

*'Monstrous familiar images':
Poetry and War, 1914–1923*

Yeats's omission of Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) from *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* gave national as well as literary offence – perhaps deliberately. While expressing 'distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war', since 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry' (*OBMV* xxxiv), Yeats justifies his contrary indulgence to Oliver St John Gogarty by boasting a superior Irish nexus between poetry and war. Gogarty's 'heroic song' is an obvious mask for Yeats himself:

Twelve years ago Oliver Gogarty was captured by his enemies, imprisoned in a deserted house on the edge of the Liffey with every prospect of death. Pleading a natural necessity he got into the garden, plunged under a shower of revolver bullets and as he swam the ice-cold December stream promised it, should it land him in safety, two swans ... His poetry fits the incident, a gay, stoical – no, I will not withhold the word – heroic song. (xv)

Like 'Lapis Lazuli', although in less complex terms, Yeats's introduction to the *Oxford Book* maintains that 'tragedy is a joy to the man who dies' (xxxiv). He did not omit Julian Grenfell's 'Into Battle', a poem that celebrates 'joy of battle'. But the Irish 'incident' harks back to the Civil War of 1922–23, which his sequence 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' (this chapter's focal work) represents more bleakly. Yeats has not always found the 'heroic' unproblematic. Nor are he and Owen poetically so far apart; witness their similar roots in Romanticism and Symbolism, their intersecting influence on 'public' poetry of the 1930s (see Chapter 5). In 'The Gyres', Yeats may react to the reaction to Owen's omission: 'What matter though numb nightmare ride on top, / And blood and mire the sensitive body stain?' (*CWI* 299). At least this improves on calling Owen's poetry 'all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick' (*L* 874). As a defensive manoeuvre, the rhetorical question makes Yeatsian 'nightmare' 'matter' as little (or as much) as battlefield images.

But it's not only Yeats who gives 'war poetry' a thematic stress that effaces 'poetry', and hence war's impact on its aesthetics. As a basis for dissolving some categorical barriers between 'war poetry' and 'modern poetry', this chapter aligns poems by Yeats, which range across European and Irish conflicts, with poems more directly 'of' the Great War. All poems written after 1914, in whatever form, come under Yeats's rubric: 'Established things were shaken by the Great War' (*CW5* 94–5). In shaking metaphysical systems, belief in progress, constructions of tradition and memory, the war shook or shocked poetry. To quote from Owen's '1914' and Yeats's 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen':

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in . . .¹

O but we dreamed to mend
Whatever mischief seemed
To afflict mankind, but now
That winds of winter blow
Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed. (*CWI* 213)

'Times like these'

Yeats notoriously disclaimed interest in the Great War. He called it 'merely the most expensive outbreak of insolence and stupidity the world has ever seen',² and told Henry James: 'I shall keep the neighbourhood of the seven sleepers of Ephesus . . . till bloody frivolity is over' (*L* 600). The latter is his gloss on 'A Reason for Keeping Silent' (February 1915):

I think it better that at times like these
We poets keep our mouths shut, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He's had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter's night.³

Yeats contributed this poem to *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), an anthology edited by Edith Wharton and sold to raise funds for refugee Belgian children (Theodore Roosevelt's introduction refers to Belgium 'being trampled into bloody mire').⁴ He later changed the title to 'On being asked for a War Poem'; the second line to 'A poet keep his mouth shut', then to 'A poet's mouth be silent'; 'He's' to 'He has'. In 'W.B. Yeats and Wilfred Owen', a rare discussion of the poets together, Jon Stallworthy construes these revisions as reluctance to be associated with 'savagely colloquial

trench poems'.⁵ Yet the changes Yeats had made by 1917 (title, from 'We poets' to 'A poet', from 'at times' to 'in times') mainly disguise the poem's immediate contexts in the first months of the war, and in irritation at the 'hurricane of poetry'⁶ that war had unleashed. This phenomenon was unique to Britain: Catherine Reilly's bibliography lists 2,225 published poets, fifty-plus anthologies.⁷

Other poets, too, resisted the hurricane or thought the war 'stupid': 'a necessary stupidity, but still a stupidity', said T.E. Hulme (who joined up as a private soldier and was killed in 1917). Ezra Pound's 'War Verse' urges: 'O two-penny poets be still / . . . Be still, give the soldiers their turn'.⁸ Like Pound, Yeats asks who is qualified to speak about the war. He not only disqualifies himself (and poetry), he sets the possible wrongness of statesmen against 'truth' and peaceful images of youth and age. The anti-war-poem war poem helps to keep war poetry self-critical, to clarify its responsibilities. In 'This is no case of petty right or wrong', Edward Thomas questions the capacity of 'politicians or philosophers' to 'judge' the situation, and says: 'I hate not Germans, nor grow hot / With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers'. In 'Insensibility', Owen reminds himself, too, that 'these are troops who fade, not flowers, / For poets' tearful fooling'. Besides refusal to speak, 'who speaks', and how to speak, a trope of induced silence covers 'millions of the mouthless dead' (Charles Hamilton Sorley) and those unable to speak for themselves or 'of comrades that went under' (Owen).⁹ Yet, as 'times like these' increasingly shook Europe from Ireland to Russia, silence ceased to be an option for Yeats. This was no longer a short-term crisis ('at') but a transforming cataclysm ('in'). To quote Terence Brown: the war 'internationalised' his poetry.¹⁰ It's true that even Yeats's elegies for Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory's son, minimise direct allusions to 'the great war beyond the sea', as his first elegy, 'Shepherd and Goatherd', calls it (*CWI* 143). But not to probe his self-distancing from the war, and its poetry, is to accept dubious national and critical assumptions.

In *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, Fran Brearton highlights Yeats's complicity in 'placing the Great War on the English side of an English-Irish opposition'. Meanwhile, as she also shows, the British canon of war poetry has often narrowed its own horizon to 'soldier poets', and soldier poets to 'trench poets' – a category that excludes Thomas, who wrote all his poems before reaching the trenches. Yet the widening of anthologies to include non-combatants and vernacular voices has perhaps done more for cultural studies than for insight into how the Great War conditioned modern poetry. It certainly does not accommodate Yeats. Brearton argues that the events of 1914–23 not only 'internationalised' his poetry, they

restructured it. Conflict had already entered Yeats's structures as 'the day's war with every knave and dolt' (*CWI* 92). And his absorption of Synge's drama had led him to think that 'all noble things are the result of warfare', both 'visible' and 'invisible ... the division of a mind within itself' (*CW4* 233). But now the dialectical, dramatic and symbolic evolution of his aesthetic came up against what Brearton calls 'a disruption in his thinking which [took] some years to resolve'.¹¹ It also took *A Vision* (1925), which she sees as crucially shaped, in successive incarnations, by the Great War and its collateral damage; by Yeats's need to absorb 'times like these' into his own artistic matrix. For James Longenbach, too: 'Although the Great War is not mentioned in *A Vision*, it overshadows the entire work.'¹² Yeats refers his 'expanding and contracting gyres' to Heraclitus' antinomies of Love and Strife (Concord and Discord) (*CWI3* 106). Effectively, the war silenced Yeats because he had no language for it, no symbolism. It gave him a more pressing need to connect his inner and outer 'quarrels', to conceive psychology and history according to 'antinomies'. The 'whirling gyres' (*L* 668) enabled him to distance the war yet acknowledge it. Thus he smuggles it into 'tragic', 'terrible' Phase 22 amid other cases of 'abstraction' producing 'absurdity': 'In the world of action such absurdity may become terrible, for men will die and murder for an abstract synthesis, and the more abstract it is the further it carries them from compunction and compromise'. The 'man of this phase', he says, 'may become a destroyer and persecutor, a figure of tumult and of violence' (*CWI3* 78). The words 'tumult' and 'violence' occur in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', where Yeats now speaks as a poet who 'can read the signs' of the times (*CWI* 211).

Yeats's poetry 'reads the signs' more deeply than his prose. *A Vision* sometimes contrasts good and bad war in a way that anticipates his attitude to Owen, and retains something of Nietzsche's precepts: 'You say it is the good cause that hallows even war? I tell you: it is the good war that hallows every cause. . . . Not your pity but your bravery has saved the unfortunate up to now.'¹³ Nevertheless, Yeats's critique of unheroic war seems to need 'compunction'. He greatly revised *A Vision* after publishing the version, 'rooted in the historical moment of 1925' (*CWI3* xlvi), from which I have been quoting. But his repeated attempts to explain European turmoil as the birth pangs of a new era involve contradictions, tensions and ambiguities that betray the continuing force of the 'disruption'. One persona (Michael Robartes) talks of change from 'an age of necessity, truth, goodness, mechanism, science, democracy, abstraction, peace' to one of 'freedom, fiction, evil, kindred, art, aristocracy, war'. He says:

'Love war because of its horror, that belief may be changed, civilisation renewed.' Another persona (Owen Aherne) asks: '[W]hy should war be necessary?' (*AVB* 52–3). In Yeats's 1920s sequences, terms from the same side of this equation oppose one another: 'art' / 'evil', 'mechanism' / 'goodness'. The intermittent appeal of authoritarian Fascism, which balances his fear of communism, explains his more positive projections. But the point is that the terms of *A Vision*, however confused or hedged or absurd, are marked by war. And it's partly because those terms underscore apocalyptic symbolism that they helped Yeats's poetry to confront 'the growing murderousness of the world' (*CW8* 192). In 'The Second Coming' (1919), 'a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi* / Troubles my sight'. The speaker of 'A Prayer for my Daughter' (also 1919) imagines that 'the future years [have] come, / Dancing to a frenzied drum' (*CWI* 189–90). The last poem of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' is headed: 'I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness' (1923). Such scenarios darkly recast Yeats's millenarian hopes for spiritual revolution: the 'dusty wind' of 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' replaces 'Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows' (67) in 'The Secret Rose' (1896). Symbolic weight shifts from apocalypse as revelation to apocalypse as the destruction that precedes it.

One reason why Yeats's dismissal of Owen can seem a denial of likeness is that Owen preceded him in developing a visionary-prophetic response to 'times like these'. Owen, too, conceives the European future / present as war-begotten apocalypse, as Armageddon. Hulme would have diagnosed another case of 'spilt religion': Owen, once a committed Anglican, had 'murdered [his] false creed', and substituted for it the creed of poetry. Both Yeats and Owen are inverted 'Romantic millenarians',¹⁴ their visions conditioned by world war as those of earlier Romantics by the French Revolution. Yeats's apocalyptic poetry, indeed, derives from Blake and other believers in 'Jerusalem'. Directly shaped by evangelical Christianity, as well as by its crossovers into Romantic poetry, Owen's vision remains closer to Christian cosmology and eschatology: 'the sorrowful dark of hell, / Whose world is but the trembling of a flare, / And heaven but as the highway for a shell'; 'Before the last sea and the hapless stars'. Apocalypse enters the poets' rhythms: 'The Second Coming' slows down with the 'rough beast' creepily 'moving its slow thighs' (*CWI* 190); 'A Prayer for my Daughter' speeds up into storm and wild dancing. In Owen's 'Spring Offensive', 'Earth set[s] sudden cups in thousands for their blood' (a parodic communion); whereas 'Insensibility' – almost every line end-stopped by consonantal rhyme – moves like an inexorable march:

'The long, forlorn, relentless trend / From larger day to huger night'.¹⁵ In 'Strange Meeting', Owen mixes slow-motion history with 'swifter' apocalypse:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred . . .

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 . . .¹⁶

Owen and Yeats take 'phantasmagoria', as Yeats calls it (*CW*5 204), to ominous millenarian extremes. Like Owen's 'sleepers', Yeats's 'Phantoms' in 'Meditations' belong to a cosmos defamiliarised by violence. A 'moon / That seems unlike itself' presides over 'Monstrous familiar images' (*CW*1 209). 'The Show', Owen's darkest version of the earth and the body as trench-landscape ('pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues'), piles on Gothic horror. The speaker is shown a 'worm' with 'the feet of many men / And the fresh-severed head of it, my head'.¹⁷

'The Show' rewrites its epigraph from Yeats's dramatic poem 'The Shadowy Waters': 'We have fallen in the dreams the Ever-living / Breathe on the tarnished [Yeats has 'burnished'] mirror of the world / And then smooth out with ivory hands and sigh' (*CW*1 421). Yeats's 'dreams' become nightmare: the dying speaker's 'soul' looks down on his body until he 'falls' to earth. Nothing is smoothed out. Owen's 'S.I.W.' is prefaced by another ironically pointed quotation from Yeats. In Yeats's play 'The King's Threshold', the hunger-striking poet Seanchan 'has set his teeth to die' (*CW*2 137); in 'S.I.W.', a suicidal soldier is buried with 'the muzzle his teeth had kissed'.¹⁸ Further, Seanchan's voluntary death, because the king has downgraded poets' 'authority' in the state (122), might seem a solipsistic sulk, throwing into relief the responsibilities to which war calls poetry. But Owen's irony rewrites his (Romantic) poetic precursors without rejecting all they stand for. He regarded Yeats's plays as a model for future work. Stallworthy judges that only Keats had greater influence on him, and shows how Owen blends echoes from Keats and Yeats.¹⁹ Owen probably never knew that Yeats's own poetic cosmos had 'changed utterly' by 1917. Yet war sent the poets on parallel tracks towards ironical, tragic, apocalyptic visions, which subvert or invert Romantic transcendence

without sacrificing Romantic scope. If Owen had no time to elaborate a 'system', he sets the Great War on a huge metaphysical stage.

Yeats did not see that Owen's poetry attains the condition of Symbolism. Just as he thought Ibsen and Eliot mere realists, he was blinded by his premise that poems 'written *in the midst*' of the Great War (my italics) could never achieve perspective. In the *Oxford Book*, he 'substitutes ... Herbert Read's *End of a War* written long after' (*OBMV* xxxiv) and Siegfried Sassoon's 'On Passing the New Menin Gate'. Sassoon's critique of 'this sepulchre of crime' may have recalled 'bloody frivolity'. Great War poetry, indeed, continued to be written after the event – by Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden, for instance – and the war still rumbles under contemporary poetry as its *débris* disturbs the soil in northern France. Yet to stress distance over 'midst' again favours Yeats himself as war poet. The anthology includes 'An Irish Airman foresees his Death': an elegy for Gregory, which is about several kinds of distance. In claiming to be 'driven' by a 'lonely impulse of delight', the 'airman' defines the aesthetic that drives Yeats's poem. Reflecting on the Abbey's rejection of Sean O'Casey's war play 'The Silver Tassie' (1928), Yeats wrote: 'To [English critics] a theme that "bulks largely in the news" gives dignity to human nature, even raises it to international importance.' This note, which mentions Berkeley and Mallarmé, continues in 'We Irish' vein: 'We on the other hand are certain that nothing can give dignity to human nature but the character and energy of its expression.'²⁰ If Yeats's politics detach the Great War from Ireland, his aesthetics attach it to Irish culture wars. He consigns Great War literature to the Young Ireland sin-bin, while hinting at what a Symbolist poet might do (or has done) with such material. On a different front, War stamps the 'packet', later attached to *A Vision*, in which Yeats challenges Pound's approach to form, and presents his own version of the relation between flux and aesthetic 'unity': 'My instructors identify consciousness with conflict, not with knowledge, substitute for subject and object and their attendant logic a struggle towards harmony, towards Unity of Being. Logical and emotional conflict alike lead towards a reality which is concrete, sensuous, bodily' (*AVB* 214). This is 'the symbolism of poetry' in a new key.

Yeats's denials of the Great War are less idiosyncratic than they might appear. It consorts with broader Irish nationalist attitudes, then and later, that 'An Irish Airman' should erase Gregory's political 'impulse' (he was an Irish unionist and British patriot), and detach the war from Ireland: 'Those that I fight I do not hate, / Those that I guard I do not love' (*CWI* 135). Ben Levitas calls Yeats's 'tacit neutrality' both 'an obvious and politic

position' and 'a delicate compromise between the split National and Irish Volunteer movements'.²¹ That is, constitutional nationalists, led by John Redmond, promoted Irish enlistment; the republican Volunteer movement, seedbed of the Easter Rising, did not. The rebels' proclamation of an Irish Republic refers to 'gallant allies in Europe', meaning Germany. Redmond's party argued that Irish support for the Allies would guarantee Home Rule, promised for after the war, and linked this policy with duty to defend Belgium as another 'small (and Catholic) nation'. Yeats's line in 'Easter, 1916', 'For England may keep faith', is a Redmondite touch. Since republicans won out, Irish war service (210,000 men) was absent from the official life of independent Ireland, while unionist Northern Ireland flagged the 'sacrifice' of the Somme rather than the Rising. Yet, thanks to a historiographical, literary and finally political shift, the last forty years have largely witnessed the death of denial. One landmark was the publication of *Our War: Ireland and the Great War* (2008): a collection of essays / lectures co-sponsored by the Royal Irish Academy and Radio Telefis Eireann. The editor, John Horne, writes: 'Few countries were more decisively affected by the Great War than Ireland. Not only did Irishmen from all backgrounds fight and die in greater numbers than in any other conflict in the country's past, but Ireland's modern political shape to a great extent derives from it.'²² Horne stresses the distinctive social forces behind the 'war cultures' that led men to mobilise in various countries. Within Ireland itself, rival war cultures engendered a split that belongs to the European breaking and making of nations. The proliferating 'new history' of Ireland and the Great War provides contexts for Yeats's war. He lived much in England (he was there during the Easter Rising). He dodged air raids. He spent two winters with Pound in Stone Cottage, where they closely followed war news. In *The Book of the Homeless*, 'A Reason for Keeping Silent' is not out of place amid the range of positions – from ardently nationalist to pacifist – that British, continental and American writers and artists take on the war. Further, Yeats was caught up in Irish-British wartime politics. Deeply critical of the government and the military higher command, he feared all measures, such as imposing conscription on Ireland, which might further inflame 'the old historical passion' roused by the Rising (*L* 649). He tried to prevent the execution of Roger Casement (who had run guns from Germany) so that 'moderate opinion' might recover (*CL IntelLex* 3002).

The literary-critical ground has also shifted, rescuing Yeats from his own obfuscations. Brearton judges that European and Irish conflicts are 'inextricably linked' in his mind as in reality.²³ In May 1918, indeed, he

planned a lecture on 'English War poetry & Irish Rebellion Poetry' (*CL InteLex* 3436). Political caution killed this project: '[T]imes are too dangerous for me to encourage men to risks I am not prepared to share or approve' (*L* 649). It might be added that Yeats was hardly up to speed with English war poetry, even if Owen's poems had not yet been published. In November 1919, he told Pound: '[T]he war (which was to give us all better morals & better art) has produced nothing besides much clotted ejaculation & Kiplinglike facility ... but has permitted one or two good sonnets by Brooke & a charming poem by Grenfell (not a masterpiece) which might have been written at any time' (*CL InteLex* 3679). Once more, Great War poetry figures as thematic, given over to (patriotic) opinion, while 'We Irish' implicitly do better. Yet, the planned lecture may have helped Yeats in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' to configure the conflicts of 1914–21. In fact, *Irish Great War* and 'Rebellion' poems did not coexist in a war anthology until Gerald Dawe's *Earth Voices Whispering: An Anthology of Irish War Poetry 1914–1945* (2008). The anthology includes Great War poems by the serving soldiers Francis Ledwidge, Thomas MacGreevy, Patrick MacGill and Tom Kettle. Yeats did not publish his own 'Rebellion' poems (written from September 1916 to April 1917) until 1920, and then in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). 'Easter, 1916' was printed privately but withdrawn from the contents list of *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919). One result (perhaps one aspect) of Yeats's caution here is that the poem did not appear alongside 'On being asked for a War Poem' and his Gregory elegies: a missed chance for a Rebellion poem and Great War poems to speak to one another. At the safer remove of 1936, 'The Rose Tree' and 'An Irish Airman' would meet in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*.

Yeats's exclusion of Owen does not exclude Yeats from the orbit of Great War poetry. If we no longer place the war 'on the English side of an English-Irish opposition' (Brearton), it becomes clearer that he internalised 'times like these' to a degree that has its closest counterpart in those soldier poets (Owen, Thomas, Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Ivor Gurney) for whom the Great War was an aesthetically defining moment: a matter of psycho-imaginative receptivity. In this respect, Yeats belongs neither with Eliot nor Pound, nor with 'senior' poets like Thomas Hardy (b. 1840) or Robert Bridges (b. 1844), nor, indeed, with Kipling, his exact contemporary. Unlike Hardy and Kipling, he was not going to be among the twenty-five leading authors summoned to assist the War Propaganda Bureau. Bridges (the Poet Laureate) edited a best-selling anthology, *The Spirit of Man* (1915), in which subheadings such as 'Christian Virtue', 'The

Happy Warrior' and 'Life in Death' drive home the message that 'our beloved who fall in the fight . . . die nobly as heroes and saints die'.²⁴ Hardy wrote some fine new war poems, and Paul Fussell argues that this 'master of situational irony' not only inspired direct imitation, as when Sassoon redirects tropes from *Satires of Circumstance*, but also laid down a deeper structural template.²⁵ Hardy's Boer War poems and *The Dynasts*, his cosmic Napoleonic epic, were also influential. Yet Hardy was more precursor than player; witness the generational dialogue between Thomas's 'As the team's head-brass' and Hardy's 'In Time of "the Breaking of Nations"' (see below). In one sense, Kipling was very much a player: from his work for the Propaganda Bureau to his devising the poignant phrase 'Known unto God' for the headstones of unknown soldiers. But, even despite his son's death, the war made little aesthetic difference to Kipling's poetry.

Yeats was, of course, a precursor: for Owen, for Thomas. But 'times like these' helped to keep him a 'contemporary' as well as 'master' (to quote Eliot). In April 1916, the Easter Rising brought history home: 'I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me – and I am very despondent about the future' (*L* 613). Besides the Rising and its fallout – 'we are living in the explosion', he wrote in 1922 (*L* 690) – Yeats was moved by the Russian Revolution and by Lady Gregory's grief at her son's death. Events set in motion by the Great War cumulatively occupied his imagination. The 'Monstrous familiar images' of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' do not allude only to the sequence's own imagery or occasion, they also reprise and symbolise Yeats's poetic engagement with modern war.

Muses in Arms

E.B. Osborn's anthology *The Muse in Arms* was published in 1917. To pluralise its title is to mark the diverse ways in which poets, including Yeats, were then creating an unprecedented body – and aesthetics – of war poetry. Osborn himself paints a confused picture. His anthology contains some poems (by Sassoon, Gurney, Graves, Sorley) that 'cry aloud from the "battered trenches" against the established order of things'. Yet one subheading is 'Chivalry of Sport', and he claims that German poets 'are moved more by hatred for other people's countries than by love of their own', and that 'as munitions of spirituality, their poems are of less value than Zulu war-chants'.²⁶

Rupert Brooke's death, taken with his sonnet sequence *1914*, had supplied British (English) 'munitions of spirituality'. Like Grenfell's 'Into Battle', his sonnets promote a heroic-sacrificial *Liebestod*. Thus, to adapt

Yeats: out of the quarrel with Brooke, other poets made war poetry. Owen's 'An Imperial Elegy' is a riposte to Brooke's 'The Soldier', his 'corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England':

Not one corner of a foreign field
But a span as wide as Europe;
An appearance of a titan's grave,
And the length thereof a thousand miles ...²⁷

Thomas's 'No one cares less than I' has two Brooke sonnets in its sights: 'The Soldier' and the sonnet beginning 'Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!':

'No one cares less than I,
Nobody knows but God,
Whether I am destined to lie
Under a foreign clod,'
Were the words I made to the bugle call in the morning.

But laughing, storming, scorning,
Only the bugles know
What the bugles say in the morning ...²⁸

Thomas called Brooke's sonnets 'a nervous attempt to connect with himself the very widespread idea that self sacrifice is the highest self indulgence'. Sorley, too, thought that Brooke had 'taken the sentimental attitude', being 'far too obsessed with his own sacrifice regarding the going to war of himself (and others) as a highly intense, remarkable and sacrificial exploit, whereas it is merely the conduct demanded ... by the turn of circumstances'. Rosenberg criticised Brooke's 'begloried sonnets' because the war 'should be approached in a colder way, more abstract, with less of the million feelings everyone feels'. Gurney wrote his own 'Sonnets 1917' as 'a counterblast' against Brooke's ignorance of 'the grind of war': a 'protest of the physical against the exalted spiritual; of the cumulative weight of small facts against the one large'.²⁹

The sonnet was itself a battleground. Although some poets (Sassoon, Gurney) began by imitating Brooke's sonnets – proof that he laid certain foundations – this iconic synecdoche for 'English poetry' soon absorbed new material and rhythms.³⁰ Sorley's deflationary sonnet, beginning, 'When you see millions of the mouthless dead / Across your dreams in pale battalions go', refutes 'soft things as other men have said, / That you'll remember'. For fourteen mostly unrhymed lines, Owen's 'Parable of the Old Man and the Young' conflates Genesis (the story of Abraham and Isaac) with war vocabulary. Then he adds a shocking couplet: 'But the

old man would not so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one'. Thomas's 'February Afternoon' moves from the 'mill-like', warlike 'roar' of starlings in an oak to another indifferent or complicit 'God': 'And God still sits aloft in the array / That we have wrought him, stone-deaf and stone-blind'.³¹ Perhaps Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan' (1923) is the ultimate heretical war sonnet: 'A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead' (*CWI* 218).

More generally, counterblasts to Brooke provide a rough aesthetic snapshot into which Yeats broadly fits. First, there is consensus on the need for new language – not necessarily a single or 'realist' language. Second, poetry is seen to require scope commensurable with the human and European tragedy – scope variously defined as mythic or symbolic (Owen's 'titan's grave'), as saying hard things (Sorley), as philosophical 'abstraction' (Yeats would oblige), as broaching the 'unknown': Thomas's poetry configures his journey to war with a psychological and cognitive quest: 'Now all roads lead to France' ('Roads').³² Third, there is the ultimately structural question of focus and proportion: where should a poem's stress fall to avoid the 'million feelings everyone feels'? Gurney's insistence on 'small facts' of trench life, such as 'Infinite lovely chatter of a Bucks accent', subverts the 'exalted' language that, in 'The Silent One', has doomed the chatterer's corpse to hang on barbed wire.³³ In 'Break of Day in the Trenches', Rosenberg's irony highlights the 'cosmopolitan sympathies' of a 'queer sardonic rat' able to cross No Man's Land.³⁴ Such strategies recall Thomas's pre-war credo: 'Anything, however small, may make a poem; nothing, however great, is certain to' (see pp. 104–5). Thomas himself picks this up in 'The Word', where the speaker recalls 'a pure thrush word' but otherwise suffers a huge amnesia that puts war in its place: 'I have forgot, too, names of the mighty men / That fought and lost or won in the old wars'.³⁵ To play with proportion can be to magnify as well as reduce: in Owen's 'Futility', a dying soldier fills the cosmos. Owen noted the paradox that '[I] who write so big am so minuscule'.³⁶ Strategic shifts of focus adjust the balance of power between poetry and war. In 'Easter, 1916', Yeats contrasts the fixed purpose that impelled the Rising, 'Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart', with the 'living stream' that compels the poet: 'The long-legged moor-hens dive, / And hens to moor-cocks call' (*CWI* 183–4). There are parallels with 'On being asked for a War Poem' and with Thomas's 'The Word'.

Thanks to his reading and criticism, perhaps to deeper promptings, Thomas was quicker than most poets to conceptualise poetry and war. His

review article 'War Poetry', written just before he began to write poetry himself in December 1914, reacts to the first gusts of the verse hurricane: 'It is the hour of the writer who picks up popular views or phrases, or coins them, and has the power to turn them into downright stanzas.' Thomas stresses that 'few younger men who had been moved to any purpose could be expected to crystallise their thoughts with speed', although 'a mature man who has seen other wars and is not shaken from his balance [might] seize the new occasion. . . . Mr Hardy has done [so].' Having invoked Coleridge's 'Fears in Solitude' – 'one of the noblest of patriotic poems' but written by 'a solitary man who, if at all, only felt the national emotions weakly or spasmodically' – he adds: 'I need hardly say that by becoming ripe for poetry the poet's thoughts may recede far from their original resemblance to all the world's, and may seem to have little to do with daily events. They may retain hardly any colour from 1798 or 1914.'³⁷ Thomas's own poetry would largely follow this interiorised model, which has (Symbolist) parallels with Yeatsian distance. His poem 'Rain' places the war dead, 'Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff', amid inner and outer dissolution: 'Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain'. 'Wild rain' and other quasi-apocalyptic natural images are not Thomas's only way of figuring war. The difference between the amnesiac speaker of 'The Word', and the *engagé* speaker of 'This is no case of petty right or wrong', exemplifies the dialectical shifts in his self-positioning as war poet, the extent to which he upsets the critical binarism of patriotism *versus* protest. Partly in oblique rivalry with Brooke's appropriation of 'England', his poetry encompasses cultural defence (see following section), yet criticises the war as issuing from a self-harming culture already hollowed out by imperialism, by loss of connection with its past and the natural world. 'The Combe' ends: 'But far more ancient and dark / The Combe looks since they killed the badger there, / Dug him out and gave him to the hounds, / That most ancient Briton of English beasts'.³⁸

Owen had less time to think. To redirect Yeats's phrase, he positions his poetry 'in the midst'. Stallworthy shrewdly remarks: '[T]he poet of distance, past and future, failed to recognise the poet of the foreground, the here and now'.³⁹ Issuing as from a present-continuous limbo, Owen's manifestos insist that poetry must blot out everything except 'War, and the pity of War': now the only measure of politics, ethics and aesthetics. He starts, not from pathos, as Yeats implies, but from empathy. The sequencing of 'Dulce et Decorum Est' maps how Owen's art moves from sensory and empathetic immersion ('we cursed through sludge', 'As under a green sea, I saw him drowning'), to an imagination imprinted by such

experience ('In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me'), to rousing the reader's own senses, imagination and hence empathy: 'If in some smothering dreams you too could pace / Behind the wagon that we flung him in ...' Pity and terror become Aristotelian. We have to be there. As audience conscious as Yeats, Owen seeks to involve his implied reader not only in participatory theatre but also in a permanent evangelical mission to 'plead', 'minister', 'protest', 'warn', expose the 'old lie', tell 'the truth untold'. Adapting the structures of sermon, prayer, litany, parable, psalm, sacrament and prophecy, he adumbrates a new New Testament to challenge the Old Testament framing of a Just War, to indict 'nations' that 'trek from progress'. Owen's rhetorical shock tactics include negation and inversion: above all, 'Above I am not concerned with Poetry' in his draft preface. 'Apologia pro Poemate Meo' begins: 'I, too, saw God through mud'. The oxymoronic internal half rhyme prepares for spiritual and literary values ('laughter', 'exultation', 'love', 'joy', 'beauty') to be redefined by war: 'Merry it was to laugh there – / Where death becomes absurd and life absurder'.⁴⁰ At the end of 'Apologia', Owen employs an unusual (and preacherly) tactic that tests the quality of our attention, our presence: 'except you share / With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell ...' This poem judges its reader rather than the other way round.

As Mark Rawlinson says, the 'reversals' of 'Apologia' 'appear excessive' because their irony sails too near the wind of 'afflatus'. Thus the lines after 'absurder' might sound like 'an active glorification of battle': 'For power was on us as we slashed bones bare / Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder'.⁴¹ Yet here Owen again goes to a phantasmagoric extreme. His reversals suggest how poetry of 'in the midst' generates its own modalities, whether negative 'absurdism' or positive paradox: 'I have perceived much beauty / In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight'. 'Beauty': Owen is another poet who transposes affiliations to Aestheticism.⁴² Inversion in Owen can also verge on perversion. 'Apologia' redefines 'love' as a bonding (bondage?) of pain and pleasure: 'wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong; / Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips'. Troubled by Owen's and Sassoon's failure to be consistent pacifists, Adrian Caesar faults them for ambivalence about violence, for voyeuristic and sado-masochistic overtones, and for a tendency to liken the poet as well as soldier to Christ crucified. This implies that they revise, rather than exorcise, self-sacrificial *Liebestod*.⁴³ But, for Jahan Ramazani, Owen's 'guilty' speaker 'occupies a dual position as both victimised soldier and performer of the victimisation', and the 'reader's position is similarly dual'.⁴⁴ Owen sometimes involves us by forcing us to be co-voyeurs. In

'Wilfred Owen and the Sense of Touch', Santanu Das gives a nuanced account of the homoerotic and sadomasochistic strains in Owen's empathy. He notices the 'perverse aestheticisation of violence' in images like 'Your slender attitude / Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed'. Yet, as he points out, this 'Caravaggio-like' approach to the dying soldier's body, also creates the 'caressive voice' that makes 'Futility' such a powerful protest: 'Move him into the sun – / Gently its touch awoke him once ...'⁴⁵ Owen's embedded poetry uniquely embodies war. Some of the poetry may be in the perversity. War is perverse; so is being 'a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience', as Owen termed himself.⁴⁶ Das writes: 'Instead of a seamless blend of the public and private, there is usually a conflict between the two, creating a powerful frisson in [Owen's] mature verse. The erotic undertow complicates the political but also gives it a lyric intensity.'⁴⁷

In Owen's poetry, psychodrama enters a war; in Yeats's poetry (like Thomas's) war enters a psychodrama. 'Easter, 1916' registers how the Rising has disrupted 'public and private' worlds that already interpenetrated: 'All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born' (*CWI* 182). 'Changed utterly' also covers Yeats as poet, while 'terrible beauty' might be a synonym for 'war poetry': a term always latently oxymoronic. Given Yeats's fear that 'all the work of years has been overturned ... all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics' (*L* 613), 'Easter, 1916' is more than reflexively interested in its own newborn aesthetic – in what war has done to beauty. Like poems at odds with Brooke, Yeats's 'Rebellion poems' contest other mediations of the event – even the event itself. Owen and other poets actually contest *two* influential kinds of war poem: hectoring imperialist balladry as well as Brooke's more insidious blend of Romantic transcendence (the dead as 'gathered radiance'), chivalric 'honour' and spiritual crusade: 'Now God be thanked who has matched us with his hour'.⁴⁸ Similarly, Yeats was up against not only the Young Ireland ballad, cloned from its imperial counterpart, but also Patrick Pearse's public staging of something that unsettlingly resembled or surpassed poetry in performative and transformative power. Historians disagree as to the nature and extent of Pearse's political calculation, but like Brooke, like continental poets such as Maeterlinck, Péguy and Claudel, he had certainly absorbed the idea, widespread in early twentieth-century Europe, that blood sacrifice could renew a nation (he thought that Orangemen were also right to take up arms). He was not alone in imbuing this idea with Catholic martyrology or in fancying that the destined saviour might be a poet. Patriotic *Liebestod* replaces the beloved with the nation: Owen's

eroticism is political because he makes the nexus between love and death human again. While Yeats deplored the execution of the Rising's leaders and other 'miscarriages of justice' (L 613), he had long seen Pearse as 'a man made dangerous by the Vertigo of Self Sacrifice' (CL *InteLex* 2935). The complexity of 'Easter, 1916' depends on how he steers between the Scylla of Young Ireland and the Charybdis of *Liebestod* to find his own poetic bearings. The poem keeps artistic as well as political options open.

Irish commemorative ballads rarely ask: 'Was it needless death after all?' More than 90 per cent of 'Easter, 1916' is occupied with the personal and political shock of the Rising, with the questions (still debated as its centenary approaches) it has raised rather than resolved, with the irrevocability of change. But finally Yeats can no longer postpone the 'verse' inscribed or prescribed by the occasion. His unorthodox ballad ends with a more orthodox one:

I write it out in a verse –
 MacDonagh and MacBride
 And Connolly and Pearse
 Now and in time to be,
 Wherever green is worn,
 Are changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born. (CWI 184)

Here partly critical portraits of the dead men (Yeats has called John MacBride, Maud Gonne's husband, a 'drunken, vainglorious lout') give way to traditional tropes underscored by a canonical nationalist ballad, 'The Wearing of the Green': 'They are hanging men and women / For the wearing of the green'. This ballad was composed during the 1798 rebellion – a point of reference for the Rising as for Yeats's and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen ní Houlihán*. More obliquely than 'Did that play of mine ...?' (see p. 31), the layered aesthetics of 'Easter, 1916' implicate Yeats's literary career and how the whole cultural movement has been read. Quoting Pearse's phrase, 'the excess of love I bear the Gael', the speaker asks: 'And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?' 'Bewilder' introduces the motif of madness that will recur in Yeats's war poetry. Roy Foster has distinguished Yeats's generation of nationalist intellectuals from a more single-minded 'revolutionary generation'.⁴⁹ In his earlier ballad 'September 1913', a shot in the Lane controversy, Yeats had ascribed the death of 'Romantic Ireland' to a bourgeois attitude that would think patriots such as 'Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone' 'mad' (107). Now 'what if' raises as much as dismisses doubts about the national romance, about the step from culture to politics to insurrection.

Doubts about the symbolism empowered by the Rising lurk behind the scenes in 'The Rose Tree':

'But where can we draw water,'
Said Pearse to Connolly,
'When all the wells are parched away?
O plain as plain can be
There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree.' (CW1 185)

'Sixteen Dead Men' backs this up by representing the voice of (wartime) 'logic' ('You say that we should still the land / Till Germany's overcome'), or voice itself, as trumped by symbol: 'MacDonagh's bony thumb' (185). Blood and the relic-like 'thumb' do not align Yeats's Rebellion poems with Pearsean 'terrible beauty' any more than with neo-Davisite 'verse'. By dramatising different perceptions / receptions of the Rising, he reaches for a more capacious vision and symbolism. In 'Easter, 1916' Ireland, where 'motley was worn', changes its national genre to tragedy: like Owen's 'pity', Yeats's 'terror' is quasi-Aristotelian. And the tragic actors, 'Hearts with one purpose alone', who compose the revolutionary generation, force him to revisit his old opposition between poetry and opinion:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change ...

The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all. (183)

The opposition of 'stone' and 'stream' completes a chiasmus initiated earlier by the rebels' 'vivid faces' fronting 'grey / Eighteenth-century houses'. This impasse – as to which principle is on the side of life – may be partly overcome, at a rhythmic level, in the shifting stresses that evoke 'horse', 'rider', 'clouds', 'moor-hens' and 'moor-cocks'. Here poetry – in *being* rhythm, a live pulse – seems to outflank 'one purpose alone' and its verse vehicles. More broadly, the dialectics of 'Easter, 1916', the dialogic modes of 'The Rose Tree' and 'Sixteen Dead Men', show poetic structures consolidated in *Responsibilities* being tested by history.

Yeats's attitude to violence varies with context.⁵⁰ But 'times like these' presented violent scenarios so contradictory and extreme – international violence, revolutionary violence, state violence, internecine violence – that they drew forth his most complex poetic response: poems that, like 'The Second Coming', speak from poetry's shaken ground:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
 Troubles my sight . . .

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (*CWI* 189–90)

Here the 'worst' have expropriated poetry's *sine qua non*: 'passionate intensity'. Overwhelming forces now implicitly 'trouble' – a verb repeated from 'Easter, 1916' – poetic as well as social order: 'the centre cannot hold'. A still more terrible birth, 'beast' not 'beauty', takes the question beyond one of artistic options. The drafts of 'The Second Coming' suggest that it was the Russian Revolution which led Yeats to perceive the 'blood-dimmed tide' as global, and that he mediated this event through Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: 'And there's no Burke to cry aloud, no Pitt'.⁵¹ Burke attacks the radical (and millenarian) cleric Richard Price for comparing the French Revolution to Christ's birth. 'The ceremony of innocence is drowned' echoes Burke's great cry, 'the age of chivalry is gone'.⁵² But 'ceremony' evokes the doomed formalities of art as well as court, and the 'best', who 'lack all conviction', include poets. Yeats had called the Great War 'a sacrifice of the best for the worst'⁵³ – either echoing Pound's belief that the war should spare artists or regretting that an officer class was about to immolate itself for undeserving proles, or both. In the ironical third poem of 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', 'Come let us mock at the great' (*CWI* 213), the 'best' become 'good, wise [and] great' who failed to 'bar that foul storm out', owing to their 'opium dream' that there 'will never be another war'.⁵⁴ Here the speaker mocks poets too. But, as in

'At the Abbey Theatre', Yeats does not accept 'mockery' as a valid ethical, critical or poetic position, any more than Owen condones 'dullards whom no cannon stuns'.⁵⁵ The 'we' of the next poem, like some Great War poets, attaches collective responsibility for violence to the hollow public / poetic vocabulary of pre-war Ireland, Britain and Europe:

We, who seven years ago
Talked of honour and of truth,
Shriek with pleasure if we show
The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth. (213)

In the third poem of 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', with its threat of artistic suicide (see p. 53), Yeats's self-image vis à vis 'Those winds that clamour of approaching night' is a swan poised between 'flight and fight': 'The wings half spread for flight, / The breast thrust out in pride' (212). 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' will open up this holding-position on poetry and 'times like these'.

The Irish contexts of Yeats's 1920s sequences keep war alive in the post-war era. In 'The Road at My Door', the fifth poem of 'Meditations', war literally arrives on the poet's doorstep:

An affable Irregular,
A heavily-built Falstaffian man,
Comes cracking jokes of civil war
As though to die by gunshot were
The finest play under the sun.

A brown Lieutenant and his men,
Half dressed in national uniform,
Stand at my door, and I complain
Of the foul weather, hail and rain,
A pear tree broken by the storm ... (CWI 208)

An image in the next poem ('The Stare's Nest by My Window') parallels the reduction of Owen's gas victim to an object 'flung' into 'a wagon': 'Last night they trundled down the road / That dead young soldier in his blood' (209). Like 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', this sequence alludes once, powerfully, to actual blood. Yeats supported the national soldiers of the Free State Provisional Government as opposed to those republicans (the IRA 'Irregular') who saw the 1921 Treaty, which accepted dominion status and hence 'the language and symbolism of empire', as betraying Irish self-determination. The anti-Treatyites precipitated armed conflict in which nearly 1,000 people, mainly combatants, died. The total includes seventy-seven republicans executed by the state: a measure, enforced by

his friend Kevin O'Higgins, that Yeats approved. Yet 'Meditations' does not take but ponders 'sides'. Just as in 1922, Yeats called Irish unionism and nationalism 'each but the other's headache' (*CW*3 192), so he blamed both civil-war parties for 'this whirlpool of hatred'. Such 'rage' (his word in 'Meditations') means that the Civil War, like the Rising, is not dead politics. Bill Kissane attributes its 'enduring impact on Irish political culture' to the fact that the Treaty served as a catalyst for 'ideological polarisation' by activating 'older traditions within Irish nationalism'.⁵⁶ Yeats's links with those traditions, even though some links had weakened, may explain why he also represents the Treaty split as a psychic split; why the issue of speech and silence returns in a more problematic guise. The eloquent Irregular – an anti-self, Fortinbras to Yeats's Hamlet – contrasts with the poet who displaces civil war onto storm damage, if with a symbolic subtext. The last stanza drives 'silence' further inwards: 'I count those feathered balls of soot / The moor-hen guides upon the stream, / To silence the envy in my thought'. This echo of 'Easter, 1916', the moor-hen image having progressed from the sexual to the maternal, applies temporary therapy for inner struggle. Not until the final poem ('I see Phantoms') does Yeats really speak, or let his unconscious speak, of what fundamentally troubles 'Meditations'. Civil war has exposed a self-fuelling nihilism at the root of war and located it in the human psyche. Psychodrama intensifies as the speaker comes dangerously close to joining a 'rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage-hungry troop' which 'Plunges towards nothing' (209). Compare 'Blood and the Moon' (see p. 24). As with Owen's eroticism, Yeats's recognition of his own 'rage', his violent impulses, helps his poetry to embody and internalise war.

What can or should poetry do? The poems in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' have numbers; the poems in 'Meditations', titles. The possessive pronoun designates local or poetic particularity a stay against global confusion: 'My House', 'My Table', 'My Descendants', 'My Door', 'My Window'. Their titles also place the poems as meditations on poetry itself: 'I' as poet-speaker now takes centre stage. The stage-set – Yeats's tower / house in Co. Galway (Thoor Ballylee) – figures poetry's sidelining by war, his poetry's interior and exterior worlds, his situation as civil-war poet. The verbless catalogue, which runs across the first two stanzas of 'My House', seems to strip him down for poetic action:

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,
A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,
An acre of stony ground,
Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,

Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable,
 The sound of the rain or sound
 Of every wind that blows;
 The stilted water-hen
 Crossing stream again
 Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows;

 A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,
 A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
 A candle and written page.
Il Penseroso's Platonist toiled on
 In some like chamber, shadowing forth
 How the daemonic rage
 Imagined everything.
 Benighted travellers
 From markets and from fairs
 Have seen his midnight candle glimmering ... (205)

The imagery summons poetry's traditional ('ancient', 'old') resources: the durability (not fixity) of 'stone', buildings that combine fortification with 'shelter'. The 'symbolic rose' concentrates Yeats's own resources, his poetic backlist. At the same time, the speaker is 'open', like his hearth, to contingent impressions and their ominous import: rain – 'every wind that blows', 'scared' water-hens. Yeats also summons role models. '*Il Penseroso's* Platonist', a many-faceted icon, fuses poetry with philosophy and (in Coleridgean style) the world-creating 'daemonic rage' with 'imagination'. 'Midnight candle' (Minerva's owl?) centres hope on the mind's, or the poem's, activity. As poetry picks itself up from the ground zero of 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' (see p. 54), the 'half-imagined ... half-written page' seems to have been completed.

The third and final stanza builds in a complementary model of persistence against the odds:

Two men have founded here. A man-at-arms
 Gathered a score of horse, and spent his days
 In this tumultuous spot,
 Where through long wars and sudden night alarms
 His dwindling score and he seemed castaways
 Forgetting and forgot;
 And I, that after me
 My bodily heirs may find,
 To exalt a lonely mind,
 Befitting emblems of adversity. (205–6)

In 'My Table', where the poet-speaker soliloquises like Hamlet, a Japanese sword potentially identifies 'lonely mind' with 'man-at-arms': 'Sato's gift, a changeless sword, / By pen and paper lies, / That it may moralise / My days out of their aimlessness'. The sword, 'Curved like new moon, moon-luminous', epitomises the power of imagination, craft and tradition to create a 'marvellous accomplishment' spanning 'centuries'. Yet the speaker proceeds to question 'changelessness', and to complicate identity between the poetic and martial arts. As if once again moving on from the 1890s, Yeats detaches art from the 'soul's unchanging look' and attaches it to contingencies: 'only an aching heart / Conceives a changeless work of art' (206). In 'I see Phantoms', the sword / moon itself changes aspect:

I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone,
A mist that is like blown snow is sweeping over all,
Valley, river, and elms, under the light of a moon
That seems unlike itself, that seems unchangeable,
A glittering sword out of the east. A puff of wind
And those white glimmering fragments of the mist sweep by.
Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind;
Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind's eye ... (209)

The strange cosmos viewed from 'the tower-top' defamiliarises the landscape of the preceding poems. Despite the historical and psychic speed of events, the longer lines (up to fifteen syllables) slow down apocalyptic spectacle. Symbolic 'foul weather' has played a more muted part in 'Meditations'. But here wind, mist and snow distort perception as the 'unchangeable' sword / moon distorts relations between Nature, imagination and artwork. Ambiguously 'glittering', the moon may portend war or represent the kind of poetry that advocates it.

I have suggested that these distorted cognitive and poetic bearings reprise Yeats's engagement with war. 'Monstrous familiar images' has replaced 'A terrible beauty is born' as his defining oxymoron. His war poems repeat themselves as that stanza repeats 'mist' and 'mind'. They brood on 'change', 'trouble', 'tumult', 'wind', 'storm', 'desolation', 'blood'. 'Bewilder' echoes 'Easter, 1916'; 'frenzies' and 'reveries', 'A Prayer for my Daughter'. But it's now the poet-speaker, obsessed or possessed by the 'rage-driven' troop, who suffers the madness associated with violence: 'and I, my wits astray / Because of all that senseless tumult, all but cried / For vengeance on the murderers of Jacques Molay' (209). Yet, if he has internalised the 'tumult of images' in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', 'all but' marks a crucial resistance. The absent 'cry' is the civil-war poem that Yeats refuses to write.

The cause of Jacques Molay (a murdered French Templar) he calls ‘fit symbol for those who labour for hatred, and so for sterility’ (*CWI* 606). So it’s back to the sidelines – perhaps where poetry should be – and to the poet as philosopher of dying and emergent gyres. In the last two stanzas, phantasmagoria assumes a more emblematic shape. ‘Cloud-pale unicorns’ with ‘ladies on their backs’ – images that evoke the Celtic Twilight and Walter Pater (see p. 78) – give way ‘to an indifferent multitude ... / To brazen hawks’. The latter, phantoms of ‘the Coming Emptiness’, are said to lack ‘self-delighting reverie’, ‘hate of what’s to come’ and ‘pity for what’s gone’. Yet poetry survives. First, the poet-speaker himself is neither ‘indifferent’ nor without ‘reverie’. Second, he resolves his ‘envy’ of civil-war actors. In ‘The Road at My Door’, he ‘turn[s] towards my chamber, caught / In the cold snows of a dream’. Now this ‘turn’ becomes decisive:

I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair
 Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth
 In something that all others understand or share;
 But O! ambitious heart, had such a proof drawn forth
 A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,
 It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy,
 The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,
 Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy. (210)

Re-entry into the tower reaffirms Symbolist interiority. ‘Daemonic’, an adjective that calls back ‘*Il Penseroso*’s Platonist’, marks a dimension without which poetry ceases to be itself and so cannot take its own kind of action. In arriving at his belated version of ‘the muse in arms’, Yeats reviews all war in the light of civil war: the psychic splits into which civil war shades, the aesthetic questions that it further complicates.

At a conceptual level, Yeats, Owen and Thomas approach the interface between poetry and war differently. For Owen, war sets poetry a supreme self-denying test: ‘The Poetry is in the pity.’ For Thomas, the Great War seems to have intensified the perplexities of earthly existence to a degree that demands poetry: ‘Now all roads lead to France’. For Yeats, war almost becomes a rival mode of cognition or power. In ‘Under Ben Bulbin’, where he unwisely allies himself with the rival power, the modes converge to echo ‘Mitchel’s prayer ... / “Send war in our time, O Lord!”’ (*CWI* 334). But, twenty years earlier, war had radically ‘shaken’ his faith in poetry and in the forms of that faith: ‘the centre cannot hold’. That is why ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ revisits first principles, why its poet-protagonist soliloquises like Hamlet. ‘The Stare’s Nest’ represents this figure at his most chastened. Like the maternal moor-hen, the switch

of focus to birds and insects has a reflexive subtext. It suggests that Yeats is seeking or creating an aesthetic antidote to poetry's (his own) share in 'fantasies' that incubate violence:

We had fed the heart on fantasies,
 The heart's grown brutal from the fare;
 More substance in our enmities
 Than in our love; O honey-bees,
 Come build in the empty house of the stare. (209)

Elegy, Memory

'Pity for what's gone': since the Great War, elegy has been war poetry's dominant genre, its default setting. By the same token, elegy has extended its own remit. Owen calls all his poems 'elegies': '[T]hese elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next.' Thomas identifies his lyric with the aspen, which 'ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves'.⁵⁷ That elegy may fail to console or never abate fits with Jahan Ramazani finding 'elegy for elegy' in the 'melancholic ... unresolved, violent, and ambivalent character' of 'modern mourning'.⁵⁸ Yet mutation and hybridity have given elegy new life. Owen's 'elegies' vary in generic make-up. 'The Show' is a Gothic nightmare. 'Dulce et Decorum Est' intermingles reportage, dream / trauma and *j'accuse*. All elegy protests against death: Great War elegy protests against needless death. The political agency with which Owen imbues elegy is one reason why 'passive suffering' is wide of the mark. At the personal level, modern 'immersion in loss' (Ramazani), stripped of consolatory ritual and divine reassurance, creates problems for elegy. At the public level, partly by remixing the tropes of personal elegy, anti-consolatory elegy politicises mourning and allies it with warning. Owen's 'Futility', a mourning ritual adapted to a particular casualty, poses large questions:

Move him into the sun –
 Gently its touch awoke him once,
 At home, whispering of fields half-sown ...
 Was it for this the clay grew tall?
 – O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
 To break earth's sleep at all?⁵⁹

Sorley spotlights dead 'millions' by saying: 'None wears the face you knew'. The very title of Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump' memorably violates memorial conventions. In 'Butchers and Tombs', Gurney makes up

for hasty war burials ('the commonness of the tale / Made it a thing not fitting ceremonial') by commemorating another kind of commemoration, at once communal and intimate: 'the Gloucesters turning sudden to tell to one / Some joke, would remember and say – "That joke is done," / Since he who would understand was so cold he could not feel'.⁶⁰

Great War elegy blends lament, protest and commemoration in varying ratios and guises. This section focuses on elegy's function as cultural memory. In recalling the dead, elegy weighs war's sociocultural cost: 'empty houses'. More than literally, 'Futility' conjures up a farmworker's lost hinterland and future. In 'Dead Man's Dump', Rosenberg invokes a Judaic genealogy whereby 'God-ancestral essences' have been violated. War desecrates 'home', while simultaneously making it problematic as both a psychological and cultural locus. Rosenberg depicts soldiers 'dream[ing] of home, / Dear things, war-blotted from their hearts'. In 'Exposure', Owen forebodes: 'Slowly our ghosts drag home ... on us the doors are closed'. Gurney's war poems pivot on homesickness for 'Cotswold', while also creating an ad hoc home from home compounded of Cotswold, northern France and his comrades in the Gloucesters. Thomas wrote three poems called 'Home'. In the first, home is purely psychological, the object of never-realised desire: 'That land, / My home, I have never seen'. In the second, home is partly local, partly cognitive, ultimately ecological and defined by the natural rather than public world: 'one nationality / We had, I and the birds that sang, / One memory'. In the third poem, home comes with inverted commas. Mention of the 'word "Home"' leads the speaker to say of himself and two fellow soldiers: 'Between three counties far apart that lay / We were divided'. Home means different things to different people, and, as Thomas's other 'home' poems indicate, need not coincide with nation: perhaps, as artificially as the army, 'a union that ends / With the necessity for it'.⁶¹ Yeats's 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', if partly owing to the ambiguity of Gregory's 'nation', eulogises a loss to locality and art: 'We dreamed that a great painter had been born / To cold Clare rock and Galway rock and thorn' (*CWI* 134). Like 'An Irish Airman', the poem builds in self-elegy by deploying Yeats's language for lyric poetry: 'intensity', 'intricacies'. And to call Gregory 'Our Sidney and our perfect man' gives Irish cultural loss a Renaissance aura. 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', all about loss, can be seen as retrospective protest elegy. This 'lamentation over lost peace and lost hope' (*L* 668) attacks Europe's failure, not only to prevent war but also to deploy its supposed cultural capital to that end. In lamenting a desecrated Irish home – 'the

mother, murdered at her door' (211) – along with the burnt 'stump on the Acropolis', Yeats laments the violation of European 'dwelling'.

The troubled bearings of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' are conditioned by postwar chaos and reconstruction in Europe and by how civil war might affect the culture, and cultural memory, of independent Ireland. Home remains problematic: 'We are closed in, and the key is turned / On our uncertainty' (*CWI* 208); while recovery, in a double sense, takes on local urgency: 'somewhere / A man is killed, or a house burned / ... Come build in the empty house of the stare' (*CWI* 208). With 'ingenious lovely things' now less the object of lament or protest than of possible salvage, houses have become central to Yeats's symbolism. Mansion, tower, farmhouse and nest represent affiliations that run from high civilisation to domesticity. Yeats wrote the first poem, 'Ancestral Houses', before the Irish Civil War. It was immediately based not on Coole Park but on Lady Ottoline Morrell's grander house and salon at Garsington near Oxford. Yet the poem encompasses 'Coole', revisits Yeats's 'analogy' or conduit 'between [the] long-established life of the well-born and the artist's life' (*Mem* 156), and develops the dialectics between house and war laid down by 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' and 'A Prayer for my Daughter'. The former, which begins with the poet and his wife 'almost settled in our house', anticipates post-war dereliction in asking of Gregory: 'What other could so well have counselled us / In all lovely intricacies of a house ...?' (134).

'In Memory' initiated Yeats's symbolic wartime uses for his own house. '[S]eeing how bitter is that wind / That shakes the shutter' (135), he furnishes or fortifies 'th' ancient tower' with Lares and Penates, with 'all lovely intricacies', with poetry. 'In Memory' and 'Prayer' are closely linked. Both poems employ the eight-line 'Cowley' stanza (rhymed AABBCDDC), in which the fourth, sixth and seventh lines have four, not five, stresses. Another link is that a newborn woman seems to redeem losses personified by a dead man, as well as balancing the more ominous births that precede the poem in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*: 'terrible beauty' and 'rough beast'. 'Prayer' (190–2) begins by evoking a 'screaming' wind that blows from 'the murderous innocence of the sea' where 'the ceremony of innocence' has been drowned: 'Once more the storm is howling, and half hid / Under this cradle-hood and coverlid / My child sleeps on'. The storm, against which the house / poem supplies protective cover, symbolises violence and its political sources: Maud Gonno's politics are called 'an old bellows full of angry wind'. 'Howl' and 'scream' figure the malformed voice of opinion (compare 'Wind shrieked' in 'Nineteen Hundred and

Nineteen'). Yeats prays for his 'daughter' / Ireland: 'So let her think opinions are accursed'. Yet, as here, Yeats's own 'opinionated mind' threatens 'magnanimities of sound' – the poem's phrase for its reflexive goal of a Muse and music predicated on domestic settlement. There are parallels with the trajectory of 'Paudeen' and with the earlier psychodrama of 'The Two Trees'. It is as if war is compelling Yeats to define home. The last stanza's ideal home reinstates the 'ceremony of innocence' by countering formal and other senses in which 'the centre cannot hold':

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
 Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
 For arrogance and hatred are the wares
 Peddled in the thoroughfares.
 How but in custom and in ceremony
 Are innocence and beauty born?
 Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
 And custom for the spreading laurel tree. (192)

The slowed, ritualistic pace, the aptly repeated 'custom' and 'ceremony', the syllabic balance and chiasmic assonance of 'Where all's accustomed, ceremonious', the insistent verb 'to be', the mainly full rhymes: all tend to a centripetal conclusion. This reverses how the seeming stanza that begins 'The Second Coming' loses even its half rhymes. The Cowley stanza's couplets can give it an aphoristic bite. In 'Prayer', Yeats uses the third couplet to attack Gonne: 'It's certain that fine women eat / A crazy salad with their meat' (191). But the last stanza changes the pattern by splitting this couplet between a self-answered question and its backup, and by lengthening the second line. 'The Second Coming', in contrast, ends with an unanswered question that leaves 'born' unrhymed. Yeats also fortifies or purifies his aesthetic by detaching 'beauty' from 'terror'. Gonne, 'beauty's very self', has taken beauty dangerously close to the sublime, which Elaine Scarry calls 'an aesthetic of power'.⁶² Yeats's 'not entirely beautiful' wife (for now) restores beauty's 'innocence'.

'Ancestral Houses' is less certain about houses:

What if the glory of escutcheoned doors,
 And buildings that a haughtier age designed,
 The pacing to and fro on polished floors
 Amid great chambers and long galleries, lined
 With famous portraits of our ancestors;
 What if those things the greatest of mankind
 Consider most to magnify, or to bless,
 But take our greatness with our bitterness? (CW1 205)

The previous stanza similarly depends on 'what if', a phrase that does not, as in 'Easter, 1916', also dismiss doubt: 'O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways / ... But take our greatness with our violence?' Yeats's 'great' houses throw into question quasi-dynastic continuities that European war has disrupted: 'buildings that a haughtier age designed' are cultural traditions or traditions of culture. Like Ireland, central Europe was in postwar turmoil. As for art, the poem extends 'self-delight', Yeats's term for the lyric impulse, to the impulse behind all civilisation: 'Homer had not sung / Had he not found it certain beyond dreams / That out of life's own self-delight had sprung / The abounding glittering jet'. Yet, in asking whether 'some marvellous empty sea-shell' is a truer 'symbol' for 'the inherited glory of the rich', the speaker deconstructs ancestry and acknowledges change. It also upsets a neat polarity between civilisation and violence if each impulse bleeds into the other, 'bitterness' marking the spot: 'Some violent bitter man, some powerful man / Called architect and artist in ... / Bitter and violent men' to create the 'sweetness that all longed for' (204). Yet to link the creative and destructive energies is to destabilise intellectual achievement. 'My Descendants' introduces another dynastic 'what if': 'And what if my descendants lose the flower ... ?' This fear, which implicates the Irish Revival as well as family, prompts a curse that would destroy Yeats's 'house' in all its figurative aspects: 'May this laborious stair and this stark tower / Become a roofless ruin' (207). As with 'Frenzies bewilder' later on, the poet-speaker does more than admit his share in violence – he virtually commits it or commits it virtually. His anger marks what is at stake: artistic legacy and cultural memory. But the next stanza pulls back from 'apocalyptic nihilism', from his prospective self-image as an owl 'cry[ing] / Her desolation to the desolate sky'. He accepts that construction and 'alteration' are interdependent. The ambiguous 'stones' could mean that maximum or minimum traces will survive:

The Primum Mobile that fashioned us
Has made the very owls in circles move;
And I, that count myself most prosperous,
Seeing that love and friendship are enough,
For an old neighbour's friendship chose the house
And decked and altered it for a girl's love,
And know whatever flourish and decline
These stones remain their monument and mine. (207)

Like 'Befitting emblems' at the end of 'My House', 'monument' underlines the poem's own memorial function.

Although they share ‘chamber’, Yeats’s house differs in symbolic decor from ‘Ancestral Houses’: not ‘escutcheoned doors’ but ‘heavy trestles, and a board’ (206); not ‘levelled lawns’ but ‘stony ground’. Even so, even if this house denotes poetic and cultural work in progress, it might seem far from Owen’s ‘whispering of fields half-sown’ (read literally) or Thomas’s elegy for ‘A Private’:

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors
 Many a frosty night, and merrily
 Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:
 ‘At Mrs Greenland’s Hawthorn Bush,’ said he,
 ‘I slept.’ None knew which bush. Above the town,
 Beyond ‘The Drover’, a hundred spot the down
 In Wiltshire. And where now at last he sleeps
 More sound in France – that, too, he secret keeps.⁶³

Yet Thomas, too, does interesting things with an eight-line stanza and couplets, and Yeats’s imagery matters less than its tenor. He and Thomas are both occupied with cultural memory, both take a long view of history, both measure what war has done to memory and to that view: ‘But far more ancient and dark / The Combe looks ...’ France ‘darkens’ Thomas’s English combes and downs (another reversal of Brooke), as it does the lanes in Owen’s ‘The Send-Off’: ‘Down the close darkening lanes they sang their way’.⁶⁴ Owen and Thomas meet in the enforced historical trajectory that ‘The Send-Off’ symbolises. Yet Owen’s elegiac cosmology tends to conceive the war spatially, as earth taken over by the trenches; whereas Thomas locates ‘earth’ in vistas of time and memory. Like the combe, the spooft inn ‘Mrs Greenland’s Hawthorn Bush’ signals that ancient ties to Gaia – our primordial home – have been violated. The graveless ploughman opens up a long eco-historical perspective.

Allied to home, pastoral takes the shock of war in tandem with elegy. ‘War pastoral’, not quite an oxymoron, has classical roots. Jane Haber argues that pastoral has always been a reflexive genre, which ‘problematizes both its own definition and stable definitions within its texts’. From the genre’s inception in the shadow of epic, ‘presence, continuity, and consolation have been seen as related to – indeed as dependent on – absence, discontinuity and loss’.⁶⁵ Virgil’s *Eclogues* and *Georgics* belong to, and criticise, civil war. By making ‘The torn fields of France’, ‘A burnt space through ripe fields’ (Rosenberg’s lines),⁶⁶ central to Great War symbolism, the Western Front defamiliarised English pastoral along with English landscape. Gurney called his first collection *Severn and Somme* (1917), and his poems reverse Thomas’s by looking back at England through

France: 'Riez Bailleul in blue tea-time / Called back the Severn lanes ... // But the trench thoughts will not go'. In Thomas's 'As the team's head-brass', trench thoughts invade rural community. Whereas in Hardy's 'In Time of "the Breaking of Nations"' a pastoral timelessness is said to prevail over 'war's annals'; here, talk between the soldier-speaker and a ploughman interjects history and loss into the agricultural cycle, the plough's rotation, the poem's rhythms:

'Have you been out?' 'No.' 'And don't want to, perhaps?'
 'If I could only come back again, I should.
 I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose
 A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
 I should want nothing more. . . . Have many gone
 From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost?' 'Yes: a good few.
 Only two teams work on the farm this year.
 One of my mates is dead. The second day
 In France they killed him . . .'

The poem ends: 'for the last time / I watched the clods crumble and topple over / After the ploughshare and the stumbling team'. The lines' elegiac freight includes the 'death of rural England' (see below), the death of pre-war worlds, the obsolescence of some versions of pastoral.⁶⁷

After 1914, pastoral found new ways to represent peace and war. 'Georgic' might cover war poems set in a rural environment, however war-disrupted; whereas 'eclogue' consciously deploys a rural setting to 'meditate' on war. Neither category is watertight. Thomas's poetry, with its eco-historical long view, its status as 'literature of preparation' for the trenches, blends georgic and eclogue. It also encodes his thinking about traditions of writing on Nature and the countryside. 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' and 'A Prayer for my Daughter' are eclogues in a relatively exact sense. In attaching Gregory and his art to the land, the former has digested Yeats's first attempt at elegy: the classically pastoral 'Shepherd and Goatherd'. 'Prayer' echoes one of his touchstones: Virgil's 'messianic' fourth eclogue, which prophesies that a child's birth will inaugurate a golden age ('the rich horn'). Both poems also hark back to seventeenth-century English pastorals in which country houses represent a civilised ideal: Jonson's 'To Penshurst' (seat of the Sidneys); Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House', where a young girl figures the future. Coleridge and Wordsworth are more surprising pastoral presences in 'Prayer'. Yeats's sleeping child and celebration of the self-delighting 'soul' recall Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', and to pray 'O may she live like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place' is to invoke Wordsworth's 'Lucy' (*CWT* 191–2). As war mobilises

Thomas's personal and literary experience of the countryside, so pastoral strengthens Yeats's cultural fortifications. 'Meditations' mingles civil-war eclogue, war-disrupted georgic, country-house pastoral, observation of Nature, Nature as spiritual nurture. Yeats overlaps with Thomas when the natural world humbles human 'fantasies' or models recovery and rebuilding: 'The bees build in the crevices / Of loosening masonry, and there / The mother birds bring grubs and flies ...' (*CW* 208).

Yeats's house is closer to Nature than we might think. Thomas's houses are always close to the earth of which he calls himself an 'inhabitant'. In his poetry (as his poetry), houses figure the cultural effects of earthly habitation. Some, like the farmhouse in 'Haymaking' – 'A white house crouched at the foot of a great tree' – affirm continuities. But in 'Two Houses', a 'velvet-hushed' farmhouse represents an illusory dream of home to a speaker, implicitly en route to war, who also notices 'another house': a trench-like tumulus haunted by 'the dead that never / More than half hidden lie'.⁶⁸ Thomas's symbolic houses are often derelict or (like Yeats's) besieged by wind and rain; here war compounds 'the death of rural England'.⁶⁹ Since the late nineteenth century, the farming culture of southern England had been devastated by the importation of American wheat. Similarly, whatever his investment in an Irish future, Yeats's house symbolism is inflected by the death of Protestant southern Ireland ('a house burned'). While Lady Gregory's nationalism was likely to protect Coole Park, IRA Irregulars burned more than 200 'big houses' that belonged to unionists. In fact, agricultural reform had already made the Protestant landed gentry less landed. For both poets, prior sensitivity to cultural change adds depth to wartime elegy. Thomas's 'The Mill-Water' records that 'Only the sound remains' of a mill, 'Where once men had a work-place and a home'.⁷⁰

That Thomas's poetry may carry the only traces of this and other buildings or 'homes', underlines the elusiveness, arbitrariness, mutability and vulnerability of memory. The poets' cultural elegies know that functional memory cannot be guaranteed. Yeats confronts nihilism; 'Old Man', Thomas's well-known poem about memory, confronts nothingness: 'I see and I hear nothing'. Before the war, Thomas wrote that words 'outlive the life of which they seem the lightest emanation ... the things are forgotten, and it is an aspect of them, a recreation of them, a finer development of them, which endures in the written words'. Here word and thing, while non-identical, remain in touch. 'Old Man' is less convinced that cognitive traces 'endure'. The speaker cannot 'think what it is I am remembering'. All that 'appears' is 'an avenue, dark, nameless, without end'. Thomas's poetry switches between seeing itself as a mediator of memory (he calls words

'lost homes') and finding itself in zones where human memory, memory of humans, fades. 'House and Man' begins: 'One hour: as dim he and his house now look / As a reflection in a rippling brook ...'⁷¹ In 'My House' Yeats pits his 'emblems' against the fate of the man-at-arms, whose 'dwindling score and he seemed castaways/ Forgetting and forgot' (*CWI* 206).

War led Yeats to conceive 'whirling gyres'. Thomas's road 'to France' shades into the darker vistas of eco-history where humanity's effort to imprint itself on the earth can appear as mistaken or meaningless as the causes that led war to 'turn young men to dung'. Yet, on the constructive side of their dialectics, both poets engage in cultural defence. This is not the same as national defence, although it depends on the fact that, before 1914, they thought deeply about Irish and English culture. When Yeats packs his symbolic house / tower with an aesthetic and cultural survival kit, he is not only thinking of Ireland. And, while Thomas's allusive long poem 'Lob' symbolises a spirit 'English as this gate, these flowers, this mire', home remains a complex variable in his poetry. His approach to England is shaped by a mainly Welsh background, by his further outsider status as one of 'those modern people who belong nowhere', and by Yeats's influence. For Thomas, Irish poets 'sing of Ireland ... with an intimate reality', beside which 'Britannia is a frigid personification'. At odds with Kipling as with Brooke, neither imperially nor mistily patriotic, his poetry stages an internal Kulturkampf too. Like Yeats's, Thomas's 'tradition' is holistic. Set in Wiltshire, 'Lob' defines the 'intimate' ground of all literature – Nature and locality, folklore and folk-idiom, language and its sources in the compulsion to name: 'And in a tender mood he, as I guess, / Christened one flower Love-in-idleness'. Here words, things and people belong to the same ecosystem. Thomas's survival kit stresses how humanity has proved or earned (must prove, must earn) its habitation of earth as home. Like Yeats, he factors in change: language is 'Worn new / Again and again'; and Lob, a metamorphic figure, faces into war as 'One of the lords of No Man's Land'. Yet, at the same time: 'This is tall Tom that bore / The logs in, and with Shakespeare in the hall / Once talked, when icicles hung by the wall'.⁷² If in a different key, the effect resembles the textual weave and cultural memo of '*Il Penseroso's* Platonist toiled on / In some like chamber ...'

War Poetry, Modern Poetry

Books with 'modernism' in their title seldom mention 'war poetry' or even the Great War itself. Yeats's co-option by American modernism may be

a further reason why the war's impact on his poetry – on poetry – has been underplayed. Again, disjunctive poetics did not have a particularly good war; there is a touch of scissors, paste and underworked Owen about Pound's 'Maunderley': 'Died some, pro patria / non "dulce", non "et décor" ... / walked eye-deep in hell / believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving / came home, home to a lie'.⁷³ Perhaps that explains why Vincent Sherry's essay 'The Great War and Modernist Poetry' invests so heavily in David Jones's retrospective *In Parenthesis* (1937): 'The whole tradition of urban modernity in verse – stemming from the proto-modernism of mid-nineteenth-century French poetry ... to Eliot – is brought into the present-tense of Jones's own service in war-torn France ... all in all the ruined and ruinous beauty that is the muse of the mainstream tradition of modernist poetry over the long turn of the century.'⁷⁴ Like American troops, American modernist criticism may take time to arrive, but it does arrive. Another difficulty is that some avant-garde writers and artists fetishised war. F.T. Marinetti notoriously proclaimed in his *Futurist Manifesto* (1909): 'We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers'. Writing on 'The Great War and the European avant-garde', Marjorie Perloff does not excuse such ideas, but she seems to believe that glorifying war as 'hygiene' was a wholly continental or avant-garde phenomenon, that all apocalyptic visions were pro-war, and that the 'problematic response of the avant-garde' is criticised only by those who 'expect the poet to be a "nice" person'.⁷⁵

American poets living in London are often deemed more 'international' than English poets fighting in France. But not only Rosenberg's rat had 'cosmopolitan sympathies'. Thomas read widely in European literature. Two pre-war years in France introduced Owen to French Symbolism through his friendship with the gay French poet Laurent Tailhade. Seven pre-war months in Germany introduced Sorley to German literature, and influenced his conviction that nationalism prevents us from seeing ourselves as 'strangers and pilgrims on the earth'.⁷⁶ Rosenberg's training at the Slade, and Gurney's at the Royal College of Music, linked them with new developments in the arts. And the war did not stop poets, including Owen, from being 'concerned with Poetry'. Muses in arms and not in arms (although soldier-poets were ubiquitous) mingled or clashed in coteries, manifestos, magazines and anthologies. War itself grouped poets: Sassoon and Graves in the Royal Welch Fusiliers; Sassoon and Owen at Craiglockhart Hospital. Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop was a hub. Monro published the Georgian and Imagist anthologies. War poems, like some poets, appeared in both. Thomas reviewed poetry for Monro's

journal *Poetry and Drama*. In March 1916, Monro advised Owen about his work, telling him 'what was fresh and clever, and what was second-hand and banal; and what Keatsian, and what "modern"'.⁷⁷

Yet I suggested in Chapter 3 that Keats is compatible with modernity and war; this chapter has noted further Romantic and Symbolist survivals. To illustrate 'war poetry's complex negotiations with Romanticism', Santanu Das singles out a phrase from 'Dulce et Decorum Est': 'the vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues', which he calls 'a masterly rewriting of Keats's "palate fine"'.⁷⁸ At another pole, Rosenberg's 'Returning, we hear the Larks' positions the bird icon of Romantic transcendence above a 'poison-blasted track':

But hark! joy – joy – strange joy.
Lo! Heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
Music showering our upturned list'ning faces.

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song –
But song only dropped,
Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides,
Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,
Or her kisses where a serpent hides.⁷⁹

In fact, 'strange joy' covers the trenches too, and neo-Romantic oxymoron persists into a collision between song and death. Rosenberg translates 'Lamia' or 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' into a war Muse who personifies danger and deception (a poem by Hugh MacDiarmid calls Salonika 'La Belle Terre Sans Merci'). The same figure lurks in Owen's 'Exposure': 'the merciless iced east winds that knife us'. Whereas Thomas reworks the existential disturbance that Keats's odes set in a seasonal-earthly frame, Owen (who read Thomas's book on Keats) reworks his empathetic, erotic and prophetic structures. Both poets build on the sensory density with which Keats invests language, although Owen's focus on the trenches and the body ensures that he lays it on thicker: 'Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces' ('Exposure').⁸⁰ Romanticism and Symbolism survive because 'times like these', with their dark new symbols, demand a poetic scope beyond 'the cumulative weight of small facts' (Gurney). Keats's feel for the life – and death – of 'sensations' is one kind of scope; Romantic-apocalyptic phantasmagoria, another. Yeats and Owen also keep Romantic faith with poetry itself (Thomas is more agnostic). Yeats recommit himself to a Blakean pursuit of 'daemoniac images'. Despite 'I am

not concerned with Poetry', the spirit of Owen's preface updates Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*.

War compelled poets to negotiate (with) tradition. Besides specific subversions or revisions, it sparked much canon making on the hoof – partly a search for models, partly a perception that poetry since 'Spring had bloomed in early Greece' (Owen) was on the line. The underworld of 'Strange Meeting' revisits Homer, Virgil, Dante and Milton. Rosenberg reflects: 'The Homer for this war has yet to be found – Whitman got very near the mark 50 years ago with "Drum Taps".'⁸¹ In *Stand in the Trench, Achilles*, Elizabeth Vandiver explores the 'range of possible meanings that First World War poetry assigned to classical texts and classical culture' – a range that runs from unexamined parroting, skewed by public-school ideology, to deep reworking.⁸² Ditto with English-language texts. The bad sense in which this, to quote Paul Fussell, was 'a literary war', can obscure the serious ways in which English poetry was practically and conceptually tested. Owen asked: 'Do you know what would hold me together on a battlefield?' and answered: 'The sense that I was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote.'⁸³ Thomas's anthology *This England* (1915), which 'Lob' synthesises, builds cultural defence 'round a few most English poems like "When icicles hang by the wall"'. When he pleads in 'Words', 'Choose me, / You English words', he seeks to give his own work similar status.⁸⁴ Here Yeats is by no means the odd man out. 'Meditations' builds in many ancestral voices, and mentions Homer, Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare ('Falstaffian'). It's not a question of 'tradition and the individual talent', or of a choice between dumping literary tradition and clinging to its presumed wreckage, but rather of tradition comprehensively 'shaken' in the crucible of change. What Carl Schorske says of 'thinking with history' applies intensively to war poets 'writing with tradition': 'If we locate ourselves in history's stream, we can begin to look at ourselves and our mental life, whether personal or collective, as conditioned by the historical present, as it defines itself out of – or against – the past.'⁸⁵

War poetry occupies more than a corner of the formal field. Yeats, Owen and Thomas are alert to the whole field, even if their (diverse) practice falls within the orbit of 'those traditional metres that have developed with the language' (*CW* 5 213). Some critics wonder why those metres or forms have endured. One answer may be the under-noted role of the Great War in conditioning 'modern poetry', in reconditioning traditional verse-forms. Certainly, more 'open' forms also mediate war and are shaped by it. Rosenberg writes in irregular line lengths and, as when he highlights

the rat, creates effects akin to Imagist freeze-frames. 'Returning, we hear the Larks' combines these structures with larger symbolic orchestration. 'Joyous' longer lines alternate with rhythms that convey 'dangerous tides'. Rosenberg's masterpiece 'Dead Man's Dump' consists of uneven paragraphs, unevenly rhymed. As in Whitman and Lawrence, repeated words draw on and create biblical resonances:

Here is one not long dead;
His dark hearing caught our far wheels,
And the choked soul stretched weak hands
To reach the living word the far wheels said,
The blood-dazed intelligence beating for light,
Crying through the suspense of the far torturing wheels
Swift for the end to break,
Or the wheels to break,
Cried as the tide of the world broke over his sight . . .⁸⁶

Forced from juvenilia into maturity, the war poems of Owen, Rosenberg and Gurney can be flawed: 'the choked soul stretched weak hands'. But unsettling signs of improvisation, of work in progress or draft, of a struggle to find commensurable language are intrinsic to the effect (and fact) of war poetry. As Gurney puts and proves it in 'War Books':

What did they expect of our toil and extreme
Hunger – the perfect drawing of a heart's dream?
Did they look for a book of wrought art's perfection,
Who promised no reading, nor praise, nor publication?
Out of the heart's sickness the spirit wrote . . .

Gurney omits connectives and syncopates phrases ('heart's dream', etc.) as if no poem can pack everything in: 'Another wrote all soldiers' praise, and of France and night's stars – / Served his guns, got immortality, and died well'.⁸⁷ Gurney's syntactical / conceptual knots, which have sources in bipolar illness rather than in 'modernist' disjunction, and which keep him in some ways a naïve poet, powerfully suggest what may be incommunicable about war.

Yet the main story of war and poetic form after 1914 is that 'traditional form' internalised history as new complications of voice, syntax, diction, image, stanza, line, rhythm and sound – ultimately, symbol. This is epitomised by what war does to blank verse at the centrifugal core of 'As the team's head-brass'. As ironical talk of dismemberment tugs against English iambics, Thomas consciously disturbs the classical-pastoral ground of the poetic line: the ploughman's 'turn' (versus). We cannot

say whether Thomas might have written differently (or at all) had the Great War not occurred. We can say that, in keeping with *This England*, his poetry seems to anthologise, reinvent, and find multiple uses for most of the English verse-forms: blank verse; couplet; sonnet, double sonnet and near-sonnet; quatrains of various or variable line lengths; one-off stanzas; lines that range from two to sixteen syllables. Perhaps Thomas's most distinctive structural move is to unsettle a sentence's linear progress and progress across lines (inversion is not always archaism). He organises the relation between clause, phrase and verse-form in a way that implicates other kinds of sequence, multiplies shades of emphasis, and helps to entangle in a poem's mesh all that presses on its occasion, its historical moment. 'Old Man' begins: 'Old Man, or Lad's-love, – in the name there's nothing / To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man'. The last sentence of 'A Private' starts with a prolonged noun-clause object ('And where now at last he sleeps ...'), and this memorial to the missing almost mislays its subject and verb. Further inversion tucks in 'secret' to underscore the ironies of 'privacy'.⁸⁸

Owen's most distinctive structural move – consonantal rhyme – affects line more than stanza. The opposite of enjambment, it not only end-stops a line, as in the slowly unfolding couplets of 'Strange Meeting' (Owen usually plays his sentences forward), but consummates lack of elision within the line. Such sound-oxymoron helps to give words their full space, weight and texture: 'With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;/ Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground'.⁸⁹ 'Sculptural and scriptural', Sassoon's phrase for Rosenberg's poetry,⁹⁰ equally applies to how Owen fuses resonance with display. His 'shows' show that he retains more of Aestheticism than does Thomas. Yet Owen is not just a one-trick formal pony. He also mingles full and half rhyme, and, among other forms, rings the changes on couplet, quatrain and sonnet ('Dulce et Decorum Est' is a disguised double sonnet). Like Yeats and Thomas, Owen creates one-off forms in which 'the symbolism of poetry' pervades every structural element. The short line pulls readers up short in the refrain of 'Exposure' ('But nothing happens') and in 'The Send-Off', where the rhythm dissonantly combines the lilt of song, men marching, dead ends:

Down the close darkening lanes they sang their way
To the siding-shed,
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.

Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath and spray
As men's are, dead ...⁹¹

Other elegies move as if laden with cosmic entropy:

I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell,
Like a sun, in his last deep hour;
Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,
Clouding, half gleam, half glower,
And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.
And in his eyes
The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,
In different skies.⁹²

Yeats had more chance than most 'soldier poets' to achieve 'wrought art's perfection'. Did 'times like these' prompt his intricate lyric sequences, or would he have got there anyway? The correlation between his later forms and 'whirling gyres' favours the first alternative, as does the extent to which some poems dwell on the changed conditions in, or from, which they work. Reflexivity takes on new urgency. When Helen Vendler describes Yeats's sequences as 'strategies for investigating multiple aspects of complex events or concepts', or refers to his 'imperious management' of forms, she may underrate the shaping force of 'events' themselves.⁹³ From *The Rose* onwards, Yeats intertwined his poems. But his formal path from draughts to chess, from the higher 'rhetoric' of *Responsibilities* to the conundrum of poetic unity and historical anarchy ('symbolic rose' / 'rage-driven ... troop'), suggests that his difficulty in getting a fix on the Easter Rising raised the structural stakes. 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' and 'Meditations' go further than Yeats's Rebellion poems, or the dynamics between 'The Second Coming' and 'A Prayer for my Daughter', in making dialectical variations on lyric form integral to how he 'thinks about the world' (see p. 60). Like 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', 'Meditations' begins with what is becoming his staple ottava rima rhymed ABABABCC, its syntax now subjunctive ('what if') rather than all-too indicative ('Many ingenious lovely things are gone'). In repeating this stanza for 'My Descendants', Yeats maintains its association with questions of tradition and inheritance. Weightier than the 'Cowley' stanza, it retains the couplet's aphoristic kick: 'And maybe the great-grandson of that house, / For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse' (*CWI* 204). The more varied stanza of 'My House', again repeated from 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', again brings its mix of line lengths to the traffic between interiority and history, as when the speaker hopes: 'My bodily heirs may find, / To exalt a lonely mind, / Befitting emblems of adversity' (206). 'My Table', which broods on Sato's problematic sword, consists of alternate

four-beat and three-beat couplets undivided into stanzas. Perhaps because set in Yeats's inmost workshop, and concerned with the dynamics of art, this poem has a volatile pulse that either overwhelms the couplet ('And through the centuries ran / And seemed unchanging like the sword') or is stopped short by it: 'only an aching heart / Conceives a changeless work of art' (206). 'The Road at My Door' and 'The Stare's Nest' share a five-line stanza with mainly four-beat lines rhymed ABAAB. This simpler form, combined with syntax that carries the factual burden – or 'no clear fact' – of civil war, places Yeats at his closest to war reportage (208). Finally, the more expansive ottava rima of 'I see Phantoms' (hexameters or fourteeners rhymed ABABCDCD) takes meditation to a new visionary pitch.

Yeats's sequences are themselves a sequence. 'Meditations' ends, as it begins, in formal dialogue with 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'. The latter's phantasmagoric finale, which primarily speaks through a 'tumult of images', subsumes three six-line stanzas into a single block. The self-contained stanzas of 'I see Phantoms' represent space cleared by and for 'meditation' and its dialectical syntax. This poem begins: 'I climb to the tower-top' rather than: 'Violence upon the roads'. Similarly, 'The Stare's Nest' reverses the direction of 'Come let us mock at the great'. Both poems consist of four five-line stanzas, but a change in rhyme scheme, from ABABB to ABAAB, marks a shift from aphoristic finality ('They never saw how seasons run, / And now but gape at the sun' [*CWI* 213]) to tentative rhythms of recovery. A refrain starting with 'Come' also changes its tone and tune. Rather than ironically foreclosing possibility in the first line ('Come let us mock'), it ends each stanza by appealing to the future: 'O honey-bees, / Come build ...' 'The Stare's Nest' might symbolise poetic forms shaken by war and rebuilt on a new basis. To configure Yeats with Great War poets is to place the survival of traditional forms, not as anomalous, but as informed by historical cataclysm. Yeats's 1920s sequences recharged the lyric's scope and complexity. So did the earlier quasi-sequences that (with war a more immediately pressing horizon) poems by Owen and Thomas seem to compose. The English line does not sound as it did before 1914: 'Down the close darkening lanes they sang their way', 'Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff', 'Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind's eye ...'