The War Poets

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) was an English writer famed especially for his novels—including Far from the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the d’Urbervilles, and Jude the Obscure—but also highly regarded for his poetry, which influenced many twentieth-century poets. Born into a working-class family in a small hamlet in Southwest England, he attended King’s College, London, but felt more comfortable in his native Dorset, where he spent most of his life writing. (Source: Thomas Hardy, Satires of Circumstance, 1914.)

Thomas Hardy: Channel Firing

That night your great guns, unawares,
Shook all our coffins as we lay,
And broke the chancel window-squares,
We thought it was the Judgment-day

And sat upright. While drearisome
Arose the howl of wakened hounds:
The mouse let fall the altar-crumb,
The worms drew back into the mounds,

The glebe1 cow drooled. Till God called, “No;
It’s gunnery practise out at sea
Just as before you went below;
The world is as it used to be:

“And all nations striving strong to make
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters
They do no more for Christès sake
Than you who are helpless in such matters.

“That this is not the judgement-hour
For some of them’s a blessed thing,
For if it were they’d have to scour
Hell’s floor for so much threatening. . . .

“Ha, ha. It will be warmer when
I blow the trumpet (if indeed
I ever do; for you are men,
And rest eternal sorely need).”

So down we lay again. “I wonder,
Will the world ever saner be,”
Said one, ‘than when He sent us under
In our indifferent century!”

1 ‘glebe’ refers to the land belonging to the church
And many a skeleton shook his head.
“Instead of preaching forty year,”
My neighbour Parson Thirdly said,
“I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer.”

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness to avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.

**Wilfred Owen**

**Dulce Et Decorum Est**

*Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) was an English writer and soldier whose dramatic and shockingly realistic war poetry placed him first among the poets of World War I. He was thrown high into the air by a mortar blast and was treated for shell shock in Edinburgh, where he met fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon. He returned to the front line and was killed by a sniper in the final week of the war.*

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 disappointed shells that dropped behind.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.--

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

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

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from 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.

Exposure

Wilfred Owen

I

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife 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.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire.
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,
But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause and renew,
We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,
But nothing happens.

II

Pale flakes with lingering stealth come feeling for our faces -
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.
Is it that we are dying?
Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires glozed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors all closed: on us the doors are closed -
    We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
    For love of God seems dying.

To-night, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,
Shrivelling many hands and puckering foreheads crisp.
The burying-party, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
    But nothing happens.

**The Redeemer**

Siegfried Sassoon

*Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967) was one of the leading poets of World War I. He was born into a wealthy family in southeast England, and attended Clare College, Cambridge, but left before graduating, devoting himself to writing and playing cricket (sometimes with Arthur Conan Doyle). When the First World War broke out, he joined the army, but broke his arm before leaving England. He got to the Western Front in 1915, after learning that his brother had died at Gallipoli. He met and befriended Robert Graves while serving in France, where his astoundingly brave, nearly suicidal actions earned him the nickname “Mad Jack.” In 1917, he turned against the war, influenced by his experiences in France and by his friend Bertrand Russell. He publicized the work of Wilfred Owen and wrote many volumes of poetry himself. (Source: Siegfried Sassoon, Selected Poems, 1925; The Old Huntsman and Other Poems (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1918).)*

Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mire was deep;
It was past twelve on a mid-winter night,
When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep;
There, with much work to do before the light,
We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might
Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang,
And droning shells burst with a hollow bang;
We were soaked, chilled and wretched, every one;
Darkness; the distant wink of a huge gun.
I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;  
A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,  
And lit the face of what had been a form  
Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;  
I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare,  
And leaning forward from His burdening task,  
Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine  
Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask  
Of mortal pain in Hell’s unholy shine.

No thorny crown, only a woollen cap  
He wore—an English soldier, white and strong,  
Who loved his time like any simple chap,  
Good days of work and sport and homely song;  
Now he has learned that nights are very long,  
And dawn a watching of the windowed sky.  
But to the end, unjudging, he’ll endure  
Horror and pain, not uncontent to die  
That Lancaster on Lune may stand secure.

He faced me, reeling in his weariness,  
Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.  
I say that He was Christ, who wrought to bless  
All groping things with freedom bright as air,  
And with His mercy washed and made them fair.  
Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,  
While we began to struggle along the ditch;  
And someone flung his burden in the muck,  
Mumbling: ‘O Christ Almighty, now I’m stuck!’

A Subaltern

He turned to me with his kind, sleepy gaze  
And fresh face slowly brightening to the grin  
That sets my memory back to summer days,  
With twenty runs to make, and last man in.  
He told me he’d been having a bloody time  
In trenches, crouching for the crumps to burst,  
While squeaking rats scampered across the slime  
And the grey palsied weather did its worst.

But as he stamped and shivered in the rain,  
My stale philosophies had served him well;  
Dreaming about his girl had sent his brain  
Blanker than ever—she’d no place in Hell....
‘Good God!’ he laughed, and slowly filled his pipe,  
Wondering ‘why he always talked such tripe’.

1916 seen from 1921

Edmund Blunden

Edmund Blunden (1896–1974) was an English writer who won the Queen’s Gold Medal for poetry and became Fellow and then, briefly, Professor of Poetry at Oxford. He also taught at the University of Tokyo and the University of Hong Kong. The eldest of nine children, he was educated at Oxford and served in the army during World War I, seeing action at Ypres and the Somme. Like Owen and Sassoon he received the Military Cross.

Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,  
I sit in solitude and only hear  
Long silent laughers, murmurings of dismay,  
The lost intensities of hope and fear;  
In those old marshes yet the rifles lie,  
On the thin breastwork flutter the grey rags,  
The very books I read are there—and I  
Dead as the men I loved, wait while life drags

Its wounded length from those sad streets of war  
Into green places here, that were my own;  
But now what once was mine is mine no more,  
I seek such neighbours here and I find none.  
With such strong gentleness and tireless will  
Those ruined houses seared themselves in me,  
Passionate I look for their dumb story still,  
And the charred stub outspeaks the living tree.

I rise up at the singing of a bird  
And scarcely knowing slink along the lane,  
I dare not give a soul a look or word  
Where all have homes and none’s at home in vain:  
Deep red the rose burned in the grim redoubt,  
The self-sown wheat around was like a flood,  
In the hot path the lizard lolled time out,  
The saints in broken shrines were bright as blood.

Sweet Mary’s shrine between the sycamores!  
There we would go, my friend of friends and I,  
And snatch long moments from the grudging wars,  
Whose dark made light intense to see them by.  
Shrewd bit the morning fog, the whining shots  
Spun from the wrangling wire: then in warm swoon
The sun hushed all but the cool orchard plots,
We crept in the tall grass and slept till noon.

June 14, 1915
Guillaume Apollinaire

Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918), one of the great French writers of the twentieth century, coined the term ‘Surrealism.’ Born in Rome as Wilhelm Albert Włodzimierz Apolinary Kostrowicki to a Polish mother (from what is now Belarus), he moved to Paris and befriended many leading intellectuals and artists there, including Pablo Picasso, André Breton, Erik Satie, Marc Chagall, and Marcel Duchamp. Apollinaire was the subject of the first Cubist portrait, in 1911; he would be painted by many other Cubists, including Picasso. Wounded during World War I, Apollinaire died in the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918. (Source: Calligrammes, 1918; translation by Daniel Bonevac.)

We can say nothing
Nothing of what happens
But we change the Sector
Ah! lost traveler
No letters
But hope
But a log

The ancient sword of the Marseillaise by Rude
The constellation has changed
It fights for us in heaven
But it means above all
That it must be this time
No ancient sword
No Sword
But Hope
War

Central branch of combat
    Touch through listening
It pulls in the direction of the rustling
    The youth of the Class of 1915
And the sons of the electric rail
Do not cry about the horrors of war
Before it we had only the surface
Of the land and the seas
After it we will have the depths
The basement and the space of flight
Masters of the tiller
After after
We will seize all the delights
Winners who relax
Women Games Factories Commerce
Industry Agriculture Steel
Crystal Light Speed
Voice Insight Delicacy apart
And together with delicacy come from afar
From farther yet
From beyond this world
Philip Larkin (1922-1985) was an English writer who worked as university librarian at the University of Hull. He won the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry and declined appointment as poet laureate. Educated at Oxford, he wrote extensively as a jazz critic as well as a poet and novelist. He is often considered the greatest post-war English poet.

Those long uneven lines
Standing as patiently
As if they were stretched outside
The Oval or Villa Park,
The crowns of hats, the sun
On moustached archaic faces
Grinning as if it were all
An August Bank Holiday lark;
And the shut shops, the bleached
Established names on the sunblinds,
The farthings and sovereigns,
And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,
The tin advertisements
For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
Wide open all day--
And the countryside not caring:
The place names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheat's restless silence;
The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;
Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word--the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages,
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.