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Wilfred Owen:
A new war poetry

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Introduction

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.[1]

Wilfred's Owen poetry is a very deep and complex subject, profoundly permeated by the experience of the First World War, which gave him the epithet of "war poet". Perhaps, he is the best known of the poets who wrote during the period of the Great War, being nowadays a symbol of English poetry of the early 20th century. Remembered as a great soldier for his war gestures and his death in the war, he left a great number of poems, which were the efforts of a lifetime spent between England and France. Owen's image of the figure of the poet started to take shape while he was a schoolchild, and then as a soldier. His personal experience is very much connected to his poetry; it is not possible to study one aspect without the knowledge of the other. However, to make a proper analysis of Owen's poetry it is necessary to study all of the influences that conditioned his literary and poetic path. First of all John Keats, his first love and approach to literature, remains a core source for Owen's poetry, both for style and content. Together with Keats there is Shelley, there is a strong tradition of the Nineties, which Owen utilizes and absorbs to create his own style. Although, the most important influence was the one of Siegfried Sassoon, soldier and poet, whom Owen met during his permanence at Craiglockart hospital in 1917. Thanks to the meeting with Sassoon, Owen had the possibility to mature as a man and as a poet, developing his personal voice and becoming the great "war poet" we know nowadays. Sassoon's friendship provided a guide for a new way of writing, a new way to conceive things and a new way to Owen's awareness of the war and its meaning. Many of his poems, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' as the first, became what they are today because of the supervision of Sassoon, which guide Owen to create the magnificent sonnet we read. Sassoon's help sets Owen in the right direction, "Meeting Sassoon did not transform Owen's poetry, for he had already embarked on his mature poetic manner- […] In Sassoon he found the intellectual stimulus that he had so far

[1] Cecil Day Lewis, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, memoir by Edmund Blunden, London: Chatto and Windus, 1963, p. 55

lacked." [2] Owen was already a poet, but with Sassoon, he explored a new way of expressing himself and of describing the war. The novelty lies not only in the poetic style, though it is a fundamental aspect, but also in the way in which Owen sees the war. The Great War was a new war; nobody knew its power of destruction, its length, and its impact on society. Owen ensured that the war could no longer be seen as the same. Through the analysis of the poems written by Owen it is possible to grasp why Sassoon played such an important role in his life. An understanding of how the style has changed and improved is necessary in order to portray Owen the poet in his entirety.

In the first part, I will be dealing with Owen's early life, through a brief biography concerning his life as a child, the relationship with his family and the first experience concerning poetry. Together with the recounting of the most important aspects of his life it would be necessary to analyse Owen's first poems, which are deeply related to the experience of the Romantics. The second chapter will focus on the particular experience of the war, the breaking out of the First World War and the response of the poet. The year 1914 marked the beginning of a new world, for Owen too, and characterised the passage to his more mature and conscious life. Through the study of his first war poems I would like to underline the change that this terrible catastrophe brought to his poetry, having 1917 as focus year. It would be at the end of 1917, with the meeting with Sassoon, that the parable towards becoming a poet would come to a conclusion. The core of the analysis would be the relationship, both spiritual and material, between Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Owen's poetic evolution had reached its peak, with poems such as 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', 'Dulce et Decorum Est' and 'Strange Meeting'. In the third chapter, I will analyse and focus on Siegfried Sassoon, studying his first collection of war poems, which was Owen's direct example and guideline. After a brief comment on the real meeting, in the fourth chapter there will be the specific study of Owen's best-known poems, trying to draw the attention on how his style changed. I will analyse three important Craiglockhart poems, 'Anthem for Domed Youth', 'Disabled' and 'Dulce et Decorum Est', which open the way to the "new war poetry". Owen's way of working, his poetical skills and his view of the war emerge from the style of these first great poems. It will be chapter 5 to deal with a specific theoretical analysis of his innovative technique

[2] Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight a Study of the Literature of the Great War*, New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1966, p.127

of the approximate rhymes. Then, focusing on ‘Exposure’, but mostly on ‘Strange Meeting’, I will show how Owen uses his new skills in order to create his own language. The conclusion of the analysis will attempt to give an end to Owen’s poetical parable. It will be clear how deeply he changed and how mature his poetry became. ‘Strange Meeting’ is the perfect conclusion; it balances the innovative style with approximate rhymes, the dichotomy between tradition and novelty and the war as a dramatic experience.

1) Keats: the first teacher

1.1) Shrewsbury and poetry

Wilfred Owen was born at Plas Wilmot, in the small town of Oswenstry in Shropshire, on 18 March 1893. He was the first son of Tom and Susan Owen, even though the death of his grandfather forced the family to move from Oswenstry to Birkenhead in 1898. Susan was pregnant and Tom needed to find another occupation, while Wilfred was learning to write at his mother's knee. He wrote his first letter addressed to his mother, a small card surrounded by a border of kisses:

> my dear mother
>
> I no that you have got there safely. We are making huts. I have got a lantern, and we are lighting them up to-night.
>
> With love from Wilfred I remain your loving son Wilfred[3]

While the Owens were finding difficulty to cope with life and its harshness, Wilfred grew up creating a strong bond with his mother. In June 1989, Wilfred was sent to the Preparatory School of the Birkenhead Institute in Birkenhead, moving up to the Junior School in 1901. Susan had great projects for her first-born son, Wilfred's school was a fee-paying private school, and she wanted the best for him and his education. Tom and Susan gave birth to other three children, Mary in 1895, Harold in 1897 and Colin born in 1900.[4] Owen's family did not belong to the nobility, they were a respectable middle-class family, living a modest life without the means for a high quality education. Tom Owen worked for the Joint Railway, which gave him the opportunity to have occasional free rail travel for him and his family. After Tom was promoted to Assistant Superintendent in 1906, the Owen's family had to move to Shrewsbury.

[3] Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.14
[4] John Purkis, *A preface to Wilfred Owen*, London and New York: Longman, 1999, p.11

Shrewsbury was a turning point for Wilfred, who in 1917 remembered that 10 years earlier something important happened. They arrived in 1907, perhaps the year started with a row between father and son, because the children were not warned about the impending move.[5] Wilfred would not find again tranquillity like the one experienced in Birkenhead. He had to change school and entered the Shrewsbury Borough Technical School in the spring term of 1907. From the beginning he did well, especially in French, and soon enough his interest for poetry and drama gave him the attention of his English teacher, Miss Wright, who helped and encouraged him to write and express himself. [6]

In school, poetry was mostly Romantic poetry, the theory was the one written by Wordsworth: for language and emotions the examples were Tennyson and of course Keats. Wilfred worked hard during his permanence at school, he wrote essays on the standard authors and studied hard.[7] He was a sharp student of literature, very bookish and interested in nineteenth century literature. He read a list of masterpieces of English literature, starting in May 1907 with *The Faerie Queen*, Book I, and Macaulay's 'Horatius'. He then read Keats's 'Ode' that he quoted in an essay entitled 'Autumn' and then he passed on to Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, *Richard II*, *Twelfth Night*, *Cymbelin*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*).[8] He was only fourteen when he started to get to know the great poets of the past, though the interest for the Romantics was already strong. The year 1907 was, also, the year in which he tried to draft a blank-verse poem on the inside cover of his *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. It was, probably, his first attempt to try to understand what it means to be a poet, although it was just an attempt and it would be necessary to wait until 1911 to read his complete first poem. As a poem in itself, it does not reveal a lot, it is not a great masterpiece, nor the revelation of a genius. However, it is useful to start the understanding of his mind process and way of approaching texts.

[5] Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, London: Phoenix, 2002, p.43
[6] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit, p.40
[7] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit, p. 1
[8] Jon Stallworthy, Op.Cit, p.40

~~Wh~~ Within those days
~~About~~
When glossy celandine forgets to flower,
And bugle blooms where hyacinth hath been
Sweet moods and mystry dawn
And those ~~things~~ ~~which~~ least
Men need a poet's tongue to tell them of,
I made a wayward journey, through new paths.
~~Alone I went, as in my mournful~~ fate
I went ~~to~~ in quest of healing for a body tired
~~Partly to~~
~~And new~~ enthusiasm for a soul
~~Too~~
love
~~To~~ Grown faint in ~~praise~~ of beauty and of truth
more
~~as~~
And further~~more I half~~ I half-forknew,
Some for
Some vision waited me, even ~~to~~ me
As ~~unto~~ those old dreamers on May Morn
When
~~In~~ England's muse was young.[9]

It is just a draft, with lots of corrections and it is unfinished, but it is exemplary in order to understand the beginning of his way of thinking and working. Perhaps it does not have a great meaning, as a young boy he was just trying to copy what he was reading, but it reveals the germ of his first poetic inspiration. The poem does not have a title or a specific subject; it may seem that Owen is experimenting in order to find a uniform style.

[9] Ibid, p.41

Life in Shrewsbury continued for the Owen family, Tom liked to take Wilfred and Harold out for the day for a good time in the countryside. As Wilfred grew more and more keen on studying and reading, Harold, the second child, started to turn to his younger brother Colin. The whole family attended the church of the Holy Trinity in Uffington regularly. Susan was a fervent Christian, she liked her son to believe as she did, even though Wilfred would follow a different path. As a curious young boy he was also interested in more scientific subjects – Botany, Geology and Astronomy. He explored the local archaeological site in the nearby area. As he continued his education he became more and more attracted to the Romantics, especially Keats and Wordsworth. Although, it is not clear when he started to write, perhaps in 1911 when he began to read Colvin's biography of Keats and while on holiday at Teinmouth visiting sites and the house of the poet.[10] Having completed his school education, in 1911 he started working as a pupil-teacher[11] at Wyle-Cop School in Shrewsbury in order to prepare himself for the London Matriculation examination. Passing this first step would mean a possibility for Wilfred to enter university, even though the main obstacle for Owen's family was money. The financial problems of the family forced Wilfred to take up an offer of parish work with the vicar of Dunsden, near Reading, and in return, he would be coached for university admission. Wilfred's education so far was perceived as a failure from the boy himself, mostly for the result of the examination test. He suffered from the great expectations his parents had put upon him, they wanted to see him fulfilled in a higher sphere than theirs. However, Wilfred had no role model, nor guidance, his parents did not totally understand his capabilities and this lead to the temporal lack of self-confidence.

[10] John Purkis, *A preface to Wilfred Owen*, London and New York: Longman, 1999, p.12

[11] "Pupil-teachers were required to pursue a two-year probationer course, followed by another two years of combined teaching and study, and Wilfred actually joined the system for his entire school career in Shrewsbury, thirteen-and-a-half terms altogether. The Technical doubled as the local Pupil-Teacher Centre (PTC), and a minute of the town's higher education sub-committee on 19 March 1907, the day after Wilfred's fourteen birthday, confirms his admission to the PTC's probationer course, subject to his passing an entrance exam." Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, London: Phoenix, 2002, p.45

1.2) The religious crisis

On 11 October 1911, Owen took up his place as lay-assistant to the Reverend Herbert Wigan. He entered a new world with rules, duties, obligations, fixed values and routines that were new to him. Wilfred was, now, a young boy of eighteen, he had equipped himself with the necessary clothes and was ready to live outside his own house, although, he was nervous and afraid about not behaving correctly in the vicarage. The new world in which he entered was full of rules, commitments and had its own responsibilities. There was time to study and to write, the place was aloof but the general atmosphere was pleasant enough for the boy. On the other hand, Wilfred had to conduct parish work, which involved contact with the inhabitants of the poor villages.

Wilfred's first impression was positive, mostly concerned with the bedroom and the place itself, writing to his mother that there seemed to be strange forces to keep the room in order, to clean and to prepare hot water and pajamas on a fixed place of the bedroom every night. Moreover, his first impression of the vicar was much more favourable, probably because he talked about literary people and he was a six times removed cousin of William Morris.[12] Wilfred's first letter at home was mostly optimistic, even though he started suffering from homesickness and depression early on during his permanence there. He was anxious about the exams and felt the strain of appearing better educated than he thought he was. While he was at the vicarage he continued writing, since 1911, he started to improve his poetical skills, adding to his knowledge of Keats the one of Shelley, for example, and subsequently more poets.

Wilfred therefore became different figures in the vicarage: a teacher, a recorder of the case of extreme poverty and an inspector of unhealthy accommodations. He visited the poor and said: "Consumption is all around us here. Scarlet Fever and Diphtheria are at work near by."[13] He took very seriously his parish duties, writing home about what he was doing, the things he used and the hope he had for the poor. He became more and more aware of the situation of poor people.

[12] Jon Stallworthy, Op.Cit., p.66
[13] John Purkis, Op. Cit., p.13

> 'Numbers of the old people cannot read; those who can seldom do so. […] Those who had within them the Hope of a Future World are content, and their old faces are bright with radiance of eternity. Those who, like the beasts, have no such Hope, pass their old age shrouded with an inward gloom, which the reverses of their history have stamped upon their worn-out memories, deadening them to all thoughts of delight.'[14]

While at Dunsden, Owen started to get to know another important Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Up until then he had known little about the English poet, what awakened his interest was his involvement and activity as a philanthropist and a social reformer. He started to read John Addington Symonds's *Life* of Shelley, where he learned that the poet had lived not far from Dunsden and had carried on a work as a lay assistant.

> I find that Shelley lived at a cottage within easy cycling distance from here. And I was very surprised (tho' really I don't know why) to find that he used to 'visit the sick in their beds; kept a regular list of the industrious poor whom he assisted to make up their accounts;' and for a time walked the hospitals in order to be more useful to the poor he visited! I knew the lives of men who produced such marvellous verse could not be otherwise than lovely, and I am being confirmed in this continually.[15]

He started to absorb the Shelleyan ideas and visions, together with a much more liberal and detached way of seeing religion. He had started to mock the preaching at Dunsden, always writing to his mother and documenting his ideas in his letters. He spent the summer of 1912 with the family at Kelso, which was followed by a week at an Evangelical Summer School at Keswick that unchained further doubts and reflections. In January 1913, Wilfred had already suffered the beginning of his religious crisis and was no longer able to maintain the right balance between his Shelleyan 'atheism' and the

[14] Jon Stallworthy, Op.Cit., p.66
[15] Sven Backman, *Tradition Transformed. Studies in the poetry of Wilfred Owen*, Lund: C W K Gleerup, 1979, pag.48

Bible-based Evangelicalism. On 7th February 1913 he left Dunsden and spent the next month at home in a state of severe illness.

After Dunsden's negative experience, Wilfred was in the need of a change of air, both for physical and study reasons; he obtained a job as a part-time teacher at the Berlitz School in Bordeaux. Since he was at high school he had developed a passion for French, he had a long standing ambition to study in France and this was the perfect opportunity for him. In September 1913 he moved to Bordeaux and rented a small room in Rue Castelmoron, then on 28th September he moved again into a cheaper room at 95 Rue Porte Dijeaux. He did not earn much money, although, he seemed to like the job and most of his pupils. In order to improve his income he gave French lessons from eleven o'clock until midnight. In the beginning, his letters home were concerned with his poor health conditions, though it was thought that with French weather it would improve. After Christmas the situation was much better, he made friends and enjoyed weekends in the country.[16] Spending time alone and away made him indulge into a form of self-examination, in the Evangelical tradition, on how he had grown mentally:

> When I ask myself *what* I am finish my interrogations in a *crise de nerfs*. You see these self-examinations, after a year's rest, begin again. At such times the sensation of the passing of Time sharpens into agony. How much have I advanced in study since the Matriculation 1911? Enormously in some fields, but not along the marked-out high-roads, and through those absurd old toll-gates called examinations. [17]

He spent time thinking about how he had grown artistically, as a man and as a scholar, in his study and his life. He was uncertain what to do in the summer, luckily, he had been invited by one of his pupils, Madame Léger, to accompany her family to Bagnères-de-Bigorre in the Pyrenees. It was already the beginning of August 1914, the war had just started and nobody was prepared for what it would be, even though everything was set. Wilfred received the news while in France, and he faced the beginning of the war away from his country.

[16] John Purkis, *A preface to Wilfred Owen*, London and New York: Longman, 1999, p.15
[17] Ibid

1.3) The making of a poet

We shall be happy, thou and I. In me
Thou'lt find a jealous guardian of thy charms,
A doting master, leaving all to be
Ever with thee, ever in thine arms.[18]

O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen
That am not yet a glorious denizen
Of thy wide heaven—Should I rather kneel
Upon some mountain-top until I feel
A glowing splendour round about me hung,
And echo back the voice of thine own tongue?[19]

The school of English poetry, which Owen followed, derived from the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century. The idea was that writing should be personal, almost confessional, sincere and richly embellished with imagery. The Romantics, such as Coleridge, Wordsworth and Blake at the beginning, saw poetry as the revelation of imagination to the people through the work of the poet. Wilfred Owen was introduced to the Romantic poetry at school, the approach was a scholastic one and it was Keats who seemed to become his role model. Beside Keats, Owen was a Wordsworthian, "Love of nature, belief in the imagination, and sympathy with suffering were characteristics which the would-be poet would have to encourage in himself."[20] However, Owen discovered Keats in a period of uncertainty and stress for him; we find notes of this discovery in a letter to his mother dated April 1911. He quoted some lines of Keats and asked for a copy of 'Ode to a Nightingale' by Gunstons. The meeting with Keats was, in a certain way, a religious one; because Owen said, he could hear the poet's voice in a sort of Evangelical spirit, as

[18] "To Poesy," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The Estate of Wilfred Owen. The Complete Poems and Fragments of Wilfred Owen edited by Jon Stallworthy first published by Chatto & Windus, 1983. Preliminaries, introductory, editorial matter, manuscripts and fragments omitted. via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed December 4, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/3367.
[19] Bartleby, http://www.bartleby.com/126/31.html, accessed December 4, 2016
[20] Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the poet*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986., p.2

if religious people could hear God's voice.[21] Keats soon became the equivalent of God for the young poet, he contributed to enrich Owen's language and vocabulary.

Between Owen and Keats there are, also, parallels that have nothing to do with their poetic style; they both died at the age of twenty-six, their important poems were all written in one year and their writing which survived consists mostly of letters. Apart from the draft of 1907, there is no evidence that Owen had written anything before 1911. It is possible that he could have written something not relevant for his poetic course, and the lack of documents does not allow us to have a clear idea. For sure, between 1909 and 1910, as the handwriting of the manuscript suggests, we have the first complete poem, on the style of a Kaetsian ode.

> A thousand suppliants stand around thy throne,
> Stricken with love for thee, O Poesy.
> I stand among them, and with them I groan,
> And stretch my arms for help. Oh, pity me!
> No man (save them thou gav'st the right to ascend
> And sit with thee, 'nointing with unction fine,
> Calling thyself their servant and their friend)
> Has loved thee with a purer love than mine.[22]

Owen started this poem having in mind three different examples, all of them written by Keats: 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Sleep and Poetry' and 'The Fall of Hyperion'. With these three poems in his mind and under his eyes, Owen tries to recreate something that has a typical Keatsian atmosphere and tone. The poem is written in ten syllable lines; it has sixth stanzas and not have a regular scheme; the rhyme pattern is ABAB. The central

[21] Ibid
[22] "To Poesy," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The Estate of Wilfred Owen. The Complete Poems and Fragments of Wilfred Owen edited by Jon Stallworthy first published by Chatto & Windus, 1983. Preliminaries, introductory, editorial matter, manuscripts and fragments omitted. via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed December 4, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/3367.

theme is poetry, which is described as a goddess and to whom the poets are constantly paying their respects and offers. Owen lists himself among the poets, using the personal pronoun "I", 'I stand among them, and with them I groan'. Owen is concerned with poetry as a person, he personifies it and gives it the connotation of a divinity, for this reason he and the other poets are nothing. It is impossible not to recognize the Keatsian influence, starting with the subject of the poem. The tone is elegiac, Owen uses archaic terms such as 'thee', 'thy', 'thou', and tries to recreate and recall the atmosphere of Keats' odes.

> Beseech another goddess guide their pen,
> And with another muse their pleasure take.[23]

> O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen Keats[24]

The theme of "holding the pen" in order to write a poem is not a novelty for the poetic field, here Owen refers to both Keats and other poets before him. In 'To Poesy' there is an allusion to the great Romantic master, in line 37, Owen writes "The bards of old", it is possible to imagine that among all the bards there is a special place for Keats himself. The poet asks to be taught his trade, to know his path in order to write and become the greatest of all. The poem is not an example of originality or innovation; neither in the style nor in the content, it is just the first attempt to get to know the world of poetic writing.

The second example of an early poem is a sonnet, written on a special occasion during 1911. In April of that year, Wilfred took the train from Torquay to Newton Abbot near Teignmouth. There he went searching for the house where Keats had lived from March to May 1818. He found the house at 20 Northumberland Place and after a closer look, he then wrote a sonnet on his way back home, 'Sonnet, written at Teignmouth, on a Pilgrimage to Keats's House'.[25] Not only the topic is strictly related to Keats, but also the style evokes the great number of sonnets written by the Romantic poet. Keats has an output of sixty-seven sonnets, inclusive of 'Nature withheld Cassandra in the skyes', an

[23] Ibid
[24] Bartleby, http://www.bartleby.com/126/31.html, accessed December 4, 2016
[25] Jon Stallworthy, Op.Cit., p.57

unfinished translation, and of *The Poet*, that is not universally acknowledge as composed by Keats.[26]

> Three colours have I known the Deep to wear,
> ‘tis well today that Purple grandeur gloom,
> Veiling the Emerald sheen and Sky-blue glare.
> Well, too, that lowly-brooding clouds now loom
> In sable majesty around, fringed fair
> With ermine-white of surf: to me they bear
> Watery memorials of this majestic doom
> Whose Name was writ in Water (saith his tomb).
>
> Eternally may sad waves wail his death,
> Cloke in their grief ‘mongst rocks where he has lain,
> Or heave in silence, yearning with hushed breath,
> While mournfully trail the slow-moved mists and rain,
> And softly the small drops slide from weeping trees,
> Quivering in anguish to the sobbing breeze.[27]

This sonnet’s structure is typically Petrarchan, with two quatrains and two tercets. The rhyme scheme is nearly canonical – as the second quatrain differs- : ABAB AABB CDC DEE, while the metre is irregular. The sonnet portrays the visit of Owen to Keats’s house, and the poet starts the description naming three colours, introducing the reader to a visual image: purple, emerald and blue. He is trying to create a kind of heroic atmosphere, using terms as ‘majesty’, ‘ermine’, ‘doom’, and using the capital letter for ‘Name’ and ‘Water’. The poetic innovation that will be Owen’s signature are still absent; the rhymes are almost

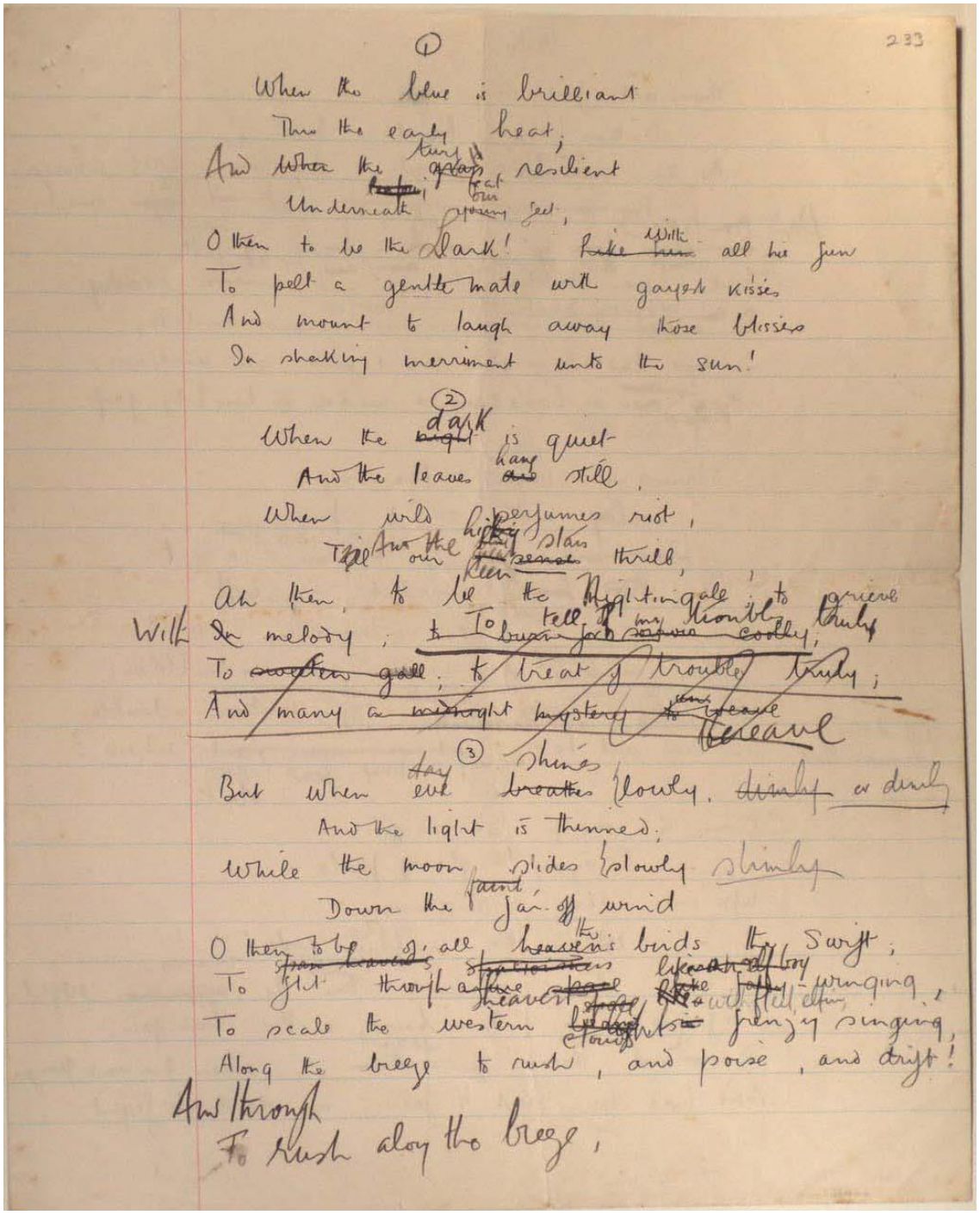
[26] Luisa Conti Camaiora, *Themes and Images in the sonnets of John Keats*, Milano: Educatt, 2010
[27] “Sonnet,” by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The Estate of Wilfred Owen. The Complete Poems and Fragments of Wilfred Owen edited by Jon Stallworthy first published by Chatto & Windus, 1983. Preliminaries, introductory, editorial matter, manuscripts and fragments omitted. via First World War Poetry Digital Archive, accessed September 30, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/3374.

canonical and pretty plane. It is not a brilliant piece of poetry, however, it is interesting because it states a passage from an early stage to one more mature and aware.

In 1912, while at Dunsden, he started to write sonnets on specific topics with his cousin, Leslie Gunston, who was himself writing poetry. He was a frequent visitor at Dunsden Vicarage, and in the summer of 1912 was challenged by Wilfred's proposal to write a sonnet on the same subject.[28] Probably, Wilfred was inspired by the competition that produced Shelley's 'Ozymandias'. The subject chosen for the competition was 'The Swift', after looking out of the window and seeing a dark flash of wings under the eaves. The interest in Shelley was, mostly, for his ideas and visions, Wilfred was less concerned with style and poetic technique. However, 'The Swift', follows Shelley's scheme and is written in the same mood of breathless ecstasy as 'Ode to a Skylark'. The draft of the poem is dated early summer 1912, but he revised that in June-August at Bordeaux 1914-1915, then again in 1917 at Craiglockhart. This long poem, beside 'Uriconium', is written in 8 and 14-line stanzas. In the ode, man and bird are compared.

> O Swift! If thou art master of the air
> Who taught thee! Not the joy of flying
> But of thy brood: their throttels' crying
> Stung thee to skill whereof men yet despair![29]

[28] Jon Stallworthy, Op.Cit., p.73
[29] Guy Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press: 2014, p.146



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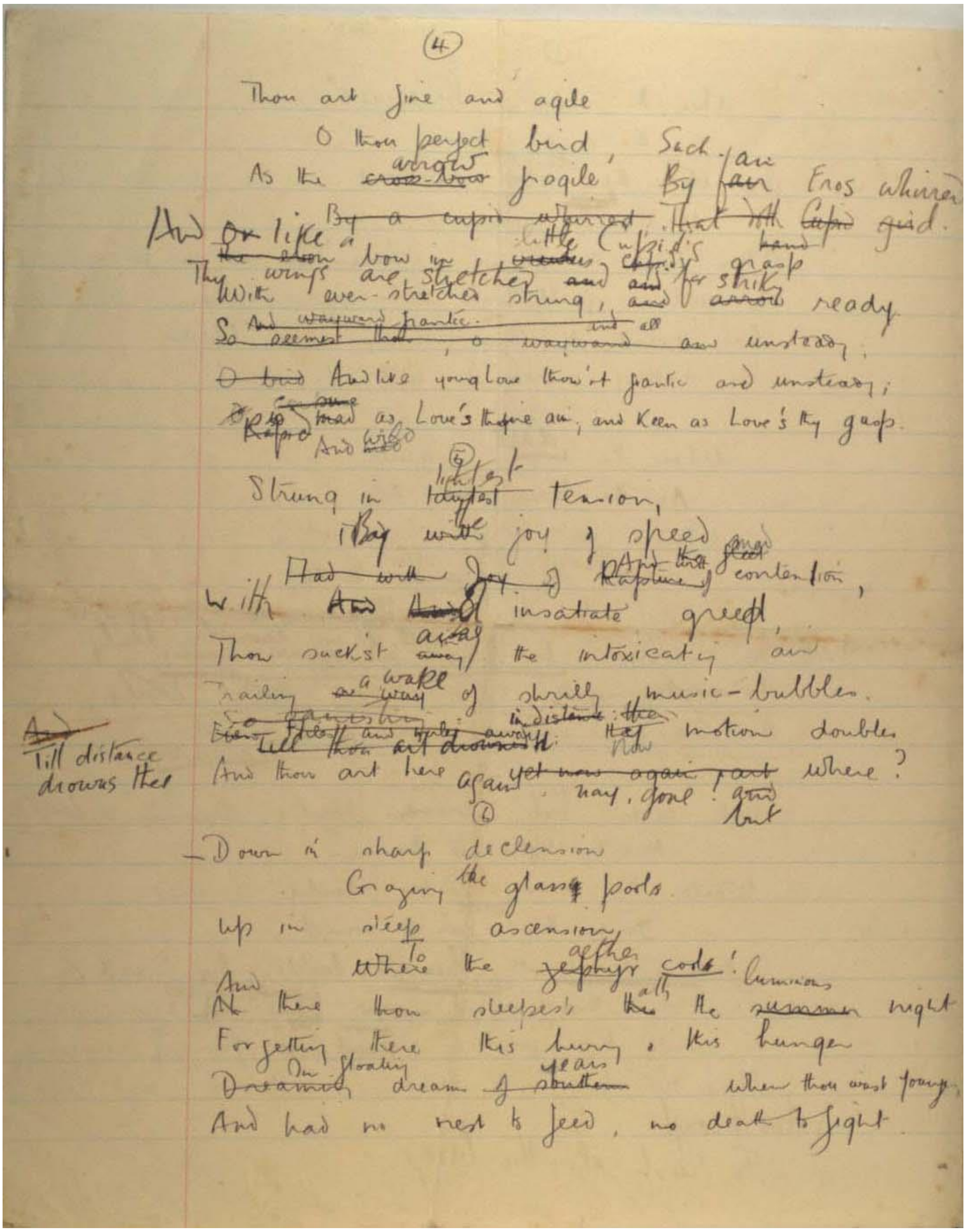
[30] "The Swift," First World War Poetry Digital Archive, accessed October 3, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/8232.


(4)
Thou art fine and agile
O thou perfect bird, Such are
As the arrow fragile By fair Eros whirred
And like a bow in little Cupid's grasp
Thy wings are stretched for striking
With ever-stretched string, and arrow ready
So seemest thou, O wayward and unsteady;
And like young Love thou'rt frantic and unsteady;
Eager as Love's thy aim, and keen as Love's thy grasp.
And wild
(5)
Strung in lightest tension,
Big with joy of speed
With insatiate greed,
Thou suck'st away the intoxicating air
Trailing a wake of shrill music-bubbles.
in distance: thy motion doubles
Till distance drowns thee
And thou art here again! nay, gone! and but where?
(6)
Down in sharp declension
Grazing the glassy pools
Up in steep ascension
To the aether cools!
And there thou sleepest all the luminous night
Forgetting there this hurry, this hunger
On floating dream of years when thou wast young,
And had no nest to feed, no death to fight

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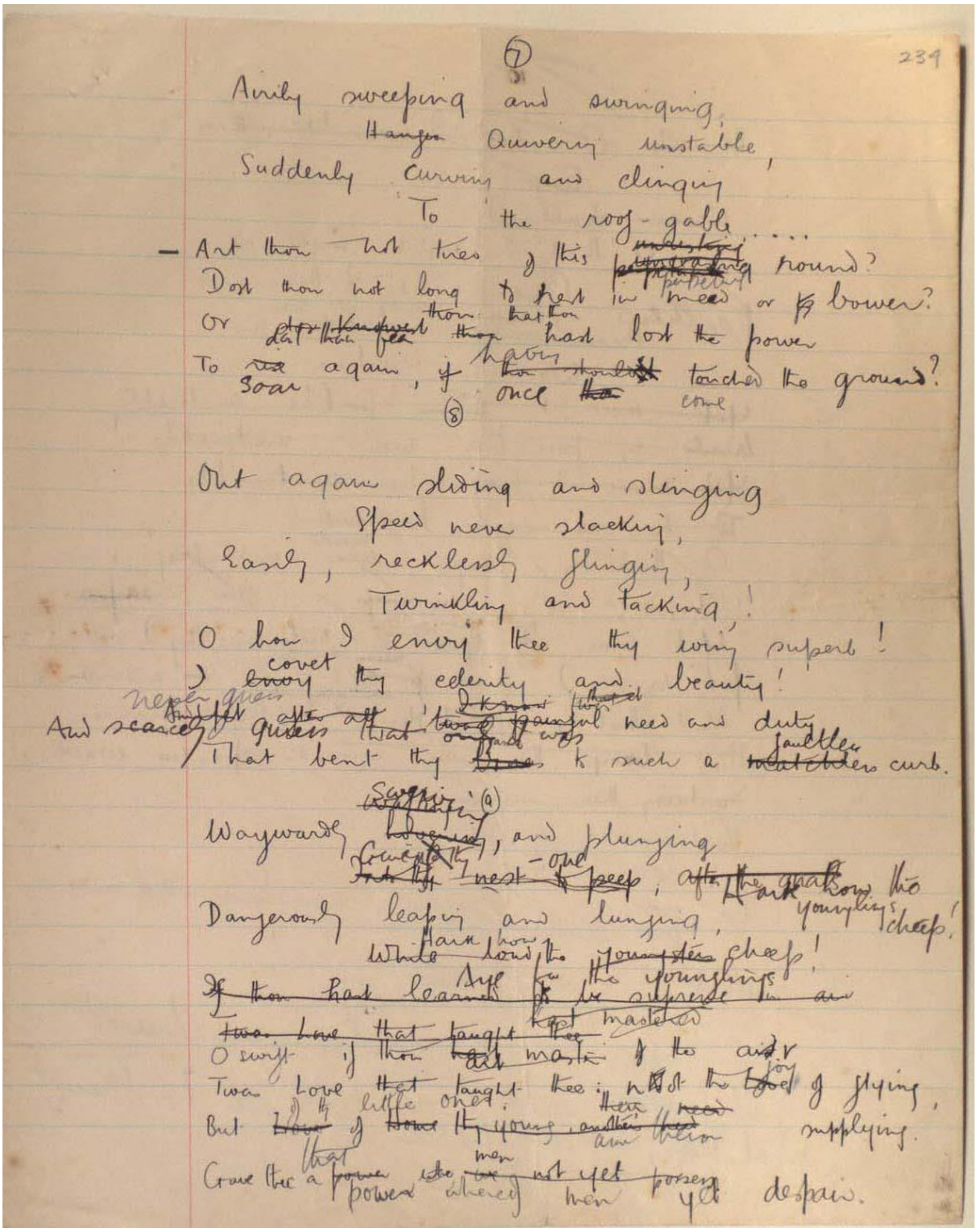
[31] Ibid


(7) 234

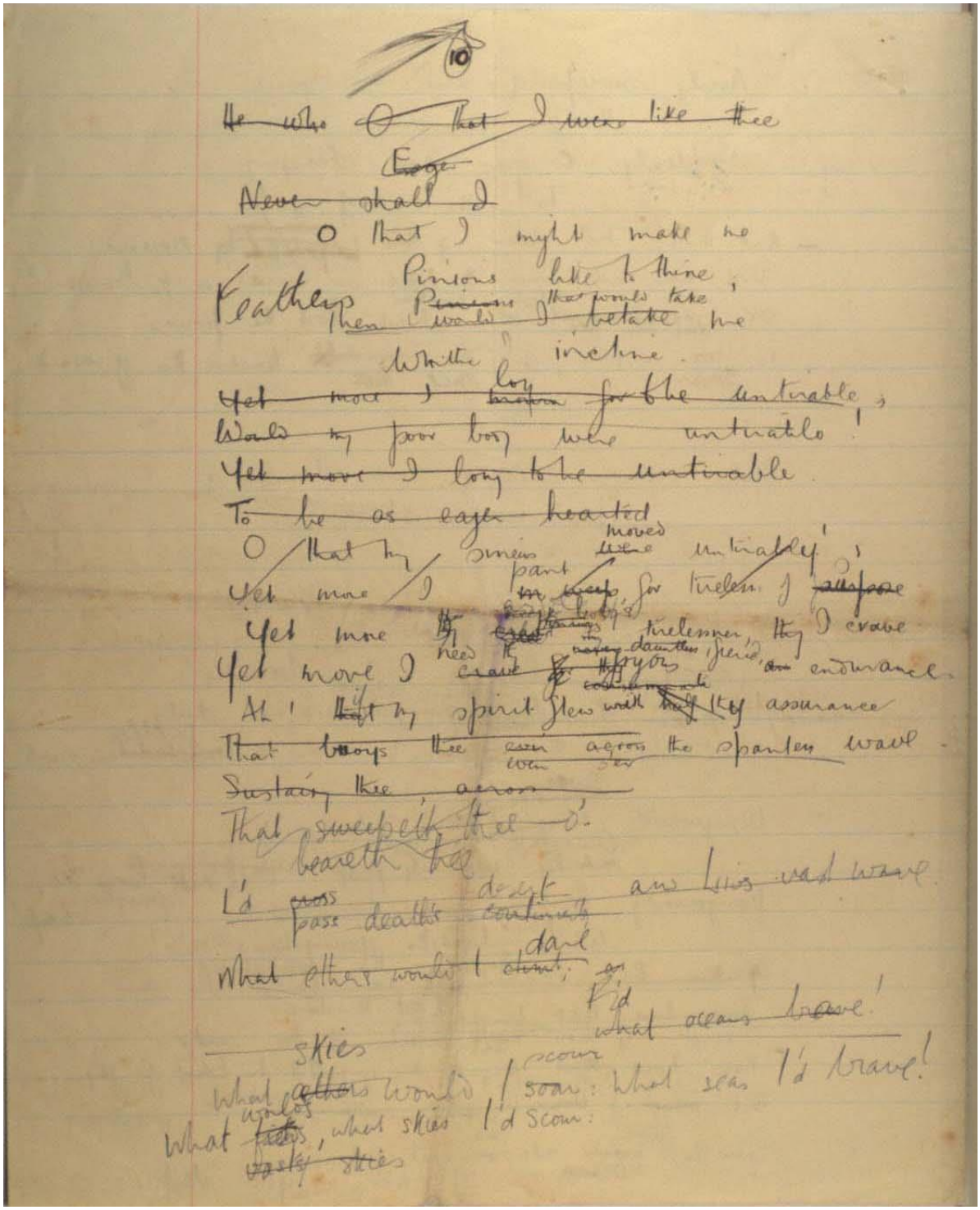
Airily sweeping and swinging,
Quivering unstable,
Suddenly curving and clinging
To the roof-gable....
— Art thou not tired of this perpetual round?
Dost thou not long to rest in mead or bower?
Or dost thou fear that thou hadst lost the power
To soar again, if once thou touched the ground?
(8)

Out again sliding and slinging
Speed never slacking,
Easily, recklessly flinging,
Twinkling and tacking!
O how I envy thee thy wing superb!
I covet thy celerity and beauty!
And scarcely guess that [illegible] need and duty
That bent thy [illegible] to such a faultless curb.

(9)
Waywardly [illegible], and plunging
[illegible] nest-[illegible]
Dangerously leaping and lunging,
Hark how the younglings cheep!
[illegible]
O swift if thou art master of the air
Twas Love that taught thee: not the joy of flying,
But [illegible] little ones: [illegible] supplying
Gave thee that power which men yet despair.

32

[32] Ibid


10
He who ~~O that I were like thee~~
Eagle
~~Never shall I~~
O that I might make me
Pinions like to thine;
Feathers Then would I betake me
Whither inclined.
~~Yet more I long for the unattainable;~~
Would my poor body were unattainable!
~~Yet more I long to be unattainable~~
~~To be as eager hearted~~
O that my moved
Yet more I part
Yet more I craving
Yet more I need endurance.
Ah! if my spirit flew with assurance
That bears thee across the spanless wave.
Sustains like aeon
That sweeps the
bears the
Lo pass death's dearth and Lo's vast wave.
What ether would I dare;
What oceans brave!
skies
What would I scour soar: What seas I'd brave!
What worlds, what skies I'd scour:

33

[33] Ibid

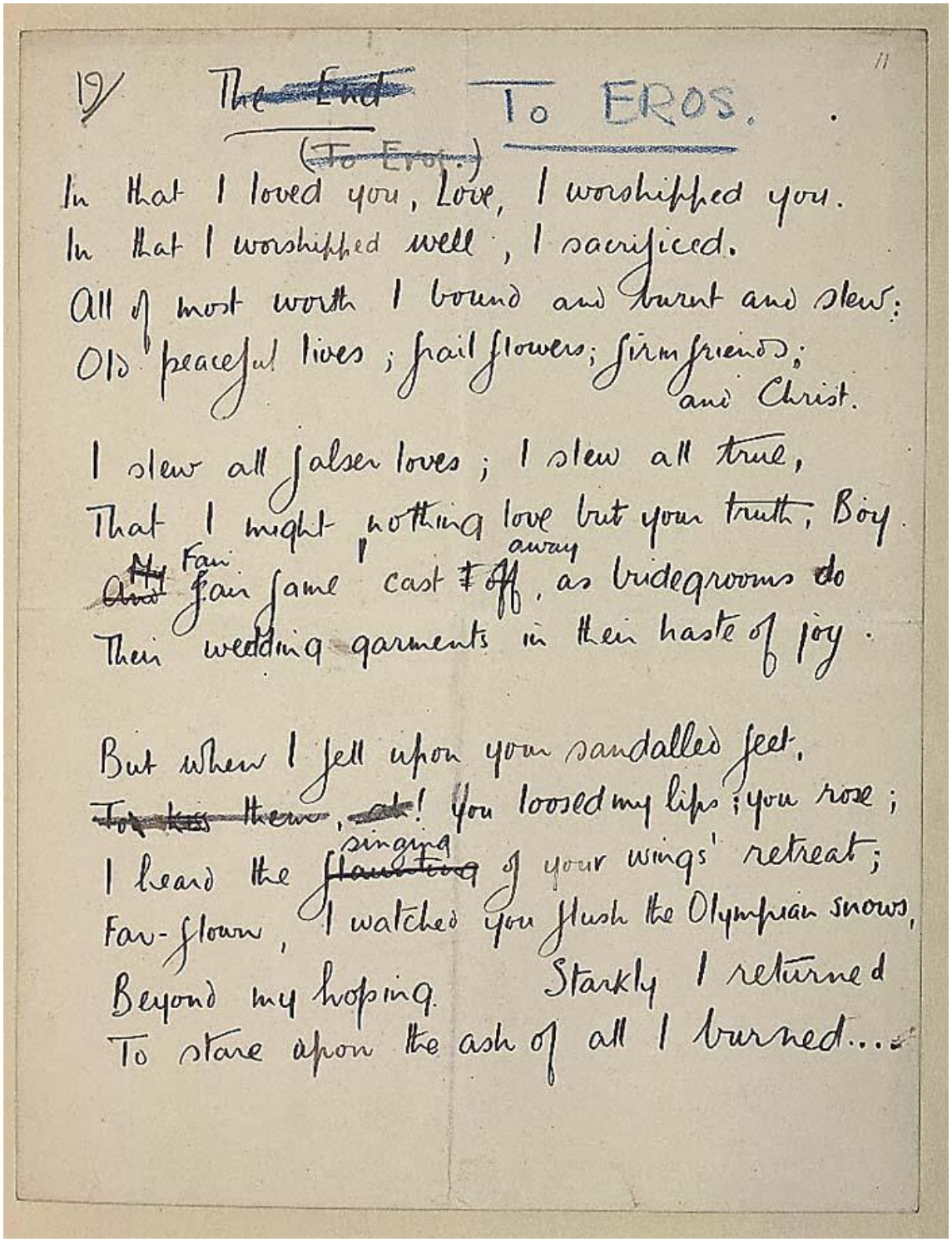
However, the work of Shelley that most influenced Wilfred's poetic studies, is *The Revolt of Islam*, which made the deepest impression on him. There can be found traces and scenes in poems like 'Strange Meeting' or in '1914'. [34] The third example of an early poem written during the permanence in Dunsden is 'To Eros'.

In that I loved you, Love, I worshipped you.
In that I worshipped well, I sacrificed.
All of most worth I bound and burnt and slew;
Old peaceful lives; frail flowers; firm friends; and Christ.

I slew all falser loves; I slew all true,
That I might, nothing love but your truth, Boy.
Fair same cast away as bridegrooms do
Their wedding garments in their haste joy.

But when I fell upon your sandalled feet,
You loosed my lips; you rose;
I heard the singing of your wings' retreat;
For-flown, I watched you flush the Olympian snows,
Beyond my hoping. Starkly I returned
To stare upon the ash of all I burned…[35]

[34] Sven Backman, Op.Cit., pag.49
[35] Jon Stallworthy, Op.Cit., p.84



19/ The ~~End~~ To EROS.

~~(To Eros.)~~

In that I loved you, Love, I worshipped you.
In that I worshipped well, I sacrificed.
All of most worth I bound and burnt and slew:
Old peaceful lives; frail flowers; firm friends;
and Christ.

I slew all false loves; I slew all true,
That I might nothing love but your truth, Boy.
~~And~~ My Fair fame cast off, as bridegrooms do
away
Their wedding garments in their haste of joy.

But when I fell upon your sandalled feet,
~~To kiss them, ah~~! You loosed my lips; you rose;
I heard the ~~flaunting~~ singing of your wings' retreat;
Far-flown, I watched you flush the Olympian snows,
Beyond my hoping. Starkly I returned
To stare upon the ash of all I burned...

36

[36] "To Eros," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed December 4, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4451.

There are no precise dates for this draft, it is probably a Dunsden's draft but it has been revised later in 1917 during his permanence at Craiglockhart. The sonnet has a typical Shakespearean structure, two quatrain (the octet), a quatrain and the final couplet, the rhyme scheme is standard: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. On the original manuscript, we can find a different title, 'The End', which was changed into 'To Eros' that remains the official title. It has a very simple and repetitive verse sentence, Owen played with anaphors such as in the first two lines with 'In that', or the repetition of the past participle 'worshipped', which creates a chiasm. The poet tries to describe the theme of Christ sacrificed to Eros, he addresses Love, with a capital letter, and says that he had worshipped Love and he is bound to him. Owen remembers his one-time obsession with love, and rationalises it in the description in the first line of the poem, 'I worshipped'; the consequence is sacrifice. Owen asks himself about the truths and the lies, and it may seem that what he saw at Dunsden was not completely true, though we know that he questioned himself about faith and religion. There is a strong Georgian influence and affinity in this sonnet: in the structure, the diction and the attempt at boldness in the bridegroom image, as well as in the whole Romanticised disillusion. It is recognised that the three closing lines are of a higher quality than his earlier poems, but there is still plenty to exercise and change. [37]

These three examples of early poems, 'To Poesy, 'Sonnet, written at Teignmouth, on a Pilgrimage to Keats's House' and 'To Eros', are necessary to describe the early stage of Wilfred Owen's poetic world. The first stage of his poetic career was characterised by a strong influence of the great poets of the so-called 'Nineties'. Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth helped Owen to develop his poetic and writing skills, accompanying him in his first years as a man and as a poet. Until 1914, Owen has not already reached his maturity, starting to take conscience on what it means to be a poet and to write poems. The breaking of the war, while he was in France, marks the starting point of a new way and a new awareness of what it means to be an artist.

[37] D.S.R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A critical study*, London: Chatto and Windur, 1960, p.42

2) The war: a new world

2.1) The Great War

On 4th August 1914, the declaration of war changed the face of Europe and the rest of the world. England declared war to Germany and marked the beginning of the global conflict and the involvement of Great Britain in this massacre. Officially, the war started the 28th June 1914, with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria by Yugoslav nationalist Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo, which sparked off the situation. It was followed by a diplomatic crisis, Austria-Hungary gave an ultimatum to the Kingdom of Serbia, and on 28th July 1914 declared war on Serbia. The peace between Europe's great powers collapsed; Allied Powers and Central Powers took on the lead and prepared themselves for war. On one hand, we had Great Britain, France and Russia together with minor nations, on the other Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. Great Britain declared war on Germany on the 4th August 1914, after Germany's attack on Belgium, which was a neutral country. The war was fought across Europe; the Western front (experienced by Owen) divided France from Germany and mostly involved English and French troops while the Eastern front divided Germany from Russia. In 1915, with Italy entering the war in support of the Allies (breaking the pact with the Central Powers) a Southern front appeared, which saw Germans and Italians fighting against each other on the Alps.

Germany began fighting the war according to the Schlieffen Plan (named for its mastermind, General Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen). It invaded neutral Belgium, forcing Great Britain to send troops to support and help the French army. It began a frantic recruitment campaign towards the population and the press was full of propaganda and patriotic messages. Even poetry was put to use as a means of convincing and attracting young men to volunteer for the army. The general spirit, which pervaded both alliances, was that war might be over by Christmas, each was sure of winning and quickly ending this massacre. They were both wrong, by 1915, the situation was in a stalemate, the war continued and the massacre was every day worse.

The Great War was a complete slaughter, it introduced new ways to fight a war while still using 19th-century weapons. At the beginning there were bicycle units and horses, however, as the war continued, it was necessary to evolve and change. Machine guns, gas bombs, tanks, the army industry supplied soldiers with novelties and weapons that could kill a lot more men than before. Although, trenches slowed down the war and forced the armies into an impasse. It was very difficult to gain territory and most of the time it took days only to conquer few metres. Trenches began to connect different areas and to link together the armies. The land in between enemies' trenches was called 'no man's land', and it was every soldier's nightmare.

Propaganda continued to call young men to the army, but as the years went by and the war continued it was necessary to introduce obligatory conscription in Britain. In 1914, the English Army was very small if compared to the others, but the need to fight forced the nation to recruit more soldiers. The Western front played as a scenario for the worst and most deathful battle of the war, the battle of the Somme and 1916's terrible winter. On the eastern front the situation was the same, however, Russia reached an armistice with the Central powers in 1917 due to the Winter Revolution, which changed the face of the nation by establishing the Communist dictatorship. The situation in the Alps was tragic, on October 1917 the Battle of Caporetto was a terrible defeat for the Allies, forcing the Italian army to retreat and lose much territory. Although, the situation from 1914 to 1917 remained balanced, for every Allies victory there was a counter-attack by the Centrals, forcing the situation to never evolve or change. World War I was fought also at sea, the British Royal Navy had the supremacy until 1916 with the Battle of Jutland; moreover, Germany's policy of unchecked submarine aggression against shipping towards Great Britain in 1917, reinforced the United States' decision to enter the war supporting the Allies. On 15th July 1918, German troops under general Erich von Ludendorff launched what would become the last offensive of the war, attacking French forces in the second Battle of the Marne. The beginning of the battle saw Germany winner, but the Allies were able to turn the situation around. On 4th November 1918, Austria-Hungary signed the armistice with the other forces, while on 11th November it

was Germany who was forced to seek for peace. World War I ended officially, leaving Europe to face a difficult period in terms of peace and balance between nations. [1]

2.2) Owen's France and his war

> War broke: and now the Winter of the world
> With perishing great darkness closes in.[2]

1914 was perhaps the happiest year of his life. Although it started badly with an illness, it soon improved and changed into a beautiful year. Life in Bordeaux was very different from England, he started drinking wine, took up smoking and stopped going to church every Sunday.[3] He was free at last, and this freedom affected his health and his growth as a man and as a poet.

During his permanence in France, Owen lived a different life from the one he had lived in England and, mostly, at Dunsden. The atmosphere was very different and for the young boy the experience was a complete success. Until 1914 he expected to be a teacher and nothing more, but the breaking out of the war changed the overall situation. He was an English boy staying in France, so he needed a permit to remain in that nation. In addition, he wrote to his brother Colin that he was excited about the war: "I have almost a mania to be in the East, to see fighting, and to serve."[4]

> The news of the War made great stir in Bagnères. Women were weeping all about; work was suspended. Nearly all the men have already departed. […] I had to declare myself, and get a permit to remain here; where I must stay still under penalty of arrest and sentence and spy – unless I get a special visa for emigrating. […] Nobody is very gay. [5]

Even though the boy seemed excited and very keen on knowing more about the war and this new situation, he had to face bureaucratic procedures in order to remain in France. The general idea was that it would be a short war and all over France and England the

[1] History, visited 24/10/2016, http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/world-war-i-history
[2] Cecil Day Lewis, *A Hope for poetry*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1935, p. 129
[3] War Poet Wilfred Owen - A Remembrance Tale (WWI Documentary) (BBC), visited 24/10/2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ByZU0-NNSs
[4] John Purkis, *Op.Cit*., p. 15
[5] Jon Stallworthy, *Op. Cit.*, p. 102

population was gay, volunteers were signing up to join the army and propaganda started. In August 1914, Owen had the chance to meet a very important French poet, Laurent Tailhade. He was a famous poet who had been at the centre of Parisian artistic life and society in its most famous period. Tailhade, as Owen, was destined for a career in the Church but had chosen poetry and art.[6] At that time, he was fifty-nine and despite the great age gap, the two became close friends; their friendship is shown in photographs of them holding a book together, and from the tone of their letters. Owen found a great guide in the French poet, who was a close friend of Verlaine and attended Mallarmé's mardi. Tailhade was a confirmed pacifist and instilled this idea into the young English poet. He had also written two pamphlets, *Lettre aux Conscrits* (1903) and *Pour la Paix* (1909). [7] In the *Lettre aux Conscrits*, the older generation is blamed for the sacrifice of the younger, and in a period of uncertainty as it was, coming across such pacifist ideas was confusing for Owen. Tailhade's pacifist beliefs must have made an impression on Owen, and in parts have remained in his conscience at some level.[8] It is no accident that the young poet would wait until 1915 to take part in the war as a soldier. The French poet was not interested in preaching mutiny or sedition, but a liberty of conscience that should be part of every man. However, Owen benefited from Tailhade's poetic ability, learning from a great master of the arts.

Nevertheless, the pacifist ideas of Tailhade were not able to prevent Owen from choosing to enlist in the army. His permanence in Bordeaux ended in 1915, after a year of the war, the young Englishman decided to joy the battle. It must be said that 'the world which Owen grew up in was rife with military activity and prophecies of coming disaster.'[9] For this reason, the war was not a complete scandal, even though it changed many aspects of the population's life. In May 1915, Owen came back to England, however, he then returned to France to escort the children of his French family towards the Channel in September. He officially returned to England in order to enlist as a volunteer and join the army. At this stage of the war, the British Army was still recruiting volunteers, the social pressure was becoming increasingly strong for the men still at home. In Owen's family,

[6] Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the poet*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986, p. 30
[7] John Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 90
[8] D.S.R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen a Critical study*, London: Chatto and Windur, 1960, p. 90
[9] Dominic Hibberd, Op.Cit., p. 55

his father was the most favourable, while his mother's view was not clear, though she did not seem to have been against the decision.

Wilfred's decision to join the war was based on different reasons and motives, which lead him to the final choice.

> I don't imagine that the German War will be affected by my joining in, but I know my own future Peace will be. I wonder that you don't ply me with this argument: that Keats remained absolutely indifferent to Waterloo and all that commotion.[10]

He was conscious of his limited role in the war, as a simple soldier, he had not the possibility to make a difference, although, in a much greater sense, he did make the difference with his poems. The strong commitment he felt towards this war was very personal as if his own life would depend on how he responded to the war. Another reason for his choice was the fear he had in case Germany was to win the war. He thought, and feared, that the victory of the Central Powers would have led to an impoverishment of English language and literature, and he was not keen on thinking about it.[11] He joined the Artists' Rifle in London on 21st October 1915, taking his oath at the headquarters in Duke's Road. He stayed in London in a French Boarding House, where everything was French, the cooking, the people and the language. He brought France with him, even in England, recollecting his stay in Bordeaux, talking French although he was now back in his country. For the next few months, he had to train with the other men before he could physically join the battalion. In November he was posted to Hare Hall, Gidea Park, Romford, Essex to continue the training. This last place was an army camp, he was soon familiar with the soldier's duties and the military life.[12] Harold went to visit Wilfred at Hare Hall after writing to his brother and asking to come. The two brothers stayed together, Wilfred showed Harold through the camp, and they talked about their experiences. Wilfred was afraid he could not pass the examination in order to complete

[10] Jon Stallworthy, Op.Cit., p. 124
[11] War Poet Wilfred Owen - A Remembrance Tale (WWI Documentary), visited 7/12/2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ByZU0-NNSs
[12] John Purkis, Op. Cit., p. 20

his formation. Harold was astonished in hearing this and in thinking about his brother failing an exam. Wilfred, on the other hand, had a very clear and specific answer to that.

> 'What does Keats have to teach me of rifle and machine-gun drill, how will my pass in Botany teach me to lunge a bayonet, how will Shelley show me how to hate or any poet teach me the trajectory of the bullet?'[13]

Harold remembered clearly Wilfred's statement; even when preparing himself for the war, the young poet was always thinking about his masters and his guides. Keats and Shelley could not teach him how to use a gun, nor any other army device, however, they were not useless. In March 1916 he joined the Officers' School, he passed his exam and was then Second Lieutenant on 4th June. He became a first class shot, began his duties as an officer of the 5th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment at Milford Camp. War for him began in 1917, he reached France at the end of 1916 and in January, he joined the 2nd Manchesters as an officer. [14] After two years from the beginning of the war, Wilfred was now part of it, he could experience the tragedy, the madness and the difficulty of the Western front.

2.3) War poetry

> For after Spring, had bloomed in early Greece,
>
> And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
>
> An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
>
> A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
>
> But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.[15]

Owen's poetry began to evolve before setting foot on the battlefield, the breaking of the war in 1914 was sufficient for starting the change. As the years went by, he tried to get rid of the Romantic elements, even though it was not so simple and immediate. He went to war with the humanitarian values of Shelley and Wordsworth, with the elegiac style of

[13] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 131
[14] John Purkis, Op. Cit., p. 20
[15] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 129

Keats but also with a need for innovation.[16] The first approach to war was a Romantic one, embracing the idea of martyrdom, pain and physical sensation that this experience would have led to. Wilfred brought with him Swinburne's book of poetry *Poems and Ballads,* which was the one he had in his kit at his death. Before experiencing the reality of the war, 'the war generation believed that they had been born to die in war.'[17]

The propaganda, the culture of the time promoted the idea of dying for one's own country as the highest value in life. Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier', written in 1914 and part of a series of sonnets entitled '1914', praises death in battle and describes the soldier who dies fighting for his country as a hero.

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is for ever England. There shall be
> In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
> A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
> Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
> A body of England's, breathing English air,
> Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.[18]

Brooke embodied the spirit of 1914, of the beginning of the war and the positivity, which came with it; he was the child of the idea that the war was to end in a short time. There was a Romantic background in his position, which would soon be surpassed by Owen, who would become the anti-Brooke. The elegiac tone of Brooke's sonnet made clear the fact that he did not experience the war, because he died before arriving in France of sepsis. He was, therefore, unable to live war in first person and to see the horror of the massacre. Brooke was part of the so-called 'bardic' school, which indicates an attitude proper of the 1914 poets of the war: "A host of poets, mostly minor, hastened with a zeal that outran both their ability and their discretion to proclaim the rightness of the national cause in

[16] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 56
[17] Ibid p. 56
[18] Poetry Foundation, visited 21/10/2016, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/detail/13076

clarion tones."[19] Welland proposes a division in three phases, the one of Brooke is the first, while the second can be traced in the poetry of Blunden and Graves, leaving Owen in the third phase. However, in 1914, the expectation of a victory was high, and many other poets wrote about the glorious endeavour of fighting and dying in battle. In the opening week of the war, dated 5th September 1914, Thomas Hardy's 'Men Who March Away', reflects the dominant mood, 'England's need are we;'[20] Rudyard Kipling supported the patriotic ideas and the popular enthusiasm for war; he even sent his son to fight in the war while he was a war journalist during that period. Like Brooke, Charles Hamilton Sorley died in 1915 and was one of the first poets who wrote about the war. He was killed during the Battle of Loos in October.[21] When the war broke out, he was in Germany, but was able to come back to Britain and joined the army. Sorley was a lover of Germany and felt it difficult to accept this hatred of the country he had loved so much. Despite Brooke, Sorley saw war as a great and a tragic paradox, analysing and questioning himself about death. 'It is a spook. None wears the face you knew./Great death has made all his for evermore.', there are the last two lines of 'When you see millions…' (1914) one of his best-known sonnet, which describes what is death, a totally alien experience for men.

Following the example of this three early "war poets", it is not difficult to understand the stance which most of the soldiers had before leaving for France. Even for Owen it was the same: "Dying for love in war was seen as sweet, decorous and sacramental, a sacrifice comparable to that of the Mass yet described in terms that were sometimes as much erotic as religious. […] death in battle had a beauty unintelligible to old men and beyond beauty of women. Only a soldier could understand a soldier's smile."[22] Therefore, it is necessary to be a soldier to understand war and to be able to describe it and give it credit.

[19] D.S.R. Welland, Op.Cit., p. 16
[20] Bernard Bergonzi, Op.Cit., p. 32
[21] Ibid, p. 51
[22] Dominic Hibberd, Op.Cit., p. 57

2.4) The ‘winter of the world’

For Owen, writing about what was happening in France seemed easy, even though we have seen that his reaction to the war was not so straightforward. The evolution of his style, from copying Keats to a more independent poetry, follows his last period in France and the return to England. As we approach the analysis and the study of Owen’s war poetry, it is necessary, to begin with an important consideration.

> […]to speak of Wilfred Owen as a war poet is true only as long as the phrase is used to denote one of the sources of and formative influences on his work: it is grotesquely untrue if it is used, as it sometimes has been, to imply that it was only the War that made him a poet. […] not to isolate him from the tradition of English poetry to which, as I shall hope to show, he both owed and contributed so much.[23]

Welland, in the first chapter of his book, says that it is not possible to talk about Owen and his poetry and reduce everything just by saying ‘war poetry’. Moreover, to reduce Owen to a war poet means to minimise the impact he had on all future English poetry, not only the one about the Great War. For this reason, even though he is placed among the war poets, his poems have much more to say than just describing the situation and the absurdity he lived through during the war. Owen experienced a shift in his poetry, from a poetry of love and Romantic images to a very truthful and realistic view of what was war. He missed the first ‘bardic’ phase because he was in Bordeaux for most of 1915; therefore, he continued writing poetry. It is important to say that a copy of Vernède’s *War Poems and Other Verses* (1917) was found in his small library, which was preserved by his family.[24] He brought along with him an aesthetic taste, which he had developed since the beginning of his study, but he evolved systematically, moving away from that idea. It is difficult to trace a precise chronology for his first poems written at the breaking out of the war because Owen seldom dated his manuscripts with more than the year, and even the year is not always written. Probably the first poem he wrote in 1914 was originally

[23] D.S.R. Welland, Op. Cit., p. 14
[24] Ibid p. 18

entitled ‘The ballad of Peace and War’, which after became ‘The Ballad of Purchase-Money’.[25]

(part of the original poem)

Oh meet it is and passing sweet
To live at peace with others,
But sweeter still and far more meet
To die in war for brothers.

The soil is safe, for widow and waif,
And for the soul of England,
Because heir bodies men vouchsafe
To save the soul of England.[26]

Even if it is only a fragment of the original poem, it is meaningful for the analysis. It is easy to recognise the echo of Brooke’s words and ideas that are presented in ‘The Soldier’. Here, Owen is retracing the same idea that dying for your country is ‘sweet’ and honourable. The two stanzas, which have a regular rhyme scheme ABAB, and a far more regular verse structure, underline a naïve and still Romantic ideal. In 1914, Owen was still in France and had not yet decided to join the army. In the first stanza, he uses repetitions, the first and the third have the same structure and the second and fourth a similar one. ‘Oh sweet’, ‘and meet’, while in the third he replicates using the same words but in a comparative sense, ‘But sweeter’, ‘and more meet’. The same repetition in the structure is developed in the other two verses, with the contraposition ‘to live’ and ‘to die’, which is used to convey the idea that dying in the battle is good. In the second stanza, we can trace again an echo of Brooke’s ideal; ‘the soil’ where a soldier will die, which is not England, but to die would be for ‘the soul of England’. Owen’s idea in this poem will be dramatically reversed in his most famous ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, however, it is the

[25] John Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 104
[26] First World War Poetry, visited 20/10/2016, https://sites.google.com/site/firstworldwarpoetry20102011/ballad-of-peace---owen

first attempt made by the young poet. It is hard to imagine that in the same year, even though there is no complete certainty, Owen had produced the sonnet '1914'.

> War broke: and now the Winter of the world
> With perishing great darkness closes in.
> The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
> Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
> Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
> Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin
> Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
> The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.
>
> For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
> And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
> An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
> A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
> But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
> Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.[27]

As the title suggests, the sonnet's theme is the breaking out of war. From the beginning, the subject is introduced with the first word, 'war'. The line scheme is not regular, though, the rhyme scheme follows a precise pattern: ABBAABBA for the octet, CDDCCC for the sestet, as it follows the Petrarchan structure. It is quite impossible that the apparent echo of Robert Brooke's 'red/Sweet wine of youth' is linked to that poem, as the latter was not published until December 1914.[28] In 1914, Owen started to experiment with pararhyme, which would become his most iconic symbol. 'World/whirled' rhyme in line 1 and 4 is a half rhyme, as 'Greece/increase' in line 9 and 12. The whole sonnet revolves around the comparison between war and winter, these extended metaphors are the core of the sonnet. Owen builds up a sensual image, both visual and auditory, in which a topical subject, winter, is used to give a deeper description of war. In the octet, war arrives as

[27] Jon Stallworthy, Jane Potter edited, *Three poets of the First World War: Ivor Gurney, Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen*, London: Penguin, 2011, p. 77
[28] Jon Stallworthy, Op.Cit., p. 105

winter all over Europe, and the great German power is said to be a 'tornado', another comparison with nature in order to remain in the same semantic field. The arrival of war brings, not only physical destruction but also a mental one like he says at the end of line six and the beginning of line seven, 'Now begin / Famines of thought and feeling.' To finish the octet he introduces another season, Autumn, saying that it is rotten because of the coming winter; in addition, Autumn represents humanity, so it is easy to understand why it is in decay. The tone of the octet is of horror and destruction, conveyed with the use of alliteration. Negatively, winter is associated with war, 'winter of the world', 'whirled', 'width', the 'wild'ness and the insufficiency of its 'wine'. In the sestet Owen introduces the other remaining seasons, Spring is related to the past and precisely Greek civilization, while Summer with the Roman Empire. Both seasons have ended their course, giving space to Autumn which is now ready to end. The contrast with the octet is immediately recognised, the great worlds of the past have influenced the human world until 'war broke'. The tone and alliteration he uses here are more gentle, the 's' is repeated creating a soft sound. The final couplet reinforces the power of winter, but it keeps an open ending: "But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need / Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed." The need for a new spring is still there, the necessity of a new rebirth and the end of the war.

With the beginning of September, wounded soldiers started to arrive in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, and Owen had the opportunity to visit one of the largest hospitals nearby. He saw the wounds, the bullets, and he wrote to his brother about this, in the letter he also included some drawings of the wounds. The passage between the beginning of the war and the realisation of it, from ignorance to understanding, is better portrayed in the poem 'Long Ages Past', written on October 31.[29]

> Long ages past in Egypt thou wert worshipped
> And thou wert wrought from ivory and beryl.
> They brought thee jewels and they brought their slain,
> Thy feet were dark with blood of sacrifice.
> From dawn to midnight, O my painted idol,

[29] Ibid p. 111

Thou satest smiling, and the noise of killing
Was harp and timbrel in thy pale jade ears:
The livid dead were given thee for toys.

Thou wert a mad slave in a Persian palace,
And the King loved thee for thy furious beauty,
And all men heard thy ravings with a smile
Because thy face was fairer than a flower.
But with a little knife so wantonly
Thou slewest women and thy pining lovers,
And on thy lips the stain of crimson blood,
And on thy brow the pallor of their death.

Thou art the dream beheld by frenzied princes
In smoke of opium—thou art the last fulfilment
Of all the wicked, and of all the beautiful.
We hold thee as a poppy to our mouths,
Finding with thee forgetfulness of God.
Thou art the face reflected in a mirror
Of wild desire, of pain, of bitter pleasure.
The witches shout thy name beneath the moon,
The fires of Hell have held thee in their fangs.[30]

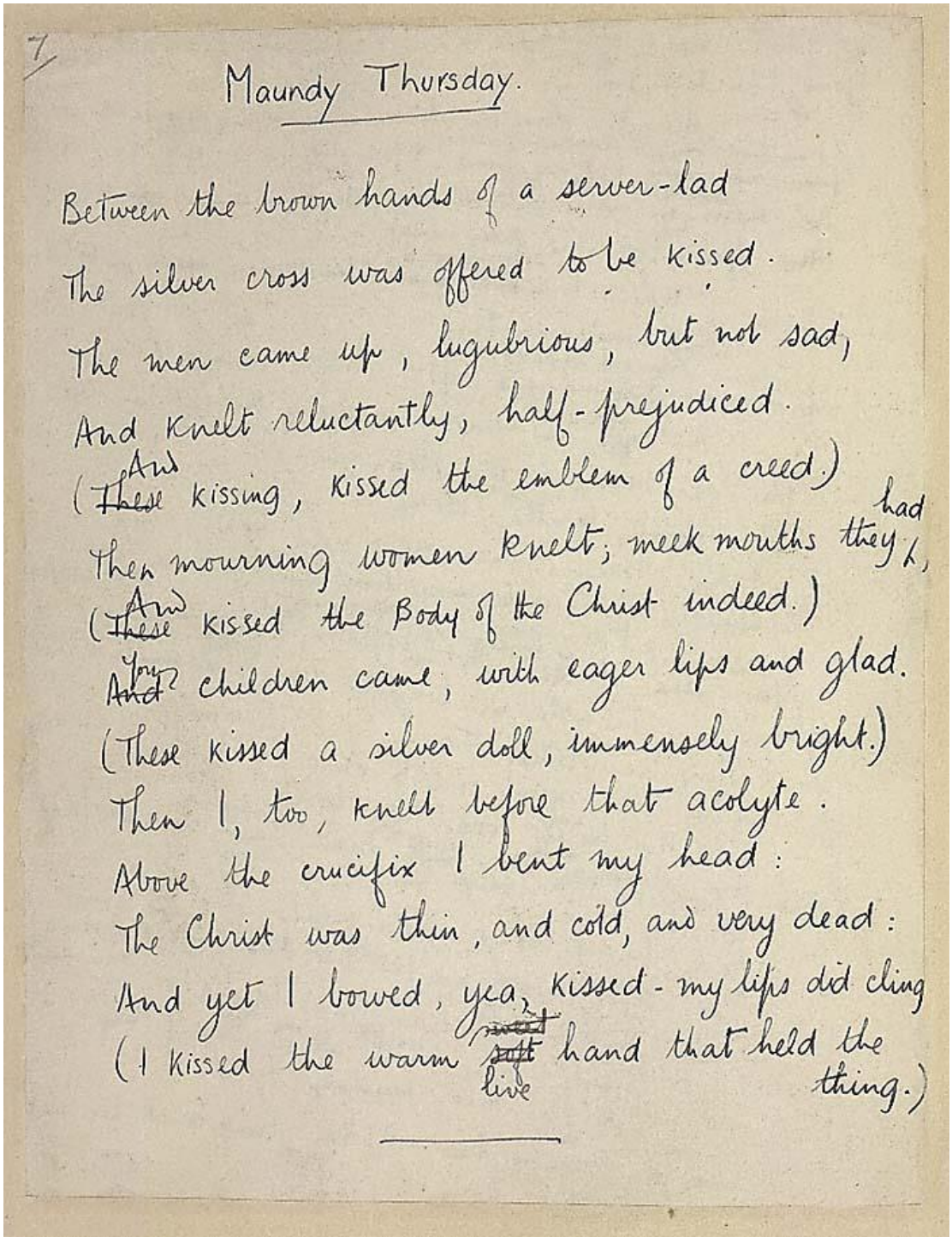
This long poem is divided into three stanzas of eight lines each; there is not a rhyme scheme and a precise structure. It has a kind of nostalgic tone, even though it describes how the situation has evolved until now, until the war. From the beginning, Owen tries to create a climax, 'Long ages past', but now war has changed the face of the world. The narrator voice of the poem is addressed to a 'thou' (you) that is the protagonist of the poem, and whose situation changed through history in a dramatic way. In the first stanza

[30] Poetry nook, visited 21/10/2016, http://poetrynook.com/poem/long-ages-past

Owed describes how this ‘thou’ was perceived in a past age and addresses to him as ‘my painted idol’ in line 5. The idol in the past ages received gifts, and the ‘livid dead’ are, for him, toys. In the first 4 lines he uses alliteration and repetitions, ‘thou wert worshipped’ with the sound ‘w’ and in line 2, ‘thou wert wrought’, while in line 3 there is a repetition of ‘they brought’, which helps the rhythm. In the second stanza the narration continues, he describes all the things this ‘thou’ did and uses anaphora in line 10 and 11, and the same in line 15 and 16. The protagonist was made a slave and loved by the king, but then he became a murderer, and in the last two lines of the stanza the repetition underlines what this murder caused; ‘and on thy lips the stain of crimson blood’, ‘and on thy brow the pallor of their death’. Finally, the last stanza ends this journey in Hell, as the last line says ‘the fires of Hell have held thee in their fangs’. In this poem, Owen uses the image of the poppy as a metaphor for war, ‘we old thee as a poppy to our mouth’; like him Isaac Rosenberg in ‘Break of the day in the trenches’, uses the poppy to describe the precariousness of the soldier’s life, ‘As I pull the parapet’s poppy’.

Even though Owen started to express his ideas of the war in a poetic form, giving shape to his images and his fears, most of what he wrote before 1917 was better expressed in other forms by other writers.[31] These first war poems were still a bit clumsy in the form, he was not yet a complete and mature poet. After coming back to London in May 1915 he spent part of a week at the British Industries Fair, and after returned to Shrewsbury. We do not know, for sure, if his poetry came naturally, but it is possible that during that period he wrote ‘Maundy Thursday’. Some dated the poem to his Dunsden period, but Stallworthy thinks that his general sophistication places the sonnet in a later position. Even though it talks about religion, so it would be “normal” to set it in Dunsden, the Roman Catholic service it describes is most likely one that Owen attended while he was in France.[32]

[31] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 59
[32] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 120



7

Maundy Thursday.

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

---

[33] "Maundy Thursday," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via First World War Poetry Digital Archive, accessed October 23, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4627.

It is a great fortune to have the manuscript of this sonnet, as we can see there were some changes in the composition of the poem. It is a Petrarchan sonnet with a fixed rhyme scheme: ABAB, CACA, DDE, EFF. The undivided lines in iambic pentameter describe the different approaches of the congregation to the act of veneration. The theme is religious, for this reason, it can relate both to his permanence at Dunsden when he was assistant to the Vicar, and to the period in Bordeaux when he assisted the children of the de la Touche family. The semantic field of the words he uses are all linked together and to religion: 'silver cross', 'knelt', 'emblem', 'Body of the Christ', 'acolyte', 'bowed'. In the octet, Owen describes the act of veneration for men and women, which is different. The men are 'lugubrious' and reluctant to kneel, while the women are 'mourning' and have 'meek mouths', with 'meek' which is usually employed to describe a lamb, and in a religious sense a good believer. In line 6 and line 8, between the two brackets, there is revealed the reality of their veneration, for men 'kissed the emblem of a creed', while for women 'the Body of the Christ indeed', forcing a strong comparison. In the same two lines, Owen made a change, he had written 'these kissing' and 'these kissed', however, he substituted with 'and', so he could maintain the anaphora. The third group is composed by children, who 'kissed a silver doll', in this third bracket he did not change the word 'these'. In line 11, he introduces himself, 'Then I', and he is part of all these people kneeling and giving credit to 'that acolyte'. There is a strong opposition between the Christ figure, 'thin, and cold and very dead', with 'the warm live hand that held the thing', which gives a shocking end to the sonnet.[34]

A manuscript dated 'May 10, 1916/London' is an earliest survived of the period of Owen's training in London, even though it is certainly a recollection of a day with the de la Touche boys in France.[35]

> Three rompers run together, hand in hand.
>
> The middle boy stops short, the others hurtle:
>
> What bumps, what shrieks, what laughter turning turtle.
>
> Love, racing between us two, has planned

[34] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 120
[35] Ibid p. 139

A sudden mischief: shortly he will stand
And we shall shock. We cannot help but fall;
What matter? Why, it will not hurt at all,
Our youth is supple, and the world is sand.

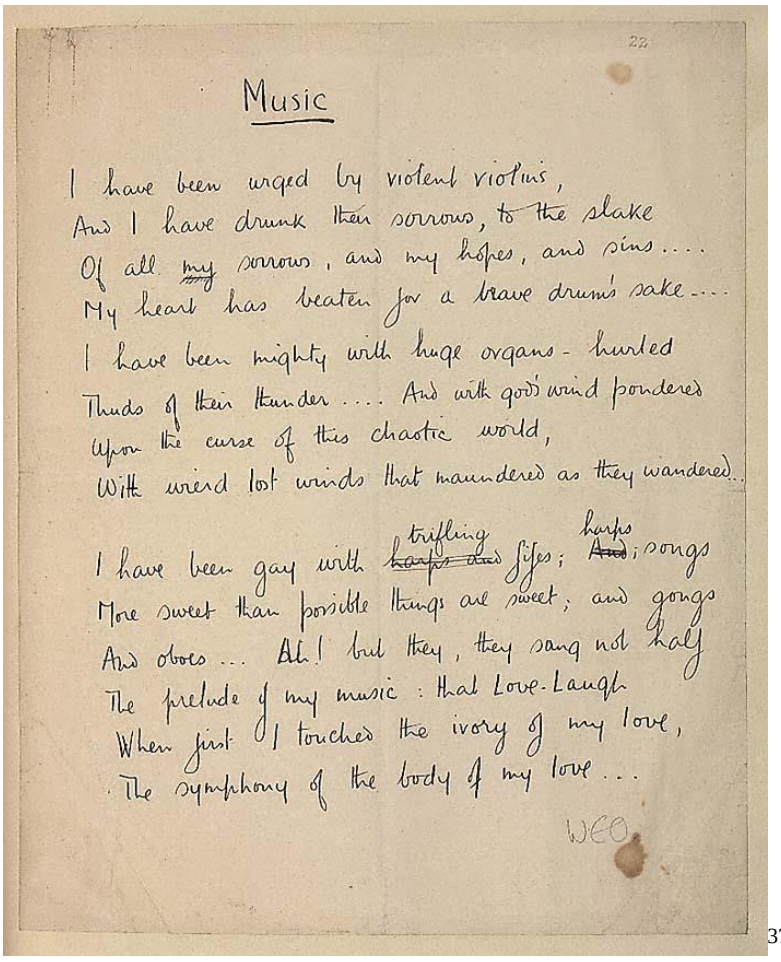
Better our lips should bruise our eyes, than He,
Rude Love, out-run our breath; you pant, and I,
I cannot run much farther, mind that we
Both laugh with Love; and having tumbled, try
To go forever children, hand in hand.
The sea is rising...and the world is sand.[36]

This sonnet, despite the ones analysed before, has a different subject and tone, it does not talk about war. It is the narration of an episode occurred to Owen, probably a day at the sea with the boys he looked after when he was in France. The sonnet has a regular structure, the rhyme scheme is: ABBA, ACCA, DEDEAA. The title 'To—', is not very specific, it does not say the person who is addressed, probably leaving an open interpretation. Perhaps, as the poem describes a moment with the French boys, the title suggest that it is written for them. This is the final version of the poem, Stallworthy in Owen's biography inserted the manuscript of the sonnet, which has the corrections Owen made while writing. There are some words, which Owen changed, in line 1 'run', which will be repeated also in line 11 and suggests the idea that the rhythm has to be fast, like a run. In line 4 he begins with 'for', instead of 'so', and 'racing' instead of 'that runs', continuing the long semantic field of the idea of running. Other changes occur in the sonnet, in line 6 the personal pronoun becomes 'we', suggesting the three boys and him. Even in the sestet, there is the idea of we, when he says 'our' lips, while he had previously written 'my'. The atmosphere seems nostalgic, in the octet, he starts to describe a

[36] "To---," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The Estate of Wilfred Owen. The Complete Poems and Fragments of Wilfred Owen edited by Jon Stallworthy first published by Chatto & Windus, 1983. Preliminaries, introductory, editorial matter, manuscripts and fragments omitted. via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed February 14, 2017, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/3364.

situation, three boys running and one stops. The "fil rouge" of running is interrupted in the second line when 'the middle boy stops', and in line 3 the repetition of 'what' increases the rhythm, 'what bumps… what shrieks… what laughter'. The punctuation is very fragmentary, there are lines interrupted in the middle by a full stop or a semi-colon, as lines 5, 6, 7 and then 10, 11, 12. Youth and love are in the background of the poem, placing this sonnet among his 'early poems'.

In the same year, Owen wrote another of his so-called 'early poems', before going to war: 'Music'. There are two manuscripts, which are dated October 1916; however, Owen revised the poem later in August 1917 and then again in November of the same year. It is a sonnet, as most of his poem until that period.



Music

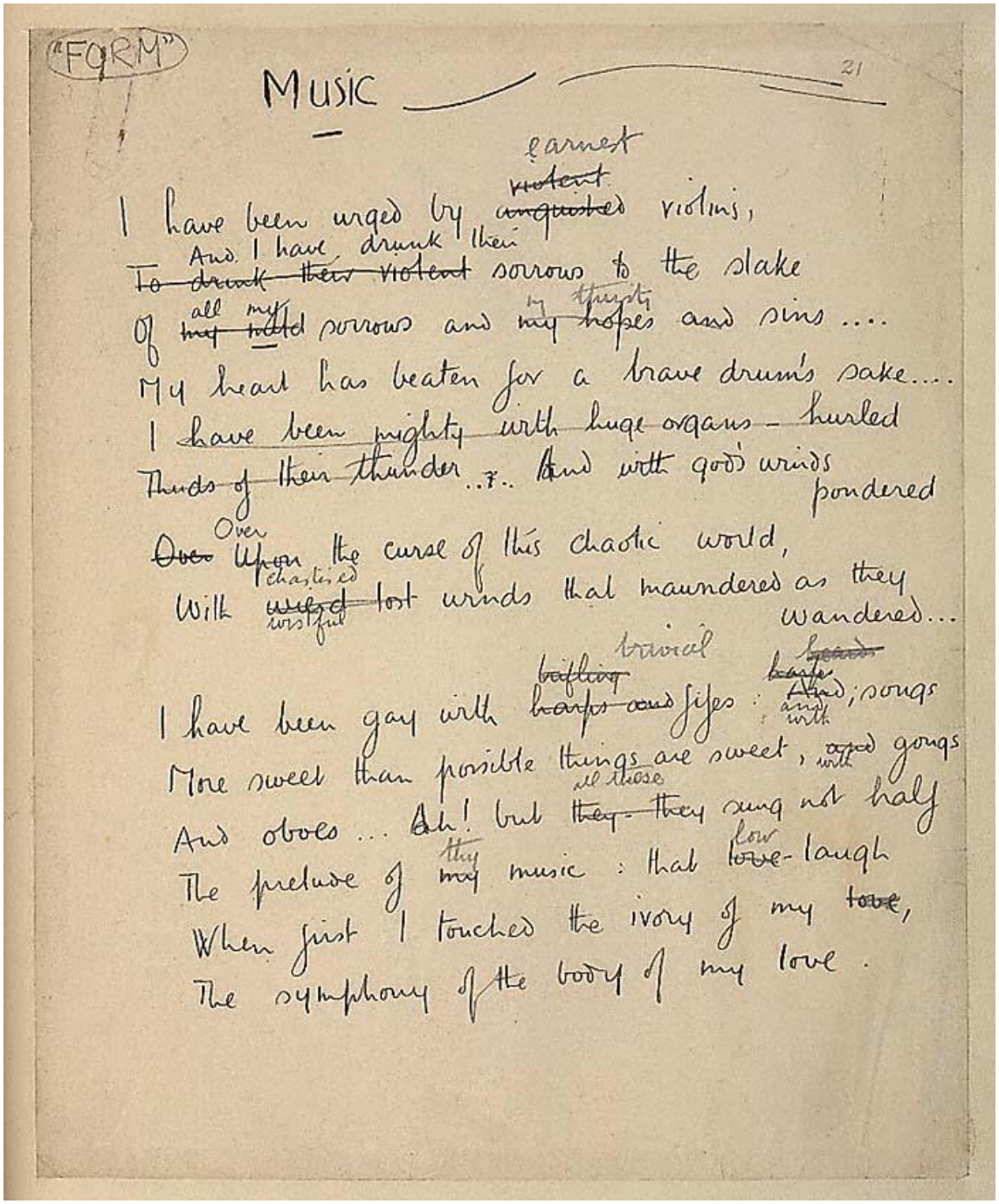
I have been urged by violent violins,
And I have drunk their sorrows, to the slake
Of all my sorrows, and my hopes, and sins....
My heart has beaten for a brave drum's sake....
I have been mighty with huge organs - hurled
Thuds of their thunder.... And with gods' wind pondered
Upon the curse of this chaotic world,
With weird lost winds that maundered as they wandered.

I have been gay with ~~harps and~~ trifling fifes; ~~And~~ harps; songs
More sweet than possible things are sweet; and gongs
And oboes... Ah! but they, they sang not duly
The prelude of my music: that Love-Laugh
When first I touched the ivory of my love,
The symphony of the body of my love...

WEO

[37]

[37] "Music," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed October 31, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4602.



38

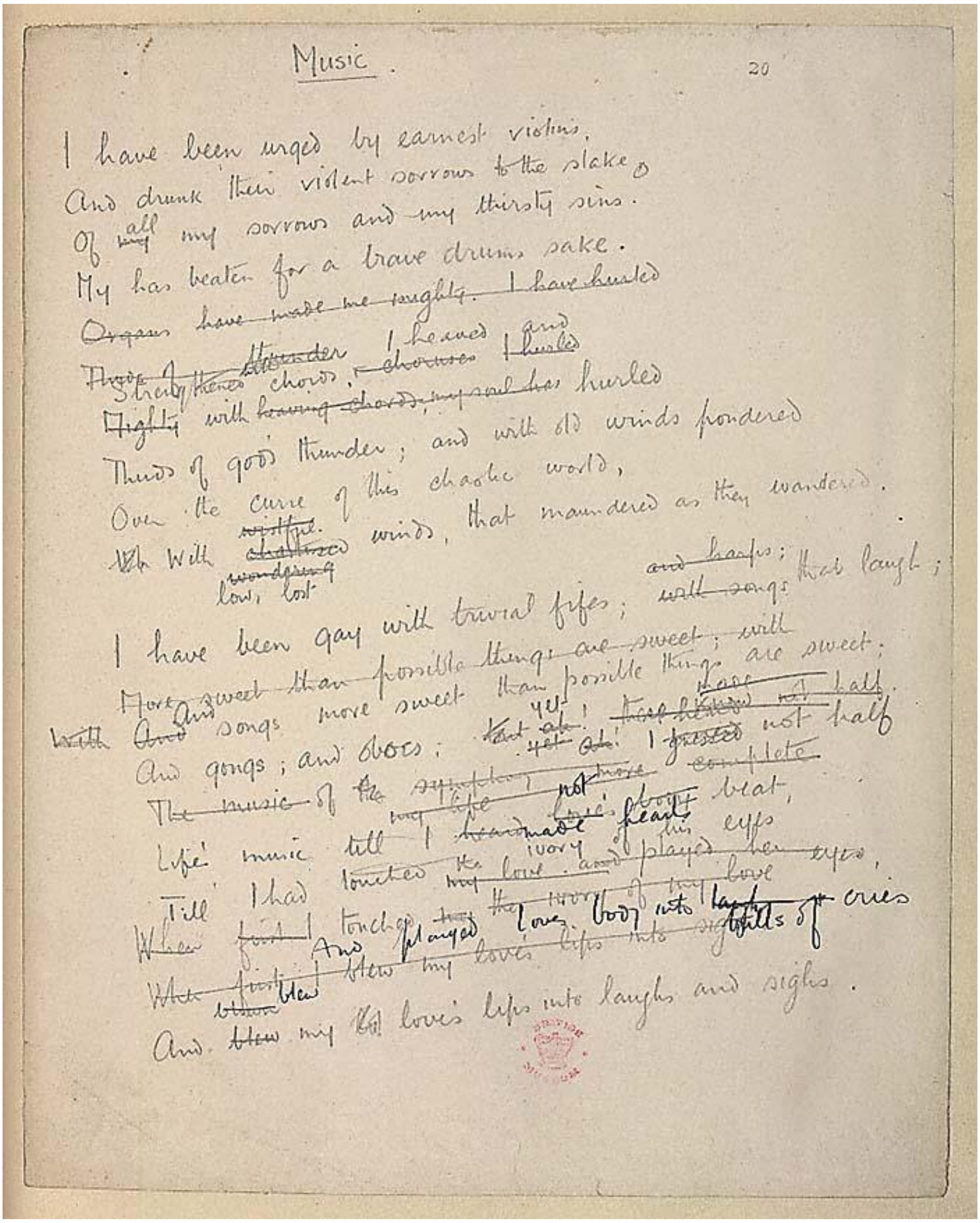
These are the first two drafts of the poem, a sonnet with a Petrarchan structure and a rhyme scheme: ABABCDCD, EFEFGG. The poem is an example of Owen's occasional regression into his earlier way of writing.[39] From the title, it is possible to understand that

[38] Ibid
[39] C. Day Lewis, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, London: Chatto and Windus, 1963, p. 104

the poem will be dealing with something unrelated to war. In his youth he played the piano, he always manifested his interest in music, even when he was in France and complained about the impossibility to practice. Above the personal interest, music as a subject has a Romantic shade and atmosphere. The sonnet tells the experience of hearing music from different instruments, each of them leaves a positive sensation in the poet. The 'violent violins' are the first to appear in line 1 of the first draft, with an alliteration; however, they will become 'earnest' from the second draft on. The poet, the protagonist of the sonnet, is fed with the power of these instruments, 'I have drunk their sorrows', which will become 'mellow'. In line 4, it appears the 'drum' and in line 5 the 'huge organs'. The sonnet continues with a series of literary clichés, 'I have been gay with trifling fifes; harp songs', the joy produced by music in the soul of the poet. In line 10 he uses a chiasmus, 'more sweet than possible things are sweet', always in order to underline this joy and harmony related to music. However, line 11 is split into two parts, 'Ah! But', introducing a contraposition, the 'gongs and the oboes' are not able to sing all the music of his love. In the sestet, we find another topical image: love. The last three lines are the description of 'my music', although from the second draft on he will revise it and change into 'thy music'. In 1916, Owen revised the sonnet, changing words and rephrasing some lines, however, it will be in 1917 that he reached a final version. Other three drafts portray how his work evolved during the process of writing.

In these three drafts, Owen changed the title, he thought of naming it 'The musician', but in the end, he came back to the original one. The final sonnet, as we can see in the last drafts, does not change the principal core it had from the beginning. There are influences by Keats, as in the last two lines of the sonnet: 'And touched Love's body into trembling cries,/And blown my love's lips into laughs and sighs.'[40] He uses the capital letter for 'Love', giving it credit and an important role. Lewis suggests that line 10 might possibly have been written by Brooke, 'And songs more sweet than possible things are sweet;' While line 6-9 have the movement and language of the mature Owen.[41]

[40] Ibid
[41] Ibid


Music. 20

I have been urged by earnest violins,
And drunk their violent sorrows to the slake of
Of all my sorrows and my thirsty sins.
My has beaten for a brave drum's sake.

Thuds of good thunder; and with old winds pondered
Over the curve of this chaotic world,

I have been gay with trivial fifes; that laugh;

And gongs; and oboes:

Life's music till I

And blew my loves lips into laughs and sighs.

42

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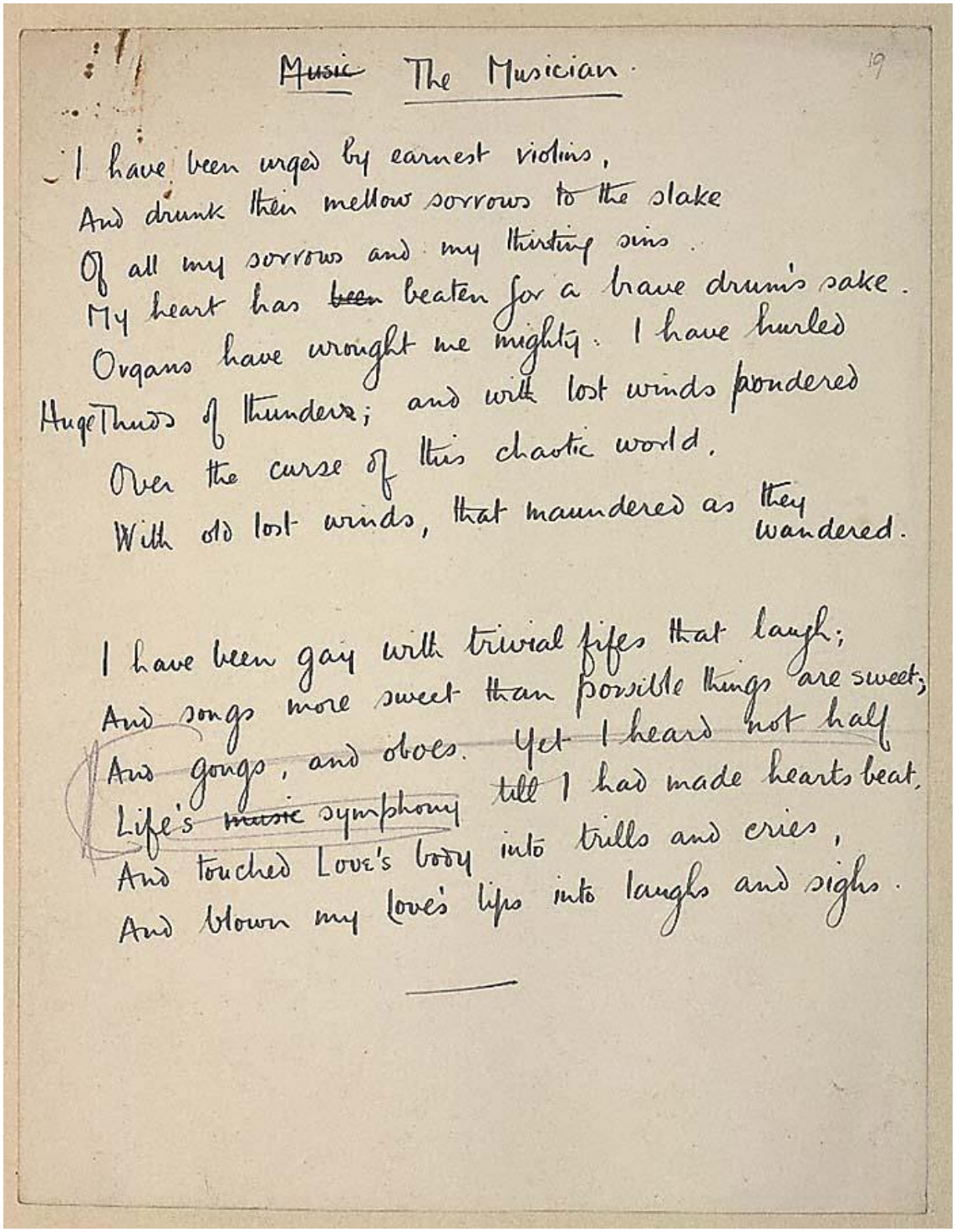
[42] Ibid



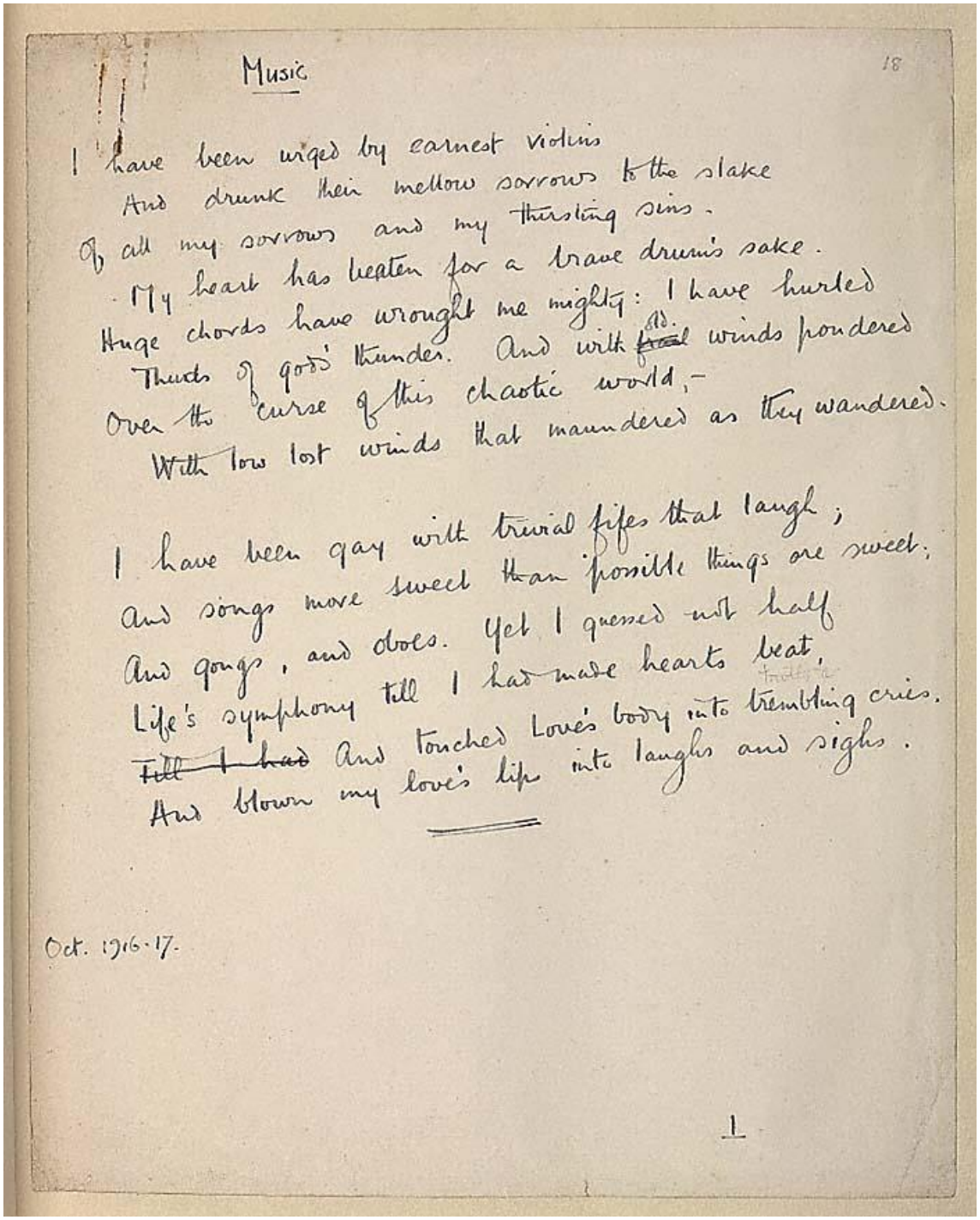
Music The Musician. 19

I have been urged by earnest violins,
And drunk their mellow sorrows to the slake
Of all my sorrows and my thirsting sins.
My heart has ~~been~~ beaten for a brave drum's sake.
Organs have wrought me mighty. I have hurled
Huge Thuds of thunders; and with lost winds pondered
Over the curse of this chaotic world,
With old lost winds, that maundered as they wandered.

I have been gay with trivial fifes that laugh;
And songs more sweet than possible things are sweet;
And gongs, and oboes. Yet I heard not half
Life's ~~music~~ symphony till I had made hearts beat,
And touched Love's body into trills and cries,
And blown my Love's lips into laughs and sighs.

43

[43] Ibid



Music

18

I have been urged by earnest violins
And drunk their mellow sorrows to the slake
Of all my sorrows and my thirsting sins.
My heart has beaten for a brave drum's sake.
Huge chords have wrought me mighty: I have hurled
Thuds of gods' thunder. And with ~~frost~~ wild winds pondered
Over the curse of this chaotic world,—
With low lost winds that maundered as they wandered.

I have been gay with trivial fifes that laugh;
And songs more sweet than possible things are sweet;
And gongs, and oboes. Yet I guessed not half
Life's symphony till I had made hearts beat,
~~Till I had~~ And touched Love's body into trembling cries.
And blown my love's lip into laughs and sighs.

Oct. 1916-17.

1

44

[44] Ibid

We can end the analysis of this first 'war poetry' with other two sonnets, 'Happiness' and 'To my friend. With an identity disc', both written in 1917 before Owen's second shellshock and his permanence at Craighlockart. 'To my friend. With an identity disc' is a sonnet written in March 1917, (the draft is dated on the 23rd), and addressed to his younger brother Colin. He wrote to him: "Perhaps you will think me clean mad and translated by my knock on the head. How shall I prove that my old form of madness has in no way changed? I will send you my last Sonnet, which I started yesterday. I think I will address it to you. *Adieu. Mon petit Je t'embrasse*."[45] He dedicated this sonnet to his brother as a form of a material gift. Identity discs were obligatory for all soldiers, they had to wear it around their neck, there was inscribed their name and service number; when a soldier died one disc was to be left with the body, while the other had to return to his unit as an evidence of death.

If ever I had dreamed of my dead name
High in the heart of London, unsurpassed
By Time for ever, and the Fugitive, Fame,
There taking a long sanctuary at last, -
I better that; and recollect with shame
How once I longed to hide it from life's heats
Under those holy cypresses, the same
That keep in shade the quiet place of Keats.

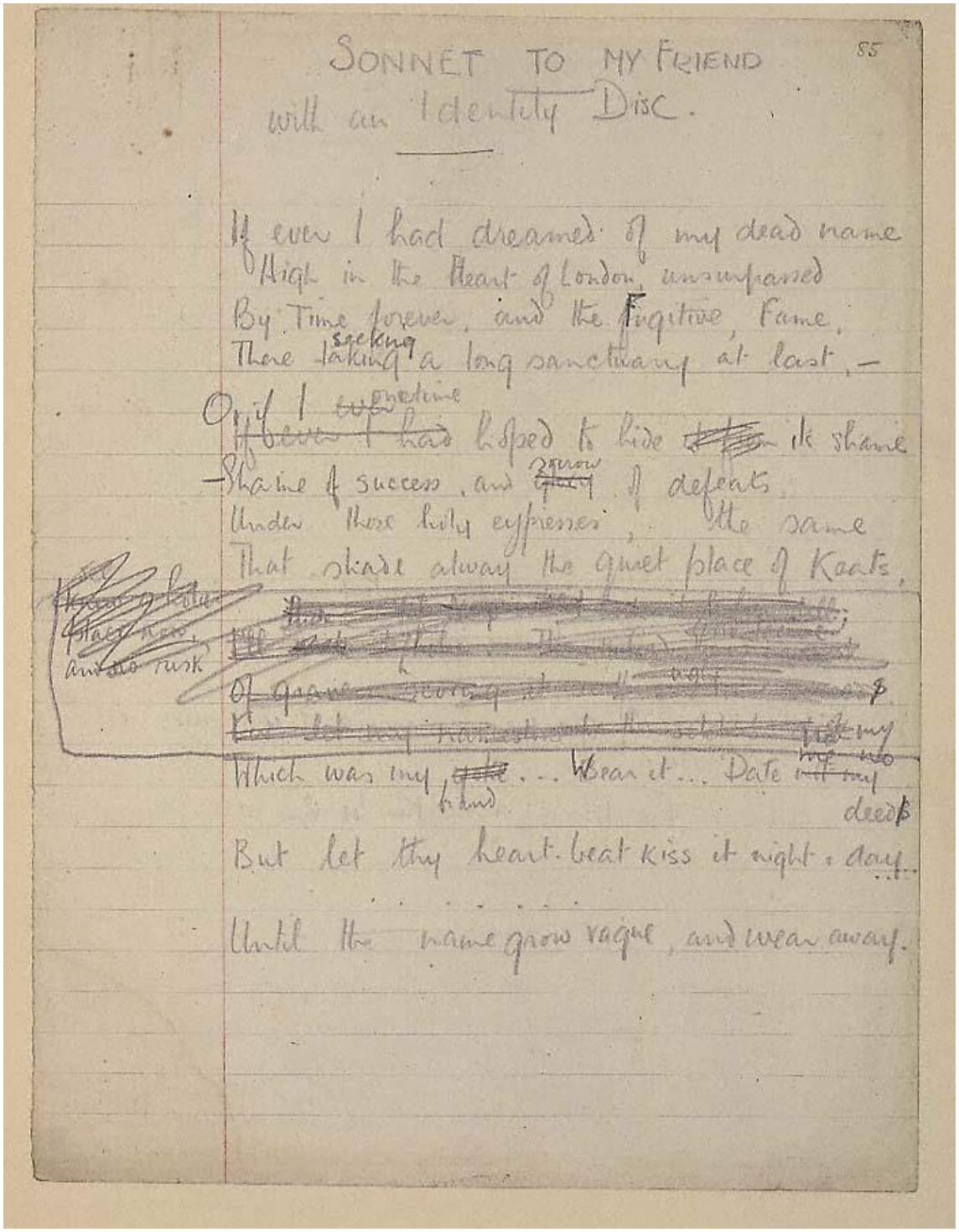
Now, rather, thank I God there is no risk
Of gravers scoring it with florid screed,
But let my death be memoried on this disc.
Wear it, sweet friend. Inscribe no date nor deed.
But let thy heart-beat kiss it night and day,
Until the name grow vague and wear away. [46]

[45] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 174
[46] "With An Identity Disc," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The Estate of Wilfred Owen. The Complete Poems and Fragments of Wilfred Owen edited by Jon Stallworthy first published by Chatto & Windus, 1983. Preliminaries, introductory, editorial matter, manuscripts and fragments omitted. via *First World War*

On The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, there are several drafts of the 23rd of March, while there is another version, which Lewis chooses for his book of collected poems. I choose to look at the original version of March 1917, which Owen addressed to his younger brother. The sonnet has a Shakespearean structure alongside with the style and vocabulary, this is conclusively proved by the fact that on one of the part-drafts of the poem he had transcribed Shakespeare's sonnet number 104, 'To me, fair friend, you never can be old.'[47] In the octet he talks about his 'dead name' and what would remain of it, capitalising 'Time' and 'Fame'. In the sonnet 104, Shakespeare talks to a friend, 'you never can be old', echoing the idea of time never passing, which Owen describes saying that the name will never be surpassed by time in line 2. It is quite a contradiction, because the unforgiving qualities of time represent its power to swallow up all things mortal, while he says 'unsurpassed', probably hoping in something more everlasting. The octet ends with Keats who is in a 'quiet place'. In the sestet, he focuses on the name written on the disc, as announced in the title, saying it will be his 'gravestone' in line 10. The idea is that this name will remain with the soldier, physically; Owen conveys the image in a sophisticated and romantic tone, 'But let thy heart-beat kiss it night and day.' The sentiment is that the disc would better remain, even though it is possible that it will be simply forgotten. Owen moves from a consideration of a traditional way to commemorate someone's death, to a more modest way. What will remain of the soldier's death, is a cause for reflection, which will accompany him throughout the war; the death of a soldier is not the death of his name, written on a disc.

Poetry Digital Archive, accessed November 5, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/3313.

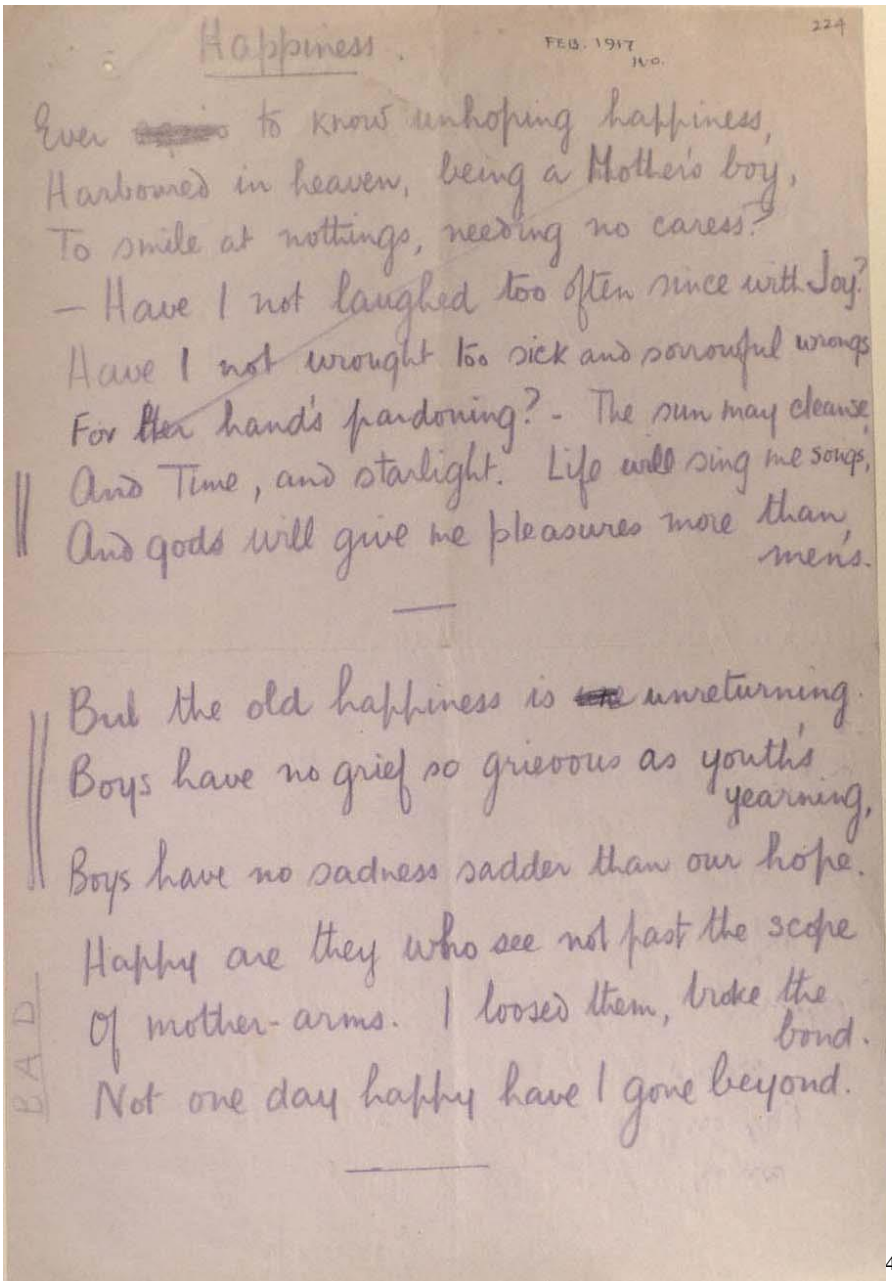
[47] Sven Backman, Op. Cit., p. 40



48

[48] "With an Identity Disc," *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed November 6, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/8184.

The last poem I am going to analyse in order to end the study of this early 'war poems', is 'Happiness'. The first draft is dated February 1917, even though Owen revised it late in June-August 1917, changing to create the final sonnet.



Happiness. FEB. 1917 224

Even [illegible] to know unhoping happiness,
Harboured in heaven, being a Mother's boy,
To smile at nothings, needing no caress?
– Have I not laughed too often since with Joy?
Have I not wrought too sick and sorrowful wrongs
For Her hand's pardoning? – The sun may cleanse,
And Time, and starlight. Life will sing me songs,
And gods will give me pleasures more than men's.

But the old happiness is unreturning.
Boys have no grief so grievous as youth's yearning,
Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope.
Happy are they who see not past the scope
Of mother-arms. I loosed them, broke the bond.
Not one day happy have I gone beyond.

BAD

[49]

This manuscript shows the first attempt of Owen to write the sonnet, even though it is clear that it will not be the final one. He wrote 'BAD' in a margin next to the final three

[49] "Happiness," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The English Faculty Library, University of Oxford / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed November 6, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4860.

lines, stating the unsatisfactory result he had from this poem. The manuscript from late June-August 1917 is full of corrections and rewritings, leading Owen to formulate the conclusive poem, which can be found in Lewis's collection. It was written during three weeks that Owen spent in Abbeville for a course at the Advance Horse Transport Depot.

> Ever again to breathe pure happiness,
> The happiness our mother gave us, boys?
> To smile at nothings, needing no caress?
> Have we not laughed too often since with joys?
> Have we not laughed wrought too sick and sorrowful wrongs
> For her hands' pardoning? The sun may cleanse,
> And time, and starlight. Life will sing sweet songs,
> And gods will show us pleasures more than men's.
>
> Yet heaven looks smaller than the old doll's-home,
> No nestling place is left in bluebell bloom,
> And the wide arms of trees have lost their scope.
> The former happiness is unreturning:
> Boys' griefs are not so grievous as our yearning,
> Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope.[50]

The title had come from a series of set subjects on which Owen and his cousin had decided to write. He dedicates this poem to his mother, "My 'Happiness' is dedicated to you. It contains perhaps two good *lines*. Between you an' me the sentiment is all bilge. Or nearly all. But I think it makes a creditable Sonnet."[51] The sonnet is in a modified form, it uses the iambic pentameter broken six times, either by the addition of one or two extra syllables or on the emphasis being placed on a line's first syllable. For the rhyme scheme, an irregular six lines follow the regular pattern in the octet. Owen describes a mixture of emotions in the octet, starting with the 'pure happiness' in line 1, which is the one given

[50] C. Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 93
[51] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 163

by their mothers, and no longer felt by them. He addresses the ‘boys’, probably speaking to his soldiers friends. He asks three direct questions, even though they seem rhetorical, using ‘we’ in order to put himself within his companions. He builds the octet upon repetitions, the two central lines have the same structure, with the anaphora of ‘Have we not laughed’, underlining the happy state that laughter provokes. The boys are trying to cheer themselves up, in the last two line of the octet, which again begins with an anaphora of ‘and’, and the hope for something beautiful. However, the sestet begins with ‘Yet’, meaning that the reality of things is different than the one expressed before. ‘The former happiness is unreturning’, it is not possible to live again the happiness they experienced before the war, and the final couplet expresses the present situation. The noun ‘boys’ is the first word of each line, and it is compared to the ‘we’, subject of the whole poem; as if the boys who once experienced happiness are now the soldier who learn that there is no hope. The last two lines, with the alliteration of the sound /s/, ‘sadness sadder’ and the oxymoron which contrast ‘our hope’ with ‘sadness’ express the reality of things. For Hibberd, ‘Happiness’ is Owen’s first mature poetry, it signs the passage from an aspiring poet, to a more conscious and capable artist.

The year 1917 was the beginning of Owen’s maturity as a poet and as a man. The arrival at the front put Owen in front of the real massacre of the war, and the desire to write takes shape thanks to what he experienced. He continued to communicate with his mother at home and to recollect everything he lived, which will soon become the core for his transformation. From the breaking out of the war to his participation in 1917, Owen spent this two year growing as a man and so did his poetry; thanks to the meeting with Tailhade, the poetry of Swinburne, the first war poets or ‘bardic poets’ like Brooke, who help Owen to begin his journey towards poetry.

3) Sassoon and the change

While Owen was at the front fighting the war, there was an important figure who started to gain popularity and fame thanks to his war poetry and his personality: Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon, a very different personality if compared to Owen, achieved popularity and became an example for most poets writing during the war, even though his political and anti-war ideas caused his 'exile'. It was Owen's meeting with Sassoon which brought out the real potential of the poet, he was already a poet so Sassoon did not transform him, although, he gave him the tools to do so. Sassoon's need to write about the war was also the need to find a new kind of language, as language was far too artificial to express moments that were 'unreproducible'.[1]

3.1) Siegfried Sassoon

> An officer came blundering down the trench:
> "Stand-to and man the fire step!" On he went ...
> Gasping and bawling, "Fire-step ... counter-attack!"
> Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right
> Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left;
> And stumbling figures looming out in front.[2]

Siegfried Sassoon was born in 1886 in a wealthy family, his father was a Jewish merchant from Baghdad while his mother an Englishwoman of Thornycroft ancestors turned sculptors, painters and engineers. He was the second of three sons and grew up in Kent, however, his father abandoned the family before Sassoon was five. He lived a leisured life devoting himself to poetry, horses and cricket. He entered late into the school system and failed to complete his scholastic education at Cambridge, preferring to dedicate

[1] Evelyn Cobley, Op.Cit., p. 7
[2] Poetry Foundation, visited 09/12/2016, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/57220

himself to his former passions. His family background and journey is, as we can see, different from Owen's, as their character and personality. When war broke out on August 4th 1914, Sassoon had already enlisted to join the army, first in the Sussex Yeomanry, and later he was transferred to the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in May 1915. He was one of the boys who fought the war from its very beginning, although, he underwent a change in his beliefs towards the war. Initially, he was a fervent patriot and a supporter of Brooke's ideas, writing according to his example. However, in November 1915 his younger brother died in the Dardanelles expedition, later he met Robert Graves who contributed to change his attitude towards the war. Although his later position would change, while he was on the battlefield he received the nickname 'Mad Jack', for his courage and almost foolish attitude, which gained him the Military Cross. His position gradually changed when he witnessed the first Battle of the Somme in July 1916 and the Battle of Arras in April 1917. His change can be traced in his letters and his poems, he started in 1915 with sacrificial ardour, in 1916 it became anger, and acceptance in 1918.[3] His first collection of war poems was published in May 1917, *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems*, but even before he had written epigrams and satires about the war. He was wounded in the Battle of Arras, and while he was recovering, he wrote a famous anti-war protest, 'Soldier's Declaration', which was read in Parliament in July 1917 and published on The Times the following day. It is not clear, whether his seclusion at Craiglockhart for shell-shock was just a mean to silence him, or if he really suffered from it. Therefore, the 23rd of July 1917, Siegfried Sassoon arrived at Craiglockart hospital where he stayed until October and met Wilfred Owen. There he met the psychiatrist Dr Rivers, who helped him and persuaded the poet to return to the battlefield to fight, as he did. In April 1918, Sassoon was once again in France, promoted to the rank of Captain, but in July the same year, he was wounded in the head. As a result, he spent the rest of the war in England, although he remained in the army on indefinite sick-leave until 11 March 1919. In the same period he came back to England he published 'Counter-Attack and other poems', which contained most of his famous war poems. The collection embodies Sassoon's reality of the war, with satire, bitterness and crude reality, as shown in the so-called poem 'Counter-Attack'. After retiring from the army, Sassoon dedicated his life to poetry, publishing a prose trilogy: *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and

[3] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 96

Sherston's Progress (1936).[4] In 1920, he was the man responsible for the publication of Owen's poems in a first collection. Subsequently, he published a three-volume autobiography: *The Old Century* (1938), *The Weald of Youth* (1942) and *Siegfried's Journey* (1945). He married in 1933 and had a child, George Sassoon, who became a scientist. Towards the end of his life, he converted to Roman Catholicism; he died in 1967 from stomach cancer.

3.2) The Old Huntsman and Other Poems

> 'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
> 'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
> 'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
> 'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
> 'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.'
> And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'(6-12)[5]

Sassoon was the one soldier poet to be widely read during the course of the war, and before Owen, probably the one who had the most success. His first successful collection, *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* appeared in May 1917, during the worst year of the war. It made an impact on civilians because of the originality of its themes and their authenticity. Even though this collection and his attitude towards the war showed a rebellious soul, there was nothing in Sassoon's early life, which could lead to this.[6] Life in the trenches provided the core subject for Sassoon's poems and the gradual change of his style. The poet himself said that the process began in the first months of 1916,

> with a few genuine trenches poems, dictated by my resolve to record my surroundings, and usually based on the notes I was making whenever I could

[4] War Poets association, visited 09/12/2016, http://www.warpoets.org/poets/siegfried-sassoon-1886-1967/
[5] Bartleby, 09/12/2016, http://www.bartleby.com/135/20.html
[6] Bernard Bergonzi, Op. Cit., p.92

> do so with detachment. These poems aimed at impersonal description of front-line conditions, and could at least claim to be the first things of their kind.[7]

Sassoon wrote this statement in *Siegfried's Journey*, recollecting the moment in which he started to think and write war poetry. He fought the war since its beginning, he lived in the trenches and was a 'foolish' soldier. His poems embody the vivid and radical way in which he changed attitude towards the Great War. In order to really understand the poems and their attitude to the war, it would be necessary to see the horror of the war: stabbing and shooting a man. The collection was dedicated to Thomas Hardy, who praised the poems and delighted its author.[8] These poems have a more realistic and even naturalistic vein, they are more mature, showing a progress from the satirical epigrams. However, Sassoon was not altogether equipped to respond completely to this naturalistic side, his strong Georgian sensibility and background were still present. The circumstances of the situation he lived through during the war made him a realist. The title of the collection is taken from the first poem, in total there are sixty-nine poems collected. The first thirty-five poems were written in the spirit of Happy Warriorism, as Brooke gave the lead at the beginning of the war.[9] However, the mood changed through the collection and from 'Stand-to' onward, the poems became a form of protest against the war.[10] Sassoon's style in these poems would be crucial for the young Owen, especially three poems, which we are going to analyse, in order to understand Sassoon's poetic potential and influence. 'The Death-Bed', 'Last Meeting' and 'A Letter Home' are the three best example, they occupy the final pages of the 1917 edition and are 'lyrical war poems'.[11]

These three poems were very important for Owen's growth in the style and manner of writing, he used them as line guides and even tried to copy them. They are all long lyrical war poems, as is easily recognisable from the very beginning of each poem.

> He drowsed and was aware of silence heaped
>
> Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls;[12]

[7] Ibid, p.93
[8] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 97
[9] Michael Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon: a critical study*, London; Leiden Universitaire Presse: Oxford Universiry Press, 1966, p. 15
[10] Ibid p.19
[11] Dominc Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 97
[12] Bartleby, *The Death-Bed*, http://www.bartleby.com/135/34.html

Because the night was falling warm and still
Upon a golden day at April's end,
I thought; I will go up the hill once more[13]

Here I'm sitting in the gloom
Of my quiet attic room.
France goes rolling all around,[14]

Each beginning has more or less the same elegiac tone, even though the subjects are different, it is possible to perceive a common background and atmosphere. The first poem begins with the subject, 'he', which is the protagonist and is presented since the beginning; he is inserted into a silent atmosphere, as the word 'silence' in line 1 suggests. 'The death-bed' is a long poem, which describes the last moment of life of a wounded soldier, forced to stay in bed until his death. From the first lines, we are introduced to the use of alliteration and consonance, in line 1 of the /z/ sound 'drowsed', 'was', 'silence', and also in all the first stanza. In 'The Last Meeting' Sassoon recollects the last visit to a friend, the subject appears in line 3 and is the poets himself, 'I thought', who decides to put himself on a journey to the hill. The atmosphere is quite different if we think about the war, it seems that the poet is trying to create a peaceful and dreamy place, 'a golden day', the lyric choice of words is clear and evident. 'A Letter Home' is a kind of letter poem, the poet, also protagonist 'I'm sitting', tries to write a letter where he explains what is happening in Europe, 'France goes rolling around', which is the war. The three poems describe three different situations, but the words and style are similar.

'The Death-Bed' is divided into seven stanzas without much regularity, the first has nine lines, the second six lines while the last two have four. There is no rhyme scheme; Sassoon plays with alliteration, anaphora and punctuation. He creates a climax, from the soldier who is still conscious, probably trying to drink, "Someone was holding water to his mouth", until the last stanza, "But death replied: 'I chose him.' So he went,". It is very

[13] Bartleby, *The Last Meeting*, http://www.bartleby.com/135/35.html
[14] Bartleby, *A Letter Home*, http://www.bartleby.com/135/36.html

descriptive and Sassoon uses a specific language in order to convey the idea of a man dying.

> He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
> Leapt like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
> His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.
> But someone was beside him; soon he lay
> Shuddering because that evil thing had passed.
> And death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and stared. (28-36)[15]

In this fifth stanza, Sassoon describes the agony and the pain that the soldier is feeling, and he uses a metaphor to convey better the image of pain. It compares the pain to a beast, 'then the pain/leapt like a prowling beast', it is a cruel creature that is ready to attack, like an animal. In line 29 the alliteration of sound 'gr' underlines the beastly aspect of pain and the harshness of the situation. Death is personified with the description in the last lines, because it 'paused and stared', as a normal person does. So, death arrived at the man's bed and there is nothing the others can do. The poet encourages to 'gather round his bed.' as he says in line 34, he has still hope for him to live, and the sixth stanza begins with an alliteration of the /l/ sound, 'Light many lamps', while the following line begins with 'Lend'.

> Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
> He's young; he hated War; how should he die
> When cruel old campaigners win safe through?
>
> But death replied: 'I choose him.' So he went,
> And there was silence in the summer night;
> Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.
> Then, far away, the thudding of the guns. (36-42)[16]

[15] Bartleby, *The Death-Bed*, http://www.bartleby.com/135/34.html
[16] Ibid

The dying soldier is a young boy and 'he hated War', which makes the reader sympathize with him and conveys the growing anti-war message of Sassoon. This boy was young and did not want to fight, and the poet questions himself, 'how should he die/When cruel old campaigners win safe through?' Unfortunately, the answer is given by death who cannot reply but 'I choose him', so it is not possible to do something for the boy. The last stanza is the description of the boy's death, the atmosphere is calm, 'there was silence in the summer night', it may seem a nice and positive image, he dies in 'silence and safety', which contrasts with the chaos of the war echoed far away.

'The Last Meeting' is a much longer poem, of 131 lines, divided into three macro sections, each section is divided into stanzas. The poem describes the physical journey of the poet through and beyond the living, towards the solitude of nature, where he hopes to feel again the presence of the dead. He begins describing his intention in a kind of soft and tender atmosphere. The poem has a lush romantic style that smothers both the subject and some strong atmospheric description beneath a richness of language.[17]

> I thought; I will go up the hill once more
> To find the face of him that I have lost,
> And speak with him before his ghost has flown
> Far from the earth that might not keep him long. (2-5)[18]

His journey is to a faraway land, where he can see the dead before his departure, and before the loss of 'his ghost'. The rhythm of the lines makes the poem similar to prose, and so does the structure and the length of it. The narration continues, there is the description of the dead 'He was old./His days went round with the unhurrying wheel.', the tone is bitter-sweet, remembering how he was.

> There stood the empty house; a ghostly hulk
> Becalmed and huge, massed in the mantling dark,

[17] Michale Thorpe, Op. Cit, p. 31
[18] Bartleby, *The Last Meeting*, http://www.bartleby.com/135/35.html

As builders left it when quick-shattering war
Leapt upon France and called her men to fight. […]
An owl flew out from under the high eaves
To vanish secretly among the firs,
Where lofty boughs netted the gleam of stars.
I stumbled in; the dusty floors were strewn
With cumbering piles of planks and props and beams; (45-53)[19]

He arrives at the place, now empty because everyone left for the 'quick-shattering war', which is a paradox as the war was everything but quick. The house has a ghostly aspect and he has to stumble in, so it is not so easy to enter because there is no order or normality. Sassoon uses the semantic field of the 'ghostly' through the entire poem, firstly for the house, secondly describing the dead men, 'His human ghost'. For the whole section, the ghost talks to the poet, explaining who he was and what he had done. The last section ends the poem, it opens with the realisation of what the dead are for the livings.

I know that he is lost among the stars,
And may return no more but in their light. (114-115)[20]

The dead have their own existence and the living humans are not able to understand it and may not communicate with them. 'I shall not understand', so he is trying to accept the situation, which he does at the end of the poem.

Then will I think: 'He moves before me now.'
So he will never come but in delight,
And, as it was in life, his name shall be
Wonder awaking in a summer dawn,
And youth, that dying, touched my lips to song. (127-132)[21]

[19] Ibid
[20] Ibid
[21] Ibid

‘A Letter Home’ is a poem divided into five stanzas, and dedicated to Robert Graves, Sassoon’s great friend. It is a letter and a recollection of memories and situations happened in a past time, mostly regarding the war. He recalls how the war started, even though the atmosphere of the poem is more lyric, it is not a description of a crude fact of the war.

> And I puff my pipe, calm-hearted,
> Thinking how the fighting started,
> Wondering when we’ll ever end it,
> Back to Hell with Kaiser send it,
> Gag the noise, pack up and go,
> Clockwork soldiers in a row.
> I’ve got better things to do
> Than to waste my time on you. (5-12)[22]

The first stanza has a regular rhyme scheme, the rhymes are all perfect; the poet inserts himself in a peaceful place, probably sitting at his desk, and remembers the war. He does natural gestures, ‘I puff my pipe’, ‘calm-hearted’. The line structure seems a little fragmented, line 5 and line 9 have a comma in the middle of the sentence stressing the rhythm of the narration. Then he continues addressing Robert directly, in the second stanza and in the last one. He described the experience of the war, which he experienced with Graves, ‘You and I have walked together/In the starving winter weather’. They fought in the same battalion and lived the same atrocity.

> Robert, there’s a war in France;
> Everywhere men bang and blunder,
> Sweat and swear and worship Chance,
> Creep and blink through cannon thunder.
> Rifles crack and bullets flick,
> Sing and hum like hornet-swarms.

[22] Bartleby, *A Letter Home*, http://www.bartleby.com/135/36.html

Bones are smashed and buried quick. (59-65)[23]

This is the beginning of the last stanza, Sassoon again talks directly to Robert and describes the war. He stressed the situation with the help of alliteration, 'bang and blunder', and then 'sweat and swear', and the use of very evocative words that underline the atmosphere on the battlefield. "Creep and blink through cannon thunder", and again 'rifles crack and bullets flick', the sounds of the trenches and the consequences on soldiers, 'Bones are smashed and buried quick.' However, even in this dark situation and the tragedy caused by war, there is hope for the poet, who never fails to find a positive answer.

Yet, through stunning battle storms,
All the while I watch the spark
Lit to guide me; for I know
Dreams will triumph, though the dark
Scowls above me where I go. (66-71)[24]

D.J. Enright states that the poetry of Sassoon is composed of "what have been called the 'negative emotions'-horror, anger, disgust- and outside of that field he inclines to become sentimental in a conventional way."[25]

3.3) Counter-Attack and Other Poems

Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,

[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid
[25] Michael Thorpe, Op. Cit., p. 32

Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop! (9-13)[26]

Counter-Attack and Other Poems was published in 1918 and it is the second collection containing war poems written by Sassoon. The collection begins with an epigraph taken from the novel *Le Feu* by Henri Barbusse, the French novel appeared in 1916. Barbusse was a realist in the tradition of Zola.[27] The novel talks about war and it is written so close to the experience which inspires it. It is the perfect beginning for a war collection, and even Owen, whom Sassoon lent the novel to, said it "set him alight."[28] In this collection, Sassoon perfects the hard, punchy and epigrammatic style that he had already used before. It is more realistic and angrily satirical, and there are more protest poems than in the previous collection. The collection contains thirty-eight poems with a wider range of subjects and matters. 'Counter-Attack' is by far the core of the collection, as mentioned in the title, but the collection contains also 'Glory of Women', a strong satire against the ignorance of the women at home. 'Does it Matter' is a short poem full of bitter pathos:

Does it matter?—losing your legs? […]

Does it matter?—losing your sight? […]

Do they matter?—those dreams from the pit?[29]

These are the first lines of each stanza, the similarity of structure underlines the satiric tone of the poem; the questions are deeply ironical and hide the dramatic experience lived at the front, which the people at home ignore and do not pay attention to as it has not happened to them. Despite the extended range of poems present in *Counter-Attack*, Sassoon remains a poet of narrow but direct effects. His language did not change progressively; it remained hard, clear and very defined, rather than suggestive. He was aware of his limitations and did not attempt a profundity beyond him; he remained a satirist as the poem 'The General' exemplifies.

'GOOD-MORNING; good-morning!' the General said

[26] Poetry Foundation, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/57323
[27] Bernard Bergonzi, Op. Cit., p. 102
[28] Ibid p. 104
[29] Bartleby, http://www.bartleby.com/136/14.html

When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

. . . .

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.[30]

This very short poem is a bitter satire against the authority leading the war, in this case, it is the category of generals. Sassoon condemned them for letting the soldiers die with their plans of attack, most of the time foolish. He blames them with bitterness, beginning the poem describing a meeting between the general and his soldiers. However, the atmosphere soon changes, as in line 3, 'Now' introduces a contraposition, the situation has changed and most of the soldiers have died. The soldiers are 'cursing his staff', insulting them for their incompetence. The two soldiers who are denouncing his lack of competence are called by name, and they are going to Arras, to fight and probably to die. Sassoon is able to communicate the state of incertitude, lack of trust that the soldiers experienced in the army. This poem, like some of his epigrams, has achieved a permanent status and a precise place in literature.[31]

Counter-Attack secured Sassoon's reputation as a poet, giving him the name and the credit for what he had done. By 1918, people knew who he was and read his poems, he was admired even by the Minister of Munitions, Winston Churchill.

[30] Bartleby, http://www.bartleby.com/136/12.html
[31] Bernard Bergonzi, Op. Cit., p.105

3.4) Craiglockhart: a new friendship

Craiglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh, became a psychiatric hospital for the treatment of shell-shock soldiers during the First World War, from 1916 to 1919. The hospital was built between 1877 and 1880 in a heavy Italian style, probably to promote expectations of Latin Luxury.[32] It was the scenario for the meeting between Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon in August 1917. On 23rd July 1917, Siegfried Sassoon arrived at the hospital after his protest against the war, so the authorities treated him like someone shell-shocked. At the beginning, he found the place very depressing and was not so keen on enjoying life at the hospital. Hibberd reports Sassoon's thoughts about the place,

> 'My fellow-patients are 160 more or less dotty officers. A great many of them are degenerate-looking. A few are genuine cases of shell-shock etc. One committed suicide three weeks ago.'[33]

The atmosphere at the hospital was not one of the best, most of the patients seemed more haunted than "mental", according to him. During the day, there were many hospital activities, the patients could enjoy staying with the others and doing different things together, while at night it could be possible to hear screaming by suffering patients. Sassoon did not enjoy taking part in activities nor taking country walks. Surely, Sassoon spent his time writing poems and analysing his attitude towards the war. He held an hour of consultation with Dr. River every other day, they talked about the war and Sassoon's ideas. Although the doctor may not have found the patient's nerves disordered, he tried to make him modify his views of the war. Rivers identified Sassoon's two vulnerable points: the affection for his men and the knowledge that they were safe if well lead. Talking to Dr. Rivers helped Sassoon to choose whether to return to the battlefield, as the doctor suggested that only on the field he could be sure that his men would be well lead. The anger against the war did not change, however, Sassoon's started to doubt the effect of his protest and to question his position. Moreover, the death of his close friend on 14th August, put the man into a more chaotic state of mind, which explains why he was not very interested in meeting Owen the first time.[34]

[32] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 189
[33] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 95
[34] Ibid, p. 96

Wilfred Owen arrived at Craiglockhart in the month of June 1917 after being at the front since January of the same year. He lived in the trenches and took part in the battle on the French front. His duty in the trenches caused him neurasthenia, which was the reason for his permanence at Craiglockhart. While he was fighting at the front, he did not write any poem, he lived the war experience and wrote letters home to his mother. There are three fundamental reasons why he could not write: he lacked the theoretical basis, he needed solitude, quiet and secrecy, which he did not possess in the trenches, and finally he had to reflect about the horrors he lived at the front. On 1st May 1917, Owen was observed to be strange, the Battalion Medical Officer found him shaky and tremulous, clearly, he was not in the condition to command the troops. He had to depart from the Battalion and soon transferred to a village near the Somme Canal, it was not until the 12th June that he crossed the channel and arrived at Southampton. On 25th June, Owen appeared before a Medical Board in Netley and was described unfit for General Service for six months and posted immediately to Craiglockhart.[35]

Like Sassoon, Owen did not have a great first impression of the place, starting from the physical appearance of the building; the corridors were gloomy, there was no natural light coming in and Owen's room was probably in a narrow corner. So, even for him, the arrival did not symbolise a fresh and positive start. Owen himself gave an account of what the hospital seemed like at his arrival.

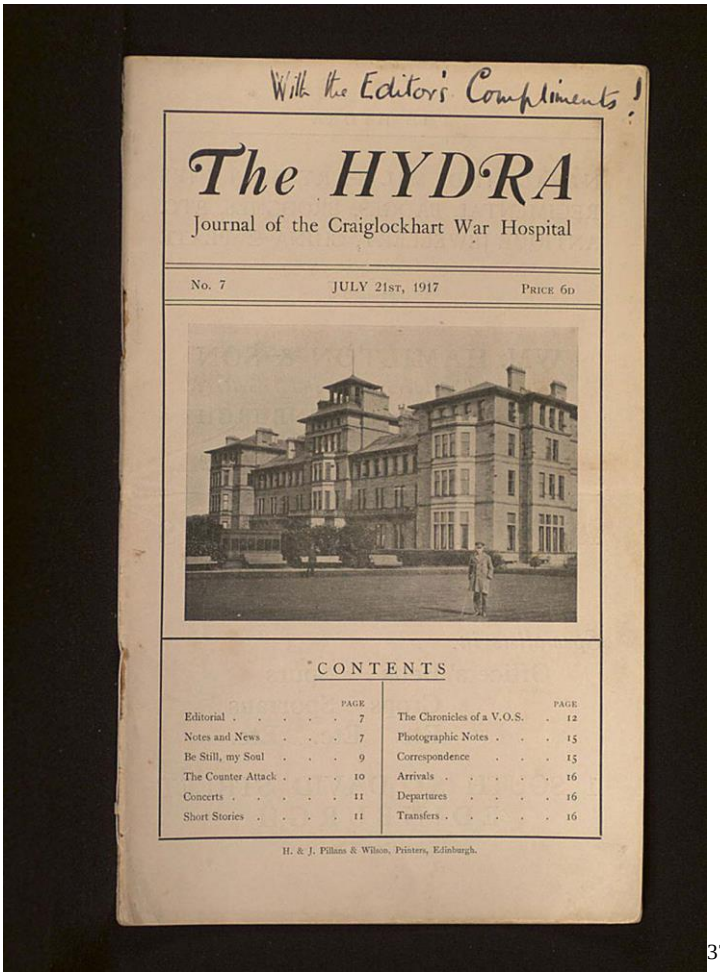
> Outwardly, War Hospital was… elaborately cheerful. Brisk amusements were encouraged, entertainment were got up, and serious cases were seldom seen downstairs…
>
> The doctors did everything possible to counteract gloom, and the wrecked faces were outnumbered by those who were emerging from their nervous disorders. But the War Office had wasted no money on interior decoration; consequently the place had the melancholy atmosphere of a decay hydro, redeemed only by its healthy situation and pleasant view of the Pentland Hills.[36]

Owen continues the description of the hospital situation, by night, the patients lost control, and like Sassoon, he felt people were haunted rather than mental. One could hear the soldiers smoking, muttering and lying awake bursting into tears a moment after. The day

[35] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p.188
[36] Ibid, p.190

after everything returned normal and people went talking to doctors about their night and their situations. Fortunately, it was not entirely like this, as Owen took part in many activities under the supervision of Dr Brock, unlike his friend Sassoon.

As part of the Hospital activities, Owen found himself on the editorial chair of *The Hydra*, the hospital magazine. The interest for poetry and writing never ceased to be a major part of Owen's character, so beginning with the issue of 21st July 1917, *The Hydra* saw in Owen its editor.


With the Editor's Compliments!

The HYDRA

Journal of the Craiglockhart War Hospital

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H. & J. Pillans & Wilson, Printers, Edinburgh.

[37]

Wilfred Owen found out from the usual lists of arrivals and departures, the presence of Siegfried Sassoon arrived in July, and now a patient of the hospital. He had been reading Sassoon's verse and had found a deep connection with his poems, especially the way in

[37] "The Hydra: 21st July 1917," *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed November 23, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/4134.

which war was described. A few days later Owen screwed up his courage and knocked on Sassoon's door, beginning what will be a life-changing friendship.

> One morning at the beginning of August, when I had been at Craiglockhart War Hospital about a fortnight, there was a gentle knock on the door of my room and a young officer entered. Short, dark-haired, and a shyly hesitant, he stood for a moment before coming across to the window, where I was sitting on my bed cleaning my golf clubs. A favourable first impression was made by the fact that he had under his arm several copies of *The Old Hunstman*. He had come, he said, hoping that I would be so gracious as to inscribe them for himself and some of his friends. He spoke with a slight stammer, which was no unusual thing in that neurosis-pervaded hospital. […] He had a charming honest smile, and his manners – he stood at my elbow rather as though conferring with a superior officer – were modest and ingratiating. […] I had taken an instinctive liking to him, and felt that I could talk freely. During the next half-hour or more I must have spoken mainly about my book and its interpretations of the War. He listened eagerly, questioning me with reticent intelligence. It was only when he was departing that he confessed to being a writer of poetry himself, though none of it had yet appeared in print.[38]

Sassoon recalls the first meeting with Owen in the pages of his autobiography. Owen appears as an admirer of Sassoon's work, taking with him copies of his collection in order to make him sign them. There is a discrepancy between their first impression, as for Owen it was a great opportunity to meet such a talented poet, while for Sassoon it was only a pleasant encounter. However, the relationship was nearly always one-sided rather than on equal terms. In Sassoon's letters, there are very few references to Owen; while Owen describes Sassoon as 'The Greatest friend I have'.[39] Owen had read Sassoon's book in mid-August, he was very touched especially on how he described the war. He had just been at the front and seen the horrors of war; however, he had only attempted to write and only before starting to fight. As the friendship began, Sassoon thought Owen and helped him to grow and become a real poet.

[38] Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey*, London: Faber and Faber, 1945, p. 58
[39] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 98

3.5) How to become a poet

Subsequently, the meetings between Owen and Sassoon became real "poem lessons" where Owen learned the theoretical and technique of poetry. The first important lesson that Owen learned from Sassoon's guide was that truth to experience was essential to poetry. Owen wanted to write about the war, what he had lived at the front, so the starting point was *truth*. This statement, probably simple and ordinary, is very important for Owen's awareness of poetry, he realised that in his letters home there was nothing similar to Sassoon's poetry. His first attempt at 'trench life sketch' was trying to imitate Sassoon's poem, precisely 'The Death Bed', which became 'The Dead-Beat' for Owen.

Imitation as a first way of working; these first poems are written in 'Sassoon's style', or are described as Sassoonish. Owen sent this first poem to his cousin and then he showed it to Sassoon. There are several drafts of this poem; according to Day Lewis the British Museum has one draft, Harold Owen has six early drafts and parts, two written in four-line stanzas and one dated September 1917; moreover in a letter to Leslie Gunston there is a draft dated 22nd August 1917. In the First World War Digital Archive are collected seven drafts, all of them belong to 'The Complete Poems and Fragments'. Two different drafts are dated while the others remain quite uncertain, the first is set in September 1917, while another in October 1917, but it probably was incorrect because it is totally cancelled. The first attempt, dated 22nd August 1917 and sent to his cousin, was the one, which should have been published in the next *Hydra*; however, Sassoon said it needed to be revised.

He dropped, more sullenly than wearily,
Became a lump of stench, a cloth of meat,
And none of us could kick him to his feet.
He blinked at my revolver, blearily.

He didn't seem to know a war was on,
Or see or smell the bloody trench at all …
Perhaps he saw the crowd at Caxton Hall,

And that is why the fellow's pluck's all gone-
Now that the Kaiser frowns imperially.
He sees his wife, how cosily she chats;
Not his blue pal there, feeding fifty rats.
Hotels he sees, improved materially;[40]

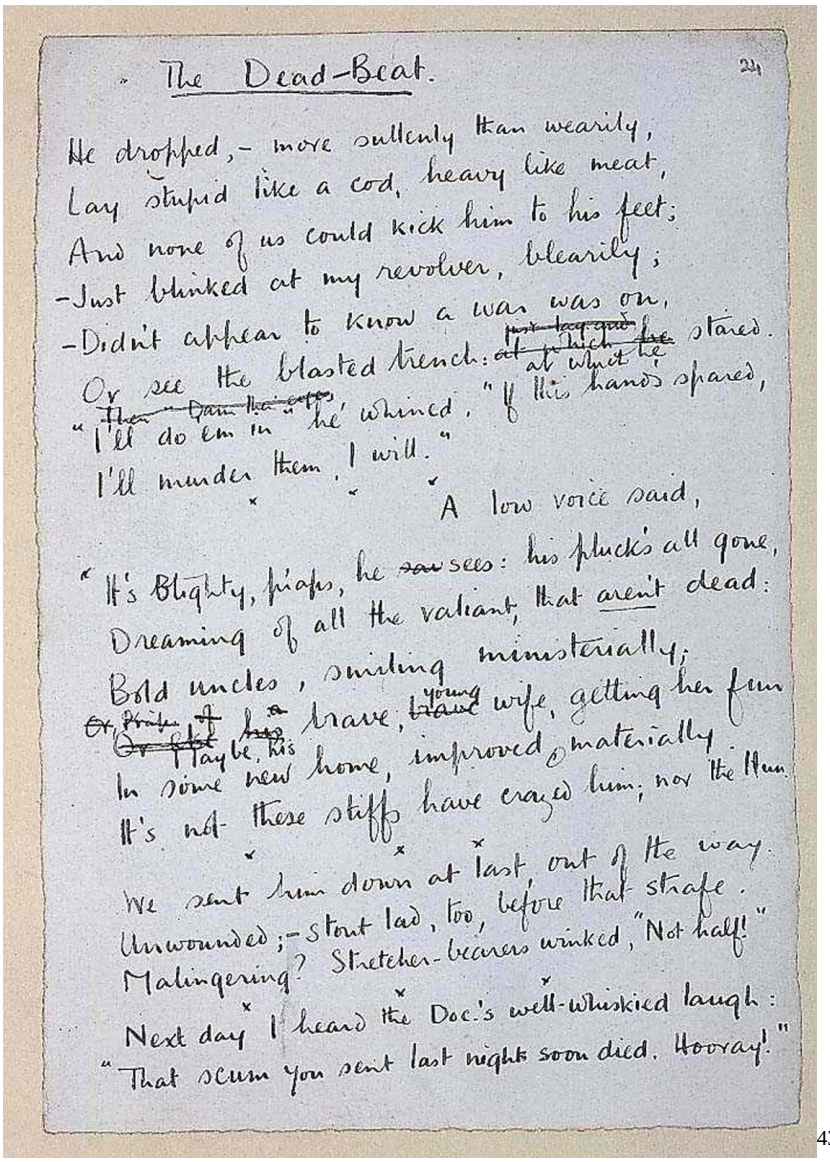
The construction of the poem is very ordinary, there are five stanzas of four lines each, the rhyme scheme is fixed: ABBA. Owen uses a very simple language, it is not an innovative and creative poem, and he gives an accurate representation of an event in a precise Sassoon style. 'The Death-Bed' directly takes the title, even though Owen transformed it in order to talk about a soldier who is no longer able to function despite the threats. Hibberd says that Sassoon's 'Blighters' also inspires the poem, being very straightforward about denouncing the Kaiser, which Owen would insert in his first version of the poem.

He dropped, - more sullenly than wearily,
Lay stupid like a cod, heavy like meat,
And none of us could kick him to his feet;
Just blinked at my revolver, blearily;
-Didn't appear to know a war was on,
Or see the blasted trench at which he stared.
"I'll do 'em in," he whined. "If this hand's spared,
I'll murder them, I will."[41]

Lewis chooses this version as definitive, I choose to report only the first stanza as the poem continues. Owen's style stumbles, even if the poem was revised a lot, he is still trapped in a state of transition, he wanted to copy the new way of writing but he is not able to abandon everything from his previous work. The final draft has four stanzas and the structure is more flexible if compared to the first version. He added three passages of

[40] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., pp. 72-73
[41] Ibid, p. 72

direct speech and enlivened the punctuation.[42] The attempt is still unripe, however, the poet results more fluent and has a precise subject. A soldier is no longer able to obey his general's orders. The direct speech helps to give truthfulness and a more familiar tone, as the reader might pretend to be at the front in that precise moment. Owen was trying to follow and respond to Sassoon's advice, 'Sweat your guts out writing poetry!', which would remain as a memento for the poet from that moment on.



The Dead-Beat. 24

He dropped,- more sullenly than wearily,
Lay stupid like a cod, heavy like meat,
And none of us could kick him to his feet;
-Just blinked at my revolver, blearily;
-Didn't appear to know a war was on,
Or see the blasted trench: ~~at which he~~ at what he stared.
"I'll do 'em in" he whined, "if his hands spared,
I'll murder them, I will."

A low voice said,
"It's Blighty, p'raps, he ~~can~~ sees: his pluck's all gone,
Dreaming of all the valiant, that aren't dead:
Bold uncles, smiling ministerially;
~~Or, Pride of a~~ brave, young wife, getting her fun
~~Or Glad~~ Maybe, his
In some new home, improved materially.
It's not these stiffs have crazed him; nor the Hun.

We sent him down at last, out of the way.
Unwounded;- stout lad, too, before that strafe.
Malingering? Stretcher-bearers winked, "Not half!"
Next day I heard the Doc's well-whiskied laugh:
"That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray!"

43

[42] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 100

[43] "The Dead-Beat," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed November 24, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4554

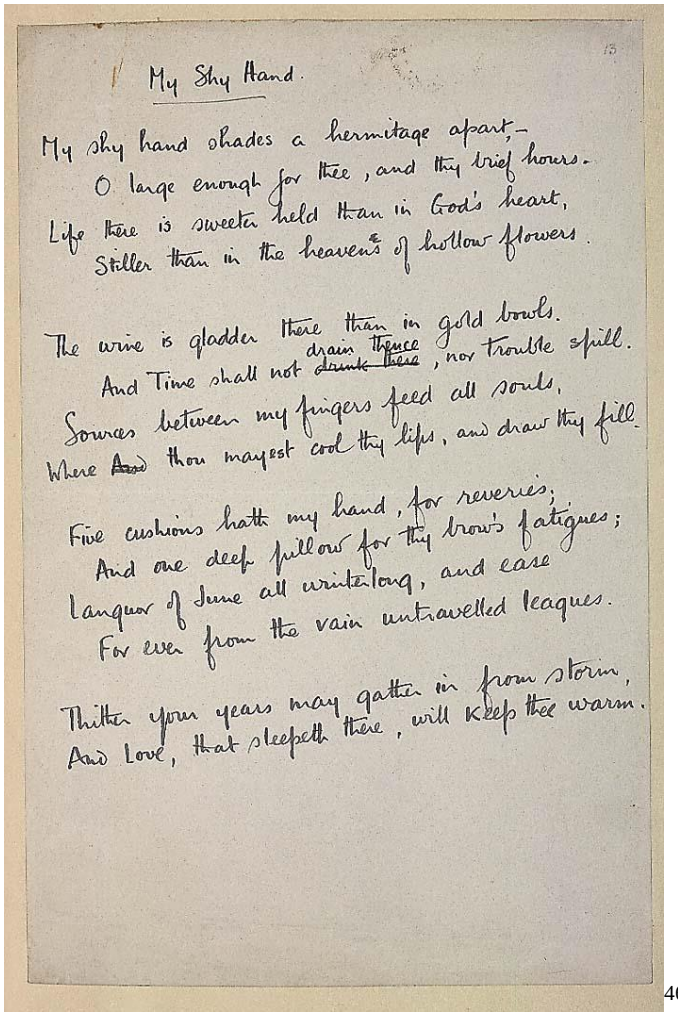
Owen's apprenticeship began with enthusiasm; he made use of everything he could learn from Sassoon's work. He scribbled two fragments, perhaps part of a poem, criticising civilians for their ignorance of war, following Sassoon's example. He had a large amount of ideas for new poems, they grew up rapidly in his mind once he started to 'sweat his guts out'. Owen did not take much time to start to compete with Sassoon, this process grew rapidly and when he was still in Craiglockhart he started most of his 'Sassoonish' poems. Most of them can be matched with poems in 'The Old Huntsman', for example, 'The Dead-Beat' with 'Blighters' or 'The Death-Bed', 'The Chances' with 'They', 'Conscious' probably took account of 'The Death-Bed' again. In the first place, Owen wrote most of these poems, 'The Dead-Beat', 'S.I.W.', 'Inspection', 'Disabled' and 'Conscious', in quatrains, but then he revised and changed the structure.[44] Most of his works cited previously were repeatedly revised in 1918; consequently, we have many drafts, which makes it difficult to establish the precise date. As an example, 'Conscious', exists in two different versions, but it is not clear if both or neither of the two could represent the final version. All three drafts are on a kind of paper he would use after leaving Craiglockhart, although, it seems more likely to be a poem of that period because it is evidently based on Sassoon's 'The Death-Bed'. However, the poem has a tone of deep criticism and it does not seem to possess the characteristics of the first flush of enthusiasm showed by Owen. He is able to convey the same idea in sixteen lines, while Sassoon needs forty-two.

Owen not only did learn from Sassoon, he started to collect some of his past works and had them read and analysed by his master. He chose some of his manuscripts and lend them to Sassoon: '1914', 'To –', 'Maundy Thursday', 'On my Songs' and others.

> Some of my old Sonnets didn't please him at all. But the 'Antaeus' he applauded fervently; and a short lyric which I don't think you know 'Sing me at morn but only with thy Laugh' he pronounced perfect work, absolutely charming, etc. etc. and begged that I would copy it out for him, to show to the powers that be. So the last thing he said was 'Sweat your guts out writing poetry!' 'Eh?' says I. 'Sweat your guts out, I say!' He also warned me against early publishing: but recommended Martin Secker for a small volume of 10 or 20 poems.[45]

[44] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 101
[45] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 210

This is an extract from Owen's letter, where he described how Sassoon reacted to his first poems and gave him the famous advice that Owen would remember in order to compose his poetry. Along with reading Owen's sonnets, Sassoon talked about publishing, at that time Owen had not published a single poem, it would be necessary to wait until 1918, however; the first collection of Owen's poetry of the First World War would arrive in 1920. Sassoon's help to Owen was not restricted to "poetry lessons" or copying manuscripts, he introduced the young soldier to new artists and poets. Probably in many of their conversations came up the name of William Butler Yeats, and in August, Owen read the latter's poems for the first time. The poem, 'My Shy Hand', was probably written having Yeats in mind, especially 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' and 'To an Isle in the Water'.



My Shy Hand.

My shy hand shades a hermitage apart,–
O large enough for thee, and thy brief hours.
Life there is sweeter held than in God's heart,
Stiller than in the heavens of hollow flowers.

The wine is gladder there than in gold bowls.
And Time shall not ~~drink~~ drain thence, nor trouble spill.
Sources between my fingers feed all souls,
Where ~~And~~ thou mayest cool thy lips, and draw thy fill.

Five cushions hath my hand, for reveries;
And one deep pillow for thy brow's fatigues;
Langour of June all winter long, and ease
For even from the vain untravelled leagues.

Thither your years may gather in from storm,
And Love, that sleepeth there, will keep thee warm.

[46]

[46] "My Shy Hand," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed November 29, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4472.

Owen continued to work on *The Hydra*, he had a lot of work to do as editor of the paper; he had to write the editorial and found the possibility to publish his poems. 'Song of Songs' appeared in print, however it was not the only one. 'The Next War' appeared in the issue of 29th September, in this poem Owen summed up many of the ideas about the war he had previously discussed with Sassoon. They discussed ideas, rather than experiences, trying not to mention precise horrors or their own sufferings. The poem, which was published anonymously, is clearly influenced by Sassoon and his view of war; the soldiers understand war more clearly than anyone else does.

War's a joke for me and you,
While we know such dreams are true.
Siegfried Sassoon

~~~~~~

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death, —
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland, —
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath, —
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed
Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft,
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldier's paid to kick against His powers.
We laughed, — knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death, for lives; not men, for flags.[47]

[47] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 86
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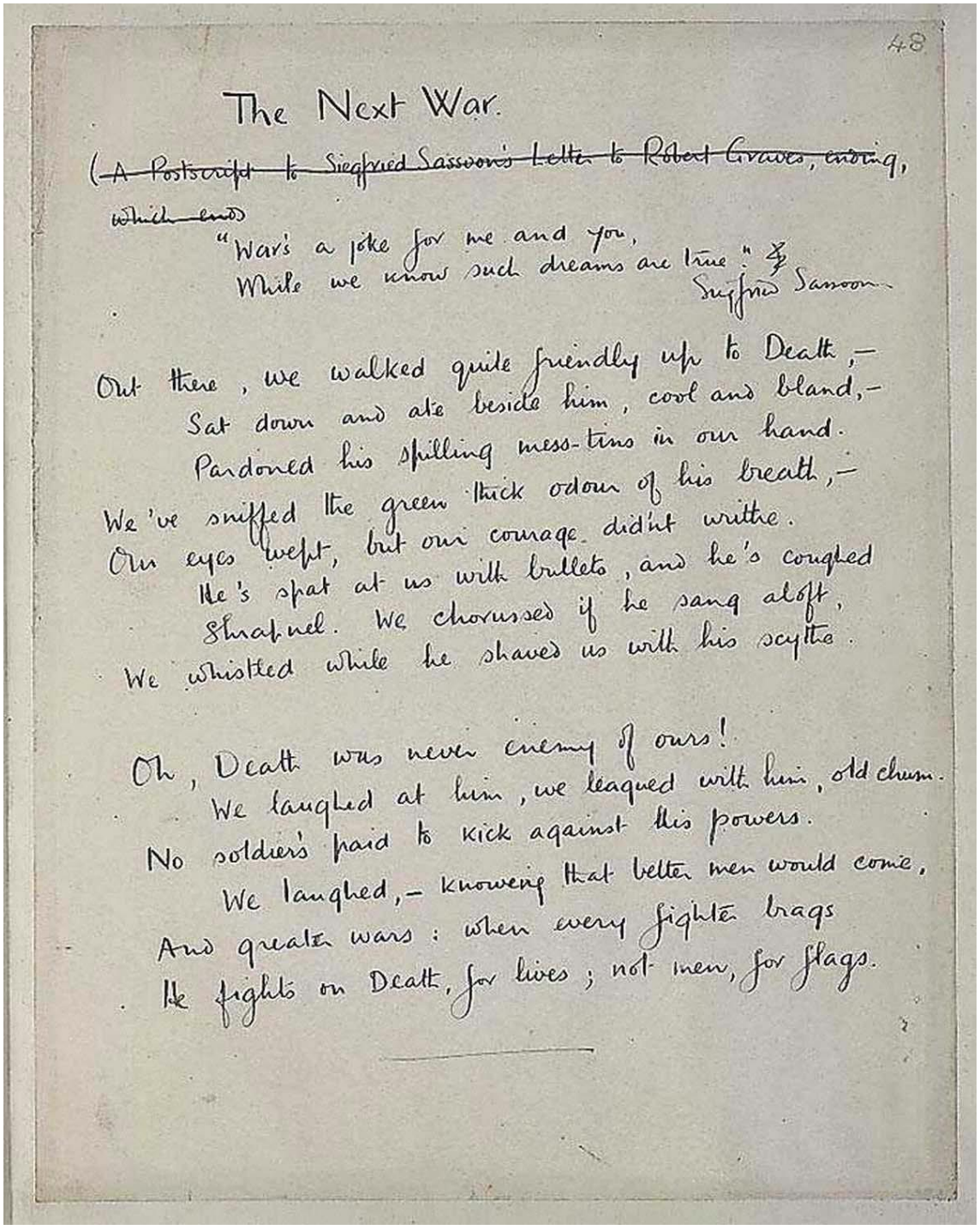

48

The Next War.

(~~A Postscript to Siegfried Sassoon's Letter to Robert Graves, ending,~~ which ends)

"War's a joke for me and you,
While we know such dreams are true." ~~SS~~
Siegfried Sassoon.

Out there, we walked quite friendly up to Death,—
Sat down and ate beside him, cool and bland,—
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,—
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
He's spat at us with bullets, and he's coughed
Shrapnel. We chorussed if he sang aloft,
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldiers paid to kick against his powers.
We laughed,— knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars: when every fighter brags
He fights on Death, for lives; not men, for flags.

---

[48] "The Next War," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed November 29, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4585.

The poem begins with an epigraph, the last two lines of Sassoon's 'The Old Huntsman', which give the tone to the whole composition. Referring directly to Sassoon, Owen declares from the beginning that he has someone to follow. In this draft, of late September 1917, Owen cancelled a sentence he put under the title, mentioning a letter to Robert Graves by Siegfried Sassoon. The sonnet has a regular structure and rhyme scheme: ABBA, CDDC, and EFEF, GG. This version is not the first one Owen wrote, the British Library has six drafts and so does the First World War Digital Archive. The soldiers are the protagonists and the narrative voice of the poem, the "we", and Owen is part of this group. The second protagonist is 'Death', which is capitalized, underlining that it is not a marginal character. The soldiers had lived with Death while fighting, and Death was never an enemy. Owen does not recall a precise event, however, he describes the feeling of living in the trenches, together with death. The nonchalance used by Owen in talking about death inscribes perfectly into war's panorama because it is a part of a soldier's everyday life. Owen puts things in perspective, at first he describes what they have done together, 'eaten with him', 'sniffed the green thick odour' (which recalls 'Dulce et Decorum Est'), and then tries to give an optimistic vision. The rupture in line 9, which confirms the beginning of the sestet, seems strange from an external point of view, 'Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!' The poet states that the enemy of their war was not death, and they have laughed together; he stresses this action beginning line 10 and 12 in the same way, 'we laughed.' The title has its explanation in the final couplet, 'The Next War' because the soldiers look at the future and know that some other war will come. So, even when this war will end, there is the certainty that another is coming.

On one hand, Owen developed a new way of talking about war, the tone is more satiric, bitter, on the other he expressed an assumed attitude rather than his deep felt ideas. The process is still in the making, this sonnet is the prelude to what will be a more concerned and personal war poetry.[49] It would not be until October that Owen started to write one of its masterpieces, 'Dulce et Decorum Est.' In the meantime, Owen and Sassoon discussed about literature more than anything else. We have already talked about Sassoon introducing Owen to Yeats, who was not the only poet discussed by the two friends. Owen showed interest in late Victorian poets, Housman included, and in Hardy; Sassoon

[49] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 104

probably persuaded the young poet to read his poems and Owen showed him Tailhade's works –he asked his mother to send him all the manuscripts he possessed.

This first phase of work with Sassoon marks the beginning of a long-term friendship and the rupture with the old way of doing poetry. Owen arrived at Craiglockhart full of disillusionment towards the war, ill and sad to leave his companions. He found a quiet place, a wonderful landscape and the perfect atmosphere to concentrate on what he wanted to do. Owen was already a poet, even though he needed the right tools to develop his skill. Sassoon gave him the possibility to do so, he did not transform Owen into a poet because there was no need. The change in Owen's poetry started to be seen in this first publication which appeared on *The Hydra,* 'Songs of song' and 'The Next War', but the great turning point would be in October when he started three of his most successful and famous poems. 'Anthem for Doomed youth', 'Disabled' and 'Dulce et Decorum Est' have their roots in 1917.

Apart from a poetic and literary point of view, Owen and Sassoon's friendship had a great value for both of them. Even if, probably, Owen had more benefits than Sassoon; it was not a one-sided friendship. They had two different ways of expressing themselves, but Sassoon kept Owen in mind, and thanks to him, we have the first collection of Owen's poems published in 1920. They had two distinct personalities, and in his memories, Sassoon gives a kind and precise description of the young Owen.

> As we got to know one another well, his admiring attitude towards me relaxed – affectionately & diffidently – into occasional signs of being amused by my idiosyncrasies – my incoherent way of expressing myself & voluble outbursts of intolerance and enthusiasm.
>
> W. was the quiet one: he spoke slowly – in that rather velvety voice of his – which somehow suggested the Keatsian richness of his poetry; it wasn't a vibrating voice – it had the texture of soft consonants, & suggested the crimsons & sumptuous browns.[50]

[50] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 215

4) A new war poetry

Owen and Sassoon had established their own way of working together, and before leaving Craiglockhart, the former began three of his most fertile and deeply felt poems; two of them will become his most famous masterpieces. 'Anthem for doomed youth', 'Disabled' and 'Dulce et Decorum Est', have their roots in pre-1917 life and writing, they all possess a Romantic heritage, which he managed to save up for his poetry. All three develop the theme of 'lost youth', as Dominic Hibberd says, a theme that Owen had previously explored in his poem before his shellshock and subsequent experience at Craiglockhart.[1]

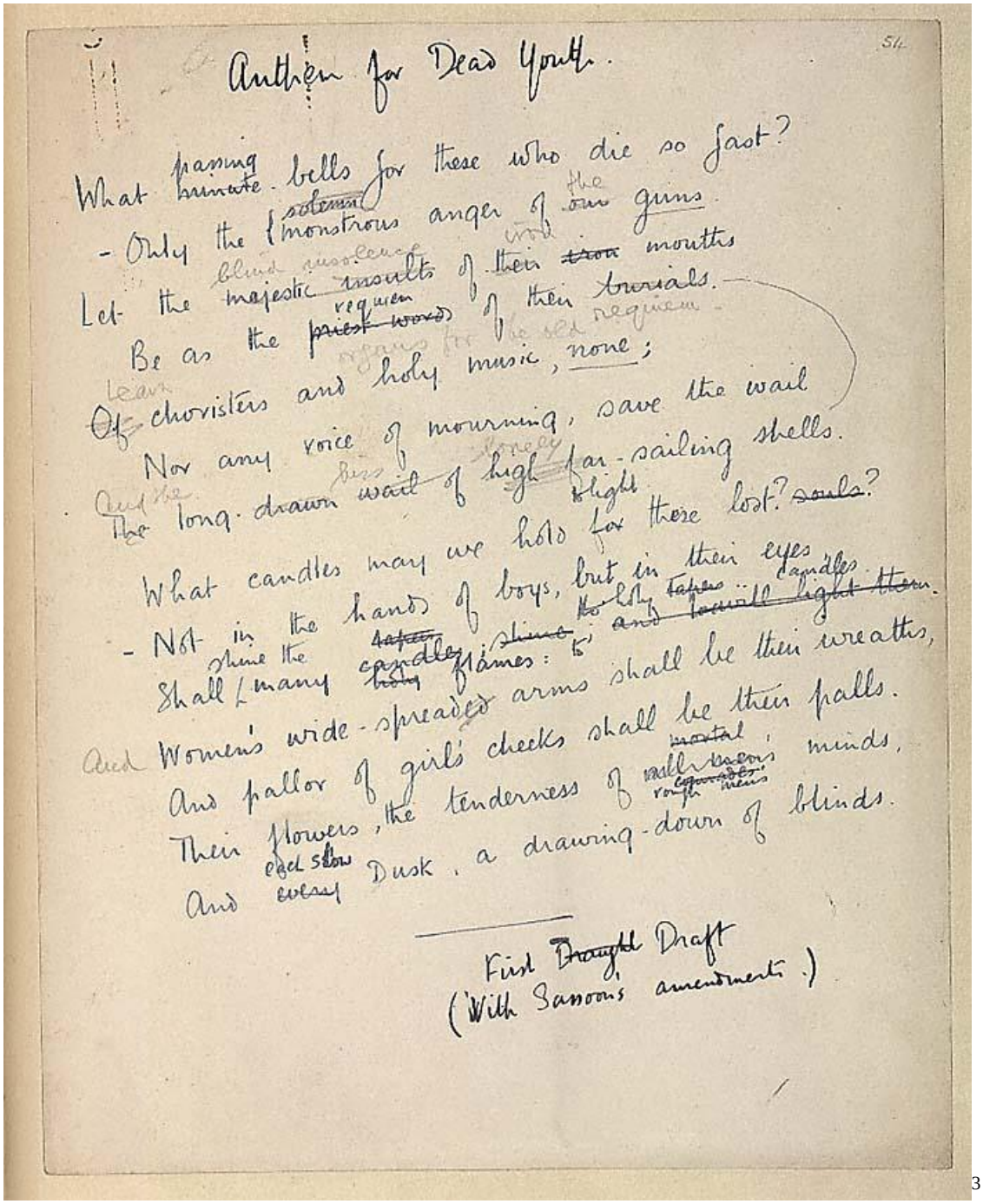
4.1) 'Anthem for doomed youth'

'Anthem for doomed youth' was completed by 25th September after the poet had received many pieces of advice from Sassoon and had worked very hard. It is the first complete and mature poem that I choose to present as an example of the process of change undergone by Owen. It represents perfectly the collaboration between the two poets, in particular, it shows how much Sassoon helped Owen and played a crucial part in his maturation. Thanks to this poem, Sassoon realised and recognised that Owen's talent was beyond the ordinary and that Owen had a very strong voice. The process behind his final piece is shown in the different drafts that Owen left us, the difference between the first one and the last, explains his idea of war and how it grew. However, the result is still a bit confused, there was much to get straight in a matter of poetical skill and maturation. As Sassoon was moved by Owen's use of pararhyme, it would be necessary to try to discover how he used this poetic mean almost as a signature.

This sonnet is significant to study because Owen left us a great number of drafts, which can be very useful in order to follow his work and the evolution of his idea. Lewis gives the precise number; the British Library has four drafts, Harold Owen has two together

[1] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 109

with a draft of the first six lines, Leslie Gunston has one draft.[2] The First World War Poetry Digital Archive has seven documents, including the draft of the first six lines.



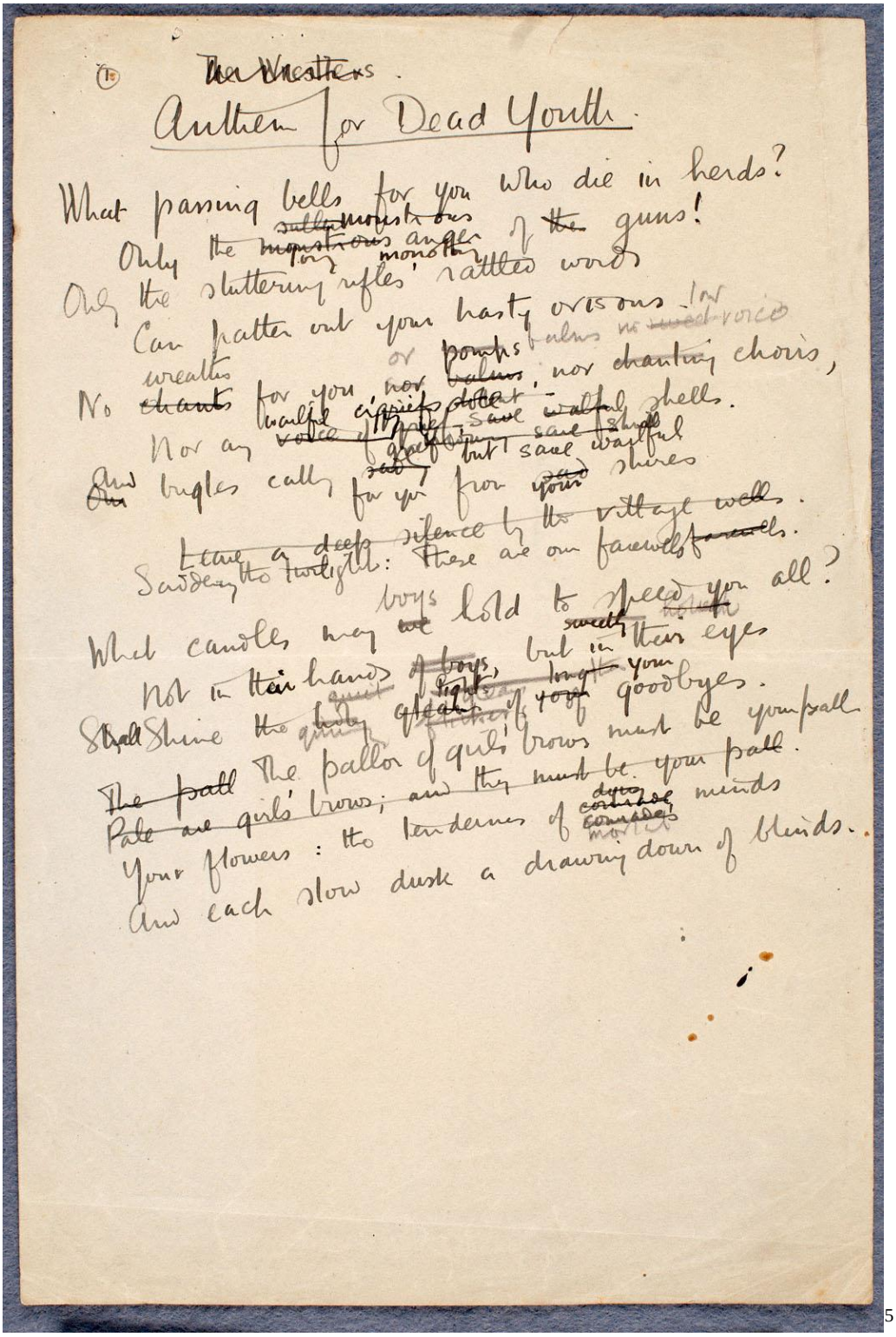
[3]

[2] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 44

[3] "Anthem for Doomed Youth," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed December 19, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4647.

I chose to insert this draft as the first, following the decision of Jon Stallworthy who in his biography of Owen put it in the first place. This is the first example of the sonnet with annotation by Siegfried Sassoon. The poetic form did not change in the process, it has always been a sonnet, although many words and lines changed together with the rhyme pattern and scheme. The first title was different from the final one, which everyone knows, 'Anthem for doomed youth', as Owen firstly entitled the poem 'Anthem for Dead Youth'. There are two fixed ideas that remained in both titles conveyed by the two words, 'anthem' and 'youth'. It is a hymn, a song of devotion to youth. This youth, who is presented in the title and is the protagonist of the sonnet, is not a happy youth, but it is connoted with a negative participle in both titles. 'Dead youth' in the beginning; it is not difficult to understand the reason behind Owen's choice of words, all the soldiers that were fighting the war were young boys, and the majority died in battle. The subject was deeply criticised, as some claimed that Owen stumbled in his youthful Romantic ideas and glorified death in war. However, it is misleading to read the sonnet in this light, not taking into account that there are Keatsian allusions in the language, while he parodied the Romantic landscape depicting the battlefield.[4] Owen's subject for the sonnet is the description of these young soldiers' youth, which slips away as the war continues, so what will remain? "What minute bells for these who die so fast?" is line 1 of the first draft, which Sassoon corrects changing 'minute' with 'passing', Owen opens the sonnet with a direct question addressed to everyone. The octet continues with the poet trying to answer the question, he says that there are no bells for the soldiers, only the 'anger of the guns'. In the sestet, he continues to inserts elements which can be related to hymns and anthems; candles to hold, holy candles. Finally, he introduces the figure of 'women' and 'girls', who are the people mourning the death of the young boys. It is not possible to give a final analysis of the poem, as this draft represents only a first attempt to write the sonnet. Sassoon gave lots of corrections and annotations, probably in pencil, although it is not clear whether the one written in pen belongs to him. In line 2, for example, he chose between 'solemn' and 'monstrous' crossing out 'solemn'. Owen continues to experiment and correct the sonnet giving birth to other temporary versions.

[4] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p.110



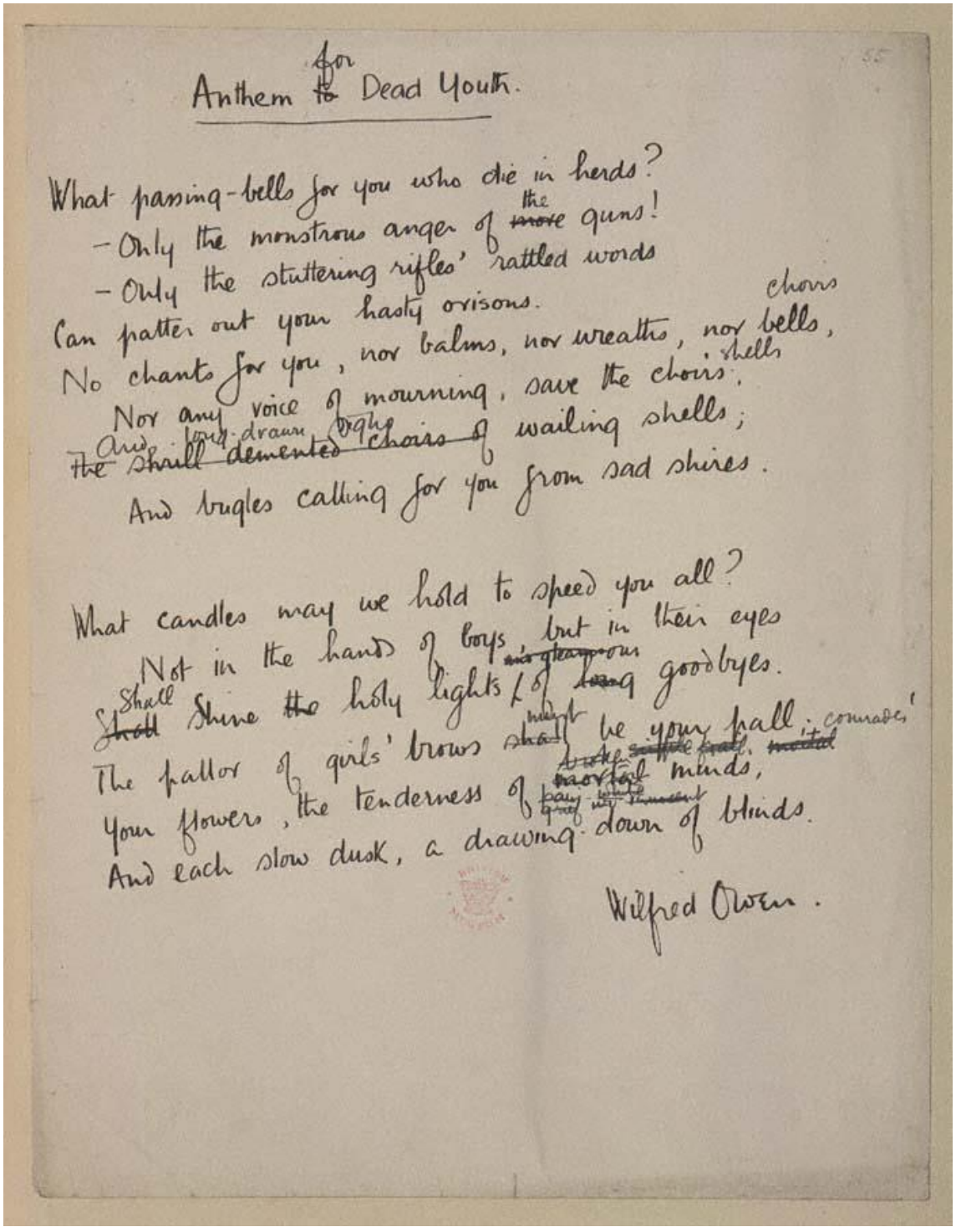
Anthem for Doomed Youth.

What passing bells for you who die in herds?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns!
Only the shattering rifles' rattled words
Can patter out your hasty orisons.
No mockeries for you; nor prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the shrill
Wild bugles calls for you from sad shires.

What candles may we hold to speed you all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be your pall.
Your flowers: the tenderness of comrades' minds
And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.

[5]

[5] "Anthem for Doomed Youth," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The Britten-Pears Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed December 20, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/5620.



Anthem for Doomed Youth.

What passing-bells for you who die in herds?
– Only the monstrous anger of the guns!
– Only the stuttering rifles' rattled words
Can patter out your hasty orisons.
No chants for you, nor bells, nor wreaths, nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning, save the choirs:
And bugles calling for you from sad shires.

What candles may we hold to speed you all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy lights of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be your pall;
Your flowers, the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk, a drawing down of blinds.

Wilfred Owen.

6

[6] "Anthem for Doomed Youth," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed December 20, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4648.

These two drafts can be called ‘middle drafts’, as they represent a transitional state of the poem. In this last draft, Owen changes the title, ‘Anthem for Dead Youth’, even though it is not the final yet. Corrections and cancellations are spread across the poem, Owen continues to work on the structure and he continues to change and modify words. However, it is worth concentrating on the final sonnet, the one that has been published and is one of Owen’s most famous poems. The title has finally come to live, as Sassoon suggested to Owen to write ‘Doomed’ instead of ‘Dead’. It may seem a minimal detail, although, it inscribes a very powerful meaning; these young soldiers fighting the war are not only destined to die, but also condemned to this fate. It is much stronger and inscribes in the sonnet a very harsh judgment about the war.

> What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
>
> Only the monstrous anger of the guns,
>
> Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
>
> Can patter out their hasty orisons.
>
> No mockeries now for them; no prayer nor bells;
>
> Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -
>
> The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
>
> And bugles calling for them from sad shires.[7]

The sonnet begins, like in the first draft, with a direct question about the slaughter of British troops in the war. The answer lies in the ‘monstrous anger of the guns’, and in the ‘stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle’, which are underlined thanks to the alliteration of the ‘r’ sound. The anaphora of “only” in lines 2 and 3, increases the rhythm when talking about the terrible weapons used in the battle. However, there is no consolation for those who die fighting for their country, ‘nor prayers nor bells’; in line 5, Sassoon chose ‘mockeries’ instead of ‘music’, which has a stronger impact. In this first part of the sonnet, Owen is trying to answer the first question. There is no possibility of bells or ‘good’ sounds, but the only music they can get is produced by shells, bugles and rifles. The ‘Anthem’ presented in the title is not as expected. The octet has a regular structure and almost

[7] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 44

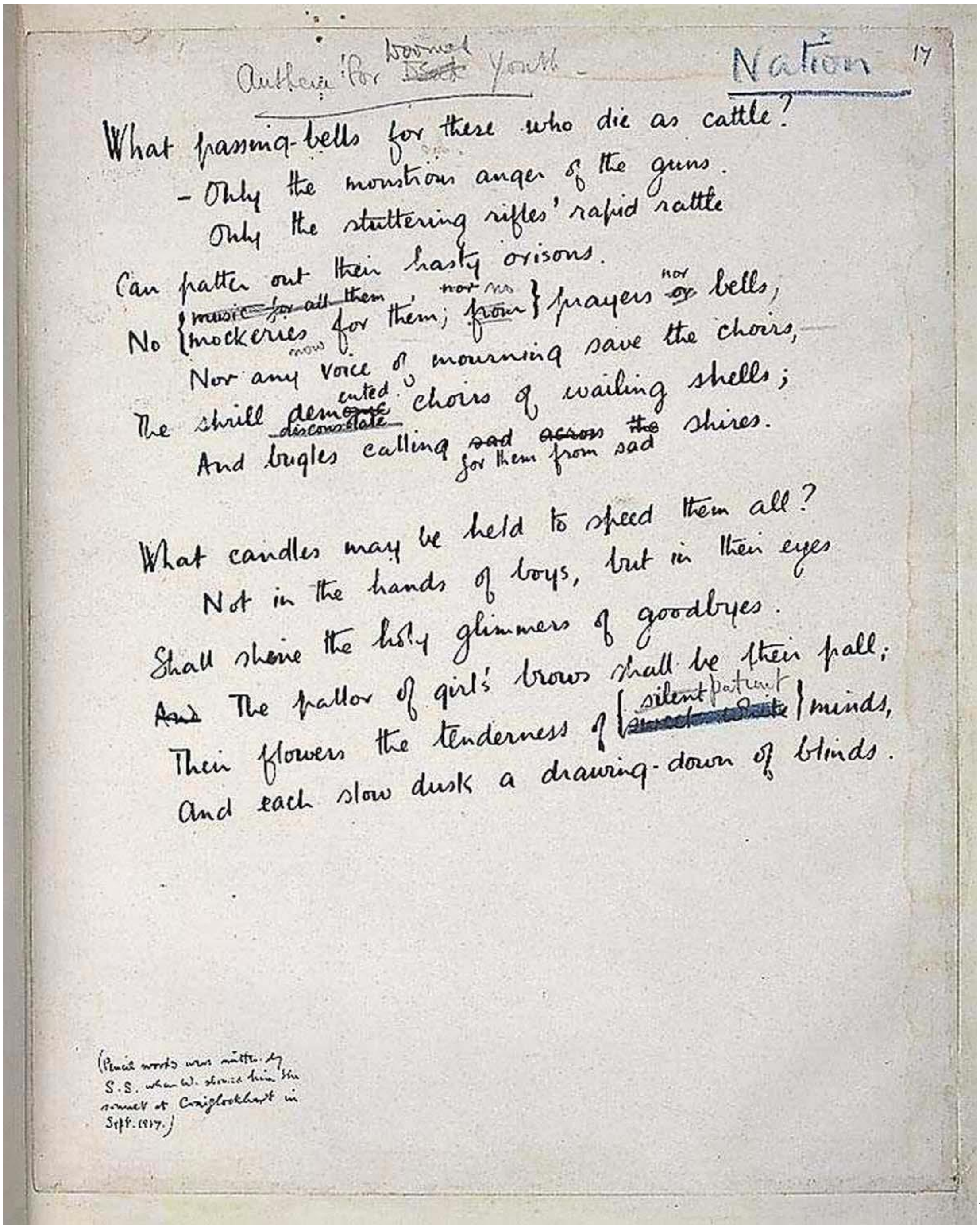
regular rhyme scheme; it is one of the first times in which Owen uses para-rhyme. The first quatrain is: ABAB, however, 'guns' and 'orisons' do not perfectly rhyme together, and the same happens in the second quatrain, CDCD, but 'choirs' and 'shires' are not a perfect match. This first part is rich in internal echo effects: *mons*(trous) is echoed by *guns* in line 2, *stutter*(ing) by *patter* in lines 3,4, *shrill* by *shell*(s) and *call*(ing) in line 7 and 8.[8]

> What candles may be held to speed them all?
> Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
> Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
> The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
> Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
> And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.[9]

The sestet is characterised by the introduction of religious images, which dominate the lines. The hymn, which Owen wants to dedicate to the soldiers has nothing to do with altar boys or candle holders. There is nothing to do with a real religious ritual; the only thing to do is to look into the boys' eyes. Therefore, the truth about war can be seen only in their eyes, and the 'holy glimmers of good-byes' shine, because they are all going to die in the war. In line 12, Owen uses a sort of para-rhyme, 'pallor' and 'pall', giving a downbeat in the line. After saying that in the eyes of the boys there can be seen the goodbyes, he continues introducing the pale girls, whose brows shall be their coffin. The rhythm is slower than in the octet, Owen chooses different terms that convey an idea of beauty and sadness, like 'flowers' in line 13, 'tenderness of patient minds'; and in line 14 the rhythm slows down further when he says 'each slow dusk'. Sassoon suggested the adjective 'patient' instead of 'silent', which was the one written by Owen. Choosing 'patient' means to focus the attention on both the aspects of silence and waiting, so the word conveys a stronger message than simply using 'silent'. Time passes slowly for the

[8] Sven Backman, Op. Cit., p. 156
[9] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 44

people who mourn the dead soldier, and the hymn that Owen is trying to create has the power to become the voice of this youth.


Anthem for Doomed ~~Dead~~ Youth – Nation 17

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

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
~~And~~ The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of {silent patient} minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

(Pencil words were written by S.S. when W. showed him the sonnet at Craiglockhart in Sept. 1917.)

[10]

[10] "Anthem for Doomed Youth," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed December 28, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4544.

4.2) ‘Disabled’

‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, as analysed before, must not be treated as a late poem, it is Owen’s first attempt to bring his own style into line with the view of Siegfried Sassoon.[11] In the same way, ‘Disabled’ came up after the arrival of Robert Graves at Craiglockhart Hospital in September 1917. Owen, Sassoon, and Graves talked about poetry together, and it was in that same period that Owen produced a new draft, which he made Graves read.[12] Graves was ‘mightily impressed’, says Stallworthy, both by Owen’s figure and by his poetry. ‘Disabled’ is Owen’s first thoroughly original war poem, he applied literary tradition to war and added a new level of bitterness to the matter. His new skills and knowledge began to come alive and played together with his pre-Sassoonish verse. The novelty and greatness of this poem were seen both by his master, Sassoon, and by Graves, who remained impressed by this young poet. The latter read the first draft and criticised the loosen organisation with irregular stanzas; Owen was aware that it was just a first attempt, as he would revised the poem in 1918 with many others.

The poem talks about a former soldier ‘legless, sewn short of elbow’, who remained wounded during the war and now back at his life. We have two different manuscripts version of the poem in the First World War Digital Archive, the same has the British Museum, while Sir Osbert Sitwell has only one.[13] The first draft is written on three papers, with numbered pages, 47, 48 and 49, and at the end of the third paper, Owen had written the total amount of lines that are 52. It is longer if compared to the final version, it contains an additional stanza that Owen cancelled later in 1918, between the present stanzas two and three.

> Ah! He was handsome when he used to stand
>
> Each evening on the curb or by the quays.
>
> His old soft cap slung half-way down his ear;
>
> Proud of his neck, scarfed with a sunburn band,

[11] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 111
[12] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 223
[13] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 68

And of his curl, and all his reckless gear,

Down to the gloves of sun-brown on his hand.[14]

The structure of the poem is similar in both versions – apart from the additional stanza in the first draft – for the rest, it is a long poem divided in stanzas without a precise regularity. The form is not traditional, the stanzas do not follow a regular scheme and do not have the same number of lines. The beginning differs from the final version, probably it is the most striking difference between the two versions.

Sitting, between two crutches, in the park

He shivers in his scanty suit of grey.

Armless, sewn short of elbows. Through the dark,

Voices of boys, rang saddening like a hymn,

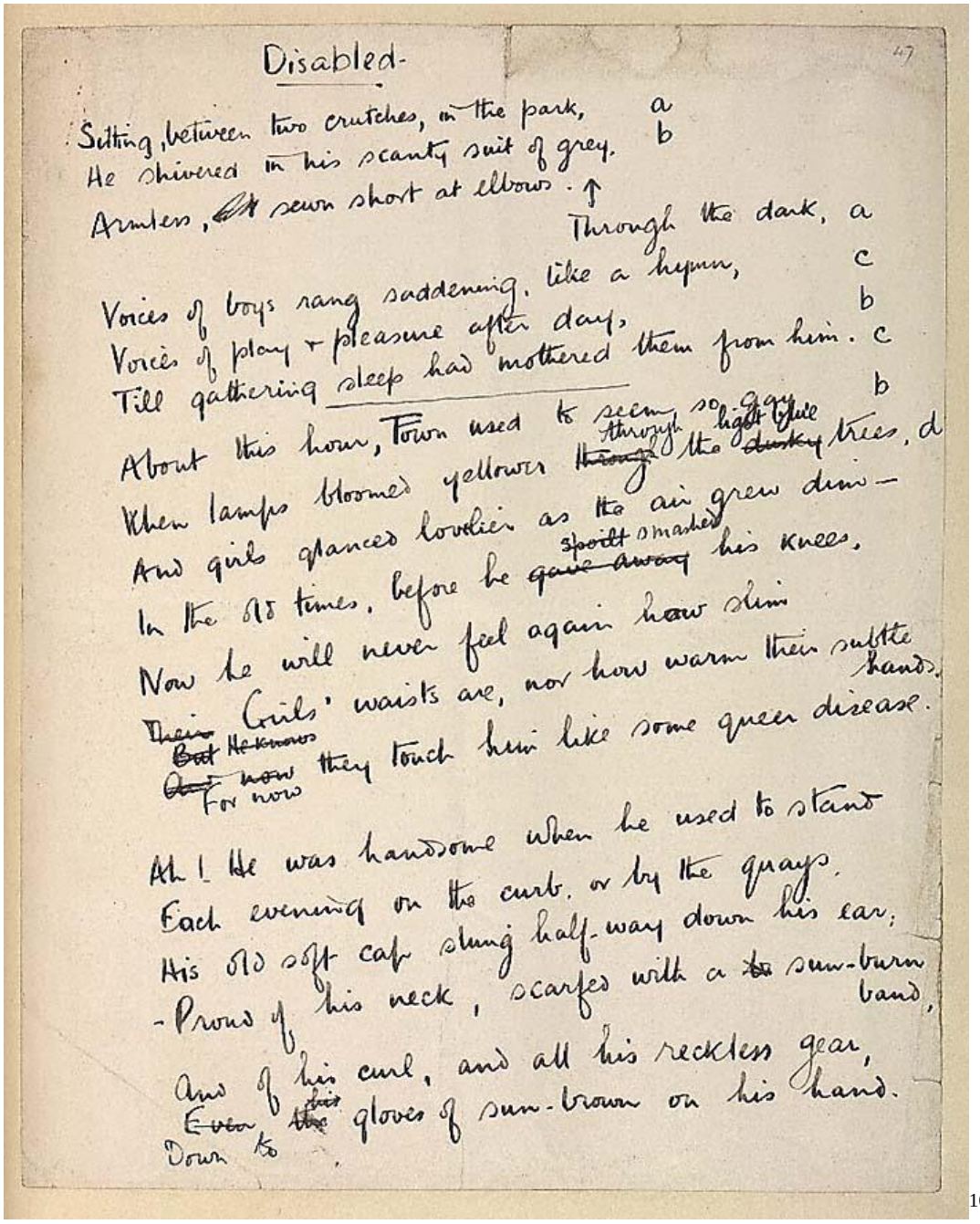
Voices of play and pleasure after day,

Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.[15]

This first stanza begins with an –ing form of the verb to sit, so Owen does not express directly the subject of the poem as he would do in the last version. The rhyme scheme is the same, ABACBC, however, in line 1 the last word is 'park' and in line 3 is 'dark', the opposite of the final poem. The subject and the words used to describe the soldier are almost the same, instead of being 'legless', here the soldier is 'armless', the body parts differ but the general concept is equivalent, he had lost parts of his body during the war. Line 4 and 5 do not change, they begin with an anaphora of the words 'voices of', 'boys' first and then 'play'. The differences are not much, even in the rest of the poem there are a few words cancelled, other changed, and of course, there is the extra stanza, which I have mentioned on the previous page. Owen describes how the soldier was before the war, it has a melancholic and a happy atmosphere, beginning with an invocation 'Ah! He was handsome…' and then describing the physical appearance of the man. He continues

[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid

with stanza number 3, which is similar to the final one, while stanza 4 has some differing lines.


Disabled.

47

Sitting between two crutches, in the park, a
He shivered in his scanty suit of grey. b
Armless, ~~at~~ sewn short at elbows. ↑

Through the dark, a
Voices of boys rang saddening, like a hymn, c
Voices of play + pleasure after day, b
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him. c

About this hour, Town used to seem so gay b
When lamps bloomed yellower ~~through~~ through the light blue ~~dusky~~ trees, d
And girls glances lovelier as the air grew dim —
In the old times, before he ~~gave away~~ spoilt smashed his knees.

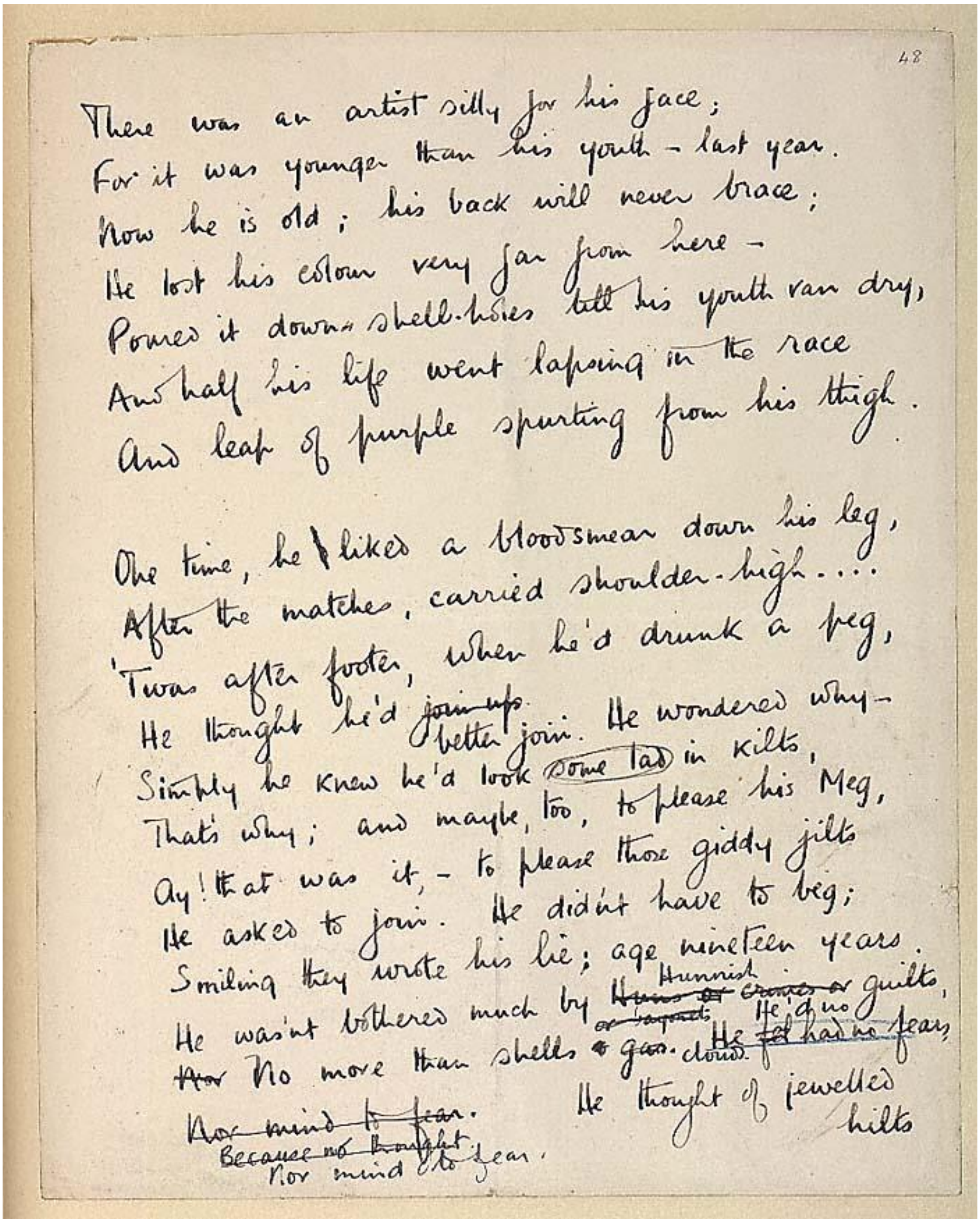
Now he will never feel again how slim
Their Girls' waists are, nor how warm their subtle hands.
~~But~~ He knows
~~Now~~ For now they touch him like some queer disease.

Ah! He was handsome when he used to stand
Each evening on the curb, or by the quays.
His old soft cap slung half-way down his ear;
- Proud of his neck, scarfed with a ~~to~~ sun-burn band,

And of his curl, and all his reckless gear,
Even ~~the~~ this gloves of sun-brown on his hand.
Down to

16

[16] "Disabled," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed January 9, 2017, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5204.


48

There was an artist silly for his face;
For it was younger than his youth – last year.
Now he is old; his back will never brace;
He lost his colour very far from here –
Poured it down shell-holes till his youth ran dry,
And half his life went lapsing in the race
And leap of purple spurting from his thigh.

One time, he liked a bloodsmear down his leg,
After the matches, carried shoulder-high....
'Twas after footer, when he'd drunk a peg,
He thought he'd ~~join up~~ better join. He wondered why –
Simply he knew he'd look some lad in kilts,
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Ay! that was it, – to please those giddy jilts
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie; age nineteen years.
He wasn't bothered much by ~~Huns or crimes or~~ Hunnish guilts,
~~Nor~~ No more than shells & gas. cloud. ~~He fel~~ He'd no had no fears,
~~Nor mind to fear.~~ He thought of jewelled hilts
~~Because no thought~~
Nor mind to fear.

17

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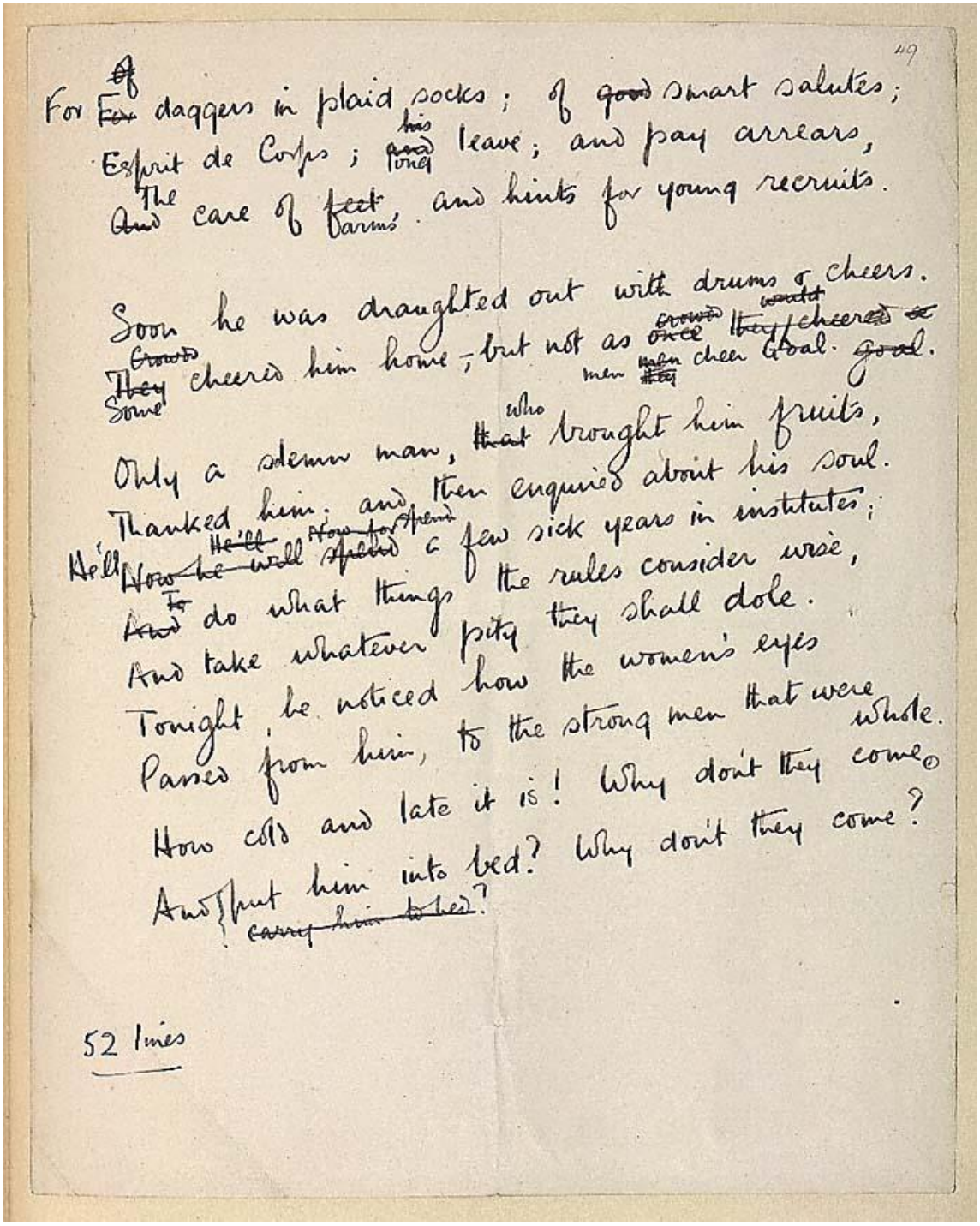
[17] Ibid


49
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
Esprit de Corps; leave; and pay arrears,
And care of feet, and hints for young recruits.
Soon he was draughted out with drums & cheers.
cheered him home; but not as men cheer Goal.
Only a demm man, who brought him fruits,
Thanked him; and then enquired about his soul.
And do what things the rules consider wise,
Tonight, he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him, to the strong men that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?
52 lines

18

[18] Ibid

The final version has a smaller amount of lines, 46 lines against 52 than the first manuscript. The entire poem is built around the parallelism between the old life of the soldier and his present situation after the return from the war. There is an ironic point of view in the way Owen describes the situation, the poem combines the Sassonish satire with the Romantic and Greek material.[19]

The soldier is presented from the beginning, the poem opens with 'He', in the first place, describing his physical situation, he is in a wheelchair and has no legs. The grey suit is 'ghastly', a negative connotation to underline that he looks more like a ghost than a man. He is sitting at the park, and he hears 'voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn', which is quite strange because a hymn is a song of praise, is full of joy although, here it has a sad connotation opposite to the one it normally has. The second stanza is built following a parallelism, 'About this Time', at the beginning of the first line, and 'In the old times' in the middle line. The contraposition of these two different times is used to say how the position of girls had changed, when the soldier was young they smiled at him, while now all has changed.

> Now he will never feel again how slim
> Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands;
> All of them touch him like some queer disease.[20]

In the present, he has no longer the possibility to touch a girl, and the only people that can do it, are the ones he connotes with 'All of them', probably nurses who treat him like an invalid. These three lines end the second stanza, they do not rhyme, and he uses the repetition of 'how' to convey the idea of what the soldier had lost because of war. The third stanza presents the contraposition of the soldier's early life as an artist, talking about colours. 'For it was younger than his youth', 'Now, he is old', another remark on age, the lost youth of the soldier that has gone, like 'his colour'. However, 'leap of purple spurted

[19] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 114
[20] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 67

from his thigh.', Owen uses the colour purple to represent blood, which contrasts with the grey suit he had to wear.

The fourth stanza is the longest one, it is composed of 16 lines. In this stanza, Owen describes some past events of the boy's life before the war. He begins with 'One time', setting the narration into the past; then he starts telling the story of what happened after a football match, as the boy played football. The stanza is all built around these descriptions, his past thoughts and his lost youth, which stopped at nineteen, probably the precise age when he went to war. From line 10, of the stanza, the situation changes and he talks about war. 'He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;', the young boy volunteered to fight in the war, he was not forced to go, but at that time he had no idea what he was facing. 'And no fears/Of Fear came yet', this enjambement between lines 11 and 12, states the condition of the soldier at the beginning of the war, unaware of everything; Owen uses an anaphora playing with the word 'fear', which is also capitalised. It is quite an oxymoron, 'fears of Fear', meaning that he did not have fear of the war, or more precisely of death, which could be seen as the ultimate fear. He has in mind only the heroic values of the war, the positive aspects, which were transmitted to the youth by the elders, the politicians, in order to create a positive and a false image of what was war.

> Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
> Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
> Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul.[21]

This penultimate stanza has only three lines, is the last salute to the boy going to war and embodies the general spirit that spread throughout Great Britain the moment the war began. People cheered but not like in a match, again the allusion to football, probably, as a part of the boy's youth, but here is the crowd who cheered the soldiers. This first line is built on a parallelism, and the repetition of the verb –to cheer in order to underline the happiness shared towards the army going to fight. The structure is simple and is just a

[21] Ibid

narration of what happened, a single man thanking the boy and questioning him. The time is still past, and it is, perhaps, the last moment of this lost youth.

> Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,
> And do what things the rules consider wise,
> And take whatever pity they may dole.
> Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
> Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
> How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
> And put him into bed? Why don't they come?[22]

The last stanza concluded the boy's story, it is set in the present time, beginning with 'Now', and is the description of the misfortunate soldier after the battle. Line 2 and 3 begin with the anaphora of 'and', telling what he is going to do now that he is back at home: spending time at an institute and following the rules. However, the situation has radically changed, women's eyes are no longer addressed to him who has no limbs, but they prefer stronger men. The last two lines embody the bitterness and the tragedy of this man, but more general of all wounded soldiers. Owen uses an anaphora and ends the last two lines with 'Why don't they come?' This question is repeated to focus the attention on the cry of the soldier, being left alone with nobody. Women are deeply criticised in this poem, as they seem very superficial and unable to empathise with the soldier.

After Graves saw the poem, he wrote a letter to Owen, expressing his judgment and his opinion on the poem. Stallworthy reports the entire letter, which contains the poem's comment and the critic towards its structure.

> Do you know, Owen, that's a damn fine poem of your, that 'Disabled.' Really damn fine!
>
> So good the general sound and weight of the words that occasional metrical outrages are most surprising. It's like seeing a golfer drive onto the green in one and then use a cleek instead of a putter, & hole out in twelve.
>
> For instance you have a foot too much in

[22] Ibid

In the old days before he gave away his knees

& in He wasn't bothered much by Huns or crimes or guilts

& They cheered him home but not as they would cheer a goal

& Now he will spend a few sick years in institutes

There is an occasional jingle

Voices of boys

& Voices of play and pleasure after day

And an occasional cliché

Girls glanced lonelier

Scanty suit of grey

I wouldn't worry to mention all of this if it wasn't for my violent pleasure at some of the lines like the one about 'the solemn man who brought him fruits' & the 'jewelled hits of daggers in plaid socks' & the 'Bloodsmear down his leg after matches.'

Owen, you have seen things; you are a poet; but you're very careless one at present. One can't put in too many syllables into a line & say 'Oh, it's all right. That's my way of writing poetry'. One has to follow the rules of the metre one adopts. Make new metres by all means, but one must observe the rules where they are laid down by custom of centuries. […] But I have no doubt at all that if you turned seriously to writing, you could obtain Parnassus in no time while I'm still struggling on the knees of that stubborn peak.

Till then, good luck in the good work. Your Robert Graves. Love to Sassoon[23]

Graves' comment underlines what stroke the most of Owen's writing, his great talent, and ability, but also the fact that he goes beyond the traditional rules of the metre. The untraditional structure shown in some verses (as reported by Graves), is deeply criticised by the poem, although he is conscious that Owen would only need to turn serious in order to write.

This 1917 poem, later revised in 1918 as most of Owen's poems, introduces the reader to Owen's new way of doing poetry. The precise situation he is describing has its roots in Sassoon's style, talking about something more specific but managing to also include a

[23] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p. 229

more general aspect. ‘Disabled’ does not represent a key poem, although, it helps us to enter gradually into the understanding of Owen’s new poetic device: pararhyme.

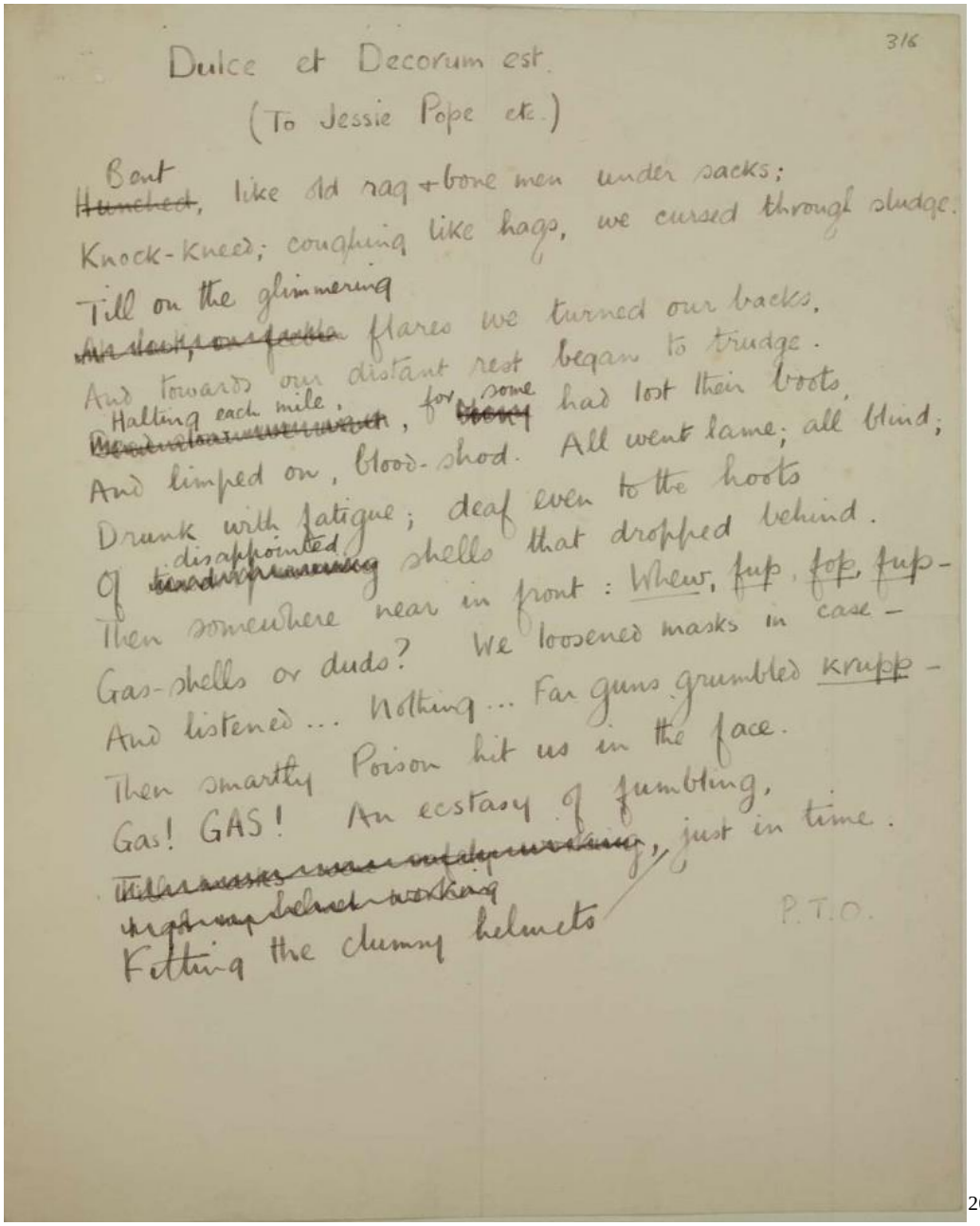
4.3) ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’

‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ is, by far, the most famous and known poem written by Wilfred Owen. It embodies the general anti-war idea that gradually germinated inside the poet, and we can probably describe it as Owen’s manifesto. In this long poem, Owen looked at literary tradition and contemporary propaganda, writing one of the finest and meaningful poem about war. He started to write it when he was still at Craiglockart, later in 1918 he would revise the poem like many others. The first complete draft, which the British Museum possesses and also the First World War Digital Archive, is dated 8th October 1917, as written at the bottom of the second paper. Harold Owen has two drafts, one addressed *To Jessie Pope etc,* the other*, To a certain Poetess*.[24] I will analyse the poem starting from the first draft, then I will concentrate on the final and official version.

The title, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, is taken from a quotation written by Horace, (*Odes*, III. ii. 13),‘Dulce et Decorum est pro patria mori.’ This quotation was inscribed on the door of the chapel of the Royal Military College in Sandhurst in 1913. Owen, perhaps, had met people who went at Sandhurst, as he did not attend it and so it is impossible he had seen the inscription personally.[25] The quotation became a statement of rejection of Horace’s values and sentiments, both for the Royal Military College and for Owen and his poem. The strong message that Owen tries to convey in his poem is directly against the idea of dying for your own country as great, however, in choosing this statement Owen implies the continuity of the words. The poem is full of anger towards the meaning of the war and the idea of dying fighting for your country, although, this strong message is not useful by itself. The power of ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ lies in the tight formality and traditional structure, which is used by Owen in an unconventional way, rearranging sonnets in order to create something new. The first draft, the one of October 1917, is

[24] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 55
[25] Stuart Sillars, *Structure and Dissolution in English writing*, 1910-1920, Basingstoke, GB: Macmillian Press, 1999, p. 66

addressed ‘To Jessie Pope etc.’ She was an English writer, poet and journalist, who was famous for written patriotic motivational poems during World War I. Her name was soon forgotten, not being remembered, unlike many other war poets.



316

Dulce et Decorum est.

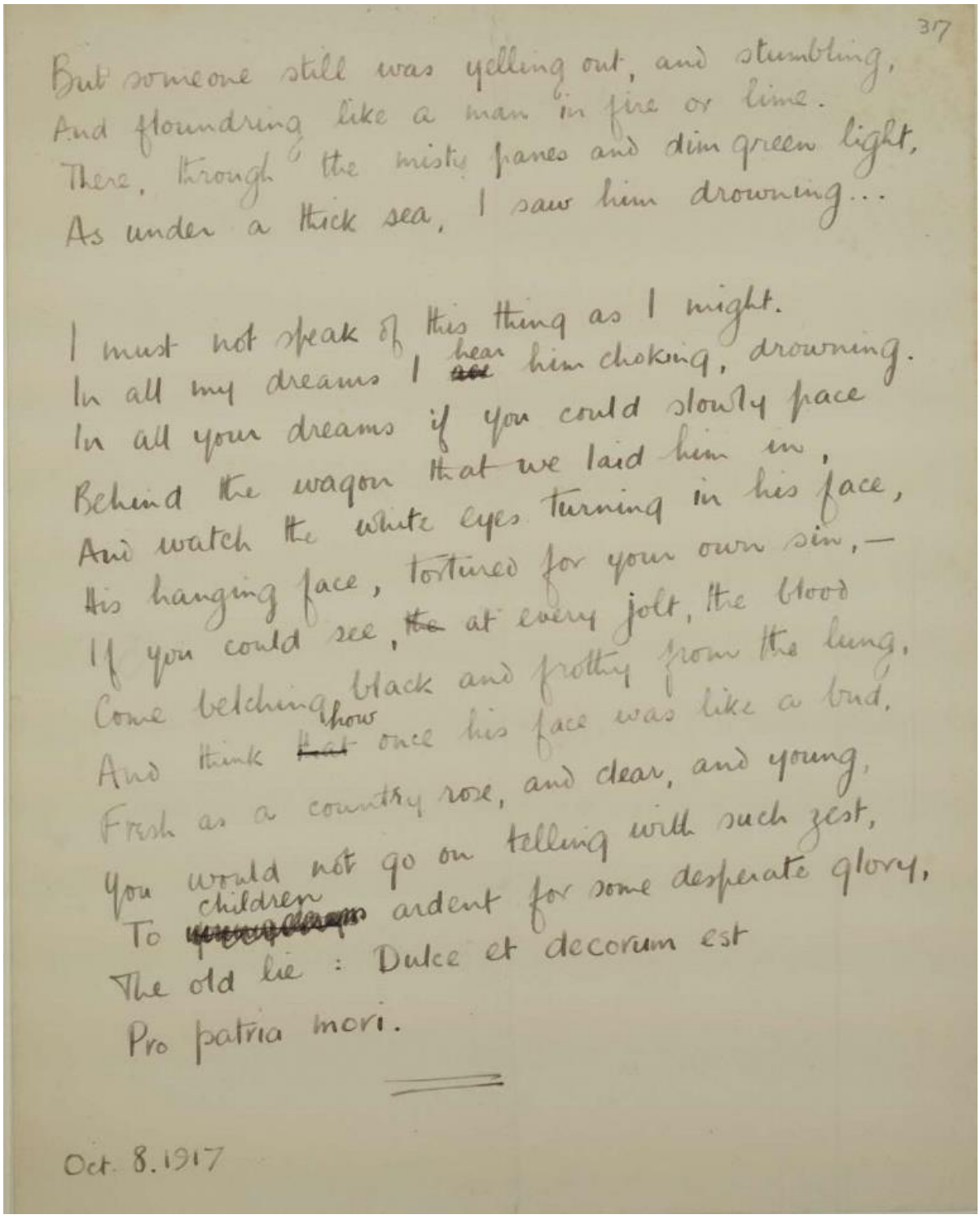
(To Jessie Pope etc.)

Bent
~~Hunched~~, like old rag-bone men under sacks;
Knock-kneed; coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge.
Till on the glimmering
~~All dazed, outpaced~~ flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Halting each mile, for some
~~Men marched asleep~~, many had lost their boots,
And limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of disappointed ~~tired hopeless~~ shells that dropped behind.
Then somewhere near in front: Whew, fup, ~~fop~~, fup-
Gas-shells or duds? We loosened masks in case -
And listened ... Nothing ... Far guns grumbled ~~krupp~~ -
Then smartly Poison hit us in the face.
Gas! GAS! An ecstasy of fumbling,
~~Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time~~,
~~Fitting the clumsy helmets~~
Fitting the clumsy helmets

P.T.O.

[26]

[26] “Dulce et Decorum Est,” by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The English Faculty Library, University of Oxford / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed January 19, 2017, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5655.



37

But someone still was yelling out, and stumbling,
And floundring like a man in fire or lime.
There, through the misty panes and dim green light,
As under a thick sea, I saw him drowning...

I must not speak of this thing as I might.
In all my dreams I ~~see~~ hear him choking, drowning.
In all your dreams if you could slowly pace
Behind the wagon that we laid him in,
And watch the white eyes turning in his face,
His hanging face, tortured for your own sin,—
If you could see, ~~so~~ at every jolt, the blood
Come belching black and frothy from the lung,
And think ~~that~~ how once his face was like a bud,
Fresh as a country rose, and clear, and young,
You would not go on telling with such zest,
To ~~[illegible]~~ children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie : Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Oct. 8. 1917

27

[27] Ibid

This first draft of the poem presents some differences in the number of lines, words and structure. It is a long poem divided into stanzas, although, from this draft, it is not possible to recognise the same division that there is in the final version, visually, only after line 18 there is a blank space that can be a sign of interruption. There are 32 lines, while in the final version there are only 28 lines. The first 8 lines, which correspond to the first stanza of the final poem, presents the same structure, even though some words differ. He begins with 'Bent like old rag & bone men under sacks', which has the same ideas but, perhaps, is less strong than the final line, 'Bent double, like old beggars under sacks'. Lines 9, 10, 11 and 12 are absent from the other versions.

> Then somewhere hear in front: When, fup, fop, fup-
> Gas-shells or duds? We loosened masks in case.
> And listened… nothing… for guns grumbled krupp.
> Then smartly Poison hit us in the face.[28]

These four lines are structured as a quatrain, with a typical ABAB rhyme, fup/krupp and case/face, which is an example of half-rhyme, as the sound /z/ of case differs form /s/ of face. In the first lines, he uses an onomatopoeia to describe the noise, 'fup, fop, fup'. He uses alliteration, as in the third line, 'guns grumbled', describing the situation of a gas attack. The quatrain precedes the central stanza of the real attack and the tragedy. Probably, Owen decided to cut it out from the final version, as it was not necessary; it added just length and made the poem too heavy. Lines 20 and 21 begin with an anaphora or close parallelism, 'In all my dreams, I hear him choking, drowning. / In all your dreams if you could slowly pace.' 'Your' is used instead of 'my' in the second line, but the structure is the same, he underlines the aspect of the dream where he recollects the memory of the soldier's death. Concerning the rest of the poem, the structure remains the same while some words are different, but the ending lines with the quotation of Horace do not change.

[28] Ibid

The final version of the poem is composed of 28 lines and has a traditional poetic form, which combines two overlapping sonnets. Using a traditional structure in an innovative way is Owen's method to go against the pure tradition, rejecting it in favour of a new writing. Owen uses a conventional poetic device, going back to Shakespeare and to a canonical form structure; however, he does it to talk about the war in an untraditional manner. The overall structure is built upon two overlapping sonnets: the first stanza is the octet of a Shakespearean sonnet in both metre and rhyme. The second stanza begins with a Shakespearean quatrain, until line 12, however, the final couplet does not follow the expected rhyme scheme. Lines 15 and 16, which create a stanza on their own, form a conclusion to the first part of the poem and rhyme with line 13, 14 as in a Shakespearean quatrain. As this first part of the poem is concluded, the last stanza introduces another sonnet, which contains three quatrains with the classic ABAB rhyme.[29] The conservativism in using a traditional form underlines the 'fractured continuity' suggested by Sillars in his study.

> 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 gas-shells dropping softly behind.[30]

The beginning of the poem describes a precise situation on the battlefield. It opens with a metaphor underlined by the alliteration of the /b/ sound, taking the reader into the tragic situation they lived on the front. In line 2, he reinforces the image of horror, 'knock-

[29] Stuart Sillars, Op. Cit., p. 63
[30] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 55

kneed', 'coughing like hags', a comparison to give a stronger idea. However, Sillars argues that the poem could have been strong enough even without the first four lines, as Owen uses conventional metaphors to convey the idea. The initial image is clear and helps the reader to focus on the situation, from the very beginning we are introduced to a horrible and difficult condition. The poet tries to relate the experience of the marching soldiers to a common and comprehensible image. The subject 'we' is almost at the end of line 2, while the at beginning of line 1 and 2 he uses participles to emphasise their status. Line 5 continues the description, the sentence is intense and its brevity accentuates the exhaustion; the line is divided into two parts with a full stop, the same is for line 6, which has another break inducted by a semicolon. The soldiers are 'drunk with fatigue', in this case, the drunkenness is caused by the terrible effort of marching without resting. The condition of the men passes through two of the fifth sense, 'all blind', in line 6 the sight is prevented, and in line 7 they are said to be 'deaf'. The octet is the prelude to the real action of the poem, it presents the situation and introduces to the real matter.

> 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.[31]

This new sonnet, plus the last couplet, signs a break point in the narration of what happened. In this later version, Owen cut out the four lines, which in the first version functioned as a passage between the octet and this new stanza. The rhythm changes drastically, line 9 begins with the repetition of the word 'Gas', repeated two times with an exclamation mark, in order to give the drama and horror. Everything happens quickly, the narrating voice changes drastically. In the first stanza it was a 'we', which makes the poet part of those soldiers, however, in the second stanza, there is a man speaking directly to his peers. 'Quick boys!' he addressed to the other, then the narration continues and

[31] Ibid

there is the description of the gas attack. The actions done by the soldiers are described using the –ing form, as the situation is happening in that precise moment and the rhythm has increased. The rhyme is ABAB, however, there is an internal example of assonance in line 12, 'in fire or lime', he keeps the same vowel patterns and changes the consonants. The second stanza represents the turning point; gas weapons were a new way to fight introduced during the years of the war. Here, a soldier is unable to put on his gas mask, and the speaker (probably Owen himself), describes the situation comparing the soldier to a drowning man under the sea. He creates a climax through the verbs with an –ing form, 'stumbling', 'flound'ring' and 'drowning', he compares the soldier to a man who is drowning in the water. Here, there is no water, only 'a green sea' due to the colour of the masks' lens, which made the sight green. The final two lines of the second stanza and the following two lines, which create a stanza on their own, form a quatrain with a classical rhyme scheme: ABAB.

> In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
> He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.[32]

These lines create a fracture in the middle of the poem stating a turning point, from the terrible situation of death to an intimate reflection. They rhyme with the previous lines and have a traditional structure, which creates a dynamics with the contemporary moral states.[33] The atmosphere has changed, the first person narrator recollects the memory of this tragic fact and puts it into a dreamy image. There is a connection between what was narrated before, the soldier's drowning, and what will be told after. The dream, which implies a new ephemeral dimension, reminds of a Romantic tradition, however, in this case, it seems more like a nightmare in which the poet is remembering a tragic episode. In line 16 there is another climax, three present participles that underline the inevitable end and the horror. The figure of the soldier comes in all his dreams, meaning that is not something he remembers sometimes but is constantly in his mind. There is a feeling of being unable to help, 'to my helpless sight', the same feeling he had experienced on the

[32] Ibid
[33] Stuart Sillars, Op. Cit., p. 65

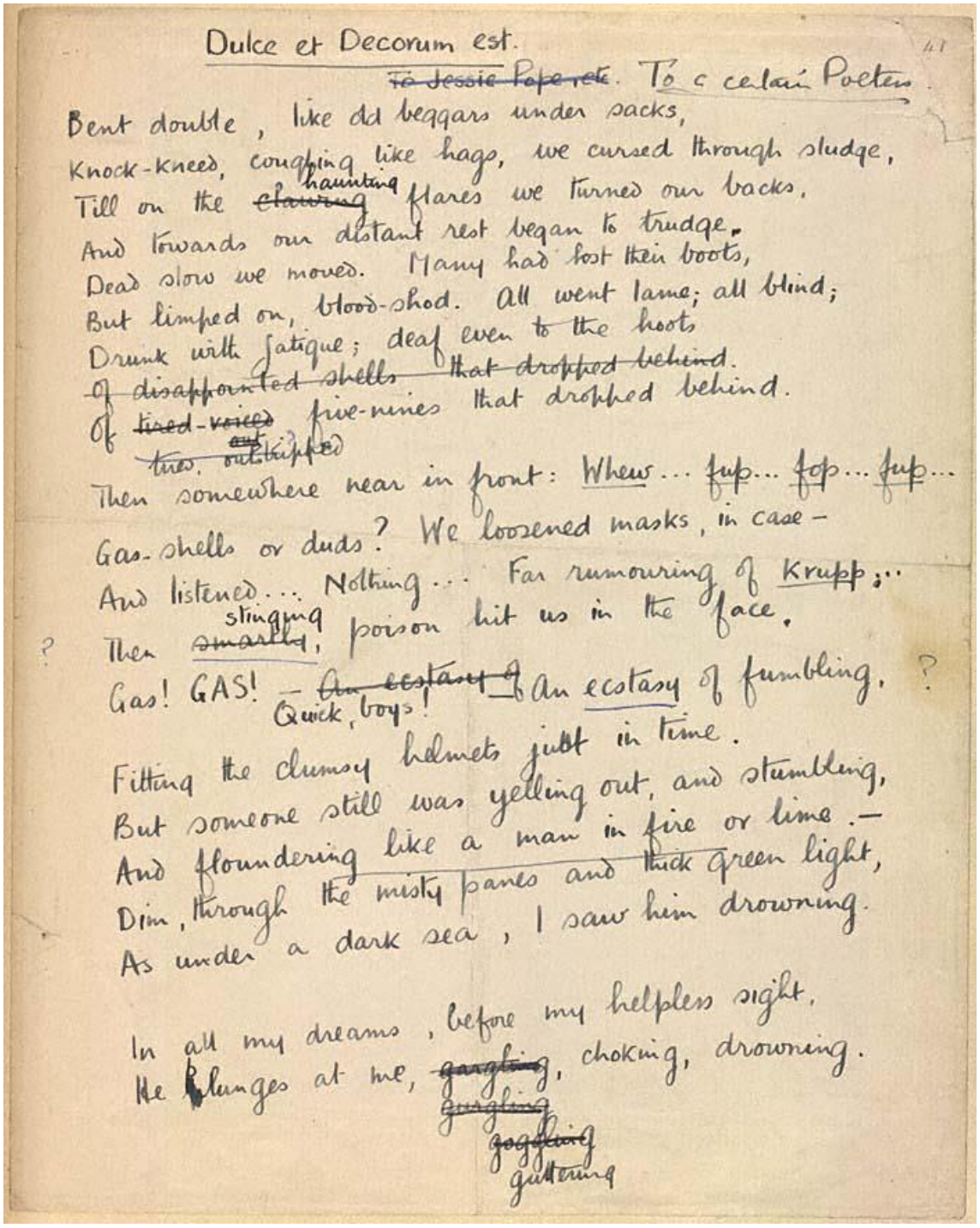
battlefield he is forced to live in his dreams, with a terrible image of the man imploring the poet to save him, even though it is impossible for him to do it.

> If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
> Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
> Pro patria mori.[34]

This last stanza is composed of three quatrains, each of them has the same rhyme scheme, ABAB, within each stanza. The last two lines have introduced a change in the poem, the poet is now reflecting on the situation. Owen introduces a speaker to whom he addresses his words, 'If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace', again the dream becomes a safe place where it is possible to think about the past. The poet asks the reader, 'you', to reflect on what he had seen, on what it means to die on the battlefield. The face of the dead corps is compared to a grimace of the devil, underlined by the alliteration of /s/ sound, 'devil's sick of sin'. The first two quatrains begin with the anaphora of 'If', introducing a conditional always addressed to the reader, 'you'. This successive image is even more disgusting and horrible than the previous, the blood gargles as if it was water, and the lungs are froth-corrupted, 'obscene as cancer', 'bitter as the cud of vile'. The language is bitter, rough, Owen describes the aspect of the corps without gilding the pill. Talking directly, without further words, is something that Owen has kept from reading

[34] Ibid

and imitating Sassoon. Even though the structure of the lines is traditional, three quatrains, the language is very strict, direct, he is able to create the precise image of this dead body, which has been put on the wagon together with the other dead soldiers. In the last quatrain the poet talks directly to the speaker already mentioned, however, he addressed to him as 'my friend', creating a deep bond between the two people. The last and final statement is the conclusion but also the title of the poem, as it represents the core of what he wants to say. 'The old Lie', which is capitalised as it is not only a simple lie but also a more profound type of falsehood. Owen's advice to this friend is not to tell with passion and fervour the 'supreme' lie, which is described in Horace's quotation: "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." The literal meaning is, 'it is sweet and respectable to die for your country', a quotation which talks about sacrifice for the motherland as the most honourable above all things. The epic hero was blessed to die while fighting, this would bring greatness to his memory; if we think about Homer's *Iliad*, Hector dies in the duel against Achilles and is remembered as a great ruler. Literature is full of heroic figures, great soldiers died fighting, however, Owen is talking about a terrible reality such as First World War. Nevertheless, Owen chooses a classical quotation to talk about a contemporary tragedy, this can cause two different reactions. On one hand, the quotation creates a gap between the old and the new, the old values represented by literature and told by many poets who emphasises the 'old Lie'. On the other hand, Owen shows that it is possible to talk about the contemporary age even with a classical reference. It may seem that Owen is taking distances in using the quotation instead of telling the lie straight away, however, it is necessary to think about his love for tradition and literary convention. Owen's position is clear and there are no doubts he is against this idea of a sort of 'traditional heroism', which may be recognised in Brooke's 'The Soldier'. After fighting in first person, he has concluded that there is nothing good and positive in this death. He gives the reader a description of the tragedy and the massacre in order to disrupt the false idea of greatness and discourage people from believing this lie.


Dulce et Decorum est.

~~To Jessie Pope etc~~. To c celain Poeten.

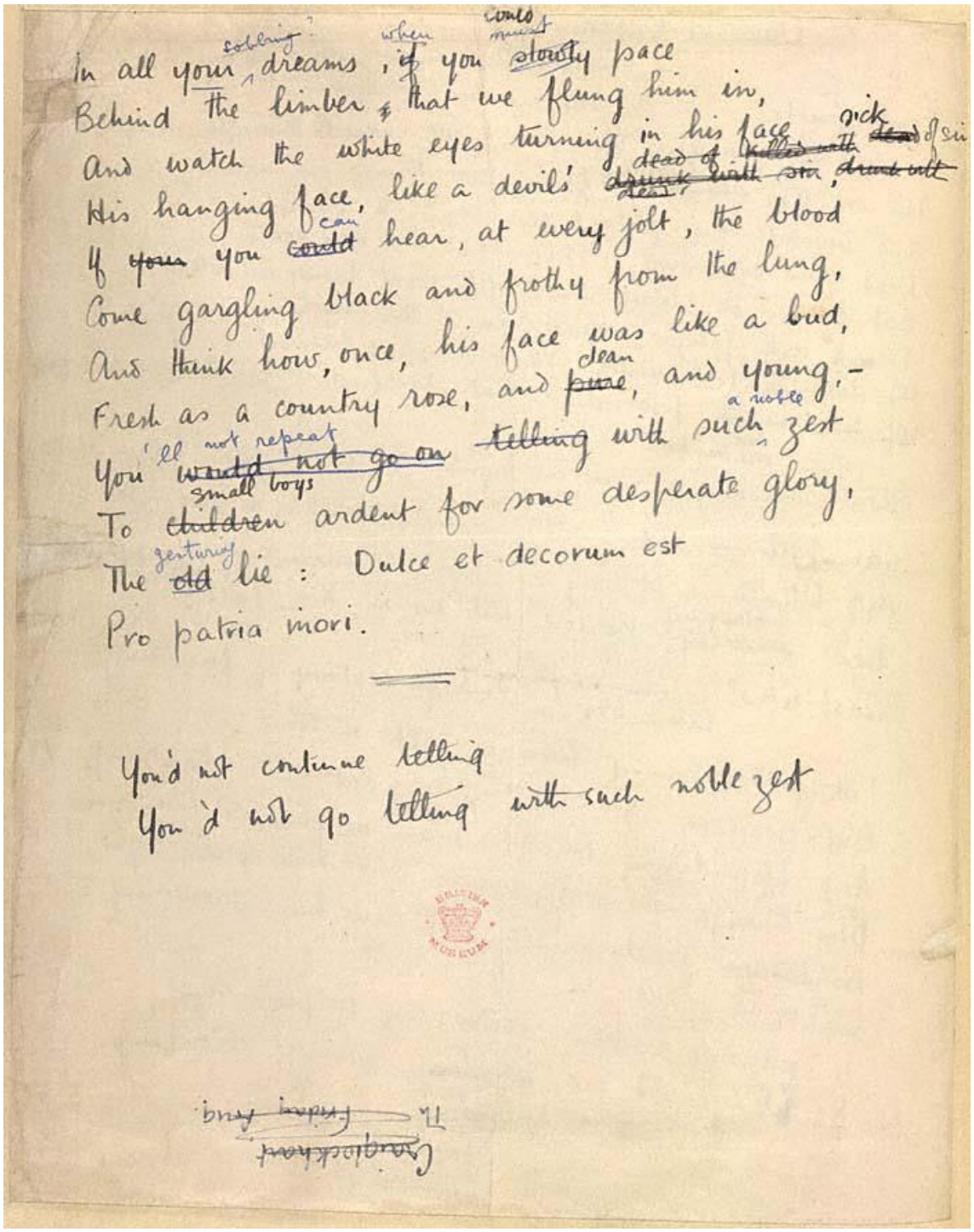
Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the ~~clawing~~ haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Dead slow we moved. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
~~Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.~~
Of ~~tired-voiced~~ five-nines that dropped behind.
~~two, outstripped~~

Then somewhere near in front: Whew... fup... fop... fup...
Gas-shells or duds? We loosened masks, in case –
And listened.... Nothing... Far rumouring of Krupp;...
Then ~~smartly~~ stinging, poison hit us in the face.
Gas! GAS! – ~~An ecstasy~~ Quick, boys! An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time.
But someone still was yelling out, and stumbling,
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.–
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a dark sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, ~~gargling~~ ~~gurgling~~ ~~gogglering~~ guttering, choking, drowning.

35

[35] "Dulce et Decorum Est," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed January 25, 2017, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5215.


In all your sobbing dreams, when you could must slowly pace
Behind the limber that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes turning in his face, sick dead of sin
His hanging face, like a devils' ~~drunk with sin, drunk with~~ dead,
If ~~yours~~ you ~~could~~ can hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling black and frothy from the lung,
And think how, once, his face was like a bud,
Fresh as a country rose, and ~~pure~~ clean, and young.-
You'll not repeat ~~would not go on~~ telling with such a noble zest
To ~~children~~ small boys ardent for some desperate glory,
The gentlemanly ~~old~~ lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

You'd not continue telling
You'd not go telling with such noble zest

36

[36] Ibid

These three poems represent the first big step of Wilfred Owen into his mature poetry. He started them in 1917, while still at Craighlockart, and after he revised and completed them in 1918, the year of his death. Although they do not present as much novelty, regarding pararhyme, as in some later poems, they create a gap between his older poetry and his new one. They convey his mature vision towards the war and writing, beginning to create his own personal style and his world. Working side by side with Sassoon and having the precious company of Graves, Owen is able to create a great impact with his words. Each poem has a duality in itself; a traditional structure, for example, Shakespearean sonnet, combined with a new language and point of view.

'Anthem for Doomed Youth' is the voice of a lost youth made by young boys going to fight and never returned, a youth made of hope that has been cancelled by the slaughter and that Owen wants to make it hear. 'Disabled' is a bitter critic against women and the people who did not go to war, who are unable to accept soldiers after returning from the front. Third, 'Dulce et Decorum Est' expresses the great tragedy of war, the duality between what really happens and what people think is glorious and dignified. Each describes Owen disillusionment towards war, with a bitter and unfulfilled point of view, a rich and sophisticated language used to describe the worst images.

5) The sound of war

5.1) Back to war

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.[1]

On the 4th November 1917, Owen was on the train back to London after leaving Craiglockart Hospital. Since that date, he would have exactly 12 months to live. Later that month he joined his Regiment in Scarborough. During his permanence there he continued to write poems, for example 'Futility', working on his passionate interest while waiting to go back to the battlefield. France was reached on 1st September 1918, after the first month of 1918 had seen a great German offensive against the allies. The return in France arrived after months of recovery, Owen spent time in England trying to get in the best shape, and while he was there, he found a room in a cottage in Borrage Lane, which he rented during the free evenings.[2] His decision to go back to war was vividly encouraged by Siegfried Sassoon, who thought that it would have been the best thing for Owen's poetry. However, when he got to France, his hopes to receive a letter from Sassoon were gone, so he decided to write to him.

[1] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 58
[2] Dominic Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 137

My dear Siegfried,

Here are a few poems to tempt you to a letter. I begin to think that your correspondence must be intercepted somewhere. So I will state merely

I have no letter from you { Lately / For a long time,

And say nothing on my situation, tactical or personal.

You said it would be a good thing for my poetry if I went back. This is my consolation for feeling a fool. This is what shells scream at me every time: Haven't you got the wits to keep out of this? [3]

Owen followed the advice of Sassoon, believing that returning to war would be a great idea. He had received unlimited leave for his health condition, nevertheless, he decided to go back because of Sassoon's wound, which prevented the poet from continuing fighting. Sassoon's situation made Owen aware that he had the task to talk about the war. Actually, 1918 was the real year for Owen's poetry; he produced his major poems and revised the 1917 ones, especially during spring. The process of contemplating war and then recollecting the images and emotions in order to write was a strict and serious discipline. The vision that haunted him, of the war, became vivid once more when he came back to the front and lived the last month of his life fighting. Between September and November 1918, he continued his correspondence with home, but he was more focused on guiding his men in battle. The war was coming to an end, English and French troops were trying to defeat Germans once and for all. The Armistice arrived on 11th November 1918, Germany declared the defeat and the war was over, unfortunately, so was Owen's life. He was killed the 4th November, one week before the end of the war, while crossing the Sombre and Oise Canal in France.

Owen's death at the end of the war helped to create his myth and image of 'the war poet'. He represents the voice of that generation, but also the voice of men asking for a meaning in life and death. Owen's poetry talks about precise facts, a precise time, however, it talks about humanity and men. Probably his premature death put a stop to his development as a poet, if he had lived longer he would have grown and changed his style. Nevertheless,

[3] Jon Stallworthy, Op. Cit., p.272

the maturity and personality he showed in his poems made his name great among the poets.

5.2) 'War and the pity of war'

In 1918, while he was still in England recovering and deciding whether to go back to the front or not, he worked on his poems and, mostly, on a possible publication. In the early months, he decided the subject of his poetry and wrote a Preface. However, we possess a manuscript of this Preface, which is not the final version, unfortunately, Owen did not finish it due to the returning on the battlefield and his successive death. The only manuscript that survived is heavily corrected so that there have been two editions of the Preface, the editors had tried to rewrite it following the corrections in order to try and guess what would have been the best version.[4]

> This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.
>
> Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.
>
> Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
>
> My subject is War, and the pity of War.
>
> The Poetry is in the pity.
>
> Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.
>
> (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 themselves fresher than Flanders. …)[5]

Cecil Day Lewis reports the Preface on his edition of Wilfred Owen's poems. It is the version that critics have claimed to be the most congruous with Owen's ideas and intentions. The statements are very clear and there is no doubt that the poet had a very precise idea of what he was going to do. It opens with a negation about the intention of

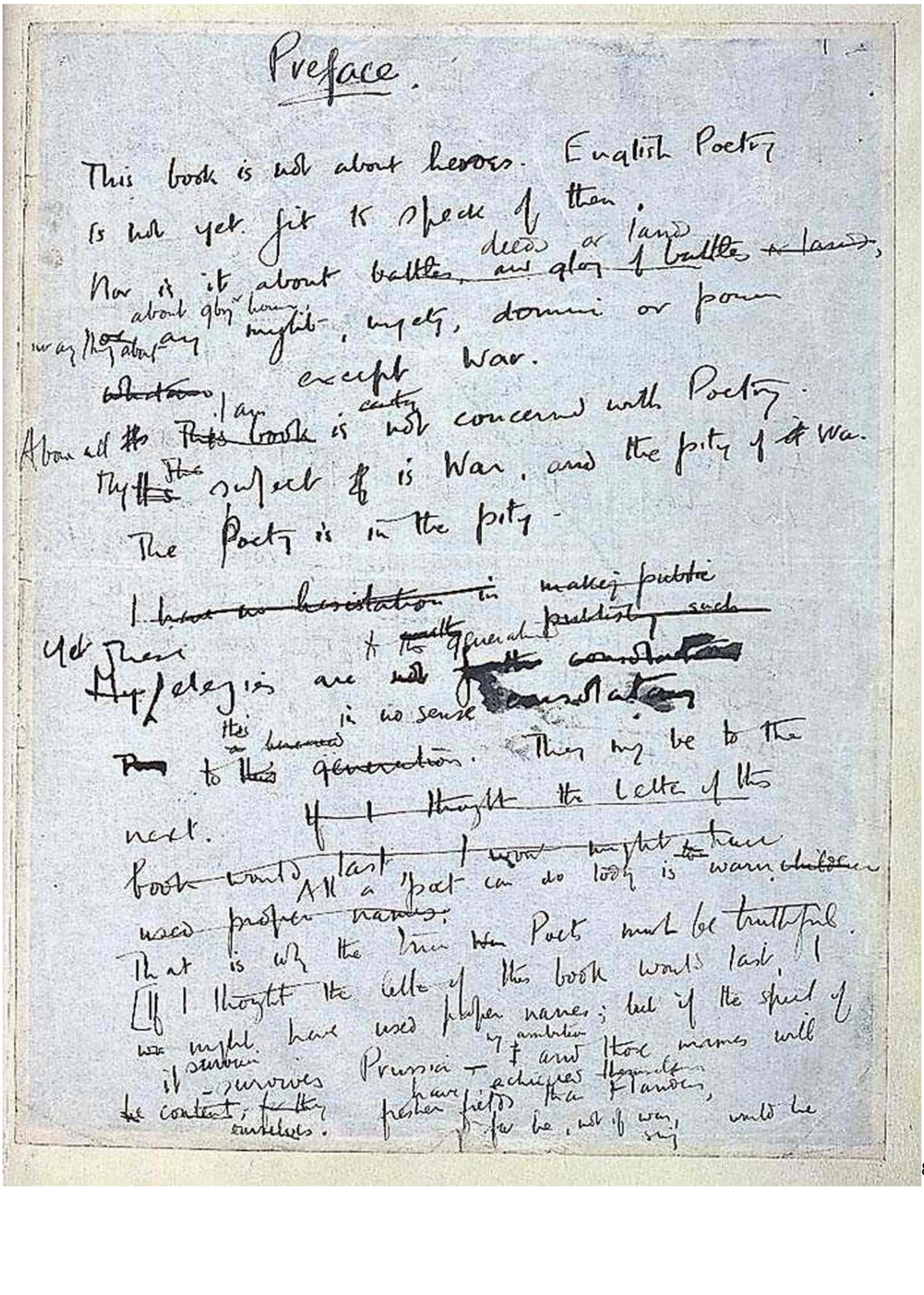
[4] D.S.R. Welland, Op. Cit., p. 53
[5] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 31

the book, ‘This book is not about heroes’; instead of beginning by declaring what the book is about, he prefers to state the exact opposite. The reason for his assertion is that English poetry is not able to do it, or at least not yet. The list of things, which this book is not about, continues: not deeds, lands, glory, honour, might, majesty etc. Until he claims that this book is about War. The following lines are, perhaps, the most famous and quoted from the Preface, and had created debates and questions among the critics. ‘Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.’ The first sentence has been studied and analysed repeatedly, trying to understand the real meaning behind Owen’s idea. He takes the distance from what he calls ‘Poetry’, which can be recognised as the mere technical formality, although the fact that he uses the capital letter introduces another shade to the meaning. It probably indicates the duality between what he wanted to write and what was urgent to say at that time. Poetry is, according to this vision, the essence of the traditional genre, embracing the Romantic status, and in a collection of war poems cannot be the priority.[6] The next statement is the core of this Preface and of the book, the pity of War. War is seen not just for what it is, a slaughter, but is filtered through a new point of view, which is the pity. The pity is what conveys Poetry; Owen sees the war and describes the pity, being compassionate with it and a voice within. He does not try to bring consolation, not to his generation who lives in the tragedy; perhaps, it would be consolatory for those who read the poems in the future. His role as a poet is to warn, to talk and to be truthful. A significant introduction, which puts the reader into perspective before starting the book. The last part, within brackets, is somewhat a hope for the future, a thought about what will last of his words. It begins with a conditional, ‘If’, a reflection about what will survive of his book: the words or the spirit. Above all, there is the *ambition* and the desire that the most important part will survive and will serve to teach something.

Welland underlines an important aspect, which becomes noticeable from the Preface, that the type of poetry, which Owen’s conscience forced him to write was a difficult kind. In pleading the suffering of others, Owen makes that suffering his own, and it makes the

[6] D.S.R. Welland, Op. Cit., p. 54

poetry true.[7] His great talent was to create a balance between the morbid description of war, and the truthfulness of the sufferance and the need for hope.


Preface.

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Nor is it about battles, deeds or lands,
about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion or power
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My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.
Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the
next. All a poet can do today is warn.
That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

[8]

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[7] Ibid, p. 61

[8] "Preface," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed January 28, 2017, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4547.

5.3) The importance of rhyme

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?[9]

Wilfred Owen became famous and attractive mostly due to his experimenting with rhyme, which brings his poetry to be fed with the so called: half-rhyme or pararhyme. This aspect of innovation and experiment had fascinated people and critics because it was not a mere style exercise, a formality, it was a thought choice closely bound with the emotions expressed in his poetry.[10] Even though Owen followed the traditional poetic patterns, from the line scheme, the metre, and the poems' structure, it was insufficient to talk about the war, to convey the emotional state that he felt and that was not possible to inscribe into a traditional poetic pattern. This need found its expression through a simple although effective device: instead of changing the initial consonant while keeping the vowel sound (bold/cold), the consonantal framework is retained and the vowel changed (cold/called).[11] This is the principle of half-rhyme in a strict sense that Owen used regularly and it is mostly recognisable in his poems. However, there is not a univocal name to describe this approximate rhyme, Welland calls it 'half-rhyme', Blunden 'pararhyme' while Sassoon refers it as 'assonances', although they are all talking about the same principle.

It is important to say that Owen did not invent 'pararhyme', he did not come up with this device by himself, as there have been researched on its antecedents. That being said, it is not a fortuitous or unintentional technique, even though, sometimes an apparent half-rhyme is actually an eye-rhyme, which has its own necessity. There have been found three

[9] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 58
[10] Sven Backman, Op. Cit., p. 168
[11] D.S.R. Welland, «Half-Rhyme in Wilfred Owen: Its Derivation and Use», The Review of English Studies, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Jul., 1950), p. 226

poets who use half-rhyme in a planned manner, two English and one American: Henry Vaughan, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson. Moreover, another great antecedent can be traced in Welsh poetry. Henry Vaughan was a Welsh metaphysical poet who lived in the seventeenth century. There is no systematic use of pararhyme in his poetry, however, we do have examples of many eye-rhymes, such as love/move, which in his time had a different pronunciation than nowadays. The same sporadic use of half-rhyme in alternation to canonical rhymes can be seen in Emily Dickinson. A nineteenth-century American poet who was said to use 'suspended rhyme', an inexact form of half-rhyme, which does not insist on the correspondence of the initial consonants. Dickinson uses half-rhyme with approximation, such as come/time, even though there are times in which she is more precise, peer/pare. The third poet, Gerard Hopkins, was an English Jesuit of the nineteenth century, differing from Vaughan and Dickinson because he uses vowel dissonance internally within the lines.

Nevertheless, it is not possible to establish with certainty Owen's familiarity with any of these poets. In his library, there are no copies of their books, although it is not a sufficient proof to say that with certainty. There is no evidence or familiarity, even though Emily Dickinson is the least likely to have influenced Owen. There is a fourth influence, which derived from the same source of Vaughan and Hopkins and it may seem a more interesting one: Welsh poetry.[12] Both Vaughan and Hopkins are linked to the Welsh, Vaughan for birth while Hopkins was influenced by their poetry. Welsh poetry is very rich in sound and imagery. Even though Wilfred Owen is a Welsh name, Edmund Blunden, claims that it is more likely that Owen must have derived his technique from the French. In particular, he takes as example Jules Romains, a French novelist who lived between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. There have been studies in French regarding Owen, but none suggested the direct link and derivation from Romains.

Sven Backman tries to give a definition to the different types of approximate rhymes that are to be found in English poetry. He defines eight different types, he divided following the contraposition between masculine and feminine rhyme, and then again between assonant, half or para rhyme. This differentiation among rhymes is significant to show

[12] Ibid, pp. 228-229

that English poetry is full of different techniques and devices; although it will be interesting to see which of them were used by Owen. I will report an example for each rhyme in order to understand and have a general idea of the differences.

Masculine half-rhyme, eyes: close.

Masculine pararhyme, fronds: friends.

Masculine assonant rhyme, ring: him.

Masculine slant rhyme, tones: once.

Feminine half-rhyme, ardour: odour.

Feminine assonant rhyme, trident: silent.

Feminine pararhyme, money: many.

Feminine slant rhyme, branches: ranges.

Fourteen poems of Wilfred Owen have been recognised as an exercise in pararhyme, from earlier poem such as "From my diary", to the more significant and complete of his production such as "Strange Meeting". Although, the great effort he made was done in 1918 when he possessed the technique and the sufficient literary knowledge to experiment and go beyond. Backman, then, studied all the different approximate rhymes and found out the percentage of usage, discovering that the masculine pararhyme was the most used (57 %). The only rhymes he did not write are masculine assonant rhymes and feminine assonant rhymes.[13] It is interesting to have a global image about Owen's poetical devices, mostly to give the right weight to this aspect, which has been used to characterise his poetry. However, Owen's poetry is made by far more aspect than mere approximate rhymes, as in many famous poems ('Anthem for Doomed Youth', 'Dulce et Decorum Est') it is not used or simply mentioned.

[13] Sven Backman, Op. Cit., pp. 172-174

"Exposure", is perhaps, the best example in order to understand the use and distribution of approximate rhymes. This long poem is divided into eight stanzas, each composed of five lines with the unrhymed fifth line, which is also shorter. The poem describes a moment in the trenches were the soldiers are waiting for something to happen, an attack from the enemy, 'But nothing happens', as he repeated four times. The narration is characterised by repetitiveness, the rhythm is slow and the whole poem revolves around this idea of everything still, nothing moving or changing. There is a sense of waiting and of being stuck, which is underlined by the traditional and regular structure, together with the systematic use of approximate rhymes.

> Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us . . .
> Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent . . .
> Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient . . .
> Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
> But nothing happens.[14]

The rhyme scheme is ABBAC, with the fifth line that does not rhyme. In this first stanza, *us/nervous* is a feminine pararhyme, while *silent/salient* is a feminine slant rhyme. As for the rest of the poem there are two masculine half-rhymes (us/ice, crisp/gasp), four masculine pararhymes (wire/war, grow/gray, -dazed/dozed, burn/born), one masculine slant rhyme (fruit/-fraid), two feminine half-rhymes (brambles/rumbles, stormy/army), one feminine pararhymes (knive us/nervous, faces/fusses), one feminine slant rhyme (silence/nonchalance), one pure rhyme (glozed/closed).[15] Together with the massive use of para and half rhymes, Owen uses long lines in order to build the poem not merely on rhymes but giving the words their own stress and importance.

> Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,
> Shrivelling many hands, and puckering foreheads crisp.
> The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
> Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,

[14] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 48
[15] Sven Backman, Op. Cit., p. 175

But nothing happens.[16]

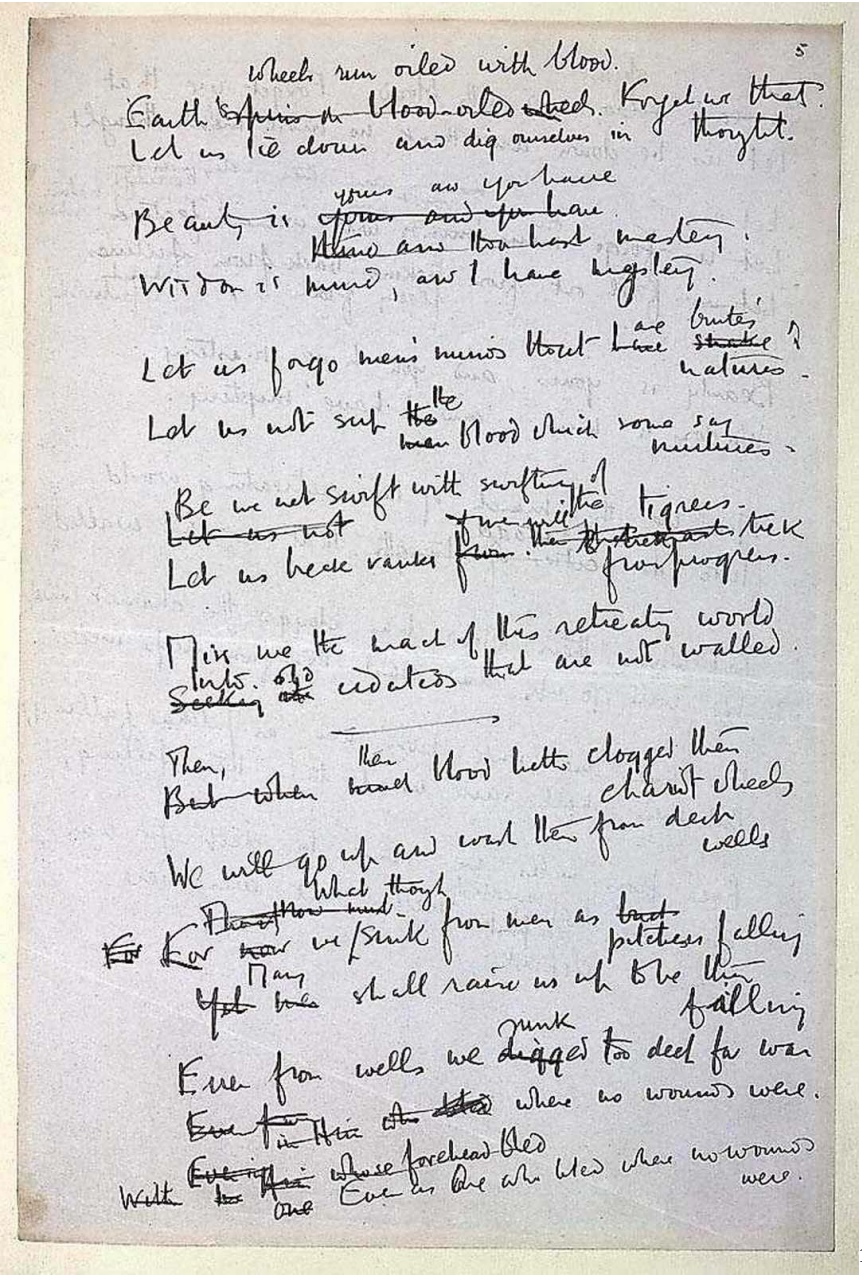
5.4) 'Strange Meeting'

According to Siegfried Sassoon, 'Strange Meeting' is Owen's 'passport to immortality, and his elegy to the unknown warriors of nations'.[17] It is the best example of Owen's mature and complete poetry, bringing together all the pieces of his work and experience during the war. It is, somewhat, the perfect conclusion for the analysis I started in chapter 1 and that passed through all the stages of Owen's life. There are no precise dates to collocate the poem in time, it is probable that he began to write the poem in 1917 while at Scarborough, although, it had been revised in 1918 and successively published after Owen's death. In 'Strange Meeting' there can be found traces of Owen's attachment to the Romantic tradition, which is a kind of first love, the positive and creative power he developed with Sassoon, the terrible reality of warfare and the moral idealism he had always within himself.

There are numerous drafts of this poem. The British Museum had the final draft, and five drafts of passage; Harold Owen had one early draft.[18] The First World War Poetry Digital Archive has collected six drafts; the item dates of four of them is between November 1917 and January 1918, while the other two from January 1918 to March 1918. The first draft that we find on the website, which was probably written at Scarborough, has very little to do with the final ad complete poem. From a closer look at the draft, which is composed of two papers, the poem is divided in rhyming couplets, with canonical or approximate rhymes. There are lots of corrections and cancellations, words that have been substituted and replaced. It is not easy to read Owen's handwriting, however, it is possible to recognise in both papers, two words that Owen repeated and that are present in the final version. "Let us…" is used four times in this first draft, always at the beginning of the line, and it is usually followed by a verb. In the final version, the last line is constructed in the same way, "Let us sleep now…", perhaps, Owen was trying to find the perfect

[16] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 49
[17] D.S.R. Welland, Op. Cit., p. 99
[18] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 36

solution and the perfect line. Basically, these papers appear much as exercise papers, as if Owen was collecting all his ideas in order to start sketching his poem.



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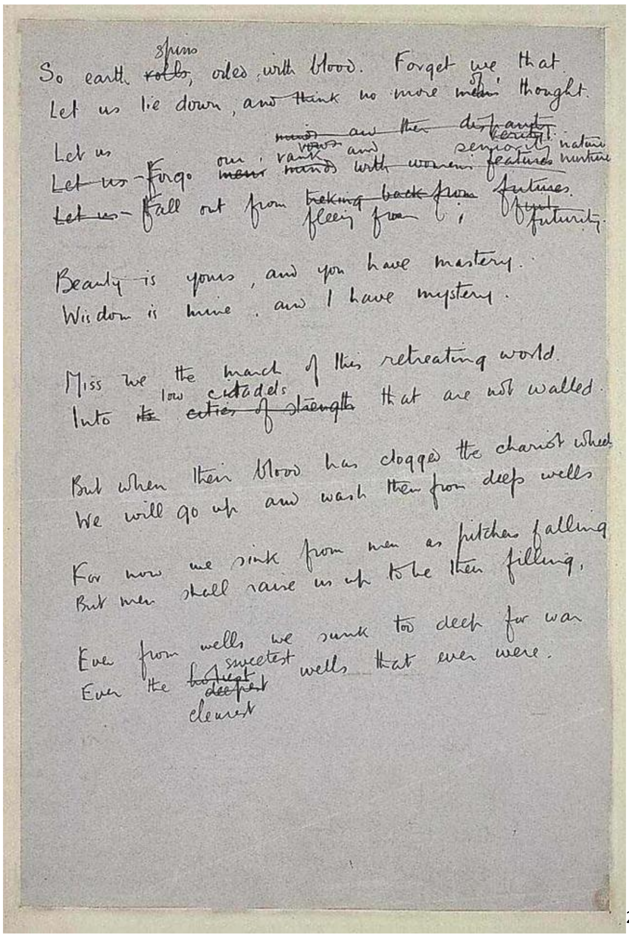
[19] "Strange Meeting," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed February 1, 2017, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5207.


So earth spins, oiles, with blood. Forget we that.
Let us lie down, and think no more men's thought.

Beauty is yours, and you have mastery.
Wisdom is mine, and I have mystery.

Miss we the march of this retreating world
Into low citadels that are not walled.

But when their blood has clogged the chariot wheels
We will go up and wash them from deep wells

For now we sink from men as pitchers falling
But men shall raise us up to be their filling,

Even from wells we sunk too deep for war
Even the sweetest wells that ever were.

[20]

The other drafts, which could have probably been written at Scarborough or later at Ripon, are similar to the one previously seen. They do not have a definitive structure, he still worked with couplets or tercets without finding the perfect solution. In these drafts, it is possible to observe that in 1917, beginning 1918, Owen did not have yet the idea for 'Strange Meeting'. In fact, neither of the drafts have a title, which can be related to the final one or can create a precedent. Even though, Owen worked very much before 1918, the real change and core, which goes behind 'Strange Meeting', arrives in 1918 when he produced many of his major poems. The title and the theme are taken from Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*.

The last two drafts, presumably written between January 1918 and March 1918, are very useful to compare with the final version of the poem. Owen had finally found the subject for his work and the way to convey the message. The poem is about a soldier, who is the

[20] Ibid

first person narrator, going to the underworld in order to escape the hell of the war. While he walks in Hell, he meets a soldier from the enemy army, who he discovers had been killed the day before. Their meeting, which Owen defines 'strange', is the occasion for a deep reflection and an important description of war. The protagonist is probably Owen himself, living from the first line the war situation, who meets much of an *alter ego* than a totally different person.[21] From the poem, the sense of brotherhood and reconciliation with the enemy is evident. The poem is divided into four stanzas, the first two describe the soldier entering a tunnel and descending to Hell, while the following stanzas are the description of the meeting.

I will report the first stanza of the three different versions I possess, two drafts and the final version, in order to compare how the poetry changed, although I then will focus on the official version for the rest of the analysis.

> It seemed from that dug out I escaped
> Down some profounder tunnel, older scooped
> Through granites which the netter flames had groined.
>
> It seemed that out of the battle I escaped
> Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
> Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

These two different versions of the first stanza, are taken from the manuscripts of the poem, I have copied without the corrections and cancellations Owen made, in order to have the overall image. It is important to underline that the second example is also the final version, as Owen chose not to change the lines. Both versions present numerous corrections and changes, in the first line of the first draft he had written 'that' after 'seemed' but then he cut it out, while he was uncertain between 'dug' and 'dull'. In line two, the tunnel is 'profounder', he uses a comparative while in the final version he will opt for the smile adjective. 'Scooped' remains, in order to create a feminine half-rhyme with 'escaped', while 'older' has been replaced by 'long since', which gives the same

[21] D.S.R. Welland, Op. Cit., p. 100

idea of something done in the past time. The third line presents differences in the second part, while the idea of a tunnel that had been dug into the granites is the same, the cause, which made the tunnel, changed. Although, from both manuscripts, the word 'netter' is not so clear, so it is my final decision after having tried to give a meaning at the whole line. 'The netter flames' become after 'the titanic wars' that have the force to create the tunnel. Owen's evolution from the first version until the final version is not much on the lines structure, as on the choice of words that can better suit his needs.

The poem opens with the recognition of the soldier who finds himself out of the battle, escaping the war, in a very old tunnel, which was created by the titanic wars. This three lines stanza is similar to an introduction for the whole poem, placing the protagonist in his physical condition.

> Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
> Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
> Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
> With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
> Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
> And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
> By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.[22]

The second stanza is composed of seven lines, the soldier is now trying to understand where the tunnel has led him. Line 4 begins with 'Yet', as if to create a fracture with the things he said before, even though it is followed by 'also', which introduced what he is going to see. He sees 'sleepers groaned', who cannot be shaken up by him. In line 6 there is another change in tone and atmosphere, 'then' something happens and a sleeper wakes up and looks at him. All the adjectives used to describe the spirit can be related to a ghost, a non-living creature: 'piteous recognition', 'fixed eyes', 'distressful hands'. The last two lines of the stanza are structured in the same way, creating a repetition to underline the fact that he has understood to be in Hell. 'I knew' is in the same position at the middle of both lines, the first part of line 9 is slightly changed in line 10, which adds the adjective

[22] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 35

‘dead’ to smile. Although the most significant part is the end, Owen plays with pararhyme, ‘hall’ in line 9 rhymes with ‘Hell’ in line 10. The whole poem is built on couplets, which rhyme together, even though there is division in stanzas in most editions, the first idea of the couplets he experimented in 1917 remains in the final version. However, in the final poem, the couplets do not form a single unity on their own, creating a continuity in the text, mostly from a visual point of view. The following part is the core of the whole poem, the soldier meets this ‘vision’, or ‘ghost’, who starts talking to him. The two of them talk, even though is the enemy who needs to say important things to the soldier.

> With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
> Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
> And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
> “Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.”
> “None,” said that other, “save the undone years,
> The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
> Was my life also; I went hunting wild
> After the wildest beauty in the world,
> Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
> But mocks the steady running of the hour,
> And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.[23]

Both men are in Hell, a place very far from earth and from war, as specified in lines 12 and 13 by saying ‘no blood reached there’, ‘And no guns thumped’, so they are not reached by the horror of war, which continues on the ground. However, the face of the man is covered with pain, war has left its scars and more precisely, the soldier who killed the man is in part responsible. In line 14 the direct speech begins, the soldier addresses the man as “Strange friend”, as in the title, so it is important that it is the first thing that he says to this man. From the beginning, he is “strange”, as if something about him does

[23] Ibid

not fit into the soldier's mind. He tries to comfort him, understanding that down here there was no cause to be sad and mourn because there is no more war. After this brief introduction, made by the coming soldier, the dead man replies with his speech. These two lines of direct speech are the only ones in which the two of them exchange words, as for the rest, is the "strange friend" who talks.

He starts to tell his life, what he did while he was alive and what were his hopes for the future. Somewhat they both share the same hope and the same destiny, as both soldiers. Perhaps a shared purpose for life, as we have said that this "strange friend" is probably an alter ego of the protagonist – the poet – himself. "Whatever hope is yours,/was my life also", then he plays with words beginning in –w, continuing in the following line; "I *w*ent hunting *w*ild/After the *w*ildest beauty in the *w*orld". During his life, the man sought the beauty of the world, which you cannot find in the nice things as "braided hair", but in the greatest things, the ones that "mocks the steady running of the hour", meaning that surpass time.

> For by my glee might many men have laughed,
> And of my weeping something had been left,
> Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
> The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
> Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
> Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
> They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
> None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
> Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
> Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
> To miss the march of this retreating world
> Into vain citadels that are not walled.[24]

[24] Ibid

He continues to talk about his former life, after exposing himself as a searcher of beauty, recalling Owen's quest for beauty inherited by Keats and the Romantics, he talks about his joy and his sadness. However, line 25 echoes the words of the Preface and the subject of Owen's poetry: "the pity of war, the pity war distilled". This line is quite in the middle of the poem, that is the core of what the poet is saying. What the dead man sought in life was "the truth untold", which is the pity of war and links again the two men in the underworld, Owen and his alter ego. So, this is the pure essence of what Owen had achieved in his life and wants to share with everyone. Line 26 begins with "Now", as to make a prediction about the future, being some kind of prophet. Men have two contrasted reactions, "go content" or "discontent", and war will arrive and change the face of the world. Lines from 28 to 31 can be seen as a quartet, the two couplets have a similar structure; in lines 28-29 "will" is the second word and visually it creates an image of order, even though he is talking about the possibility of a war. While in lines 30-31 there is a visual and structural parallelism. The first half is identical, in line 30 there is "Courage" while in line 31 "Wisdom"; the second half changes only because of the final words, which rhyme together, "mystery" and "mastery". The following couplet uses a figurative language to talk about what the war.

> Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
> I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
> Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
> I would have poured my spirit without stint
> But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
> Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.[25]

These six lines end the stanza, describing the warfare and giving a premonition about what war will bring, even though the war has already happened in reality. Here the two strands - the aim and rationale of poetry and the predicted course of events come together in a movingly expressed blueprint for the cleansing of the human spirit. "Then" at the beginning of the line creates a pressing rhythm, the man is saying what will happen and

[25] Ibid

what he will do. “When” settles the situation in time, a future time, the same does the use of “would”, which reinforces the idea. The intentions are both on a practical line and on a more spiritual as if to combine two aspects of life.

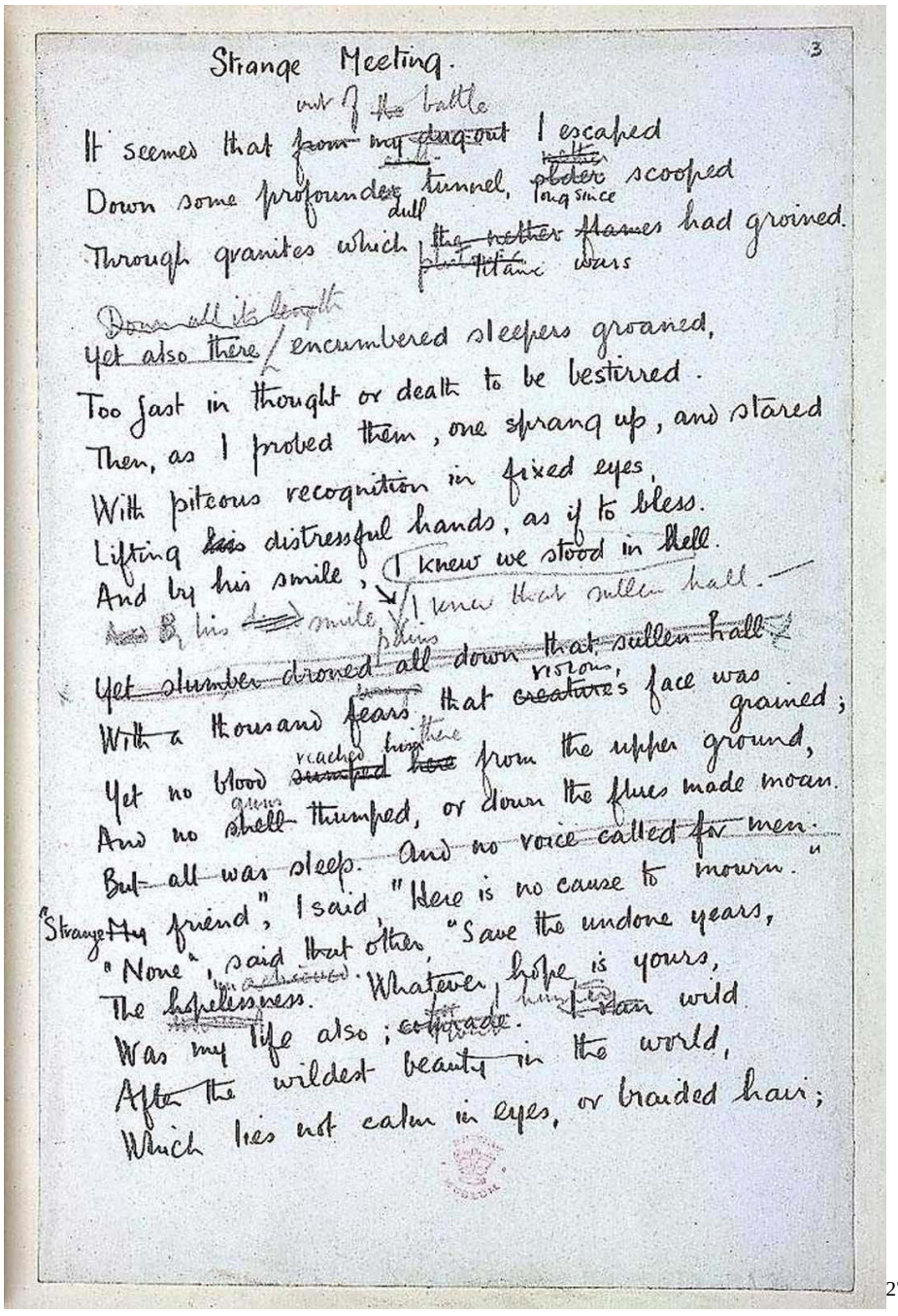
> “I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
> I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
> Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
> I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
> Let us sleep now. . . .”[26]

The last stanza, which closes the poem, is very important and resolves the mystery about who is the dead soldier. In the first line, it is said from the beginning, “I am the enemy you killed”, so the soldier who has entered Hell is now facing the man he killed on the battlefield. However, here in Hell, they are the same, and the stranger calls him “my friend” because he recognises that even though they were enemies in life, now they share the same destiny. The stranger talks in first person as he says that he has recognised the soldier, “I knew you”, because he remembered his face while he was dying. There is the description of the real act of killing, talking directly to the “you”. It is possible to picture the confrontation between the two thanks to the verbs used, “frowned”, “jabbed”, “parried”. Owen decides to finish the poem with a non-rhyming line, this last stanza has five lines, two couplets and a solitary verse. Friend/frowned, killed/cold all approximate rhymes, while at last the line is shorter and ends with suspension dots. “Let us sleep now…” recalls directly to the earlier drafts of the poem, as already mentioned, however, Owen decided to use these words to close the whole poem. The dead man prays the soldier to let him rest now that he has confessed everything.

The analysis of “Strange Meeting” has underlined how far Owen’s technique and poetics have come. The whole poem is developed with approximate rhymes, a Romantic atmosphere combined with the crude reality of the war. The language is more mature and

[26] Ibid

personal, it is impossible not to think about Sassoon's advice when they first met, "sweat your guts out writing poetry".


Strange Meeting. 3

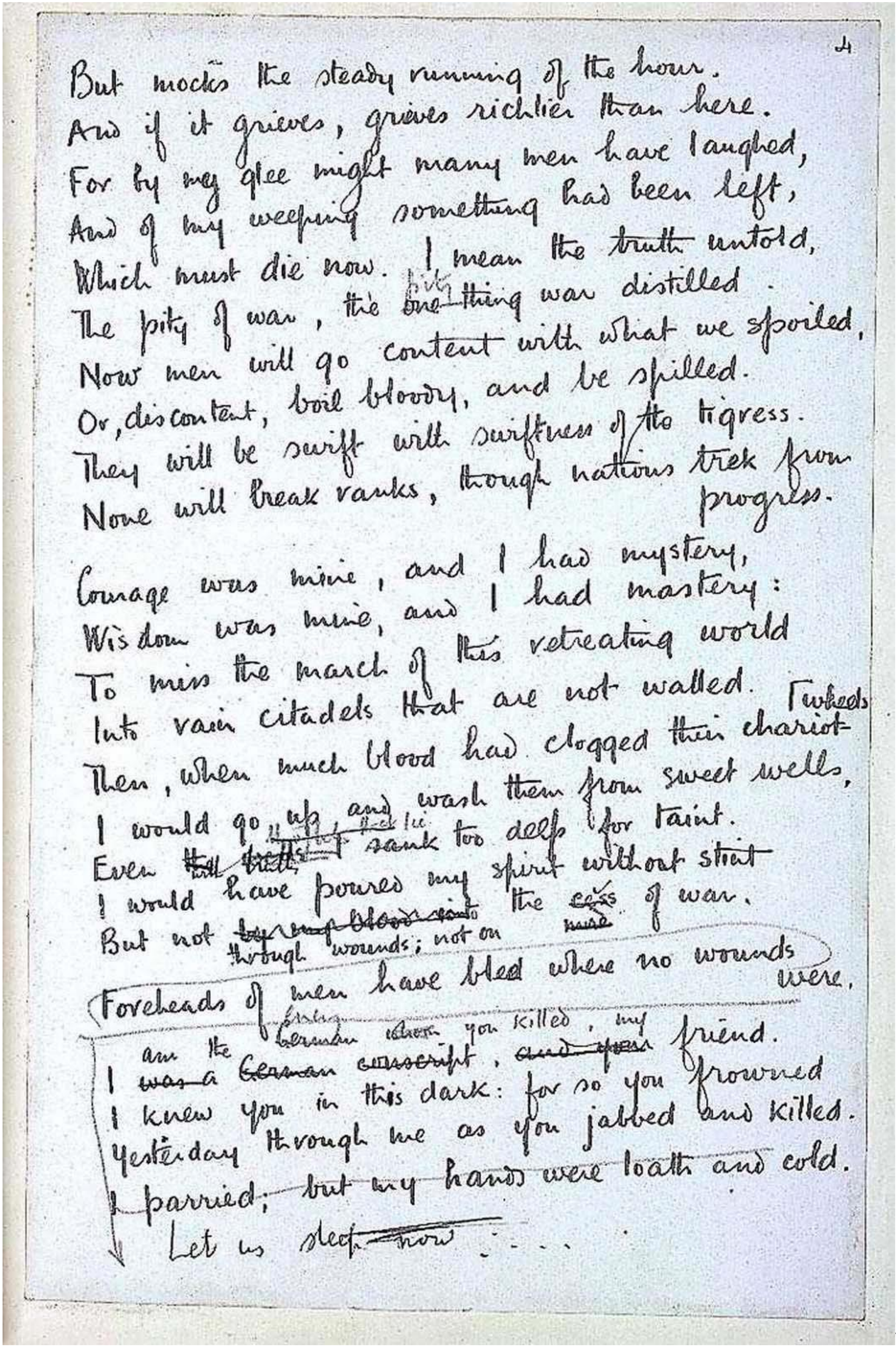
It seemed that out of the battle I escaped
Down some profounder dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which ~~Titanic~~ wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew we stood in Hell.
With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no shell thumped, or down the flues made moan.
All was sleep. And no voice called for men.

"Strange friend", I said, "Here is no cause to mourn."
"None", said that other, "Save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair;

[27]

[27] "Strange Meeting," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed February 3, 2017, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5202.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But mocks the steady running of the hour.
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now . . . .

[28]

28 Ibid

Conclusion

I have perceived much beauty
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
Heard music in the silentness of duty;
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate.[1]

This seventh stanza of 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo' is an emblematic passage to summarise Owen's new war poetry, which states a new point for English literature. In this quatrain that follows the ABAB rhyme scheme, Owen described the paradox he lived during the war and that he was able to transmit to people. Even within the horror, the mud, "the silentness of duty", he found beauty, and that same beauty is the one that pervades all his poems. He asserted with great maturity and strength that in the war he had the courage to see beyond the deaths and the tragedy. This double aspect of beauty within the war is a constant through all his poems. The paradox is clear; the whole stanza is an oxymoron about finding beauty in the worst situation people can ever imagine. Beauty is also conveyed through language and form, which play a very important role in Owen's poetry. 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo' is a 1918's poem, it was influenced by Graves' advice to write more optimistically and cheerfully; so, Owen wrote a poem 'in defence of my poetry' saying what war could not destroy the beauty in life and especially in poetry. Even though these are very specific lines, I think they can express the feeling that Owen never fails to communicate. His "new war poetry" not only can be described by his innovation from a formal point of view, but also by the way he looked at the war.

"The pity of war" passes through all these aspects and is shown to the reader. Wilfred Owen is, probably, the most remembered War Poet, who continues to speak even nowadays. Through the analysis of the evolution of his poetry, it is possible to see how far he had gone and grown. From his interest in the Romantics and especially Keats to the many meetings with great poets who helped him embracing his abilities and finding

[1] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 39

his path: Tailhade, Sassoon, Graves. The most important aspect on which the analysis has focused is the poetic style. From his early sonnets, which were mostly written in a classic and unoriginal style with echoes to Shakespeare and Keats, to his war masterpieces. The first poems represent Owen's earliest stage, 'To Poesy', 'To Eros', which were written in his early age when he was still knowing himself and relying on Keats example as a guide, almost copying his style and manner. Successively, the permanence in Bordeaux helped him to become more independent and self-confident, the meeting with Tailhade got him in touch with French poetry, for example, Verlaine's. The themes are still very Romantic and classic, although the breakout of war in 1914 changed everything. His conventional style had to deal with a new and terrible reality, filtered by the first war poets and his initial pacifist position. Owen felt the need to express his ideas and started to realise that he did not have the exact means to talk properly about the war, firstly because he was not a soldier yet, secondly because he was still too much focused on tradition. Although, Owen's fascination towards war was vital in order to make him joining the army in 1915. He wanted to make the difference in the war even though he was very sceptic about; however, he would make a huge difference thanks to his poetry. The year 1917, was the break point in Owen's life before he was an average poet, most interested in creating lovely sonnets and lyrics. Afterwards, the meeting with Sassoon changed Owen, as a person and a poet. It is possible to talk about poems before Sassoon and poems after Sassoon. War became the principal subject, although when Owen talked about war it was not a mere description of its horror, but always a look within. Sassoon's encouragement brought Owen to experiment and found his own style, mostly recognised by the use of approximate rhyme. This fundamental innovation, together with his mixed used of tradition and novelty, composed Owen's voice.

> You shall not hear their mirth:
>
> You shall not come to think them well content
>
> By any jest of mine. These men are worth
>
> Your tears: You are not worth their merriment. [2]

[2] Ibid

Owen's memory lived beyond the war, even after World War I had ended, his poems were only starting to be known. In 1920, with the help of Siegfried Sassoon, the first collection of Owen's poems came out, so that the world was finally able to read one of the finest English poets of 20th century. There has been some criticism from poets like William Butler Yeats, who did not include him in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Yeats claimed that the sufferance described by Owen was passive, for this reason, there was no place for his poetry in English literature. However, his book was badly reviewed due to Owen's exclusion, as Yeats' reasons were not sufficient to support his choice. The debate that arose around Owen's poetry saw many literary figures taking the defence of Owen, contrasting Yeats for his strong position that the only valid memory of war was the *joy of battle*[3]. However, after Yeats' death in 1939, the atmosphere and the political climate had changed, Owen was reprinted in a great number of copies and was enjoying a new rush of popularity. Even though he was and still is inscribed inside the so-called "war poets", his popularity has not vanished or diminished.

> Whether his deeper sleep lie shaded by the shaking
> Of great wings, and the thoughts that hung the stars,
> High pillowed on calm pillows of God's making
> Above these clouds, these rains, these sleets of lead,
> And these winds' scimitars;
> —Or whether yet his thin and sodden head
> Confuses more and more with the low mould,
> His hair being one with the grey grass
> And finished fields of autumns that are old ...
> Who knows? Who hopes? Who troubles? Let is pass!
> He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous, less cold
> Than we who must awake, and waking, say Alas![4]

[3] Cohen, Joseph, «In Memory of W.B. Yeats: And Wilfred Owen», The Journal of English and Germanic Philology, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Oct., 1959), pp. 637-649
[4] Cecil Day Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 57

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