing the truth of war. The central theme of his war poems is the beastliness of war. He wrote bitter satires, like "Inspection", "The Dead-Beat" as well as touching elegies like "The Send-Off" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth", but his strongest poems, that speak directly to humanity and put the anguish of the individual soldier in a universal frame are "Futility" and "Strange Meeting". Not only did he write powerful and moving poetry on the truth of war, but he was also one of the first war protestors of the 20th century. He became an eloquent spokesman for the millions of soldiers with whom he shared the same experience. In the preface to the collection of poems he intended to publish he states his expectation, his objectives, his sense of duty and his own role as a poet and man. It is paradoxically in the act of renouncing art and poetry that he wrote his most successful poems, as paradoxically through acting in the war he became a pacifist. His protest is all the more powerful because it is the outcome of his own war experiences. He had entered the war as a volunteer, with the belief of going to fight for a just cause, yet at the front he recognized the futility and absurdity of war, and saw clearly the self-deception that lay behind the patriotic exhortations of church and state. On the whole he saw the war as a crime against nature, against humanity, and against creation itself. Therefore, in his view, no war can be justified. Based on The Sermon on the Mount, he insists in his poems on the practice of fraternal love as the only way for humanity to achieve peace.

RESUMO

A vida e obra de Wilfred Owen pode ser dividida em duas fases: antes da guerra e sua experiência na guerra. A primeira se caracteriza pela timidez, insegurança e egocentrismo. A poesia é romântica, rica em imagens sensuais, porém imitativa. Na segunda ele se mostra como um homem maduro e seus versos são de uma dura realidade, expressando verdades que a meditação e a guerra lhe ensinaram. O tema central desta fase é a bestialidade a que o homem fica reduzido com a violência da guerra. Escreveu sátiras como "Inspection", "The Dead-Beat" como também elegias comoventes: "The Send-Off", "Anthem for Doomed Youth",porém suas poesias mais profundas, que falam diretamente à humanidade colocando a angústia de cada soldado numa forma universal, são "Futility" e "Strange Meeting". Owen com suas poesias foi um dos primeiros contestadores das guerras no século XX. Foi o porta-voz de milhões de soldados com os quais compartilhou dos mesmos sofrimentos. No prefácio da obra que pretendia organizar,Owen expressa suas expectativas, seus objetivos e sua missão. Paradoxalmente em renunciando à arte e à poesia escreveu suas melhores poesias, assim como, em atuando na guerra tornou-se um pacifista. Seu protesto é mais autêntico por ser resultado da própria experiência. Ele entrara na guerra como voluntário, convicto de que iria lutar por uma causa justa, mas no "front" reconheceu claramente a hipocrisia por trás das exortações patrióticas da igreja e do estado, como também a futilidade e o absurdo da guerra. Em suma a guerra foi para Owen um crime contra a Natureza, a humanidade, e contra a própria Criação. Por estas razões, para ele não há guerra justificável. Em contraposição insiste nas suas poesias na prática do amor fraterno, tendo como base o Sermão da Montanha como único caminho para a humanidade alcançar a paz.

1. INTRODUCTORY

1.1. Statement of Purpose

More than ever we see these days more and more individuals and groups of individuals actively engaged in promoting peace among men. Philosophers, scientists, politicians, artists of all branches, free-thinkers, religious people and atheists are more and more concerned with peace for a world that is sinking deeper and deeper into wars each time more violent in destruction. However this concern is not a characteristic peculiar to the present decade. Many of these pacifist movements have their origin mainly in the First World War and its aftermath. In those movements also philosophers, artist,intellectuals and even laymen took part, but the outstanding figures, at least in England, were the soldier-poets, those who had witnessed and lived through the horrors and beastliness of war, and therefore their voices in favour of pacifism are more significant. It is to that group that the Englishman Wilfred Owen, (at that time unrecognized) who devoted his life and his poetry to peace and harmony among the peoples, belongs.

The purpose of this dissertation is to show Wilfred Owen as a convinced pacifist starting by setting the author in his familiar, social, religious, economic, and political context. Besides this the influences or non-influences of each element on Owen's pacifist ideal will be examined. Especial attention will be given to Keats, Owen's poetic guide during his youth; Laurent Tailhade, the French poet and pacifist, who sowed the seeds of pacifism in Owen, and to Siegfried Sassoon, the English pacifist poet, who watered those seeds in Owen, made them grow, and so started Owen as a pacifist poet. This dissertation will also attempt to show the transition of the early youthful,romantic

poet to the more mature war poet, pointing out how early themes somehow forshadow later themes, becoming intensified and expressive of deep moral concern. It also tries to explain the question of possible interference of his moral intention with his poetic art and the solution he gives to this problem. Particular attention will be devoted to dealing with a central dilemma in Owen, the paradox of his being a pacifist and yet fighting in the war. Throughout the dissertation Owen's deeply religious mind, his feeling of pity, his love for humanity and his sense of brotherhood, which played a great part in his becoming a pacifist, will be discussed.

It is necessary to state that this paper is not intended as an exhaustive study of the work of Wilfred Owen. It will limit itself to the analysis of the content of those poems that deal with themes related to Owen's pacifism, without attempting a psychoanalytic study of the poet, or a stylistic study of the poems. Both these topics could provide material enough for other dissertations.

Finally, this present work will be based on the method of analysis and discussion of individual poems by comparing and contrasting themes and ideas in each phase of the poet's career, as well as comparing and contrasting themes and ideas of different phases to show the evolution of the pacifist.

1.2. Previous scholarship in relation to Owen's pacifism

Wilfred Owen's Collected Poems were first published in 1920, and not very much has been written on his poetry so far, nor on his pacifism. This review will show the points of view (with regard to Owen's pacifism) of some of the few critics whose works are considered in this thesis.

Patricia Ledward in her article "The Poetry of Wilfred Owen" Poetry Review 32, 1941, pp. 101, argues against critics who have said that Owen "wrote excellent propaganda for the cause of pacifism". She admits that Owen's war poems might be considered propaganda on one hand, but on the other, she adds:

> "the humanity of Owen was far more profound than that of the pacifist who thought that, by withdrawing himself from the conflict into self-imposed isolation, he could alter the trend of world events... His philanthropy was of the heart and body not merely of the mind".

In other words, to regard Owen simply as a propagandist is to ignore his humanitarian involvement.

D.S Savage discusses in his article "Two Prophetic Poems," Western Review, 1949, Owen's "Strange Meeting" and Yeats' "Second Coming". On page 73 he refers to Owen's pacifism:

> "That Owen was a pacifist, or even that his attitude was tinged with pacifism, has been denied in certain quarters, and the question itself silently passed over in others, from motives, the questionability in which not concern us here."

In savage's opinion the evidence of Owen's pacifism is clear in the sequence of the remarks Owen had written agains various poems he ordered in the table of contents for the publication of his poems: "The Unnaturalness of weapons". "Inhumanity of war". "The insupportability of war". "Horrible beastliness of war". "Foolisheness of war", and in Owen's letter where he says:

> "Already I have comprehended a light which never filter inot 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... And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?"

Joseph Cohen states in his article "Owen Agonistes", English Literature in Transition 8, 1965, on page 256 that Owen's latent homosexuality is :

> "the final key to understanding (his)achievement, and that the position he took toward the war was almost entirely motivated by homosexual elements."

We cannot deny that Owen's intense relationship with his mother and his estrangement from his father could have predisposed him to homosexuality and that indeed his poems give evidence of that latent homosexuality Cohen discusses in his article. And I believe that an analysis of Owen's themes of guilt and sacrifice in terms of his alienation from his father could be most interesting to someone with a psychoanalytic orientation. But I do not believe that in it lies the key to Owen's poetry and pacifism, and I try to show in my dissertation that it lies elsewhere. Owen's poems exist in themselves, thus we do not need too much information about the poet himself in order to understand them. I would even ask, as the critic Gertrude M. White does in her article "Critics Key: Poem or Personality", English Literature in Transition, 11, 1968, on page 175:

> "whether homosexuality, even if proved, can be considered the "key" to an understanding and proper evaluation of Owen's poetry or that of any other poet; whether, in fact, emotional motivations, whatever they may be suspected to have been, are relevant to a consideration of a poet's achievement".

Vivian de Sola Pinto in Crisis in English Poetry - 1880 - 1940, Hutchinson & Co (publisher) Ltd, London, 1967, suggests that Owen found his religion through the influence of Tailhade towards pacifism and his own experiences in the trenches,

which I also try to show in my dissertation. He says on page 132 that Owen "was unable to retain his belief in orthodox Christianity, but the pacifism of Tailhade gave him a kind of 'religion of humanity', and the indignation and pity arising out of his war experience had the quality of a 'conversion'".

D. S. R. Welland in his book Wilfred Owen - A Critical Study, Chatto & Windus, London, 1969, pp. 89, maintains that, although Owen's pacifism is usually expressed in Christian terms, it is "not entirely the outcome of the conflict between his military experience and his religious upbringing. There is another influence behind it, more powerful than is sometimes recognized". Welland is referring to the influence of Laurent Tailhade, the French symbolist poet, whose pacifist beliefs Welland says "must have made on Owen an impression so deep that particular phrases and images may well have remained at some level of his consciousness". Welland identifies those phrases and images in Owen's "Mental Cases" and "The Show", and Owen actually became a convinced pacifist only three years after his meeting with Tailhade, as discussed in 2.3. of this dissertation.

Gertrude M. White in her book Wilfred Owen, N. York, 1969, Twayne's English Authors Series, does not attribute too much weight to Tailhade's pacifist influence on Owen, though she admits that there was some influence. She says on page 26, "Though Tailhade had no direct influence on Owen's poetry, his warm, sympathetic interest and encouragement must have meant a great deal to the lonely youngster. The elder man was also a pacifist, a fact which perhaps did have some effect on the development of Owen's attitude toward the war." On page 129, referring to Owen's "Strange Meeting", "The Show",

"Insensibility", and "Futility" she argues that these poems "are in themselves a sufficient answer to the critics who charge that his pacifism weakens his achievement as a poet, for in them Owen "freed himself wholly from the limitations of the personal and the subjective and gave form and body to universal truths". Continuing to argue with other critics, she says on the same page: "we cannot justly say that Owen's pacifism is an 'historical limitation' on his verse. His pacifism was the result of his vision. And his vision at its clearest was not limited to the trenches of World War I but he saw man and world sub specie aeternitatis."

Jon Silkin in his book Out of Battle - The Poetry of the Great War, London, Oxford University Press, 1972, discusses Owen's dual role of pacifist - killer. On page 233 he says: "Owen's difficulties are partly located in his perplexed self-questioning, 'and am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?' If he indicts the Church for its failure to accomodate this 'light', he also accuses himself. A combatant conscientious objector shares in the suffering but also in the killing. Owen did not and could not resolve the 'victor-victim' paradox, but he tried. By fusing anger with compassion, he indicated that the only solution lay in people so rethinking their attitude to war that they would never wage it again....

It seems possible that Owen coped with the dual role of pacifist-killer partly by encompassing the miseries of the German, French, and English soldiers in a universal pity." I myself intend to deal with this problem in detail in 4.5. of my dissertation.

Jon Stallworthy in his critical biography Wilfred Owen - A Biography, Oxford University Press and Chatto and Windus, London 1974, summarizes Owen's evolution as a pacifist and poet. He says on page 281: "He came to the War with his imagination in large measure conditioned and prepared to receive and record the experience of the trenches. Botany and Broxton*, Uriconium**, and Keats, his adolescent hypochondria, his religious upbringing and later doubts, all shaped him for his subject, as for no other. He wrote more eloquently than other poets of the tragedy of boys killed in battle, because he felt that tragedy more acutely, and his later elegies spring from his early preoccupations as flowers from their stem." In my dissertation I will also deal to a certain extent with this evolution.

1.3. War and Pacifism

The issue of war and peace is as old as the history of mankind. There has always been a war going on in some part of the world as well as there have always existed groups or individuals concerned with establishing peace for the world, which of course has never been achieved. Wars continue to exist. These people engaged in such movements have been called pacifists. The absolute pacifist or conscientious objector refuses to go to war and holds the extreme position that no

*Broxton - a village in Cheshire where Owen spent a few happy weeks in 1907, where according to Owen's own words was born his poethood.

**Uriconium - a Roman city in Shrewsbury, that had been destroyed in a battle, the history of which Owen became very interested in. From 1909 to 1913 he made several expeditions to the ruins of this city, which provided him with the inspiration for a poem called "Uriconium/An Ode"

circunstances can justify war. He generally bases his belief in religion or philosophy. Christianity is one of the sources of pacifism, and for Wilfred Owen, it was certainly the most important source of his pacifism. Absolute pacifists have taken passages from the "Sermon on the Mount" such as "resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" or "love thy enemies, bless them that curse you"(1) as their leading principles. It is possible to distinguish two types of pacifists, since not all are absolute pacifists. Some people have called themselves pacifists, but have not rejected war completely. They have set restrictions and argued that wars could be distinguished as just or unjust. This might have been possible and justifiable for wars in the past, but after the Second World War it seems that no war can ever be justified morally, because with the devèlopment of nuclear weapons the powers of destruction have become too great.

After the Reformation non-resistance to aggression and the refusal to bear arms became a matter of doctrine for several religious sects, like the Quakers in Great Britain, the Anabaptists in Germany and the Mennonites in Switzerland. These religious groups have multiplied over the centuries. Up to the present there are still more sects, which all continue to observe strictly their pacifist principles, but there is no evidence that these groups had any strong influence on the First World War in the sense of holding back or stopping the war.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), the Russian novelist, author of War and Peace shares this Christian view of non-resistance, although he does not have any connection with those religious

sects. He also bases his pacifist doctrine on Christ's teachings about the brotherhood of men, humility and the duty of returning good for evil. In Tolstoy's view real peace could only be achieved if all men understood, accepted and carried out Christianity in its true significance, but all this has been hindered because Christianity has already been presented to men in a corrupt form, not in its essence. Unlike other pacifists and movements, Tolstoy's ideas had some influence on other people before the First World War. Hans Kohn says in his The Modern World: 1848 to the Present that Tolstoy's thought influenced Russian people, mainly the oppressed, who came to him looking for support. His influence even reached writers and leaders from other countries, like the French writer Romain Rolland (1866-1944), who wrote Vie de Tolstoi in 1911, the Indian leader Mohandas Karamanchand Gandhi (1869-1948) and many conscientious objectors of the First World War, but in general pacifism carried very little weight before and during the First World War.

The authorities of different states took very different attitudes towards conscientious objection. It was not easy for conscientious objectors during the First World War. There was strong social pressure on them. They had to come before court and argue their case. They had to prove that they were not just cowards trying to escape military service. Many people, although they were pacifists, went to war because it was easier than facing all the social abuse. Great Britain tried a solution for conscientious objectors during the First World War by offering them other services of national importance and a non-combatant corps was established. After the Second World War it became easier in Britain. It was decided that

any conscientious objector had to register on a special list of conscientious objectors and he was not called up for military service. Great Britain and the United States seem to be the only countries in which an attempt has been made to recognize all kinds of conscientious objectors. Many other states, even at present, do not recognize conscientious objection at all, and a refusal to undertake military service is treated like any other transgression of the law.

1.4. The First World War and its combatants

The last half of the 19th century elapsed rather peacefully for Great Britain. There were some wars between the great European powers during the years of 1850 to 1880. In Germany Bismarck was busy with his bloody campaigns to unite Germany, while in Italy Count Cavour was also involved in the unification of Italy. France and Britain were involved in the Crimean War. The Crimean War in 1854 was perhaps the greatest war of that time, and it was the only war in which Great Britain was directly concerned. The second half of the 19th century was also called in Great Britain "the age of prestige and expansion" or "colonialism". During this time not only Great Britain, but also France, Germany, and Belgium were expanding their territories by adding colonies to their empires in other parts of the western and eastern world. There is little evidence that Wilfred Owen thought much about colonialism, but it was very important for the British view of themselves. The British and other European thought themselves superior races, therefore they believed they had a divine right to colonize and to civilize the conquered peoples. Through colonialism had

developed a kind of racism. The colonizing countries also expected that the colonies would automatically support them if it came to a war. In fact, the British colonies, particularly Canada, Australia and New Zealand did support Great Britain during the First World War. Through colonization these countries increased their economic power and political influence in the world. Great Britain was threatening the other major European countries with her powerful navy. This originated a rivalry between Britain and the other European countries, which accounted partly for the outbreak of the First World War.

Looking at the period from another point of view we see that it was also a period of great achievement in scientific discoveries and of great adventures. This last fact was due partly to the romantic spirit of the age. The invention of the radio, wireless telegraphy and the increasing development of railroads had made communication among mankind easier. Near the end of the 19th century Englishmen , Frenchmen, and Germans penetrated into the unknown African continent, while Norwegians and Englishmen explored the poles of the earth. All these events affected man's thinking and his way of life. Nineteenth century thought was also deeply influenced by Darwin's revolutionizing ideas in the study of biology. The publication of his book The Origin of the Species in 1859 made the year a turning point in modern science and philosophy. His thesis "that it is by constant adaptation to the environment through a process of natural selection and struggle for survival that all species have become differentiated" (2) challenged the traditionally accepted notions about the origin of mankind. The book provoked a real shaking of the very foundations of Christian-

ity. On Wilfred Owen the effects of Darwinism can also be seen. In his poem "Futility" he talks about the sun that "Woke, once, the clays of a cold star" (3) suggesting the idea of evolution according to which the sun is the very source of life itself. At the beginning Darwin was severely criticized by the theologians of his time as a blasphemer for denying the act of the Divine creation, but from 1870 onwards some reconciliation was achieved between Darwinism and religion. The theologians saw the need and tried to adapt religion to the new environment.

At the same time another revolution in thought was about to take place. This, however, was coming from another direction, from psychology. It was the detailed study of human nature itself, and was being carried out by Sigmund Freud and his associates Carl G. Jung and Alfred Adler. It opened new opportunities for the understanding of human behaviour.Freud's psychoanalysis and the study of the subconscious made man aware of the power of the emotional, irrational and the instinctive impulses that motivate his behaviour. Although Freud's influence was really powerfully felt after the First World War, the view of man that psychoanalysis required was already present in the 19th century, that is, man as a sophisticated animal, or basically man without religion. This view had been developed by Darwinism. Psychology influenced the literature. It provided new material for novelists and poets, who began to explore the field by attempting psychological studies of their characters.

The third major revolution in thought and influence of the age was Marxism. This current of thought was expounded by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). These two German exiles lived in England, where in 1848 they put out The Communist Manifesto. They wrote the manifesto on behalf

of the Communist League of some German workers in Belgium and Britain. Through this pamphlet their ideas spread all over Europe and even beyond, exercising a strong influence in the whole world. Marxism aided the rise of the common man. There was much community and economic thinking going on in Europe at that time. In Great Britain the labour movements and the formation of the Trade Unions were significant. The Trade Unions were associations of all the various kinds of manual workers, who were beginning to awaken and seriously to question the right of the middle and upper classes to exploit them. The main objective of these trade unions was to get representatives into parliament who through their conscientiousness, would command the confidence of the class. The historian David Thomson says in England in the Nineteenth Century that Marxism had no direct influence on the formation of the labour movements and Trade Unionism although Engels and Marx lived in England at that time. This might be true, but as the movements grew stronger and since Marx's ideas fitted too well with the labouring classes' demands, in the 1880s the movements definitely assumed a doctrinaire character. Marxism, the labour movements and Trade Unionism obviously affected the British society indirectly, and it is very likely that they affected the poet Wilfred Owen. Though with Owen it is remarkable, for his privileged position as officer and petit bourgeois should naturally have made him an opponent of Marxist thought, yet in the war he identified with the common soldier. When the soldiers in the trenches, not only the British, but also from other nations, saw their miserable condition, they realized that they had some social basis for complaint. There was an awareness of class consciousness and of class solidarity which helped them to

identify with the soldier on the other side and to regard the officer class and the opulent capitalists and war profiteers at home as the real enemies.

Approaching the end of the 19th century, observing all the progress and development he had achieved, man became more and more aware of his power and capacity to create things, while his sense of complete dependency on God was slowly vanishing. Nineteenth century man, mainly in the industrialized European countries, had a boundless faith in progress and science. He was foreseeing a new age of prosperity and peace within reach of mankind, but all this was abruptly dispelled by the outbreak of war in 1914. Man had forgotten that the means put at his disposal by science and technology in order to make human life easier, might also be used for destruction or tyranny instead of for beneficial creation and the welfare of humanity. By the end of the 19th century Europe was losing its equilibrium in all directions. There was a general conflict between religious faith and a growing materialism. The churches were losing their spiritual influence on the rising classes of intellectuals and industrial workers because of their turning against secular progress and scientific discovery. Man himself was feeling disoriented, because the established beliefs had fallen apart, but no new substantial values were at hand yet. There was a general discontent in the individuals, between classes, and between nations, which may have contributed to the outbreak of the war.

Though the war had been foretold by political prophets, its outbreak caught some of the major European countries rather by surprise. In England particularly, the politicians seemed

to be too busy with internal problems to care about international affairs. Besides that British people had come to the belief that they were the strongest nation in the world since they possessed the greatest navy, the greatest dominions in other parts of the world, and a superior way of life. All this had made them rather complacent and had given them a feeling of invincibility. However by the end of the 19th century Germany was increasing her importance very fast too. The Germans were also building their navy and were claiming that it would be the most powerful in the whole world, a claim which obviously alarmed Great Britain and the nations on the borders of Germany. By the 1890s Germany had reached the point of being the greatest military power in Europe, and the centre of its economy. Britain's fear of Germany's foreign policy pushed Great Britain and France together. Germany's drive into the Near and Far East was also alarming Russia, France's ally. Thus by 1907 the triple entente of France, Great Britain, and Russia was established, while Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy made up the so-called Triple Alliance. Though much has been written by experts on the subject, the question of the outbreak of the war seems not to be settled yet. However the rivalry between the two naval forces (Great Britain and Germany) is widely accepted today as one of the major causes of the outbreak of the war(4).C. Stewart Doty in Western Civilization - Recent Interpretations - From 1715 to the Present - Vol.II states the breakdown of the two alliances and the international anarchy created by this breakdown as the real reason of the outbreak of the First World War. This looks like a more convincing argument. It is quite clear that the very systems of alliances

made the war inevitable. Each group of countries, being afraid of the other's intentions began to pile up arms with the illusion or perhaps as an excuse for preserving the peace and balance between the major European countries. This arms race came to the saturation point and created such tension between the two systems that made the war inevitable. The war started with the invasion of Serbia by Austria on July 29,1914, followed by the entry of Germany as an ally of Austria, of Russia as protector of Serbia, and of France and Great Britain in entente with Russia, which was later joined by Japan,Italy, and finally by the United States. Once the war was started it was impossible to halt it. As if driven by fate or like in a game of chess, in which one step makes the next inevitable, so one country forced the other to enter the war. Great Britain was obliged to enter the war by the German attack on the borders of Belgium.

In spite of the initial indifference of the British towards the war, it was not difficult to get them into uniforms. There was already a deep sense of patriotism and of duty to one's country in the British. Patriotism was almost considered a God-given sentiment during Victorian times. To a certain extent this spirit had been instilled by the training of the privileged young in public schools and through the literature of the 19th century. War had been endlessly praised by Victorian poets like Alfred Tennyson in "The Charge of the Light Brigade", a poem glorifying the English valour and prowess in the Crimean War, and Kipling. Even when the war had already started poets were employed by the government to write poetry for recruiting propaganda. There are William Watson's "Sons of Britain", Eden Phillpott's "Germania", and

Henry Newbolt's "Vitai Lampada". These poems are typical examples of the kind of poetry written to persuade people to go to war. The imagery and heroes are taken from wars in the past. If we look at these poems they seem incongruous. These poets can be compared to soldiers facing tanks and planes with cavalry, and bows and arrows. Naturally this propagandist poetry found great echo in the hearts of the young in Britain. Hundreds of thousands of young men gave up their comfortable homes and their jobs to join the army. Many of them left school to go to the fight. The poet Robert Graves was one of them. The number of volunteers was so huge that there were neither enough huts nor uniforms for them. It was in this mood of enthusiasm and jingoistic pride that the British went to war. Going to war was to them a high adventure undertaken for noble ends and they took Great Britain's victory for granted. Thomas Hardy expresses this in his "Men who March Away":

"In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just",(5)

The British had a completely unrealistic conception of modern war. In fact they had no idea of what it was really like. Yet it must be emphasized that there had been no major war for a century in which the British nation had been involved, Besides that no one could expect that this war would develop into one of the greatest wars on record. The colonial wars and the Boer War had been conflicts only of the governing people of the countries, and had been regarded more as games. Consequently young soldiers imagined that the new war would also be rather fun. This can be seen in a letter of a soldier named Paul Jones. This young boy writes to his family: "I have longed for the rough and tumble of the war as for a football match"(6). Julian Grenfell, a soldier poet also states in his

letters about the war: "I adore war. It is like a picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic"(7). Rupert Brooke, another soldier poet was certainly the most widely read during that time. Even at war he continued writing bardic poetry. Like others, Brooke had not realized that this was not a war of the old times. He saw the sacrifice at war as something welcoming, as an opportunity for man's purification. This appears in his sonnet "Peace", in which he describes war as a cleansing force:

"Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with
His hour,
And caught our youth, wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened
power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping..."(8)

In"The Soldier ", his most celebrated sonnet he expresses sensitively the exaggerated feeling of patriotism. It is almost carried to the point of racism when he pretends that the very spot where the English soldier is buried will become England. The soldier is part of the English soil and therefore united to it forever. Even the dust will become richer through the dust of the corpse, because it is of an Englishman.

"If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home."(9)

It is certainly true that lines like those above could only come from people who had neither lived through the misery of the trenches nor even seen it. In fact Rupert Brooke died before the main carnage.

British people at home, as already stated, were out of touch with reality with regard to the events at the battle

front. The casualty lists did not tell the truth and the newspapers did not print the truth either. After all the English civilian was at a safe distance from the destruction, therefore he certainly did not even care much about the war until the terrible battle on the Somme in 1916. After that battle the British feeling of pride and security was "substituted by an ever-growing doubt and disillusion" (1). By that time British society itself had passed through a change. The civilians at home became still more separated from the people in the army fighting on the continent. In a way Great Britain was divided into two nations: the nation at home, made up by the people who continued to believe in a heroic war or knew the truth but cinically remained silent and the army overseas, which was in touch with the crude reality of life and death at the battle front and had long lost that belief. The soldiers realized the truth about the war and among them were poets who began to speak up about that truth in their verses. These poets have radically different attitudes towards the war and the fallen from the pre-war poets. They see death in action as horrible and piteous, not as beautiful and heroic. This shows up in Charles H. Sorley's poem:

> "When you see millions of the mouthless dead
> Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
> Say not soft things as other men have said,
> That you'll remember. For you need not so.
> Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
> It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
> Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
> Nor honour. It is easy to be dead." (11)

Sorley and Owen were the two soldier poets who were able to grasp the reality of the war and express it in their poetry. Both realized the waste of human values at war, and like many others felt helpless and frustrated "being part of a huge

machine that functions in an inhuman and incomprehensible way."(12) Sorley states this in the lines:

> "A hundred thousand million mites we go
> Wheeling and tacking over the eternal plain,
> Some black with death - some are white with woe.
> Who sent us forth? Who takes us home again?"(13)

As the war progressed the English and German soldiers at the battle front became more and more united and their hatred turned against the civilians at home. This appears in Wilfred Owen's poem "The Dead Beat", where the exhausted soldier on the stretcher says angrily:

> " 'I'll do 'em in',... "If this hand's spared,
> I'll murder them, I will' " (14)

The "them" refers to the war profiteers at home and the politicians, those responsible for the miserable situation of the soldiers, and in the lines "It's not those stiffs have crazed him; nor the Hun."(15) Owen implies that it was not death or the enormity of the fight that drove the soldier mad, but his frustration and bitterness at what was going on in England. Robert Graves, another trench poet refers to that attitude of the soldiers when he says: "Patriotism, in the trenches was too remote a sentiment, and at once rejected as fit only for civilians, or prisoners. A new arrival who talked about patriotism would soon be told to 'cut it out'"(16). Graves describes a discussion he had with Bertrand Russell, who at that time called himself a pacifist. Russell had asked Graves what his attitude would be if his men were sent to stop a strike of munition makers and these refused to go back to work. Graves answered that he would order the men to fire if there was no other way, and adds: "It would be no worse than shooting Germans really."(17) Another example of the British soldiers' disillusion with the war and their growing hatred towards the politicians

and civilians at home is Siegried Sassoon's public protest he sent to his commanding officer:

> " I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.
> I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow-soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.
> I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.
> I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.
> On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacence 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.
>
> July, 1917 S.Sassoon." (18)

The fact that there was even friendship between the rival armies on the battlesfield is well documented. During one Christmas at least they all met in between the lines and sang Christmas songs, exchanged drinks and jokes. Graves says "The Germans wanted to be social. They sent messages to us in undetonated rifle-grenades. One of these was evidently addressed to the Irish battalion we had relieved:

'We all German korporals wish you English korporals a good day and invite you to a good German dinner tonight with beer (ale) and cakes'.

The battalion cared as little about the successes or reverses of our Allies as about the origins of the war. It

never allowed itself to have any political feeling about the Germans.

... The Christmas of 1914 fraternization, in which the battalion was among the first to participate, had the same professional simplicity: no emotional hiatus, this, but a common-place of military tradition - an exchange of courtesies between officers of opposing armies."(19)

All this shows us the complete alienation of the soldiers from the politicians at home, the solidarity and identification between the rival soldiers, which Wilfred Owen wrote so well about in "Strange Meeting":

> "'Strange friend', I said, 'here is no cause to mourn
> . . . .
> Whatever hope is yours, was my life also;
> . . .
> I am the enemy you killed, my friend'."(20)

Owen identifies with the dead soldier. At the end he is both the enemy who was killed and the poet. Sorley and Owen both saw the war as "a tragic cleavage between two nations blinded by hatred"(21), and their poetry expounds this. Sorley expresses it in his sonnet "To Germany":

> "You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,
> And no man claimed the conquest of your land.
> . . .
> And each in other's dearest ways we stand,
> And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind."
> (22)

and Owen expresses the absurdity of war and the blindness of humanity to realize this absurdity in "Strange Meeting":

> "Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
> Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
> They will be swift with the swiftness of the tigress.
> None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress."(23)

Wilfred Owen went to war as a volunteer, perhaps with the same illusions as any young Englishman, but after he had

realized and experienced the reality of modern war, he felt it his duty to warn humanity against the dangers of it. Thus he became a pacifist and set himself to write pacifist poetry, which he did with great enthusiasm until his death on November the fourth 1918. His death seems an irony of fate, for he died in action a week before the armistice.

1.5. Contemporary Pacifism

There were war resistance movements in several countries during the First World War, but the movement in England seems to have been the most well-organized. It was composed of writers, artists and intellectuals. The playwright George Bernard Shaw had published in 1914 his Common Sense About the War, which turned him into one of the most hated men in England. Bertrand Russell, the English philosopher wrote pacifist articles during the First World War and led a movement of overt pacifism in 1916, to which belonged several trench writers, like Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and others and even some civilians. "The Nation", an influential periodical, in which Russell's articles were published, was threatened with suppression several times. In 1918 Russell was imprisoned for his unpopular opinions on the war. Defending himself at his trial he said:

> "The noblest thing in a man is the spiritual force which enables him to stand firm against the whole world in obedience to a sense of right; and I will never acquiesce in silence while men in whom spiritual force is strong are treated as a dangerous rather than its most precious heritage. I would say to persecutors, 'You cannot defeat such men; you cannot make their testimony of no avail. For every one whom you silence by force a hundred will be moved to carry on his work, until at last you yourselves will be won over, and will recognize... that all the material force the world contains is powerless against

the spirit of indomitable love'." (24)

Despite his imprisonment and all the hostility towards him, Russell continued, even after the Second World War, to appeal to the leaders of the nations warning them of the dangers of nuclear war, but later on he abandoned his pacifist view. Clive Bell, the art critic, a conscientious objector, published in 1915 a pamphlet titled Peace at Once, which was immediately suppressed by the government. Apart from these people, there were other intellectuals in England engaged in pacifist movements, like Aldous Huxley, Lytton Strachey, Herbert Read, Osbert Sitwell and his brother Sachereverel Sitwell. Osbert Sitwell was a trench poet, with whom Wilfred Owen kept up a correspondence during the war.

In 1915 Lilla Brockway, a socialist and confirmed pacifist organized, together with her husband, the No-Conscription Fellowship by collecting signatures of a great number of war resisters in England. From this association sprang others, so that in October 1915 over fifty of them existed in England. But they all failed to achieve their goal when military service became compulsory. By May 1916 many conscientious objectors had been arrested, court-martialed, and even condemned to hard labour. Many had received brutal treatment from the military authorities, and only those who were willing to undertake other work of national importance were released from prison.

In France, conscientious objectors and men who refused to fight suffered the same treatment as the British, whereas Lenin in Russia seems to have been more sympathetic to war resisters, freeing many from prison during the Russian Revolution. However the conscientious objectors of the United States had a bad time during the First World War. Arthur Orrmont

reports that "so brutal was their treatment that most accepted some form of noncombatant service; those who did not, an estimated five hundred, received long terms of imprisonment in harsh military prisons".(25) In Germany, apart from a number of religious sects, there were few conscientious objectors who based their refusal on religious convictions, but there were many who refused to serve a militaristic government with expansionist aims. Even members of both political parties (radicals and socialists) made public speeches against the war. There were a number of German peace societies, which aimed at bringing about political and economic understanding between the nations of the world. One was called "Bund Neues Vaterland" and formed in 1914, but they were all suppressed later by the government.

After this brief review of conscientious objection and the various attempts at bringing peace in several countries during the First World War one is forced to realize that very little was achieved. The general effect of all the pacifist movements on man and war was like a drop of water in the ocean.

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2. THE POET AND HIS TIME

2.1. Family

Wilfred Salter Owen was born at Plas Wilmont, Oswestry, Shropshire on Marh 18, 1893. He was the eldest of the four children in his family. His father Tom Owen, a railway official was a man of independent and adventurous spirit, while his mother Susan Shaw Owen was a very religious and conventional puritan. Wilfred spent the first four years of his life with his parents at Plas Wilmont, in the house of his maternal grandparents. Tom Owen never reconciled himself to his career. He had always dreamed about a career in the navy. Susan's parents had been financially comfortable until 1897 when her father died and it became evident that he had spent all he possessed. From that time onwards the Owen family had to live on Tom's meagre salary, and thus they frequently moved about always looking for cheaper houses.

Their straitened means naturally affected the children's education deeply, particularly Wilfred who wanted to become a poet and Harold, whose inclinations were towards painting. Both boys had to begin working early in their lives to help pay for their education. This situation was perhaps also partly responsible for Wilfred's insecurity during his childhood and youth.

2.2. Education

Wilfred Owen's family had left Plas Wilmont in 1897 and moved to Birkenhead. In 1900, because of his increasing interest in reading and books, he entered the Birkenhead Institute. In spite of being a very shy little boy, he did

well at school from the beginning. As soon as he learned to read, he began playing with words and, together with one of his friends, he developed a word-grame. In 1902 he went to live with his paternal grandparents in Shrewsbury.

His grandfather allowed him to use part of the garden for himself to grow vegetables, which he did with great pleasure. No doubt Owen's interest in nature and the process of the growing of plants, which he shows throughout his life, began to develop during that time he spent in his grandfather's garden.

Wilfred was doing well at the Birkenhead Institute until 1907 when his family moved to Shrewsbury. Then the question of the next school for Wilfred and his brother Harold came up. Tom and Susan were particularly concerned to find the right school for Wilfred, while they considered Harold's abilities not worthy of the expenses of a good school. This attitude naturally produced a feeling of inferiority in Harold and one of superiority in Wilfred, which created a certain rivalry between the two boys, and this rivalry persisted until both achieved their maturity and they became real friends.

Wilfred developed a very close relationship with his mother, due partly to his father's constant absence from home and to Susan's exaggerated protective instinct towards her son. Tom Owen constantly criticized Wilfred's leaning towards poetry. He loved Wilfred,but his bitterness at the rift growing between them made him more and more critical of his son's interests and ambitions. It was with Susan that he discussed his problems and shared his happiness during his whole life. It is almost a sacred veneration he shows towards his mother. This is seen in his letters to her. Of the 673 letters,550 Owen wrote to his mother. He sent almost all his poems first to his mother for her

appreciation and judgment. It seems that for every decision to be taken, he needed her approval. In 1913 when he wanted to leave Dunsden (see below p. 31), he felt the need to talk first with his mother, and still at the end of 1914, when he was considering entering the army he wrote to her that he was waiting "to talk over my future, first with you; and then with a Professor or a Recruiting Sergeant" (1). This emphasizes his lack of self-confidence.

In the early spring of 1907 Wilfred entered the Shrewsbury Technical School, and he began working hard in order to win a scholarship to Oxford University. At the Shrewsbury Technical School Owen met an English teacher, Miss Wright, who was of great importance to him at that time and perhaps even in his later development as a man and a poet. Miss Wright had realized Owen's insecurity and distrust of himself, which are typical of adolescence. She had also noticed his struggle to overcome these difficulties and his efforts towards the scholarship at the University. Thus she not only gave him classes on drama and poetry, but with her friendly understanding she helped him to gain more confidence in himself. Jon Stallworthy (2) says that it was during his time with Miss Wright that Owen began writing poetry. He quotes a draft of a blank verse poem Owen had written on the inside cover of one of his books at that time.

Wilfred Owen had many interests. Natural history, as already mentioned, always fascinated him. He took some Botany classes at Oxford University in 1912-13 while he was with the vicar in Dunsden. Images from nature and plants are very common in his verses, and in 1917 while he was at the Craiglockhart War Hospital with shell-shock, he prepared and gave an interesting speech on lichens to his fellow-patients.

His greatest loves, however, were music and poetry. Even after he knew how to read himself, he liked to hear his mother reading poetry to him, and he himself used to read poetry aloud to hear the effect of the combination of sounds. He had studied the piano for some time during his Birkenhead years and had become a fairly good pianist. In fact Owen had a sensitive ear for the perception of harmony and discord. This can be seen in several of his poems like "From My Diary":

> "Leaves murmuring by myriads in the shimmering trees
> Lives wakening with wonder in the Pyrenees"(3)

and in his most famous war poem "Strange Meeting":

> "It seemed that out of battle I escaped
> Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped"
> (4)

in which he plays with his so called para-rhymes as for example "escaped"/"scooped"*.

In September 1911, Owen took his entrance examination at London University. He passed it, but he did not get either the first place or the scholarship as he had expected. At the same time he was invited by the vicar of Dunsden, Reverend Herbert Vigan, to become his lay assistant and pupil. After his unsatisfactory results at the examinations, he promptly accepted the Vicar's offer.

During the first days he spent at Dunsden, he was pleased with the Vicar, who had proclaimed his knowledge of and familiarity with the great literary figures of the time like Ruskin, Dickens, Holman Hunt, and their works. Thus Owen believed he had found the right person to help him in his own literary studies, but he soon discovered that this was an illusion. The parish work kept him busy all day, so that there was little time left for himself. On January 20, 1912 he

* a combination of consonant rhyming and vowel assonance

complains in a letter to his mother:

> "The isolation from any whose interests are the same as mine (that is systematic study), the constant, inevitable mixing with persons whose influence will tend in the opposite direction - this is a serious drawback." (5)

Meanwhile his botany lecturer at University College discovered Owen's interests in literature and introduced him to Miss Edith Morley, an English professor. This woman was also very helpful to Owen. She gave him some extra tuition in English literature, and mainly technical advice for the writing of poetry. This literary companionship helped Owen to take another step towards the revelation of his own poetry. But as time passed, Owen grew more and more discontented at the Vicarage, and at Christmas in 1912 he went home and discussed with his parents the possibility of leaving Dunsden. At the age of twenty he was still insecure about his future and unable to find out his real vocation. He had again tried to sit for a scholarship to University College Reading and again failed to win it. The same year, 1913, after a serious illness, his doctor recommended him to spend a winter in the South of France for the sake of his health. So in August 1913 he went to Bordeaux, where he began working as a part-time teacher of English in the Berlitz School of Languages. His letters from Bordeaux show that he enjoyed teaching and his pupils, but quite soon he was again complaining to his mother about having insufficient time for his own studies.

At the beginning of August 1914 Owen found himself in the Pyrenees at Villa Lorenzo, the house of Madame Lẽger, a pupil of his. There he stayed with the Lẽgers and their daughter Nenete, whom he describes, in a letter to his sister

Mary, as an exceptionally beautiful little girl. Nenete appears in several of Owen's early poems, such as "The Sleeping Beauty" (6) and "From My Diary" (7).

During his stay with the Lègers at the Villa Lorenzo, Owen came to know another important figure, the French poet Laurent Tailhade, who was also a convicted pacifist. Tailhade had given two lectures in the Cassino at Bagnères-de-Bigorre, and Madame Lèger arranged a personal contact between Owen and the French pacifist, by inviting Tailhade to lunch. They struck up a close friendship, and Tailhade's influences on Owen seem to be responsible to a certain extent for Owen's later becoming a pacifist.

All in all Owen's youth seems to have been rather dull. Up to 1914 he had tried several jobs. He had even considered a career in business, but nothing really appealed to him except poetry, and he had never abandoned the idea of becoming a poet. On Frebruary 6, 1915 he wrote to his mother:

> "Of the many prospects of the world that I have spied upon, there is only one field in which I could work willingly, and would work without wage. Only I must wait for the water of many seasons before I hope to produce one acceptable flower.
>
> ... I seem without a footing on life; but I have one. It is as bold as any, and I have kept it for years. For years now. I was a boy when I first realized that the fullest life liveable was a Poet's. And my later experiences ratify it". (8)

Owen always considered formal education indispensable to becoming a good poet. Therefore his deepest regret was that he did not have the opportunity to finish his university studies and to obtain a degree . On March 5, 1915 he declared in a letter to his mother:

to, study is necessary: a period of study, then of intercourse with kindred spirits, then of isolation. My heart is ready, but my brain is unprepared. I quite envisage possibility of non-success".(9), but later on he realized that formal education was not really that important. In another letter to his mother he says that he would no longer think of a certificate and what really counted for him was his experience, "the course in the university of life"(10) he had taken. As a matter of fact, critics even think that Owen's lack of formal education was a benefit to him, for the university might have destroyed his originality as a poet. Vivian de Sola Pinto comments ironically that Owen "had the good fortune to avoid public school education."(11)

2.3. Religion and Philosophy

Besides plants, music and poetry, it was perhaps religion that mostly occupied Owen's mind in his early years. This was a result of his own religious training and particularly the influence of his mother's religious fervour. She was a Calvinist by upbringing and conviction, and believed in a Divine Will. It is natural that she passed on her religious views to her children, especially to Wilfred who responded so well to religion. As a boy his interest in religion was so deep that he showed signs of eventually becoming a preacher. In his letters to his mother he writes very precisely the numbers of the hymns sung in church, and the references to the Bible of the Day's Sermon. Generally he ends the letters with a biblical passage like "Greet ye one another with a kiss of Charity. Peace be with you all that are in Christ Jesus"(12).

Another and perhaps stronger evidence of Owen's inclinations towards ministry is an event related by his brother Harold:

> "Aided and encouraged by my mother, Wilfred would on Sunday evenings arrange our small sitting-room to represent a church....
>
> Wilfred would spend a long time arranging the room, after which he would robe himself and,looking very priestlike in his surplice and mitre, would call us in to form the congregation. He would then conduct a complete evening service with remarkable exactitude and would end by reading a short sermon he had prepared with great care and thought." (13)

Wherever Owen found himself, even at a picnic he never forgot his mother's injunctions to read a passage from the Bible every night. It was partly his interest in the study of religion and theology that led him to the Vicar's at Dunsden. There he began performing the religious service for children, and according to his letters, he seemed pleased with his religious work. Only after two years did he realize that he was pursuing the wrong vocation. It became clear to him that his mother's religious influences had led him into this situation and that he was just pleasing her in carrying out those religious activities.

Looking at it from another point of view, however, one could say that Owen did not waste the time he spent at Dunsden. His experiences there affected him positively in another direction. He grew a little more as a human being; that is, he became a little less selfish. During his visits to the parish he had an opportunity to face another side of life. There he saw poverty and sickness, and all this forced him to look more outside and around himself. On March 23, 1912 he wrote to his mother:

> "I am holding aloof from the short breads; and I mean to give some to a gentle little girl of five, fast sinking under consumption - contracted after chickenpox. Isn't it pitiable? She is going to a hospital (weeks from hence of course), and maybe beyond reach of doctors by that time. She cannot take unappetizing food, poor Violet; but how is aught to be provided her; when the father is perennially out of work, and the mother I fancy half-starving for the sake of four children. This I suppose, is only a typical case; one of many Cases! O hard word! How it savours of rigid, frigid professionalism! How it suggests smooth and polished, formal, labelled, mechanical callousness!" (14)

Here we begin to see Owen's concern for others, his humanism which he shows throughout his whole life, particularly later towards his fellow-soldiers in the trenches. The word "pitiable" is a crucial word in Owen's work. It reappears several times in his letters and poems as well as the other adjective "piteous", which is related in meaning to the first, and in his preface he uses the noun "pity". They all convey his compassion for the suffering of the individual and for human suffering in general, but the word "pity" in the preface is particularly powerful for suggesting all the possible meanings of the word.

By the end of 1912 Owen had lost his interest in the study of theology, and with it he was gradually losing his faith, perhaps not his faith in Crist, but in organized Christianity. He had been observing how the religious people, especially the preachers selected only what interested them and ignored the essence of Christ's teachings. He had arrived at the conclusion that the only things that matter are the attitudes of men, not their beautiful words about Christ and his doctrine. He makes this position of his very clear in

a letter written to his mother on July 24, 1912, in which he tells her about an Evangelical Summer Convention he had attended:

> "there is, in a tent remote from mine,a Northumberland lad who works in the pits, whose soul-life and Christianity is altogether beyond my understanding. He has absolute peace of mind; faith before which mountains not only sink, but never become visible; and most other virtues of which the Keswig Platform speaks: The watching of his conduct, conversation, expression of countenance during meeting, bids fair to speak louder to my soul than the thundering of twenty latter-day Prophets from their rostra upon these everlasting hills." (15)

All the theological discussions at the convention meant nothing to Owen, compared to the deep impression the attitudes and gestures of that simple man made on him. He emphasizes this when he says in the same letter:

> "while they say, I say, preach that preaching is no witness of a Christian Soul, your scarbacked mining-lad acts that acting is efficient."(16)

On January 4, 1913 Owen finally told his mother that he had abandoned his belief in orthodox Christianity and how he was longing to leave the vicarage, where the real Christ for him was not present. In his poem "Maundy Thursday" Owen expresses clearly his disillusion with traditional Christianity.

> " Maundy Thrusday
>
> Between the brown hands of a server-lad
> The silver cross was offered to be kissed,
> The men came up, lugubrious, but not sad,
> And knelt reluctantly, half-prejudiced.
> (And kissing, kissed the emblem of a creed.)
> Then mourning women knelt; meek mouths they had,
> (And kissed the Body of the Christ indeed.)
> Young children came, with eager lips and glad.
> (These kissed a silver doll, immensely bright.)
> Then I, too, knelt before that acolyte.
> Above the crucifix I bent my head:
> The Christ was thin, and cold, and very dead:
> And yet I bowed, yea, kissed - my lips did cling
> (I kissed the warm live hand that held the thing.)(17)

We see here that Owen's view of Christianity is different from the general view. Traditional Christianity to him is just a creed, worn out like the ceremony he describes in the poem. For him Christianity should be dynamic, alive.

The poem describes a ceremony which takes place in the Catholic church on Good Friday. Each stanza shows different worshippers and their attitudes towards the Christ. To the men, who reason, the Christ is just an emblem of a creed; to the women it is the real body of Christ, but nothing more; to the children who do not understand at all what is happening, the Christ figure is just a beautiful doll, and for the poet it is just a thing "cold and very dead", therefore instead of the Christ figure he kisses "the warm live hand that held the thing". With this Owen wants to show that this kind of Christianity no longer relates to man. He needs something alive to hold on to. Again we notice his humanism which is growing stronger and will really become predominant at war where he identifies so closely with the suffering soldiers. Owen was able to grasp that real "brotherhood" which Christ so often mentions, that which makes no distinction of creed or race, which has as its highest principle to do good to the other, no matter who it is.

Since Owen had written to his mother in 1913 that he was no longer a Christian, it seems a paradox that in 1917, after he was wounded in the war, he wrote from the 41st Stationary Hospital on the Somme about an apparent reacceptance of the Sermon on the Mount:

> "Already I have comprehended a light which will never 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.
>
> ... Christ is literally in "no man's land". There men often hear His voice: Greater love hath no man than this; that a man lay down his life for a friend. Is it spoken in English only and in French? I do not believe so"(18).

Owen returned to the front after having recovered. His decision to return was strengthened by Christ's passage about the "greater love". He returned because

> "he felt that there he would be in a stronger position to voice his protest against the war and speak for his comrades" (19).

By speaking against the war and trying to convince more people of his pacifist ideas through his poetry, and dying for his cause he actually lay down his life for others, if not directly, then indirectly, for he died in action while helping his men to cross the Sambre Canal. There is no evidence that Owen deliberately planned to die for his cause. It happened by accident. But the idea of "laying down one's life for others" was part of his philosophical basis.

As for Christianity, one could say that it was during his years in the trenches that Owen behaved more as a Christian than ever before. He himself mentions this in that same letter:

> "I am more and more Christian as I walk the unchristian ways of Christendom" (20).

He adopted a religion of humanity. The terrible experience in the misery of the trenches functioned as a conversion for him. As the English literary critic V. de S. Pinto says: "it purifies his inner life and gave him a new vision of the outer world."(21)

It is difficult to say that there was a line of thought that built up Owen's philosophy. He had read much, during his

early life, but not very deeply. C. D. Lewis says that Owen's reading "was at random perhaps (as a poet's often is), and indirected,"(22) which shows that he perhaps did not want much influence, that he was just looking for suggestions and techniques of writing, while he tried to pursue his independent line of thought. As the list of his books shows his favourite writers must have been Dickens and Scott, and Tennyson seems to have been his favourite poet. Although he did not always agree with their ideas, they did influence his thought. Either byaaccepting or rejecting them he built up his own philosophy. No specific observation of Owen's on Dickens or Scott has been found, but he makes a critical comment on Tennyson through which he shows himself very modern:

> "The other day I read a Biography of Tennyson, which says that he was unhappy, even in the midst of his fame, wealth and domestic serenity. Divine discontent! I can quite believe he never knew happiness for one moment such as I have-for one or two moments. But as for misery, was he ever frozen alive, with dead men for comforters. Did he hear the moaning at the bar, not at twilight and the evening bell only, but at dawn, noon, and night, eating, and sleeping, walking, working, always the close moaning of the Bar; the thunder, the hissing and the whining of the Bar? - Tennyson, it seems, was always a great child. So should I have been, but for Beaumont Hamel*. (Not before January 1917 did I write the only lines of mine that carry the stamp of maturity" - (23)

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*Beaumont Hamel was the heavy battle of November 18, 1916,the aftermath of which was Owen's first sight when he arrived at the front, and he means that it was that experience that turned him into a man and poet.

2.4. Political Ideas

Wilfred Owen was not connected with any official political party of his time. At least there is no evidence of that in his letters and biographies, and his only real political activity seems to be his pacifism which appears in his poems, particularly after his contact with Siegfried Sassoon. However in his early letters, mainly in those he wrote from Dunsden, one notices his concern with illiteracy, poverty and social injustice. In a letter to his sister on November 7, 1911 he writes:

> "From such mansions as these, I pass, next afternoon, to the wretched hovels of this Parish...
>
> Numbers of old people cannot read; those who can seldom do so. Scores of them have passed their whole lives in the same stone with straw lid, which they call their cottage; and are numbed to all interests beyond it." (24)

It is very likely that he was influenced by Dickens, who is sometimes read as a socialist for his dealing with the ordinary people in his novels. Owen had read all of Dickens' novels, which possibly contributed to the shaping of his social conscience. It was at Dunsden, during his visits to the parish, that Owen began to show his concern for the poor, but also his revolt against the upper classes. This can be seen in another letter written on April 23, 1912:

> "I am increasingly liberalizing and liberating my thought, spite of the Vicar's conservatism. And when he paws his beard, and wonders whether £10 is too higha price for new curtains for the dining room, (in place of the faded ones you saw); Then the fires smoulder; I could shake hands with Mrs.

> Dilber who stole Scrooge's Bed-Curtains; and was affronted that old Joe was surprised or questioned her right! From what I hear straight from the tight-pursed lips of wolfish ploughmen, I might say there is material for another revolution.Perhaps men will strike, not with absence from work; but I know not; I am not happy in these thoughts; Yet they press heavy upon me. I am happier when I go to "distribute dole/To poor sick people, richer in His eyes,/Who ransomed us, and haler too than I" (Tennyson, Idyllis of the King: Guinevere) (25).

With "another revolution" Owen seems to be referring to the French revolution of 1789, which was also caused mainly through the oppression of the poor by the upper and middle-classes. Although there is no evidence that Owen read Marx's Das Kapital, this letter shows slight evidence of Owen's socialist tendencies. It is possible that, if Owen had survived the war, he would have emerged as a revolutionary against leadership since he saw the war as a conflict between leaders, who simply used the common men, the soldiers, to satisfy their interests.

Owen seemed to be searching for something like a confirmation of his ideas, at least for a way to express them in order to take a political position. This he actually does when he sets himself to write anti-war poetry. Owen's friendship with Tailhade, the French pacifist and poet, started in himself the desire to become a pacifist, but paradoxically after the meeting with Tailhade, Owen began to think about enlisting. He finally did so in October 1915, and about two years later he was sent to the front.

In June 1917 Owen was invalided home and sent to the

Craiglockhart War Hospital. There he met another poet and convinced pacifist, Siegfried Sassoon. This was perhaps the most important meeting of his life because of the influence of Sassoon on Owen and his poetry. Sassoon definitely established Owen's confidence in himself as an artist, and "above all he gave him the sense of being recognized as an equal by one whose work he respected."(25)

At the hospital he was able to revise his thoughts, and it was there that he produced his most powerful anti-war poems, like "Disabled", "The Calls", "Dulce et Decorum est". He arrived at the conclusion that he should return to the front, which he did after having recovered although he had medical reasons to return home. Thus his decision to return to the front was a conscious one. He refused all offers of influential people who tried to secure a job for him in England. During his last conversation with his brother Harold the latter asked him: "You have made up your mind to get back to the front line as soon as possible, haven't you?" and Wilfred answered: "Yes, I have Harold, and I know I shall be killed. But it's the only place that I can make my protest from"(26). This acceptance of possible death is not the earlier death-wish, but a logical extension of his mature commitment. When he heard that Sassoon, who had returned to the front in May, had been mistaken for a German and shot in the head by one of his own men, he wrote a letter to his mother in which he refers to this:

"I send you a precious letter from the Greatest friend I have.

This time surely he has done with war. The most encouraging thing is that he is writing already again.

Now must I throw my little candle on his torch, and go

out again."(27) Owen saw himself drawn to continue Sassoon's work, that is to write pacifist poetry. To be able to accomplish what he proposed to himself, to write authentic and powerful anti-war poetry he considered his own experience in the war necessary. In another letter written to his mother on August, 10, 1918 he restates this belief:

"I am glad. That is I am much gladder to be going out again than afraid. I shall be better able to cry my outcry, playing my part"(28). His very theory of poetry is based on experience. He shows this in the sentence "I think every poem, and every figure of speech should be a matter of experience"(29). Finally, already back at the front Owen reemphasized once more the reason for his return in a letter he wrote on October 4,1918, a month before he was killed: "I came out in order to help these boys-directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first".(30)

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(22) LEWIS, op. cit., p.14.

(23) OWEN and BELL, op. cit., p. 1482.

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(25) LEWIS, op. cit., p. 26.

(26) OWEN, op. cit. vol. III, p. 162.

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(28) Ibid., p. 568.

(29) Ibid., p. 510.

(30) Ibid., p. 580.

3. THE DEVELOPING POET

3.1. Early Poetry and Influences

As seen in 2.2, Owen began writing poetry very early in his life, although it cannot be determined very accurately when exactly he started writing since he seldom dated the poems of his early phase. Most of the early poems were destroyed (according to his instructions) by Owen's mother after his death. This also makes it difficult to trace back his poetical career since what is left from that early period are only some poems and fragments. Critics in general consider Owen's juvenilia rather derivative and provincial and attribute this to Owen's lack of guidance in his development as a poet; that is, his isolation from the literary people of his time. In fact, most of the early poems are imitations of Keats and Shelley,but there are also some original poems, as for instance "From My Diary, July 1914"(1), a beautiful and powerful poem, and apparently his first success in the use of para-rhymes, which alone make it his own. For a real understanding of Owen's later major work, a study of some of his early poems will be necessary since they played a large part in the poet's development.

Owen began forming his own ideas on poetry while he was still very young. At the age of fourteen, during his time at the Shrewsbury Technical Schod, he wrote an essay on "Value of Poetry", in which he states that " 'the rules for metre and versifying are taught by act, & acquired by study; but the force and elevation of thought which alone make poetry of any value, must be derived from Nature' " (2). It seems that he followed this prescription. Harold Owen

says that Wilfred was seen every night "at his attic window studying by candle light"(3). As a matter of fact nature was an important element in Owen's life and his poetry. He loved nature and believed in "an indivisible union of all living things"(4), and this sense of man's unity with nature he shows in several of his early fragments as in:

> "Water lilies all tranquil lie
> When their secrecies I spy.
> Ruddy pout the mouth of roses -
> More I kiss, more each uncloses." (5)

The same sense appears also in his later poetry, as in "Spring Offensive", where he uses the image of "the summer oozed into their veins/like an injected drug for their bodies' pains"(6).

Owen, like any other young Englishmen of his time, grew up reading and studying Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and other Romantic poets, and Keats was the poet who most strongly influenced his work. Owen absorbed much of Keats' poetry as far as language, style, and themes are concerned, and particularly his principle of poetry, that is his variation "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty."(7). Although Owen does not mention it, he seems to have followed Keats' idea of the proper evolution of a poet, moving from the private self to the more public self in his poetic career. In Owen's early poetry he uses archaic language such as we find in Keats' poetry, but in his later poetry Owen frequently uses colloquial speech. The use of sensuous images is present in almost all his poems; however there is a difference between them in the early poetry and the later. In the early poems he generally employs rather luxuriant images similar to Keats', as for instance in:

> "Has your Soul sipped
> Of the sweetness of all sweats?
> . . .

Sweeter than nocturnes
Of the wild nightingale
Or than love's nectar" (8)

In Keats' "Ode to Autumn" we see these images of taste:

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness
. . .
And fill a fruit with ripeness to the core
... and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel..." (9)

However in Owen's later poems the sensuous images are sometimes horrifying, as in "Dulce et Decorum Est":

"And watch the white eyes writhing in his face
. . .
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud." (10)

Owen's purpose in doing this is to make the experience he is describing more real and powerful to the reader.

As to the themes, we can detect several of Keats' in Owen's poetry. There is the closeness and love of nature, the mourning of death, the escapism theme, and the death - wish.

Among Owen's early poems, "From My Diary, July 1914"(11) seems to be the poem that expresses best his love and closeness to nature. In this poem he presents his vision of a morning. The description of nature is so accurate that the reader gets the impression of being shown a film. Each line shows the gradual awakening of all kinds of life at the same time as gradual breaking of day:

"Leaves
Murmuring by myriads in the shimmering trees.

Lives
Wakening with wonder in the Pyrenees.

Birds
Cheerily chirping in the early day.

Bards
Singing of summer, scything thro' the hay.

Bees
Shaking the heavy dews from bloom and frond.

Boys
Bursting the surface of the ebony pond."

At the opening of the poem it is dark in the morning, as the description progresses it becomes bright day and the closing lines show us that is is dark again because night has come:

"Stars
Expanding with the starr'd nocturnal flowers."

Although this theme is still present in his war poems, nature is there generally described as hostile to man, as in "Exposure" where dawn is personified as an enemy:

"The poignant misery begins to grow...
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks
of gray"(12),

but sometimes it is described as humane and sympathetic towards the dying soldiers, as for example in "Anthem for Doomed Youth", where nature is the only thing that gives reverence to the dead:

"And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds."(13)

The mourning at death theme appears for the first time in one of Owen's unpublished poems. It is the outcome of his reaction to the double funeral of Alice Mary Allen and her four-year-old daughter, which took place at Dunsden while he was working in the parish,

"Deep under turfy grass and heavy clay
They laid her bruised body, and the child.
Poor victims of a swift mischance were they,
Adown Death's trapdoor suddenly beguiled.
I weeping not, as others, but heart-sick,
Affirmed to Heaven that even Love's fierce flame
Must fail beneath the chill of this cold shame."(14)

Yet in his war poetry this theme is developed more seriously,

particularly in "Futility", in which he mourns the death of a young farmer, who was killed as a soldier in the war, and this death stands for all the deaths in war. It is particularly death in war that he mourns here because it is unnecessary and pointless:

> "Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
> Full-nerved - still warm - too hard to stir?
> Was it for this the clay grew tall?
> - O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
> To break earth's sleep at all?" (15)

One can notice here that the sense of nihilism in this poem is far stronger and more bitter than the almost conventional denial of Christianity in the earlier poem.

The escapism theme shows up in Owen's poem "My Shy Hand" (16), which he began writing at some time during his youth, but only finished in 1917. The poet imagines a sort of haven of happiness, a timeless world into which his beloved can escape and be well protected from the storm of real life:

> "My shy hand shades a hermitage apart,-
> O large enough for thee, and thy brief hours.
> Life there is sweeter held than in God's heart,
> Stiller than in the heavens of hollow flowers.
> . . .
> Thither your years may gather in from storm,
> And Love, that sleepth there, will keep thee warm."

In this poem the sense of escape is very similar to Keats' in his "Ode to a Nightingale", in which he also wats to avoid the sufferings of this world through escaping into the beauty of the nightingale's song:

> "That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
> And with thee fade away into the forest dim:"(17)

This theme is also present in his later poetry. In one of his greatest war poems, "Strange Meeting" (18) the poet dreams of being underground, thinking himself safe from the terrible experience of war, but he realizes that it is an illusion and

perhaps impossible to escape suffering, because there also people were marked with it. But at the end he still sees the escape into forgetfulness as the only way out:

> "It seemed that out of battle I escaped
> Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped.
> . . .
> Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
> . . .
> Let us sleep now..."

Keats' death-wish, seen in poems like "Ode to a Nightingale" (19), in the line "I have been half in love with easeful death" he expresses his desire to die in ecstasy. In Keats this desire seems to be conscious, whereas in Owen it is half-hidden, but it can be sensed in his early poetry. In "Storm"(20),written in 1916 he visualizes his future poetic career. He is contemplating the ideal poet he longs to become, which is represented by the face "charged with beauty", that attracts and frightens him at the same time. The face could also be a personification of war:

> "His face was charged with beauty as a cloud
> With glimmering lightning when it shadowed me
> I shook and was uneasy as a tree
> That draws the brilliant danger, tremulous, bowed."

In this poem Owen is seen identifying with the power of storm and violence that he later will condemn in war. He assures himself that he must take on part of the charm of that "face" in order to become a poet, and the gods of poetry, "who made his beauty lovelier than love", perhaps who made Keats' poetry so beautiful, will also be sympathetic to him:

> "So must I tempt that face to loose its lightning
> Great gods, whose beauty is death, will laugh above,
> Who made his beauty lovelier than love.
> I shall be bright with their unearthly brightening."

These gods are compared to violence that produces beauty, and as a matter of fact, later war proves to be a creative violence in

that, ironically, it is to some extent responsible for making Owen a poet. In this poem Owen foresees his future poetry as great, powerful, and enlightening. He is willing to spend all his energy for the sake of his poetry. He prophesies that the effect of his poetry on men will be like the sun's on land that was in the dark for a long time: it will be renewing, in other words:

> "And happier were it if my sap consume,
> Glorious will shine the opening of my heart;
> The land will freshen that was under gloom;"

The style in this poem, that is the consistency with which Owen uses the image of the lightning-struck tree throughout the poem, and the assonances glimmering/lightning; lovelier/love; happier/sap; uneasy/tree:, anticipate his later style.

Owen believed in close, realistic observation of nature and life. He had absorbed Keats' idea of "Beauty is truth and truth is beauty" and worked out the second equation in his war poems, while in his early poetry he may have emphasized the first. By describing realistically the horrible truth of the war he produced beauty, but his best definition of Keats' idea on beauty and truth we find in his preface, when he says:

> "This book is not about heroes. English poetry
> is not yet fit to speak of them.
> Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything
> about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion,
> or power, except War.
> Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
> My subject is War, and the pity of War
> The Poetry is in the pity
> Yet these elegies are to this generation in
> no sense consolatory. They may be to the next.
> All a poet can do today is warn. That is why
> the true Poets must be truthful." (21)

This sense of mission of telling the truth we notice in his war poems, particularly in his way of sharpening the language in order to find the sounds, words and images that best convey

the experiences he is describing. His poem "Anthem for Doomed Youth" he rewrote five times and "Disabled" he also revised several times. But this idea of truthfulness of the poet had developed by 1916 into a new concept of poetry in general. D. H. Lawrence expresses almost the same in a letter to Catherine Carswell in 1916:" 'The essence of poetry with us in this age of stark and unlovely actualities is a stark directness, without a shadow of a lie, or a shadow of deflection anywhere. Everything can go, but this stark, bare, rocky directness of statement, this alone makes poetry today' "(22). Thus Owen's variation on Keats' "Beauty is truth and truth is beauty", as F. W. Bateson says , could be taken as "the battle cry of modern English and American poetry"(23).

Keats considered three stages necessary in the development of a poet (24). The first he defines as the chamber of "Flora and Old Pan". During this stage the poet deals with rural and subjective themes. From this he passes to the chamber of "Maiden Thought", where there is no deep thought yet, and he writes innocent sensuous poetry. The third stage Keats calls "one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man", that is where the poet should deal with the suffering of humanity. In Keats' work the first and second stages correspond to the early "Hyperion" and the third he intended to explore in the second "Hyperion", but he died before he could complete it. Whether Owen followed this evolution consciously or not we do not know, but the fact is that we can see at least two clear divisions in his work. He actually moves from the private self of his early poetry to a more public self in his later war poetry. As we have noticed, his early poetry is subjective,

concerned with nature and with his own problems, whereas his later poems deal mostly with themes concerning the suffering of humanity.

Apart from the themes already discussed, we find others which are also prominent in Owen's early poetry, such as his feeling of deprivation and loneliness, his search for poetic vocation, and for authority. His loneliness and insecurity as a poet appears first in a rhymed letter. Although he admires Keats, Shelley and other poets of the past century, he seems to be longing for a new great poet, a living one with whom he can talk and share his new ideas, a sort of guide perhaps not only for himself, but for all other young poets of his generation.At the end of that letter he says: "Let me attain to talk with him, and share his confidence"(25), and in the same letter he declares: "I am alone among the Unseen voices"(26). This longing for a new poet with whom he can identify appears also in his early poem "On My Songs" (27), written on January 4, 1913:

> "Though unseen Poets, many and many a time,
> Have answered me as if they knew my woe.
> And it might seem have fashioned so their rime
> To be my own soul's cry, easing the flow
> Of my dumb tears with language sweet as sobs,
> Yet are there days when all these hoards of thought
> Hold nothing for me. Not one verse that throbs
> Throbs with my head, or as my brain is fraught"

Here Owen shows himself cut off from the poetry of the time.He is suggesting that although other poets may use the same language and the same poetical devices as he to express themselves, and he can understand them, their poetry does not relate to him. It is not actually illuminating anything. It is out of tune because it speaks of experiences of the past, and Owen seems to be perceiving changes going on in the world and the need to adjust poetry to this new reality. His head is full of ideas, but he

cannot reach a conclusion:

" 'Tis then I voice mine own weird reveries:
Low croonings of a motherless child, in gloom
Singing his frightened self to sleep, are these."

In this poem Owen feels as a poet like a motherless child, and his poetry is compared to "low croonings", it is powerless. No one listens to it, there is no communication. Therefore he is longing for another poet or some sort of recognition of his poetry as a new style or a new approach. However his attitude in relation to his own poetry changes later. We noticed in "Storm", the poem he wrote three years later, that he feels much more confident. It is interesting to remark here that he actually found this poet and the recognition for his poetry four years later in Sassoon, the poet who definitely started him as a pacifist poet.

Among Owen's early poems, "The Unreturning"(28) is perhaps the poem which expresses best his sense of isolation. It was written during the second half of 1914, and is related to his actual experiences during his loss of Christian faith. It reveals his inner conflict with regard to the idea of an after-life. He seems to be questioning the existence of the spiritual part of man, and his conclusion is that there might be no spirit since he as a poet, who should be able to communicate at all levels, received no answer from the dead he had called. He rejects the conventional idea of heaven, but at the same time he feels "oppressed by the emptiness"(29) he is obliged to substitute for it. The poem starts with a description of a scene in nature, the breaking of the day through night, which happens not in a smooth but in a violent way:

"Suddenly night crushed out the day and hurled
Her remnants over cloud-peaks, thunder-walled.
Then fell a stillness such as harks appalled
When far-gone dead return upon the world"

Nature is personified in "night crushed and hurled" and "stillness harks appalled". The last two lines of this stanza create a haunting atmosphere preparing the reader for the next scene:

"There watched I for the Dead; but no Ghost woke.
Each one whom Life exiled I named and called,
But they were all too far, or dumbed, or thralled,
And never one fared back to me or spoke."

The poet has now moved from the concrete in the first stanza to the imponderable, the unreturning of the dead. As he does in his most powerful war poems, he deliberately employs an excess of images of oppression, like "thunder-walled", "exiled", "dumbed", "thralled", "gagged", "smothering", to emphasize the state of oppressiveness and incapability of the dead to react or respond. The words which denote negation, as "no Ghost", "never one fared back" reinforce the absence of an answer, and the repetition of the final"d"suggests the idea of a vague echo in the emptiness, that is, the echoing back of the poet's own words. Then the poet returns to nature again:

"Then peered the indefinite unshapen dawn
With vacant gloaming, sad as half-lit minds,
The weak-limned hour when sick men's sighs are
drained."

We notice that the image of twilight of the breaking day is linked with the twilight of the "half-lit minds", the stage of near-madness and with the twilight of sick men, that is, the moment when men depart from life. The twilight of nature and the twilight of men are compared, though there is an opposition between them. While there is hope with the coming of the day because it will bring light, there is no hope with the coming of death and madness. By presenting this opposition

Owen shows the conflict of his own mind. It is interesting to point out here that Owen was very aware of the "half-lit minds", of the stage of the brink of madness. We see this particularly in his later poem "Mental Cases"(30), where he discusses those "men whose minds the Dead have ravished" in war. The image of "sighs are drained" also reappears in his war poem "Insensibility"(31). Finally towards the close of "The Unreturning", while considering other men's fate, Owen is reminded of his own death:

> "And while I wondered on their being withdrawn,
> Gagged by the smothering wing which none unbinds,
> I dreaded even a heaven with doors so chained."

He imagines himself dying in the last two lines, but there is an ambiguity in "Gagged by the smothering wing which none unbinds". It refers either to the dead being withdrawn or to the poet himself, or to both, which is more likely. The poet seems to be horrified thinking of the possibility for himself taken to "a heaven with doors so chained", a heaven that to him does not appear like a place of complete peace, but like a prison locked from inside, because the dead enter, but never come out again.

3.2. The Beginning of the War

In July 1914 the war broke out. Owen was in France at that time, working as a teacher of English in Bordeaux and spending his free time at the Villa Lorenzo in the Pyrenees, the house of Madame Lèger. The news of the war did not affect Owen very deeply in the beginning. He regarded the war even as a disturbance of his peace and perhaps as an obstacle for the normal development of his poetry, which was the only thing that mattered to him. However his view on the war began to change

later, particularly after his visit to a war hospital in Bordeaux in September, 1914. The horrible sights of the war wounded and the almost inhuman treatment they received, due to the lack of adequate medical equipment and hygiene, impressed Owen deeply. It reawakened his compassion for the suffering, that had remained dormant for some time. In his letters from August, 1914 to the end of 1915 a gradual change in his attitudes towards the war can be delineated. Apparently he moved from a certain indifference to some interest in the war and finally to personal involvement when he joined the army in October 1915, and was later sent to the front.

In his poetry we also notice certain steps in the change of his attitude to the war. Three of his poems written after the outbreak of the war show the transition from complete ignorance to a certain understanding, and finally to a complete acknowledgement of the bitter truth of war. "The Ballad of Purchase/Moneys" or "The Ballad of Peace and War"(32) as Owen had originally called it, is not accurately dated, but it seems to be the first poem he wrote after the outbreak of the war. It displays almost the same peaceful tone and lightheartedness as Rupert Brooke's war poems (see section 1.2.). The two first quatrains express the poet's satisfaction at the peace and safety of English people and the integrity of England, secured through the sacrifice of the British soldiers who, he suggests, kindly died "to save the soul of England". Here Owen still sees the soldier carrying out his duty in dying for his country:

"The Sun is sweet on rose and wheat
And on the eyes of children;
Quiet the street for old men's feet
And gardens for the children.

The soil is safe, for widow and waif,
And for the soul of England,
Because their bodies men vouchsafe
To save the soul of England"

However in the last quatrain appears his later view of the soldier as a victim. Particularly in the two last lines one can notice a certain sadness for the death of young people, which stands out in his later war poems:

"Fair days are yet left for the old,
And children's cheeks are ruddy,
Because the good lad's limbs lie cold
And their brave cheeks are bloody."

This poem is similar in style to the later poems for its alliterations, a common device in the war poems.

The second poem of this sequence is "Long Ages Past"(33), dated October 31, 1914. The poem describes two characters that embody the spirit of war and destruction beneath a façade.First Owen shows an unidentified idol of ancient Egypt that rejoiced at the sacrifices of the dead and blood offered to it:

"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."

and the second character is a mad slave in a Persian palace, whose wonderfully beautiful face was provided with the power to carry out the cruellest acts. He (or she) was loved by the king and everyone, but he killed recklessly whomever he wanted. even those who loved him. His "fair face" hid the evil face in him:

"And all men heard thy ravings with a smile
Because thy face was fairer than a flower.
But with a little knife so wantonly
Thou slewest women and thy pining lovers,
And on thy lips the stain of crimson blood,
And on thy brow the pallor of their death."

In both characters sex is in question. Their sexuality is not defined. Both seem to be male and female at the same time, and

their violence is associated with sexual pleasure. It is Swinburne's* "Lurid Pain-in-pleasure" motif that we notice here, which is linked to Owen's other theme, the death-wish we saw in "Storm". In "Long Ages Past" Owen's ambiguous feelings of attraction and loathing towards the war emerge again. On one side he is describing the war as the illusion of glory and magnificence of great leaders, and on the other as the complete annihilation, the end of everything, "of all the wicked and of all the beautiful". Owen is suspecting that the truth of the war is hidden behind its beautiful face which poets and politicians have painted, but his position towards the war is not clearly defined yet:

"Thou art the face reflected in a mirror
Of wild desire, of pain, of bitter pleasure."

The "foul is fair, fair is foul" theme is present throughout this poem, and it closes with a reference to "Macbeth", Act IV, scene I, when the witches foretell Macbeth's death, but he does not understand it. His ambition to become great leads him towards his own destruction.

"The witches shout thy name beneath the moon
The fires of hell have held thee in their fangs."

If we compare this poem to "The Ballad of Purchase/Moneys" we notice that he is tending to become more realistic for he sees now the "good lads, whose limbs lie cold" more precisely as "the livid dead".

However still more powerful is his sonnet called "1914" or "The Seed"(34), also written in 1914, in which

*Swinburne was the main representative of the decadent literary movement of the 1890's, which focused particularly on themes of cruelty and violence.

he describes the war as "the winter of the world". He no longer sees it as heroic, but to use Vivian de Sola Pinto's words, "as a terrible international disaster"(35), as the annihilation of a whole civilization. Owen foresees the war destroying all progress and all good things that man had accomplished in the various fields of human knowledge. The flags of Art are torn, poetry mourns instead of singing life and its beauty, and this "winter" will bring a lack of thought and feeling, and of love among human beings. "The grain of human Autumn rots", that is, the young, those who should be the "seed" or the continuation of this civilization, lie rotting on the ground. They were killed in the war:

> "War broke: and now the Winter of the world
> With perishing great darkness closes in.
> The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
> Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
> Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
> Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin
> Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
> The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled".

In the second stanza Owen compares Europe to early Greece, where Western civilization began, developed and achieved its highest point, had its continuation with Rome, and finally declined and disappeared. This stanza is built on images of the cycle of the seasons, of death and rebirth. They suggest the idea of cyclic history of various philosophers, that Yeats expressed best in his poetry:

> "For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
> And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
> An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
> A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
> But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
> Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed."

In the last two lines Owen shows on one side his sad and bitter conclusion that a harsh winter is coming instead of Autumn because there is nothing to harvest, while on the other he

shows a certain hope that perhaps out of the blood shed in the war might spring a new civilization. It is again his ambivalent attitude towards the war. Although in the beginning of the poem he seems to be condemning the war, in the end he sees it as a creative kind of destruction. This links him to the so-called "fascism"* in Yeats and D.H. Lawrence, and it his buried death-wish and fascination towards destruction that enables Owen to feel this rather pagan hope, also expressed well by Indian religions, echoed by Americans like Whitman.

* Yeats and Lawrence sometimes glorified race and blood and exalted violence and war in their verses. Therefore they were compared to fascists, whose political philosophy was in evidence in Germany and Italy before the Second World War.

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4. THE WAR POETRY

4.1. Owen's War Career

Wilfred Owen joined the army on October 22, 1915 as a volunteer. After having considered the French and the Italian army he finally decided to enter the Artists' Rifles in England. There he received his military training and became an infantry officer. At the end of 1916 he was sent to the Western Front. Through Owen's letters and The Memoirs of the Owen Family by Harold Owen,the poet's brother,we learn that Wilfred was friendly but firm with his subalterns and therefore liked and respected by them. We saw him in his early life as a shy and insecure youth, but it seems that this sense of isolation and indirectness somehow vanished after he had joined the army. Once in uniform he found a true comradeship and perhaps a purpose together with his fellow-soldiers.

Sensitive as Owen was, his close observation of people and their behaviour continued while he was being trained in the army. He soon discovered a paradox between what the soldiers were taught and their carrying out of the lesson. In his letter of March 18, 1916 he remarks to his mother: "The army as a life is a curious anomaly, here we are prepared - or preparing to lay down our lives for another, the highest moral act possible, according to the Highest Judge, and nothing of this is apparent between the jostle and jest"(1). It is the same concern with the divergence in principle and practice of Christ's lesson on love he had shown before at Dunsden while observing religious people. In general he was happy to be in the army, and although he was very busy with reading about military law, he still found time to read Housman and Tennyson, as well as to write

poetry.

In Owen's first letters from the front one can still notice traces of his ambiguous feelings towards the war. As his letters and poems from his early life did so his first letters from the Somme alternately show his loathing of war and his attraction to it. Sometimes we notice the same adventurous spirit as in the pre-war poets like Brooke and others. On January 1st, 1917 he writes:

> "There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France, and I am in perfect spirits." (2)

and on May 14, 1917, referring to the battle of Feyet he writes:

> "The sensations of going over the top are as exhilarating as those dreams of falling over a precipice,when you see the rocks at the bottom surging up to you.
> . . .
> There was an extraordinary exultation in the act of slowly walking forward, showing ourselves openly." (3)

After some weeks in the trenches however his view changed and he tended more and more towards a definite and absolute loathing of war. We see indications of this in the letter of January 19, 1917 written to his mother:

> "They want to call No Man's Land "England" because we keep supremacy there.
>
> It is the ternal 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.
> . . .
> I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have <u>perceived</u> it, and in the darkness, <u>felt</u>." (4)

Wilfred Owen saw much action between January 1917 and June 1917 when he was sent home with neurasthenia and sent to

the Craiglockhart military hospital in Edinburgh. During his four months at the hospital, Owen achieved his position as a pacifist and reached the conclusion that he had to go back to the front. Encouraged by Sassoon he returned in the beginning of September 1918.

Owen's last months in the war must have been of great physical and spiritual strain for him, but from what we learn through his letters and biographies, he carried out his military duties with great courage. On October 4th, 1918 he received the Military Cross for his bravery in the attack on the Fonsomme line on 1st and 2nd October, 1918, and on November 4th, 1918 he was killed while trying to cross the Sambre Canal with his men under heavy German machine gun fire.

4.2. Thematic Development

It is possible to perceive two delimited periods in Owen's life and work. There seems to be a dark period comprehending his life and work from 1911 to approximately the beginning of 1917 when he is already at the front. During this early dark period he is concerned mainly with finding a meaning in life through finding his vocation, with loneliness, and doubts about eternity. Owen's letters as well as the poems of that time reflect all this through their themes. As discussed in 3.1. in the poem "Deep Under Turfy Grass", written in 1912, he deals with the mourning at death and he is seen identifying with the dead. The poem shows a sort of revolt against God for permitting death to happen, and a suggestion that it might be better if man had not been born at all:

> "I affirmed to Heaven that even Love's fierce flame
> Must fail beneath the chill of this cold shame."

This rebellious note is even stronger in an untitled and unpublished poem written at the same time:

Nov. 6. 1912

Unto what pinnacles of desperate heights
Do good men climb to seize their good!
What abnegation from all mortal joys,
What vast abstraction from the world is theirs!
O what insane abuses, desperate pangs,
Annihilations of the Self, soul-suicides,
They wreak upon themselves to purchase — God!
A God to guide through these poor temporal days

Their comings, goings, workings of the heart,
Obsess, indeed, their natures utterly,
Meanwhile preparing, as in recompense,
Mansions celestial for their timeless bliss.
And to what end this Holiness; this God
That arrogates their intellect and soul?
— To none! Their offered lives are not so grand,
So active, or so sweet as many an one's
That is undedicate, being reason-swayed!
And their sole mission is to drag, entice
And push mankind to those same cloudy crags
Where they first breathed the madness-giving air
That made them feel as angels, that are less than men.

Here God is being accused of demanding too great a sacrifice from mankind and for his niggardliness, that is for offering man too little in exchange.

Owen's identifying with the dead also shows up in his is letter of April 1913, in which he tells his mother about his visit to the tomb of Keats: "How happy-melancholy I was I will not relate! To be in love with a youth and a dead 'un is perhaps sillier, than with a real live maid."(6) In his poem "On My Songs" and in his letter of March 1915 we noticed his search for his poetic vocation and for his position in life.

"The Unreturning" a poem written in 1914 (also discussed in Section 3.1.), deals with the theme of loneliness and his quest for immortality. In his sonnet "The End"(7), written at the end of 1916 or in the very beginning of 1917, he gives us his vision of the Judgement Day and expresses his non-belief in a Christian resurrection:

> "After the blast of lightning from the east,
> The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot Throne;
> After the drums of time have rolled and ceased,
> And by the bronze west long retreat is blown,
>
> Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth
> All death will he annul, all tears assuage? -
> Or fill these void veins full again with youth,
> And wash, with an immortal water, Age?
>
> When I do ask white Age he saith not so:
> "My head hangs weighed with snow."
> And when I hearken to the Earth, she saith:
> "My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is death.
> Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified,
> Nor my titanic tears, the seas, be dried."

Another dominant theme of that period is frustration in love. It appears in the poem "To Eros"(8):

> "But when I feel upon your sandalled feet,
> You laughed; you loosed away my lips; you rose.
> I heard the singing of your wings' retreat;
> Far-flown, I watched you flash the Olympian snows,
> Beyond my hoping, starkly I returned
> To stare upon the ash of all I burned."

Although several themes of Owen's first period reappear in his poetry written after his experiences in the war (that is from January 1917 to the end of his life), we can call this second period an optmistic one because the poetry of that time can be considered constructive. Owen has an aim in writing it, which is to awaken humanity to stop war and promote peace. The themes of mourning at death, loneliness, love, and beauty are present in the second period, though modified through the experience of war. Owen's poems and letters of the first months in the trenches show that he had grasped the beastliness and

cruelty of war. In his first poem "Exposure" (9) he describes the agony of the troops waiting endlessly for the attack of the enemy. He brings out particularly the physical and spiritual suffering of the soldiers in the harsh coldness of a bitter winter. The poet's insistence on the icy and indifferent wind and the coldness of the snow suggests the soldiers' feeling of loneliness and abandonment in that horrible place, where even nature is an enemy, and perhaps harder to face than the real one:

> "Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east
> winds that knive us. . .
>
> Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
> Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of
> gray,
>
> . . .
>
> Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the
> silence.
> Less deathly than the air that shudders black with
> snow,"

In this poem we notice a slight change in Owen's attitude towards God, death and eternity. It foreshadows his later return to belief for it shows his attempt in accepting death and suffering in the lines:

> " We turn to our dying.
> Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn,
> Nor ever, suns smile true on child,or field,or fruit.
> For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid,
> Therefore, not loath, we lie out here,therefore
> were born,
> For love of God seems dying."

Owen is making parallels between spring/life/eternity. He is saying that as to have spring,winter must occur and to have life death must happen, so in order to receive the love of God or in other words, to attain the beauty of eternity one must suffer. The love of God demands sacrifice. However there is an ambiguity in the last line "For love of God seems dying".

It can also be read as proof that God's love for humanity seems to be dying, since he does nothing to stop this slaughter, an interpretation that ties in with Owen's former attitudes towards God. Yet if we read the stanza as a whole the first interpretation is more acceptable, though it is very likely that Owen intended to leave it open to both interpretations.

It is clear in Owen's poetry of this second period that death was really the evil thing for him. His former mourning at death becomes the loathing of death after he realizes its futility. The loathing of death is seen particularly in "Dulce et Decorum Est" (10) in which he describes the violent death of a soldier through gas poisoning:

> " the white eyes writhing in his face,
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;"

and in "Greater Love" (11) in which he describes the violent death of men in action:

> "Rolling and rolling there
> Where God seems not to care;
> Till the fierce love they bear
> Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude,"

In other poems we see his sense of futility at death, as for example in "Futility" (12) in which he suggests that the whole process of evolution was useless if after all, man, the most sophisticated being to come out o it, must now end with this pointless death. The death described is the death of a soldier in war. He asks the question:

> "Was it for this the clay grew tall?
> - O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
> To break earth's sleep at all?"

Owen mourned particularly the death of the young, whose lives were cut short before being completed. In his poem "Asleep"(13) he describes how a soldier was killed by a bullet while he was sleeping. It was as if life itself inside of the soldier was

trying to resist death:

> "And in the happy no-time of his sleeping,
> Death took him by the heart. There was a quaking
> Of the aborted life within him leaping..."

We do not know if there would have been a third period in Owen had he survived, nor what it would have been, for he died in the middle of his most creative phase.

4.3. "Greater Love"

We have noticed Owen's sympathy for the poor and for the suffering and his love for man in general since his early years of life. It shows up during his work with the parish at Dunsden and is seen throughout his whole life. After joining the army and particularly in the war this love for humanity becomes stronger. His belief in the "greater love" had been intensified through his terrible experience in the war. This belief together with his feeling of pity for the suffering soldiers, victims of the blind hate of economic and political leaders, moved him towards the development of a sense of brotherhood. We noticed this theme for the first time in a letter he wrote to his mother from the army (Section 4.1.), in which he already shows his awareness of the absence of that real fraternity, but after his experience in the war it becomes increasingly prominent. "Greater Love", written in January, 1917, as seen from the title, deals with the theme of brotherhood in relation to the theme of Christian sacrifice. The poem describes two (on the surface) opposing experiences, that of violent death of men in action and the love between man and woman. Owen establishes a contrastive comparison between the beautiful woman and the dying soldiers. He achieves this by way of contrasting images. In each stanza he refers to one of

the parts of the body in which the erotic charms are found. He starts with lips:

1- "Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead

2- O Love, your eyes lose lure
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead

3- Your slender attitude
Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed...

4- Your dear voice is not so dear...
As theirs whom none now hear.

5- Heart you were never hot,
Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot

6- And though your hand be pale
Paler are all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail."(14)

In stanza after stanza one sees Owen's intention to diminish the value of sexual love and to point out the love involved in those men's death, that is the "greater love", which enables man to lay down his life for others. In his view the spiritual reflection to which those men have come through infinite suffering is above conventional physical beauty and goes beyond the experience of sexual love. Their sacrifice is compared to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, "Paler are all which trail/Your cross through flame and hail." They have gone through hell carrying others' cross in order to secure that innocent beauty and love at home.

"At the Calvary Near The Ancre" (15), a poem written soon after "Greater Love" also concentrates on the same theme. In the first two stanzas he shows the ignoring of the "greater love" by Christ's "disciples" at the battle front, the priests who instead of carrying out their mission, "hide apart". They abandon the suffering soldiers as the disciples did with Christ

during his moments of greatest agony before his death:

"One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
In this war he too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the soldiers bear with Him."

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ is denied,"

The priests are not at the "Golgotha" where the soldiers are dying. The verb "strolls" suggests that they walk up and down leisurely, well out of the real trouble and uninterested in helping to put an end to the war. On the contrary, they are happy to be "flesh-marked" by the war and favour the continuance of the war. Therefore they deny Christ who does not want war.

In the last stanza he seems to be referring to the administrators and politicians, those who send others to the battle, but they themselves do not want to get involved with the actual fight. They do not want to dirty their fingers and so leave others to do the sacrifice. Owen compares them to the scribes Christ speaks about in the New Testament:

"The scribes on all the people shove
And brawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate."

Owen wants to show here that it is not among those who preach Christ's teachings that we find true Christianity, but among those who live according to them, in this case among the soldiers who do not hate, but endure their suffering and love one another. They fight for others' hate. This ties in with a statement in his letter of May 14, 1917:

"Christ is literally in no man's land. There men often hear his voice: Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for a friend.

Is it spoken in English only and French?

I do not believe so.

Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism." (16)

Christ is neither on the English side nor on the German, he is there where people do not hate, but love the "greater love". Through this same letter Owen reveals that "the final crystallization of his religious beliefs had taken place" (17). From that time onwards one can see through his letters a gradual return to the "pure Christianity" and a deliberate rejection of the "pure patriotism" of the state church. In "Soldier's Dream"(18), a poem written for the first time at the Craiglockhart war hospital, Owen deals with this incompatibility. He tells a dream a soldier had about the intervention of Jesus to stop the war:

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

The fact that he puts it as a dream suggests that it is an illusion to think that Christ will stop the war. Christ has become irrelevant in a world where hate has become dominant. As seen in the poem, after:

> "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."

Man will always continue making war because he does not live the"greater love". He has substituted the god of political power and of economic power for the god of love.God and Michael are allegorical in this poem. God stands for political power and Michael (the angel in the Apocalypse who fights for God) stands for economic power. The political power "was vexed" since a stopping of the war would not have been very convenient, so it provided the economic power with means to continue produc-

ing more arms that the war could go on.

The idea of the "greater love" is present in almost all of Owen's later poems. He had learnt the great lesson of human fraternity Christ taught man almost two thousand years ago, and now through his poems he makes an attempt to pass on the same lesson to his readers. "Strange Meeting" (19) is perhaps the poem that expresses most profoundly this lesson. This poem can be interpreted on two levels, the mental and the physical; that is, it can be seen as a descent into the poet's unconscious and as a dream in which the poet finds himself under ground among the dead, a place he later identifies as hell.There he has a dialogue with a dead soldier. The very place of the dead is described as being the result of many wars, and the faces of the dead show their suffering from physical pain or guilt or both, also produced by the war, though they are well out of the war on the upper ground:

> "It seemed that out of battle I escaped
> Down some profound dull, tunnel, long since scooped
> Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
> Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
> Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
> Then, as I probed them, one sprung up, and stared
> With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
> Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
> And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,
> By this dead smile I knew we stood in Hell."

The poet and the dead soldier identify well since they discover that they had had so many things in common during their lives. It is through the "other's" words that Owen voices his despair and hopelessness at the irreparable loss of humanity through war. From their discussion "the truth untold,/The pity of war, the pity war distilled" comes out, the truth which was in fact the subject of Owen's actual poetry. He sees one war as the germ of another. Man will go on making wars and this

means a regression to his earlier state of animal (he associates man's ferocity and violence to that of the tigress), because he does not know any better. Man does not know the truth he as a poet could have told him. He (the poet) had the knowledge of war, the ability to tell the truth of war, and the courage to go against the war. Thus he (the poet in the poem and Owen,the poet) could have stepped aside and avoided the march that led humanity into her own destruction:

" 'Strange friend,' I said,'here is no cause to mourn.'
'None', said the other, 'save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For of my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with the swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I nad mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.' "

Owen suggests in the next lines that had he not been killed, (he is foreseeing his death and the impossiblity of carrying out his mission) he would have spent all his energy to cleanse the world from the blood of war, yet not through wounds and war but with the "sweet water" of his poetry, that is teaching humanity the lesson of the "greater love", which is the "truth that lies too deep for taint":

"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.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.' "

At the end of the poem the "other" reveals himself:

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

and we come to know that the poet is both the killer and the enemy whom he had killed the day before. Owen is saying that in killing the other, man kills himself if not physically but at least spiritually, because in killing his brother he loses his humanity. But the deepest truth Owen reaches in this poem is "that brotherly love must be learned not in the death struggle between enemies but before such a struggle can come about."(20) If a man is willing to sacrifice his life for the other he must learn in time of peace to live for him.

4.4. Influence of Sassoon

Near the end of June 1917, Owen was transferred from France to the Craiglockhart war hospital in Edinburgh. It had been declared that he was suffering from neurasthenia. At the hospital Owen busied himself with various kinds of recreations since he was a mild case. One of those recreations was the debate club, for which he suggested the topic "The Church in Great Britain Has Failed in Her Mission" to be debated. Again we see him concerned with the same problem, the divergence between principle and practice of the church. As seen in the previous section the concept of the "greater lover" has become the guiding principle of Owen's life. In the trenches he had seen and experienced the suffering of a soldier. He had developed a sense of brotherhood and responsibility for his fellow men. At the hospital he wrote poetry against the war. He felt moved to help his suffering comrades out of that hell and he thought

a way to begin with might be to tell the people at home the truth about the front.

It was in the middle of August that Owen met Sassoon in the hospital. Sassoon had also been at the front and had been sent to the hospital with shell-shock. He was now a conscientious objector and already well known for his bitter satires against the war. Owen had read Sassoon's war poems of The Old Huntsman* and naturally identified with them since he had much in common with the older poet, but Owen did not know that Sassoon had escaped being court-martialed for his daring public protest against the war (referred to in 1.4.)**. As time passed a close personal and literary friendship developed between them. Owen showed Sassoon some of his early poems and Sassoon kindly showed him what the shortcomings of his poetry were and how he could improve it. Owen also revealed to the other his plan to write poetry against the war and Sassoon approved it and encouraged him in this intention. Through Sassoon's example and influence Owen realized that he had the power to accomplish his plan. Immediately he started rewriting former drafts and writing new poems. One poem he rewrote four times under the guidance of Sassoon, who first suggested the

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* Sasson's collection of poems.

** Sassoon escaped being court-martialed through the intervention of his friend Robert Graves. He agreed entirely with Sassoon about the "political errors and insincerities", but he did not agree, as he says in Good-Bye to All That, p. 125, that Sassoon should "be allowed to become a martyr to a hopeless cause in his present physical condition". Graves tried to do everything possible to prevent republication of, or comment on Sassoon's letter. A medical board was established and Graves testified that Sassoon's protest was a result of his disturbed mind and that he was in no conditions to face the consequences of his letter. Thus Sassoon was declared in need of medical attention and sent to the Craiglockhart war hospital.

title Anthem for Dead Youth and finally Anthem for Doomed Youth, besides other amendments in style. After Sassoon read over the final poem he recognized it as a masterpiece, which assured him that Owen had the potentialities of a great poet. "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (21) deals with the discrepancy between what was told to the soldier before he went to war and the crude reality of the war. It shows how men there die like cattle, not a glorious death. They do not even have a burial proper to a human being:

> "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
> Only the monstruous anger of the guns.
> Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
> Can patter out their hasty orisons.
> No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
> Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -
> The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
> And bugles calling for them from sad shires."

This poem has the same bitter tone as Sassoon's "They" and certainly both poems were produced by the same impulses - anger and indignation at the callousness of the people at home. Other poems written after the contact with Sassoon and which display this spirit of indignation are "The Dead Beat", "Disabled", "S.I.W.". In these and in such poems as "A Terre", "Inspection", "The Letter" one can see Sassoon's influence in the language. In his early poetry Owen only used formal language, but after Sassoon's influence he becomes confident in using direct speech. Yet it is worth remarking that these influences do not last throughout Owen's work. Later he works out his own style and writes more elegies. Critics in general agree that his elegies are more powerful than his satires. Sassoon functioned as a sort of catalyst in Owen's poetry. His interference moved Owen towards self-revelation. Owen's poetry did not actually change very much after the contact with Sassoon. Sassoon only confirm-

ed Owen's ideas. Owen felt a sense of mission of telling the truth about the war and warning against it. He had felt it before but after the meeting with Sassoon this feeling becomes more and more intensified. He also realized that to tell the factual truth of the war and to make his protest powerful, he had to go back to the front. Sassoon told Owen that it would be good for his poetry if he went back, and after he had left the hospital he definitely decided to return. In June 1918 he wrote "The Calls" (22), a poem that clearly shows his sense of mission and his decision to return to the battle field. It describes in each stanza a different bell calling people for different duties, but in the last stanza he refers to another kind of call:

> "For leaning out last midnight on my sill
> I heard the sighs of men, that have no skill
> To speak of their distress, no, nor the will!
> A voice I know. And this time I must go."

It is the call of suffering humanity and only this call appeals to the poet. Owen's feeling of pity for the suffering and his fraternal love urges him to take his position, and it is here that he reaches that third stage of development of a poet (referred to in 3.1.), that of "sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man" when he finally knows his place as a man and poet. No matter how much he loathed the war by that time, in the beginning of September 1918 Owen returned to the front.

4.5. Paradox of a Pacifist Combatant

Considering Owen's belief in human fraternity and in the fact that participation in war is anti-Christian, there arises the question of how this pacifist could return to fight.

In doing so is he not contradicting his own beliefs through violating another essential command "do not kill"? To answer these questions it is necessary to consider various other facts.

Firstly, Owen had set himself a life task, which consisted in persuading humanity to stop war and promote peace. This was (as discussed in 4.4.), a result of his humanism.To accomplish his task, in his view, the first step should be to eradicate the blind patriotism in his own country, which was responsible for the distorted image people had about the war. Therefore he had to tell them the truth about the war and to be able to do this he considered his returning necessary. As things stood it was only there that he could put into practice the "greater love" in words and in deeds, first through alleviating the suffering of his fellow men by leading them as well as possible; second by avoiding inhuman treatment of the enemy, whom he regarded as another fellow sufferer, and third by spreading his ideas on peace among the soldiers.

Secondly, Owen knew that there were arm-chair pacifists in England whose voice was not listened to at all, and that there was even a general criticism which tried to discredit them with the smear of homosexuality. It was clear to him that if he went back to England and tried to make his protest there he would run the same dangers. He was aware of the futility of this attempt first because of his own limitations, that is his insignificance in front of a whole nation conditioned to war. Politics, religion (of the state church), literature, and technology had been conducted in that direction to create that conditioning or collective conscience of war. In addition Owen had an active personality. He conceived even pacifism as some-

thing active. In his letter of January 1917 he shows his first pacifist sentiments and we see that pacifism to him equals agitation. He says: "The people of England needn't hope. They must agitate. But they are not yet agitated even."(23) and later on from Craiglockhart he writes on September 27, 1917 commenting on a newspapers article on peace by H. G. Wells: "As for myself I hate the washy pacifists as temperamentally as I hate prussionists. Therefore I feel that I must first get some reputation of gallantry before I could successfully and usefully declare my principles "(24). As we see Owen believed that only through acting in the war could he somehow help to alter the course of world events, not by withdrawing himself from the conflict into isolation.

Thirdly, Owen believed in truth and his ultimate objective as a pacifist poet is not to write pure poetry, but to state the bare truth of war. He was now interested in truth more than in beauty, as he states in his preface:

> "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry
> My subject is War, and the pity of War.
> The Poetry is in the pity.
> . . .
> All a poet can do today is warn.
> That is why the true Poets must be truthful." (25)

He was forced to reformulate his former concept of poetry and truth. Poetry for its own sake no longer had any meaning for him, for it was not fit to express the new truth, which consisted of the pain, weariness, madness and degradation of human beings under the strain of war, and of "the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises... everything unnatural, broken, blasted, the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-out all day, all night, the most execrable sights." (26) Thus his very attitude towards

his art changed in relation to his new subject - the war.Having decided to protest against the war, he chose poetry as the means of expression, since he believed it to be the most powerful and effective way to voice his protest. So he subjected his poetry to his moral intention, but it does not seem that this diminished the value of his poetry as poetry. As John Lehmann says, "He had trained himself too seriously as an artist ever to forget it." (27).

He wanted every word in a poem to be an expression of a real experience. Therefore he thought his own experience in the war utterly essential. It would enable him to tell more accurately the naked truth and make his argument more powerful for the confidence it would give him. But the main forces to drive him back to the front were the brotherhood he felt with his comrades, his realization of their helplessness and inability to utter their suffering, and his awareness of his own power as a poet, the feelings which together produced that sense of mission he expresses so well in the last line of "The Calls" (discussed in 4.4.), "And this time I must go".

Despite all these reasons for Owen's return to the front one still has to recognize that it must have been a determination of a profound spiritual dilemma. Owen himself was aware of the paradox. We notice it in the letter discussed in 2.3. where he considers his being a conscientious objector and at the war at the same time. It is clear that on one hand Owen breaks the commandment "do not kill" by deliberately returning to fight, and killing, but on the other hand, had he gone back to England and made his life comfortable while leaving his suffering comrades behind he would have betrayed his own beliefs. So he superimposed his ethical principles on his

moral principles and chose the way he saw as the only one to accomplish the task he had set himself.

4.6. Commitment to Pacifism

Owen had realized the foolishness and inhumanity of war during his first months in the trenches. He had also realized his position in relation to the war and the helpless soldiers, pitiful victims of evil forces outside their control. He had made up his mind to denounce that inhumanity through his poetry by telling people the truth of war. He believed that if the leaders of nations were forced to realize the beastliness of war perhaps they would not wage another war. As seen in 4.4., Sassoon stimulated Owen into adopting a more committed anti-war posture. After his contact with Sassoon Owen's poems become more specifically protests against the continuance of war. He deliberately presents the most horrible sights because his sole objective is to show the darker side of the war, the martyrdom of the soldiers. In his war poems he deals with all the possible things that can happen to a soldier at the battlefield and after he comes out of war, that is the fear and horror in combat, violent death in action,disablement, and madness. In some of his poems of protest, anger, satire or irony are directed against the civilians and politicians at home, those who, in Owen's view (this was also the view of other poets like Sassoon and nearly all the fighting men), are unable to understand or care about what the fighting men have to endure.

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" (already discussed in section 4.4.) is perhaps the poem to start with. Besides attacking the civilians at home for their indifference to the suffering soldiers, it contains also Owen's common theme, the incongruity

of traditional Christian religion and the realities of war. Those symbols and rituals like prayers, candles, bells,mourning and choirs are meaningless for they offer no consolation to the suffering. They would even be a mockery for the deaths in such conditions.

"The Dead Beat" (28) describes the collapse of a young soldier under the strain of war and the cruelty and incomprehension of some of his comrades, especially of the medical officer who simply believes that the soldier is malingering. Although the exhausted soldier seems unconscious:

> "-Didn't appear to know a war was on,
> Or see the blasted trench at which he stared.",

he is conscious of those responsible for the war's continuation and he is still able to utter his aggression against them:

> "'I'll do 'em in,' he whined.
> 'If this hand's spared,
> I'll murder them, I will.' "

Owen's hate against the callous civilians of the older generation shows up in the irony in the lines:

> "Dreaming of the valiant that aren't dead:
> Bold uncles smiling ministerially;"

and particularly in the last two lines, where the "Doc" is a typical figure of the old generation of noncombatants, well-fed and inhumanly rejoicing over the soldier's death, because it represented less work for him:

> "Next day I heard the Doc's well-whiskied laugh:
> That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray."

The deliberate disregard of the realities of the war by those who have not experienced them finds its best expression in "Dulce et Decorum Est" (29). This poem is a direct response to Jessie Pope, an English poet who used to write poems in the newspaper, expressing the traditional heroic sentiments towards

war and aiming at encouraging young people to go to war. "Dulce et Decorum Est" reports the retreat of soldiers from the battle-field and the horrors of a gas attack to which they are subjected on their way. The soldiersare described in a very unromantic and unheroic way, placed in an unromantic setting:

> "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
> Knock-kneed, coughing hags, we cursed through sludge,
> . . .
> Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
> But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame;all blind;
> Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
> Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind."

During the gas attack one of the soldiers fails to put on his gas-mask in time, and the vision of this soldier's agony of dying through the gas haunts the poet in all his dreams:

> "And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
> Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
> As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
>
> In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
> He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

The last stanza denies the traditional moral of pre-war poetry, that is "The old Lie" about the beauty and glory of death in war. Owen's bitterness is here directed at the children's poetess, who exhorted them "to play the Game"*.

> "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,
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
> Of vile, 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."

---

* Taken from Henry Newbolt's "Vitai Lampada", a poem of public school propaganda in favour of the war.

It is clear that Owen is not only speaking to the poetess, but to anyone who still believes in the"old Lie", that is, the line of Horace. Owen loved children very much and he had had much experience with them, for he had taught different groups of children for several years during his time in Dunsden, Bordeaux, and even while he was in the hospital in Edinburgh. He thought a lot about child psychology and education. In a letter from Dunsden he says: "It is a mightily instructive, as well as pleasant thing to have the confidence of a child. In fact it is the only way to get at any notion of child psychology...

Teachers in Colleges talk of studying a child. And go about it with moral microscopes in their eyes, and forceps in their fingers. Not the way at all. All that is wanted in the hand is the child's own hand; the best lens for the eye is an earnest smile" (30). He was aware of the power of influence of education and he was also aware of his own capacity of influencing young minds. In the same letter he says: "In fact I am convinced that I hold under my tongue, powers which would shake the foundations of many a spiritual life". And this is the crucial point in "Dulce et Decorum Est". Owen wants to say that it is to children that the truth of war and peace must be taught.

In "Disabled" (31) Owen draws the ugly picture of a multiple amputee:

> "He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark
> . . .
> Legless, sewn short at elbow"

This soldier who not long ago was young and full of life and energy is now impotent for normal life, and love. He is condemned to a vegetative existence:

"About this time Town used to swing so gay
When glow-lamps budded in the light blue trees,
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,-
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands;
All of them touch him like some queer disease.
. . .
Now, he will spend a few sick years in Institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,
And take whatever pity they may dole"

This is his price for having listened to the "old Lie". Instead of being received as a hero by his "Meg" there is only the callous indifference of the women towards him now that he is disabled.

In "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" (32) Owen makes his defence of his poetry and philosophy. He declares that in the hell of war he found God, and glory and happiness in the eyes of the soldiers:

"I, too, saw God through mud, -
The mud that cracked when wretches smiled.
War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child."

he saw the divinity in the men who offered themselves as sacrifices, although they were apparently foul:

"And witnessed exultation -
Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl,
Shine and lift up with passion of oblation,
Seraphic for an hour, though they were foul."

he found beauty in the courage and strength of the soldier and peace among the shell-storms:

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

and all this was possible to him because he loved the "greater love" sharing "with them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell". But the end of the poem leads to a condemnation of those who

are incapable of entering the experience and he concludes:

"These men are worth
Your tears"

but:

"You are not worth their merriment".

This profound religious experience draws its strength from the very unanimity with which the soldiers oppose traditional orthodox Christianity, which was employed as a weapon in the war. It is of course a debatable argument for a pacifist to say that to understand war one has to go to war, but it seems that what Owen is defending here is his conviction that "the true Poets must be truthful."

"The Show" (33) describes the poet's vision in a dream. He sees the decomposing head of a corpse, full of pocks and scabs and infested with insects. The images in this poem are horrifying and the creatures are described with brutal realism:

"My soul looked down from a vague height, with
Death.
As unremembering how I rose or why, -
And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues."

The head is a metaphor for the Western Front,the barbed-wire is its beard, the pockmarks and scabs are the holes produced by the shells. The swarms of brown and grey caterpillars that come "intent on mire" and eat each other, are the English and German troops respectively:

"Across its beard, that horror of harsh wire,
There moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled.
. . .
From gloom's last dregs these long-strung creatures
crept,
. . .
On dithering feet upgathered more and more
Brown strings, towards strings of gray, with
bristling spines,

All migrant from green fields, intent on mire.

Those that were gray, of more abundant spawns,
Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten."

Owen's emphasis on the ghastly creatures shows the central theme of the poem - the dehumanization of man by war. It reduces men to beasts. "The Show" enacts the truth which Owen had so deeply apprehended, that war is both a crime and punishment of humanity at the same time. Both "strings" in the poem have the same fate - destruction and decay, and the poet sees himself as killer and killed, as guilty and as a victim when he understands the vision:

"And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid
Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,
Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,
And the fresh-severed head of it, my head."

This theme of killer and killed is more profoundly developed in "Strange Meeting" (discussed in 4.3.).

Related to the theme of "The Show" is the theme of the unnaturalness of man's use of weapons in "Arms and the Boy"(34). Owen starts with the malice and hunger of blood he sees in the bayonet, the bullets and cartridge, which are not actually intrinsic qualities of the weapons, but a projection of man's mind who designed and uses them. The weapons are described with a "human inhumanity"(35), as Gertrude M. White puts it:

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

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

Owen contrasts the beauty and innocence of youth with the destructiveness of arms:

"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.",

but what he mainly wants to convey in this last stanza is that God does not provide man with weapons as the animals have them, for man is intended for love and creation, not for destruction. Thus if man kills his fellow he is denying his humanity, (compare "The Show") he is not living the purpose he was created for, which is to love his fellow human beings. And in Owen's view the ignoring of this sense of love and brotherhood is the only cause of war. Man misuses his intellect and inventive capacities constructing arms so cruel and with such a destructive power that at the end he himself becomes helpless in front of them. They seem to play with man and ridicule him. This is seen in Owen's "The Last Laugh"(36) where the arms laugh at the dying soldiers, mock human love and fear:

" 'O Jesus Christ! I'm hit,' he said; and died.
Whether he vainly cursed, or prayed indeed,
The Bullets chirped - In vain! vain! vain!
Machine-guns chuckled,- Tut - tut! Tut - tut!
And the Big Gun guffawed.

Another sighed, - 'O Mother, mother! Dad!'
Then smiled, at nothing, childlike, being dead.
And the lofty Shrapnel-cloud
Leisurely gestured, - Fool!
And the falling splinters tittered.

'My Love! 'one moaned. Love languid seemed his mood,
Till, slowly lowered, his whole face kissed the mud.
And the Bayonets' long teeth grinned;
Rabbles of Shells hooted and groaned;
And the Gas hissed."

The suggestion is that at the end the victory belongs to the arms, they have the "last laugh", not man who uses them.

In "Insensibility" (37) Owen examines the various stages of insensibility a soldier is forced into in war, and he half envies and half satirizes those who are able to face

death without fear or compassion:

> "Happy are men who yet before they are killed
> Can let their veins run cold
> Whom no compassion fleers
> Or makes their feet
> Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers".

those who have lost not only their sensitivity but also their imagination;

> "Happy are those who lose imagination:
> They have enough to carry with ammunition.
> Their spirit drags no pack."

Their senses have been "ironed" so that they "Can laugh among the dying unconcerned", without any feeling of guilt; and the soldier home who feels less because he knows less:

> "Happy the soldier home, with not a notion
> How somewhere, every dawn, some men attack
> And many sighs are drained.
> Happy the lad whose mind was never trained:
> His days are worth forgetting more than not."

But the poet's attitude towards these men is not of condemnation, for they are victims of the circumstances of war that forced them into that spiritual death, yet he suggests that those who are conscious of the consequences of war, those who are "wise" (and he includes himself) and therefore guilty, can only see their task through the eyes of the victims, those who do not know why they are fighting:

> "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?"

The task he is referring to is probably that of helping his fellows out of that hell and putting an end to the war. It ties in with what he says in the last stanza where he discusses the one kind of insensibility that can not be forgiven, and that is precisely the refusal to identify with suffering. It is the insensibility of those who deliberately "made themselves immune

> To pity and whatever mourns in man
> . . .
> Whatever shares
> The eternal reciprocity of tears.",

that insensibility of which he accuses the noncombatants at home.

In "Mental Cases" (38) Owen paints a terrifying picture of those soldiers who have suffered complete mental break-down. The realistic description of their physical distortions conveys their inward state of perturbation:

> "Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
> Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?
> Stroke on stroke of pain, - but what slow panic,
> Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?"

In the second and third stanzas he refers to them as murderers and sufferers (compare "The Show" and "Strange Meeting"). Their madness is a result of the murders they witnessed and of those they committed. They are haunted forever by their memories and guilt:

> "Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
> Multitudinous murders they once witnessed,
> . . .
> Always they must see these things and hear them,
> Batter of guns and shutter of flying muscles
> Carnage incomparable, and human squander
> . . . On their sense
> Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-
> black;
> Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh."

As in "Macbeth", the "blood-smear" is the symbol of guilt. Those men cannot face nature because they have violated the natural order. They cannot enjoy nature, they see it only in terms of blood, because blood has become obsessive to them. However those men's guilt is only part of the total guilt of war, in which, from Owen's point of view, all humanity is implicated, as seen in "The Show". In "Mental Cases" Owen suggests that the mad soldiers are accusing "us" (including thus himself) as

responsible for the war and consequently for their madness:

> "Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
> Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
> Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
> Pawing at us who dealt them war and madness."

Finally after the discussion of this sequence of Owen's poems, we see that he actually intended, as he had written to his brother, to "strike a blow at the conscience and heart of England and the world"(39) through his poems. His propagandist views can also be seen in his preface, where he clearly states: "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry", and particularly in his Table of Contents where he lists the poems according to themes, which shows that he wanted each poem to further his central objective of inspiring loathing for the bestiality of war. But, as J. Loiseau says: "His pacifism struck deeper roots than a hatred for war. It sprang from his love for men, and his pity.

. . .

From this pity comes his greatness as a war-poet. Because he so intensely felt the misery of his fellow sufferers, he rose above mere realism, satire, propaganda or rhetoric."(40)

4.7. Sacrifice

Owen saw the killing of hundred of thousands of soldiers in the war on one hand as a deliberate crime of the old generation for sending their young to the holocaust without allowing them to inquire about the justice, honour, and necessity of their sacrifice, and on the other as an enormous, involuntary and unconscious destruction of his generation, caused through the pride and hate of the old generation, and therefore he condemns it. As seen in the previous section, in almost all his war poems

Owen presents the soldier as a victim of war. The young lives pay for the sins of others, of those who plotted the war for economic or political reasons. We saw this sacrificial role in "Greater Love", where the death of the soldiers is identified with the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. Owen's main themes, those of brotherhood, guilt, pity, and sacrifice are deeply inter-related. He suggests in "Greater Love", that as Christ was sacrificed out of the love of God and Christ for humanity, so the soldiers sacrificed their lives for others because they loved the "greater love".

The "Parable of the Old Man and the Young"(41) deals entirely with the theme of sacrifice. In this poem Owen parodies the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham in the poem stands for the older generation and Isaac for the young generation. Unlike the biblical story, in Owen's poem Isaac is sacrificed. It is an indictment of the old generation, who because of their sins of pride and lack of pity, murder their own sons by sending them to war:

> "Then Abraham bound the youth with belts and straps,
> And builded parapets and trenches there,
> And stretched forth the knife to slay his son
> When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
> Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
> Neither do anything to him. Behold,
> A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
> Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
> But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one,"

It is significant that it is an Old Testament parable, with a wrathful and unforgiving God, quite unlike the merciful Christ of the New Testament.

This suggestion of the killing of the young in war being an expiation of the elders' crime is still more patent in the poem called "Inspection" (42), which is a dramatic

dialogue between an officer and a soldier who has been dirty on parade and was therefore cruelly punished by his inspecting officer. However it was later discovered that the dirt was blood from a wound the soldier had received in the war:

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

As in "Macbeth", the "damned spot", that is blood here becomes the symbol of guilt and at the same time the means of washing out that guilt, which here is not attributed to the soldier, but to that hypocritical world:

> " 'The world is washing out its stains', he said.
> 'It doesn't like our cheeks so red:
> Young blood's its great objection.' "

The "washing out of stains" through blood can also be an allusion to the Christian expression of being washed in the blood of the Lamb. Lady Macbeth, of course, is unable to wash the blood from her hand, symbolically unable to cleanse herself of guilt. The parallel is closely made.

"Spring Offensive" (43) is another poem which represents the soldiers' blood shed in the war as a holocaust through the image of the butter cups, which after the attack is launched, become chalices for the sacrificial blood:

> "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;"

Owen believed that the very solution of war and the establishment of complete peace lay in the love based on sacrifice, yet not a sacrifice in death but in life, that is through the individual expression of the "greater love" in life. He himself tried to practise it as well as he could.We learn

through his letters that as an officer, he was constantly concerned with the welfare of his men. This sense of responsibility we noticed throughout his poems. Owen was ready to sacrifice his own life and his art for the cause of peace, however not as a blind patriot but out of his love and pity for suffering humanity.

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5. CONCLUSION

Finally we come to realize that Owen's early life and early poetry contributed to mould the later poet and pacifist and his poetry. His adolescent feelings and attitudes grow into convictions of a mature man. His love of beauty becomes the love of truth. His early themes anticipate his later themes, but do not suggest the transformation fired by searing personal experiences. His sympathy for the poor becomes his fraternal love, which in its turn deepened and matured into his humanism and his mission.

Owen's unusual relationship with his father during his childhood and youth produced in him such feelings as the hidden death-wish, perhaps a desire to be punished for unconscious guilt towards his father, a search for authority, and a certain awe of destruction, which are manifested in the themes of his early poems. These feelings seem to have been the main forces driving him towards his first war experience. Once he had the opportunity to act in the war, thus exposing his stored up aggressiveness, he overcomes his initial conflict. He identifies with that authority, which seems to be the war itself. His view of the war changes to a more objective one and his attitude towards it becomes one of protest after he realized its negative side. Thus, the war matured Owen. It showed him his religion and his mission and made him a positive authority, very conscious of his position of telling others the truth of war.

The hypocrisy of religion of the time, that is, the divergence between what had been taught to him and the practice of Christianity did not fit with his sense of truth and made him revolt against it. Thus his own religious training para-

doxically turned him into an atheist during his youth. But his early introspectiveness and his innate religious devoutness (strengthened through his mother's influence) were the basis for his later meditations on the biblical truths and the truths of violence the war had shown him. And the recognition and evaluation of these truths contributed to his humanism, that became his new religion.

Tailhade carefully instilled in Owen the basis of humanism, the sense of fraternity, which was later stimulated and confirmed by Sassoon.

Owen's early romantic poetry shows traces of egocentrism, inconstancy, explosiveness, and the immaturity proper to youth, but these qualities are transformed through his meditations on the deepest truths which his former religion and the war had distilled. And his later poetry becomes realistic and powerful, with clearly defined themes and objectives.

The mother's early religious influence did not produce the priest she had dreamed of, but Owen's attitude to his poetry and his mission can be seen as that of a student of theology towards priesthood. Perhaps, we could say that Owen continued to play the role of priest in his poetry, preaching a new and more authentic religion to the new generations. He knew that he would be understood only by the generations that would come after him. He failed in his intention of warning statesmen and politicians against war, but his poems will continue to move the readers as long as there exists in them a trace of that "eternal reciprocity of tears".

Humanism had finally become Owen's true religion. It

had its roots in his sense of beauty, the harmony and order he saw in nature, his love for life, his pity, the truths the war taught him, and his "greater love". And Owen's pacifism was not an idea that he acquired at a given moment, but it was born and developed with his personality, grew and matured with the thudding of shells in the war. It was in an ultimate analysis an offspring of his humanism. We cannot fit Owen easily into the present concept of pacifism, but his ideas can be seen as pre-figuring the impulse towards peace and brotherhood that exists in some quarters, even today.

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