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Larner-Lewis, Jonathan

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Poetic Versus: Conflicting Great War Poems

By

Jonathan Robert Larner-Lewis

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Committee in charge:

Professor Kent Puckett, Chair

Professor Charles Blanton

Professor James Vernon

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Abstract

Poetic Versus: Conflicting Great War Poems

by

Jonathan Robert Lerner-Lewis

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Kent Puckett, Chair

This dissertation is a close look at poems written during the Great War by Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, and Wilfred Owen. I describe how each deploys poetry's formal resources to engage the affective, cognitive, spiritual, and political problems the war produces for them. I argue that strategies of poetic doubling allow them to address—if not quite assuage—the effects of the war that trouble them the most. Each poem manifests this doubling in different ways, but the tactic of doubling is pervasive. Ultimately, I argue that this doubling is equally an effect of the war's incessant production of antagonistic cultural forms, and of lyric poetry's fundamental ability to accommodate internal opposition at the formal level. The intrinsic ambivalence of poetic form makes it a particularly effective discourse for examining war's social and political contradictions.

This unifying theme of formal doubling or what I call the “poetic versus”—double timeframes in Hardy, double identities and locations in Thomas, and two or more opposing verbal registers in Owen—is a careful instantiation of Isobel Armstrong's influential figure of the “double poem.” I track examples of how poems formally enact the kind of doubleness Armstrong describes—how they enact a second-order commentary on their own primary expression. Doubling is a broad but apt name for the strategies by which the war's disturbances and antagonisms are transferred between the poem's double levels of engagement, whether conceived as formal/social (Raymond Williams), literary/political (Caroline Levine) or expressive/epistemological (Isobel Armstrong).

The prominent forms of doubling I identify line up with tenets of liberal political thought threatened by the war: Hardy's trouble with time is tied to a belief in rational human progress that the war renders increasingly difficult to maintain. Thomas's dual identities, in light of the economic forces that ultimately forced him to abandon writing for a soldier's salary, are traceable to a crisis of alienation underlying liberalism's basis in the individual. Owen's project of incorporating voices of inherited cultural tradition and authority, only to expose them as the very origins of the war's depredations is a critique of liberalism cast as a personal betrayal. Drawing on critical work by William Empson and Paul Fussell, I identify a complex form of irony as the crucial intellectual and affective stance which poetic doubling enables, a stance that becomes an increasingly important cultural survival strategy as the war persists.

Poetic Versus: Conflicting Great War Poems

Introduction

The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves.
—Oscar Wilde

I. War on Christmas

Let's begin with a hymn:

Christmas: 1924

'Peace upon earth!' was said. We sing it,
And pay a million priests to bring it.
After two thousand years of mass
We've got as far as poison-gas.
1924

The first feeling one gets from reading this acerbic little lyric by Thomas Hardy is that nothing more needs to be said. It's brutal, perfect. It utterly gibbets the Anglican pulpit, the gullible singers in the pews (us!), and that fatuous modern faith in technology and scientific progress. Rhyming "mass" with "gas" is the coup de grace. We're all dead.

And yet... right behind that is a feeling is that Hardy is not quite done with us. Here he has crafted a neat modern hymn in traditional long meter (iambic tetrameter); the setting perfectly fits the setting, as it were. But instead of opening us up to grace, it snaps shut like a nasty limerick. Clearly offense was meant, given and taken. And yet again, it is unlike Hardy to be merely blasphemous for no reason; he's ironical, fatalistic, sure, but rarely so plainly bitter. There must be something else going on. I look to the interesting redundancy in the first line of "said" and "sing." Why the shift immediately from the passive-voiced past tense to the first-person plural—who "said" and who "sing[s]"? I also look to the poem's bad math. Even accounting for Jesus's own ministries, we're half a century short of 2000, give or take. There is, then, a vaguely millenarian tendency here, which undermines the firm historicity of the poem's redundant dating in its title and postscript, and which is perhaps kin to the more explicit prophetic mode that we see in other Hardy poems. So maybe we still have a little time left. Which brings me to that last line again: "We've got as far as..." Yes, this is a straightforward travesty of the liturgy, which conveys clearly enough that we've gone in the wrong direction, that those who would argue "poison-gas" and the war itself were necessary steps towards global harmony are wicked, stupid or both. But there is also buried there, beneath that hard top crust of irony, a sense that we must keep going. Keep singing "Peace upon earth" together, even though our own recent history makes us look stupid doing it. The surface irony of this poem is ever so slightly undermined. We're faced with a double negative: Priests and their peace talk are mocked, but industrial warfare is repudiated, even more strongly. There is literally no more

urgent call for peace on earth than poison-gas (until nukes). The poem has no faith in Anglican authority, yet it retains some small faith in having faith. Besides, it's Christmas! It is that special time each year when we step out of the flow of our daily lives, sing songs together, try to be charitable and kind, and pledge to do better next year, in hope that the world may do the same. This hymn begins by excoriating empty rituals and traditions, yet somehow, despite itself, ends up reinforcing their necessity. The poem's antagonist is not the priest, but the poem itself.

Here I've expended almost 500 words on these four lines and haven't even touched on Hardy's intimate life-long relationship to church music, or to his late literary friendship with Siegfried Sassoon, whose influence seems all over this poem—not just in its particularly pointy brand of irony, but also its slide into self-contradiction—indeed, “Christmas: 1924” could be read as Hardy trying out a “Sassoon Poem” and productively failing. And I'd like to connect this poem to the rest of *Winter Words*, the threnodic posthumous volume that is underrepresented in Hardy criticism; or to Hardy's counterintuitive optimism, aka “evolutionary meliorism”—famously if awkwardly set forth in the “Apology” to *Late Lyrics*—which urgently calls for poetry to provide an “alliance between religion” and scientific “rationality” (this poem sets itself against both, but that's interesting too). But I'll stop there, because we must move on. But this poem, like Christmas, will come back soon enough.

This dissertation is a very close look at some poems written during the Great War by Hardy, Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen. I describe the ways each deployed poetry's formal resources to engage some of the affective, cognitive, spiritual, and political problems the war produced for them. Ultimately, I argue that strategies of poetic doubling allowed them to address—if not quite assuage—the effects of the war that troubled them the most. Each poet—indeed, each poem—manifests this idea of doubling in different ways, but the tactic of doubling is pervasive. Ultimately, I argue that this doubling is equally an effect of the war's incessant production of antagonistic cultural forms, and of lyric poetry's fundamental ability to accommodate internal opposition at the formal level. The intrinsic ambivalence of poetic form makes it a particularly effective discourse for examining war's overwhelming contradictions. This introduction will proceed first with a descriptive and contextual account of my formalist critical method. Then I briefly lay out a more detailed account of the concept of poetic doubling, and why it is not reducible to mere irony or ambiguity. I then cite two recent literary-critical exemplars that help situate my archive and argument between the major disciplinary lines of Victorian and modernist literatures and the problematic minor classifications of “Georgian Poetry” and “War Poets.” Finally, I briefly summarize my chapters, touching on each poet's central concerns in regards to the war, and the poetic strategies they use to address them.

II. Formalist Versus

This is an unabashedly formalist project. It is formalist, though, in two senses of the word, which differ but do not conflict. Raymond Williams usefully accounts for a basic duality built in to the very term in *Keywords*, first by tracking a split in the development of the root “form” which in English comes to mean two nearly opposite things: “(i) a visible outward

shape”; and/or “(ii) an essential shaping principle.” The first sense, as in “mere forms,” and the inexorable “form versus content,” leads to the derisive tone of “formalist” when used to describe the early 20th century Russian school of that name,¹ along with the midcentury New Critics, and other critical schools which allegedly attempted to cordon off the individual artwork from its historical context, and the aesthetic generally from the social and political. (Never mind that any such cordon would be a potently political form.) Before I go on to claim I am not *that* kind of formalist, I first want to admit that I am.

Because, I am above all committed to a practice of sustained, inductive close readings of individual poems. Most of my readings are of a length that has become unfashionable, and a fair portion of that length is comprised of a careful account of formal poetic effects, including meter, rhyme and other sound effects, and line and stanza shapes. I strive always to account for the effects each of these have on the poem’s content and context, on its other overlapping forms, and ultimately on the reader as well. Because the poems I examine are shorter lyrics, they aspire to unity and completion, and this aspiration is honored in my critical practice with a corresponding bid for comprehensiveness. In this, my formalist methodology may look a bit old school, though I concur with many critiques of formalism that hold any notion of totality in art to be both illusory and ideologically suspect. In the end, in addition to being quite difficult, it is simply less interesting to try to situate a poem above or apart from its social and historical contexts. Though it is very interesting indeed when the poem itself aspires to that kind of detachment. How and why do some poems make a bid for separation from the things of the world, from the flow of history? When that bid inevitably fails—as the “Peace upon Earth” song fails in “Christmas: 1924”—in what can we learn from its failure? These are among the further questions I strive to ask of poems, once I have credibly classified as much of their architecture and armature as I can.

This kind of broader question squares with the second kind of formalism to which I subscribe just as readily. Williams suggests the term “*social formalism*” for the work of those later formalists who incorporated techniques from Marxist critical practice, and which

asked about the real *formation* (form [ii]) of a work, which requires specific analysis of its elements in a particular organization ... involving extension from the specific form to wider forms ... of consciousness and relationship (society).²

This aptly describes the sense in which my readings are always on the hunt in the poems for “wider” social, political and historical ideas depicted and understood *as forms*. Indeed, here Williams describes something very like his own critical project, which he outlines at some length in *The Long Revolution*:

The theory of culture [is] the study of relationships between the elements in a whole way of life. The analysis of culture is the attempt to discover the nature of the

¹ Much in the way people to their political right—and left—often use poorly understood terms like “liberal” and “socialist” as slurs against those they accurately describe.

² *Keywords*, 139, parentheses and italics in the original.

organisation which is the complex of these relationships. Analysis of particular works or institutions is, in this context, analysis of their essential kind of organization, the relationships which works or institutions embody as parts of the organization as a whole. A keyword in such analysis, is pattern: it is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationships between these patterns, which sometimes reveal unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities, sometimes again reveal discontinuities of an unexpected kind. (67)

The value of this description is in the way it patiently drills down from the “whole way of life” all the way to the individual “work” through the “relationships” and “patterns” which connect and organize part with whole at every level along the way. This, to me, is the best way to think of the relationship between poetic forms at the micro level and historical and political formations at the macro: not as metaphors or representations of each other, but as links at either end of a chain, or better yet, a web, to borrow a potent figure from Thomas Hardy: “The human race to be shown as one great network or tissue which quivers in every part when one point is shaken, like a spider’s web if touched” (*Life* 182).³

The work of the formalist then, is not in naming or arranging hypostatic forms, but in tracking patterns of movement and relationship between various parts and wholes. It is also important to notice in Williams’s formulation that there are two different kinds of “relationships” available for analysis: those which link “elements,” (“works or institutions”) and those which link “patterns,” which I take to correspond to first- and second-order analyses. My formalist critical practice reenacts the whole focusing movement of the Williams passage in reverse—twice: first by putting individual elements of a single work into relationships and patterns; then starting again finding relationships and patterns between multiple works, finally working out from those to the organizations and institutions in which they were conceived, tracking the patterns of social and political activity which move them all. The formalist’s work, in other words, has only just begun when they are done with the poem.

What we also find in Williams is an emphasis not just on art as one link in the web, but as a particularly important one for shared consciousness and shared experience, as he describes here:

Art reflects its society and works a social character through to its reality in experience. ... If we compare art with its society, we find a series of real relationships showing its deep and central connexions with the rest of the general life ... We find also, in certain characteristic forms and devices, evidence of the deadlocks and unsolved problems of the society: often admitted to consciousness for the first time in this way. (91)

³ The Hardy quote continues in a way which is helpful to understanding his strange Platonic abstractions “Spirits, Spectral figures, etc.” several of which we will encounter in Chapter 1: “The Realities to be the true realities of life, hitherto called abstractions. The old material realities to be placed behind the former, as shadowy accessories.”

This, for me, is a highly compelling account of the critic's other task: to get at "unsolved problems of society" which may only just be coming visible in the "characteristic forms" of one kind of art at one particular time. According to this model, poetry might be able to tell us things about a historical moment that other art forms may not (and vice versa). One need not divert too deeply into genre theory to see that different art forms have different qualities and capabilities—"forms and devices"—which give different views of the culture that produces them. A useful conceptual term that Williams offers for what one seeks while plumbing art's "deep connexions" is the appositely formal "structure of feeling." Defined in part as "a way of thinking and living ... a particular organization of life"—it is a complex and labile concept—indeed Williams insists it must be to accommodate the constantly changing nature of a society's "lived experience"—because "it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity" and "it is on it that communication depends" (69). In other words, in seeking this elusive but pervasive structure, we are looking for the very patterns that constitute culture.

The way to begin looking for a form so fundamental that it tends towards invisibility, is to look for its component forms that are more discrete and ready at hand. An example of a "structure of feeling" we might extract from "Christmas: 1924" is a pervasive disenchantment with church and state and the ideals they supposedly upheld, a painful malaise that exists not just in the poet's mind, but deep in the culture of interwar England. But of course we cannot claim to have found it by simply positing that it ought to be there. We must reconstruct it inductively from the poem's many discrete forms, as in the use of "millions," which is simultaneously too specific and too abstract, counting the priests and what "we pay" them in the same terms one might count the casualties of war or the costs of rebuilding Europe. Or in the way rhyming "mass" to "gas" uncomfortably forces together the most unlike cultural categories, perhaps even punning on a mass which weighs us down where it should lift us up; or the way the poem begins in peaceful song and ends with a sarcastic quip. None of these constitute the whole "structure of feeling," but they are among its constitutive parts, and when we find compatible parts in other cultural expressions from the period, we can begin to perceive the larger pattern.

Though I embrace Williams's terms and aspire to align my overall project with his, I think my own method offers both a simplification and a shift of emphasis. Where Williams is willing and able to survey vast swathes of literary and other cultural materials, I drastically narrow my scope, hoping that by such focus, in both archive (a few poems by a few poets written in a few years' span) and method (close reading for political valences of formal devices) I can better understand the specific relationships between those forms and the "structure of feeling" they express (hereafter I will stop putting this term in quotes). In this focusing of method, I find myself in solidarity with a burgeoning cadre of like-minded academics who may or may not identify as "new formalists" and some of whose work I discuss at greater length below. Theirs has been a recurrent and basically successful effort to rid formalism of the "negative associations" still clinging to it in 1973 when Williams was limning its use in the academy.

Caroline Levine offers a recent and particularly cogent rearticulation of a by-now familiar cycle of division and reconciliation, this time around conceived as a rift between "formalist" and "historicist" methodologies (her terms, which stand in readily for whatever metonyms are thought to be presently at odds: aesthetics versus politics, text versus

context, Formalist versus Marxist, etc. etc.).⁴ Though she tends to overstate the degree of her intervention and innovation, Levine offers an elegant and useful set of terms with which to analyze forms and formal relationships across disciplinary and conceptual divides. Aiming to “expand our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience” (2), she offers the following, which is hard to dispute: “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (3). From this teeming infinity she helpfully extracts “wholes, rhythms, hierarchies and networks” as particularly pervasive forms which are relatively easy to identify as they “collide” and overlap in literature, politics and social life, which are themselves all forms “nested inside one another” (16).

For instance, in the Hardy poem we might look at the way “we pay millions of priests” suggests *networks* of both taxation and ecclesiastical administration, which are colliding destructively with other forms like theological tradition or industrial production. Or perhaps we might discuss the way the colliding *rhythms* of hymn and clipped modern lyric discredit both in turn, leaving us unsettled; or the way the liturgical calendar (a kind of rhythm) which culminates in Christmas is in painful conflict with the historical measure inscribed by the outgoing “1924,” a clear reference to the ten-year anniversary of the war.

In adopting aspects of her proposed method, I adopt Levine’s conveniently broad definition of “form.” Obviously this gives one a lot of rope, but I also share Levine’s and others’ sense that those political forms which are embedded in—or even disguised as—some other kind of form are particularly worth watching out for. As she puts it:

[I]t is the work of form to make order. And this means that forms are the stuff of politics. ... the political is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience ... there is no politics without form. (3)

Levine’s case is both easier and harder to make than my own: easier, because, like Williams 50 years before her, she incorporates a huge and diverse set of examples into her book, moving between categories and archives with an admirable, if at times alarming, assurance; harder because few cultural forms of any kind are as manifestly formal and plainly political as war poems.

Indeed, a preeminent example of reading for and through the kinds of sociopolitical forms that Levine describes, which aptly illustrates my point, are the names of the subchapters that organize Paul Fussell’s ineluctable *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Some of the most salient include “Ironic Action,” “The Enemy,” “Theater of War,” “Ridiculous Proximity,” “Adversary Proceedings,” and “The *Versus* Habit” (this last which I have hijacked for my project’s title).⁵ With these, the formal and figurative labeling of

⁴ Levine offers simplified and understandably self-serving institutional histories of formalism versus Marxism (11–16) and new historicism (24–37); Williams does a knottier version in the 1986 lecture “The Uses of Cultural Theory” (In *The Politics of Modernism*, 163–176).

⁵ See especially Fussell’s chapters I, III, and V *passim*. He defines “The *Versus* Habit” thus: “one thing opposed to another, not with some Hegelian hope of synthesis ... but with a sense that one of the poles embodies so wicked a deficiency or flaw or perversion that its total submission is called for” (79). The pun on “verses” is a perversion all my own, which I attempt to justify below. And the pun on “salient” in this sentence was a total accident that I left in for any WWI buffs out there.

sociopolitical concepts structures the discussion of similar and adjacent concepts. Though Fussell's broad-ranging cultural history can only afford to pay scant attention to poetic form, his organizing themes and concepts are as useful an example of Levine's convergence of literary, social and institutional forms as any she provides. I wholeheartedly share Levine's opinion that "what literary critics have traditionally done best—reading for complex relationships and multiple, overlapping arrangements" ought to be applied to "the conflicting formal logics that turn out to organize and disorganize our lives" (23). Fussell's enduringly relevant study shows how effective a method that combines broad cultural analysis with close attention to formal discursive patterns can be.

Another way of describing my project, then, is to say that war poems are formal and political in such obvious ways, that my task is merely to describe precisely how these two registers interact. Reading a stridently progressive Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem, "The Cry of the Children," Levine says: "Barrett Browning suggests that poetry, with its capacity for tensions, inversions, and ironies, is ideally suited to the representation of a divided and hypocritical nation" (640). I would aver that, according to a few of England's poets (not to mention a few of its cultural historians), it has rarely been quite so divided or hypocritical as it was during the Great War. And if divisions and hypocrisies have gone forth and multiplied since then, they were never quite so poeticized as they were in those bloody years.

III. Poetic Versus

In the ostensibly personal form of the lyric poem, the poets I examine took up some of the most urgent political questions of their time. In this sense, the personal and the political are always in tension in these poems—"colliding" as Levine has it—occasionally as antagonists, but more often as imbricated concepts whose beginnings and ends are invisible. The sweepingly complex sociopolitical situation of this global empire at war, allied with one of its ancestral foes against another rising industrial power that to many Englishmen seemed more culturally kindred, is distilled into small, intimate poetic engagements which mostly keep "the enemy" out of view, or if they include him, treat him like a familiar. In this general sense of large forces put into small forms, these poems may all be read as "versions of pastoral" in the terms of William Empson's classic treatment. Empson provides a sort of negative definition of pastoral, as its formal conventions migrate through other literary modes (to which I'll add war poems).⁶ The most fundamental of these conventions is "the process of putting the complex into the simple" (23). And it is clear enough how any lyric that takes on political or historical concepts (as war poems do, almost by definition) must employ this process. The sheer formal compression that short lyrics entail, along with their frequent approximation to an individual human consciousness, means they will almost always involve the kind of distillation that Empson describes, though geopolitics certainly provide a special challenge. It is worth noting how this process resembles both Levine's

⁶ Fussell does include a fine section on war poems as pastoral, but he uses the term in a narrower sense of "nature poem" or "poem about shepherds," missing the chance to connect his fundamental irony to Empson's. See chapter 7, especially 235–243.

and Williams's practices of relating broad social processes to discrete artistic forms. In this sense pastoral is an early and enduring methodology for layering the sociopolitical onto the poetic, and so worth invoking explicitly. There are at least two other important aspects of Empson's work that will also be recurrently important here.

For one, pastoral is quite obviously concerned with class. As Empson has it, "pastoral though 'about' is not 'by' or 'for'" the people (6). The relations of complex to simple, then, often align with the relations of high to low, and pastoral, somewhat counter-intuitively, is meant to evoke a sense of "solidarity between the classes." Of course this "solidarity" has always been from the perspective of the economic elite and the intelligentsia towards the rural laborer, not vice versa. But the form is consistent across time, even as it relies on increasingly elaborate arrangements to come off. Going back to its classical and early renaissance origins, Empson says:

The essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (... the most universal subjects, something fundamentally true ...) in learned and fashionable language. (11)

This is inevitably the structure of much war poetry, with the stereotypical rural laborer replaced by the more socially ambiguous figure of the soldier, who is not always poor or simple, and who even at the lowest level is nominally held in some esteem. However, the pervasive notion, which comes to us from pastoral, that the soldier may have better access to "strong, universal, fundamental feelings" (cf. Williams's structure of feelings) than a noncombatant is a fundamental assumption made by just about every war poem, and indeed, of most discourse about war from soldiers and civilians alike. Even where the soldierly worldview is ascribed to a hostile tribal or nationalistic ideology (in the more negative sense of false consciousness), it is still often held to be more strongly and deeply felt than shallower civilian mores. It does not negate this class element that two of the poets I examine were soldiers, because, of course, they were educated officers, and in this their poetic bid for solidarity with men in the lower ranks is as pastoral as it gets.

And if, contra Empson's "old pastoral," all three of the poets I examine make efforts to honor and incorporate the "simpler" (read: lower) language of the soldier into their poems, these are still literary products destined for books and magazines with a higher class of reader in mind. In fact there is an interesting process I will discuss in my chapter on Owen by which "trench talk" does become "fashionable," in large part thanks to such poetry. This clash of discourses is related to another important disruption to the pastoral tradition by these poets, specifically to that dubious desire for "beautiful relations" between the classes. Instead of dignifying the lower orders by lending them lofty words and feelings, most of the poems I examine reverse that trajectory, using caustic language and imagery to drag the more fortunate reader/observer, safe at home, down into the trenches to experience the soldiers' affliction. Even the civilian Hardy participates in this sadistic aesthetic, for instance by bringing "poison gas" to church. Yet it is a testament to the flexibility and persistence of pastoral (and Empson's analysis) that even this can still be read as a way of conferring dignity on the wretched, despite the distinctly soured class relations. There is a reflexive, concurrent result of bringing the reader into the trenches

that also brings the soldier out and up, into the respectable company of poetry's high cultural tradition, and this reflexive action is crucially related to the notion of doubling that I will go on to elaborate.

The final, and perhaps most important point of connection I want to make with Empson's pastoral has to do with the complex doubleness of irony itself. He lays this out in his chapter on "Double Plots" in Elizabethan drama, wherein a comic subplot, with lower-order characters, often clowns or servants, shadows the more serious main plot of courtly intrigue or romance. In a great many examples he shows that the pastoral effect obtains where the low is ennobled by analogy and proximity to the high, even as the laughter and bawdiness emerging from the domain of the low serves to deflate the heroism and glamour of the high, bringing it to earth and making it more relatable to a socially diverse audience. There is irony enough built into this reflexive exchange, whose resemblance to the relationship between battlefield and home front just discussed should be clear: but that is not where my truck with Empson stops. He goes on to posit the vital importance of the lowly pun to this elaborate social-aesthetic process:

[V]erbal ironies in the comic characters' low jokes carry on the thought of both plots of the play ... one source of the unity of a Shakespeare play, however brusque its handling of character, is this coherence of its subdued puns. (39)

He follows this with a bravura reading of a repeated pun on the word "general" in *Troilus and Cressida*, which activates the play's fundamental "comparison between the person and the state, between a personal situation and a political one" (42). It is thus at the lowest level of language that the double plot coheres, and single words that not only have double meanings (and in "general" nearly opposite—the singular military hero versus the multitudes who he leads and defends) but double functions (low laughter and lofty identifications) are the linchpins that hold the complex form together. The simple duality of the pun gives access to the more complicated duality—a double duality—of irony. Empson elaborates later, discussing Swift's elaborate and sustained ironic postures:

The fundamental impulse of irony is to score off both the arguments that have been puzzling you, both sets of sympathies in your mind, both sorts of fool who will hear you ; a plague on both their houses. It is because of the strength given by this antagonism that it seems to get so safely outside the situation it assumes, to decide so easily about the doubt which it in fact accepts. (62)

This doubly antagonistic irony, which allows its recipient to "get safely outside the situation" I will argue, is the most important way in which the war poems I examine carry on the pastoral tradition. It is the only way these small poems are able to hold and communicate the staggeringly complex and quite often horrifying feelings engendered by the war in such a way that they don't completely unravel the person feeling them. This is not, I should stress, the simple irony of Sassoon's anti-church/government/military brass propaganda poems (effective though they are), nor even the infamously pessimistic irony of early Hardy, where the hopes of simple people are neatly crushed by fate. The heights and depths of irony it took to survive the war (even for those who didn't quite) was more

profound than these, and indeed is best described by Empson as the “strength given by [the] antagonism” of saying a “plague on both their houses.” Though the doubling I discover in these poems is not identical to this irony, this is one of its most common and potent effects, this feeling that one must oppose all of it to keep oneself together.

I’ll say then, that it is by way of Empson that I take my permission to use a pun as my project’s title; but perhaps more important there is the nod to Fussell. His work shows us how and why poetry and war—each, but especially in combination—confront us with a minefield of unfortunate usages, double entendres, and dodgy, dark humor. If I have surrendered already in the battle of trying to keep my language free of war puns, I will strive instead to be self-conscious and purposeful in their use, as with Empson’s “general.” One way I do so is to catalogue and account for the ways in which war invades language as a crucial aspect of my broader critical method. Fussell himself has two indispensable sections about this cultural-linguistic phenomenon of invading forms.⁷ After cautioning that we must avoid assuming *everything* that comes after the war is somehow about the war, he goes on to aver that “some special ways the modern world chooses to put things do appear profoundly affected by the sense of adversary proceedings to which the war accustomed those who fought and those who had not” (105). And later he gives several convincing examples of how we are all inheritors of the Great War’s “special diction and system of metaphor, its whole jargon of techniques and tactics and strategy” (187). I follow Fussell in this, and though I am keenly interested in those particular words and phrases that emerged from the trenches with new currency and unfortunate subtexts (“the trenches” foremost among them) I am even more keen on those more abstract formal and conceptual habits (“ways... to put things”; “techniques, tactics and strategy”) which were the war’s bequest to the language. These conceptual legacies of the war are often the central forms that activate the poems I examine. Indeed, the Fussell-inspired pun in my title is a fair warning of this study’s general obsession with antagonistic forms—and formalisms—disinterred by the specific disturbances of the period spanning the turn of the century to the end of the war. To sharpen this metaphor, the war does not create these forms, but it uncovers and exposes them as either particularly useful or useless for addressing its effects. War’s distinct forms disseminate throughout the culture, begetting new forms or deploying old forms in new ways (ploughshares and swords, lines and trenches, etc.), which provide especially intense examples of what formal concepts can and can not do.

In addition to Fussell’s persistent influence, I am indebted throughout to Meredith Martin, who cautiously identifies as a “new formalist” in the introduction to *The Rise and Fall of Meter*, her painstaking study of “historical prosody” in and around the Great War. Martin’s book is based around a compelling central question: “asking how and why meter was on the minds of so many poets in a time of national insecurity, and how this insecurity and instability are inherent, now, in any definition or discussion of meter in English” (14). Because I am entirely convinced by her assertion that “meter, as a discourse, was deeply imbedded in cultural politics and institutions of the state,” I hope to extend her historically

⁷ See “The Persistent Enemy,” 105–113; “Survivals,” 187–90. Fussell: “One reason we can use a term like *tactics* so readily, literally or in metaphors, is that the Great War taught it to us” (187).

precise formal inquiry into a broader engagement with poetic forms. I am, for instance, just as interested in the ideas and relationships arranged through rhymes and stanzas as I am in the ideological vicissitudes of meter which Martin tracks so ably.

So instead of focusing on the historical and cultural contexts of a single aspect of poetic form, as Martin does, my method is to focus at length on individual poems, emphasizing what their various formal aspects, each in turn and all in combination, can tell us about how war inflected the thought and practice of the poet, his readers, and their shared lived experience outside the poem. Another way to say this is that because inherited poetic forms are inherently conservative phenomena—they always look backwards to tradition and precedent (e.g. classical or Anglo Saxon meters, ballad or sonnet forms, allusions to poetic predecessors, etc.)—form is also the place where energies of progress and disruption can be most readily observed. Here I have lapsed into another metaphor that I want to make more explicit and purposeful: poetic form is like a location—similar to a library or a museum. It is a kind of archive where previous cultural forms are conserved, and to which artists may go to find forms for ideas they too want to sustain, but equally for ideas they want to update, disrupt, or destroy completely—like Hardy opening up his hymnal. In this sense, literary form is unavoidably political; it is a place where an individual can confront more or less powerful inherited cultural structures (cf. Levine’s “ordering principles”) and make the choice between obedience and dissent. This is not necessarily a binary choice, mind you: in artistic practice (if perhaps less so in political praxis) there is plenty of room between those two poles. Form is where the tradition inheres and is passed forward, but also a place where it can become vulnerable and start to tear loose; as soon as underlying cultural structures become recognized as such, they open themselves up to subversive destabilization.

Therefore, even though most poetic forms are manifestations of conservative cultural traditions, elite, even courtly, conventions, and an overwhelmingly patriarchal inheritance (notwithstanding the Sapphic origins of lyric), it does not follow that the mere use of a particular poetic form intends any specific political belief on the part of the author, less of the culture itself.⁸ Any form, like meter, is first of all an abstract entity, which underlies but is not identical to the material that it gives form. In this way it manages to be both politically significant and politically neutral at once. Let me offer a crude but expeditious example: Imagine a poem on a stirring patriotic theme written in lock-step marching trochees with nice, clean balladic rhymes that all resound to that theme—some early Kipling would be perfect, though this line from Newbolt will also serve: “You that mean to fight it out, wake and take your load again.” Now imagine a poem with the same exact rhythm, perhaps even more exactly regular, and which uses not just the same rhyme scheme, but the same exact rhyme words; but this second poem is an uncouth and anarchistic parody of the first poem, along the lines of: “You who signed up to die for us, please rise and try again.” In this exaggerated example we can see the way in which form is more like a stage (to switch metaphors again) on which ideologies and sentiments (patriotic or not, in my example) can be conveniently observed in action than it is itself the

⁸ Levine recounts the critical history of politicized suspicion and opposition to New Critical obsessions with unified, bounded wholes (24–37). Likewise Martin’s main argument is that meter has historically been employed in service of diverse and opposed conceptions of nation and tradition.

expression of any particular ideology.⁹ Form is absolutely where the action is—it's the field of play—so you need to be able see the field clearly to follow the action.

All of the readings that follow begin with an assumption that the poem at hand is trying to solve a problem either precipitated or intensified by the Great War—that these poems are themselves basically tools, equally cognitive and cultural, at work on ideas that aren't quite working. My understanding of lyric poems and of what they can and cannot do owes much to Allen Grossman's *Summa Lyrica*, which he opens by defining "'the poem' as an object of thought and as an instrument for thinking ... *thinking* as it may arise in the course of inquiry directed towards poetic structures" (207). Although there is a plain tautology in Grossman's formulation (which I don't think he would disavow)—that a poem is most useful for thinking "towards poetic structures"—but I think he means "poetic" and "structures" as Levine does, in an expansive and multifarious way, while by "the poem" he means just that, the thing on the page. Therefore, this conception of lyric is actually nicely compatible with Levine and Williams's more explicitly sociopolitical practice, whereby the structures we see working in poetry are useful counterparts for structures we find elsewhere. A critical reading of a poem must therefore identify which social or political problems the poem is engaging. This is not because the poem solves the problems (they rarely do, even when they claim to, which is also rare) and even less that readers can solve any analogous problem for themselves by extrapolating from the poetic attempt. Rather it is just to say that a critical reading of a poem must first recognize that every poem is already engaged in a critical reading of its own culture, much as we see in Williams's formulations.

One of the reasons short lyric poems are so useful for the kind of broadly synthetic formal analysis that Williams and Levine suggest—and that I am embarking on here—is that all the parts of a poem relate to all the other parts in a way not often true of the more linear construction of prose. Which is to say that, though poems are often carved into convenient, aphoristic bits—indeed, often lend themselves well to, or even demand such carving (many people with little patience for poetry can quote a little bit of Keats, Yeats, or King James, whether they know it or not)—this is not an effective way to deploy them if the goal, as it is here, is to seek the broad insights they can offer into the determining forms of the culture and society in which they were produced. It is not that we must look at all the parts to understand the whole—the very concept of *wholes* is constantly undermined by the poems—but rather that all the parts move and work together. Again, returning to Williams, we might say that we are looking for "patterns" and "living processes" not "fixed and separable objects" (118). One can't see a pattern by looking at only one iteration, nor follow complex processes with a glance. Poems love to be quoted, one can assume; but they vastly prefer to be read.

⁹ I try to henceforth use this slippery term in what Raymond Williams calls its "neutral" sense: "the set of ideas which arise from a given set of material interests or ... from a definite class or group" (*Key Words* 156–7).

IV. Victorian Versus

I have limited myself to a primary archive of poems written in the interval of late 1915 through late 1917 with only a few poems outside that interval (including “Christmas: 1924,”) used for a specific comparison. I have limited my interpretive conclusions to positing how these poets were thinking about war in poetry and about poetry in war (i.e. what they think poetry can tell us about war that other discourses cannot, and what is different about writing poetry during wartime versus any other time—if indeed there is any other time) and what we might learn about the “lived experiences” and structures of feeling specific to wartime. I find it particularly interesting to read poems about the war written without its end in sight, when the world still seemed to be violently breaking into pieces, with no hint yet of how they might be put back together—an activity which even the bleakest of postwar cultural output would have in front of it. In delimiting my archive in this way, I am participating in yet another interpretive act that I feel is important to acknowledge—which will in turn answer the question, “why these poets and not others?” Again, we can turn to Raymond Williams for a searching (if not quite succinct) discussion of this phenomenon, which he calls “the selective tradition”:

In society as a whole, and in all its particular activities, the cultural tradition can be seen as a continual selection and reselection of ancestors. ... We tend to underestimate the extent to which [this] is not only a selection but also an interpretation. We see most past work through our own experience, without even making the effort to see it in something like its original terms. What analysis can do is not so much to reverse this, returning a work to its period, as to make the interpretation conscious ... to relate [it] to the particular contemporary values on which it rests; and by exploring the real patterns of the work, confront us with the real nature of the choices we are making. (74)

My “particular activity” of course, is literary criticism, and I have tried to carefully contextualize my method as such, and will continue to do so in what follows. But my “selection of ancestors” is a more difficult question to address.

To begin with, the era of “total war” and the interrelated phenomena of technologically advanced communications, global markets, and international law, which are all emergent in the period in question, are still fundamental characteristics of our contemporary experience. In this sense my chosen ancestors are fairly close kin. And while recognizing and in some ways sharing in the sociopolitical pressures and problems I track throughout the poems is one reason I have chosen them, that still doesn’t adequately account for the fact of this somewhat unconventional grouping of three poets, who cross disciplinary lines, as a group and individually. I have selected three poets who exhibit profound ambivalence about war, nationalism and violence in their poetry, views which are nowhere reducible to simple acceptance, nor opposition, but shot through with shifting allegiances, conflicting inheritances, and ambiguous personal feelings. That there is, in my attraction to these poets (or more accurately to these poems, as I have carefully excluded a great many), an uncanny sense of self-recognition, of fellow-feeling across time, an alloy of anger and pity, empathy and irony, dissent and resignation, must be acknowledged as the

first condition of my critical activity. Another way of saying this is that motivating this project is an intimate recognition of the structures of feeling made available by these poems, and that is reason enough to try to discover its origins and composition. To wit, I do not feel scandalized or offended by “Christmas: 1924” in the way Hardy clearly meant many of his contemporaries to feel; I recognize its sense of angry exasperation in the face of state violence and its denial and/or social acceptance as intimately my own. It is as if someone else constructed my own feelings for me 100 years ago. It is natural to want to know how that happens, and if, indeed, I feel what I feel because it was constructed in those forms at that time.

All three of my poets are deeply invested in overlapping questions of national belonging, literary tradition, and organic and/or geologic cycles of life and death. These subjects come to feel like acute crises during the war, and as such the poets recast them in poetic forms so they can work on their personal responses. If they occasionally gesture towards broader political and/or cultural solutions, it is not necessarily because they believe poetry itself is a potent political force (though both Owen and Hardy do occasionally court this notion: Hardy with his ventures into the prophetic mode, and Owen in his manifesto-like “Preface,” which I examine at length in his chapter) but because the fantasy of making a contribution towards cultural healing or political course-correction is itself a form of private consolation. In most cases though, these poets are acutely aware of how precious little a poem can do in an era of violent political upheaval and massive material destruction, and the poems reflect this painful awareness in various reflexive postures. The poems actively internalize the war and personalize its effects even as they express their own sense of powerlessness in the face of its overwhelming influence.

My archive and my arguments are also strung between two influential critical texts that I wish to acknowledge and use as jumping off points. These are Isobel Armstrong’s *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (1993),¹⁰ and Vincent Sherry’s *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (2003). Both studies are cardinal examples of the kind of historically aware close reading that I aspire to and Levine prescribes. It should be clear that my three poets constitute an awkward—but not entirely impossible—fit for either of these books’ own delimited domains. My poets are neither Victorian nor modernist in the disciplinary sense of either word, yet all three evince important aspects of both. The sense that they are all three too late to be Victorian, and yet too Victorian to be modernist is part of what make them so interesting to me as a group. And the war itself plays no small part in their literary historical awkwardness, because the two younger men had the misfortune to die in it, while Hardy subversively kept outliving successive cultural and historical eras. Despite writing in the 20th century and displaying many of the tendencies and preoccupations of modernism (not least the very fractured and self-reflexive use of language that my broad term “doubling” points to) all three engaged in explicitly post-Romantic, highly formal poetic modes such that they are not customarily grouped with modernism’s avant-garde. Neither Victorian nor modern, they may also be both, productively undermining these categories by revealing their shifting borders.

¹⁰ Armstrong’s aggressive use of repetition and alliteration in her very title is, to my ear, an inspirational bit of metacriticism.

There is, of course, a term conspicuously missing here, which I want to acknowledge before dispatching. “Georgian Poetry” is sometimes used to describe poetry written in England from 1910 until the mid 1920s. It also refers to a series of five anthologies published from 1912–1922, two of which came out in the war years. These sold quite well at first, and gathered some renown for the group of poets featured, who threatened for a moment to become a prominent avant-garde coterie. Robert Ross (whose 1965 treatment is still the only academic monograph on the Georgians) asserts they were “in revolt against Humanism ... Academism ... the dead hand of the Romantic-Victorian tradition” and were determined to represent “real life in real language” (22). Edward Thomas himself, dutifully reviewing the first volume, which included several of his friends from London literary circles, faintly praised the mostly “narrative or meditative verse [which] shows much beauty, strength, and mystery, some magic — much aspiration, less defiance, no revolt.” He goes on to pinpoint one of the volume’s recurrent themes, an association which has clung to them ever since: “many sides of the modern love of the simple and primitive, as seen in children, peasants, savages, early men, animals, and Nature in general.”¹¹ In a word: pastoral—though of an attenuated variety notably lacking in the self-awareness and double-edged irony that Empson finds there. Thomas was not yet writing poems himself when he penned this review, and the lukewarm aesthetic atmosphere of his own social group may be partly why. Thomas’s dullest poems (which too show “much beauty”) would not be out of place in the anthologies, but the poems that would go on to earn him posthumous fame are too conflicted, self-conscious, and semantically contorted—not to mention ambivalent toward regular rhyme—to fit in readily with this group. Like Thomas, one can admire the Georgians “cleaner and sparer line and newly idiomatic accent” without wanting to join the group or write at length about them.

I am trying not to succumb to the general critical drift towards the Georgians, in which, as Sherry tells us “in the interests of dramatic literary history, and in the simplifying binaries of retrospect, Georgianism is often presented as a reactionary opposition to the convention-dismaying temperament of modernism” (36). But to be sure it is partly this half-wrong institutional bias against the ethos of the anthologies that prevents me from using the term in my project. There is also the fact that none of the three poets I discuss appeared in any of the five anthologies and that the two most enduring names from those anthologies, Rupert Brooke and D.H. Lawrence, are more often associated with other groups anyway. All of this points towards a clear instantiation of Williams’s “selective tradition”: That we don’t count the Georgians among our cultural ancestors is partly an accident of the war disrupting their rise, and partly due the outsize cultural success of various contemporaries who better captured post-war structures of feeling. So while “Georgian” may be a perfectly accurate historical label for my project, it is aesthetically unbecoming. Two terms from Thomas’s review hit on what is most lacking: “defiance ... revolt.” The poets and poems I take up are all in constant revolt, if not against poetic tradition, than certainly against their own thoughts.

This project’s unifying theme of antagonistic formal doublings or what I call the “poetic versus”—doubled timeframes in Hardy, double identities and locations in Thomas,

¹¹ His review was published in the *Daily Chronicle* 14 Jan. 1913 and reprinted in *Georgian Poetry 1911–1922: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Timothy Rogers. London: Routledge, 1977. 66–67.

and two opposing verbal registers in Owen—is neither a happy accident nor an overly strenuous manipulation of my interpretive findings. It is rather a careful instantiation of Armstrong’s influential theory of the “double poem.” This, the central concept of her monumental study, is so informative of my own reading method that it warrants a selective summary here. She begins by convincingly making the familiar case that Victorians conceived of themselves as both “belated” and “intensely historicized” —existing in a historical continuum brought to “a condition of crisis ... from economic and cultural change” at the inflection points of democracy, technology, science, religion, print culture, and the arts. (3–6) She then posits an artistic response to all this change and self-awareness, which is mutable and reflexive in kind. This is the double poem, “quite literally two concurrent poems in the same words ... [which] turns its expressive utterance around so that it becomes the opposite of itself, not only the *subject’s* utterance but the *object* of analysis and critique” (12). Armstrong goes on to describe the double poem as “a deeply skeptical form,” which “draws attention to the epistemology which governs the construction of the self and its relationships and to the cultural conditions in which those relationships are made ... It is an expressive model and an epistemological model simultaneously” (13). It is not a coincidence that this double structure aligns so well with Levine’s two overlapping senses of the word “form”: one narrowly aesthetic and contained within the poem and the imaginary self (poet/speaker) that its utterance posits, the other much broader and encompassing all the systems and structures that surround that poem and that person. As Armstrong puts it: “In a post-revolutionary world in which power is supposedly vested in many rather than a privileged class, the double poem dramatizes relationships of power. In the twofold reading, struggle is structurally necessary and becomes the organizing principle” (16). This internalized opposition by the poem of the political situation which forms its conditions of expression is the “struggle” to which my “poetic versus” refers. Every poem I examine in this project would qualify as a double poem under these terms, because every poem describes or presupposes both an individual threatened by the war (“expressive model”) and a set of values, systems, community and culture (“epistemological models”) which are threatened in kind. The structure of each poem—its forms—depict the dynamic in which these coterminous threats are registered and contended. Doubling ends up being a broad but apt name for the strategies by which the war’s disturbances and antagonisms are transferred between the poem’s two levels of engagement, whether conceived as formal/social (Williams), literary/political (Levine), expressive/epistemological (Armstrong), personal/political or any other analogous paring that best fits a poem’s specific concerns. For instance “Christmas: 1924” doubles itself, as we have seen, by first registering as a savage parody of Anglican bad faith, but then letting a kind of secular hope for redemption creep back in in its subtle rhetorical hedging and its inability to completely abandon the belief that songs *are* worth singing and we really *can* do better than “poison-gas.” In the end Hardy’s poem is the most effective critique of its own dark worldview. The Victorian double poem survives the war in fine form.

Thus my project is precisely the kind of opportunity to test Armstrong’s gleefully provocative assertion that “since Victorian poetry is the most sophisticated poetic form, and the most politically complex ... it is proper that Victorian poems should generate principles for reading the poetry of the past two-hundred years” (21). My poets only missed being Victorian by a decade or two, but Armstrong’s strong shot across the bow is

explicitly aimed at modernism's mythically proportioned self-regard and its insouciance or "silence about Victorian poetry"—a body of work which she claims anticipated many of the modernists' purported innovations. "Where the Victorians strive to give a content to these [political, sexual, epistemological] problems and to formulate a cultural critique, the moderns celebrate the elimination of content. (7). I don't share Armstrong's opinion of literary modernism's relative vacuity, nor do I wish to wade into the fraught and disputed waters between scholarly subfields, other than to keep a foot in each—but I do find it useful to track how my poets participate in both Victorian "cultural critique" laid out in Armstrong's terms and a modernist aesthetic of detachment and fracture. That my poets veer between the two modes might be seen to undermine or confirm Armstrong's division, straddling, as they do, the Victorian and modernist eras.

My notion of formal doubling in these poets, however, is not identical to Armstrong's "double poem": Rather, I would say that the doublings I track are examples of *how* poems *formally* enact the kind of doubleness Armstrong describes—how *these* poems enact a second-order commentary on their own primary expression. Armstrong's critical structure overlaps in a striking way with Vincent Sherry's influential account of literary modernism—especially striking given Armstrong's goading minimization of the modernism. I am much convinced by Sherry's genealogy of high modernism's poetics (Pound, Eliot, Woolf) as the aesthetic metabolization of the tortured, rationalist rhetoric of terminal English Liberalism (Asquith, Grey, George) as the latter tore itself apart justifying an underhanded entry and increasingly catastrophic implementation of the war. As Sherry has it, "the body of work that the modernists will evolve attains a good deal of its significance in the exception it presents to the mainstream standards of liberal modernity" which were put through such strenuous contortions justifying the war (52). I believe my project and its constellation of poems offers a related genus of the same species of Sherry's elaborately formal notion of a "body" of evolving literary work. The other formal concept I am drawn to in his formulation (one of Sherry's most concise in a prolix multitude) is "exception." Both Sherry's moderns and my war poets (and, I am suggesting, Armstrong's Victorians) register their exceptions to certain ideological forms in inventive re-presentations of the language, concepts, and forms that they critique.

While my poets and my project are not as deeply invested in parliamentary politics and public rhetoric as Sherry's, my perception of the interaction between the aesthetic forms and political discourse parallels Sherry's in the sense that all three of the poets I address engage mainstream political, historical and/or cultural ideas by showing how the war's broad material and ideological wreckage destabilized and indeed, often fully delegitimized those concepts. Again, it is primarily in the formal poetic register that these poets can show these old forms breaking down and also there where they try to formulate appropriate responses to this epochal rupture that are at once personal, aesthetic and political. Sherry ably highlights an acute area in which aesthetic and political forms collided with exceptional ideological force and a disproportionately influential cultural aftermath. The poets I take up evince a structurally similar collision, though perhaps with more diverse inputs and more diffuse effects. This is in part because each was in his way still beholden to various core liberal ideals in ways in which Sherry's modernists purport not to be.

Indeed, it is striking that each of the specific forms of doubling I track lines up quite well with one of the crumbling pillars of liberal thought: Hardy's obsession with time's conflicting forms is tied to a core belief in rational human progress that he finds increasingly hard to maintain. Thomas's unstable dual identity, and even the economic forces that ultimately forced him to abandon writing for a soldier's salary are both traceable to a crisis of alienation underlying liberal capitalism's firm basis in the individual.¹² Finally, Owen's project of incorporating voices of classical tradition and political authority, only to expose them as the very origins of war and soldiers' suffering is, in its way, an even more devastating critique of liberalism than the more abstract and playful dressing down it gets from Sherry's modernists, because it is a more personally felt betrayal.

Though my project is ultimately not centered on their personal politics, it is worth noting that all three of my poets were raised in the lower and more marginal reaches of the expanding middle class (sons of a stonemason, and two railway clerks respectively) before arduously transforming themselves into literary men against great economic odds.¹³ Hardy's lifelong affection (condescending and defeatist though it was at times) for honest laborers and bootstrapping rural tradesmen, and the other two poets' contact as officers with the lower-order rank and file meant they were fundamentally sympathetic to the suffering of the war's primary victims.¹⁴ All three show strong undercurrents of populism and social solidarity in their work, even as they themselves ascend various social ladders into the cultural elite. As liberal rationalism falls away beneath their feet, abandoning good men to the killing fields, these poets begin using conservative poetic forms to experiment with radical political ideas (an interesting counterpoint to Pound and Eliot). Just as Sherry's modernists try to rescue the culture from war's devastation, my poets try to rescue social conscience after its evacuation from the public sphere during liberalism's descent. But, to be sure, as in both Sherry and Armstrong's models, anything resembling an ideological stance in the poems is immediately subject to critique by way of the reflexive, doubling structures of poetic form. In the end, in poetry at least, form always trumps politics, and ideologies left, right or liberal never stand fixed or unopposed.

V. Poets Versus

My first chapter examines how Thomas Hardy's war poetry extends and complicates his career-long engagement with the contradictory nature of time itself—especially in two of its most mediated and discursive manifestations: history and poetic meter. I compare three poems from the "Poems of War and Patriotism" in 1917's climactic collection *Moments of Vision* and then compare these to a poem about the Boer war from the "War Poems" group which opens 1901's *Poems of the Past and Present*. My own retrospective movement in this

¹² Stan Smith's account of Thomas as a "Superfluous Man" caught between eras and allegiances is particularly good on this subject (11-59).

¹³ Though Thomas attended Oxford, he "failed to get the college fellowship that would have saved him from genteel poverty" forcing him to "slave away as a literary hack" and constantly fret about money (Smith 18).

¹⁴ I acknowledge that soldiers in many cases ought to be classified as perpetrators as well as victims; yet the basic opposition of soldier-victim to politician-perpetrator is one of WWI's most enduring "forms."

chapter is motivated by an analogous tendency in Hardy to use events of contemporary upheaval as occasion to look back into an equally unsettled past. He employs poetry's ostensibly stabilizing formal resources to examine and counteract the distressing vagaries and inconvenient repetitions of history and memory. Hardy employs poetry as a timekeeping measure in these explicitly historical poems (situated as they are with specific wartime dates), evaluating human activity against two different time-scales in a single text and allowing the resulting contradictions and disturbances to manifest as formal infelicities. Though for reasons of space and focus I do not systematically compare Hardy's war poems to some of his more famous time-obsessed poems, such as the elegiac "Poems of 1912-13" or his historical epic *The Dynasts*, I try to make it clear how Hardy's conceptions of time are complicated and changed by the Great War in particular, while at the same time acknowledging the overall persistence of his poetic preoccupation with temporality as limned by previous critics. Hardy infamously takes such a long view of history that entire epochs appear vanishingly insignificant, never mind individual lives; yet he recoups some of these infinite losses where poetry's mediating capabilities refuse the more coercive tendencies of historical and narrative modes, and he can insert a small countervailing measure of hope.

My second chapter takes up the poetry of one of Hardy's great admirers and poetic inheritors, who was also his predecessor in the tragic and literal way which the Great War disturbed time's procession by killing off a generation of men before their elders. Edward Thomas came to poetry late, in 1914 at the age of 36, after a prolific but onerous career as a freelance critic and writer of "country books." He enlisted in July 1915 after much hem and haw, volunteered for front-line duty in January 1917 and was killed by a shell at Arras in April. I find in several of his poems a motivating tension between two alternate selves, the first a diffident, melancholy man of letters, the second a disciplined, patriotic, if relatively resigned soldier. The former is alienated, anxious, and searching—the latter so sure of his place that he is content to die there. Neither character is plainly autobiographical nor cleanly differentiated from the other, and both are treated with restraint and empathy. In opposing these alternate or alternating selves, Thomas dramatizes a set of formalized relationships between civilian and soldier and between each and his nation. Nation and nationalism in Thomas's poems are not staked on empire or even culture (though in letters and criticism he does at times self-consciously embrace an idealized literary tradition as the stuff of Englishness) but rather on a fierce localism and love of the rural countryside.¹⁵ The "poetic versus" in Thomas's poems, in addition to pitting his two imaginary selves against each other, is pitched between this nostalgic love of an already lost landscape and a kind of front-bound fatalism that would reduce it all to dirt and ashes. In formal terms, Thomas's wartime poems show a persistent doubling at the level of sound, image and syntax which reifies the oppositions of soldier/civilian, countryside/battlefield, England (home)/ France (front), past/present, etc. Ultimately this doubling, and the haunted poetics which it produces, devolves in Thomas into a tendency towards obsessive repetition that undermines any continuities offered by history or identity, leading to a mode of death-obsessed entropy that I link to Freud's contemporaneous concept of the death drive.

¹⁵ See Longley, (18) and Smith, chap. IV.

My final chapter rereads the canonical combat poems of Wilfred Owen, also finding there a fundamental formal doubling. In Owen's case, the poem is a site where two opposing discourses or linguistic registers contend. One of the two is always a form of cultural inheritance or tradition (as in the Latin of "*Dulce et Decorum Est*") or else a kind of official or authoritative language handed down from England's power structures: these discourses are thoroughly and brutally contradicted by the first-hand experience of the front-line soldier. Owen's representation of political and/or journalistic cant is not as completely digested and refashioned as in Sherry's modernists; its formal opposition to an opposing discourse is what provides the critical energy of his poems. The various gaps and contradictions between these conflicting discourses are registered in Owen's elaborate formal techniques, which force antagonists into an uncomfortable contiguity in the space of the poem. I argue that this is never a dialectical synthesis or completion for Owen, but rather a way of emphasizing violence, disjunction and hypocrisy in a way that forces civilian readers to confront realities they might otherwise be spared. Owen's poetry allows for formal unity, but never ideological unity; or perhaps more accurately, his strategically unsuccessful attempts at formal unity foreground the hidden failures of any attempt at an ideological unity that might justify the war.

These war poems are as multivalent and reflexive as the minds that produced them, and if they can reliably transmit anything, it is the structures of feeling that emerge from new formations constructed by creative minds reflecting on historical facts that exceed and shatter the boundaries of inherited forms, like self, culture, history and nation. Returning to Williams's account of art, and moving a little past where we left it, we can catch a tempting glimpse of what is beyond these endlessly recursive, reflections:

We find in certain characteristic forms and devices, evidence of the deadlocks and unsolved problems of the society: often admitted to consciousness for the first time in this way. Part of this evidence will show a false consciousness designed to prevent any substantial recognition; part again a deep desire, as yet uncharted, to move beyond this. (91)

I look deeply into these poems, examining every part, finding evidence of the unprecedented problems the Great War brought to British society, but also new ideas about how it might "move beyond" these and emerge better in some small but meaningful ways. In political terms, this might register as frustratingly slow, incremental reform (the revolution is long, after all) but in critical terms, there is a radical freedom to exploring the formal relationships and patterns of the poems in this probing, unhurried way. It brings us nowhere near such an untenable totality as "Peace upon Earth," but that is because we don't find a better world ready-made somewhere out there, we build it by the social exchange of forms—"we sing it" into existence line by line, verse by verse.

Chapter 1

The Long Dash: Hardy's War Time

The ages live in history through their anachronisms
 –Oscar Wilde

I. Double Time

A few months after my son's birth, on one of our first tentative outings together, I ran into an acquaintance outside the café in our small town. I must have looked just as addled and fatigued as I felt, because after congratulating me, this fellow, who can often be seen around town wrangling five or six towheaded wildlings of his own, volunteered this bit of encouragement: "Just remember, the days are long, but the years are short." The tender, counterintuitive wisdom of this little bon mot from a man locally known more for his blundering hyper-masculinity almost brought me to tears (as almost anything could in those heady days of emotional amplification and sleep deprivation). Weeks later, I was sitting down to work after scanning the news (Syria, Yemen, Charlottesville) and a Thomas Hardy poem brought back the adage's curious, simultaneous dilation and contraction of time, its paradoxical figure of a longer—indeed, often endless—interval (the day) contained within one shorter and more fleeting (the year).

Long nights can be particularly enervating, for Hardy as for new parents:

Phantasmal fears,
 And the flap of the flame,
 And the throb of the clock,
 And a loosened slate,
 And the blind night's drone,
 Which tiredly the spectral pines intone!¹⁶

This is the first of the seven Roman numerated stanzas of "A New Year's Eve in War Time" which appears near the end of the sequence titled "Poems of War and Patriotism" a subsection of Hardy's massive 1917 collection *Moments of Vision*. The scene initiated here is a long, anxious, sleepless night. I don't think my own association of this interval with new parenthood is total solipsism either, as the poem's opening lines "Phantasmal fears, /And the flap of the flame" and the title's stated context of "War Time" clearly call up Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude" and "Frost at Midnight" as very obvious referents. The famous "fluttering stranger" and the "thin blue flame," at the beginning of "Frost," is directly invoked in Hardy's first two lines. A peacefully sleeping infant (that improbable bit of poetic license) features prominently in both of Coleridge's poems, not merely as a symbol of innocence to contrast with worldly conflict and adult disillusionment, but also as a figure of hope for a future in which the poet's "filial fears" might "be vain." The babe is the keeper of "far other lore ... in far other scenes" than those available in the "dim" and "evil" present

¹⁶ Hardy, 548. The other poems in this chapter can be found at 543, 91, 542.

era. Symbolically, the infant is the inchoate idea of a better future, which the poet intimates he may not live to see. The childless Hardy offers a significantly darker version of historical progress and the “Young Unknown” in his poem. In the meantime “Phantasmal fears” is still a strikingly apt description of what runs through a father’s mind in the wee hours, where the only thing more disquieting than the drone of crying is utter silence. In each of these dilated night times, Coleridge’s, Hardy’s and my own, the background noise of distant war haunts the comparative serenity of domesticity. A nagging question—What kind of world have we brought you into?—is the internalized manifestation of political disquiet. Disturbingly, the peaceful home is the ground on which war inscribes its forms, and sleeping child and quiet house cannot help but become the negative signs of social disintegration and international hostility. In Hardy’s poem we can track how this invasive process is enacted in the formal register.

The first stanza initiates the poem’s basic form in which each stanza’s five lines rhyme with the corresponding lines from the other stanzas; only stanzas I and VII contain a sixth line that completes a rhyming couplet: *abcde(e)*. I balk at calling this a rhyme scheme because it is very hard to *hear* a rhyme that is separated from its pair by more than a few lines, let alone five lines and a stanza break. Hardy employs a subtly different strain of repetition here, which looks like rhyme, but sounds like something else. The poem indeed is so full of unnerving sounds, indeed is *about* those sounds in such a crucial way, it is as if Hardy does not quite want the reassuring familiarity inherent in rhyme to smooth out all the flapping, throbbing, knocking, droning and moaning. Yet he still wants to draw on the formal, thematic and cultural correspondences—distant echoes, a slightly estranged sameness—which rhyme provides. This is perhaps the strongest of the poem’s strategies for invoking war’s gradual invasion of the domestic space. Quickly, but incrementally, the homey hearth and the clock are replaced by the flames and “shock” of wars abroad. The arbitrary sonic associations of rhyme words allow this exchange of, inside for outside, private for public, peace for war, to occur bit by bit, until imaginary “fears” been transformed into dire political realities.

Hardy, unlike his Romantic forebear, has no sleeping child on which to focus his anxieties, and so his twentieth-century speaker in “A New Year’s Eve” begins this dark night extremely isolated and self-enclosed, as we can see (or hear, really) in stanza II:

And the blood in my ears
Strumming always the same,
And the gable-cock
With its fitful grate,
And myself alone.

This is where the poem’s sonic barrage really gets humming, adding a darker tone to the already foreboding scene. The fearful phantasms are not just swirling about the trees and the house: they are deep in his head. The external sounds of the first stanza—issuing from flame, clock, roof, wind and pines in turn—are quite literally echoed by the internal “strumming” of “blood in [his] ears.” This echo resounds in the anaphoric “And[s]”, which continue from the first stanza, now at a longer interval, and in the now visible (but not audible) rhyme words, most of which arrive in a slightly diminished form (fears/ears;

flame/same; clock/cock). The stanza itself is also abbreviated by one line, as if the night is closing in, and the space of the poem—the house, but also the headspace of the speaker—becomes more claustrophobic. Here we might recall Levine’s useful concept of bounded wholes whose borders collide with each other in destabilizing ways—the storm threatening the safe enclosure of the house forewarns an external threat to the speaker’s self-enclosed mind.

The line “Strumming always the same” subtly sounds the formal logic of the poem. Like five strings struck again and again, the five rhyme sounds of this poem resound once in each stanza, “always the same” but different each time. The effect is more like a “blind ... drone” than the gratifying, bouncing rhythm created by more traditional forms (such as Hardy’s numerous variations on the ballad) wherein rhyme sounds provide a reassuring underlying structure for the variable melodies of more or less metrical lines. For Hardy, an accomplished amateur musician, a strumming sameness becomes the tonal background for more subtly divergent interruptions, just as the metrics of this line give the lie to the sameness it proclaims: This is one of a handful of lines scattered throughout the poem which carry an extra beat to the poem’s regular two (STRUMMING ALways the SAME). The odd trimetrical line is a “fitful” recurrence, periodically disrupting the throb/strum of the otherwise steady dimeter, which evokes the heartbeat-like rhythm of “the blood in my ears” (*tha-thump tha-hump*). Just as that deeply personal, internal rhythm is repeatedly disturbed by outside sounds pressing in on the house, and by the house’s faltering structures disturbing its lonely resident, so, by repeatedly asking the reader to accommodate two syllables between stresses, Hardy introduces a literal arrhythmia into his iambics. Analogously, it is the purported regularity of the clock’s ticking that is disturbed by the interruptive tendencies of this particular poem—all its repetitive structures, whether comforting or disquieting, are threatened by untimely interruptions. It is this broader, more abstract sense of temporal adversity—two different conceptions of time disturbing and subverting each other throughout the poem—that I will go on to claim is the central structure of feeling in Hardy’s wartime poetry more generally.

As far back as 1961, Samuel Hynes identified temporality as one of the fundamental elements of Hardy’s poetry:

In almost every case ... the point of view of the poem is not the moment in the past, but a present from which the past can be viewed ironically, sadly, nostalgically. Both the theme and the structure are provided by time. (50-1)

Irony, sadness, nostalgia: this is a plausible list of all the underlying modes that Hardy criticism has attributed to the poems in the years since Hynes, none particularly surprising. Likewise, though it is pleasingly succinct and discomfotingly similar to the fundamental claim about doubling in this chapter, the second statement above is also not overly revealing. Time, after all, “structures” most human experiences, and therefore is also an exceedingly common theme in cultural forms. What is more interesting for our purposes in Hynes’s formulation, however, is the not structure of the poems’ perspective, but its retrospective action, whereby a discrete “moment in the past” recurs, disturbing the progress of an ongoing present.

Another major Hardy critic, Dennis Taylor, intervened exactly 20 years later with an evocative description of a similar structure, first depicting a Hardy-like figure drifting off while sketching in an “old church” until he is startled to by his pencil falling to the floor:

This is a central type of experience in Hardy’s poetry. As he meditates about the world, the world changes around him and intrudes on the meditation. ...

What happens in the course of a few minutes is the model for what happens in the course of years. (xi)

Taylor’s punning use of words like “type” and “model,” alongside his more explicit contrasting of timeframes is closer to what I propose to be the fundamental structuring of Hardy’s poems, yet I will argue that effects that war in general and the Great War in particular have on Hardy’s “meditations” are exceptionally intrusive, and require a different model from the main body of Hardy’s poetry. It is not just “the world” that changes through time, as in Taylor’s version: time itself is changed by war.

More recently, Jeff Blevins has produced a useful account on Hardy’s intellectual interest in shifting cultural conceptions of time, up to and including Einsteinian relativity. He first notes Hardy’s tendency to oppose what he calls “artificial” or “railway” time, measured and administered by public clocks, with an increasingly well understood “organic” or “celestial” time marked by the movements of heavenly bodies and their earthly recorders—chiefly sundials, pagan holidays, scientists, and of course poets (607-8). This is a fine example of Levine’s productively colliding forms, with the intriguing wrinkle that time is often conceived not just as rhythm, but also as embodied whole (as in narratives and typologies, but also sundials and clocks) and even as a network in the way it can enact unifying simultaneity across geopolitical spaces (think railway timetables or bank holidays). Blevins’s dichotomy maps fairly well onto “A New Year’s Eve” and the poem’s opposition between the steady “throb of the clock” and the more unruly spectral forms that arrive with the New Year. His reading of a cluster of early Hardy poems remarks their probing of time in relation to the ironic “disappointed expectations” of their unlucky human subjects, for whom hazy, idealized memories of the “lost past” and/or rosy expectations of the “envisioned future” occlude a clear lived experience of the present. In these there is always an “excluded middle”—often quite literally in the form of a gap between stanzas—in which critical events occur, unseen by the reader, and become known only in ironic retrospect. Blevins’ readings are convincing, especially where they offer up contemporary sources for Hardy’s thinking about time as a cultural concept circulating in the early poems. But while this account may help establish the intellectual substrate for poems like “A New Year’s Eve in War Time,” it cannot quite account for this particular poem’s more specific juxtaposition between early and late, between the waiting for and the missing of midnight, as it were. Here, there is no lost interval between a period of eager waiting and one of deflated regret, and certainly no time to reflect upon private emotions; rather the whole poem takes place *within* an empty interval from which personal feelings (beyond fear) are excluded, left in the state of dissociated dispassion described by “the blind night’s drone,/ Which tiredly the spectral pines intone.” Hardy’s conception of “War Time” then offers a different account the poet’s relationship to untimely disruptions, and

therefore demands a new schema beyond the empty gap between the emotions attached to early- and lateness.¹⁷ We can say provisionally that Hardy is now more interested in exploring the larger gap war creates between personal and historical timeframes.

To further gauge these conflicting temporal structures we can return to the poem at hand, remembering the “throb of the clock” from the first stanza, which recurs in a more disturbed and disturbing form in the third:

The twelfth hour nears
Hand-hid as in shame
I undo the lock,
And listen, and wait
For the Young Unknown

Midnight on New Year’s Eve, this arbitrary point when, a second, hour, day, month and year all purport to change at once, is the perfect moment for this poem about time’s strange dilations, or to use a historically appropriate term, its relativity. Anticipation is artificially magnified at this overdetermined moment, when we hope to feel a momentous shift in the world and in ourselves... and always find both disappointingly the same when that moment passes. In “War Time,” there is a superadded sense of paradox in which every year feels interminable, yet also dangerously accelerated. All of this anticipation and disappointment, hope and fear, is built into Hardy’s clever image of the clock with its “Hand-hid, as in shame” (i.e. near the stroke of midnight the longer minute hand conceals the shorter hour). Never shy of the pathetic fallacy, Hardy is clearly displacing an emotion from his poetic alter ego into his grandfather clock (those automatically anthropomorphic old men—there were three in Hardy’s house Max Gate). Why shame? From the clock’s perspective—which we were already welcomed to imagine in the first stanza’s uncannily biological “throb”—there is the embarrassed admission of being powerless to effect meaningful change in the short term, despite always being blamed for large-scale depredations. From the speaker’s perspective, as from any halfway sober New Year’s Eve reveler’s, there is the perhaps milder shame of the repressed awareness that a childish desire for instant change is always disappointed.

Another aspect of this poem’s temporal form reifies the old saw of “history passing one by”: At a few minutes to midnight (as at every hour, but never quite so dramatically) the short slow Hour waits patiently for its meeting with the bigger, faster Minute, just as Hardy waits at his gate for the unknown rider. Then, before the slow and the fast manifestations of time can reconcile or align, the moment passes. Hardy takes this quirk of the mechanical action of a clock and turns it into a figure for life itself, and more specifically for the way the individual waits for his chance to participate or at least witness the action of historical change, but by the time he can see the change, he has missed his chance to participate—history “speeds on” and he is left to wait again (and again), repeating this

¹⁷ An exception to this which rather proves the rule is the lovely but comparatively inert and uncharacteristically unironic “Before Marching and After,” written explicitly as an elegy for Hardy’s cousin killed in the war. It coheres quite precisely to Blevins’s structure—death occurs offstage between stanzas 2 and 3. Though it also features a clock and midnight, its overall tone of decorum and reverence makes it an ill fit for my focus on antagonism in this chapter and project.

circular process. In Hardy's clock we have a consummate figure for illustrating Levine's template of colliding, incommensurate forms. In the clock we try to encode and enclose not just the small rhythms of the body, with heartbeats passing like seconds, but the larger rhythms of years, eras, history—time itself. The poem illustrates the ultimate failure of the clock to contain all these rhythms or successfully overlay them onto each other, even while time repeats itself in the eventual return of the refrain.

So why, if the speaker is so beset with both "fears" and "shame" does he "undo the lock," inviting in the very world that threatens his self-security? Surely he knows at some level that nothing good can come through that door. Yet here we are: we "listen, and wait" alongside the speaker for that mysterious harbinger of change, the "Young Unknown." This spectral figure owes something to the conventional anthropomorphism of the New Year as an infant, and also recalls Coleridge's sleeping babe; but this is a darker kind of presence than either of those. We might more productively compare Hardy's "Young Unknown" with the many other ghostly visitors who arrive (or just as often fail to arrive) throughout his poems, but for now let's maintain the mystery this poem presents: We don't know who is coming, or why.

A crucial temporal shift occurs in the gap between the slow, drawn-out timeframe of the first three stanzas, which is evoked as a kind of dull suspension ("drone ... tiredly ... always the same ... alone ... listen and wait") and the headlong pace of the next three. Unlike the pregnant stanza gaps central to Blevins's readings of the earlier poems, in this gap time doesn't disappear, it just speeds up. At last a visitor does approach, but he is definitely not a youthful herald of better days to come:

In the dark there careers –
As if Death astride came
To numb all with his knock –
A horse at mad rate
Over rut and stone

Instead of a drolly tophatted baby, here comes "Death astride"; instead of "Auld Lang Syne," we get *Revelations*. Death's numbing "knock" is overridden by the sound of his "horse at mad rate" which increases the pace of this poem, even though the rough but regular pattern of mixed iambs and anapests remains basically unaltered. Hardy manages to turn a droning dimeter into a galloping one primarily with imagery, a neat trick. He draws clever metapoetical attention to this effect with the line "to numb all with his knock": just as the knock-knock/tic-tock droning of the meter was threatening to lull or "numb" us into a kind of trance, it jerks us awake with its new "mad rate"—though the meter itself doesn't change.

The passage of time has accelerated in an alarming manner, but only in the mind (the speaker's and the reader's), the clock continues "'tic-toc' / Without check." Yet despite the intensifying pace that comes with this arrival there is still a prevailing sense in which nothing much transpires in this poem's strangely dilating interval. The accretive anaphora of the first two stanzas ("And, And, And") is counterpoised to a negative repetition in stanza V:

No figure appears,
 No call of my name,
 No sound but 'Tic-toc'
 Without check. Past the gate
 It clatters – is gone.

These “No”s simultaneously affirm and negate the speaker’s expectations. In one sense he was clearly awaiting something, perhaps hoping it might be auspicious (hence the tentative unlocking of the door) but more likely expecting something dire (this is a Hardy poem after all). Instead, he gets... nothing. “No figure appears” and the moment quite literally passes. The anticipation, the lonely waiting, which made time seem more capacious, more full of possibility, is foreclosed, and the “tic-toc” of the clock, which had had been internalized as a building “throb” or a “drone” resumes “without check.”

This poem offers one vision of time in which it is only a faulty and mistaken human desire that inflates the steady, indifferent intervals of clock-time with a sense of space and possibility; only intense attention to a moment’s passing will reveal this mismatch, the gap between human expectations and the inhuman forces that deny (or grimly fulfill) them. The final stanza expands this realization into the realm of history, rendering the difference (really an indifference) between the clock time of the poem and the “War Time” of its title. Up to this point the poem could be about any rather dark New Year’s Eve. But at the moment the unseen horseman “careers ... past the gate” without noticing or returning the speaker’s regard, when “the Old Year has struck” (here the clock’s painful “throb” is endowed with a sharper, more precise kind of violence) and the “scarce animate” New Year “makes moan” more like a ghost or a wounded man than like a newborn child, we can begin to understand what distinguishes “War Time” from other times. Time becomes a imaginary figure that is not so much neutral or indifferent towards human suffering, but an active participant in its creation.

The notion of being passed by and disregarded is crucial here. The apocalyptic horse and rider, so dire and impressive in their conception, are like a passing rumor which poet strains and fails to comprehend. For the civilian at home, “War Time” is structured by a feeling of uselessness and irrelevance. This may also help explain the odd sense of “shame” from the third stanza. The speaker feels a furtive eagerness to glimpse the fearful mounted figure on horseback (Death? War? History?), but he knows at some level that he is too sheltered in his stately home to truly encounter this phantasm—or rather that it will only be a “pale” specter, with none of the visceral reality it brings to a European battleground that is truly aflame. “War Time,” according to this poem, is a time of shame and estrangement for civilians. As Hardy’s uneven version of a popular soldiers’ song puts it, the valorous beating “heart of hearts” of the nation travels abroad with the young “men who march away” with “faith and fire within” them, leaving behind uneasy country hearths. At least that is how it feels to materially comfortable but anxious old men in their gabled homes among the pines, so far from the action. Hardy is particularly alert to this class- and generation-bound problematic of war. He is ready to admit that war undoes his ability to see clearly (“No figure appears”) or to play his role (“No call of my name”) and this undermines his ability to write with the customary wisdom of his age and station.

The tentativeness introduced by the poem’s similes—“Hand-hid *as* in shame,” “*As if*

Death astride came”—increases to an outright admission of ignorance in stanza VI: “What rider it bears/ There is none to proclaim” — which in turn gives way to a more overt equivocation in the final stanza:

Maybe that ‘More Tears! –
 More Famine and Flame –
 More Severance and Shock!’
 Is the order from Fate
 That the Rider speeds on
 To pale Europe; and tiredly the pines intone. (my italics)

The speaker admits that he does not know the true import of these dire figures, which are really more like obscure phantoms than they are observable events. Yet even in this zone of unseeable figures and unknowable futures, the speaker gives proper names to these specters: the preponderance of capitalized nouns in this final stanza brings on a small army of personifications, which join up with the dark presence of “Death astride” from stanza IV to suddenly overpopulate the poem’s heretofore lonely setting. The oblique allusion to the book of Revelations in stanza IV is also made more explicit here with the figure of “Famine” and the odd inclusion of the word “pale”—used here to describe not Death’s horse, but “Europe” itself.

I want to focus on “pale” for a moment, because I think it bears more weight in the poem than it may seem to at first. In trying to answer “why is Europe ‘pale’—Isn’t it Death’s horse that’s pale? Isn’t Europe rather inflamed?”—we may uncover another important facet of Hardy’s thinking about war and especially the role of nationalism, a concept to which he is openly ambivalent, at times even dismissive, in the “Poems of War and Patriotism.”¹⁸ First of all, in using the general term “Europe,” Hardy simultaneously erases the borders therein (or at least refuses for the moment to pick sides) while also emphasizing England’s outsider status. Still, why “pale”? A more conventional wartime cliché would be a landscape either literally or figuratively “red” with blood. On one level, we may be simply asked to imagine a personified Europe as pale with dread; or perhaps even more gruesomely, literally drained of blood. A land either “scarce animate” or dead already is an image which recalls a more famous New Year’s Eve poem, “The Darkling Thrush” wherein “the land’s sharp features seemed to be/ The Century’s corpse outleant.” Another reading might offer this poem’s “Europe” as one among the many other unseen specters, a “pale” ghostly figure whose suffering is beyond the speaker’s ken. This in turn activates the second, wholly appropriate political meaning of the word “pale”: The “pale” is also a literal pole that marks the borders of political jurisdictions in colonized lands (especially perennially contested Ireland). The war in Europe is “beyond the pale” in the sense that it is taking place outside England’s jurisdiction, yet it is decisively concerned with the borders of other sovereign powers. This mixing and worrying of literal and figurative borders is indeed already part of the formal logic of the poem, as the speaker is

¹⁸ “The Pity of It” discussed at length below, appeals to older cultural affinities than nation; “Often when Warring” depicts a defiant act of compassion between enemy soldiers; and “His Country” has an outright internationalist message.

quite concerned with his own private boundaries (as in “the lock,” “his knock” and “past the gate”). The notion of a border is present even in the tired “pines” which provide an important alliterative pair to “pale Europe” that gives the conspicuously long last line its structure. The “spectral pines” out “past the gate” are where the speaker’s domestic space ends and the fearful phantasms of War and Fate swirl threateningly.¹⁹

The verbatim repetition of the word “flame” referring the second time to the fires of war instead of the hearth is also one of the poem’s crucial formal effects. This repetition draws more attention to the class consciousness that has been lingering in the background of both the poem and my reading. There is a buried comment on bourgeois (dis)comfort in this poem, which recalls us to Empson’s notion of the pastoral mode. To juxtapose the cozy hearth and grandfather-clocked parlor of a slate-roofed, stately gated and gabled manse in Dorset to the fires of war on the continent is politically provocative, even if unwittingly so. It is certainly possible that Hardy, in including all this architectural detail was merely being his descriptive, professionally trained self, but the fact remains that it touches a nerve that will recur not only in his own poetry about the war, but even more strongly in the poets who experienced the flames outside the gate, beyond the “pale,” as it were. “Famine and Flame” is economics and politics by other means; the realization looms that exporting war underwrites affluence and ease at home. Shame and guilt emerge at the site of domestic comfort and plenty, where war’s phantasms call to mind the destitute conditions elsewhere.²⁰ Gone is the interruptive nature of retrospection offered by Hynes and Taylor, replaced in the painful present of “War Time” by an adversarial and interruptive simultaneity.

Two crucial forms for understanding Hardy’s complex vision of war, time and “War Time” emerge at the end of this poem. First, we share the perspective of this hapless and powerless observer, a fearful, tentative, modern prophet, who hazards a prediction on distant events he knows he cannot influence. It is important to note that contra most criticism (not to mention conventional wisdom) on Hardy, this observer’s stance towards these events is not ironic. Expectations are not confounded or disappointed, but rather grimly fulfilled. The vaguely personified “Fate” at the end of this poem is not an arch ironist who revels in the dramatic overturning of hopes and dreams; rather this is a Fate who issues rote, Haig-like orders for more of the same—“Tears... Famine... Flame” etc. It should be said that this tone of resigned, defeatist pessimism with no word of hope or victory would have been a fairly cutting-edge, subversive position for a prominent British writer to proffer in late December of 1915 (“1915–1916” is the date appended to the poem, much more on which in a moment) though decidedly less so in late 1917 when the *Moments of Vision* was actually published.²¹ Hardy assumes the voice of a latter-day prophet, hearkening back to ancient texts while carrying forth on the apocalyptic near future, in a tone that conspicuously lacks the fiery enthusiasm of his predecessors.

¹⁹ From the *Life*: “Some two or three thousand small trees, mostly Austrian pines, were planted around the house by Hardy himself, and in later years these grew so thickly that the house was almost entirely screened from the road” (178). The trees themselves are from “pale Europe”!

²⁰ Hardy addresses the economics of this geopolitical moment more explicitly (if less poetically) in other poems in this series: “On the Belgian Expatriation,” “Cry of the Homeless,” and the precisely titled “An Appeal to America on Behalf of the Belgian Destitute.”

²¹ See Hynes, chapters 4–7 about the changing moods at home towards the war’s “progress.”

In addition, and somewhat in contradiction, to this “tired, pale” update on ancient prophecy, Hardy’s is also a voice of modern relativism. This poem has many strands, but one way of summarizing it would go: “In war-torn Europe time is galloping forward ‘at mad rate’ while—at the same time—here in sleepy Dorset, time is moaning, droning, tic-tocking tiredly along.” The final return of the refrain “tiredly the [spectral] pines intone” is a way of showing that effectively nothing has happened during this interval of fire, fury and war. There is a strong sense in which the relative progress of time’s creep–march–gallop has everything to do with one’s position in relation to the flash point of “Shock [and] Flame”—to the spot where history’s lightning-like violence “has struck.”

In Hardy’s new, darker vision, history is no longer a narrative of progressive human improvement, but a cycle marked by regular but unwelcome repetitions (“fears/flame/clock ... Tears/Flame/Shock!”). The pun on the word “order” in the final stanza is a key to this historical schema. “[T]he order from Fate” is not just a command for more war—it is a demand for “order,” as in structure and pattern. Unfortunately Fate’s “order” is not peace and light but recurring intervals of war and flame. In this final stanza the poem’s inaudible *abcde* rhyme scheme reasserts itself: first as discussed, with the identical word “flame” from the first stanza; and second by bringing back as a closing refrain most of the first stanza’s supernumerary sixth line. This is tacked on after “To pale Europe;” with the semi-colon marking another kind of threshold between the capitalized plague-like abstractions and the brick-and-mortar space of the poem. The diminished return of the refrain—sans specters, still tired—is what attends this grim vision of the immediate future. Repetition is the strongest indication of the specific dual temporality that this poem describes, and which I will continue to argue is the crucial feature of Hardy’s most affecting war poems. In the six intervening stanzas between the two refrains, only a moment of the speaker’s life has passed, yet another “Old Year has struck” as Hardy puts it. But instead of bringing a vision of hope, or even any news change at all, “the New” only offers a dull “moan” as history clatters on. The tired intonation of “the pines” returns us to the poem’s intensely local beginning, to the rural region safe from Europe’s inferno, to the draughty house, to “the blood in [the] ears” of the speaker. The “mad rate” of history is contrasted to the tiring personal experience of time. The night is long, while the years are vanishingly short.

That final refrain is not quite the poem’s last line, however. After another line break, we read, in smaller print: “1915–1916.” Only a reader unfamiliar with Hardy would overlook this figure as merely a dutiful editorial dating of the poem. To do so would be to entirely miss the poem’s argument about history as surely as its speaker misses seeing Fate’s rider. Both are at the very center of the poem’s vision of time, even as neither is, strictly speaking, *in* the poem at all. The historical figure “1915–1916” ostensibly denotes a brief but relatively significant interval of historical time. Not just two full trips around the sun, but two remarkably eventful ones from a British-European perspective. All of which is just to say that this span of two war-torn years figures large. This is when “Home by Christmas!” became “Will it ever end?”²² It is this outsize momentousness which demands the inclusion of the date in the first place, a demand signaled by the poem’s title.

²² See Hynes (101), and Eksteins (143); though per Fussell, Hardy may have again been ahead of his time here. In January 1916, Haig & co. had only *begun* planning the ill-fated Somme attack (12, 71–4).

Hardy, it should be said, appended dates to many poems that have none of this explicitly historical emphasis; likewise he wrote not a few occasional poems which are even more clearly linked to a specific event than this poem.²³ Yet, with this particular date, something is subtly amiss. First of all, read as a range, it is a null set. There is nothing—no time at all—between the two years. The long dash denotes only that briefest moment described in stanza V when “No figure appears.” To put it differently, the entire poem takes place in the empty interval of that dash; it is that emptiness that comprises the poem’s structure of feeling—the erasure of human progress during “War Time.”

My reading of this date as the crux of the poem is indebted to a 2014 article by Kent Puckett (an early version of which I heard as a talk in 2012) called “Hardy’s 1900,” in which he gamely considers the question “what happens when we treat the date as part of the poem proper—as text, not paratext?” Noting that Hardy dated many of his poems with considerable care—though with notably little consistency—Puckett goes on to say “The date is an oddly significant pressure point in Hardy’s poetry; it is often both an index and an argument” (59). Puckett takes as his primary example the mercurial dating of one of Hardy’s most famous poems, “The Darkling Thrush,” which also takes on the overdetermined temporality at the change from one calendar year (indeed, from one century) to another. Puckett shows how in this particular poem the ambiguous and contested dating of the new century occasions Hardy’s poetic fixation on “Time’s awkwardness”: I’d add that it is not time itself that is awkward, but rather these human attempts to contain it, which always involve overlaying two awkwardly incompatible structures. Puckett gets at this when he concludes “Hardy shows that the human desire to know when things will be qualitatively different reaches its limit when measured against the other-than-human experience of the time necessary to see that difference through” (71). This is a useful analogue to the problematic I am exploring here, except for the not-insignificant detail that the fatal “order” that comprises “War Time” and frustrates our speaker’s “desire to know” cannot accurately be construed as “other-than-human”—war is so vexing to Hardy precisely because it is made by humans against humans. We will need more subtle temporal divisions than “human” and “other-than-human.”

That dash between years—a durative rather than punctual piece of punctuation—comes up in Puckett’s article as well, not in reference to Hardy but to two different texts of the same period. The first refers to the date at the end of Conrad’s *Lord Jim*:

[The] dash, denoting a kind of embodied, embalmed leap between 1899 and 1900, says something significant and compressed about the time of the novel. *Lord Jim* is about inhabiting the time of the leap, and the pseudoparatextual sign, “September 1899 – July 1900,” figures the leap with surprising economy. (63–64)

While I want to make a similar claim for the dash at the end of “A New Year’s Eve”—namely that the dash itself “figures” the brief timeframe of the poem in a “significant” (i.e. more than an extrinsic or merely “paratextual”) way—that the *long dash* is, in a sense, an

²³ Of the former, for instance, the first 20 poems in 1898’s *Wessex Poems* bear dates from the 1860s and ’70s, ostensibly the years of their composition, and all the “Poems of Pilgrimage” in 1901’s *Poems of the Past and Present* are dutifully datelined. Of the latter I have in mind especially “V.R. 1819–1901” the epitaph for Queen Victoria, and the armistice poem “And There Was a Great Calm.”

exegesis of the poem—I need to do it within an even more compressed space. Conrad’s date represents a comparatively significant range (11 months inclusive), whereas the range I am examining is, well, naught. Puckett’s second example comes from an illustration on the copyright page of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*:

The Woodman stands always almost—but only almost—ready to mark the same difference that the date of Lord Jim embodied and elided with its dash. The space between the differently significant years 1899 and 1900 is left suspended as a chop that could but does not fall; the edge—the event—that would mark the difference between one time and another remains curiously dulled. (64)

I want to carry forward this notion of a literary event as “the edge ... between one time and another” into my readings of Hardy’s various poems about “War Time.” Puckett’s playful exploration of the printed date that hovers on the edge between the exegetic and the diegetic gives us a valuable orientation point for the way Hardy uses poetic forms to sever human events off from an inhuman version of time.

We’ve seen here how within a single poem Hardy engages multiple formal strategies to address the problems of defining and enduring “War Time” for an individual isolated by and insulated from its effects. Recalling to Williams’s *Long Revolution*, we can perceive how the contradictory structure of feelings of the *long dash* might denote the lived experience of wartime as simultaneously too slow and too fast, tediously inconsequential and incomprehensibly sweeping. We can now move on to observe in a different poem from the same series how the concept of wartime is broadened and redefined beyond the individual’s experience of being left out of it.

II. End Times

There is another form recalled by Hardy’s appending of years to indifferent catastrophic events (More famine and Flame): that ancient (but never outdated) method of historical recordkeeping, the annal. Hayden White’s memorable treatment of it in relation to historical “narrativity” (which it notably lacks) is useful for considering Hardy’s take on wartime. White describes the rather impersonal and opaque structure which has subsequent years listed in one column and memorable events—mostly battles, bad weather, failed harvests and notable deaths—in the opposite, with no clear relationship to each other and many unnerving gaps:

[T]he annalist’s account calls up a world in which need is everywhere present, in which scarcity is the rule of existence, and in which all of the possible agencies of satisfaction are lacking, absent, or exist under imminent threat of death. ...What is lacking in the list of events ... is a notion of a social center by which to locate them with respect to one another and to charge them with ethical or moral significance. (15)

This is a pretty good description of Hardy’s accounts of wartime as well, though the formal

choices of the poet give him many more options for evoking relationships and patterns where none are readily apparent, or, perhaps, for putting the striking lack of pattern into relationship with its formal opposite. In this way, the poet's task is much like the historian's: construct a new form that injects agency and significance to the desperate chaos of the annals. For Hardy, the war has sent Europe back in time, into a situation of "imminent threat" appropriate to the annals' impassive arrangement, and poetry is a way of resisting that arrangement, in part by its incorporation.

"War's annals" are directly invoked in one of the most famous and least understood of Hardy's war poems. An otherwise succinct, even lapidary little piece, its unwieldy title is a prime example of Hardy's tendency to conflate times of trouble and troubles with time. I will discuss below why critics cannot quite decide if this poem's outlook on human history is uncharacteristically hopeful or exceptionally apocalyptic, but first here's the full text of "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'":

I

Only a man harrowing clods
 In a slow silent walk
 With an old horse that stumbles and nods
 Half asleep as they stalk

II

Only thin smoke without flame
 From the heaps of couch-grass;
 Yet this will go onward the same
 Though Dynasties pass.

III

Yonder a maid and her wight
 Come whispering by:
 War's annals will cloud into night
 Ere their story die.

1915

Before I approach the important differences between this poem's double conception of time versus that in "A New Year's Eve in War Time" I'll note several conspicuous formal similarities between the two poems that make them obvious companion pieces: first of course, the word "Time" in the title; then the roman numerated stanzas, which made a certain amount of sense in the longer poem containing references to both clocks and Revelations (seven seals, etc.), but in this much shorter piece seem oddly excessive; also, the significant years at the end of both poems. Both poems include oblique references to biblical prophecies, and the fact that this poem, which comes earlier in Hardy's sequence, references an Old Testament prophecy, and the later poem Revelations, is a significant statement on Hardy's attention to the war's apocalyptic "progress." Both employ phantasmal imagery and a pseudo-biblical typology with their very different but equally central imagery of horses and flames (indeed, they share the "flame/same" rhyme) to

explore how war unsettles human conceptions of time. Yet despite all of these similarities the two poems have nearly opposite orientations towards history: In “New Year’s Eve,” war’s “horse at mad rate” disrupts and occludes the personal experience of “the throb of the clock.” In “Breaking of Nations” “war’s annals” disappear behind a close-up view of quotidian life.

Hardy’s modernized rendition of the prophetic mode is a good place to begin this inquiry into his historical poetics. The phrase in the title is cited to Jeremiah 51:20, though it is not a direct quote. Here is that verse from the KJV:

Thou *art* my battle axe *and* weapon of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms;

The speaker here is Jeremiah ventriloquizing God, though it is hard to say for certain whether “thou” in this passage refers to the prophet himself or to Israel (aka “the portion of Jacob” [Jer. 51:19]) more broadly. In any event, Hardy borrows more than just his awkwardly embedded title phrase from the prophet: the several verses immediately following that cited contain a long list of erstwhile pairs which God will also “break in pieces,” including: “the horse and his rider ... the chariot and his rider ... man and woman ... young and old ... the young man and the maid ... the shepherd and his flock ... the husbandman and his yoke of oxen ... captains and rulers” (Jer. 51:20–23). Then, a few verses later, during a detailed description of the siege of Babylon comes this: “the passages are stopped, and the reeds have burned with fire, and the men are affrighted” (Jer. 51:32). So it is not just the title and theme Hardy has appropriated from the prophet, but nearly all of the poem’s images and figures as well. Prophetic and pastoral forms collide here in a combustive synthesis.

One crucial departure from the Biblical source is that Hardy’s poem at first seems determined to keep its pairs intact—the “husbandman” and his horse, and the maid and her man—perhaps offering a hint of the “social center” which White tells us the annals lack. Jeremiah describes a situation in which Babylon’s sins against Israel (i.e. the decadent, idolatrous nation versus the favored) bring about the destruction of its fundamental units of natural and cultural reproduction (i.e. agriculture, courtship and mating) whereas most critical readings of the Hardy poem stress his insistence that these elements of human culture will endure “though Dynasties pass.” The failure to account for this crucial difference between Hardy’s update and the ancient text is the source of what I will argue is the widespread misreading of this poem. For instance: Tim Armstrong claims the poem focuses on “a time which is both specific and continuing, a repetition of the cherished same” (106); while Edna Longley claims that “Hardy segregates archetypical narratives from ‘War’s annals’”(301)—I will argue that he does not segregate them at all but analogizes them in a deeply troubling way. Even Raymond Williams, usually a particularly incisive reader of Hardy, and not one to accept pastoral nostalgia at face value, says this poem asserts: “the persistence of landwork through what seem the distant accidents of history” (258). These suspiciously optimistic takes on this poem ought to make the veteran

Hardy reader wary, blithely overlooking the fundamental apocalypticism made plain in the biblical reference.²⁴

Indeed, it is a willfully oblivious reading which avers that “this” in the phrase “this will go onward the same” stands for something like: “picturesque and peaceful pastoral activity”; or that the “story” that survives “War’s annals” is something like: “lovers wander and whisper happily among the fields.” Every descriptor of the man and horse from in the first stanza points to something other than serenity. These figures are as beaten down as the harrowed ground they “stalk”: they are “slow,” “silent,” “old,” stumbling and “half asleep.” This pair is not at peace. Granted, they are as geographically remote from the killing fields of Europe as the sheltered speaker in “A New Year’s Eve”; yet they are markedly not safe and secure. Indeed, this is a thoroughly modern pastoral: the privileged observer is not charmed to ease by his simple view on agricultural labor, but rather subtly menaced by a complex history contained therein.

If the heavily loaded term “harrowing” from the first stanza weren’t indication enough that there is more going on in this poem than a pleasant pastoral deferment, the “smoke without flame” of the second stanza ought to clue us in to the fact that Hardy means not to segregate but to analogize agricultural activity with its concurrent political strife, and in doing so to activate more of the prophetic reference than a mere title. The burning of the reeds in Jeremiah is not just another day on the farm, but the aftermath of a vengeful clearing of the fields before a siege of the city—Hardy’s “heaps of couch grass” (a deeply persistent weed often torn up by the harrow) in this allusive context should certainly be read as an ominous sign. “Smoke without flame” portends a worse conflagration, much as the “flap of the flame” in the fireplace of “New Year’s Eve” returns as “more Famine and Flame” in the fields of Europe.

Only Dennis Taylor has given this poem a proper critical treatment. He uses it as a thematic bookend to a long chapter titled “Hardy’s Apocalypse” which convincingly links Hardy’s poems of personal loss and memory of the 19th century to his later meditations on the violent depredations of the war-torn 20th. Taylor refuses to take at face value an oft-quoted assertion from the *Life* (which Hardy ghost wrote) that the poem is a straightforward depiction of an “exhumed memory” of what he felt while viewing just “such an agricultural incident” in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War, a memory of which resurfaced in 1914. Hardy ends this oblique musing on memory, poetry and history: “Query: where was that sentiment hiding itself during more than forty years?” (378) Taylor does well to unearth the clear link between the 1870 incident and 1914: at the former date he was courting his first wife Emma, and at the latter he had just published the famous elegies, “Poems of 1912–13” about ambivalent interactions between the memories of that happy time and Emma’s rather dour ghost. Taylor goes on to list all of the other “elements [of the poem] which are difficult to explain” away as pleasant personal feelings or quotidian activities which survive the destruction of dynasties. The first Taylor mentions is the most important and glaring, inexplicably ignored by so many critics:

²⁴ Hardy of course famously rejected the “pessimist” charge often leveled at him, pleading for a more nuanced understanding of his philosophical stance, which he termed “evolutionary meliorism.” I humbly accept his term while wondering if he doesn’t protest too much. So I use the term “optimistic” here advisedly: more colloquially and less rigorously than Hardy might like. See the “Apology” to *Late Lyrics* (557).

- 1) the harrowing of clods which, in the context of Jeremiah quoted in the title, suggests a biblical harrowing of souls and the popular notion of the harrowing of hell. (89)

Indeed, the fact that Hardy chose “harrowing” as the activity for his man instead of any number of other “agricultural activities” is crucial. The twinned questions the poem forces us to ask right from its outset are: is this a destructive or regenerative activity we are witnessing; and, is it a metaphor for something else? We would not have the same interpretive dilemma, if the man were *planting*, or even *furrowing* the field. The preparation of a new crop would plainly suggest the restorative and promising, future-oriented mindset most critics so wish to see here. But that word “harrowing” and its indication of breaking up and flattening out in the context of the poem’s demanding title evokes a darker wartime vision of clearing the fields, as Taylor rightly alerts us.

Of course, one might object that if this poem truly recreates a memory unearthed from Hardy’s deep past (even for the wizened poet-sage, forty-odd years is half a lifetime) then the field-wise Hardy means nothing by “harrowing” other than what he saw. Indeed, in this reading the word “Only,” which gives such an emphatic charge to the first two stanzas, is Hardy’s way of stressing (in both senses) that there is no metaphor to see here, “Only a man ... with an old horse.” Indeed, this tension between the will to interpret, the desire to allegorize (as Jeremiah certainly does with all his “breaking[s] in pieces”), and the equally strong desire to see things for what they are, just as presented to the mind’s eye, is the poem’s clearest doubling effect. We are forced to ask ourselves again, every time we read it, is this a literal or metaphorical “harrowing”?

In our attempt to untangle these dueling readings we might begin again with the poem’s title. It is the poem’s most explicit mention of “Time,” both in its apparent reference to the current events of the war (reaffirmed by the date at the bottom) and in its countervailing allusion to the old testament. So the word “Time” refers to two times at once, two scenes, two moments separated by several millennia. It also, then, invokes a sense of timelessness, or a feeling of being “out of time” or separated from time in the historical sense. There is also, it should be said, something purposefully difficult and unsettling in the very mechanics of the title, with its awkwardly double preposition (of/of), and its parenthetical title within a title. This awkwardness, though it reaffirms the common trope of such in Hardy criticism, is not reducible or dismissible as such. Which is to say, the embeddedness of the biblical title in Hardy’s title is one of the many ways in which the poem deforms and deters any historical narrative which would elevate the “Nations” currently at war into a position of primacy or “moral significance”. Hardy forces the reader to disentangle “Time” and “Nation[s]” from a recalcitrant discursive form, and then repeats this process, in a way, by excluding these two terms from the poem that follows, which forces the reader, again, to try to figure out exactly how (and if) they fit and what (and if) they mean in this shifting and ambiguous, literal and figurative, field of forms.

“Time” only figures in the first stanza in two reticent adjectives: “slow” and “old,” applied to the man and his horse, respectively. The pair’s progress as they break up the “clods” is thereby held in contrast to the more frantic “Breaking of Nations” simultaneously taking place elsewhere. A single image and sentence is haltingly, almost leisurely (although surely that’s the wrong word in this laboring context) extended over four lines in this first

stanza, reifying the slow, stumbling pace of the harrowers, and the timeless space in which their action takes place. Again, the effect here is ambivalent: the title locates us in a space of conflict and violence, while the imagery and activity of the first stanza immediately contradicts this with an atmosphere of quotidian, somnambulant, banality. Only the words “harrowing” and “stalk” hint at the poem’s menacing background of human slaughter. Otherwise we have been confusingly relocated from the battlefields of contemporary Europe to a raw and mostly empty agricultural field that could be just about anywhere and any time.

It is ironic that this poem about being “In Time” is metrically a shambles. The first stanza’s measure “stumbles and nods,” especially at “old horse,” but basically resolves into common meter: 4343/abab.²⁵ But the second stanza becomes markedly more difficult to resolve, starting with its first line “Only thin smoke without flame” which has only three stresses—not a problem in itself—“short meter” lines (three stresses with an implicit rest) are also prevalent—though it is relatively unconventional to switch back and forth mid-stream. The problem really emerges with the nearly unscannable second line: “From the heaps of couch-grass;”—that final hyphenate strongly resists an iambic rise, leaving the equally awkward options of a closing spondee or a trochee. The trochee is particularly difficult because it would be the only falling-stress line ending, which would undermine the steady rhythm of the end-rhymes, the poem’s most consistently grounding formal feature. A spondee here creates less of a problem in theory, unless you believe with Taylor that this line should only have two stresses, in which case you’ve resolved yourself into an absolutely untenable four slack syllables to begin the line, which the prominent “heaps” obviously rebuffs in any case. Thus we are left to resolve a line which could equally plausibly be said to have two (heaps, grass), three (From/heaps/grass *or* heaps/couch/grass) or four stresses (From/heaps/couch/grass), with none of these options sounding just right, thanks to “couch-grass” which forces one to rush and stumble again. The third and fourth lines of stanza II accept three stresses more gracefully, though the third needs two anapests to do so. Indeed, I can make a strong case that the poem scans 4343 in the first stanza, 3232 in the second, and 3343 in the third (try reading this last without stressing “Come,” “War’s” or “Ere” and you’ll see how any bid for regularity fails).

Why is the metrical awkwardness of this poem worthy of such attention, when awkwardness is often held to be Hardy’s poetry’s most defining characteristic? Partly because the lapidary form and prophetic register seem to demand something more sure-footed (unlike the horse). But also because the poem appears to be otherwise so precisely patterned with repeated words and parallel constructions between the three stanzas, whose roman numeral designations also proclaim a more formal kind of form. Note, for instance the anaphoric use of “Only” morphing into the near anagram “Yonder” to begin each stanza; the prepositional phrase in every second line; the parallel positions of related words like “silent” and “whispering” and phrases like “will go onward” and “will cloud

²⁵ I find it nearly impossible accept Dennis Taylor’s classification of 3232, even allowing for a purely accentual meter with some four-syllable feet. I do, however welcome Taylor’s other tantalizing suggestion about this poem’s form: “[Its title] probably means that the poem’s setting is wartime. But there is another possibility, that the poem is written in the ‘time’ or tempo of a hymn, of which ‘The Breaking of Nations’ is the typically abbreviated title” (90). This mysterious (nonexistent?) hymn which Hardy clumsily attempts to reset for the 20th century is an irresistible chimera.

into.” This is all to say that in a poem whose central claim and concept is that forms and events “go onward *the same*” (my italics), it feels odd that the metrical line, modeled on the ever reliable repetitions of hymn meter, should falter, shift and fall apart in this way. It is perhaps unproductive to wonder what Hardy “means” by his formal infelicities (though we can safely assume they are not accidents in the careless sense), but here it seems a particularly fair and nagging question. In a poem nominally about the fundamental repetitions that mark time, this unreliability bespeaks a kind of cheekiness or irony that the poem otherwise resists. Recalling Empson’s assertion of the importance of the pun to pastoral’s ironic dual register, the field of this poem, from “harrowing” onward is plainly scattered with verbal clods which we can’t help but try to smooth out, and so our stumbling earns the dignity of hard work, even if it is, at base, unsettling to see puns in a poem about war.

To return to the contradictory phrase “*Only* a man,” even as it insists on his ordinary, unremarkable nature, it isolates the figure from his surroundings and renders him emblematic. Therefore, we must be ready to understand this walking figure simultaneously as a literal, material body and as a symbol or biblical type. He is ancient and archetypal, a laborer scraping his living from the earth. And importantly, he is not just the type of innocent Adam exiled from Eden to become a “tiller of the ground”: he is also the type of Cain, not a tiller *and* a killer. Hardy hints at the portent of this figure with “Half asleep as they stalk,” which evokes the deep exhaustion of the labor, to be sure, but also a dangerous lack of awareness or responsibility, with the rhyme’s move from “walk” to “stalk” also bearing an edge of menace.²⁶

So, recalling Isobel Armstrong, we must read this double poem in two ways at once. First, as a comforting salve to the wounds of war, which avers that those fundamental human activities—cultivating the land, romantic coupling, telling “stor[ies]”—will continue despite “Dynasties” and “Nations” and “War’s” repetitive and destructive activities. Simultaneously we begin to sense that any innocence or refuge available in the pastoral scene is an illusion. Even the humble plowman is a potential killer in his “half asleep” breaking up of the ground. The activity of the plow to quite literally delineate the land for its future use, is here aligned with the drawing of national borders with swords and fire.

The metaphor of war as the “plowing under” of young men was especially salient to the trenches of WWI, and in this analogy, the plowman must also be read as one of the heedless “old man” sleepwalking through his complicit role in the violence. This creeping sense that all is not innocent and well in Hardy’s rural landscape is echoed in the second stanza, where the “thin smoke” of burning “heaps of couch-grass” can be read both as a quaint sensory image of the countryside and another uncanny metaphor for mass destruction, recalling the perversely optimistic sense of “moral hygiene” at the beginning of the war (think of Rupert Brooke’s youths “into cleanness leaping”).²⁷

“Yet,” the word exactly at the poem’s halfway point, is another one of very few which explicitly indicate time. It appears to finally set these agricultural activities against their concurrent political analogues. But is that setting in contrast or parallel? “Yet” is the perfect

²⁶ The “sleepwalker” has become a favored figure for describing the heedless march of the European powers to war. Hardy seems prescient as ever in these matters.

²⁷ Hynes is particularly good on this perverse cultural notion of the war as a welcome “purgation” or “disinfectant” for a decadent Georgian England; see 12–19.

word for Hardy's conflicting versions of time, because it can mean "nevertheless" (yet she persisted), "up until now" (worst yet), or "going forward" (worse and worse yet). Hardy's "Yet" grammatically opposes "Only," which in turn would delimit the plowing and burning of the fields to the current moment and the material world. But it also can easily be read to activate the higher "prophetic" register of those images. Nothing is ever only what it seems when we first see it, claims the newly farseeing speaker, looking up from the pastoral scene to the thicker smoke clouds on the horizon.

At last we come to the poem's final and most mysterious stanza. In Hardy's retelling of the poem's origin story, he was courting his future bride when he first observed the "incident" and felt the "feeling" that then reemerged in 1914. Which means, in one sense, the "maid and her wight" here are none other than Hardy and Emma. But even accepting the biographical at face value does not make the poem's contorted chronology any easier to align. Indeed, the "story" of Hardy and Emma had come to its sad conclusion before the current (in 1914) war began. Hardy's famed "Poems of 1912–13" about that relationship were published 1914's *Satires of Circumstance*, and are full of lucid memories, ghostly returns, and apocryphal dating (as in appending years to poems, not making love—though that too). The romantic couple here, then, is also a fading memory, one man's view of his own past. Their "story" lives on because the figures "yonder" are ghosts of former selves.

While the critics cited above do pay lip service to Jeremiah, they are so eager to emphasize a final note of consolation, they fail to mention that Jeremiah's "young man and the maid" are also broken "in pieces." In his verse Hardy has reversed the bible's order of male and female and added a possessive pronoun—a "maid and *her* wight," which subtly diminishes this second figure. And what exactly is a "wight"? According to Taylor, Hardy responded with a shrug when contemporary reviews of the poem took issue with his use of the "archaic word" (90). The *OED*'s definition is vague and variable, designating almost any anthropomorphic figure, living or supernatural; it occupies roughly the same semantic space as "creature" or "being" (see *OED* 1a&b). Hardy's "wight" might well be a young lover, but he knew the word more often refers to an otherworldly or otherwise unenviable being than it does to someone in their prime (it is usually paired with adjectives like "unlucky" "simple" or "poor"; see *OED* 2a).²⁸ Likewise, the word rhymes prominently with "night" in the phrase "cloud into night" (or in an important variant "fade into night"). So these "whispering" figures are not so young and lively as they may seem; the poem emphasizes their faded timelessness. So the sense of "wight" as a ghost-like figure may make more sense when we think of this couple as nostalgic phantoms of youth, made more of memory and desire than flesh and blood.

One final tantalizing possibility for "wight": The *OED* says that in the 17th century it was especially common to use the word "wight[s]" to refer to "the four beasts of the Apocalypse." These chimerical figures emerge in Revelations 4–6, for which the sacking of Babylon in Jeremiah 51 is an obvious typological pair, with their similarly ominous horses and riders auguring the divine destruction of earthly dynasties. In chapter 6 we meet the beasts' most culturally famous manifestations, the Four Horsemen, who emerge from the

²⁸ Indeed, this is how Hardy uses the word elsewhere, where "fellow-wights" are old friends, some dead, remembered fondly, as in "Ditty" (17) and "Friends Beyond" (60); or weak men as in "The Bride-Night Fire" (71) and "The Subalterns" (121); or romantically deceived men as in "The Supplanter" (177) and "A Conversation at Dawn" (371).

first four of the seven seals. Behind door number two: “And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.” This is the figure conventionally called War, and it seems that Hardy has a sort of attenuated version of these portents in mind in this poem. The “old horse that stumbles and nods” and his drab plowman are Hardy’s symbols of destruction. In this reading, they are not figures of enduring human activities that survive the war: they *are* the war.

This typological-apocalyptic reading is complicated—but not negated—by a couple facts: the “man harrowing clods” is not mounted like the Four Horsemen; and the “wight” whose biblical echo I’m reaching for here is a different man entirely in the poem. But I think that it is safe to say that Hardy is not aiming for precise allegory or biblical typology, but rather a modern prophetic voice, more modest and earthbound than Jeremiah or John in Patmos. But there is still form of typology at work here, with the eternal return of the plowman and his horse, the clearing of the field, and the anonymous couple in their eternal youth. These rustic types in their worldly rhythms “will go onward the same/ Though Dynasties pass.” This is to say both that they are ignorant of national politics—they’ll go on doing what they do—and that they transcend them—they go beyond the end. If the couple are truly carefree in love, their ignorance is both touching and tragic. But again “wight” injects unease into the poem: he is, even in his youthful prime, already a ghostly creature, preemptively doomed, perhaps bound for Europe. In any case these minor human stories are too “slow [and] whispering” to register in “War’s annals.”

The crucial choice this poem offers us is not between the peaceful people and the warring dynasties, but between annals and stories, i.e. two conflicting ways of organizing and recording the passage of time into text. “A New Year’s Eve in War Time” set the domestic clock against Fate’s “order” and showed how the slow creep of the former does not reconcile easily with the fatal haste of the latter. White describes the annals’ special preoccupations: “Everywhere it is the forces of disorder, natural and human, the forces of violence and destruction, which occupy the forefront of attention” (14). In this poem the attention is focused on forces of social and the cultural reproduction in the couple and the farm worker respectively. True, we are left with the nagging feeling that these may still be mere figures for the apocalyptic goings-on. But the poem gives us the choice. We can read history as it is written in the annals: a blank series of events, most of them harrowing, many utterly catastrophic, all connected indifferently under the sign of the years. Or, we can read history as “their story”: a narrative arc held together by the human beings at its “social center” and the fictive promise, as White has it, of a moral resolution. It seems naïve in its political context—the breaking of nations—and in this Hardy cannily predicts the perennial critical misreading of this poem. And yet he has also sympathetically underwritten that misreading as the only way to survive history’s continuing deprivations. This obviously wishful, willfully ignorant style of reading is itself a kind of double structure of feeling inherent to wartime—the shortening of the glance to only what is right in front of us, or extending it to whatever might be beyond the war. That it is so legible, so irresistible in latter wartimes proves we “go onward the same.”

III. Back in Time

The wish that the intimate, personal “story” of a “maid and her wight” might provide some form of moral consolation (however momentary) to hold against “War’s Annals” and might even provide access (however temporary) to a different temporal dimension which could supersede the “Breaking of Nations” is the exact subject of another fine Hardy poem. To read it we will have to distort chronology a bit by moving back from the Great War to the Boer War, and to Hardy’s first series of “War Poems” from 1901’s aptly titled *Poems of the Past and Present*:

A Wife in London
(December 1899)

I

She sits in the tawny vapour
That the Thames-side lanes have uprolled,
Behind whose webby fold on fold
Like a waning taper
The street-lamp glimmers cold.

A messenger’s knock cracks smartly,
Flashed news is in her hand
Of meaning it dazes to understand
Though shaped so shortly:
He – has fallen – in the far South Land. ...

II

‘Tis the morrow; the fog hangs thicker,
The postman nears and goes:
A letter is brought whose lines disclose
By the firelight flicker
His hand, whom the worm now knows:

Fresh – firm – penned in highest feather –
Page-full of his hoped return,
And of home-planned jaunts by brake and burn
In the summer weather,
And of new love that they would learn.

This poem is often overlooked, hiding as it does between the more canonical “Drummer Hodge” which precedes it in the series, and the more expansive and fantastical “Souls of the Slain,” which follows it. Few critics mention it other than to mark it as “a simple example of ... Hardy’s ironic structure” (Hynes 44). Its two-part irony seems too neat for further comment, and so the poem is too obvious to read. But held up against other more strident

“War Poems,” this one emerges as a subtle and complex examination of precisely the kind of conflicted temporality we have been pursuing so far.

An elaborate rhyme pattern is established in the first stanza that will obtain throughout: *abbab* with the *a* rhymes feminine. Metrically, this is basically a three-beat ballad line with the quirk that line three has four beats and line four has only two. This contrast between shorter and longer lines which each leap out from their surroundings comes to bear on the poem’s “story,” which also turns on a contrast between one message that is too short and comes too soon and another that is too long and arrives too late.

It begins with the foggy atmospherics of the first stanza, which immerse us in the London streets as evocatively as any description of the hills and lanes of Wessex ever sent us there. The “tawny vapour” floating off the Thames fills the lines of the first stanza just as surely as it fills the “lanes” and the “dazed” mind of she who “sits in” it (though we learn in stanza two that she is safely indoors). This shifting and layered confusion between inside and outside, subject and object, becomes an important aspect of this supposedly “simple” poem. The fog creates an unmooring pathetic fallacy, as it takes over subject status from the unidentified woman, such that the pronoun “whose” feels indecisive, conflicted between “She,” the “vapour” or even “the lanes.” All three share this “cold” submersion in the brain-like “webby fold on fold.” The light of the syntactically belated “street-lamp” fails to illuminate: as readers, we are thoroughly lost in a vague, unsettling eventide; this feeling of disorientation is the first of the poem’s several effective couplings between the descriptive and expressive registers.

The second stanza shocks us out of our trance when the “messenger’s knock cracks smartly.” The dim light of the lamp is displaced by the harsh “flash” of bad news: her husband “*has fallen – in the far South Land.*” This is a crucial moment, because its sudden “flash” (presumably in the form of a telegram) from abroad locates us in a technologically modern timeframe. The disorienting speed with which the “news” (which is always bad—this is Hardy after all) can now traverse the globe “dazes” the wife’s understanding even though (or perhaps precisely because) its message is “shaped so shortly.” The incommensurability of the immense distance travelled and the short time creates a gap in “meaning” so unnavigable that the poem completely elides the wife’s experience of grief.

Instead of tears we get more London weather: “’Tis the morrow, the fog hangs thicker.” A day’s time passes instantaneously in the gap between the first numbered section and the second, the same structure Blevins noted in early Hardy lyrics of disappointed romance. The repetition of the poem’s first image in the second stanza establishes a formal parallelism that persists through nearly every line. The “messenger” in stanza 2 is echoed by “the postman” of stanza 3; the “firelight flicker” offsets “The street-lamp glimmers cold”; the personal letter “penned” in “His hand” opposes the impersonal telegraph dropped unceremoniously “in her hand.” Finally, and perhaps more subtly, the imaginary, wished-for “jaunts by brake and burn / In the summer weather” of the final stanza ironically invert her frigid solitude in the “Thames-side lanes” whose “tawny” (i.e., industrially discolored) fogginess oppose his “Fresh – firm” lines.

The “simple” two-part irony of this poem is that the sharp news of his death negates every aspect of his warm and hopeful letter. But the inverted, untimely structure of the wife’s experience—renders this too-obvious irony considerably more complex. That the carefully handwritten letter (“in highest feather”) arrives *after* the telegram, and its “lines

disclose” (or reopen) the painful news after it has already dazed the wife’s understanding is ironic, sure, but also oddly, inconveniently comforting. It is of course tragic and cruel that she must experience his death twice in this way, but there may be some consolation in his Keatsean afterlife when she reads the “Page-full” of “His hand.” There is no indication at all that she shares with poet and reader the bitter irony that might devalue this latter correspondence. Quite the contrary, the fact that the poem ends on an (ironic, to be sure) up-note “of new love they would learn” proves that the slower-moving, more traditional form of communication—the love letter—will surely outlive the modern technological form that outpaced it. If there was something inevitable to his death in a foreign war, there is an opposing inevitability offered here, tentatively perhaps and surely concealed behind a fog of “simple” irony, but powerful nonetheless: love and hope are stronger and will outlast the cynical, empty shocks of modern communications and imperial warfare. The larger, more complex irony here, obscured, as it were, by the simpler, is that love itself can outlive the lover’s death. As consolation goes, it may not be much, but its profound “meaning dazes to understand.”

Again, we can read this poem as a formally complex expression of conflicting timeframes, and also, borrowing Levine’s terms, as a collision between different rhythms and networks. The slower personal form of the love letter is eclipsed by the fast impersonal telegraph, the technological marvel which connects the empire’s violently contended outposts with its foggy lamp-lit center. These advanced networks disturb and infringe on both the domestic space of the wife at her hearth (that ever-present Victorian form, the separate sphere, of which Levine offers several destabilizing readings) and on the longstanding rhythms of communication in writing. The two-day, two-stanza timeframe of the poem, with its pervasive parallelism, sets a frame for these colliding forms. But the counterfactual future of the final stanza, which has been foreclosed by war itself, is the final word. Hardy’s ironical structure is not simple here, for in suspending the feeling of “hoped return” between memories of the past and visions of the future, he gives us the formal resources to survive the present. There is a similar ironic and paradoxical structure of feeling to this as to “Christmas: 1924” written ten years after the *next* war, opposing comfortingly slow, old forms (mass) and distressingly sudden, new forms (gas): Never give up the hope for a better future, even though it is obviously already too late.

I’ll offer one final reading, because it is a poem whose concerns are strikingly similar to what we’ve seen so far, but whose forms are bizarre and distinct. This poem returns us to the Great War, but also attempts to take us ever further back in time, to an epoch when “Anglo-Saxon” described not war lines (with the dash as the versus) but a newly unified culture. It also features at least eleven puns by my count:

The Pity of It

I walked in loamy Wessex lanes, afar
 From rail-track and from highway, and I heard
 In field and farmstead many an ancient word
 Of local lineage like ‘Thu Bist’, and ‘Er war’,

‘Ich woll’, ‘Er sholl’, and by-talk similar,

Nigh as they speak who in this month's moon gird
 At England's very loins, thereunto spurred
 By gangs whose glory threats and slaughters are.

Then seemed a Heart crying: 'Whosoever they be
 At root and bottom of this, who flung this flame
 Between kin folk kin tongued even as are we,

'Sinister, ugly, lurid be their fame;
 May their familiars grow to shun their name,
 And their brood perish everlastingly.'

April 1915

Here we have as many colliding forms as one could ever want: networks old and new ("lanes" versus "rail-tracks" and "highways"); whole nations and their languages, (English and German); enemies aplenty, but also "kinfolk" and "familiars"; landscapes ("fields," "farms"); and strangely disembodied bits, ("loins," "bottom," "heart" and tongues). Importantly, few of these forms are specific or discrete—they run into each other alternately as ideals and material forms, metaphors and literal denotations. They are all just barely held together by that famous Latinate import to English, the sonnet form, which Hardy employed relatively rarely.²⁹ And of course we have puns aplenty, wholly appropriate to a deeply pastoral poem about the inherent duality of language itself. The most obvious, if perhaps not the best of these, is "war" (l. 4) which does not denote its most urgent contextual referent, but rather the German "*was (to be)*"—translating the global conflict into a state of being.³⁰

That this poem is also fundamentally about time may not be quite as obvious as in others we have looked at, despite its final word: "everlastingly." But I want to argue it is precisely time's inscrutability and incompatibility with other important formal categories—especially nations and languages—that is at "root and bottom" of this poem's strange lament, which pits what is "ancient" against what is happening "this month"; knowledge versus rumor; history versus the news. We come to understand that what Hardy hates about this war is not just the loss of young life, but the loss of old *ways* of life, both in "local" communities who must surrender their "ancient" affinities for those of the more recent and abstract nation, while simultaneously losing touch with that nation, which seems to also be at war with its own origins and ideals. One recalls again Raymond Williams's efforts in *The Long Revolution* to recoup residual social forms against the liberal nation's cleaving off of the individual. But we've gotten ahead of ourselves, starting at the end, as it were.

²⁹ Thanks to Taylor we know only 38 of the 1000-odd poems were sonnets; It is noteworthy there are five or six (counting the hybrid "Appeal to America") in this series on the European war (1988, 52)

³⁰ Other candidates include: "local lineage" in the same stanza with "rail-tracks," "highways" and "lanes"; "similar" with two similar meanings; the basic philologist joke "root"; along with "familiars" *not* referring to cognates. But the winner may be "Pity" itself, which shifts in meaning from disappointment, to compassion, to an unfortunate pitilessness by the end of the poem.

First a word on philology: Hardy was deeply invested in this high Victorian pursuit, not just in plumbing the dialect of his home county, Dorset, alongside its philologically astute dialect bard William Barnes, but also in the broader history and theory of language across Britain and Europe. Dennis Taylor gives the definitive treatment of this subject and his insight is at the base of my discussion here. He memorably argues that:

Awkwardness in Hardy is the linguistic equivalent of interruption;³¹ it marks the moments where the language is under pressure. ... Hardy is fascinated by these fault lines in a temporarily standard English which, in fact, is at the mercy of history.” (1993: 28)

Despite the fact that “The Pity of It” is one of Hardy’s most awkward, faulty, and self-consciously historical and philological poems, it barely warrants a mention in Taylor’s book. Perhaps this is because its dialect words are not integrated with artful awkwardness into its standard idioms, but instead held apart as notably foreign; or perhaps the whole poem is just a little too on the nose for Taylor. Still, his figure of language “at the mercy of history” is particularly apt here, especially when we marry it with Fussell’s account of the war’s hostile takeover of English vocabulary and usage.

The whole poem is heavily studded with earthy, curt Anglo-Saxon words—*walk, loam, field, gird, spur, gang, heart, root, bottom, folk, tongue, brood, word*—or “words of Anglo-Saxon origin,” I should say, because there is actual Anglo-Saxon spoken here too. But appropriately for the theme, there are also plenty of Latinate forms layered in—*pity, ancient, lineage, similar, glory, flame, sinister, fame, familiar, name, perish*. The split here basically hews to the standard received notion in English that higher concepts come from Latin and lower things from German; the ratio in this poem, though definitely skewed towards the Anglo-Saxon substrate of Hardy’s Wessex, is not actually all that extreme. Hardy is making a point about “lineage,” but he is still basically speaking a standardized modern English, especially in the first stanza, where his elocution is high-standard, with poeticisms like “afar” and “many a” setting up the contrast with the baser stuff he finds in “loamy lanes.”

However, there are two moments in the poem that are particularly vexed in regard to English origins and worth looking at more closely. First is the oddly redundant phrase “in this month’s moon” which puts the Germanic “moon,” (from *Mond*) next to the Latinate “month” (from *mensis*) to no good end, other than perhaps to intimate how their relationship is mutually constituted—i.e. the *month* is an abstract measurement of time made with the real *moon*. The two words share an Indo-European root, and so there is a gesture perhaps towards the fundamental indivisibility of the language. But the fact remains that it is a vacuous phrase in the line where the poem starts to get especially awkward. Compared to the wistful but quite cogent first stanza, the second reads like a bad translation. One feels the pressure of language shearing apart at the hands of history, just as Taylor describes.

³¹ “Interruption” was also the central figure of the first of Taylor’s three indispensable Hardy monographs, *Hardy’s Poetry: 1860–1928*, whose “old church” scene I quoted above.

A second overdetermined juxtaposition of a different kind comes later at line 12. The line “Sinister, ugly, lurid, be their fame” seems like a missed opportunity. The high rhetorical tone of the line and its three Latinate words are oddly and unattractively interrupted by “ugly,” which has Nordic origins, but could pass for Anglo-Saxon. “Ignominious” would have been a great choice (and another nice pun) to keep the Latin streak alive across the whole line, slyly sending up those who would ignore their own (Germanic) ancestry. I think this jarring series shows that, despite the preponderance of aggressive wordplay in the poem, Hardy was actually actively trying to avoid overcommitting to the tempting but too neat analogy between warring languages and nations. Because ultimately, he wishes to preserve the ancient kinship subsumed in the very structure of English, not put it in any more peril. Rather than show how English might look if its German kinship were denied and purged, he shows how impossible such a procedure would be on such a deeply hybridized formation.

Let’s return to line 6, which begins unpromisingly with “Nigh” and gets progressively stranger from there, and is followed by two more lines also undeniably and intensely “under pressure,” each phrase undergoing torturous inversions in order to end with their verbs *à l’allemand*. All of this seems to put the English language (“England’s very loins”) under some vague threat. But, the threat, as it turns out, does not come from the Germany. Taylor very uncharacteristically misreads this poem in his first book when he claims it expresses “anger against the German perpetrators”—though his broader point stands up well that “The Poems of War and Patriotism” have a “confused object [of] indignation” (1981, 125). Indeed, it is that very severe confusion about who exactly these “gangs whose glory threats and slaughters are” that obviates any nationalist feelings at all in this poem. It is undeniably the Germans who “gird/ At England’s very loins.” (A very strange misuse of an already strange phrase it must be said—I had previously assumed one could only gird one’s own loins. In any case, if England is girding for battle, aren’t “they” doing her a favor here?) But it is altogether less clear who is spurring whom “thereunto” said girding. These “gangs ...whosoever they be/ at root and bottom of this,” could equally be German or English jingoists—government, military or civilian—Austro-Hungarian hotheads, Bosnian or Serbian rebels, presumptive Russians, or all of the above.³² The imprecision of the poem here speaks directly to the geopolitical chaos at the origins of the war. Lines had yet to be drawn clearly, and old forms (empires) and new (nation states) were colliding apace.

Then, at the volta of this already confused sonnet, we get a particularly confusing—and particularly Hardy-esque—change of voice: “Then seemed a Heart crying:” Whose heart? Crying from where? Hardy’s speaker goes from the already slightly disembodied experience of hearing unattributed “by-talk” in the “field and farmstead” and vague “threats” from abroad, to hearing this strident, floating Heart-voice loft multi-generational maledictions at unknown perpetrators on behalf of *both* Germans and Englishmen—“kin tongued even as are we.” Hardy avails himself of these strange spectral voices often enough, and this one seems related the both prophetic mode we have seen at work in the other Great War poems, and to similarly piercing voices in poems like “Cry of the

³² Modris Eksteins has a particularly good section about the crowds baying for blood in the streets of Berlin, spurring the Kaiser to declare war. (57–61)

Homeless” and “I Met a Man” from this same series. But even if it is in the venerable biblical tradition of the still, small voice from the flames, its final proclamation is what doubles this unwieldy example of the double poem, ironizing and undermining everything that came before it: “May their familiars grow to shun their name/And their brood perish everlastingly.” Strong words, completely at odds with the anti-war rhetoric that precede them. Indeed, the poem’s stated distaste for “gangs whose glory threats and slaughters are” gives way to this glorified threat of slaughter unto extinction. Hate begets hate, violence, violence, on down the line “everlastingly” is the conclusion here: but it is notable that the poem itself is not able to extract itself from the cycle it critiques. Indeed, this “Heart crying” begins as the voice of liberal empathy for the other, and ends up calling for nothing less than the extermination of its ideological enemies—much like the self-canceling voice of the English liberal establishment as it sounded the call to war.

We see in this poem a characteristic poetic structure of Hardy’s, where each stanza (assuming a sestet) presents a subsequent timeframe—past (“ancient word”), present (“this month”), to distant prophesied future (“perish everlastingly” [cf. “ere their story die”])—a structure cleverly reproduced in the tenses of the Germanic verb forms heard as “by-talk.” But as in the other poems we’ve looked at, the attempt to arrange these timeframes into a meaningful linear structure breaks down as incompatible forms collide. The divisive “threats” (including the Heart’s) that are the contemporary lingua franca of the political realm drowns out the familiar “by-talk” that preserved ancient lineage and kinship. The only future possible from this arrangement is one in which “familiars” shun each other’s (shared) names unto death. What this poem adds to Hardy’s struggle with temporal forms is an extra layer of self-consciousness about language as that very structure that tries (and fails) to give form to time as history. This complex view of time is informed by the paradoxical structure of philology itself, which looks to the past progression of a language to understand its evolving present—the whole field of inquiry conceived within a characteristically Victorian rational optimism about the future. “The Pity of It” documents the death of that optimism, the realization that intellectual and scientific progress has brought us up to the horizon of its own extinction.

The way this disruption in time severs human communities from their past is related to the poem’s ironic moral insight that prophets who cry for righteous revenge are no more righteous than those they excoriate, and never have been. The crying heart is the strange (foreign) voice from within that carries forth the contradictory structures of feeling, which suggest that to survive history, human communities must be structured as both wider (and older) and narrower (and more immediate) than the nation; that our enemies are our familiars and vice versa. This is a self-consciously blasphemous position—that there is no holy struggle, only a repetition of past sins—that progress leads back into darkness. This obtains in the somewhat ridiculous double oxymoron in the last line of this poem: a brood, by definition (if it is breeding) cannot be perishing. And nothing can perish everlastingly anyway—you perish once, and then you’re done. We are left to puzzle over a nonsensical form that has us (for ultimately we “flung the flame” on ourselves) reproducing only to go extinct—endlessly. This is the complex structure of feeling in so many of Hardy’s wartime poems put into the simple form of a silly threat. Elaborate paradoxical linguistic and temporal devices like this one try in vain to divert history’s fatal progress—our endless race toward our own ends—the long dash to death.

In all these poems Hardy opposes sweepingly global forces to the local, personal forms they threaten to submerge and erase. This endless struggle to record the smaller human costs of large-scale changes alerts us to a persistent underlying humanism fundamental to Hardy's worldview, which is under constant threat by his enthusiasm for those modern knowledge systems (geology, economics, the higher criticism, telegraphy, philology just to name the few we've touched on here) that invariably diminish individual lives and the intimate social worlds in which they transpire. The Great War, as we discussed in the introduction, severely undermined the specifically liberal humanist core of a Victorian worldview like Hardy's, and so in these poems we are witnessing the complex and conflicted structure of feeling that emerges when one tries to rescue and reconstruct humanism from the ashes of liberalism. In every case we've examined it is at the level of formal poetics where the deep difficulties and contradictions—but also the possibilities—of this project inhere. For Hardy in particular it is the infinite ductility of time in its various conceptual manifestations that poetry can act upon in its transmission of fleeting human experiences into more the more durable—but still ever-changing—social forms of language. As we move on to other poets we will see time and language persist as the substrate forms of the poetic struggle between the individual and society in wartime, while introducing a critical figure that is notably absent in Hardy: the soldier.³³

³³ To be fair, soldiers feature in "The Men Who March Away," "Before Marching and After," and "Often When Warring" and several of the Boer War poems. But that they most often appear as ghostly absences—either generalized, geographically distant, or already dead—rather proves my point. "Often When Warring" is a poignant exception that does not quite fit this chapter's purview.

Chapter 2

Soldiers Everywhere: Edward Thomas's Doubles

There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men
in England at the present moment who start life with perfect profiles,
and end by adopting some useful profession
—Oscar Wilde

I. Soldiers' Clothes

On 8 May 1915, two months before he finally enlisted in the Artist's Rifles at the age of 36 after over a year of deliberation, Edward Thomas contributed a short piece of reportage to the *New Statesman* titled "Soldiers Everywhere."³⁴ This was one of his last pieces of paid prose; the war had largely dried up the market, especially in his specialties: poetry reviews, nature writing, and literary biography. Thomas had already written a few similar commissioned pieces for the *English Review* in 1914, including "Tipperary" and "England," elliptical meditations in which the author subsumes himself into chaotic and ambivalent wartime talk in English public spaces. "Soldiers Everywhere" begins like this:

The railway carriage was almost packed by two sailors lying at length upon the seats, sober and tired out. I managed, however, to slip into one corner, by the door, and a young farmer into the other, and so we traveled some distance. At each station, whenever someone was about to enter the carriage, the farmer winked and jerked his head towards the sailors; if necessary, he added: 'Best leave them to have their sleep out.' Thus the sailors were not disturbed.

Although everything seems genial enough here, there is something oddly disquieting about these "two sailors lying at length" while quotidian civilian travelers make pains to let them rest in peace, a pantomime of death and avoidance which can't help but suggest underlying anxieties about the war then entering its second year. And though we have no particular reason to doubt the veracity of Thomas's encounter with the farmer, it is exceedingly convenient that these sleeping men are flanked by two noncombatants of the rural laboring and intelligentsia class respectively. The farmer feeds them, and his solidarity is symbolized here by his touching parental protectiveness of the sailors' sleep. The literary man merely observes, his furtive "slip" and subsequent silent testimony intimating a subtle sense of guilt; in any case, neither wishes to "disturb" them. This placid, almost tender scene soon gives way to a much more uncomfortable one:

At a big station the sailors left the train. Two sergeants of regulars came in and sat in opposite corners. A bulky cattle-dealer in a greasy box-cloth overcoat sat between one of them and me. An Army Medical private and a civilian sat on the other side, and in the fourth corner a great broad old man, who said nothing. The platforms

³⁴ Reprinted in *A Language not to Be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas*, Ed. Edna Longley, (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1981) 241–3.

were crowded with soldiers. 'Soldiers everywhere,' remarked the cattle-dealer, looking out sideways over his spectacles. 'It's all right. If the German Emperor could see what's getting ready for him, he wouldn't smile again. The man must be mad! I said so right at the beginning of the war. There, look! there's some young ones!'

Thomas carefully situates and enumerates the diverse passengers of the carriage in a grid of opposites: two soldiers, two nondescript "civilian[s]" (including the author), the medic and the cattle-dealer, and in his own separate corner, the "broad old man" who we later find out is a Boer War veteran. All these diversely representative men (no women to be seen, broadly true of Thomas's poetry, with a very few strained exceptions that prove the rule) are brought together in that quintessentially modern public space, the train car, a picture of tenuous British pluralism. But Thomas, as in all his wartime work, can't help but probe small cracks in the patriotic façade, which appear as soon as the soldiers speak:

Here one of the sergeants spoke. He was trying to persuade an injured thigh into a comfortable position. He was wretched. His grey eyes seemed incapable of seeing things except as they were. 'If you knew,' said he, 'what I know, you wouldn't like to see those young ones. They will get killed most likely. We don't want many of their sort in the trenches. They can't keep still and smoke. They are too excited and restless, and keep bobbing about, and they get shot. And don't you make a mistake: if some of these men were to go out now, the Germans would die of laughing.' 'That's a fact,' said the other sergeant. 'Soldier's clothes don't make a soldier.' 'Quite true,' said the cattle-dealer, disconcerted but glad to have a generalization to agree with. From that point on he agreed with everything the sergeant said, until he fell asleep...

This tense and bitter exchange depicts a worrisome rift between soldiers and civilians that would become a central theme of later war poetry.³⁵ The first sergeant cannot abide the inane jingoistic chatter of the cattle-dealer, whose profession encodes a sharp irony into this scene, especially in his appraising eye for the "young ones" herding the platforms. Where the cattle-dealer sees bright young Tommies heading off to give it to the Kaiser, the sergeant, "incapable of seeing things except as they [are]" sees young cattle being led to slaughter. Thomas anticipates Owen's famous "Anthem for Doomed Youth" ("What passing bells for these who die as cattle"), which he would never get the opportunity to read. Not only does the combatants' lived experience divide them from their civilian counterparts, but it has made them cynically dismissive of young recruits as well. The sergeant's wounded thigh is also a source of alienation in this scene, though not between men, but within the one, who must "try... to persuade" part of his own body to do something against its will. A similar formal relationship of reluctant part to fractious whole obtains in nearly every aspect of this piece. The second sergeant then goes on a bit of a rant:

The war, he said, was hell. Nobody who had been out there once wanted to go a second time. It was hell: there was no other word for it. After an interval the red

³⁵ Fussell is foundational on this, in his section "The Enemy to the Rear" (86-90).

cross on the arm of the RAMC man—a meek, quiet young man—roused him. ‘What did you join that for ... was it to shun the bullets?’ The young man had a bad voice, and, what with nervousness, made no audible reply. But the sergeant did not mind, he was set going now. He announced that it was every man’s duty—every man’s—to go and have a taste of it. The upper classes had done their duty. The poor classes had done their duty. But the middle classes had not. They ought to be made to go. Varicose veins! Sprains! He had got sprains in both legs.

The civilian who wanted to agree with him, a man with half a mouthful of teeth like agates, said:

‘Yes, and teeth too. You don’t shoot with your teeth. That’s what I say.’

‘But you eat with your teeth, don’t you?’ said the sergeant with his grin. He was not going to have any interruption.

This exchange is particularly interesting in its frank discussion of class. If we recall Empson, we can observe the pastoral mode at work here, including the dubious bid for class solidarity, and the concentration of a complex society into the (relatively) simple space of the train car. But the pastoral impulse is harshly rebuffed in both cases; class divisions bite back (with “teeth like agates”) and simplicity is fractured into antagonistic cross talk. Thomas is experimenting with a new form of counter-pastoral here, which he will work through his poetry, and which better captures an emergent wartime structure of feeling in which liberal middle-class attitudes of empathy and individuality are under assault by the war’s totalizing demands. An astute reader of Empson might counter that pastoral always already included the capacity for its own counter-reading, not least through its central structuring irony. While that is undoubtedly true, what may be novel here is the way the lower-class speaker is allowed to talk back and set the terms of relationship. The sergeant continues:

‘I have done my share,’ he continued. ‘I was wounded in the Boer War. I was wounded on the Marne in this war. I have done my share, and others ought to do theirs.’

The wounded sergeant looked at him, but only readjusted his thigh. The great broad old man looked at him, and moreover, did not take his eyes off him, which, I think, was the reason the sergeant began to feel the bit, and possibly why he got out at the next station. ‘I was a soldier before he was born,’ said the old man. ‘Some people don’t know when to keep their mouths shut ... a man with no more sense than he’s got will never make a regimental sergeant. He ought to be on the stage.’

A new divide opens here, not that between soldiers and civilians—though the sergeant’s words definitely widen that one—but rather the notorious generation gap. The “broad old man” it turns out, is of a previous vintage of professional British soldiery, and he looks down on the strident sergeant just as the sergeant had looked down on the young recruits. Unlike the ideal military hierarchy that maintains discipline and order, here we see a hierarchy that divides the nation. The old man aligns silence with dignity, and in his remark about “the stage” reduces the younger soldier to the comic relief in war’s tragic double plot, which dooms high and low alike. Just as crucial to the journalist’s depiction of all this social

tension is his own resounding silence. Unlike the chastened cattle-dealer, the demeaned medic, and the toothless civilian, the journalist is able to conceal himself in his detached point of view, escaping any recrimination other than his own. The scene concludes strangely:

By the time we were all standing up to get out at the terminus the cattle-dealer woke, and, seeing the soldiers on the platform, said as before: 'Soldiers everywhere. It's all right.'

The cattle-dealer gets the last word, and it is nothing more than a dull repetition of the gratuitous observation (and the article's title) which earned him the sergeant's rebuke. Thomas formally highlights this repetition, which in one way negates the volatile exchange that it brackets, at least in the oblivious mind of the cattle-dealer. It also draws attention to a preponderance of repetitions throughout the article, most prominently in the sergeant's own stuttering style—"the war was hell... it was hell" "every man's duty—every man's" ("duty" then repeats twice more) and "I have done my share." Though it seems that the cattle-dealer has ignored (or slept through) the entire encounter, his need to repeat himself, despite his dressing down, proves there is a strong but faltering force behind the desire to feel "It's all right." This force, and the strange comforts of verbal repetition in the face of distress, will be key to our reading of Thomas's poems, which began to suddenly pour from his pen right around the time he published this piece.

Another formal aspect of this piece to notice is the preponderance of pairs. Two sleeping sailors, two bitter sergeants, two quiet civilians, two Boer war veterans, all set in opposition. Granted, opposing pairs may well be a simple coincidence of the rail car seating experience, but Thomas highlights this (and repeats it) in a way which makes it feel significant. Again, we will follow this formal habit throughout the poems, but for now it may suffice to say that the only figure here who seems to have no pair or partner in the scene, only his own isolating perspective, is the writer himself, keen to record this social exchange, but somehow unable or unwilling to join in. Drawing on Levine's terms of colliding forms, note how the collisions among the hierarchies of class and occupation here are forcibly contained and aligned by the train car and its progress to a single "terminus" at which the fractiousness must end and where "as before" there are "soldiers everywhere."

In early 1915 Thomas was still a civilian, a respectable middle-class man of letters. But it had been a penurious and punishing pursuit for him for many years, and with the war it became absolutely untenable. Economic hardship was not the only reason he enlisted, but his letters show very plainly that the need to support his wife and three children—and his desire to be free of them—was pivotal; by July 1915 he had become a soldier. He eventually gave up a cushy job teaching map- and compass reading in Kent to join the Royal Artillery in France.

Here is the entry for March 28, 1917, in the small leather-bound war diary recovered from his body after he was killed by the concussion of a shell on April 9:

Frosty and clear and some blackbirds singing at Agny Chateau in the quiet of exhausted battery, everyone just having breakfast at 9.30: all very still and clear: but these mornings always very misleading and disappearing so that one might think

afterwards they were illusive. Planes humming. In high white cloud aeroplanes leave tracks curving like rough wheel tracks in snow — I had a dream this morning that I have forgot but Mother was in distress. All day loading shells from old position — sat doing nothing till I got damned philosophical and sad. Thorburn dreamt 2 nights ago that a maid was counting forks and spoons and he asked her ‘Must an officer be present.’ Letter to Helen. Tired still. (168)

Thomas’s daily entries from January 1—April 8 follow a reliable pattern: recording the weather and birdsong, his location, the quality of his sleep, his duties (or galling lack thereof, as in this entry and another from March 9: “I am fed up with sitting on my arse doing nothing that anybody couldn’t do better”), letters received and sent, conversations with fellow officers (or his batman, Taylor, whose inadvertent witticisms get recorded with slightly more affection than condescension), and evening activities, including what songs were on the gramophone or what he was reading (usually Shakespeare’s sonnets). The writing is clipped and note-like, as if preparatory to a fuller literary account, which is also perhaps why Thomas insisted his wife keep all his letters home.³⁶ Obviously that account was precluded and we are left with only these fugitive forms.

I reproduce this entry because it is particularly lyrical, but also entirely typical, containing a vital picture of several crucial formal elements that structure Thomas’s poetry: fine observation of the natural world set forebodingly against human and industrial incursions; odd pairings and unlikely echoes (blackbirds singing/planes humming); a “misleading” calm that portends violence; dream scenes that beg analysis alongside “illusive” realities that refuse it; the stark contrast between soldierly work (all day loading shells) and spiritually harrowing inactivity; finally, a pervasive, weary sadness. All of this is filtered through Thomas’s new but oddly familiar persona: the capable military officer.

Earlier in 1916, while still in officer training at Hare Hall in Essex, he had written Robert Frost: “Yes I wear 2 stripes or chevrons on my upper arm now—not on the skin but on the sleeve,” and later in the same letter, “Goodbye and try to imagine me as more of a soldier than this letter sounds.” These wry comments show that Thomas conceived of soldiers as men merely dressed and imagined differently, rather than as fundamentally different kinds of men. The “skin/sleeve” distinction is both an offhand (upper arm) joke and a serious effort to cling to individual identity while being subsumed into the martial apparatus. It also recalls the adage from “Soldiers Everywhere” that “Soldier’s clothes don’t make a soldier”—Thomas’s anxiety about wearing the uniform is palpable. Likewise his suggestion that one can receive an unsoldierly letter from a soldier, and yet also be able to “imagine,” and even in a sense to hear the “sounds” of a soldier in the voice of a writer is crucial to Thomas’s formal, aestheticized understanding of what a soldier is. In his letters home from camp, and later from France, he is constantly opposing these new and old identities—the doomed and depressed hack writer of his past, and the easygoing, competent soldier of the present—as if they were two different men. Hovering behind this personal transformation is another taking place simultaneously, one to which Frost in particular would have been alert: Thomas, quite suddenly in late 1914, began writing the

³⁶ This is suggested by R. George Thomas, who edited both the collected poems that include the war diary, and the selected letters.

poetry that would earn him posthumous fame, ransacking and renouncing his voluminous prose output (nature writing, literary criticism, histories, biographies, travel guides and an unfathomable amount of reviews), which would almost certainly have been forgotten by posterity. All at once, at a relatively late age (Thomas was 36 in 1914; old for a soldier, if not necessarily for a poet), Thomas found himself radically renegotiating his relationship to the written word, the British state, and his own identity, all at once. This chapter will continue to track the parallel trajectory of these negotiations, focusing on how the formal techniques of the poetry—especially persistent patterns of repetition and doubling of sounds, structure and imagery—express his ambivalent understanding of these momentous personal and political changes.

Thomas often seems to be in two places at once in his poems: meditatively moving about the countryside of southern England and Wales, while also distracted and preoccupied by the news from London and Europe, especially the fatalistic thought that “all roads lead to France.” We see this reversed in the war diary entry, which can’t help but persist in old country habits, watching the sky and identifying birds, looking carefully for beauty, even where it has been obliterated, listening for the songs drowned out by planes and shells. Most often these tense juxtapositions, between nature and culture, home and abroad, life and death, obtain not by contrasting two separate thoughts or images, but within a single poetic utterance, like the diary’s haiku-like “In high white cloud aeroplanes leave tracks curving like rough wheel tracks in snow.” There is also, in these double poems (as in the journal entry, with its “illusive” imagery, dream notes, and exhausted ending) a recoil from waking life, at times more or less explicit, but always pulling at the edges of the lines, an existential fatigue that conflates death and sleep. “Tired still” might mean persistently tired or dead tired.

With these tendencies in mind, let’s approach the short poem “A Private,” started in 1915, six months before Thomas enlisted, and as far as we can tell his first poem to explicitly mention the war:

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors
 Many a frosty night, and merrily
 Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:
 ‘At Mrs’ Greenland’s’ Hawthorn Bush,’ said he,
 ‘I slept.’ None knew which bush. Above the town,
 Beyond ‘The Drover’, a hundred spot the down
 In Wiltshire. And now at last he sleeps
 More sound in France — that, too, he secret keeps.³⁷

The poem opens with a subtle act of rhetorical doubling. We are presented one man with two identities: “A Private” instantly becomes “this ploughman” in the first line. This quick shift from indefinite article to the deictic pronoun and from the anonymity of lowest rank to the lowly but time-honored occupation of ploughman sets up two competing time frames and their concurrent worldviews, the before-and-after not of death but of the man’s enlistment (1915 being too early for conscription). This doubled timeframe is repeated and

³⁷ Thomas 50. The other poems in this chapter can be found in this volume at 64, 80, 120, 79, 99, 105.

reinforced in the rest of the line: “dead in battle” in the present, “slept out of doors” in the past. The private is dead, the ploughman has slept. They are the same person, yes, but they are also two different characters in the poem, one an absent stranger, the other, his predecessor, a vivid and familiar (if unforthcoming) presence. These two timeframes coincide with two views of the private/ploughman, one distant, general, anonymous, one local, specific and personal.

The poem’s deceptively simple form echoes this doubled structure. It comprises two quatrains with two rhymes each—*abab cdd*—yet the lines themselves and the poem’s two halves bleed into each other, with nearly every line enjambed into the next—even the commas ending lines 4 and 5 propel the reader into the next line more than they mark a pause, as the first divides the ploughman’s statement awkwardly in half, and the second generates readerly anticipation for what is “Above the town.” The result of this syncopation of line and sentence endings is a tension between our desire for doubling—in paired rhyme sounds that end the lines—and its sly retraction into the grammar of the sentences. Carrying the ploughman’s answer over from the fourth line to the fifth accomplishes something similar, as the rhyme scheme suggests two balanced halves while the ploughman’s utterance, nested in the speaker’s narration, runs them together into a single unit. The poem doubles itself in other ways as well, as “This” and “in battle” of line 1 are paralleled by “that, too” and “in France” in the final line. The poem begins with a present tense absence: “This ploughman dead in battle,” then passes through the absent past “in Wiltshire,” before returning to a true present tense “where he sleeps ... he secret keeps.” There is a subtle political thrust to this whole structure, as it is not his recent death in battle or his status as a soldier that makes this ploughman’s life worth recording in verse, but rather his prior idiosyncrasies as a Wiltshire pub-goer. His “private” identity has been erased by the national political formation, while being preserved as a local, social form.

Which is not to say this ploughman was necessarily loved or respected in his lifetime: his relationship to his local community seems to have been slightly apart, as evinced by his characterization of his interlocutors as “staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores” and the mischievous, evasive nature of his answer. Yes, there is a kind of mutual affection encoded in the concern of his fellows, and the “merry” tone of his banter, but there is also contempt: it’s none of their business where he slept—they’re all bores anyway. If there is an assumed sense of community among those at the pub, held against the bureaucratic anonymity of military life (and death) in the poem’s title and final line, then there is also a clear class divide within that community, between “good bedmen” and men who sleep under bushes. Rural life in general and our ploughman in particular are affectionately particularized, but not at all idealized. Indeed, those “frosty” nights “out of doors” are only enviable in comparison with a presumably violent death.³⁸

Raymond Williams offers an account of the ploughman’s social type in his chapter on “Individuals and Societies” in *The Long Revolution*. He contrasts the status of “members, subjects, and servants” all of whom orient themselves towards the power structures of their society, to “rebels, exiles and vagrants,” three “modes of nonconformity” which “modern individualism” offers to those who wish to refuse coercive social organization. Our

³⁸ It should be noted, however, that as in this poem’s obvious predecessors “Drummer Hodge” and Brooke’s “A Soldier,” violence is kept conspicuously absent from the poem.

“ploughman” is a vagrant, not because he sleeps outside—Williams’s categories are not about socioeconomic status, but about structural relationships between individuals and society. The vagrant, then, is someone who “stays in his own society, though he finds its purposes meaningless and its values irrelevant ... his maximum demand is that he should be left alone.” The vagrant does not hold firm to moral principles as the rebel and the exile do— not even the principle of defiant self-assertion, as we can see in the ploughman’s utter disinterest in sharing his whereabouts. “The events that others interpret as ‘society’ are to him like such natural events as storm or sun” recalling his nights “out of doors” (115–6). And far from gaining the coveted status of “membership” by joining the army, our ploughman ends up becoming another victim of history in its guise as a catastrophic natural event.

By sleeping outside and refusing to answer questions, our ploughman shows a bit of good-natured disdain for the more comfortable members of his native community, a disdain he surely carried into his second life as a soldier. But what exactly does he admit with his cheeky response? “At Mrs Greenland’s Hawthorn Bush ... I slept.” Who is Mrs Greenland? Edna Longley, annotates her as “a personification that prefigures ‘Gaia,’” and ventures on, “Thomas may also eulogize the ploughman’s easy connection with the earth, in all its weathers, which war has severed and travestied” (175, sic). This reading reaches a bit outside the poem for its travesty—Thomas has many poems plainly about ecological destruction, this is not one of them—but it also contains, perhaps accidentally, a nice figure for what is at stake: An “easy connection with the earth”—in the form of a casual burial—is certainly being ironically eulogized in “A Private.” The earthy ploughman’s death is rendered lightly by this poem. If in his life he communed more readily with “Mrs Greenland” than his fellow villagers, in death he is similarly easy going. The whole poem in this way can be read as a fiercely ironic variation on the Anglican “dust to dust” with none of the transcendent consecration of Brooke’s “Soldier” or even the secular/organic transubstantiation of Hardy’s “Drummer Hodge.” The ploughman, after a life led so close to the earth that even his familiars found him a little low, readily returns to the soil. The poem lowers him, but it also commemorates him. Its speaker is somehow both closer to the ploughman than his neighbors (thanks to the deictic “This”), but also oddly distant, with a perspective that manages to roam simultaneously “in France” with the dead man and “above the town... in Wiltshire.” This is a fine example of Thomas’s new pastoral, which not only complicates class solidarity, it refuses a single identifiable perspective on its rural subjects, whose ostensible simplicity can never be reliably located.

I can find no corroborations for Longley’s identification of “Mrs Greenland,” but if the figure is indeed a kind of fairy queen, or even just a fictional landowner whose property lines the ploughman had no compunction in crossing, then this irreverence might be a key to his identity and to his death. He enjoyed having secrets, enjoyed keeping one small thing “private” even in the “public” space of “The Drover.” The central sentence “None knew which bush” shows that he was able to maintain this modest mysteriousness, while remaining all too familiar. This is not a contradiction, but a simple statement of how little one can truly know one’s neighbors: what happens “Beyond ‘The Drover’” stays beyond The Drover. The war brings modern urban alienation to the emptying rural countryside, and this is one of the most frequent and profound structures of feeling made available by Thomas’s poetry.

As to the “Hawthorn Bush,” it is also at once familiar and specific, opaque and anonymous. The hawthorn is a traditional hedge, common throughout Northern Europe. So in one sense it is as unremarkable as a ploughman. And yet the ploughman’s specificity regarding plant species does count for something. Thomas is always fastidious in his identification of flora and fauna, that specificity itself a mode of respect for the natural world. And if there is a bit of middle-class hobbyism and rural nostalgia in this mode, as with the benighted Georgians, there is also an honest attempt to connect with the vanishing landscapes and populations the poet loved. In the ploughman’s voice this “Hawthorn Bush” shows a local knowledge and affinity that has been erased by his death. This homeliness is also found in the phrase “Above the town,/ Beyond “The Drover”, a hundred spot the down/ in Wiltshire.” Identifying the pub, “the down,” and the county all advance this local attentiveness. But “a hundred spot the down” also simultaneously bears the poem’s elegiac sense of erasure. If we remember back to its opening gambit of two timeframes and two modes held immediately proximate, then the phrases “In Wiltshire” and “in France” mean we ought to be alert for a counterpart or double for the hundred bushes. If our ploughman slept under one, and now he sleeps with the dead, then these “hundred spot[s]” become markers not just of Wiltshire’s fertility, but also of France’s increasing barrenness. That is, if the poem exists in an abstract space between France and Wiltshire, toggling back and forth so that everything is doubled, then the bushes represent just as many secret, private graves. “A hundred spot the down” then brings to mind not just the picturesquely unpopulated landscape, but also the violently depopulated one, littered with bodies instead of bushes. This shadow No Man’s Land, either overlain on or hidden beneath a placid-seeming rural English landscape is a crucial feature of Thomas’s poems that we will continue to track.

I alluded to this poem’s elegiac mode, which is established by the deictic “This,” as if the speaker is standing over the body looking at it, even though it is irrevocably lost somewhere in France, and the private’s primary activity is disappearance. In a sense the poem exists to do the work of mourning and remembrance that the private/ploughman has been denied dying in some foreign field. So who, exactly, does mourning? The speaker has more intimacy with the dead man than those he left behind in Wiltshire, but still shares no final access to his “secret”—neither his final resting place nor his elusive identity, also lost “in battle.” The contrast between the drolly inconsequential secrets of the man’s life (i.e. where he slept after his benders) and the dark consequence of his death (where, and why, he died) is set up so that the wrong one receives emphasis. He “merrily” keeps secrets as a negative expression of individuality, but the final “secret” is no longer his prerogative, but rather a sign of the willful ignorance and indifference of the forces that turn ploughmen into privates and then carelessly inter them overseas. This sense of dehumanization haunts the poem. But before we fall into the obvious trap of simple affection for the ploughman and/or pity for the soldier—that “old pastoral” mode—we must also take seriously the suggestion that “at last he sleeps/ More sound.” Though there is something of the opiate rhetoric of elegy in this phrase, the conventional desire to imagine him enjoying in death the rest he never knew in life, there is also a problematic sense of relief that he died a soldier. If it is true that “now at last he sleeps more sound” it may not be just because he is dead, but also because he found the purpose (or perhaps just the paycheck) in France that he no longer had in Wiltshire. This possibility offers a second pairing—of the lost identity

of the anonymous soldier, with the equally elusive identity of his close-but-distant double, the poet—one that will return as the central structuring relationship in a remarkable number of Thomas's poems.

II. Soldiers' Dreams

The structuring parallelism between sleep and its eternal double, death, will return in other poems as a way of bridging the literal and metaphorical gaps between peacetime and wartime, England and "France," and civilian and soldierly identities. Recall for a moment the two dreams noted in the war diary: "I had a dream this morning that I have forgot but Mother was in distress. ... Thorburn dreamt 2 nights ago that a maid was counting forks and spoons and he asked 'Must an officer be present.'" In both of these the soldier anxiously interacts with a figure from his civilian past, the mother/maid, whom he cannot help. The elusiveness of Thomas's forgotten dream and the banality of his fellow officer's both highlight a sense of futility that both is and isn't the domain of the soldier—that is, the officer is supposed to be active and helpful, but in both dreams, as often in his administrative role in the war effort, he is often passive, useless, a counter of forks and spoons, unable to help those "in distress."

Another Thomas poem built around a similar complex of doubled forms—social vagrancy, indoors/outdoors, soldier/civilian doubles, elusive sleep, and frustrated empathy—is the often anthologized "The Owl." This poem was written five months before Thomas's enlistment, and one can trace an ethical momentum towards that decision:

Downhill I came, hungry, and yet not starved;
Cold, yet had heat within me that was proof
Against the North wind; tired, yet so that rest
Had seemed the sweetest thing under a roof.

Then at the inn I had food, fire, and rest,
Knowing how hungry, cold and tired was I.
All of the night was quite barred out except
An owl's cry, a most melancholy cry

Shaken out long and clear upon the hill,
No merry note, nor cause of merriment,
But one telling me plain what I escaped
And others could not, that night, as in I went.

And salted was my food, and my repose,
Salted and sobered, too, by the bird's voice
Speaking for all who lay under the stars,
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.

This begins with a brisk country walk (or perhaps a bicycle tour, which both Hardy and Thomas often enjoyed) and its rough but steady iambic pentameter and regular ballad rhyme scheme, *abcb*, along with its setting at the country inn, locate it firmly in the modern English pastoral tradition, à la Lyrical Ballads. It maintains its entropic momentum not just through meter, but through a series of phrases—“Downhill I came,” “then at the inn,” “as in I went”—which keep the poem moving forward in each stanza, even as its speaker’s thoughts take a few jogs back (as with the past perfect in line 4, discussed below). This rural idyll turns dark quickly, however, as the comfort of its steady rhythm and peaceful setting are actively undermined by a strategy of comparison intimately related to the characteristic doubling we’ve been tracking so far.

An erosive force of repetition and morbidity that eats away at the speaker’s well-being begins in the first line, where “yet not starved” wants to invert to “not yet starved”—why even include the grim superlative to “hungry” here? The phrase only serves to introduce a morbid thought into an otherwise pleasant scene, and the “yet” turns an unnecessary comparison (hungry≠starved) into a terminal progression (hungry=>starved). This inaugurates a series of worrying comparisons. For every pleasure, comfort and advantage the speaker experiences, he is haunted by its inversion, of someone experiencing equal and opposite pain and privation. The three “yet[s]” set this up: the speaker is “hungry,” “cold” and “tired” yet each of these will be assuaged once he is “under a roof,” as he knows he will be soon. He repeatedly undercuts his own basic human needs with the nagging “yet” that betrays his privilege. “Proof” here seems to mean an internal resistance to the elements that echoes the impermeability of its rhyme word “roof”—and though Thomas himself was not a drinker, the “heat within” his speaker here might also be a warming nip of something high in “proof.” The speaker is well provisioned, yet a nagging countercurrent enters into the poem with the past perfect tense—during his walk the prospective of rest under the roof of an inn “had seemed the sweetest thing” but now the poem’s admission of contrary states begins to vitiate that sweetness, and this process continues throughout the poem.

This first stanza’s list of privations and privileges, already repetitive, are repeated again in the first two lines of the second stanza: “Then at the inn I had food, fire, and rest, / Knowing how hungry, cold, and tired was I.” He said it would happen, then he says it happened—the speaker advances but his language reverts, as if caught in a loop. The word “knowing” is odd here. Just as in the first stanza the “yet”s each functioned as pivots by which the speaker minimized his own needs, here “knowing” functions as a hinge which opposes all of those needs with their fulfillments, and divides the two “I”s of this strangely constructed sentence. The sentence, in effect, has two verb phrases: “had food, fire, and rest” and “was [] hungry, cold, and tired” and these are yoked to each other and to their doubled subject “I” by the gerund—“knowing” these states leads to their reversal, but also to their repetition (from the corresponding lists in the first stanza). In knowing one’s own needs, and in satisfying those needs, the “I” of this poem becomes estranged from itself. The “I” that needs transforms into the “I” that feeds, and the previously needy “I” is looked back upon. In the process, the second pronoun is pushed out to the end of the line and sentence in a particularly awkward inversion. The opening up of a distance between these two identities, first formally, then conceptually, becomes the central operation of the poem.

In the meantime, further sounding this distance, another voice enters the poem: “An owl’s cry, a most melancholy cry.” This allusive quotation puts the poem explicitly in dialogue with the Lyrical Ballads, especially the “most melancholy bird” of “The Nightingale” (that phrase itself a quotation from Milton’s *Il Penseroso*), and also the answering owls in “There Was a Boy.” Thomas at first seems to reject Coleridge’s claim from “The Nightingale” that “In nature there is nothing melancholy,” but it is worth looking closer at the surrounding lines from the earlier poem:

‘Most musical, most melancholy’ bird!
 A melancholy bird? Oh idle thought!
 In Nature there is nothing melancholy.
 But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced
 With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
 Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
 (And so, poor wretch! fill’d all things with himself,
 And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
 Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
 First named these notes a melancholy strain:
 And many a poet echoes the conceit;
 Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
 When he had better far have stretched his limb

Thomas is in fact outing himself as a version of this “night-wandering man”—the “poor wretch” of a poet who believes “all gentle sounds tell back the tale of his own sorrow.” And so he is not contesting Coleridge’s claim about no melancholy nature, but rather the lesser claim that “stretch[ing] his limb” alleviates melancholy. Also, despite the quotation and similar theme, we ought to remember that Thomas has swapped the nightingale’s song for an “owl’s cry.” The nightingale’s “gentle sounds” may not be melancholy, but this darker nocturne from Athena’s bird of knowing offers a much less “musical” utterance.

The owl’s voice brings the sense that “the night”’s vague threat has been safely shut out and “escaped.” Yet its doubled “cry”—so-called twice in one line—is also the echo of the doubled “I” with which it rhymes, so it is quite plainly a thing the poet has “fill’d ... with himself.” Unable to enjoy the satiation of his own needs and the safety of this roof for reasons that emerge in the following stanzas, he is also unable to hear beauty in the bird’s song. Instead, it sounds plaintive, and even, as the speaker’s psyche turns in on itself ever further, accusatory. The owl’s song evolves, in three stanzas, from an inarticulate “cry” to “plain ... telling” to, finally, a declamatory voice—“speaking for all.” This rhetorical evolution tracks the speaker’s increasing understanding of the social source of his own private unease.

The third stanza is built on yet more repetition, which returns the speaker’s mind to its cold-hungry-tired state, even as his body rests safely indoors. Even though the speaker has arrived safely at the inn, the owl’s cry pulls him back out to the cold dark hill—“Shaken out long and clear upon the hill” sounds more like an alarm than the mellow hoot of an owl. “No merry note nor cause of merriment,” is another internal repetition like downhill/hill, and, cry/cry, (cf. the repetitive sergeant from “Soldiers Everywhere”) which reveals the

speaker's increasingly recursive thoughts. "That night, as in I went" also repeats and reverts to an earlier moment in the poem—he's already gone in to the inn, "had food, fire and rest," barring out the night, yet he returns to that moment of entry when he left imagined "others" behind.

In the final stanza, the grammatical inversions ("salted was...") and the suddenly ceremonious tone ("speaking for all... unable to rejoice") complete the poem's dour transition from a folksy lyrical ballad about grabbing a bite at the inn into a phantasmal internalization of war. The salt here is both savory and spoiling; it intensifies the taste of his food to the point of ruining it. That effect repeats in his "repose" which is "sobered, too, by the bird's voice." He can't relax and enjoy himself despite having all his animal needs met, because he hears the "voice" of war's political and economic victims, "soldiers and poor." The advocating owl's "speaking" is the culmination of the verbs "knowing" and "telling" of the previous two stanzas, and shows the coming-to-consciousness of the poem's own speaker, who gradually sheds his solipsistic "knowing" for a full-fledged penetration by "the bird's voice/ speaking for all." This generalizing movement, it should be clear, is not based on the actual sound the owl makes, but the sense of guilt that has overtaken the speaker's mind and spoiled what should have been a good night's rest.

Sleeping safely in wartime is a kind of nightmare for the civilian speaker, because he is haunted by the thought of soldiers who guarantee his comfort, along with the poor who "lay under the stars," like the ploughman from "A Private." Indeed, in this poem the speaker tips his hand, showing that he is in fact one of those "good bedmen ... under a roof." But instead of looking askance at those who "sleep out of doors," like the "bores" at "The Drover," this speaker is "sobered" by their plight, and they become for him a preoccupying absence. Though he does not encounter them in person, he conjures their image, which haunts him awake. He doesn't just imagine them, he identifies completely with them—they completely overtake his thoughts, by way of the owl's representative voice, such that he is just as "unable to rejoice" as they are.

Stan Smith convincingly argues that the source of Thomas's emotional struggles, which both motivate and cast a pallor over his art, was his "symptomatic destiny" as the consummate representative of a historical and cultural crisis of "middle class individualism under strain, faced with the prospect of its own redundancy in ... a new era, struggling... to understand the flux in which it is to go down." (19) This can serve as a preliminary foundation as we attempt to limn Thomas's poems' structure of feeling. Certainly this particular poem takes the perspective of a middle-class individual under great psychic strain. He spoils his own pastoral sojourn by obsessing over the paradox between his identification with, and separation from, the working and soldiering classes. Further, by lumping these two groups together, Thomas conceptually overlays the English countryside with the trenches of the continent, a formal relationship he repeats throughout the poems. He constructs an imaginary encounter with his countrymen, who are too brave, poor, or far from home to enjoy their own pastoral space. If they can't have shelter and safety, he won't either. This poem details an experience of what we might call pathological empathy, when one's own feeling apparatus is utterly overwhelmed and destabilized by the suffering of others.

It is constructive to compare the formal structures and dynamics of this poem to an almost exactly contemporaneous document of the struggle to explain with metaphors what

the human mind does with suffering. In the 1915 article “The Unconscious” Sigmund Freud added an “economic point of view,” to his “topographical and dynamic” conceptions of the mind’s structures, which “endeavours to follow out the vicissitudes of amounts of excitation” or quantify and track the psychic energies which drive the conscious and unconscious mind (581). Thomas’s poem is utterly pervaded by psychic energy and entropy transformed into imagery of motion and stasis. From the kinetic energy of “downhill” and “shaken,” to the many caloric deficits and yields (food and hunger feature in three of four stanzas), the fire, heat and cold, activity and fatigue, rest and repose—this poem is a figurative combustion engine. Add to this the poem’s focus on in-and-out movement, transmission and exchange—bodies moving in and out of shelter, and “the night” “barred out” even as the owls cry forces its way in. The poem is clearly working out a theory of energy and exchange that is simultaneously psychic, social and material. This is not to say Thomas’s energetic concept is identical to the Freudian economic factor, which is itself characteristically dynamic, variable, and vague, but rather a parallel attempt to conceive of emotion and identity in energetic terms is at work in both writers, and so explanatory terminology and structures provided explicitly as such in Freud can render some of Thomas’s more implicit structures easier to read.³⁹

Despite attaining “food, fire, and rest” the speaker still finds a void in himself (“no merry note, nor cause of merriment”) which he proceeds to fill with the suffering of those “unable to rejoice.” Their troubles enter him through the owl’s cry, which changes over the course of three stanzas from a “melancholy” pathetic fallacy, to a “plain” note, before finally becoming a “sober” political appeal “for all who lay under the stars.” Remembering Coleridge’s charge that the melancholy poet “fill[s] all things with himself,” and adding a dose of Freud’s economic factor, we can imagine a scenario in which the displacement of his narcissistic energies—his personal, unproductive melancholy—onto the “owl’s cry” in the second stanza leaves a vacuum ready to be filled with the needs and desires of others in the final stanza. This structure coheres with the poem’s progression from hunger to fullness and cold to warmth, and the speaker’s repetitive “I/cry” giving way to the “voice” of “all.” It also finds support in a remark from another of Freud’s famous wartime essays “Mourning and Melancholia,” which describes the affective disorder Thomas readily admitted himself having:

The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies ... from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished. It can easily prove resistant to the ego’s wish to sleep. (589)

In the poem the process of ego impoverishment is expressed not just in a feeling of physical emptiness, but through a psychic identification with “soldiers and poor.” Likewise the “drawing to itself cathectic energies” is a fine description of the way the owl’s cry pierces the speaker’s shelter and “repose” and proceeds to impose a complex of guilt and commiseration that must arise from the speaker’s unconscious needs (which is to say,

³⁹ Edna Longley makes a limited but convincing argument for Thomas as a fundamentally psychoanalytic poet, noting that it was in therapy with Godwin Baynes (a collaborator and English translator of Jung) where he learned to abstract himself from his “isolated selfconsidering brain” and treat his melancholy as “psychodrama” to be detachedly sublimated into writing (13–14, 21).

again, we are not meant to believe the owl actually speaks in language, but that it evokes these thoughts). As in the Freud, sleep becomes impossible.

If we conceive of the speaker's sated and exhausted desires as quantities of energy, then we might see how the melancholic inarticulate "cry" imposed on the owl by the isolated, guilt-ridden self is transformed into capacious the socio-political "voice" of an entire class of less fortunate people. It's the same sound heard by the same silent speaker, but as the speaker's ego is emptied and begins to concentrate or "cathect" energy from outside sources, the sound's polarity is reversed. The empty cry becomes a fulfilling speech when the listener is no longer focused on his attenuating ego, and replaces its hollowness with "all ... soldiers and poor." Despite all his comforts and advantages in the poem (or perhaps because of them), Thomas's speaker is haunted by doubles with whom he identifies and whose struggle he substitutes for his own. In Thomas's case the obverse process of radical identification with another—maybe a cause, maybe an effect of this process—is self-alienation (recall the "tired was I" line). He begins to suspect his double is the truer, better self.

III. Soldiers' Work

Expanding to the broader pattern of repetition and doubles in Thomas, we begin to see how it is not just sounds, words and figures within single poems that are "redoubled and redoubled" (to quote Wordsworth's owls) in the poems, but themes and figures that repeat across separate poems. The ploughman who "slept out of doors" in "A Private" returns in "The Owl" in the more abstract but equally affecting form of "all who lay under the stars,/ Soldiers and poor." Both poems identify and collapse these two categories, "Soldiers and poor," into one, then oppose that category to the speaker's privilege and safety. To get a better sense for how Thomas's doubling works across poems in addition to within them, we might take up two pairs of poems that are explicitly linked—double poems—one pair through their shared title "Digging"; the other paired by means of a specific poetic form and a corresponding conceptual structure. Here's the latter pair:

In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
 This Eastertide call into mind the men,
 Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should
 Have gathered them and will do never again.

The Cherry Trees

The cherry trees bend over and are shedding
 On the old road where all that passed are dead,
 Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding
 This early May morn when there is none to wed.

Written a year and a month apart, the first in April 1915 and the second in May 1916, these poems are obviously variations on a shared theme and form, echoing each other across the year in which Thomas enlisted and began his training, just as they are themselves about a kind of echo, which diminishes a beautiful instance—the “flowers” and “petals”—into the mournful absences in the “never” and “none” of their last lines. In both, flowers that might conventionally symbolize promise and renewal are ironically repurposed to mark death and loss, much like the hawthorns in “A Private.” Both poems consist of a single sentence stretched across four lines rhymed abab. They are also among of the very few poems in Thomas’s entire oeuvre which do not contain the pronoun “I”; they both imply a single speaker in their observational viewpoints, but the losses they limn and the mourning they enact are broadly social through generalizing forms like “the men” “all/none.”

“In Memoriam” evokes another double, invoking Tennyson’s famous elegy while reversing its method. Instead of innumerable quatrains commemorating a single death, Thomas deploys a single quatrain to commemorate countless deaths, and instead of the famous enclosed *abba* stanza that opens a conceptual space between rhymes, this more pedestrian abab form snaps firmly shut, resolving into defeated silence. Tennyson slowly accumulates verses of incremental theological questioning and hard-won consolation; Thomas moves quickly from plant life to human death. This is yet another iteration of Thomas’s modernization of the pastoral mode, fit for the industrialized scale of death brought by total war—complex into simple—millions of dead: four lines.

The poem also manages a subtle dig at religious consolation: unlike the original Easter heroics, these men don’t rise and “will do never again.” Thomas’s, “Eastertide”—the term stretches the day into a season and gives it gravitational pull—offers not regeneration, but false promises and total loss. The two situating phrases, “nightfall in the wood” and “Now far from home” refer not just to the respective locations of the speaker and the absent men brought “into mind,” but also serve as double euphemisms for death in a distinctly pagan register. These men have not “gone home” to their savior, they’ve crossed over a dark Hadean channel.

The “flowers” also double as the markers of fallen men, like the hundred hawthorns in “A Private,” they “call into mind” dead soldiers, who are also “left thick at nightfall in the wood”—not this English wood, but its darker counterpart overseas. And as we’ve also seen before, Thomas collapses several different time frames into the tight space of a line or two: The historical “Now” of “(Easter 1915)” with its enclosing parentheses, enfolds both the foreclosed future of “will do” and the severed past of “never again.” The rhymes “wood/should” (with the pun on “would”) and “men/[never] again” reinforce the double figure of a time of loss (Eastertide/wartime) as a loss of time (should have/never again); the war’s own repetitious timeline robs the men and their sweethearts of both the future and the past where they should have been together, repopulating the earth. The “flowers left thick” are thoroughly ironized to represent waste instead fertility. In sum the poem is a devastating epitaph for youth, which categorically excludes any sense of heroism or sacrifice in its gnomic reference to the war. The war here manifests only as cultural waste, which spoils the experience of natural beauty by coming “into mind” where it is not wanted.

A year later, Thomas revisits this form with a few interesting differences. The metaphor of loss shifts from courtship (“sweethearts”) to marriage, from April to May, and instead of in the woods, the later poem takes place “on the old road.” The punning redundancy of “all that passed are dead” is more direct, resigned, and cynical in tone, and comes earlier in the quatrain than the awkward, late inversion of the first poem’s “will do never again,” suggesting that death is a more familiar, less uncomfortable subject for the poet one year later. As for the dead themselves, the more specific “men” and “their sweethearts” of the first poem have evacuated to the abstract pronouns “all” and “none” in the second. A generalized structure of absence and loss has become more familiar to the poet than the intimate social forms it has superseded.

The possessive pronoun “Their” in line three is forced to do double duty by the line break. The “petals” belong obviously to the “ben[t] over” trees but also to “all that passed,” their multitudinous deaths represented by the “shedding” and “strewing” actions of nature. The emotion escalates in this second poem from tender regret to ironic outrage, as instead of the somber “nightfall” and Easter’s suggestion of life in death (albeit ironically reversed), the obsequies of “The Cherry Trees” take place on an “early May morn” perfectly suited for a wedding. This amplification is also visible in the ironic rhymes, where “shedding/wedding” and “dead/wed” aggressively undermine the force of cultural regeneration with a stronger opposing entropy. The central rhyme sound “-ed-” is repeated in all four lines, the syllable “wed” twice. This poem not only repeats the conceit of its predecessor, it doubles down.

What else has changed from the first poem to the second, from 1915 to 1916? For one, the more social forms of “home” and one-on-one courtship gathering flowers in the woods have been replaced with the more broadly cultural forms of the “road” and the “wedding.” Weddings accrue formal, legal, and religious significances on top of the basic reproductive process, transforming sex into culture—both are destroyed here. Likewise the “old road,” though it is familiar and comforting in its way, also implies commerce, transmission and the urbanizing Roman lineage more than the symbolic liminal space of “the wood” from the first poem. Though the earlier poem’s vision of loss was generational and diffuse, it was also more placid and private. The later poem’s lament feels edgier and more politicized. The final line—“This early May morn when there is none to wed”—with its pun on “mourn,” is much more explicit in its charge of cultural failure and political folly. The voice of this poem, which proclaims with an arch authority reminiscent of Hardy, says: “We have swapped funerals for weddings, we have cluttered “the old road” which ought to convey us to the good spaces of home and community, and we are now carelessly “shedding” and “strewing” our nation’s youth.” If not for the date in its title, first poem of this pair might still be read as a generic lament for passing time and lost youth, with the war lurking in the background but not necessary for the poem’s function. While relinquishing flowery courtship is surely regrettable, it is not only a feature of wartime but of all maturity. No such ahistorical reading is possible for the second poem, with its more explicit reference to mass death. Even the way the trees “bend over” as if in pain reveal this poem’s more aggrieved stance towards history. A nation with “none to wed,” has ceased to progress and is on another kind of Roman “road”—the path of self-inflicted decline and fall.

This tactic of doubling a previous poem, of repeating its forms and its themes, while intensifying its negative affect, is a way for Thomas to register the tension between

ideological stasis and political change from 1915 to 1916. The poet has not changed much in his opinion of the war's effects—on the eerily empty countryside, and on his own mournful state of mind—but he has moved away from euphemism and subtlety. The emergent structure of feeling Thomas is relaying here as the war continues its harrowing course shifts from a nostalgic, almost wistful regret into a much more hardened despair. The second set of double poems registers a different progression, less an emotional intensification and more like a deeper internalization of war's disruptive effects into the very stuff of language and thought. Here's the first "Digging":

Today I think
 Only with scents,—scents dead leaves yield,
 And bracken, and wild carrot's seed,
 And the square mustard field;

Odours that rise
 When the spade wounds the roots of tree,
 Rose, currant, raspberry, or goutweed,
 Rhubarb or celery;

The smoke's smell, too,
 Flowing from where a bonfire burns
 The dead, the waste, the dangerous,
 And all to sweetness turns.

It is enough
 To smell, to crumble the dark earth,
 While the robin sings over again
 Sad songs of Autumn mirth.

This deceptively simple account of sensory experience is yet another poem predicated on doubling, both in its technique and—more obliquely perhaps—in its content, about the way wartime forms a dark counterpart to quotidian life. The metrical form of the poem is apportioned to suggest this second sense: each of the four quatrains is built of two longer four-stress lines contained by two shorter lines of three stresses each. The first lines of each stanza feel overloaded in both significance and rhythm because, as they pack their three emphatic beats into only four syllables, they also each initiate weighty sentences that are then enjambed into the following lines, which proceed to unfold the poem's wealth of natural detail. This structure, functioning like an internalized call and response, creates a sense of tension and momentum in a poem that might otherwise read like a garden seed catalogue. The even lines are end rhymed, the odd lines are not, but every stanza has a preponderance of internal rhymes, slants, and repetitions, such that almost no word in the poem stands alone, without an echo somewhere else. Some of these echoes serve to intensify the sounds within a line or stanza, with double alliterations like "scents/scents" (2), "root/rhubarb; rose/raspberry" (6–8), "smoke's smell" (9), "bonfire/burns" (10), "sings/songs" (15–16). Others sound across stanzas to suggest more abstract

correspondences, like “carrot/currant” (3, 7), “seed/-weed” (3, 7), “dead/dead” (2, 11), “smell, too/To smell” (9, 14). All of this sonic doubling leads us to the kind of abstract, conceptual doubling that the poem wants us to engage in without its explicit help. Our attention is inevitably drawn to words that denote one thing in the poem’s apparent pastoral context, but seem like they must also refer to something else, somewhere else. Words like “Digging ... dead ... mustard ... spade ... wounds ... smoke ... burns ... dead ... waste ... dangerous ... dark ... sad” seem to be lifted from another poem—about a figure “digging” trenches and graves instead of garden beds. Recalling Paul Fussell’s “Persistent Enemy,” this poem borrows language from the lexicon of war to intimate a commentary on how political violence pervades and infects the language of all people in its range. It uses the cover of gardening to cultivate a structure of feeling that is not just vaguely ominous but decidedly morbid.

I include “mustard” in the list of “doubled” words for its obvious evocation of the horrific chemical weapon that features so prominently in accounts of WWI. But I should add that in late April 1915 when this poem was written, gas was only just beginning to be used routinely as a weapon on the Western front, and mustard gas in particular wouldn’t come into common use until its infamous debut at Ypres in 1917. Yet the debate about the propriety of chemical warfare was well underway.⁴⁰ Still, the fact that the name of this specially piquant but utterly common plant would later take on such an appalling association shows exactly how structures of feeling move gradually and unconsciously across time. That war thus infects the language which pervades Thomas’s poems has much to do with the posthumous fame they brought him. He became a powerful poet of war without ever having been a War Poet, per se, precisely because of the talent he had for letting the shadow of historical events darken his poems without overrunning them completely: this poem is one of the consummate examples of this technique. Thomas shows how war haunts our language even when it is not part of our personal lived experience.

And oddly, in this poem it is the predominance of scents which do this work; rather than rooting the speaker in the here-and-now of sensory experience, they allow him to “think” across the literal (geographic) and figurative (psychological) gaps between him and other diggers elsewhere. Unlike sight or touch, smell often indicates physical absence rather than presence, and often acts as a warning, an indication of something unseen but nearby. Likewise, smell is conventionally associated with memory, with past thoughts and associations that return, ghost-like, with the scents that first accompanied a since-forgotten experience. None of this is exactly explicit in the poem, but it gives us an idea of what thinking “only with scents” (without sense) might mean. Hovering above the realm of material things, and just outside the mental space of the self-considering speaker, there are scents, associations and memories, only barely communicable. This supravocal realm drives the cascading parataxis of the first two stanzas, where leaves, weeds, trees, berries, herbs and roots mingle without any apparent order or use value. We’re offered plants at the beginning of their life cycle (“mustard seed”) and at their end (“dead leaves”) and every stage in between, foodstuffs and poisons side by side. At once one feels confidently situated by this specificity, yet also made uneasy by its formless preponderance. That is, the flora are at once confidently specific and meaninglessly mixed together; the thoughts that they

⁴⁰ See Eksteins, 161–4, and Trumpeiner, *passim*.

might fertilize are opaque, just outside the realm of the socially communicable. What exactly is this speaker so desperate not to think or say?

But if we are left mostly without the relationships or meanings among these smells, we are provided with some spatial and temporal markers that might situate us. First, literally, is “Today,” a word that establishes the poem as more immediate and intimate than some of the others we’ve looked at which wander through history and memory. That immediacy persists in the poem’s reliable present tense. Next, although we are placed in a pastoral space by the first stanza, and possibly an autumnal one with “dead leaves,” it is not until the second stanza’s opening— with “Odours that rise/ when the spade wounds the root”—that we see the activity of the poem’s title, reminding us that the speaker is indeed working in the dirt. The verbs “rise” and “wounds” reverse the passive seep of the first stanza’s “dead ... yield,” and introduce a vaguely religious register. “Odours that rise” from “wounds” however suggests physical trauma and the note of sepsis is reinforced by the disrupting presence of “goutweed” in a list that would otherwise make a lovely salad. This is not, in other words a healthy garden. Something is rotten.

This poem’s process of turning organic decay into an existential threat reaches its apotheosis in stanza three’s “bonfire,” an intensified echo of Hardy’s smoking “couch-grass.” “Smoke’s smell” is as often portentous as it is homely; likewise a “bonfire” is as often destructive as it is celebratory. These troubling double senses are again the central structuring form of the poem, with an accumulating atmosphere of menace as we pass through “the dead, the waste, the dangerous” before we can reach the dubious “sweetness” on the other side. Indeed, to access “sweetness” we must first dig and burn. This conflagration, more than any of the poem’s other olfactory images, reeks of war.

In the pair of four-line poems discussed above we saw that Thomas explicitly associated botanical images like flowers falling to the ground with the “waste” of war. In this poem this association is simultaneously more vague and more insistent. Here “Young men” dead or in peril are never explicitly named, nor are the procreative cultural processes like courtship and marriage placed under threat; yet the poem still manages to convey more potential violence than the passive, rueful laments of “In Memoriam” and “Cherry Trees.” Part of this has to do with “Digging”’s strategy of accumulating menace bit by bit, in clipped images and phrases, “dead leaves ... spade wounds ... smoke’s smell ...” which independently might feel relatively innocuous, if a little bleak, but in series invoke an accumulating atmosphere of dread. This poem gains much of its power of foreboding precisely by its refusal to name the source of its threat.

In “The Owl” it was walking, eating, and especially sleeping which the civilian could not enjoy while his beleaguered doubles were suffering; here it is digging, gardening, working the land (recalling the ploughman as well), which take on a different, darker tenor in wartime. But this darkness is also oddly alluring. The notion of being burned away to nothing, like both the suggestively laden pile of yard waste—“the dead, the waste, the dangerous”—and the legion of war dead it can’t help but evoke, is evoked with the phrase “all to sweetness turns” which recalls Brooke’s regrettable “into cleanness leaping.” The irresistible “sweetness” of annihilation is found also in the breakdown of the innovative project of “thinking with scents” as that old poetic standby, birdsong, interrupts the poem’s olfactory register. It is not clear whether the speaker is actually hearing the familiar and repetitive “sad songs” of the robin, because “It is enough/ to smell” suggests he might be

shutting out the conflicting “Sad songs of autumn mirth” to remain in his trance-like state of “sweetness.” But if the bird does not interrupt the speaker, it still interrupts the poem, complicating it with a confusing pathetic fallacy. “It is enough” also sounds almost like consolation, even fulfillment, such that one might fool oneself into thinking for a moment this was just a poem about one man’s love of working in his garden. And for a moment it is that poem. But in the same moment it oscillates back to its darkest point: “to smell, to crumble the dark earth” is to fall face first into that earth and be buried in it (or worse yet, left unburied, a motif we will find in Owen’s poems from the front). It should not surprise us that the poem “digging” ends in a kind of grave, with another threnody: “the robin sings over again/ Sad songs of Autumn mirth.” The bird here bears ambivalent witness to this season of death and dying. Her song is repetitive, inevitable, “sad,” but also somewhat bemused. “Autumn mirth” is not just a strange happiness that’s out of season, it is autumnal happiness, a wry welcome into death’s “dark earth.”

Andrew Motion claims of this poem that “what appears to be destructive is purgative” (163) and that Thomas maintains a “balance of death’s attractions and life’s demands” which only gives way in later poems to the “chilling certainty of annihilation” (132). I have tried to show that, on the contrary, the “certainty of annihilation” is already present here as a warming consolation to the cold brutality of “life’s demands.” We begin to notice, in Thomas that “death’s attractions” are more dominant than life’s, that indeed poetry is the space where the image of death as the place of rest is an underlying factor in his repeated identification with sleeping soldiers. What is striking and counterintuitive is that these images begin to lighten Thomas’s mood considerably.

The second poem called “Digging” takes up its spade exactly where its predecessor ended, in dark earth and sad mirth, while invoking war and history much more explicitly, and with lighter tone:

What matter makes my spade for tears or mirth,
 Letting down two clay pipes into the earth?
 The one I smoked, the other a soldier
 Of Blenheim, Ramilies, and Malplaquet
 Perhaps. The dead man’s immortality
 Lies represented lightly with my own,
 A yard or two nearer the living air
 Than bones of ancients who, amazed to see
 Almighty God erect the mastodon,
 Once laughed, or wept, in this same light of day.

The same title and the repetition of “mirth” in the first line links the two poems, along with the images of spade and smoke. Both poems mediate between the “matter” of “dark earth” and the lightness of “living air,” to think about the intermingling states of life and death. Yet this poetic double is a very different kind of exploration. For one it is much looser in form and lighter in mood, beginning with its punning opening question “What matter[?]” There is an uncharacteristic insouciance here, which suggests a shift in attitude towards the conflicted self and its emotional impasses (“tears or mirth?”). The question’s tone suggests that there is, in fact, no “matter” to these feelings, and that finally letting go of their hold on

the mind is as easy as “letting down two clay pipes into the earth.” This rhyme is the only one in the poem, another convention let go. But aligning “mirth” and “earth” is also a way of placing a simple pleasure there, like the pleasure of smoking a pipe. The “two clay pipes” are then turned from mere “matter” into metonyms for their smokers, both “into the earth,” one alive and digging, the other long dead, his body also turned to mere clay. Clay and words, as the names “Of Blenheim, Ramilies, and Malplaquet” place the dead soldier in historical battles alongside the Duke of Marlborough, on whom Thomas had just drudgingly ground out a commissioned biography.⁴¹ These battles in the War of Spanish Succession (1701–1714), named as specifically as they are, seem like they must be significant. One might offer the historical irony that they were all fought in alliance with the Prussians against the French. Or that Ramilies is in Flanders, Malplaquet near Ypres and Mons, and that all three locales have been traded between warring nations repeatedly since Thomas’s anonymous “soldier” fought there. But even this activity of historical reclamation reveals something about Thomas’s new insouciant mode, whereby momentous battles of the past are reduced to mere names, destined to be cheapened by hack historians like himself and soon to be replaced by other names, in an endless chain. And then Thomas uses the lightly dropped “Perhaps” to further undermine the significance of these names, exposing the whole construction as mere speculation.

But one interesting fact does remain, which links this poem significantly to its predecessor and yet changes the stakes considerably. Whereas the first poem clearly took place in an English garden (“rhubarb and celery”), the place-names here suggest our digger may now be on the continent, his own pipe and spade part of his new soldierly paraphernalia.⁴² Indeed, the identification with “a soldier” of the past is quite direct, “The dead man’s immortality/ Lies lightly represented with my own”—a complex yet simple construction of doubleness. Neither man is truly immortal, obviously, but their “representation” in the “pipes” and in the poem places them side by side on a timeline that is much longer than that in Thomas’s history book. “Lies” also takes a double meaning here: thanks to its position at the line break the word also suggests untruths, perhaps urging a skeptic stance towards concepts like history and “immortality” which are also “represented lightly” in the poem’s rhetoric.

The lines of this poem function like the layers of an archaeological dig, moving further back in time with each downward step, while holding vast time spans in such tight proximity that they begin to intermix. The “two clay pipes,” articles of pleasure and leisure, are a lighter archaeological signifier than the soldiers’ weapons or bones would be. But their suggestive discovery (or placement, as it were) also goads the digger “a yard or two” deeper, until he imagines the “bones of ancients.” This is where this poem crosses over from lightly whimsical to deeply strange. The layering of 200 years of relatively recent history gives way to a wild speculative vision of hunter-gatherers and, reaching even further back, to the primordial epoch of creation myths, when through “amazed” ancient

⁴¹ In a letter to Frost on 3 May 1915 Thomas wrote: “You are enjoying this period ... if you weren’t you ought to be, because you are not writing about Marlborough.” And later: “I find I can’t write [poetry] ... there’s Marlborough behind and Marlborough before” (110)

⁴² To be clear (and historical), Thomas himself would not have been on the continent in July 1915 when this poem was written. But he had enlisted, and so he writes as a soldier here and it is significant that his speaker/digger may be in France.

eyes we see, “Almighty God erect the mastodon.” The most striking and surprising aspect of this poem, then, is not how “lightly” it looks at war and soldiers from a deep historical rather than shallow political perspective, but rather how quickly it moves past war and politics altogether, using them only as a brief way-station on a journey into a prehistorical phantasmagoria in ten lines or less.

Thomas’s poetry so rarely ventures into the theological realm that it is worth lingering a moment on the strange appearance of “Almighty God” late in this poem. The reverent amazement of the “ancients” is held in contrast to the lighter curiosity of the digger, whose sense of awe has been dulled by his modern, compartmentalized knowledge of the layering and lengthening of the past offered by history, archaeology, geology, and theology, such that he responds with “what matter?” And yet the monotheistic epithet is equally incongruous with the “ancients” and their “mastodon,” suggesting a bit of epochal confusion, and perhaps another hint of modern irreverence. Thomas betrays (in both senses) his knowledge of archeology and the fossil record as a way of undermining, quite literally, the cultural formations of the Iron Age and eighteenth century geopolitics. “Almighty God” would most certainly not be on the lips of Stone Age men (at least not in as many words), so by placing it there Thomas slyly signals our tendency to see what we want in the past, to and restructure it as a reflection of ourselves. We can’t know, of course, the thoughts or emotions of the ancients from their bones alone, so unless we can unearth some of their own representations, we rely on our own imaginary reconstructions. It comforts Thomas to imagine these “ancients” experiencing the awe and reverence that he no longer feels.

In the poem’s last line Thomas clearly exposes this narcissistic perspectivism. By pondering whether the “ancients” “laughed, or wept” he returns us to the “tears or mirth” of line one (and of the previous “Digging” poem). Despite digging into prehistoric times, he remains stuck in his mind in the present, in a repetitive loop. A flattening of history occurs “in this same light of day” such that mastodons, dynastic battles and modest clay pipes all “lie” together, their “matter” an unreliable representation of the lives they once touched. “This same light of day” has a similar leveling quality as “all to sweetness turns,” reducing the detailed particulars of the poem to an undifferentiated, unmeaning mass. But this is not a failure of the poem so much as its basic strategy—to think about how time so thoughtlessly erases strong emotions, single lives, famous battles, and giant animals alike into the same matter/clay/earth. This long, slow return to organic homogeny, sped up by poetic technique, is not tragedy but a seductive entropy. Repetition, once again, is the best means of arriving back where one began.

Though the second “Digging” features many of the functions of repetition and return we’ve seen elsewhere, this poem also seems, in its brighter tone, to have found a different affective mode and formal strategy, still built on doubles and repetitions of familiar images and forgotten things, but with a different structure of feeling. To limn this subtle shift, it will help to return to Freud. Beyond the *Pleasure Principle* (1920) was in part an effort to explain the descent and regression of Freud’s beloved high European civilization into tribal aggressions and war. In it, Freud pushes his theories about man’s repetition compulsion past a simple pleasurable return to past experiences, into an unconscious mental strategy that overrides the pleasure principle and its pressures on the living organism to develop and progress, leading eventually to an aggressive instinct turned inward—the infamous

death drive. The “living organism” at the center of Freud’s construction is a simplified biological precursor of what later becomes the whole central nervous system (which Freud does not differentiate from the mind). That is, “later becomes” in Freud’s text and in his theory as it evolves before our eyes, but also later in the life cycle and the evolution of the “living organism,” which stands in for all life forms organic and mental. Freud’s flexible, metaphorical treatment of time, alongside his commitment to carefully articulated but constantly evolving models—in a word, his formalism—is what makes him such a seductive partner for discussing poems, especially these poems so vitally concerned, as he was, with Europe’s self-destruction.

He begins his discussion of the drives imagining “the most simplified possible form ... an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance ... susceptible to stimulation,” gradually adding layers, literal and figurative, material and theoretical in turn, until he arrives at a model for human consciousness that satisfies his emerging theory. Along the way Freud wavers between treating this ur-organism as an actual biological form and/or as formal metaphor for various functions of the mind, or the mind in its entirety. I am suggesting, first, that Freud’s process of layering resembles Thomas’s in “Digging” in the sense that the older, more primitive forms (“the bones of ancients... the mastodon”) are not supplanted by the newer, more complex forms, but persist within and alongside them and can serve as models for understanding higher order functions and feelings. Same matter, same clay, same tears and mirth, just a different (but analogous) set of formal arrangements. Thomas’s journey “into the earth” and back in time is also simultaneously a journey into his own consciousness, an attempt to throw off the anxieties of its highest, most complex form and get back to an earlier affective state of amazement, laughter and tears that feels like it has disappeared into an ancient (and mostly metaphorical) past.

Freud’s desire to talk about the mind’s processes by way of simple, primordial forms is his way of progressing toward a new “dual” arrangement of the drives or mental energies, that could account for the disturbing tendency he had observed in patients, including traumatized veterans of the war, to compulsively repeat unpleasurable and even self-destructive thoughts and acts. If one can imagine a simple organism that has just made the jump, as it were, from inanimate organic matter to individuated, animate life form, then one can imagine the emergent moment of Freud’s new theory of the death drive:

The tension which then arose in what had previously been an inanimate substance endeavoured to cancel itself out. In this way the first instinct (drive) came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state. (46)

Freud’s elaborate speculative scenario results in a new dualistic structure in which life and death energies are both constantly at work in the mind/organism, and this helps to account for forces like aggression, self-harm and the inexorable attraction to death. The latter as we’ve now established, is a recurring form in Thomas’s poems and especially in his masterpiece “Rain,” which combines many of the formal and thematic aspects we’ve been discussing into a climactic crescendo:

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me

Remembering again that I shall die
 And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
 For washing me cleaner than I have been
 Since I was born into this solitude.
 Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
 But here I pray that none whom once I loved
 Is dying tonight or lying still awake
 Solitary, listening to the rain,
 Either in pain or thus in sympathy
 Helpless among the living and the dead,
 Like a cold water among broken reeds,
 Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
 Like me who have no love which this wild rain
 Has not dissolved except the love of death,
 If love it be towards what is perfect and
 Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

This powerful poem washes away the ambivalence and guilt of its precursor “The Owl” annihilating the separation between the sheltered self and others outside. The “bleak hut” of Thomas’s officer training camp is colder comfort than the roof and fire at the inn of “The Owl,” yet it allows him closer access to the “wild” entropic forces of nature. This “cleaner” speaker was “born into this solitude” and like Freud’s simple “living organism,” longs to return to the simplicity of death. We again find the speaker kept awake again by thoughts of others. But in this poem these counterparts are much closer, because the undifferentiated sound of the rain, unlike the “clear” piercing tone of the owl’s cry, washes away distance and difference so effectively that the speaker identifies not just with those “whom once [he] loved” but even with “the dead that the rain rains upon.” Here it is the “perfect” deluge rather than the “plain” song of the owl that precipitates this radical “sympathy,” but again it takes a dynamic force of nature to drive a “solitary” human from his self-enclosure, toward empathy for the dead and dying.

This poem’s rush of blank verse is more intense and unequivocal than the neatly balanced quatrains of “The Owl” and the other organized stanza forms we’ve examined. Even the uncharacteristic regularity of the syllable count works counter intuitively to wipe away any rhetorical structure. This is a rush of leveling language, not a measured argument. The many enjambments and additive clauses keep the poem flowing forward, with the only true stop before the end at the word “solitude” in line 6, which works as a reinforcement rather than a reprieve from the poem’s steady gloom. And though the poem has no end rhymes, it also employs the now familiar tactic of a series of repeated and nearly repeated words—“rain(x8),” “solitude/solitary,” “still” “dead/death” “broken reeds,” and “love(x4)” —which build its dirge-like rhythm.

Metaphor and imagery too are “dissolved” by the driving rain, which of course begins to resemble the death drive, that atavistic “love of death” which “is perfect” in its inhuman precognitive power. Whereas “The Owl” had the “downhill” rhythm of walking, this poem employs unnerving, eddying repetition, as in its oddly recirculating image of “cold water among broken reeds,/ Myriads of broken reeds” —odd in part because it is hard

to tell exactly what this simile refers to, sandwiched as it is between two “like[s]” the first of which seems to attach to “sympathy” and the latter to the speaker. Not just sympathy but “Helpless” sympathy is the fascinating if confusing tenor for the metaphorical vehicle of “cold water” made even more troubling by the fact that all the other water in the poem, the torrential rain, seems to be its most literal, material content. Thus we try to understand how cold water “among broken reeds” is like sympathy and/or helplessness “among the living and the dead”—perhaps a kind of reflective medium that offers referential images but no steadying ground. Then, just as the reader’s mind takes on this figure, the second simile forces us to consider how the speaker is also like the “myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff.” So the living and the dead are alike, awash in sympathy that does nothing but reflect the pain and loss it surrounds.

Whereas earlier “soldiers and poor” and “men/ Now far from home” were figures who shamed and alienated the speaker from himself, here the “myriads” (which reads doubly as my reeds, echoing the rustic maker of songs already named twice) are more “like me” (the speaker)—“dissolved” in the same “cold water,” a substance of exhausted, disordered affect (with “no love ... except love of death”). And though this is a grim, sodden state, it is free of the ambivalence and anxiety that upset earlier poems like “The Owl.” Instead of a painful separation from imaginary sufferers, here the speaker surrenders himself painlessly into them, reversing “Solitary, listening” into the chiasmic “thus in sympathy.” It is a subtle repudiation of Thomas’s other feckless speakers, as here the speaker achieves a kind of self-determination and strength, much like the strangely affecting determination of Freud’s “living organism” driven “to cancel itself out” even as the pressures of “decisive external influences ... oblige the still surviving substance to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life” (46). The speaker turns his back on the social forms and people “whom I once loved” and surrenders to a “love of death” which, unlike the ambition and anxiety of the social, “cannot ... disappoint.”

Why, if death is the ultimate goal and comfort, and its open and easeful embrace produces the finest poems, does Thomas expend so much poetic energy elsewhere lamenting it (as in the flower poems), ironically grieving it (“A private”) and elaborately transfiguring its processes (“Digging”)? Freud offers insight here too as he describes how his theoretical organism persists in self-preservation and “struggles most energetically against events (dangers, in fact) which might help it to attain its life’s aim [of death] rapidly. Such behavior is however, precisely what characterizes purely instinctual as contrasted with intelligent efforts” (47). We can thus think of “Rain” as not constructed by the intellect but set in motion by the drives, its intense rush of nonlinear language flushing away the cultural forms that needlessly complicate the poet’s unconscious desire to escape language’s social limits and join the peacefully silent dead.

The civilian persona in all of these double poems, observes and describes his observations from the second, simultaneous perspective of the dead or dying soldier, until, in “Rain,” he annihilates that difference. It will be useful to recall the description of Isobel Armstrong’s “double poem” here, in which the poem “draws attention to the epistemology which governs the construction of the self and its relationships and to the cultural conditions in which those relationships are made.” Thomas attempts to give form to the degeneration of his sense of personal identity and social relationship during “the cultural condition” of wartime. His language is driven towards oblivion by his own double

experience of the war, which first destroys his civilian, artistic identity, and then, as he actively anticipates, his soldier persona as well. He intuits that his soldier's work is to stop struggling to construct himself among social and cultural forms and to surrender his bare, organic life form to the violent, impersonal forces of historical change. He cannot clearly articulate the knowledge of this second doubled perspective, because its source is by definition outside his lived experience, but he is painfully aware of its destabilizing effects on his self-expression. In these poems, doubling and repetition are not merely formal effects, but the verbal signs of the poet's loss of control over his own language and feelings. War has permeated all discourse, and among its greatest horrors is its undeniable attraction. The poet is drawn towards "what is perfect," not language but its obviation, not communication, but the unmediated formless communion of death.

Chapter 3

Dead Letters: Wilfred Owen's Agonistic Poetics

If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out.
 –Oscar Wilde

I. True Lies

Here is a poem Wilfred Owen wrote in England in 1918, awaiting redeployment to France:

The Letter

With B.E.F June 10. Dear Wife,
 (Oh blast this pencil. 'Ere, Bill, lend's a knife.)
 I'm in the pink at present, dear.
 I think the war will end this year.
 We don't see much of them square-'eaded 'Uns.
 We're out of harm's way, not bad fed.
 I'm longing for a taste of your old buns.
 (Say, Jimmie, spare's a bite of bread.)
 There don't seem much to say just now.
 (Yer what? Then don't, yer ruddy cow!
 And give us back me cigarette!)
 I'll soon be 'ome. You mustn't fret.
 My feet's improvin', as I told you of.
 We're out in rest now. Never fear.
 (VRACH! By crumbs, but that was near.)
 Mother might spare you half a sov.
 Kiss Nell and Bert. When me and you –
 (Eh? What the 'ell! Stand to? Stand to!
 Jim, give's a hand with pack on, lad.
 Guh! Christ! I'm hit. Take 'old. Aye, bad.
 No, damn your iodine. Jim? 'Ere!
 Write my old girl, Jim, there's a dear.)⁴³

The most obvious and important thing to say about this poem is that it is built from two separate, nonliterary registers—a soldier's handwritten letter and his vernacular speech—set in chaotic juxtaposition. It begins as a letter but ends as a poem, a poem wherein the epistolary and oral modes are interspersed but markedly unblended. One way we can see it is in fact a poem and not either of the other two communicative acts whose forms it includes is that it rhymes regularly. The stylistic choice to set the ostensibly spoken

⁴³ Owen 114. Other poems in this chapter can be found in this volume at 192, 117, 151, 167, 112, 135.

portions of the poem off in parentheses also draws extra attention to their purely textual status, as something only a reader is meant to “hear,” otherwise outside the flow of the main text. Depending on your perspective this makes the parenthetical portion of the poem either more or less poetic than the other part—more poetic because it is a kind of direct address, akin to a dramatic monologue or a lyrical mode overheard by the reader (the reader of the poem, not the fictional intended of the fictional letter); less poetic because the soldier’s interjections are presented as acts of coarse and spontaneous expression in contrast to the more thoughtful and circumspect letter, the latter a communicative act which more closely resembles sitting down to compose a poem. In a way, it is precisely lyric poetry’s constitutively ambiguous status between speech and writing which this poem invokes and interrogates in its manic back and forth between the two. The fact that the soldier must toggle violently, schizophrenically between the lies and truths he must tell to try (and ultimately fail) to protect himself and others is the principle that survives his death at the end of the poem, and gives us our first picture of a crucial structure of feeling in Owen’s poems.

It is important to note that neither half of this poem, neither its written nor its spoken portion, is particularly lyrical or poetic in the traditional sense, that is to say in the high Romantic and Decadent idioms in which Owen customarily worked before his 1917 stay at the Craiglockhart military hospital. Indeed, the letter home portion of this poem is stereotypically dull and commonplace, full of empty conventions and notably lacking in description or emotional expression. The spoken portion, on the other hand, is nonpoetic in the opposite direction, comprised of thoughtless outbursts and rough talk not quite fit for the page. Yet somehow, when bound together by meter and rhyme, these two unpoetic halves comprise a poem, whose literary status emerges from the ironic gaps between its conflicting parts. This is not among Owen’s most famous or elegant poems, and it is among several whose glaring debt to Sassoon tends to overshadow their relative merits, but it may be one of the best poems by which to approach the problem of how war poetry, as a posthumously (and dubiously) defined genre unto itself, was able to negotiate difficult formal and rhetorical treaties between its forebears and its survivors, between its long cultural inheritance, its cataclysmic socio-historical moment, and its relieved but guilt-ridden inheritors. More locally, this particular poem exhibits a distinctive double-voicedness that is one of Owen’s most important and distinguishing poetic strategies. The poet and the soldier write entirely different kinds of letters home—one aims to comfort, the other to afflict— even when they are the same letter, even when, as in Armstrong’s figure of the double poem, they share the exact same words.

Paul Fussell offers a useful discussion of the “Other Rank’s Letter Home” as a genre unto itself, so encrusted in conventions and clichés (many imposed by official censorship) that the letters came to serve an entirely different purpose than interpersonal communication: “The trick was to fill the page by saying nothing and to offer the maximum number of clichés. ... What possible good could result from telling the truth?” (182). It is notable here that “telling the truth” is not just an inconvenience to be avoided, but an impossibility. Indeed, Fussell notes (chastising a few historians on the way), whether censored or not, letters home from WWI are decidedly not a reliable source of “factual testimony about the war”(183); which is to say, they were usually comprised entirely of euphemisms and lies. Owen’s fictional letter-within-a-poem certainly fits this description:

every line written (as opposed to the spoken parentheticals) contains either careless assumptions (“I think the war will end this year”) or outright lies (“We’re out of harm’s way, not bad fed”). Indeed, the letter’s only plainly truthful line lies right at its center: “There don’t seem much to say just now.” The poem reveals how the war is doing violence not just to men’s bodies, but to their social relationships, their ability to communicate, and to their very language. Kind platitudes and terms of endearment are repeatedly interrupted by oaths and exclamations (and the unintelligible “VRACH!” which I take to be either an inarticulate outburst or the sound of a shell or bullet hitting nearby). Without blending or reconciling them in any other way, Owen integrates these interjections into the poetic form: Six of the poem’s 12 rhymes bridge the alternating written and spoken modes, and when they do, they put contradicting discourses into provocative proximity: “Wife/knife; bad fed/bite of bread; just now/ruddy cow!; my cigarette/mustn’t fret; never fear/that was near!; me and you/stand to!” In every single case a comforting word or phrase oriented towards the domestic sphere is rhymed with a mortal hazard of the trench. The sonic similarity of rhyme here actually serves to exaggerate the difference between the poem’s two registers, giving the lie to any notion that poetry might civilize or domesticate war, or even bring home its truth to a noncombatant audience. The poem begins and ends with the word “Dear,” perhaps a way of indicating it was never finished, never sent, a dead letter.

The poem’s final line—the letter within is cut short before it can be signed off—“Write my old girl, Jim, there’s a dear” reveals how familial and romantic intimacies are being both precluded and replaced. The “hit” soldier’s final words —“there’s a dear”— are spoken to Jim about writing the wife, but the term of endearment hovers ambiguously between the two modes and the two intimates. Who, exactly, is “dear” in that sentence, whereby the act of writing is affectionately passed on at the moment of the soldier’s death? This moment, with its unsettling mixture of intimacy and isolation, beauty and horror, and the total failure of all forms of expression to capture it appropriately, is another formal leitmotif we see throughout Owen. Death’s new proximity enables—maybe even requires—alternative forms of intimacy.

The already vacuous content of the letter within “The Letter” is further undermined by its constant interruption, first by the quotidian annoyances of trench life (dull pencil, bad food) then by shelling and attack. One point the poem makes clear, is that any text that survives the trenches, even if it is a mess of comforting falsehoods, will still necessarily be a truthful record of violence and death’s capriciousness. And if a text has survived (as with Edward Thomas’s journal and letters), it’s all the more likely its writer has not. And whether he has survived or, as in this case, hasn’t, he will quite literally not be the same man. The fact that “Jim” will have to finish and deliver the letter or completely replace it with his own, underlines the expendable and easily replaceable nature of the line soldier, an interchangeability that correlates eerily with the replacing and shuffling of phrases such as “in the pink” and “I’ll soon be [h]ome,” which seem to feature in every letter from every soldier, even though the health and relief those phrases denote actually describe very few of them.⁴⁴ To function properly and efficiently the military must be an overarching formal whole that can be filled with replaceable, interchangeable parts. The extent to which this is

⁴⁴ This interchangeability also obtains in the way, as here, Owen can write a “Sassoon poem” (brutal, colloquial, ironic), or Sassoon can write an “Owen poem” (elegiac, homoerotic, incongruously beautiful).

also true of poetry itself is one of the major themes of this chapter. Poetry is fundamentally formal in nature: its shapes and conventions can remain recognizable and effective for centuries while poets and their individual concerns come and go—does this somehow make poetry particularly well-suited to the context of war? Or is something like the opposite true? Are war poems somehow diminished by their hopeless repetitions? The differences and similarities between a letter home and a war poem are as good a place as any to start in on these questions.

Fussell avers that the letter home's "pervasive style [of] formulaic understatement" is a manifestation—perhaps even a crucial origin—of "British Phlegm," northern cousin to the French *sang froid*, whereby every situation with a potential for horror, or emotional and physical pain is rhetorically "toned down" to a mere inconvenience. "The effect is less euphemistic than ironic and comic" (181), but the result is that those not in on the joke never come to understand what is really going on. Fussell continues:

Ironically, the reticence which originated in the writers' sympathy for the feelings of their addressees was destined in the long run simply to widen the chasm of incomprehension which opened between them. (183)

I would argue that, in fact, to establish and reify that gap is the very purpose of this style, not just in the ubiquitous letters home, but perhaps even more so in the poems that draw on and repurpose this linguistic strategy, not in order to maintain close relationships with the civilian world, but rather to actively dissolve and replace them with an exclusively masculine, soldierly social network. The war's infamous all-pervasive irony in this context is not an incidental byproduct, but a true foundation of its practitioners' self-protective and reconstructive social mission. Soldiers had to continuously rebuild new spaces for themselves from the wreckage of the old world; irony is perhaps the most notable, but certainly not the only form in this elaborate network of defensive positions.⁴⁵

If the letter home didn't (indeed, often couldn't, by law) convey accurate or precise information about the front-line soldier, and if they often hadn't much else to say, what purpose did they serve? One simplified but true-enough answer, per Fussell, is they were meant to comfort and distract their recipients in England from the dark facts on the ground across the channel. Conversely, the most famous protest poems of Sassoon and Owen serve to afflict the comfortable, to hold to their faces the truths from which they wish to be spared. The poems, in this sense, reverse the polarities of the letter, deploying a kind of weaponized irony to undermine or explode the untruths of all the officially sanctioned, censored, and sanitized modes of communication, especially letters, journalism, and political rhetoric. And one simple but potent way to accomplish this task is to rewrite those forms themselves in a way that throws their absurdities and insufficiencies into the harsh flare-light of the trenches. This is why a poem like "The Letter" though it lacks the imagistic beauty and lyrical artistry of Owen's finest, is still an effective little piece of ordinance. It deploys small jokes that are more caustic than funny: The writer who tactlessly says "blast

⁴⁵ As I warned in the introduction, it is exceedingly hard to avoid crossing back and forth between metaphorical and literal registers when discussing the literary endeavors of trench soldiers. But when I surrender to these rhetorical habits, I am falling in line not just with innumerable critical forebears, but the soldiers themselves, who recognized the trenches for the hideously literalized metaphors they were.

this pencil” and attacks it with a repurposed “knife” is later quite literally blasted while trying to write. His inane predictions “the war will end this year” and “I’ll soon be ‘ome” end up, for him, coming tragically true. The phrase “I’m longing for a taste of your old buns” is such a groan-worthy double entendre, it’s a wonder it made it past the army’s (or the poet’s) censors, and yet, it is not quite so droll when followed by the real-time request, “spare’s a bite of bread”—he is not so much hungry for wifely succor as he is literally hungry. The phrase “half a sov” is funny too, because the word, like so many in the poem, is already cut in half, leaving even less for its needy recipient, and the sovereign himself has already taken away the better part of this man’s worth.

This brings us to the issue of Owen’s awkward and inconsistent attempt at the demotic in this piece. Douglas Kerr discusses this fault in *Wilfred Owen’s Voices*, noting that the “speech of the ranks” was something “Owen must have been very familiar with, [as] a platoon commander [who] had to read and censor all his men’s letters.” Yet this poem, “in a surprising solecism, confuses the conventions of written and spoken language” (213). But while Kerr is right that there is certainly something ungainly in the way parts of this poem are punctuated, we must realize that in an important sense, a disorienting mixture of “written and spoken language” is precisely the central principle of poem’s construction. So, what in this poem may seem like sloppiness, or an indecisive style, speaks rather eloquently of the way the trenches made proper usage and poetic precision quaint relics of a prewar past. Owen’s other-ranks ventriloquism here is not an exercise in accuracy, but in awkward empathy. The main effort towards capturing the vernacular here seems to be to simply lop off all the H’s from the beginning of words, though a few are left inexplicably unharmed (“harm” “half” “hand” and “hit”).⁴⁶ There’s some dodgy grammar (“There don’t seem much to say” ... “Me and you”), some salty oaths (“blast,” “by crumbs,” “Christ!” “Damn”) and a general boorishness that feels slightly condescending coming from the officer-poet, even as it locates the reader in the trench with the men. Recalling Empson’s formulations, an attempt at solidarity is part of the work of pastoral, and its imperfect application reveals its status as an aesthetic form, colliding with the already conflicted political formation of class relations within the ranks.

Our relationship to the poem’s author is complexly layered onto the relationship between the fictional writer and reader within the poem’s diegetic space, given that this soldier is so clearly marked as belonging to a lower class and lower rank. It becomes all the more crucial that we are asked to identify with him, feel a rough affection for him, and even, as reader, to imaginatively occupy the space of his addressee, toggling between the positions of his “Dear Wife” and his trenchmates. In this way, we are forced to experience his death twice, as firsthand witness and secondhand report. This doubled intimacy and doubled loss is perhaps one of the strongest effects of the poem, which cuts its words and phrases and registers up in so many different ways, that the parts must necessarily begin to add up to a greater whole—the fragmentation of discourses becoming a new discourse, the point of which is to make us truly see and feel the tragedy of this soldier’s death in a way

⁴⁶ It is fun, if not entirely productive to speculate as to why: of these exceptions, all but “half” would become different words entirely if they were contracted, with “harm” and “hit” providing particularly confusing—and therefore interesting—alternate readings: “We’re out of ARM’s way”; “Christ! I’m IT.”

that his distant and shielded wife cannot, any more than his fatalistic and desperately preoccupied fellow soldiers.

Owen's final cut here is the sharpest of all, as the soldier's last written phrase "When me and you —" is severed, a promise left not only unfulfilled, but unpromised. His last effort at maintaining a civilian relationship is tellingly cut short (although his "Dear Wife" may still get a second shot, as I'll discuss below). In the meantime, the chaos of the poem's last five lines is delivered in a rapid-fire string of single syllables, a mixture of grunts and oaths, desperate commands and requests. Only the oddly specific word "iodine" stands out here as a multisyllabic intrusion from medical discourse, and its dismissive rejection—"Damn your iodine"—serves as a measure of the futility of caring for others in the trenches. The Christ-like "Jim" who earlier shared a Eucharistic "bite of bread," with our writer (or perhaps refused to), is now rebuffed when he offers a healing balm. But the spiritual subtext of this moment is undercut further by yet another cheap pun, as "iodine" sounds too much like "I'm a dyin'" to take seriously, ratifying Fussell's assertion that soldiers' letters work better as comedy than history.

Good Jim's final act of grace will be to take up the writer's "blasted pencil" and offer—what exactly? Some kind of belated comfort to his "old girl"? One doesn't envy Jim the task. And yet, futile and desperate as it may seem, this final request makes a bid for true, unironic mercy, the only hint of any that this poem offers (not counting its comforting lies). Just as the writer was forced to exchange his wife's buns for Jim's bread, she may now receive Jim's comforting voice in place of her old man's. Perhaps we can be forgiven for hoping, given the poem's own irreverence, and its obvious romantic triangulation, that the two survivors might hit it off, and provide some real comfort and maybe even affection to each other in some unforeseeable post-war future. The harsh logic of interchangeable forms extends from the martial realm to the marital. Even if it isn't Jim who comforts his mate's "old girl" it'll likely be some other bloke. Ultimately, the civilian survivor of this poem may receive compassion and recompense, but always only at her soldiers' expense. We must look beyond the horizon of the poem (and the war) for our consolation, but the poem, like Hardy's "Christmas," very subtly urges us to keep looking.

This ambivalence towards consolation is one of several of provocative parallels between this minor poem and Owen's famous "Preface." Both are dead letters, posthumous fragments that never reach their destinations, yet seem to increase in their authority and gravity by means of the death that interrupts them. Owen died before he could finish the "Preface" and see his poems into print; "The Letter" has its writer/speaker killed before he can finish and post it. Both depend, therefore, on a proxy, or executor, to deliver them: dear Jim, in the one case, and a series of fellow soldier-poets in the other.⁴⁷ Both pieces also blend and conceal their poetics with prose, The "Preface" overtly ("Above all I am not concerned with Poetry"), the poem more covertly, as we've discussed, in its uneasy formal integration of two nonpoetic registers. Yet both are fundamentally built on conventional poetic techniques: the "Preface" includes a sonorously patterned list ("deeds ... lands ... glory, honor, might, majesty, dominion ... power ... War") and is quite clearly lineated as a

⁴⁷ From the biographical note that opens John Stallworthy's *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*: "Sassoon's edition of the poems was published in 1920, Edmund Blunden's in 1931, C. Day Lewis's in 1963, Dominic Hibberd's in 1973" (i.)

series of gnomic sentences and short paragraphs—the kind of free verse or prose poetry just becoming available to English poets, but which Owen was still too much of a traditionalist to embrace openly. “The Letter” on the other hand, employs regular rhyme and an extended sonnet-like structure,⁴⁸ both of which techniques elide the obvious gaps between the speaker’s letter and his speech, forging a poem from unpoetic fragments. The violent juxtaposition and forced proximity of the soothing lies written home and the harsh truths spoken (nay, blurted) in the trench, together add up to a rough but recognizable poetry. In isolation, neither half would constitute a poem. But in combination, the war poem is forged when the tender letter and the rough speech, the domestic and the regimented, England and the trenches, two opposing sites of intimacy, are brought awkwardly, forcibly together, through rhyme and lineation, into a third, inconveniently intimate space. It is precisely this kind of multifariousness Owen is invoking when he insists in the preface that his poems are “not concerned with poetry” and are made only of—and for —“pity” and “warn[ing].” Finally the famous compressive figure “the Poetry is in the Pity” functions as a rough example of Owen’s signature consonantal pararhymes and urges us to listen for partial rhymes elsewhere: “honour ... power ... War.” In other words, the “Preface” functions as a primer for Owen’s poems *and* his poetics, the latter function rather ghostly and implicit.

One thing Owen seems eager to make clear is that his poems cannot and should not be read as capital-H History. It is not “the letter” of his “book” that will survive to “warn” (but not console) future generations, but perhaps “the spirit of it”—and that vague spirit has something to do with “Poetry” (capital P) and “truth” (small t). Owen, and his imagined future readers are clearly still caught up in an old rivalry between poetry and history, art and truth, in which the sides are not so discernibly separate as we might like them to be. Indeed, the tautology “true Poets must be truthful” is so problematic that it troubles every reading in this chapter. If we look back at “The Letter” we see that truth is explicitly absent from the formalized, generic language of the letter home, but it becomes available to and through the poem when that discourse is set up beside the rougher language of fear, hunger, violence and suffering that the soldiers must talk among themselves. Owen’s reconceived poetry emerges where truth and lies violently collide, and come to rest in the same space. This poetics of collision becomes a more consistent and discernable formula in Owen’s later, more assured poems.

Another formal element that the “The Letter” and the “Preface” share is their rather strange use of parentheses. In the former, they set off speech transcribed (by whom?) from the soldier’s written word. In the latter they seem to contain a few comparatively unfinished, informal thoughts, whose language and message is not nearly as carefully considered or aphoristically expressed as what precedes them. In both texts parentheses seem to try to keep two registers, two voices or even two identities of a single person, quarantined off. The salty language, raw neediness, and tense anxiety of the soldier’s trench persona cannot be allowed to mix with the emotionally distant, but upright, reassuring man

⁴⁸ The poem’s form can be read two ways: either as four quatrains —rhymed *aabb, cdcd, eeff, gbbg*— and a sestet (rhymed *hhiibb*) comprised of the final, severed line of the letter plus the final five lines of panicked speech; or as five quatrains and a final, dying couplet, which repeats the *bb* rhyme—and the word “dear”—both for the third and last time. I tend to think the sestet, even with its three couplets instead of a more traditionally elaborate interlocking scheme, coheres. A prolix sonnet, then.

who writes his wife. Likewise, Owen's stern, reproachful, war-wise sage persona cannot assimilate the dubious, over-eager, ambitious, even somewhat playful young poet who writes:

(If I thought the letter of this book would last, I might have used proper names; but if the spirit of it survives—survives Prussia—my ambition and those names will have achieved fresher fields than Flanders. ...) [ellipses Owen's]

This statement is clearly not as artfully composed as the rest of the "Preface," and therefore it can be read as provisional, even extraneous, and with the parentheses, somehow subordinate, a kind of afterthought. Yet, because it survives, we *must* read it alongside its pithier preamble. And somehow, perhaps because its tone is more conversational, it carries an air of greater authenticity, or at least greater sincerity—analogous to way the parenthetical speech in "The Letter" compares to its neighboring prose—it sounds more credible, more truthful, even though it is a plain admission that information has been withheld.

Samuel Hynes writes of the "Preface": "[Owen knew] the truth about war was a matter of language—and especially of the words that you did *not* use" (183). Hynes is referring primarily to the high-historical values that Owen lists in the preface as what he excludes from the poems. But what else is Owen trying *not* to say in this late-lingering fragment? How does the parenthetical's relative reticence adjust the climactic statement of the "Preface" which immediately precedes it: "That is why the true Poets must be truthful"? Which "proper names" were/are omitted from his poems? And what are we to do with the opposed categories of "the letter" and "the spirit" which seem to revert to precisely the kind of legal and theological modes of reading that the first par of the "Preface" dismisses? Any guidance the "Preface" might have offered for reading the poems is surely undermined by this odd addendum.

It is true that there are very few proper names of people in Owen's poems beyond "Jim" in "The Letter," and a very few place names.⁴⁹ Instead, for the most part he deploys a long, ghostly succession of intimately described but otherwise anonymous "he" and "him"s, "boys" and "lads"—very occasionally "men"—who populate and depopulate an undifferentiated string of muddy and dark dug-outs, holes, trenches and tunnels. Odd, then, that the "Preface" itself contains two proper names—"Prussia" and "Flanders." Perhaps, in their specificity, they serve to illustrate the implicit point: that the broad proper names that denote changing geopolitical spaces are decidedly outside the narrow purview of the trenches. It sounds odd to contemporary ears that instead of the names of nations that have come to be associated with the war's Western Front—Belgium, France, Germany—Owen uses the names of two medieval principalities whose borders and sovereignty were contested and in flux. With the phrase "fresher fields than Flanders" he ironically invokes John McCrae's famous poem, whose rousing, Patriotic fatalism ("deeds ... glory ... honour") had certainly begun to seem stale and untruthful by 1918. By referencing "In Flanders

⁴⁹ There's also "Bill," owner of the knife, and a presumably different "Jim" who goes mad in "The Chances." There's "Somme" and "Cérisy" in "Hospital Barge" along with a few others here and there: "At a Calvary near the Ancre," "Shadwell Stair," "Canongate," and "Princes Street."

Fields” in the preface for a planned volume of his own poems, Owen is coopting its popularity while rejecting its ethos. And by using the term “Prussia,” the administrative seat and center of military command for Bismarck’s ascendant German Empire, Owen is underlining precisely the kind of concern over “might, majesty, dominion” that his soldier-centered poems reject.⁵⁰ Oddly, Owen’s attempt to tone his rhetoric down to a purer truth seems to backfire here, or to require more energy than he has left to expend. The “Preface” peters out, exhausted and, in its exhaustion, it becomes as abstract as those paeans to “honour and glory” which it aims to discredit. And in including in his statement the proper names, rhetorical features and abstract values of the discourses he wishes to reject and replace, he is also admitting that they cannot truly be avoided. To defiantly reject them is to actively engage them.

This final portion of the Preface admits to the same problem Fussell points out with “The Other Ranks’ Letter Home”; namely that a more official and officious style, a more conventional form—such as a capital-P “Preface”—cannot tell simple truths in a simple way. Conventional forms proceed by euphemism and omission, paving over details, particulars, individuals. In this sense, and despite what the “Preface” attempts to claim in its first half, the poems themselves are not necessarily a more truthful and expressive antidote to an officially approved History (or a censored letter) but rather a similar exercise in dressing up a messy truth as something more readable and recognizable, if notably less agreeable.

The main body of the “Preface” sets up several provocative pairs—Poetry and War, Poetry and pity, Poetry and consolation, Poetry and truth—and then tries to assert their relationship through sheer rhetorical force, strong indicative statements of identity or nonidentity. Whether these strong statements succeed in rendering anything clear is up for question, and the tautological relationships we’ve already identified certainly lead to doubt. The parenthetical portion of the “Preface” sets up another difficult pair, “the letter” and “the spirit,” but these legalistic terms are couched in a subjunctive mode that renders the relationship and content of the words insecure from the start. It is perhaps this creeping subjunctive mood, this fundamental doubt about what will and won’t survive the war, that begins to show the fissures undermining Owen’s stronger statements as well. *If the letter lasts; if the spirit survives...* These *Ifs* recast the entire preface in a mood of doubt and skepticism while simultaneously letting language’s sonic features—here a conspicuous alliteration—distract from the conceptual labor it attempts. It is as if Owen the officer is trying to command proper pity, clarity and the logical structure of the law, while mildly insubordinate Owen the poet is just playing around with words. We realize belatedly that the forms of “The Preface,” meant to lead us away from “heroes” and “honour” towards “pity” and “truth” were at their base simply a pattern of sounds, with like letters leading to like concepts, with “poetry” and “pity” merely the most alike. The poetry *in* the “Preface” ultimately undermines its authority *on* the poetry.

⁵⁰ The use of “Prussia” here is also a reminder that this was not a confrontation between small discrete European countries but rather between sprawling empires, with all their constituent parts expected to fight and die for a whole to which their sense of belonging was no doubt contentious and wide-ranging—Prussia to Germany as England was to greater Britain.

II. Old Lies

If the “Preface” is one of Owen’s most famous and quotable statements about poetry’s uneasy relationship to truth, it is surely surpassed in that regard by the final lines of “Dulce et Decorum Est,” which mercilessly expose the jingoistic misuse of Horace’s *Odes* by patriotic poets and rhetoricians back in England. Having tracked Owen’s artful tautologies in the “Preface,” (“true Poets must be truthful”) it is instructive to move on to his less ambiguous stance on “The old Lie”:

Bent Double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 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, outstrapped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

GAS! GAS! Quick, boys! — an ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
 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.

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 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

Owen’s most famous poem is also his most brutally confrontational, and quite probably his best, not least because it cleverly proclaims its formal principle of construction from the start: As Meredith Martin points out in her valuable reading of its metrical forms, “Bent double” describes not just the burdened soldiers, but Owen’s innovative take on the sonnet,

in which he reflects two sets of fourteen lines around a central couplet, which repeats the last word of the first sonnet: “drowning.” The line also thereby marks a reflective divide between states of waking and dreaming, between the Western front and home front, between the soldier’s bitter irony, and the callow optimism of his civilian “friend.” But the description of the bent men is not just a formal metaphor; it is also a portrayal of real class differences exacerbated by the war. The poem aims to show how the war has made “old beggars” of young men by forcing them prostrate before the heavy material and machinery of war- and statecraft. These men are being bowed, not ennobled, by their burdens, their movements, and their environment.

The adjective “haunting” describes not just the foreboding “flares” in line 3 but the whole scene, including the men themselves, who, stripped of consciousness (“asleep”), clothing (“blood-shod”) and their sensual connection to the present (“blind ... drunk... deaf”), appear in the poem like shades who have crossed over prematurely to the land of the dead. This tentative movement between worlds, and the diminishing difference between those worlds, persists through the rest of the poem. If the living soldiers look and move like ghosts, the dying soldier behaves like one, returning again and again to the poet’s dreams: “He plunges at me”; it is precisely this nightmare that the poet wishes to confer on his civilian readership, and the vehicle of this transitive haunting is the poem itself. This is a good explanation for why its imagery is so intense, insistent and unpleasant: Its details are not meant to impress or entertain us, but to appall and assault us, over and over, not just while we read them, but as they recur in our memories.

Let us focus for a moment on the interesting detail of the “tired, outstripped Five-Nines.” This use of technical terminology, war jargon, naming things by numerical dimensions, is a kind of soldierly shibboleth, used to mark and measure in language the gap between poet and reader. The poet names these inhuman agents of harm in a numeric register. So then why are these particular shells anthropomorphized as “tired, outstripped” if they are clearly live enough to deliver a load of gas with a lively “hoot”? Perhaps they are “tired” because the sound they make, just like their numerical designation, has become so banal and familiar to the soldiers. The poem’s first-person plural speakers have become numb even to the things to which they should be most alert. The shells are “outstripped” because, in one of the war’s cruelest inversions, the shell’s sound is often preceded by the thing itself. By the time they’ve heard it, it’s already arrived.⁵¹ This sense of a sound too late to alert is also a fitting figure for the poem itself, whose formalized warnings can’t help those actually in danger. It is also notable that the numbers 5–9 add to fourteen, and therefore comprise an odd (literally, mathematically) counterpart to the poem’s other “numbers” the 8–6 stanzaic arrangement of the first sonnet, and to the ten syllables of each line. It is as if the poet is admitting that these particular numbers don’t quite fit into the sonnet, but they arrive anyway, violently blowing the evenly balanced composition to pieces. Finally, by including war jargon in the poem in this way, Owen again forcibly inducts the reader into soldierly spaces from which they would otherwise be excluded.

⁵¹ There’s a great passage in Graves’s *Goodbye to All That* describing this effect, and the fact that seasoned officers “learned not to duck to a rifle bullet because, once heard, it must have missed”(96): You simply don’t hear the one that hits you.

We share these dozing soldiers' harsh wakeup after the false rest of the poem's first turn, assaulted by the famous ninth line's four-beat explosion "GAS! GAS! Quick, boys!" Calling this line out leaves the reader breathless and a little choked by the four glottal stops "G-G-Q-ck" (which are then neatly echoed in line 16 "*guttering, choking*"). And there is a similarly mimetic effect in the drunken kinetics of the internal rhymes and gerunds of the sestet: "fumbling ... clumsy ... someone ... stumbling ... flound'ring ... under"—we feel the desperate failures of action in crisis in this guttural muddle of words. And then, as suddenly as the gas shells' arrival, there comes another line break, a literal and figurative fissure, which exists not just textually, between the end of the first sonnet and the hinge-like couplet, but conceptually and chronologically, between the intense present tense of the battlefield and its delayed and dissociated traumatic aftermath. The line break's already disruptive gap is made to do considerable extra conceptual work here.

The gap — "A Gap in History"—is the organizing formal concept of Samuel Hynes's seminal *A War Imagined*, which he uses to describe a series of cultural relationships, including those between young and old, combatant and civilian, but especially between pre- and postwar culture. Hynes speaks of this gap as the central feature of "The Myth of the War" which post-war artists used to distance themselves from it perpetrators:

The sense of a gap in history ... poets and novelists rendered it in images of radical emptiness — as a chasm, or an abyss, or an edge — or in images of fragmentation and ruin, all expressing a fracture in time and space that separated the present from the past." (xiii)

Owens's poems also locate immense power not just in "images" of gaps and negative spaces, but in their literal presence on the page, and "Dulce and Decorum Est" is the consummate example of this technique. The poem's first turn is, as we've seen, filled with violence and surprise. It marks a rapid change from one state to another, from the octave's resigned, beaten-down "fatigue" to the sestet's desperate flurry of alarm and action. It boasts six frantic gerunds in its six lines: "fumbling ... fitting ... yelling ... stumbling ... flound'ring ... drowning." Of these, only the "fitting" of the helmets can be read as a purposeful and successful act, and even then, the suspenseful trope "just in time," with its false note of relief, is subject to the same bitter irony as the rest of the poem. One man's competence only earns him the privilege of watching every grotesque detail of another's suffering. Another figurative gap opens, as critical as the violent line break of the first turn: the space between the living and the dying, as thin as the "misty panes" of celluloid in the gas mask, but as vast as the "green sea" between the drowning and the (temporarily) saved. That gap is reproduced in the space between the poem's first sonnet and the second, the latter of which is inverted, couplet first (although the couplet does not rhyme internally, but rather with the last two lines of the first sonnet) such that it acts as a kind of mirror, whereby the war experience is repeated first "in all my dreams" and then, after another gap, in "some smothering dreams" of patriotic civilian commentators, back home in England. This is where Owen's gap comes closest to Hynes's: the unbridgeable division between those who experienced the war in person and those who merely read about it later. He wants to vividly recreate an experience for others, while simultaneously depicting

the impossibility of that very act of communication. One particularly useful form for this incommensurability is the dream.

The plight of the gassed “man in fire” (the poem never actually grants us or him the comfort of his death, but suspends us in the depth and intensity of his suffering) repeats ad infinitum, “In *all* my dreams” (my emphasis), a true *mise en abyme*. The horror repeats itself by way of two new and one repeated gerunds of line 16: “guttering, choking, drowning.” This endless, repetitive experience is centered in the two lines, but spills across the bracketing gaps of the line breaks into the past of the event itself and the future of his surviving countrymen. The lines: “If in some smothering dreams you too could pace/
Behind the wagon that we flung him in” begins an unflinching, even sadistic description of the man’s slow torture by the aftereffects of the gas, with “smothering” shifting from the memory of the dying soldier into the cursed dreams. The purpose here is to shame and inflame the reader, to make us flinch and then to hold a mirror up to our flinching. Owen’s editor, Jon Stallworthy, claims the “you” is Jessie Pope, the author of patriotic children’s books and jingoistic verse to whom the poem was originally dedicated; but Owen’s decision to remove that dedication decisively invokes a more generalized “you,” unidentified other than by the fact they (we) can only dream of the war’s horrors —i.e., they (we) are those who lack direct sensory access to soldiers’ acute suffering, and who are culturally implicated in “the old Lie” of classical, patriotic fatalism. The “children” who are subject to these Latinate lies are a direct counterpart to the “boys” called out in the sestet, who themselves are a regressive incarnation of the “men” marching “asleep” of the opening octave. Owen emphasizes an underlying childishness to the whole affair, both in the helplessness of the soldiers and in the cluelessness of the civilians. This reaffirms his now famous message that the schoolboy Latin from Horace, with its empty abstraction, is not only an insidious medium for telling one’s children (and by extension, oneself) comforting lies about death and valor, but it is also partly to blame for boys’ dreams of war. Language itself shares the culpability.

There are no “innocent tongues” in this linguistic field—the Latin roots beget an English emergency, which subsumes both languages into inarticulate “gargling.” So to the trench talk and empty epistle of “The Letter,” we can add three more repurposed linguistic registers to the list of sources for Owen’s collagist poems: military-technical jargon (“Five-Nines”), inarticulate sounds (“coughing,” “hoots,” “guttering, choking,” “gargling,” to which we might retroactively add the “VRACH” of “The Letter”), and the schoolboy Latin and other, related “old lies” of English and European culture. And if the sum of all these spare parts ends up being poetry, the other name for the force that binds them together across their many gaps is, of course, irony. Fussell famously calls “mortal irony” the “appropriate interpretive means” for understanding the war, and these terms have remained one of the basic starting points for interpreting WWI poetry.⁵² This pervasive irony is, I think, intimately related, and at moments, identical, to Hynes’s equally fundamental “gap.” Irony lives in the gaps of these poems, and so we must read those gaps extremely carefully to understand how they undermine, contradict and multiply the meanings of the words that surround them, remembering Empson’s formulation of the much-needed “strength” one gains from “antagonism ... to both sides.” Neither soldier nor civilian occupies a position of

⁵² Pp. 3–4, and chapter 1 *passim*.

strength in this poem—both are complicit in the buying and selling of lies. But only one dies for it.

The figure of the dream so central to this poem is worth parsing further because it recurs throughout Owen's oeuvre (recalling too, the centrality of dreams to Edward Thomas). Despite the line breaks and chronological gaps that separate the first half of the poem from the second, there is no clean distinction made between the gritty waking reality of the soldiers at the front and the fantastical or terrible dreams of civilians. On the contrary, the soldiers' reality takes place in an atmosphere of gauzy, dreamlike phantasmagoria, thanks to their extreme fatigue, which blurs and dulls the edges of the material world, as well as in the atmospheric and perceptual disruptions caused by the gas and masks respectively. The reality of war in the first sonnet has all the trappings of a bad dream, where movement is either sluggishly difficult or frantically ineffective, forms obscured in the "misty ... thick green light." Conversely, the "dreams" of the second sonnet are marked by their lucidity, both in the unflinching description of the gassed soldier's agonies and the frank, accusatory turn at the end, whereby "The old Lie" is so sharply exposed. In this poem, war's reality is dreamlike, and dreams are disturbingly realistic. This strategy of poetic inversion or mirroring, the juxtaposition of bad dreams with equally bad realities, is yet another way that Owen deploys poetry's formal resources to attack the war's contradictions.

The war's ironic repudiation of the heroic and patriotic expectations people had for it is not just the theme of "Dulce et Decorum Est," but also its structural principle. Which is to say also, that the theme and the form of the poem actively elide the ironic gaps between home and front, the way that the thoughts, desires and experiences of each space and state of mind contradict and counteract each other. Pain-blunted perceptions obscure the war's realities and an excruciating clarity marks its dreams and memories, an inversion that is yet another example of a fundamental irony. The poem conveys this contradictory set of conditions to a public who has not experienced either side, and who wants desperately to cling to a moral clarity which can only be maintained by ignoring the war's realities: Owen's impossible task is to clarify what can't be seen and obscure what seems so clear. No wonder the "Preface" trails off in confusion... The poem comes much closer to fulfilling this politicized poetic mission, of democratizing the war's suffering and its pity, an achievement entirely staked on its manipulations of the sonnet form, whose multiple turns are used to transfer pain successively from soldier to poet to civilian audience.

It will be instructive to compare this poem to "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," another of Owen's innovative variations on sonnet form which also repurposes a traditional language of authority—in this case biblical instead of classical—to undermine its invocation in perverse and dishonest justifications of the war. The conflicting registers of cant and ironic honesty are in reverse proportion and position to their arrangement in "Dulce et Decorum" and instead of that poem's powerful moral rhetoric and assaulting realism, this poem's ethical force is produced by a more directly ironic formal juxtaposition:

The Parable of the Old Man and the Young

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,

And took the fire with him, and a knife.
 And as they sojourned both of them together,
 Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
 Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
 But where the lamb, for this burnt-offering?
 Then Abram 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, thy son.
 Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
 A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.

But the old man would not do so, but slew his son,
 And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

This strange sonnet boasts an extra couplet after its first 14 lines, which themselves are not traditionally divided. But this allows Owen to deploy another effective literary juxtaposition, between biblical language, traditional poetic form, and a modern destabilization of each that is both irreverent and devastating in its way. This poem is yet another activated by a treacherous gap filled to the brim with irony. The gap is like Hynes's generation gap between fathers and sons, but also one between ancient and modern cultural practices, ethics and ways of thinking. The darkest, sharpest irony here, of course, is that the biblical obedience and forgiveness that one might associate with an older generation, who might hew more towards scriptural codes in their personal behavior, is undercut, rejected, and savaged by precisely those men, who choose their own pride and power over the mercy and obedience offered in the Bible. In turning the Bible against patriarchy, in turning biblical rhetoric against the powerful men in such a clear and brutal way, this poem shows how irony and violence are two sides of a warring nation's coin. They are opposites made for each other, and each renders mercy irrelevant.

Another formal manifestation of Owen's assault on tradition here is in his use of imperfect and irregularly distributed rhymes, deployed only when they will be eerily effective, as in the first instance "together/... Father" a pairing that sets up the violation to come. These two figures are in fact held "together" not by filial values, but only by the wartime indifference of age towards youth. The entreaties of the son to "My Father" are not merely left unanswered but completely unheard—the father in this poem is disturbingly silent, a dumb and unstoppable force of pure violence freed from all reason and justification. Thereafter the rhymes become even more slant, with "son" vaguely echoed in "iron," "heaven" and "horns." This teasing resistance of the sonnet form is one way that Owen opens up a gap in this poem between what is and what should be, what we expect and what we get instead, to our horror. We see a sonnet in pentameter, and so we expect end rhymes—instead we get terse blank verse; we also see a "parable" in an obviously biblical vein and so we expect redemption or divine intervention—instead we get senseless slaughter. But this grim conclusion, in a final, ironical twist of the knife, arrives in two

neatly rhymed lines of iambic pentameter, the typical unit of both English wit and classical epic in English translation. Here it separates the brutally contemporary historical conclusion from its biblical preamble. This scriptural almost-sonnet is left open and unfinished, followed by a suspenseful gap whereafter a traditional biblical form might then offer God's mercy and deliverance. Owen retracts this promise and offers only abject brutality instead, implicating not just one English "old man," but the entire structure of European authority.

This is one of Owen's most potent examples of Hynes's "Myth of the War"—that persistent narrative that later generations would tell themselves about its cultural and historical significance: The "chasm... or abyss" between the old and the young; the betrayal and sacrifice of the latter by the former. For our purposes it is important to stress how this gap is represented by a literal gap in the poetic text on the page. The sonnet ends, but then after a gap, it ends again, not in redemption but in mass death. But there is a disturbance in Owen's method that upsets the neat divisions and oppositions that so characterize Hynes's "Myth of the War."⁵³ In so many of Owen's poems, most famously "Dulce et Decorum est" it is the overreliance on ancient rhetoric and myths of valor and sacrifice that led to the older generation's disregard for those actual lives being wasted on their war fronts. In this case there is a double betrayal, a deeper hypocrisy by which the ethics and structure of an ancient text (in this case the Old Testament) are violated and modernized to catastrophic effect. Instead of learning the lesson of mercy or restraint from the Abram and Isaac story, the "old man" of the updated text reverts to an atavistic logic of slaughter, completely deaf to the influence of those civilizing covenants between God and man, let alone those between man and man. Indeed, the deafness and silence of the old man in this poem is its most terrifying feature; he is completely immune, not just to the reasonable questioning of his son, but even to the direct command of the "Angel ... out of heaven." This stunning silence is the other striking gap in this poem.

Instead of an elaborate, romanticized justification of war by which cultural authorities silence dissent or debate on the conflict, Owen offers us nothing at all, a hole in human discourse so utterly unnerving that it constitutes its own kind of power, a destructive force that cannot be shamed or reasoned with. In representing this inarticulate violence, the silent gap on the page between the sonnet and the excessive couplet is the most powerful line in this poem. The fierce finality, the snapping shut, of that final rhyme mimics the dumb brutality of the old man's act. Whereas the lines preceding the couplet reached and groped for rhymes and answers to questions, not to mention any available means to avoid the impending slaughter, the rhyming couplet is decisive and bayonet-sharp. The rewritten biblical story here does not cast forward in time a lesson or typology for future believers, but rather abruptly severs the bond between past and present.

Just as the war's harsh irony rendered Horace's rhetoric wholly insufficient, even ridiculous, here the foundational mythology of the Bible is repurposed and repudiated. On the one hand it is used to violate its own ostensible principles, of mercy, obedience, redemption, etc. On the other hand that very violation shows a kind of self-contradictory nostalgia for a time when those principles still applied to culture and behavior. Past and

⁵³ It should be said here that Hynes himself works to show the cracks and contradictions in the pervasive "Myth"; he stresses that it is a retrospective construction, not a historical fact.

present values and their modes of transmission reach for each other in this poem, but they fail to connect across the precipitous gap of contemporary violence. Owen once again shows inherited forms failing to apply to the modern catastrophe, and yet that very failure, and the unfathomable gap it leaves in understanding, comes closer to an accurate accounting of the war, the action of the double poem. This poem illustrates not just the indifference and brutality of old men, but the very failure of the cultural touchstones that created them in the first place.

III. Smiling Lies

That Owen is unable to reconcile his poems' fundamental formal oppositions—between letters and speech, high Latin and trench talk, parable and angry oath—is a fundamental truth behind his emergent structure of feeling. The lived experience of the war repudiates all the rhetorical efforts to give it any meaning at all, least of all ethical justification. This of course recalls us to Vincent Sherry's formulation of modernists' rhetorical confrontation with English Liberalism, though Owen begins and ends his confrontation with political rhetoric from a liberal humanist position, perhaps hoping to rehabilitate his own liberal worldview after the war's total assault on everything human has exhausted itself. Here is an Owen poem which explicitly takes on public rhetoric in the form of the *Daily Mail's* belligerent propaganda, and allows his soldiers the opportunity to respond—an opportunity which they do not quite take up, except in pained, silent irony:

Smile, Smile, Smile

Head to limp head, the sunk-eyed wounded scanned
 Yesterday's *Mail*; the casualties (typed small)
 And (large) Vast Booty from our Latest Haul.
 Also, they read of Cheap Homes, not yet planned,
 'For,' said the paper, 'when this war is done
 The men's first instincts will be making homes.
 Meanwhile their foremost need is aerodromes,
 It being certain the war has just begun.
 Peace would do wrong to our undying dead, –
 The sons we offered might regret they died
 If we got nothing lasting in their stead.
 We must be solidly indemnified.
 Though all be worthy Victory which all bought,
 We rulers sitting in this ancient spot
 Would wrong our very selves if we forgot
 The greatest glory will be theirs who fought,
 Who kept this nation in integrity.'
 Nation? – The half-limbed readers did not chafe
 But smiled at one another curiously
 Like secret men who know their secret safe.

(This is the thing they know and never speak,
 That England one by one had fled to France,
 Not many elsewhere now, save under France.)
 Pictures of these broad smiles appear each week,
 And people in whose voice real feeling rings
 Say: How they smile! They're happy now, poor things.

This poem highlights two related gaps in experience, between those at home and those at the front; and among the latter, between the living and the dead. The figure of both is irony, the meaningful gap between what is said (or written) and what is actually true. It is significant that the “wounded” are reading “Yesterday’s *Mail*” because it reveals they are at a short but significant remove from their country and its news, even though they *are* the news. This gap is narrow but deep, as they read words meant for someone else, somewhere else, wherein they themselves are either “(typed small)” or abstracted in inflated, and mostly posthumous terms.

The quiet outrage and the ironic smiles around which this poem is built arrive first with the excessive capitalization of “Vast Booty,” “Latest Haul,” and then, in a purposefully jarring shift in subject and register, “Cheap Homes,” all of which highlight the government role in perpetrating and profiting from the war’s elided horrors. These “large” emphases stress how quickly the *Mail*, a cheap, popular daily paper which became a jingoist propaganda rag in the lead-up to the war, wanted to paper over the casualty list, and how insulting this is to the wounded, who clearly feel excluded from the patriotic first-person plural of the article. They are “the men” whose “first instincts” are being discussed, yet they are also “the sons” who were “offered” and “have died” with “regret.” Who, exactly, is discussing and ventriloquizing these men as they read in “sunk-eyed” passivity? Lines 5–17 are in the pompous, propagandistic voice of “the paper” which is perhaps uniquely capable of an utterance as fatuous as the line “Peace would do wrong to our undying dead,” but then the point of view shifts to one that takes in the soldiers themselves.

This poem, similar to “The Letter” with which we began, is a collage-like combination of a nonpoetic text (the paper’s) with the internal voice of some wounded soldiers, bound together by an elaborate and relatively regular rhyme scheme. The first two rhyming quatrains take the *abba* form of the *In Memoriam* stanza. The next two go *aa’aa’* (where the ‘ indicates pararhyme) and *cccc* respectively, the rhyme becoming more insistent and distracting. As in “The Letter,” we are made to wonder at the effect and the status of poetry and rhyme itself: why would the paper rhyme? Does chopping bad journalism into rhyming lines make it poetry? Again the answers, such as they are, seem to emerge in the ironic effects created by the gap between the two modes (journalistic and lyric) and voices (officials’ and soldiers’). The space of the poem allows these two entities to converse in a way they are decisively not prone to in “real life.” As the rank and file read what passes for journalism in “The Mail,” they, in effect, read about themselves in someone else’s voice—and reject the likeness. The poem’s elaborate double-voicedness allows us to see from multiple perspectives the various parts of the state apparatus looking at itself and not liking what it sees. Neither the press nor the soldiers can afford such self-awareness on their own, but through the double form we can enjoy an external critical vantage point.

As to that form: Every line in this poem carries precisely ten syllables except the awkward and excessive line 23: “Though all be worthy Victory which all bought,” a line whose murky grammar demands repeated readings to which it remains stubbornly and ironically unrewarding, *contra* its remunerative theme. To bring it to account we must tellingly elide “Vict’ry.”⁵⁴ Otherwise this regular pentameter undergirds the social intercourse promised by a journalism. Only a few lines here though, approach anything like metrical regularity, iambic or otherwise, largely because so many feature obtrusive initial trochees (“Yesterday’s,” “Also,” “Meanwhile,” and the dubious “Peace”), multisyllabic fantasies and abstractions (“aerodromes,” “indemnified,” “integrity”) and the several line endings with equally weighted pairs (“yet planned,” “all bought,” “each week,” “poor things”). One of the results of this metrical stuttering is to reify the disjunctive reading experience of the “wounded” who have “fled to France” consuming language written by and for the increasingly foreign-seeming tribe back home, who very obviously view the “casualties ... who fought/ Who kept this nation in integrity” as a foregone abstraction. In return, the wounded view that other abstraction—“Nation?”—with increasing suspicion. It is Owen’s cheeky irony that it is the poet who brings truth and accuracy to bear on the weak and harmful abstractions of public rhetoric, and not vice versa as a more Platonic convention might have it. Journalism has sacrificed its claim to measured objectivity in the course of its failure to address and account for the soldiers’ experience while it eases the conscience of its civilian audience.

In this poem, the daily newspaper, that communal, communicative organ of the nation state, is proof positive for these particularly alienated readers that they have been cut out of the body politic, a bloody sacrifice to “greatest glory.”⁵⁵ Indeed, the paper itself, with its economics-inflected language of loss and revaluation (“offered” “indemnified” “worth[y]” “bought”) is the very mechanism by which “sons” are reduced to “pictures,” and small print. In other words, it is not just war and the state, but also mass media, which reduce men to things in order to insure an “undying” future that elides those casualties. Only poetry can restore an account of these losses, and even then, only in a deeply ironic, unremunerative manner, outside the ready market of penny papers. The soldiers’ loss is the civilians’ profit in various literal and figurative ways. The soldiers confront this bleak iniquity with their own genre affinity, singing fatalistic, ironic verses like the one that gives this decidedly unlyrical poem its name.⁵⁶

The smiling pictures of the dead, and the soldiers’ songs invoked in this poem take on an even harsher irony in relation to the biting “Epilogue” of the poem “S.I.W.”:⁵⁷

With him they buried the muzzle his teeth had kissed,
And truthfully wrote the mother, ‘Tim died smiling.’

⁵⁴ Thanks to Dan Blanton for pointing out this fitting detail.

⁵⁵ Benedict Anderson on the daily newspaper: “What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?” (35) These soldiers are removed enough to see through the fiction of the “mass ceremony.”

⁵⁶ Stallworthy includes its opening verse in a note: “What’s the use of worrying?/ It never was worth while,/ So pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag/ and smile, smile, smile” (168).

⁵⁷ My cringe worthy pun on the poem’s final image was unintended, but so apt, I guiltily leave it in.

The “self-inflicted wound” here is expanded beyond the suicides or dangerous bids for “blighty” that the term initially denoted. For we are meant to see in all of these poems that it is not just wounded soldiers, but an entire culture self-harming with its tortured uses of language. In this poem, Tim (it seems important to use his “proper name,” so pointedly deployed in the poem’s last line) is haunted by the rhetoric of his hawkish father and fretful mother. “Death before dishonor” is the credo he imbibes, and it ultimately poisons him during the “reasoned crisis of his soul.” His suicide is shameful, but reasonable, much like the soldiers’ cuttingly “truthful” but oddly compassionate letter to “the mother.” The killing joke is the only rational form in an irrational situation, where everyone agrees to tell and hear whichever lies will allow them to go on. The letter from the fellow soldiers to the mother, with its wicked white lie, offers a concrete example of Owen’s abstract assertion in the “Preface”: “the true Poets must be truthful”: they cheekily slant the unspeakable into something that can be said out loud.

Irony, repression, the relentless counteraction of propaganda and the hypocrisy of public rhetoric, and the somewhat novel mode of poetry meant to shame and attack its audience—these are all familiar aspects of the now-canonical “War Poets” and the politically and pedagogically convenient but unfair and inaccurate homogenization of their output. But what we have added to this old story is the way in which this familiar critical narrative takes place not so much through the content of these poems, but in their formal execution. Owen in particular manages a critique and repudiation of conventional ideas and their received forms *in and through form* and especially in the way he uses poetic effects to combine multiple nonpoetic registers, pitting them against each other (putting the *versus* in verses) in a transgressive discourse that tries to break through cultural deadlocks into a hard-won truth.

IV. Deep Lies

Another multi-voiced poem with a skewed relationship to the newspaper is the phantasmal, “Miners,” which also features a disquieting gap between the past and present, and provides an interesting comparison to Coleridge and Hardy’s hearths as loci of liberal guilt. This also happens to be one of Owen’s most effective experiments in pararhyme, that inherently double form which allows a poem to comment ironically on its own status as a set of literary conventions:

There was a whispering in my hearth,
 A sigh of the coal,
 Grown wistful of a former earth
 It might recall.

I listened for a tale of leaves
 And smothered ferns,
 Frond-forests, and the low, sly lives
 Before the fauns.

My fire might show steam-phantoms simmer
 From Time's old cauldron,
 Before the birds made nests in summer,
 Or men had children.

But the coals were murmuring of their mine,
 And moans down there
 Of boys that slept wry sleep, and men
 Writhing for air.

And I saw white bones in the cinder-shard,
 Bones without number.
 Many the muscled bodies charred,
 And few remember.

I thought of all that worked dark pits
 Of war, and died
 Digging rock where death reposes
 Peace lies indeed.

Comforted years will sit soft-chaired,
 In rooms of amber;
 The years will stretch their hands, well-cheered
 By our life's ember;

The centuries will burn rich loads
 With which we groaned,
 Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,
 While songs are crooned;
 But they will not dream of us poor lads,
 Left in the ground.

We might call this poem a nightmare pastoral, which ends in horror after watching the complex emerge unbidden from the simple, and wherein a bid for social solidarity ends in a mass grave. There is an excessive quality to this poem: not that the its horror is inappropriate to its topic (quite the contrary) but rather that the discussion appears to spin out of the speaker's (and the poet's) control. This loss of control, I will argue, is due to the poem's chaotic mixing of discourses, which is perhaps less apparent on the surface than the other poems we've looked at so far. At the risk of undermining my argument with yet another pun, I'll aver that the formal conflict in this piece occurs under the surface.

Stallworthy's editorial note tells us that on January 14 Owen wrote his mother "Wrote a poem on the Colliery Disaster: but I get mixed up with the War at the end" (113). The disaster in question was the Minnie Pit explosion in Halmerend that killed 156 miners, which Owen read about in the *Daily News*. So a newspaper report is the shadow source of

the poem's descent into its own internal horrors. One also has to wonder too, if Susan Owen appreciated her son's pun on the how he himself got "mixed up with the War," that more persistent disaster.

It begins, however, in a deceptively comfortable place: a fireside reverie softened by "whispering" and "wistful[ness]", and the pleasant, only slightly slanted rhyme "hearth/earth." It invokes a geological rather than theological past, part of a desire to imagine a neutral prehistory before man and war, good and evil; he tries to conjure from the "sigh of the coal," a "tale of leaves/ And smothered ferns," a literally and figuratively condensed pastoral Eden, "Before the fauns ... Before the birds made nests in summer,/ Or men had children." The poem tries to construct a quaintly scientific vision: a gentlemanly appreciation of the organic process that transforms all the plants and creeping things into the substance that is fuel to our own warmth and our domestic reveries. One can already anticipate how these discourses of scientism and geological time might be disrupted by present violence.

Indeed, the primordial dream does not cohere, and the very words which ostensibly summon it allow a pointedly historical unease to emerge instead: the "steam-phantoms" which "simmer" and "Time's old cauldron" in the third stanza inaugurate the poem's movement into a kind of dark and unbidden séance of contemporary suffering. Instead of dinosaurs and ferns, the coal conjures up miners and soldiers. In these moments there is an echo of the same generational conflict enacted so vividly in "The Old Man and the Young." The speaker's yearning for a vision of a time "before men had children" hints at something sinister or at least undesirable in this erstwhile uncontroversial generational process. Something, it seems, has befouled the innocent pastoral moment when "birds made nests in summer," and the natural, neutral biological act of reproduction has been replaced by cultural rituals more occult and infernal.

The biological and geological images of the opening stanzas, which attempt to avoid the fires of war, are quickly consumed by an economic and political conflagration, as the proletarian experience of the men (and boys) who mined the burning coal subsume the "former earth" under the present earth, with all its attendant violence and injustice. Indeed, the fourth stanza's alliterative quartet of "murmuring ... mine ... moans ... men" bespeaks a brand of radical solidarity that might at first seem somewhat surprising from a culturally elitist, upwardly mobile officer like Owen, and yet may be available to him as a poetic fantasy precisely because of this social gap. The war, we know, had a way of cleaving old class lines, realigning soldier with soldier, officers and men, against the safely ensconced "old men" so far back behind the lines, especially those worthies in government, clergy, media and business, whose overlapping interests prolonged the war for their own gain. Indeed, Owen's quick move to identify actual coal miners with "all that work the dark pits/ of war" shows that suffering is a powerful unifying force, and that working-class suffering was being democratized upward, as it were, in the hellish "cauldron" of the war. There is also a potent echo of the "beggars" and the unforgettable gassed man from "Dulce et Decorum est" in this poem's buried "men/ writhing for air."

The fifth stanza is the deepest circle of what has so suddenly become a terrifying Dantean vision:

I saw white bones in the cinder-shard,

Bones without number.
 Many the muscled bodies charred,
 And few remember.

These lines are the clearest clue that the mind depicted in this poem is profoundly disturbed. It is one thing to think of miners as one burns coal—any reasonably imaginative, sensitive liberal mind might do that. It is another thing entirely to envision unnumbered burning bodies in the ashes of the fireplace. At this point the reverie's conceit becomes a nightmarish metaphor, with a tortured intensity that is more Poe than Coleridge. And if the detail of "muscled bodies" seems strange or nonsensical here (first there was nothing left but bones and ash) we can keep in mind not only that it sensuously unites the hardworking and predominately youthful soldiers and miners, but also that "muscled bodies charred" contrasts thematically and sonically with the line two stanzas later: "Comforted years will sit soft-chaired." In other words, Owen is markedly opposing hard and soft bodies, young and old, dead and alive, because, in yet another of the war's cruel inversions, indolent old men will long survive the able-bodied young who "moan" and "groan" under the burdens of their fathers' war.

Yet despite the atmosphere of horror and anger in this poem, it is strangely abstracted and reticent when it comes to identifying its enemies. Instead of specified or stereotypical "old men" to condemn and resent, the poem offers us only the oddly anthropomorphized "years" and "centuries"—Hardyesque figures which deny our desire for an object for our outrage, probably to the detriment of the poem's sentiment, but perhaps to the benefit of its complexly layered sense of history and solidarity. By failing to explicitly condemn one demographic here, Owen succeeds in reminding us that the livelihood of *all* future generations are predicated on the work and (often violent) deaths of their ancestors. This is the rule not just of human history as presented in this poem, but of time itself, reaching back into the Precambrian. What is up for criticism is not this cycle itself, but the willful ignorance of the comfortable, "[who] will not dream of us poor lads/ Left in the ground." That is to say, the poem censures the cultural failure to engage in acts of imagination like the poem itself.

This poem also initiates another ironic conflict between its speaker and his own words; for though he is resentful as he imagines future generations sitting in front of their fires "not dream[ing]" (much like the addressee of "Dulce et Decorum est") of "us poor lads" he has simultaneously elided and replaced the very miners he hoped to remember with anonymous soldiers, and directly identified himself with the "comforted years" who enjoy the luxury ignorance of the suffering and sacrifice from which they benefit. There is a strong sense of survivor's guilt here, which has the odd effect of aligning the speaker equally (and paradoxically) with both the suffering dead and the comfortably alive.

Jahan Ramazani, as part of a fine reading of "Miners" in *Poetry of Mourning*, articulates the poet's ambivalent position and the resulting instabilities around guilt, blame and implication:

For Owen, the audience is often guilty, the dead person innocent, and the poet split between the two poles ... As poet, Owen is implicated in the space of middle-class leisure, and he is at an inevitable remove from the deaths he mourns. As victim, he is

one of the exploited and oppressed, but to maintain this stance, he must evade his own indirect confession that he uses the dead for poetic gain. (81)

This is an apt description of the radical instability of speaker's role in the poem, but it falls short in that trying to locate the poet's "stance" between the innocent and guilty "poles," underselling how completely the speaker identifies with both groups. The poem is not a safe space between "middle-class leisure" and the "exploited and oppressed" but a manic, confused tacking back and forth between them. The shift from the second to the first person in the final two stanzas collapses the separation between the news from home, the horrors of the front, and the poem's audience, drawing all down into the pit beneath the flames.

As we saw in Hardy, war does some of its worst damage to the fundamental processes of time, reversing the roles of old and young so that the latter become the group closer to death, wiser and more experienced in its ways, and less able to even imagine—never mind survive to witness—the ameliorative future by which the Liberal executors of war justify its continuance. This poem works by way of this destructive reordering of time, examining without solving the contradictory spaces it opens up. By rendering old men naïve and childish in their ignorance of war's true results, and young men old, in their unwanted wisdom and proximity to death, and by throwing both into the same recriminatory fires of the poem's self-contradictory forms, Owen begins to draw the shape of a structure of feeling for the war built on an excruciating irony that can no longer "get so safely outside the situation" as Empson suggests. Owen traps us in two terrible positions at once.

The precise use of pararhyme in this poem supports its unstable conceit. The coal in the fire initially "recall[s]" an ancient peaceable "former earth"—but not exactly. Something seems slightly off, and the quatrain with the ominous rhymes "summer/simmer" and "cauldron/children" is where the mismatch between the speaker's desire for peace and the reality of war begins to emerge between the slippage of similar words and concepts. This pattern of rhymes which subtly repudiate their predecessors persists through the poem, for instance "amber/ember" contrasts the luxury and stasis of "soft-chaired" rooms with the hard "charred" state of the soldiers, and the "mine" is the site of the infernal transubstantiation of these "men." There is an uneasiness, even a perversity to this rhyming practice, which refuses and repudiates the comfort of aesthetic tradition in a manner analogous to this poem's repudiation of bourgeois domestic comforts. This conversion of form and content culminates in the poem's final sestet (indeed, we have yet another reapportioning of the sonnet form here, with its extended overall length offsetting its radically restricted lines), which counteracts the potential comforts of "dreaming lids" and "songs ... crooned" with "burn[ing] loads" and "poor lads" who "groaned" and were "left in the ground." In this way, the rhyme words themselves, and especially the repeated realizations that they are not quite rhymes, are used to spoil any bid for consolation.

Again we see how a specialized gesture of formal poetics—in this case pararhyme—is the rhetorical ground from which Owen is able to conceptualize political arguments that his status as a middle class officer and proud English chauvinist would otherwise render unutterable. The poem's doubling language allows Owen to conjure up a shadow self, who

is able to say things that the speaker is not quite able, to deliver a message he is not ready to hear himself. This is the effect of pararrhyme, with its simultaneous acceptance and rejection of poetic tradition and all the deep history and cultural assumptions buried in its forms.

It will be worthwhile to look at another pararrhymed poem in which the speaker invokes agricultural and geological processes to confront a more intimate kind of inassimilable truth, the death of a loved one, where the love itself cannot be named.

Futility

Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds –
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
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?

This sonnet participates in a similar transubstantiation to Hardy's "Drummer Hodge" and Thomas's "Digging," into the geological layers of deep-historical time, while also recalling the anonymous obsequies of "A Private." But it begins more intimately, with the gentle handling of the body of a soldier who appears to have died in his sleep. The speaker carries the knowledge and authority of a devoted senior officer, which we can observe in both the imperative mood of the first line and in his familiar reference to the soldier's sleeping habits "at home." But the steadying familiarity of this voice quickly grows strange, with the magical thinking of "if anything might rouse him now," and the phrase "kind old sun," which is so tonally inappropriate that it must be read as either sarcastic or "fatuous."

The poem begins something like a public eulogy, with its specific positive memories of the dead, before lapsing (or turning) into a private, internalized lament. Lines 3 and 4 have nine syllables (but still only four stresses) so in a sense they flirt with pentameter, approach its volubility, its capacity to explain and expound, but then the poem proceeds by a mode of withholding, subtracting syllables from subsequent lines, and with them the potential to "rouse" someone into conversation. If there is anything that "the kind old sun" *does* "know"—about the soldier's past, or about answers to the three questions of the second stanza—we don't get to hear it. The poem is nowhere a dialogue, but only a fitful, lonely, self-enclosed hybrid of hymn and sonnet. The initially authoritative voice of the

speaker grows less and less assured, until it becomes clear he is only talking to himself, lobbing impossible, slightly unhinged questions into the void.

At this point the sonnet splits in two, and it is worth looking closer at this unconventional form. Instead of the traditional European 8-6, or the English 4-4-4-2, this sonnet splits 7-7. And though there is no particular reason why the turn can't arrive a line early in a sonnet, it decisively upsets the form's traditional proportions, where an extended exploration is resolved in a more succinct and decisive summation. Rather than more balance, the 7-7 arrangement here actually yields a kind of indecisiveness or unanswerability. In the gap of the extra line break between the two halves, the intimacy and specificity ("*this* morning and *this* snow") of the first stanza is lost, as if the soldier's body was left and forgotten as the speaker's distracted—perhaps repressive—train of thought ascends into abstraction. The poem's voice falters as it reaches across this gap—we might even call it a trench or a grave—and in so doing it abandons the space of special personal knowledge and floats into a realm of an almost cosmic uncertainty. It also abandons any pretense, however hollow it might have been, that the sleeper is still alive. Hope, optimism, the desire to cling to life: all disappear into that gap.

In addition to the evenly split seven-line stanzas, the form here is also notable for "missing" stresses and a rhyme scheme that is both simpler and more complex than most sonnets. Neil Corcoran has noted the poem's "abbreviated lines, its refusal of pentameter" (93); but while he accurately names what they are not, he stops short of describing what they are. Both stanzas begin and end with three-stress lines that surround more traditional tetrameter lines—but even those have a terse and reserved feel compared to the more conversational pentameter of so many sonnets. Though the pattern is a little off, inverted in a sense, the alternation of tetrameter and trimeter lines recalls a ballad, or more perhaps more aptly here, hymn meter. And while Corcoran also likens the "opening instruction" of the poem to the "initiation of a pastoral ritual" I'd say we are more in the realm of a subverted Anglican funeral rite, with "clay" and "earth" instead of dust-to-dust (no dust in the perpetual mud of the Western Front). In yet another of the infernal inversions of the trenches, the body is *disinterred* at death, raised up out of the earth for one last moment in the sun.

The rhymes follow a similar logic of refusal, in that they recycle similar sounds without actually engaging in anything like the comfortable repetition of "true" rhymes. As in "Miners" these are fine examples of the "pararhymes" Owen became known for, which repeat sounds of either the vowel (as in "sun" and "once") or the consonants (as in "sun" and "sown") of their predecessors, but never both, and so never quite "rhyme," in the strict sense of the word. The effect is of a kind of sliding and slurring from line to line, a continual thwarting of expectations, what Kerr calls "a broken promise to return" (295). Owen's technique here cuts directly against Wordsworth's bold assertion in "The Preface to Lyrical Ballads" (1802) that, "more pathetic situations and sentiments ... those that have a greater proportion of pain connected with them, may be endured in metrical composition, especially in rhyme, than in prose" (306). In this formulation, meter and rhyme have an anesthetic effect, not eliminating pain, but improving the reader's ability to endure it. Owen, on the other hand uses the pararhyme to twist the knife of grief and blame, as he tweaks his forms to approximate—but ultimately violate—accepted practices. If rhyme soothes, pararhyme piques, drawing extra attention to what is unfitting, disappointing, or

downright wrong. Owen also cleverly deploys anagram (as in “sown” and “snow”) and subtraction, (“snow” and “now”) to create sight rhymes and false rhymes that contribute further notes of subversion to the poem. The kind of grim play of this poetic technique is most visible in the final three (para)rhymes of the first stanza, which just barely suppress a desperate cry of “no, no, no...”

The second stanza engages in an odd mix of awe and disappointment with the capabilities of the sun. It honors and accuses that light source, which “wakes the seeds” and “clays of a cold star.” The star in question is earth, and so we are participating in another juxtaposition of unfitting discourses here, of old testament cosmogony and new science, and the category error here (the sun is a star, the earth is not) is evidence of the mismatch. Then come the desperate, impossible questions. The soldier is gone from the poem, reduced to parts—“sides” and “limbs”—and the speaker asks to know why, knowing very well he can’t ever know. “Was it for this”⁵⁸—this pointless death in a trench—that the sun went through all that trouble of raising “the clay” in the first place? In descending back into “mere clay” the dead soldier’s body repudiates the sun, rendering its magic “fatuous.” The “toil” and “break(ing) earth” of the final lines recall the “fields half-sown” of line 3, leaving us with an image of unfinished work and wasted time, of work that might as well never have been begun. The poem too, has the feeling of something “half-sown” with its too-short lines, unfinished rhymes, unanswered questions, and the empty trench cutting it into two halves that don’t quite answer to each other. If indeed, it begins as a tender funeral rite, it ends as a rather aimless rant. Aimless in the sense that its anger misses the mark; similar to the anthropomorphized “years” and “centuries” in “Miners,” the “fatuous” sunbeams bear the brunt of a holy rage that could easily have been more accurately (i.e. politically) directed. But this wandering, distracted anger is not so much a flaw of the poem as it is its fundamental condition. The speaker here is constitutionally unable to assign blame for the pointless death of his fellow soldier, for a host of reasons we can well imagine (patriotism, camaraderie, obedience, and the need to justify one’s own continued fight). Instead he flails about in an absurd—indeed, slightly unhinged—pathetic fallacy.

Ramazani and Neil Corcoran have singled out “Futility” as one of Owen’s best poems, respectively calling it “more persistently evocative of abject loss” and praising the “exact intensity” of its “subverted elegy and homil[y]”: but to me it seems most effective in transmitting only this destabilizing sense of unresolved and aimless anger, which is either the cause or result of an inability to properly mourn in the context of mass death and the inescapable awareness one’s own impending oblivion.⁵⁹ The two unresolved poetic registers here, first the gentle, intimate affection and then the futile cosmic anger, are two especially discordant examples of the many competing voices which we’ve seen Owen’s poetry set in conflict. By combining them in a sonnet that has split itself in half, without either half resolving or augmenting the other, Owen has again shown how his poetry can only try—and only fail—to account for the war’s effects. The futility which the poem registers is not so much an assertion of political outrage as it is an expression of existential—and formal—exhaustion.

⁵⁸ Another echo/repudiation of Wordsworth here: “Was it for this” is also the question on which the first book of “The Prelude” turns.

⁵⁹ See Corcoran, 93, and Ramazani 73–5.

Coda

Formal doubling, internal antagonism, and strong irony are pervasive in these wartime poems and in the cultural and political structures that were their context. To stop there, though, would be merely to confirm what is already well known and widely claimed, not least by Paul Fussell, who proclaims “I am saying that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War” (35). What Fussell calls a “dominating form of ... understanding,” I identify with Raymond Williams’s “structure of feeling.” To explain how and why this epochal ironic mode is constructed in poetic form specifically is the primary focus of this study.

Poems written in the middle of the war will necessarily have a different structure of feeling than poems written in its lead-up or after its end. During the war, there are no stable cultural forms; everything is precarious or under outright threat of extinction, but especially those sociopolitical formations based on principles of liberalism, which even avowed liberals (and Liberals) seem to undermine or abandon at moments of crisis. These three poets employ variations on traditional poetic form to examine this feeling of radical cultural instability. Hardy interrogates the failure of history as a measure of human progress. Thomas confronts the emptiness of the individual as a locus of social cohesion. Owen exposes predominant inherited sources of moral authority as useless and rotten. By way of these endangered forms, all three poets come to question the concept of the nation itself, exposing it as a dangerously antisocial formation.

Poetry is the means by which they think through what is at stake, try on various forms of loss and see what, if anything, might be left afterwards. For all three, a complex or “double” irony, and related conventions of the pastoral mode, are the most useful strategies for limning these real and imaginary losses, because they allow the mind to simultaneously occupy two sides of an unfathomable divide—between faith and despair, but also the divide between social classes—those with the power and prerogative to observe and exert control, and those who are observed and controlled in turn. As Empson describes it, the complex irony of pastoral does not oppose sincerity, it opposes opposition—by saying “a plague on both their houses ... it seems to get so safely outside the situation.” Of course that safety is illusory, or rather, imaginary. It is real for the mind, but not for the body. These poems offer a kind of strength in the face of doubt and despair for which irony—and poetry—is more useful than faith or knowledge. In wartime, irony is not merely an aesthetic strategy, it is a survival strategy.

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