

## CHAPTER II

## CHANGES OF ATTITUDES

Considering the "faith and fire" of the men who marched away in 1914, the disillusion that characterized the last half of World War I was indeed profound.

The lapse of the early patriotic fervor can be attributed to a number of obvious external factors: to disappointment in hopes for an early victory, to the peculiarly frustrating nature of stalemated trench warfare, and to the steadily mounting total of casualties which all too often resulted in only trifling gains. These factors all were related to what seemed an unsuccessful prosecution of the War by England's political and military leaders.<sup>1</sup>

The disappointment and frustration produced the negative attitude that so strongly marks the literature written in the later stages of the War.

Barely a year after his enlistment, Sassoon's outlook of the War was changed. In fact, he began to produce some "genuine trench poems" some time before the Somme Offensive. What appeared in his early realistic poems was only in anticipation of the attitude and style he was to adopt in his post-Somme verses.

In "Golgotha," the poet is found hesitating between the conventional image and the realistic one, in a description of the light and sound at the front:

Through darkness curves a spume of falling flares  
That flood the field with shallow, blanching light.  
The huddled sentry stares-  
On gloom at war with white,  
And white receding slow, submerged in gloom.  
Guns into mimic thunder burst and boom,  
And mirthless laughter rakes the whistling night.  
The sentry keeps his watch where no one stirs  
But brown rats, the nimble scavengers.

"The Redeemer" identifies the common soldier with the suffering

Christ.

No thorny crown, only a woollen cap  
 He wore-- and 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 discontent to die  
 That Lancaster on Lune may stand secure.

"Stand-to: Good Friday Morning" more clearly anticipates

Sassoon's later methods:

Deep in water I splashed my way  
 Up the trench to our bogged front line.  
 Rain had fallen the whole damned night.  
 O Jesua, send me a wound today,  
 And I'll believe in Your bread and wine  
 And get my bloody old sins washed out!

The blasphemous character resorts to Christ not out of hope or faith, but out of despair. This differs sharply from the sacrificial motifs in "The Redeemer." The colloquial tone, moreover, is to be used almost exclusively in his later satiric poems.

Sassoon had a strong dislike for his colonel. At first, "Kinjack" seemed to him all that one could expect of a military leader. Later on, he found him an intolerable disciplinarian, so fond of ordering people about; very authoritative despite his many faulty assumptions, which partly accounted for the failure of the Push.

Sassoon grew more and more conscious of the rudeness of the "brass-hats", their lack of understanding, their self-importance. The army was a democratic community, it's true, but not without classes. Instead of the upper-class and the middle-class, there were the "brass-hats" and the "ranks." Sassoon wished them to

merge to form an unbreakable watch-out. But it always occurred that:

A little platoon officer was settling his men down with a valiant show of self-assurance. For the sake of appearances, orders of some kinds had to be given, though in reality there was nothing to do except sit down and hope it would not rain.<sup>2</sup>

For having occupied an enemy Wood Trench by himself, the magnitude of which achievement he did not "underestimate", Sassoon was severely rebuked: he had not sent words for consolidation. He in fact did not know what he was doing then. His senses were "dulled by emotion". (This was after the sudden death of a "Kendle", whom he considered a representative of the so-called "undoubting generation".)

He saw the War killing its victims blindly and himself had to equally as blindly accept it as part of some "hidden purpose";

...my thoughts were powerless against the unhappiness so huge. I could not alter European history, order the artillery to stop firing. I could stare at the War as I stared at the sulky sky, longing for life and freedom and vaguely altruistic about my fellow victims. But a second-lieutenant could attempt nothing...Armageddon was too immense for my solitary understanding.<sup>3</sup>



He used to wonder why the other soldiers were not very moved when friends were killed, crippled or somehow broke down. He thought "they were taking their victimization for granted". He was soon to realize that one had to give in, and try to think that all was part of some "hidden purpose". At least, his friends were only among thousands of promising young men who had "gone West". His was only among lesser tragedies of humanity. Because of enteritis, he was taken home: "One of the lesser miracles of the Great War".

He was confined to an Oxford hospital where he had more time to reflect upon the significance of the War and evaluate his own experiences. The "Great Advance" on the Somme was a failure. The disappointment, along with the concern about the extent to which the victimization of men was taken for granted by the military class, the civilian ignorance, frivolity and apathy, readily made him an enthusiastic pacifist. Most of the poems written during his convalescence reflect an increasingly wrathful sense of the discrepancy between the shameful elation of the people at home and the suffering of the soldiers overseas.

The house is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin  
 And cackle at the show, while prancing ranks  
 Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;  
 'We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!'

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,  
 Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, Sweet Home,'  
 And there would be no more jokes in Music-halls  
 To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

"(Blighters)"

Earliest among the post-Somme poems is "Died of Wounds," in which the War's horror echoes in the pathetic raving of a dying man. To disturb the civilian complacency, the protagonist in the "One-Legged Man" is made to feel thankful to God that "...they had to amputate," and that he is sent back home. This somehow affected the home front propaganda. "Blighters" epitomizes the frivolous and jingoistic spirit of wartime England. "They" is an attack leveled at the fatuities and empty consolation of formal religion, whose representative fails to realize the physical and moral destruction brought about by the War.

The Bishop tells us: 'when the boys comes back  
 'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
 'In a just cause: They lead the last attack  
 'On anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
 'New right to breed an honourable race;  
 'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face'.  
 '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'd served that hasn't found some change!  
 And the Bishop said : 'The ways of God are strange!'

All the poems mentioned so far are in the Old Huntsman collection. Most of the poems in the collection were written between the late spring of 1915, when he began his training as an officer and early 1917. They reflect a gradually increasing awareness of the true nature of the conflict, and contain a strong protest against "glorification" and the false glamour of the War.

On his way to the Spring Offensive, (which was, of course, to get the "Boches" on the run.) he was puzzled by the luxurious life many people were living.

Fivers' melted rapidly at the Olympic, and many of them were being melted by people whose share in the national effort was difficult to diagnose. In the dining-room I began to observe that some non-combatants were doing themselves pretty well out of the War. They were people whose faces lacked nobility, as they ordered lobsters and selected colossal cigars...They had concluded their spectacular feast with an ice-cream concoction, and now they were indulging in an after thought - stout and oysters."<sup>4</sup>

This occurred when there were food restrictions in England. By this time, he learned that the soldiers were regarded candidates for military martyrdom. He also learned that "bellicose" politicians and journalists, who were so fond of using the word "crusade", usually refrained from giving out true information about the War. Their main point was the high spirit of the troops.

The Spring Offensive, 1917, found not "drafts of volunteers" but "droves of victims"; for most of those who came in then joined the Army unwillingly, and there was no reason why they should find military service tolerable. Nevertheless, there was no use worrying about the War at this stage. In this "machine," all responsibility for their future was in the haphazard control of whatever power manipulated the British Expeditionary Force. Sassoon longed to be a youth who came to fight undoubting for his country, and steadfastly believed that he was making the world a better place.

I had believed like that, once upon a time, but now the only prayer which seemed worth uttering was Omar Khayyam's:

For all the sins wherewith the face of Man  
Is blackened--Man's forgiveness give and take.<sup>5</sup>

There was nothing left for him to believe in except the "Battalion spirit": which meant getting along well with the officers and the fighting men around one, winning respect or even affection of platoon and company. But Sassoon's World War I experiences had disclosed the impermanence of its "humanities".<sup>6</sup> The previous summer, the First Battalion had been part of his life; by the middle of September it had been almost obliterated. He knew that a soldier signed away his independence, that they were at the Front to fight, not to think. But it was somewhat awkward when one could not look even one week ahead.

Despite his despondency, he knew for sure that he would not go back to England the next day if he were offered a choice between that and the battle. He felt a strong affinity between himself and the fighting men. In his position, he could not save them, but at least he could share the dangers and the discomforts they endured. The idea of this "magnanimity" gave him emotional satisfaction.

I had often read those farewell letters from second-lieutenants to their relatives which the newspapers were so fond of printing: 'Never has life brought me such an abundance of noble feelings', and so on.

I had always found it difficult to believe that those young men had really felt happy with death staring them in the face, and I resented any sentimentalizing of infantry attacks. But here I was, working myself up into a similar mental condition, as though going over the top were as species of religious experience.<sup>6</sup>

His elation, however, had intervals of lapsing into the awareness that "...every man carried his own hazardous hope of survival".

In the Battle of Arras, he was wounded and was sent home. At Charing Cross station, a woman handed him a bunch of flowers and a leaflet by the Bishop of London, who advised him to "lead a clean life and to attend Holy Communion". Sassoon never hesitated to say, explicitly or implicitly, that the Church and religious instructions were somewhat out of place.

Despite his self-defensive saying that he still felt warlike and could equally as well stay in France for his wound to heal before going back to have "all the hell of fighting" again, he was by no means sorry to find himself alive in an English hospital: "Anyhow the War had taught me to be thankful for a roof over my head at night."<sup>7</sup> Though he assured his visitors that he would not have missed his war experiences for worlds, "thankful" was barely adequate a word to express his feeling when he was laid up. "Altruism is an episodic and debatable quality; the instinct for self-preservation always got the last word."<sup>8</sup>

A talk with a London editor, during his convalescence, informed him that many attempts for peace negotiations had been turned down by his own country, that England had refused to state her War

aims, which were essentially acquisitive. What they were fighting for was the Mesopotamian Oil Wells! He became convinced that the fighting men were victims of conspiracy between politicians, the military caste and people who were making money out of the War. If once the common soldier became articulate, the War could not last a month. But how could he? If a newspaper presented a truthful account of trench life, it would be "...suppressed as prejudicial to recruiting". The censorship officials were always watching for plausible excuse for banning it. The soldiers were not allowed to express their point of view. "In wartime, the word patriotism meant suppression of truth".<sup>9</sup>

Through this editor, Sassoon wanted to make his voice heard. His distinguished service at the Front would differentiate him from the conscientious objectors. He felt it his duty as a soldier to protest against the prolongation of a war, the aims of which could no longer justify the "continued reckless sacrifice of human life".

He applied for a home service position, supervising a platoon of Cadet Officers at Cambridge. If he was given a job in England, people would not say he did the protest to avoid being back to France. He overstayed his leave several days and waited until he heard from the Depot. When he received a wire for reporting, he mailed his statement of protest declaration to his commanding officer.

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defense and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and



conquest. I believe that the purpose for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this War should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation. I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the War, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now, I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they do not have sufficient imagination to realize.<sup>10</sup>

His act was received with surprising tolerance by his immediate superiors. He had anticipated a court-martialing, an imprisonment and so forth. But all he was required to do was to reconsider and to draw back his words. He tried to explain his mental attitude toward the War, but could not make it sound convincing. He knew what his major could be thinking. A man who wanted England to make friends with Germany could not be right-minded. The major's refusal to put him under arrest embarrassed him all the more. In a moment of exasperation over the apparent failing of his act, he flung his M.C. ribbon in a river.

Watching a big boat which was steaming along the horizon, I realized that protesting against the prolongation of the War was about as much use as shouting at the people on board the ship.<sup>11</sup>

Robert Graves arrived in time to save him. Graves told him that the War was bound to go on, and nobody could do anything to help it. To have his friend well in hand, Graves even resorted to the lie that Sassoon would be sent to an asylum if he insisted. Graves succeeded in persuading Sassoon to appear before the medical board. The board was influenced by Graves's testimony that his

friend was a victim of shell-shock, thereupon Sassoon was sent to the hospital for neurasthenics at Craiglockhart.

Most of the poems in Counter-Attack, the volume appearing in 1918, were inspired by his experiences in the Battle of Arras, and were written during the second period of convalescence in England.

The Counter-Attack represents an uncompromising rejection of all the War has come to signify. "War is hell, and those who institute it are criminals."

The theme of the Counter Attack can be seen in the preface of the volume which is a quotation from Barhousse's Le Feu, a powerful anti-war novel produced by World War I.

Dans la trêve désolée de cette matinée, ces hommes qui avaient été tenaillés par la fatigue, fouettés par la pluie, bouleversés par toute une nuit de tonnerre, ces rescapés des volcans et de l'inondation entrevoyaient à quel point la guerre, aussi hideuse au moral qu'au physique, non seulement viole le bon sens, avilit les grandes idées, commande tous les crimes— mais ils se rappelaient combien elle avait développé en eux et autour d'eux tous les mauvais instincts sans en excepter un seul; la méchanceté jusqu'au sadisme, l'égoïsme jusqu'à la férocité, le besoin de jouir jusqu'à la folie.

Sassoon clearly professed himself an anti-war propagandist; it is thus natural that he hardly depicted a successful attack or even an incident representing individual heroism; he could hardly portray a soldier who could master his own emotional confusion and then respond to the imperatives of his duty. During an attack, the protagonist of the poem "Counter-Attack"

...crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear,  
Sick for escape,—loathing the strangled horror  
And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.

He frantically goes for a counter-attack, as a result of which he dies an ignominious death.

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...none heeded him;...

Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans...  
Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,  
Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

The description of a war-ravaged landscape in this title poem is unprecedented in its obscene details.

The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps;  
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;  
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,  
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.  
And then the rain began, — the jolly old rain!

The aggressive satires in this volume are essentially negative and destructive. In "The General," which violates the rule against criticism of the conduct of the War, Sassoon indicts the military class for incompetence and lack of imagination that characterized the British staff work during most of the War.

'Good-morning; good-morning!' the general said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of them 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.

Explicit satire is also found in "Base Details:"

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,  
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,  
And speed glum herves up the line to death.

Most of the critical poems of Counter-Attack have a bitterly satiric intent or at least a strong ironic turn. "Suicide in the Trenches" is a furious attack of civilian ignorance.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.

To him, women are so shallow in their romantic interpretation of what the War can signify. They do not have the faintest idea of the actual miseries the soldiers suffer:

...You listen with delight.  
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.  
You crown our distant ardours when we fight,  
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.  
You can't believe that British troops 'retire'  
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,  
Trampling the terrible corpses-blind with blood.

"(Glory of Women)"

Women hardly see the War in terms other than those that affect her son, lover and husband. This is the idea in "Their Frailty."

He's got a Blighty wound. He's safe; and then  
War's fine and bold and bright.  
She can forget the doomed and prisoned men  
Who agonize and fight.

Sassoon is at his best when writing irony. The ironical method is most effectively used in "How to Die," "Does It Matter?," "Lamentations," "Survivors." "How to Die" mocks the popular concept of death in battle:

You'd think, to hear some people talk,  
That lads go West with sobs and curses,  
And sullen faces white as chalk,  
Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses.  
But they've been taught the way to do it  
Like Christian soldiers; not with haste  
And shuddering groans; but passing through it  
With due regard for decent taste.

Upon seeing a man mourning his dead brother, the poet distastefully remarks:

Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

"(Lamentations)"

"Does It Matter?" mocks the blithe consolations that civilians

afford the crippled, ("people will always be kind") and the blind, ("there's such splendid work for the blind").

"Survivors" portrays the afflicted state of those whose nerves have given way under the stress of the battle.

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain  
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.  
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'-  
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.

"To Any Dead Officer" is obviously directed against people who lead the country to the War. In the poem, the poet assumes a conversation with a dead officer:

Good-bye, old lad! Remember me to God,  
And tell him that our Politicians swear  
They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod  
Under the Heel of England...  
...and the War won't end for at least two years; . . .

Sassoon, on the other hand, describes the demoralizing psychological effects of the battle more often than wounds or physical anguish. His soldiers are numb with fear or horror, or they break down completely under the prolonged emotional strain of trench fighting. "Sick Leave," for instance, portrays a mind obsessed with suffering and death. The poet, in his dream, is asked by the dead soldiers:

'Why are you here with all your watches ended?  
From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line'.

Awakened,

While the dawn begins with slashing rain  
I think of the Battalion in the mud.  
'When are you going out to them again?  
Are they not still your brothers through our blood?'

The poet pays tribute for sure to the courage and the tenacity of his "brave brown companions": "In Prelude : The Troops,"

they "stamp their sodden boots/And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky/Haggard and hopeless..." Nevertheless, they "cling to life with stubborn hands", and can "grin through storms of death and find a gap /In the clawed, cruel tangles of his defence".

But, Sassoon never makes this bravery the subject of a specific poem. To do such a thing would have been to grant that the War had at least positive moral significance.

Frederic Manning's attitude towards World War I is clearly stated in the first chapter of Her Privates We, which begins with Shakespeare's resigning words:

By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once; we owe God a death...and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next.

The quotation embodies Manning's view of the War, which he believed, like any other wars, to be waged by men, "...not by beasts, or by God". To him, a war is something so natural with men, as long as "prejudices and partialities provide most of the driving power of life". We have got to accept it as unavoidable. If we think of it otherwise, we would, in desperation, take in a scapegoat to put the blame on.

The underlying message of the book is that war is not only a "crime against mankind" but also the "punishment for a crime". The story centres around the Somme Offensive; by then the early romantic mood was completely gone. The frequent failures of active services, great bodily discomforts in the trench, combined with military favoritism, make life in the army almost intolerable for Private Bourne, the protagonist. His miseries have torturing

effects on the reader, for Bourne is not the type to take people into his confidence easily. He does not talk; he suffers alone and nobody understands. This is all the more torturing, and this is the punishment that anybody can feel. The quotation will show how much Manning knows about the War, its inexorableness and haunting terrors

Once during the night Bourne started up in an access of inexplicable horror,... gradually his awakened sense felt a vague restlessness troubling equally the other men. He noticed it first in Shem, whose body, almost touching his own, gave a quick convulsive jump, and continued twitching for a moment, while he muttered unintelligibly, and worked his lips as though he were trying to moisten them. The obscure disquiet passed fitfully from one to another, lips parted with the sound of a bubble bursting, teeth met grinding as the jaws worked, there were little whimperings which quickened into sobs, passed into long shuddering moans, or culminated in angry, half-articulate obscenities, and then relapsed,... Even though Bourne tried to persuade himself that these convulsive agonies were merely reflex actions,...his own conscious mind now filled itself with the passions, of which the mutterings and twitchings heard in the darkness were only the unconscious mimicry...His mind reached back into the past day, groping among obscure and broken memories; ...he felt again the tension of waiting that became impatience, and then the immense effort to move, and the momentary relief which came with movement, the sense of unreality and dread which descended on one, and some restoration of balance as one saw other men moving forward in a way that seemed commonplace, mechanical, as though at some moment of ordinary routine; the restraint, and the haste that fought against it with every voice in one's being crying out to hurry.<sup>12</sup>

The War called up regiments from different regions. Thus an army, the British one that Manning chooses to portray, is a world in itself. There are many types of people from different kinds of civilian life and backgrounds. It is true that they become more or less uniformed in the long run by the disciplinary principles of the troops and by experiences they have in common; but they do not

completely lose their individuality. There are intervals when they go back behind the lines for a respite. Then, <sup>they</sup> become individuals, motivated by "prejudices and partialities", with human greed, lust and caprices. Manning makes it clear that the type to suffer the most in this kind of life is the perceptive, the retrospective and the undemonstrative. And Bourne represents all these qualities.

Whether a man be killed by a rifle-bullet through the brain, or blown into fragments by a high explosive shell, may seem a matter of indifference to a conscientious objector, or to any other well-placed observer, who in point of fact is probably right; but to the poor fool who is a candidate for posthumous honors, and necessarily takes a more directly interested view, it is a question of importance. He is perhaps a victim of an illusion, like all who, ...are fools for Christ's sake; but he has seen one man shot cleanly in his tracks and left face downwards, dead, and he has seen another torn into bloody tatters as by some invisible beast, and these experiences have nothing illusory about them: they were actual facts. Death, of course, like chastity, admits of no degree; a man is dead or not dead, and a man is as dead by one means as by another; but it is infinitely more horrible and revolting to see a man shattered and eviscerated, than to see him shot.<sup>13</sup>

Bourne does not always find himself compatible with his fellow men. The latter are either panic-stricken or cheerful types; nobody is really miserable because each is too preoccupied with his own feeling to realize the true nature of this catastrophe. That they are less reflective allows them to make their way comparatively happily in the "hazardous" world. Bourne, on the other hand, suffers at the idea that he is obliged to act against his will. To destroy his own species is the most contemptible act imaginable, yet he has to, since he is but "an act in the long chain of action." He holds that an individualist is not always entitled to shirk responsibilities. The highly valued individuality makes him refuse, in the first place, to take a commission. The officers work more like a machine;



in the ranks, though there are certain rules to comply with, a private soldier is "a man in arms against the world, a man fighting desperately for himself, and, in the last resort, he stood alone".<sup>14</sup> In other words, a private has to possess certain self-reliance which, to a certain extent, suggests individuality.

Though Bourne is very friendly, he is never keen at making friends. He always keeps his thoughts to himself. Very often he feels curiously isolated from the ranksmen who he is never willing to part.

He was not of their county, he was not even of their country, or their religion, and he was only partially of their race. When they spoke of their remote villages and hamlets, or sleepy market-towns in which nothing happened except the church clock chiming the hour, he felt like an alien among them; and in the vague kind of home-sickness which troubled him he did not seek company, but solitude.<sup>15</sup>

To him, the words spoken never seem adequate as a means for communication. Martlowe is still "all right" when he is finished off. Trench fighting remains "cushy enough" though the chance of survival is fading. The extreme instance in this connection is the misunderstanding between an English officer and his French hostess. The problem is, the latter takes her guest's compliment in a broken French for an indecent invitation. So much is the confusion in the existing verbal communication:

But thy speaking of my tongue, and I thine, most truly-falsely,  
must needs be granted to be much at one.

(Shakespeare)

Bourne is a person who can "do without the necessities of life more easily than without some smaller comforts". He strongly disapproved of the men being deprived of facilities. The **keeper**

of a canteen started for the benefit of the troops by public subscription, for example, maintains that they only serve officers. The men are provided with cocoa and biscuits only. Bourne resents this very much. Everybody in the army, regardless of his rank, should have an equal share of both sufferings and available comforts.

Men-----acting together in constant peril of their lives demand at least that the chances shall be evenly divided among them. They could be generous and accept additional burdens without complaint if there were real need; but in moment of bitterness it seemed that duty and honour were merely the pretexts on which they were being deprived of their most elementary rights.<sup>16</sup>

Bourne is many times approached by his superiors that he should go in for a commission. Bourne refuses from the beginning, explaining that he has no experiences of soldiering and especially of men. To many, he is a "queer chap"; for, to a certain degree, an officer has a far less hard life than a private. At any rate, officers are to plan, while the ranks are to fight. The insistence on the part of the authority changes Bourne's opinion of them all for the worse. Referring to his own experiences in the ranks,

It is a hard life, but it has its own compensations, the other men have been awfully decent to me; as they say, we all muck in together... I am becoming demoralized. I begin to look on all officers, NCOS, the military police, and brass-hats, as the natural enemies of deserving men like myself. Captain Malet is not an exception, he comes down on us occasionally and disturbs the even tenor of our existence.<sup>17</sup>

The officers usually make them do what they can't. During a "silly and useless" parade, there is an enemy air-raid which causes the loss of many lives. The men have been unnecessarily exposed, the plane-guards having been chosen from among untrained men. There is an attempt to give an accidental colour to the incident. But Bourne knows it is not an accident. It is in fact a murder.

Then he reflected, with a certain acidity of thought, that there was a war on, and that men were liable to be killed rather cursorily in a war.<sup>18</sup>

Bourne's refusal is also due to a definite prejudice against the people composing the commanding staff: they are usually motivated by personal likes and dislikes. A Mr. Clinton is very well-liked in the troops. He is the sort that does not have to "shout to make himself heard". Decent and able to humour the men and master them at the same time. He becomes a target of jealousy; his immediate superiors try every possible means to get rid of him.

The poor man cannot escape for long. He is finally killed while leading a working party, after having been through the Somme battles without a scratch (and without sparing himself). Bourne himself is also killed in a raid which he joins as a forced volunteer. This malicious intention for men of the same army might be shocking, but Manning asserts that though a war annihilates all human conventions and almost all human faculties, one thing remains: self-interest. This is the most probable survivor of the War.

The plot of Her Privates We centres around the Somme and Ancre fronts with intervals behind the lines. The result of this big Allied offensive is already too well known. Manning accepts military inefficiency as a matter of course and focuses especially upon putting up the machine-like facet of the War side by side with its humanity.

An instruction regarding an attack that the troops will soon be called to make reads: "...men are strictly forbidden to

stop for the purpose of assisting the wounded..."

The shocking passage is considered inhuman and not practical at all, for most of the time stretcher-bearers are not to be found on the spot.

We all know that there must be losses, you can't expect to take a trench without some casualties; but they seem to go on from saying that losses are unavoidable, to thinking that they are necessary, and from that, to thinking that they don't matter.<sup>19</sup>

The "brass-hats," however, are not to be blamed alone. They don't know what the men have got to go through; but it is not entirely their fault. Their job makes it imperative that they cannot think of individual man, or of any particular battalion or division.

Men, to him (a brass-hat), are only part of the material he has got to work with;...It's not fair to think of him as inhuman. He's got to draw up a plan, from rather scrappy information, and it is issued in the form of an order;...The original plan is no more than a kind of map; you can't see the country by looking at a map, and you can't see the fighting by looking at a plan of attack.<sup>20</sup>

This being the case, nothing can be altered. The men have got to run the machine more or less as it has been handed over to them. In fact, it is up to them whether they will stop to help the wounded or not; the point is, they must not make another man's agony their excuse. At any rate, it is absurd to give out such a prohibition.

The War disintegrates families, and ravages peaceful country life. Back in the rear, Bourne comes to know some peasant families with whom he finds some degree of kindred and affinity. The War calls away fathers and sons. The War makes livelihood so precarious. To them,

...war is one of the blind forces of nature, which can neither

be foreseen<sup>e</sup> nor controlled...There is nothing in war which is not in human nature; but the violence and passions of men became, in the aggregate, an impersonal and incalculable force, a blind and irrational movement of the collective will, which one cannot control, which one cannot understand, which one can endure, as these peasants in their bitterness and resignation, endured it. C'est la guerre.<sup>21</sup>

The War put an end to life without discrimination. The War separates lovers; it left a disabled father alone, whose son went into the Army and was never heard of again. The War trespassed upon personal property the ownership of which it completely ignored. It is pathetic when a farmer shrieks at the troops moving through her clover:

'Ces champs sont à moi'.

In a way she stands for the simple folks who look up to the War as a natural disaster. An instinctive reaction is to keep it off as long as possible; but their shrieking at those 'bellicose' companies is by no means more effective than a shouting to stop the stream of lava.

The dreary life in the military machine is made tolerable by its humanities. When asked why he prefers to stay where he is in the troops, Bourne explains:

I don't suppose I have anyone whom I can call a friend. I like the men, on the whole, and I think they like me. They're a very decent generous lot, and they have helped me a great deal...In some ways, good comradeship takes the place of friendship. It is different: it has its own loyalties and affections; and I am not sure that it does not rise on occasion to an intensity of feeling which friendship never touches.

...Friendship implies rather more stable conditions... You have time to choose. Here you can't choose, or only to a very limited extent.<sup>22</sup>

Bourne has two or three particular "chums" with whom he can speak what he thinks. When one of them, Martlow, is killed, he feels completely blank, finding nothing to hold on to. Nothing is certain or permanent, especially humanity in the army. Every life is at the disposition of the inscrutable providence to whom a mere pawn like himself has to acquiesce.

Circumstances oblige Bourne to recognize human impermanence and work himself more or less like a part of the machine. Behind the lines, however, the generosity, the sincerity and the innocence of the peasants touch him deeply, and his human attributes begin to reassert themselves. He goes so far as to have a casual romance with a farm girl. Another return to the front somehow makes him lose balance. The monstrous killing upsets him to the point of tears. Bourne becomes insecure and uncertain as to his place in the world. The fact that he often sits by himself, contemplating the peaceful sky -- the very posture of his dead body in the end, is probably symbolic of the quest for his own identity.

Bourne is not explicitly canonized; but, in a way, he approximates a saint in his realization of the bleak reality that life is "a hazard enveloped in mystery," that all men are equally balanced on a dangerous chance. In his resignation that "a man can die but once; we owe God a death,..." Manning points out a great moral power. To him,

The moral power of man is greater than any purely material force which could be brought to bear on it. It took the chance of death, as one of chances it was bound to take; though, paradoxically enough, the function of our moral nature consists solely in the assertion of one's own

individual will against any thing which may be opposed to it, and death, therefore, would imply its distinction in the particular and individual case.<sup>23</sup>

Shakespeare's final outcry in the book, "Fortune? O, most true; she is a strumpet," sums up the feeling of people whom Bourne leaves behind, and goes away among those whose lives have become implements of warfare.

When the War was declared Wilfred Owen was in France. That he was not swept through with the patriotic emotions like people in England then and that he had had no previous war experiences account for the remoteness in "The Seed," his first attempt to deal with the War; written after his reading of the conflict as an "abstract" subject. He viewed the past and discerned inevitability.

War broke. And now the winter of the world  
With perishing great darkness closes in.  
The cyclone of the pressure on Berlin  
Is over all the width of Europe whirled,  
Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled  
Are all art's ensigns. Verse moans. Now begin  
Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.  
The grain of earth's great autumn rots, down-hurled.

For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,  
And Summer blazed to perfect strength in Rome,  
There fell a slow grand age, a harvest-home,  
Quietly ripening ...

But now the exigent winter, and the need  
Of sowings for new spring, and fresh for seed.

The War, in the eyes of Owen the observer, means the end of a cycle of civilization, put in analogy with a cycle of nature.

Owen joined the Artists' Rifles in 1915 with all excitement. Yet, at that early date, he could perceive something of the victimization of the soldier.

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

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

"(Ballad of Purchase Moneys)"

A letter home, written before leaving the Base, reveals what the War was to him, one of the "multitude of unselfish youth",<sup>23</sup> personally.

It is a huge satisfaction to be going among well-trained troops and genuine 'real-old' officers. ...There is a fine, heroic feeling about being in France, and I am in perfect spirit. A tinge of excitement is about me, but excitement is always necessary to my happiness.<sup>24</sup>

The first poem in which Owen expresses a deeply felt reaction to the War is the sonnet entitled "Happiness," which was not written until as late as January 1917. (He spent the sixteen months after enlistment in infantry and officers' training, and it was not until early January 1917 that he was assigned to the Second Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, then on the Somme front). He contrasts the innocent happiness of boyhood, the happiness "to smile at nothing" with the deeper joys and sorrows of the "morally dubious"<sup>25</sup> experience of the War.

But the old happiness is unreturning.  
 Boy's griefs are not so grievous as youth's yearning,  
 Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope.

After a period of hard times at the front, which led him to condemn "pulpit professionals" for "skilfully and successfully ignoring one of Christ's commands : Passivity at any rate,"<sup>26</sup> he



began to see the War in an even more realistic light. Owen's impulse for realism was already evident before he met Siegfried Sassoon at the Craiglockhart War Hospital. In one of his letters, he called Tennyson "a great child" with "divine discontent",<sup>27</sup> the latter being unhappy in the midst of 'fame, health and domestic serenity'. "I quite believe he never knew happiness for one moment such as I have-for one or two moments".<sup>27</sup>

The meeting with Sassoon, the exchange of views about the War, the discussion of poetry, the older poet's advice and encouragement--all contributed to a strengthening of the poetic impulse along the lines previously indicated in his early letters from France.<sup>28</sup>

Many people assumed that Owen modelled his poetry on Sassoon's. Though Owen felt it the duty of a "true poet" to disclose the truth of war, he was compassionate in his realism. He thought it was the only attitude through which the tragedy of the War could be rightly revealed and interpreted. A friend of his wrote:

The bond which drew us together was an intense pity for the suffering humanity - a need to alleviate it, wherever possible, and an inability to shirk the sharing of it, even when this seemed useless.<sup>29</sup>

This was the keynote of Owen's character.

In "Dulce et Decorum Est," the poet is watching the agonies of a gassed and dying soldier:

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,  
Bitter as a 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.

The "Dead-Beat" depicts a soldier who, suspected of malingering by his fellows, dies unwounded, obviously a case of demoralization. In "S.I.W.", Owen presents a suicide in the trench with much sympathy and understanding. The lad comes out to the Front bravely and hopefully, but

...courage leaked, as sand  
From the best sand-bags after years of rain.  
But never leave, wound, fear, trench-foot, shock,  
Untrapped the wretch. And death seemed still withheld  
For torture of lying machinally shelled,  
At the pleasure of this world's Powers who'd run amok.

The final resort is the suicide.

It was the reasoned crisis of his soul  
Against more days of inescapable thrall,  
Against infrangibly wired and blind trench wall  
Curtained with fire, roofed in with creeping fire,  
Slow grazing fire, that would not burn him whole  
But kept him for death's promises and scoff  
And life's half-promising, and both their rilling.

The theme of "Disabled" is the pathetic destruction of youth, beauty and strength. The poem presents the reflections of a soldier who volunteered while half-drunk simply to "please his Meg". Now he is condemned to lead an immobilized existence in the hospital.

.....  
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?

A picture that contrasts not only with Brooke's vision of "decorous immolation" but also with the conventional concept of heroic death in action. In its devastation, the War also destroys

the 'procreative' principle.

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.

"Mental Cases" reveals the terrible mental and spiritual effects of the War on individual soldiers. "Owen enlarges upon the tortures of the mad as the effect of sin and guilt--an effect that constitutes a broad moral condemnation of those who still approved of aims and methods of the War,"<sup>30</sup> which everybody now agrees to have inflicted "carnage incomparable".

Besides the pity implicit in most of his poems, Owen's Christian concept is also relevant in discussing his work. Owen was brought up in a religious family. It is thus natural that his wartime poems and letters are those of a young man "whose shocked imagination almost invariably sought Biblical parallels and allusions".<sup>31</sup>

"Exposure," his first important war poem, embodies the terrible experiences he was undergoing.

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced 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.--

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.

Pale flakes with fingering 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?

For all the miseries, he feels that "...love of God seems dying". Owen always felt that "...pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism".<sup>32</sup> He believed that dangers and difficulties they faced were a punishment from the part of God, who wants them to "suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms".<sup>33</sup>

He drew on a Biblical incident in the "Parable of the Old Man and the Young." Just like Abraham, who refuses to kill the ram instead of his own son, the British authority refused to make any negotiations that might put the War to an end, as a result of which action they "slew/half the seed of Europe, one by one".

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" is especially explicit in its indictment of formal Christianity.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous angers of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,--  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling 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 good-byes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

The symbols of grief: candles, pall, flowers and closed blinds, can no longer adequately represent it. These formal rituals are merely irrelevant to the actuality of human loss. While Christianity,

the 'impure' one, fails to condemn the evils of war, it has obviously lost contact with the very reality that it was called upon to interpret.

The poet also questions the Christian belief in the hereafter, contrasting a place with all conventional comforts with the poignant physical reality, in "Asleep:"

Whether his deeper sleep lies 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?...

The sacrificial love in "Greater Love" is depicted as greater than sensuous love.

Red lips are not so red  
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.  
Kindness of wooed and wooer  
Seems shame to their love pure.  
O Love, your eyea lose lure  
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

Since God, in whom man finds the perfection of love, is indifferent to the fate of the dying, man himself becomes the exemplar of the "greater love".

Your slender attitude  
Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,  
Rolling and rolling there  
Where God seems not to care;  
Till the fierce love they bear  
Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude.

"Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" is a glorification of the trenchmen who, despite hardship, remain fearless. Though circumstances oblige

them to ignore certain human sensibility, they found a bond of friendship never to be paralleled because it is "wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong"; the idea of sacrifice effects an exultation almost religious. People who have never shared with them "the sorrowful dark of hell" cannot understand how they can be so happy. Life in the trench is hard, but the poet would not have missed it for worlds:

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

"Miners" is another step in his dealing with the theme of pity. It is a plea for recognition of men whose strenuous attempts towards peace is taken for granted by the following generation. The soldier's career is put in a highly imaginative analogy with the miner's, who is often forgotten though the coal he digs out serves so many purposes.

I thought of some who worked dark pits  
 Of war, and died  
 Digging the rock where Death reposes  
 Peace lies indeed.

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

"Insensibility" deals with the victims of the fighting, who have lost their sensibility as a result of <sup>the</sup> perennial horrors of the War.

Happy are these who lose imagination:  
 They have enough to carry with ammunition.  
 Their spirit drags no pack,  
 Their old wounds save with cold cannot more ache.

Having seen all things red,  
 Their eyes are rid  
 Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever.  
 And terror's first constriction over,  
 Their hearts remain small-drawn.  
 Their senses in some scorching cautery of battle  
 Now long since ironed,  
 Can laugh among the dying, unconcerned

The conclusion is the solemn condemnation of those who have  
 no compassion for the men:

But cursed are dullards who no cannon stuns,  
 That they should be as stones;  
 Wretched are they, and mean  
 With paucity that never was simplicity.  
 By choice they made themselves immune  
 To pity and whatever moans in man  
 Before the last sea and the hapless stars;  
 Whatever shares  
 The eternal reciprocity of tears.

Owen is distinguished especially for his "pity" through his  
 sympathetic presentations. He might be disillusioned with what was  
 imposed upon the men's lot, but he never hated and never was angry.  
 He made himself a mission as a "pleader" to disclose "the truth untold,  
 the pity of war, the pity war distilled".

Owen asserted that 'Poetry is in the Pity.'