Twentieth-Century Poets: a Selection with Notes

edited by
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TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETS:
A SELECTION WITH NOTES

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THOMAS HARDY
(1840-1928)

Hap'

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
Know that thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

Then could I bear it, clench myself, and die,
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller3 than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed4.

1 Hardy wrote *Hap* in 1866, but the poem lay dormant for thirty years before being published in 1898 as part of *Wessex Poems*. The title word, *Hap*, means 'chance', and is an archaic form, which attests to Hardy's interest for the diachronic dimension of language. Living through a great lexicographical age (i.e. the age in which the *Oxford English Dictionary* was founded and compiled), Hardy develops a strong sense of the layers in language and of the history of words; a keen etymologist, he nonetheless achieves formal simplicity, which can blind to the complexity in his use of words. His poetry, Perkins claims, needs heightened attention; without it, many poems will seem "dull, prosaic, eccentric, and lame – sketchy incidents of a predictable kind, diction that is odd without purpose or appeal, jolting meters, awkward metaphors, an inert, flattening tone of voice." (David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: from the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*, Belknap Press, 1979, 148). In fact, Hardy advocated the use of ordinary, everyday language in poetry; but his archaisms and etymologically-charged words give his poetry scope and depth and reveal his craftsmanship. "His poetry is stylistically Janus-faced: with its complexly rhyming and organized stanzas, it parades its status as something made, yet it wishes to come across, not as a lifeless artifice, but as a living creature." (Michael O’Neill, Madeleine Callaghan (eds.), *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry: Hardy to Mahon*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2011, 12). Hardy tried to combine clever artifice, whose expressive power he had learned in his career as an architect, and spontaneity. The sonnet has an argumentative structure in which no element seems to be out of place or out of logic. The first quatrains proposes a hypothesis, the second its logical consequences; the sestet contradicts the quatrains and presents the reader with the truth of chance, or, as Hardy calls it, casualty. Hardy begins his poem by imagining the existence of a god whose sole purpose is inflicting pain on humankind. Man's pain is god's ecstasy. Man's loss is god's gain.  

2 The word “Powerfuller” is an example of Hardy's taste for words: the adjective "powerful" is transformed into the (grammatically impossible) comparative “powerfuller”, and finally used as a noun. The poetic voice claims that such a god, ruthless and bent on achieving man's suffering, would be a relief, would instil courage and resilience in man. This quatrains shows Hardy's celebration of man's dignity and independence: faced with tragedy, loss, and suffering, man is not discouraged, but stands tall and bears his burden. The use of the verb ‘clench’ is particularly interesting: clenching
But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?--
Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan.
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

something means holding something tightly and firmly; in this context, the verb describes an intangible action, the gathering of one's inner strength in preparation for what is to come.

The syntax shows sharpness and certainty: the sestet is introduced by the adversative 'but', which contradicts the preceding quatrains, and followed by the negative 'not' and the adverb 'so'; the fragment is obviously elliptical in that it lacks both a subject and a verb, but its adversative force comes precisely from this conciseness.

The syntax and the word choice are interesting: the interrogative sentence is realized without the use of the auxiliary "do"; the verb 'arrive' acquires the meaning of 'come to pass', 'come to happen', implying a sense of questioning possibility, reminiscent of the French 'arriver'.

'Unbloom' is an instance of Hardy's verbal creativity: it means 'not to bloom'.

Crass Casualty is 'chance'. Joseph H. Miller observes that the adjective 'crass' (i.e. stupid, without purpose) "suggests an energy which is unthinking, inhuman, without intention or meaning, mere brute force." (Joseph H. Miller, Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature, Duke University Press, Durham, 1991, 121).

Time is as responsible for our pain as Casualty is. It is interesting to note that both Time and Casualty are personified. Time, in particular, is portrayed as 'dicing', that is, playing a game of dice, gambling with human life. In fact, Hardy's Time, Casualty, and, in The Convergence of the Twain, Immanent Will, are different incarnations of the same supreme power: Fate. Fate is neither good nor evil, but merely indifferent to humankind.

THOMAS HARDY

The Convergence of the Twain

(Lines on the loss of the ‘Titanic’) 1912

I

In a solitude of the sea

---

'The Convergence of the Twain' was first published in the souvenir programme of a charity event held on 14 May 1912 at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. The event aimed to raise funds for the victims of the SS Titanic shipwreck. The title of the poem contains important suggestions as to how Hardy deals with his chosen subject: he uses the archaic numeral 'twain', to indicate the two protagonists of his tragic story, namely, the Titanic and the iceberg; the word 'convergence' indicates the collision between the British ship, deemed unsinkable, and an iceberg on 15 April 1912. The tragedy caused a veritable cultural shock and was hailed as the incontrovertible sign that the end of an era was approaching. Tim Armstrong writes that the shipwreck "quickly became one of the most heavily predicted events ever recorded: people found that there were portents of the disaster in dreams, in literature, and even in the name of the ship, with its reference to a mythical race of over-ambitious giants." (Tim Armstrong, Haunted Hardy: Poetry, History, Memory, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2000, 112). Many interpreted the disaster as a warning against hubris: the bishop of Winchester claimed that "The Titanic, name and thing, will stand as a monument and warning to human presumption;" (quoted in Armstrong, op. cit, 112) while the editor of the Irish News claimed that the ship's doom was written in its very name, as the Titans "symbolized the vain efforts of mere strength to resist the ordinances of the more 'civilized' order established by Zeus." (Armstrong, ibid.) Hardy's poem enacts the dynamics of prophecy and 'consummation', which seemed inherent in the tragedy of the Titanic; this dynamics was a recurring Hardyesque framework. Moreover, the poem is informed by concerns, which are similar to those expressed by the bishop of Winchester and the editor of the Irish News: Hardy's text is pervaded by 'casualty' and exposes human presumption as well as the futility of human efforts to defy limitations, and the laws of nature and history. At the same time, the poem is a reflection upon history, a reconstruction of facts in an attempt to establish causes and reasons for such a great tragedy. Hardy retraces a path of ignorance: men and women are destined to go through life ignoring the 'master plan', the slow, implacable unfolding of events, whose significance is only discernible a posteriori. In The Convergence of the Twain, Hardy is "the saddened historian" (Armstrong, op. cit., 116) who reads the meaning in history.

The poem starts from the outcome of the tragedy as Hardy describes the ship lying at the bottom of the sea, a fallen dream, and works his way backwards. As historian, Hardy keeps his distance from the wreck: he merely observes its dire consequences and ironically lists the differences between the ship's late opulence, beauty and technological grandeur, and its present state of ruin. The Titanic is now a carcass inhabited by fish and sea worms, a shadow of its former magnificence. The first four stanzas show the same thematic pattern: the ship's present state is compared to its former glory.
Deep from human vanity³,  
And the Pride of Life⁴ that planned her, stilly⁵ couches she.

II
Steel chambers⁶, late the pyres  
Of her salamandrine fires⁷,  
Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres⁸.

III
Over the mirrors meant  
To glass the opulent⁹  
The sea-worm crawls – grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

IV
Jewels in joy designed  
To ravish the sensuous mind  
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind¹⁰.

V
Dim moon-eyed fishes near  
Gaze at the gilded gear  
And query: ‘What does this vain gloriousness down here?’¹¹...

³ The wordplay here is interesting: the ship is ‘far’ from human vanity, but since it lies at the bottom of the sea, Hardy describes it as being ‘deep’ from human vanity.
⁴ This is the first reference to hubris: the ship was born of pride.
⁵ Another archaic word, meaning ‘quietly’, ‘calmly’.
⁶ The steel chambers are the ship’s boiler rooms.
⁷ The ship’s boiler rooms were inhabited by fire, which was ‘salamandrine’, that is, safe. Salamanders are said to live in fire and be able to survive fire. Hardy uses this metaphor to indicate that the fire in the ship’s boiler rooms could not consume the ship, on the contrary, it fuelled it.
⁸ The boiler rooms are now fire-less, cold currents thread (in the text, Hardy uses the archaic verb ‘thrid’) through them, rhythmically, and produce sounds as if from a lyre.
⁹ Sea worms crawl over mirrors, which were meant to reflect opulence, wealth and happiness (the most prominent people of the day were travelling in first class).
¹⁰ Beautiful gems are deprived of value and light: symbols of wealth, they are now symbols of useless vanity. The alliterating words (‘bleared’, ‘black’, and ‘blind’) reinforce the ideas of loss and uselessness.
¹¹ The Titanic’s opulence and grandeur sharply contrast with its present predicament, its tragic destruction. Nature is either indifferent to it (e.g. the sea worm) or questioning the causes of such a horrible demise. This question lies at the core of the poem and it is at once judgemental, in that the Titanic is deemed a work of vainglory, and instrumental, as the poet transitions to a distant past
VI
Well while was fashioning,
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

VII
Prepared a sinister mate
For her – so gaily great –
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

VIII
And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

where the causes for the tragedy can be retrieved.

12 The tone is sharp and dry. The argumentation almost surgical, as Hardy starts tracing the origins of the tragedy.

13 The ship appears to have been ‘fashioned’ by an invisible ‘hand’, even though the ‘Immanent Will’, mentioned a couple of lines later, could be the obvious ‘fashioning’ force. Hardy seems to imply that there is a power shaping historical events, a ‘maker’ behind everything that happens. Yet, the grammatical connection between ‘was fashioning’ and ‘Immanent Will’ is frail, and, in the end, the verb appears suspended, subject-less, almost a process of creation deprived of its creator. In fact, the second half of the poem, Armstrong suggests, is “couched … in ambiguous terms which might be seen to both offer and withdraw a sense of active forces at work.” (cf. Armstrong, op. cit., 119

14 i.e. the *Titanic*. The ship has a ‘cleaving wing’: it is fast, hence the connection with flight, and it moves quickly through the sea (cleaves through water).

15 The ‘Immanent Will’ is a ‘mythological being’, which Hardy will expound in his epic *The Dynasts*; here it is also called ‘The Spinner of the Years’.

16 The iceberg is sinister, yet gay and great. It is a mate, a companion for the *Titanic*.

17 David Perkins writes: “With what Auden calls his ‘hawk’s vision’, Hardy focuses on two things – the ship being fitted out for her maiden voyage, and the iceberg simultaneously forming far away – from their origins to their collision.” (David Perkins, op. cit., 149).

18 Perkins (op. cit., 151) points to the negative connotations of ‘smart’: the word has associations of hurt and ‘of suffering of the nature of punishment and retribution’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, www.oed.com).
IX
Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

X
Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

XI
Till the Spinner of the Years
Said 'Now!' And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

---

19 The word 'Alien' continues a series of words aimed at underlining the seeming incalculable distance between the Iceberg and the Titanic (i.e. far, dissociate, distance). To the unsuspecting eye of the present, the two are unrelated.

20 'Welding' is expressive both of the material nature of the Titanic, metal is welded to build a ship, as well as of its fate; in fact, its tragic end seems to have been welded onto it right from its inception.

21 Hardy the historian follows the lilting arc of his story: he begins his poem by observing the outcome of the disaster, then flashes back to its mysterious origins, and, here, flashes forward to expose man's cluelessness. Meaning unfolds through time, but is only retrievable post hoc: only after the event can the historian know that the Titanic and the iceberg were fated to meet. Hardy, Armstrong maintains, finds the suggestion that history can be mapped and predicted offensive (Armstrong, op. cit., 122). "History is rather a stream than a tree," Hardy writes in 1885, "There is nothing organic in its shape, nothing systematic in its development. It flows on like a thunderstorm rill by the roadside; now a straw turns in this way, now a tiny barrier of sand that. The offhand decision of some commonplace mind high in office at a critical moment influences the course of events for a hundred years." (Hardy, quoted in Donald Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1973, 103).

22 Bent' implies the incontrovertible quality of the meeting: the iceberg and the Titanic could not have avoided colliding, or, in Hardyesque terms, converging.

23 Hardy was sensitive to the root sense of 'august', that is, 'prepared by augury', 'brought to fruition'.

24 'Consummation' comes instantly: an event that has been prepared for a long time comes to pass in a few short moments. There is a voice, a power, finally setting things in motion and tragedy strikes fast. Hardy's voice, as historian and poet, points to a vision in which meaning is "retrospective, the product of a necessary blindness," and "understanding is belated." (Armstrong, op. cit., 123).
THOMAS HARDY

In Time of the Breaking of Nations

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

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

The poem was written in 1916 and is one of the most celebrated war poems in English literature. The poem’s beauty and undying testimony to the tragedy of the First World War lies in its obliqueness: no overt reference to contingent events is made. This is typical of Hardy, whose tendency is to put “the human stories he tells at a distance, and so [evoke] an attitude that is both sympathizing and reflective. He creates distance by seeing the individual human fate within an immeasurably larger context.” (David Perkins, op. cit., 157). Only in the poem’s title can the reader discern a reference to the war. The title is taken from the Bible, Jeremiah 51:20. “Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war; for with thee I will break in pieces the nations, and with thee I will destroy kingdoms.” The poem juxtaposes rural scenes and settings, emblematic of durability and continuity, to the horrors of war. Here “the cataclysmic insanity of the Great War seems but a passing mood to the everlasting, unchanging ways of the labours of peasant man and maid.” (H. C. Duffin, 
Thomas Hardy: a Study of the Wessex Novels, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1964, 320).

A harrow is a piece of farming equipment used to break up the earth before planting seeds (www.oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com). A clod is a lump of earth. The rural image epitomizes the fatigue of labour and the natural processes of death and re-birth; these are pitted against the tragedy of war, not to imply a simplistic contraposition between a healthy country life and the horrors of battle, but, on the contrary, to draw them close as expressions of the same cycle of death, decay and re-birth which underlies the workings of the world.

The syntax is peculiar: the non-finite clause in the first line of the poem conveys a sense of suspended time, governed by continuity in the repetition of seasons.

The slow awkward movement expressed by the verb ‘stalk’ conveys both fatigue and a vague threat, for ‘stalking’ can also mean moving in a threatening or unpleasant way.

The theme of decay is evident in this image and in the word ‘couch-grass’ (i.e. an invasive weed often difficult to remove). In these lines, the poet describes the grass being burned in heaps.

‘Dynasties’ must be understood as earthly powers, the powers which fight each other all through history: their power will pass, they will be supplanted by others, but rural life, the seasonal cycle, the repetitive, yet reassuring rhythms of nature, will continue.
Yonder a maid and her wight⁷
Come whispering by:
War’s annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die⁸.

⁷ Hardy describes the meeting of a couple, but the word ‘wight’ (i.e. ghost, spirit), reminiscent of the wight in Keats’s *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, gives the meeting disturbing undertones. Death and decay seem to be woven into the very fabric of life.

⁸ The poem “pictures human life in a few timeless and elemental scenes, which are themselves beheld from a distance in a wide landscape. Human beings disturb the landscape in a way so minimal that, for the imagination, they are assimilated to it, and take on its reassuring qualities of silence and perduring being.” (David Perkins, op. cit., 157) Despite war, despite the hints of death and decay, natural life endures, its cyclical continuity a warm comfort.
RUPERT BROOKE
(1887-1914)

The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.
There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

The Soldier is the last in a series of five war sonnets named "1914". The sonnets were published between December 1914 and January 1915, in the literary periodical New Numbers. Their fortune was impressive. Written in the early months of the First World War, the Soldier presents an idealistic, highly patriotic view of war. Brooke's patriotism and his idyllic vision of death on the battlefield epitomized both the popular and the institutional view of war, and celebrated what another war poet, Robert Graves, would call the 'big words', honour, valour and glory (cf. George Walter, ed., The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry, Penguin Books, London, 2006, xx). As a soldier, Brooke's career was short-lived: he was in the army for seven months before finding his death by blood poisoning in the Dardanelles on 23 April 1915. He was never engaged in direct combat. His lack of experience on the battlefield is partly responsible for the idealism and purity of his vision. Yet, his belief in the importance of fighting for his country should not be taken to imply blindness as to the more painful and dreary facets of war. Even though he believed in "heroic feats, vast enterprise, and the applause of crowds" (Rupert Brooke, Letters from America, with a preface by Henry James, Kessinger Publishing, Whitefish, 1913, 77.), even though he thought that "it's a great life, fighting, while it lasts" (quoted in Timothy Rogers, ed., Rupert Brooke: a Reappraisal and Selection, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1971, 9), Brooke could also see that war was "a bloody thing", and that "half the youth of Europe, [was being] blown through pain to nothingness in the incessant mechanical slaughter of these modern battles" (ibid.). Published at a time of great distress and uncertainty, The Soldier proved valuable to the British Government, which was in search for the right tool to inspire loyalty and patriotic love in the masses. The sonnet was thus enormously successful as a means of propaganda: on Easter day 1915, the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, read the poem during his sermon. Brooke died only a short time later: his untimely death, his devotion to King and Country, and his poetry made him the stuff of legend.

While the poem is 'death-riddled' (the idea of death in battle is the pivot on which the entire sonnet is built), it does not, in fact, contain any description or reference to the gruesome, horribly painful reality of death. Death is described as an abstraction: there are no wounds, no trenches, no agonies, no bones or voices breaking; nothing of the crude, annihilating violence of war.

The noun 'England' is used four times in the poem, while the adjective 'English' is used twice. The repetition emphasizes the strong patriotic value of the work. England makes and provides for all its sons; in the poem she is hailed as a kind, giving mother: her sons are seeds, whose death will sow life into the earth of any foreign country. It is easy to perceive the imperialist undertones of such words.
Gave⁴, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind⁵, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends⁶; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven⁷.

⁴ The relative pronoun “to whom”, which should have logically preceded the verb “gave” is omitted by ellipsis.
⁵ The non-finite clause “all evil shed away” (l. 9) and the minor clause “a pulse in the Eternal Mind” (l. 10) both refer to “this heart” (l. 9).
⁶ Read: ‘learned from friends’.
⁷ Following the news of Brooke's death, his acquaintance, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, wrote a eulogy which can be interpreted as the beginning of the mythologizing of Brooke. Churchill’s political agenda is evident in the text: “Rupert Brooke is dead. A telegram from the Admiral at Lemnos tells us that this life has closed at the moment when it seemed to have reached its springtime. A voice had become audible, a note had been struck, more true, more thrilling, more able to do justice to the nobility of our youth in arms engaged in this present war, than any other more able to express their thoughts of self-surrender, and with a power to carry comfort to those who watch them so intently from afar. The voice has been swiftly stilled. Only the echoes and the memory remain; but they will linger. During the last few months of his life, months of preparation in gallant comrade-ship and open air, the poet-soldier told with all the simple force of genius the sorrow of youth about to die, and the sure triumphant consolations of a sincere and valiant spirit. He expected to die: he was willing to die for the dear England whose beauty and majesty he knew: and he advanced towards the brink in perfect serenity, with absolute conviction of the rightness of his country's cause and a heart devoid of hate for fellow-men. The thoughts to which he gave expression in the very few incomparable war sonnets which he has left behind will be shared by many thousands of young men moving resolutely and blithely forward in this, the hardest, the cruellest, and the least-rewarded of all the wars that men have fought. They are a whole history and revelation of Rupert Brooke himself. Joyous, fearless, versatile, deeply instructed, with classic symmetry of mind and body, ruled by high undoubting purpose, he was all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in the days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is that which is most freely proffered’ (cf. Rupert Brooke's Obituary in The Times, http://net.lib.byu.edu/english/WWI/poets/rbobituary.html).
SIEGFRIED SASSOON
(1886-1967)

Glory of Women

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
Glory of Women was published in Sassoon's 1918 collection Counter-Attack and Other Poems. The title of the poem epitomizes one of the defining characteristics of Sassoon's war poetry: irony. Despite the celebratory intentions in the title, the text is a strong indictment against some women's ignorance and narrow-minded idealism. Sassoon's irony "underscores the poem's overall sarcastic tone concerning the disparity between the front and home – between the soldier's horrific experience and the polite society the women live in. The old-fashioned women just do not understand the modern condition of war" (James H. Meredith, Understanding the Literature of World War I, Greenwood Press, Westport, 2004, 121).

Unlike Brooke, whose early death prevented him from experiencing the full horror of the war, Sassoon enlisted in 1914 (August 4, the same day the English declared war to Germany) and fought until the end in 1918. He lost a brother in battle, was injured several times; his approach to writing about the war was thus fundamentally different from Brooke's. In the last months of 1916, home on leave and harbouring discontentment and anger with regard to the war, Sassoon made contact with a group of pacifists, and that was the beginning of his heart-felt, strenuous protest against the injustice of war. Most of the British war propaganda was aimed at proving that war was inevitable, that stopping the fierce, savage German enemy was a moral imperative. After years at the front, Sassoon was unable to keep believing this; on 14 June 1917, he made the following statement public: "I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, on which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation. I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the contrivance of agonies which they do not, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize" (cf. Michael Copp, ed., Cambridge Poets of the Great War: an Anthology, Associated University Presses, London, 2001, 251). After the declaration Sassoon risked being court-martialled, but his friend and fellow-poet Robert Graves intervened; the military authorities proved sympathetic and sent Sassoon to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Scotland to be treated for shellshock (a form of post-traumatic stress: some soldiers subjected for months to the intensity of artillery warfare showed symptoms of neurosis, suffered from panic attacks, and mental and physical paralysis). In Scotland Sassoon met and made friends with fellow-poet and soldier Wilfred Owen.

The poem hinges on the opposition between the front and home. In fact, Sassoon was growing increasingly aware of "civilian ignorance and insensitivity" (Patrick Campbell, Siegfried Sassoon: a Study of the War Poetry, McFarland and Company, Jefferson, 1999, 113) and of the dire consequences of Government propaganda.

Leave: "a period of time when you are allowed to be away from work … for a special reason."
Or wounded in a mentionable place⁴
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells⁵. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laureled memories when we're killed⁶.
You can't believe that British troops "retire"
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood⁷.

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks⁸ to send your son

⁴ Meredith writes: "A mentionable place could have multiple meanings here. One meaning is that the soldier is wounded in a geographical place that is identifiable, mentionable only because it would not be censored by the authorities. The second meaning is that the soldier is wounded in a place on his body that could be mentioned to a proper lady, such as an arm or a leg. Either meaning involves one form of censorship or another for the soldier" (Meredith, op. cit., 121).

⁵ Shells are "metal case[s] filled with explosive, to be fired by a large gun." (www.oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com) By the end of the First World War munitions factories were employing 950,000 women.

⁶ Celia M. Kingsbury writes: "what Sassoon describes here is … the attitude engendered by war propaganda" (Celia M. Kingsbury, For Home and Country: World War I Propaganda on the Home Front, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2010, 96). In fact, much of the enlisting process was carried out through propaganda either exalting man's role as protector of woman or exploiting women's emotional ascendant as mothers and wives on the male population. Kingsbury quotes a British popular song, in which a mother declares: "No matter what befalls you / We shall love you all the more, / So come and join the forces / As your fathers did before" (Kingsbury, op. cit., 251). Such words mirror the moralistic stance exposed in Sassoon's sonnet: the soldier's "mutilations will only be endearing, and they will become decorations in which [the women] express pride" (ibid.).

⁷ Sassoon's crude words here provide both a stolen snapshot of war's harshest horrors and a contrast to the artificial, illusory talk of heroism and chivalry which is the main currency on the Home Front.

⁸ During the First World War boots and socks were an important concern for soldiers. Time in the trenches meant that soldiers often stood in water or mud for days; this caused them an infection called 'trench foot': their feet went numb and the skin turned red or blue. If ignored for long, the condition could result in amputation. From the end of 1915 onwards, British soldiers were required to have three pairs of socks on them at all times and change them at least twice a day. Sassoon's gruesome irony is here particularly effective: while a German mother is working, thinking of her boy's healthy feet, the war has already taken his life. The German mother seems to ignore how much is really at stake during the war. Sassoon's choice of introducing a German
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

woman is interesting for it points to different interpretative possibilities. On the one hand, it could be understood as a criticism of the war's cruelty, meant to go beyond partisan interests and national borders. On the other hand, it could be read as the poet's attempt to universalise his indictment of the female attitude to war.
WILFRED OWEN
(1893-1918)

Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,

The title is taken from Horace's eponymous poem: Dulce et Decorum Est pro Patria Mori (i.e. “It is sweet and right to die for one's country”). Owen drafted the poem in 1917 while he was away from the front and recovering from shellshock at Craiglockhart War Hospital. It was there that he met fellow-poet Siegfried Sassoon. Owen’s poetry was deeply influenced by Sassoon’s “unflinching, direct language and style” (Harold Bloom, ed., Poets of World War I: Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, Chelsea House Publishers, Broomall, 2002, 14). The months following Owen’s stay at Craiglockhart were the most prolific of his short life. A soldier by the end of October 1915, Owen had always harboured conflicting feelings about the war, and yet the experience of trench life, death and bloodshed made him a true poet, allowed him to find his true voice and leave ready-made poetic models behind. He was shot and killed in November 1918, one week before the Armistice. While Brooke is usually regarded as the poet of early-war idealism, and Sassoon as the scathing, angry poet of irony-clad protest, Owen is remembered both for his deep understanding of the tragedy of war, all human, and for his vivid, sometimes brutal portrayal of death and bloodshed. He is the poet of protest and truth as much as Sassoon is: Dulce et Decorum Est is, in fact, a direct accusation to the kind of propaganda-fuelled, simplistic and cheap poetry which was published in England during the war. When he wrote Dulce et Decorum Est, Owen seems to have had a female poetess in mind, Miss Jessie Pope, who authored a number of recruiting poems during the war. Such poems celebrated the “glamorized decency of war” (Bloom, op. cit., 15) and perpetuated the centuries-old stereotype of the sacredness of death in battle. Owen firmly attacked this hypocritical and, most importantly, ignorant perspective, which misrepresented the gruesome reality of trench war. Yet Owen is also the poet of pity. After his death, a draft preface to a collected edition of his war poetry was found among his papers: “Above all, this book is not concerned with Poetry,” Owen writes, “The subject of it is war, and the pity of war. / The poetry is in the pity” (ibid., 21). “Pity,” Ramazani explains, “is Owen’s term for emotional identification with the victims of war” (Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning: the Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, 4).

1 This is a poem of sights and sounds; its graphic nature is realized through the recurrent use of similes, to enhance the visual effect, and onomatopoeias, to achieve aural vividness.
2 “Someone who is knock-kneed has legs which turn inward at the knee” (cf. Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary Online at www.mycobuild.com).
3 Owen delays mentioning the subject until the second line, so as to give more relevance to the soldiers’ dreadful conditions. Notice the use of the pronoun ‘we’, which establishes the text’s documentary authoritativeness. Owen narrates what he has experienced, thereby drawing a line between real-life war and Miss Pope’s idealized, sugar-coated version.
4 Mud.
5 Rockets sent up to light the area between the front lines (i.e. no-man’s-land).
And towards our distant rest\(^7\) began to trudge.\(^8\)
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,\(^9\)
But limped on, blood-shod.\(^10\) All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots:\(^11\)
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets\(^15\) just in time,\(^16\)
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,\(^19\)
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.\(^20\)

\(^7\) Camps were built away from the frontlines so that soldiers could leave the trenches and rest for a few days or more.
\(^8\) Walk with great difficulty, due to fatigue or pain.
\(^9\) About the importance of boots and socks during the First World War, see above note on Glory of Women.
\(^10\) Blood was their shoes.
\(^11\) "Unable to walk well because of an injury to the leg or foot" (www.oxfordadvancedlearners-dictionary.com).
\(^12\) The soldiers’ exhaustion is here portrayed as all-encompassing: they have lost all ability to use their senses (they are blind and deaf) and perform the most basic motor functions (walking).
\(^13\) A hoot is a loud noise. Owen refers to the noise made by the shells which are still being fired as the soldiers go back to camp.
\(^14\) Direct speech marks the end of the descriptive first part and the irruption of action in the poem, as soldiers withstand a gas attack.
\(^15\) Gas masks.
\(^16\) Owen’s syntax vividly renders the urgency and danger of the moment. The soldiers try to put on their gas masks as quickly as they can.
\(^17\) One soldier does not manage to wear the mask and his movements become more and more frantic as the gas starts affecting him. A person ‘flounders’ when he/she has to move in water or mud, thus ‘floundering’ here refers to uncoordinated and struggling movements.
\(^18\) Lime is a white chalky substance which can burn live tissue.
\(^19\) The narrator’s vision is influenced by the mask: he sees as if under water, that is why the falling soldier looks as if he were drowning.
\(^20\) The narrative sequence is here interrupted by a present reflection: the narrator’s memory gives way to its lasting effect, which continues to haunt him. The poet is helpless (helpless sight) and cannot fight his nightmares. The use of onomatopoeia achieves a peculiar vividness here. With the verb ‘guttering’ Owen probably meant flickering out like a candle or gurgling like water draining down a gutter, referring to the sounds in the throat of the choking man, or it might be a sound partly like stuttering and partly like gurgling." (www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html)
If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

This is the final part of the poem, which contains both the memory of the soldier’s poisoning and an admonishment to all those advocating the justness of the war (e.g. Miss Jessie Pope).

The soldier is literally thrown onto a wagon. This is reminiscent of the death carts used to dispose of the dead during Plague epidemics.

To writhe is to twist or move relentlessly because one is in great pain. Owen uses this verb in connection with the soldier’s eyes, to emphasize the intensity of the pain.

The simile tries to account for the soldier’s facial expression, twisted into such a dreadful grimace as to be almost impossible to describe.

Poison gas usually caused the victim’s lungs to fill with fluid. The soldier is here portrayed as choking on his own blood.

Cud is the half-digested food that cows bring back from the stomach into the mouth.

This is an obvious address to Miss Jessie Pope.
W.H. AUDEN
(1907-1973)
Spain 1937

Yesterday all the past. The language of size

"Much of Auden's poetry of the late 1930s is defined by journeys to and from war" (Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, 106). Auden's wars (World War I, which ended when he was only eleven; the Spanish Civil War, 1936 – 1939, and the Sino-Japanese war, 1937 – 1945) affected his perspective on space, time, history, poetry and the role of the poet. Despite spending seven weeks in Spain in 1937 and six months visiting the Sino-Japanese war in 1938, Auden believed that the strong emotional impact of the particular experience should not blind to the complexity of the universal experience: the world "has no localized events" and everyone, every day is "profoundly implicated" (W. H. Auden, 'Commentary', in W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *A Journey to a War*, Faber, London, 1939, 292). "Every war, no matter how distant, is everyone's war" (Kendall, op. cit., 107), and the good artist must be "more than a bit of a reporting journalist" (W. H. Auden, "Psychology and Criticism", *New Verse*, No. 20, April-May 1936, 24); the poet in particular "must have direct knowledge of the major political events" (Auden, quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: a Biography*, HarperCollins, London, 1981, 207). *Spain 1937* is the product of this belief in the artist's duty to document and comment on the world's events. Yet, it is "the best poem [Auden] wished he'd never written" (David Garrett Izzo, *W. H. Auden Encyclopaedia*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2004, 245): initially titled "Spain" and published by Faber in pamphlet form to raise funds for medical aid in Spain, the poem's title was changed to "Spain 1937" in 1939. It was included in *Another Time*, 1939, and in *Collected Poems*, 1944, but Auden subsequently banned it from all following collections. Auden's unease with the poem could be ascribed to the conviction that "regardless of his original good intentions, his original support of the anti-fascist loyalists in the Spanish Civil War, and his masterful artistry, he had written propaganda" (David Garrett Izzo, op. cit., 245).

The first six stanzas of the poem trace the history of mankind through a series of symbolic, allusive snapshots; the passage of time is quick and seamless, helped along by the clipped, sharp rhythm of Auden's almost completely verb-deprived verse. The events are painted in bold strokes as the poet worries less about precision than he does about the security this summarized version of the past gives us, "the sense of a knowledge encapsulated and possessed" (Paul Hendon, ed., *The Poetry of W. H. Auden*, Icon Books, Cambridge, 2000, 94). Despite the apparent spatial and chronological exactness in the title, *Spain 1937* embodies Auden's belief in poetry which is "informed by localized events, [but] expresses them in an abstract language which does not limit the applicability of the lessons learned" (Kendall, op. cit., 107). The beginning of the poem erodes the stability of time and place to establish a universal succession of yesterdays, todays, and tomorrows as the poet "situates concrete historical events inside a universal history of mankind" (Rainer Emig, *W. H. Auden: towards a postmodern poetics*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2000, 105). Spain is only a fragment in the ever-travailing flux of time and history. The poem "signifies Auden's idea of inclusive time as a perpetual continuum. He begins with alternations of 'Yesterday' and 'Today' then a focus on 'Today' followed by alternations of 'Tomorrow' and 'Today'. The past is the present is the future" (D. G. Izzo, op. cit., 245).

In the poem's retelling of history language plays a pivotal role: it is the means without which
Spreading to China along the trade-routes; the diffusion
Of the counting-frame and the cromlech;
Yesterday the shadow-reckoning in the sunny climates.

Yesterday the assessment of insurance by cards,
The divination of water; yesterday the invention
Of cartwheels and clocks, the taming of Horses. Yesterday the bustling world of the navigators.

Yesterday the abolition of fairies and giants,
The fortress like a motionless eagle eyeing the valley,
The chapel built in the forest;
Yesterday the carving of angels and alarming gargoyles.

The trial of heretics among the columns of stone;
Yesterday the theological feuds in the taverns.
And the miraculous cure at the fountain;
Yesterday the Sabbath of witches; but to-day the struggle.

Trade and ritual monuments (like the ‘cromlech’) would have been impossible. Specifically, the ‘language of size’ can be interpreted as the language of trade, of economics and mathematics.

This is the first of the two verbs in the first six stanzas of the poem. Interestingly, ‘spreading’, like the second verb ‘eyeing’, is a participle; its non-finite status is evidence of the poem’s portrayal of time as a continuum.

China is here anachronistic, as it did not exist as such at the time of the cromlech and the counting frame. The reference could be taken as a nod to the Sino-Japanese war.

This is a reference to mathematics: the ‘counting-frame’ is a “frame with small balls which slide along wires, ... used for counting” (www.oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com); and the ‘cromlech’ is an ancient stone circle.

‘Shadow Reckoning’ is an Ancient Greek method to measure inaccessible objects (e.g. buildings), by measuring the shadows they cast.

Despite the apparent modernity, this could be a reference to fortune-telling.

In the first six stanzas the poem expresses “the Western teleological conception of history as moving from antiquity to the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and even colonialism and imperialism” (Rainer Emig, “Good Fight: W. H. Auden’s ‘Spain 1937’”, in Tim Kendall, ed., The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, 264-278, 267). This line can be taken as the first reference to the Middle Ages. “The abolition of fairies and giants” could be interpreted as a reference to the pivotal role of religious faith in the Middle Ages, which aimed at ‘abolishing’ superstition.

‘Eying’ is the second verb in the first six stanzas, and is significantly referred to a fortress, a military building, and, as such, the first and only overt reference to war.

This line is a reference to the Inquisition.

This is a reference to the Reformation.

The past is contrasted to the present for the first time in the poem: the quick pace of history...
Yesterday the installation of dynamos and turbines\textsuperscript{14},
The construction of railways in the colonial desert\textsuperscript{15};
Yesterday the classic lecture
On the origin of Mankind. But to-day the struggle.

Yesterday the belief in the absolute value of Greece,
The fall of the curtain upon the death of a hero\textsuperscript{16};
Yesterday the prayer to the sunset
And the adoration of madmen\textsuperscript{17}. But to-day the struggle.

As the poet\textsuperscript{18} whispers, startled among the pines,
Or where the loose waterfall sings compact, or upright
On the crag\textsuperscript{19} by the leaning tower:
'O my vision. O send me the luck of the sailor.'

And the investigator\textsuperscript{20} peers through his instruments
At the inhuman provinces, the virile bacillus
Or enormous Jupiter finished:
'But the lives of my friends. I inquire. I inquire.'

is halted by a present whose only defining feature is struggle. ‘Struggle’ can be taken as a reference to the Spanish Civil War, but the lack of specificity in the verse points towards a universal struggle, ‘the struggle or moral choice that goes on occurring every today, because in the present in which men live they must choose and act …’ (Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s, The Viking Press, New York, 1977, 252).

\textsuperscript{14} This is a reference to the Industrial Revolution.
\textsuperscript{15} This is a reference to colonialism and imperialism.
\textsuperscript{16} Here Auden refers to the founding role of Greek art and culture in Western tradition. In particular, he refers to Greek drama.
\textsuperscript{17} Emig (op. cit., 268) believes this to be a criticism of “the specifically British upper-middle-class values that shaped Auden and many of his generation, often promoted by lectures on (precisely) universal history and universal values, often leading straight to ‘the adoration of madmen’”.
\textsuperscript{18} This stanza signals the end of the introduction. In the following four stanzas, the poet, the investigator (i.e. scientist), the poor, and the nations are faced, in turn, with the impossibility of reconciling yesterday’s past and today’s struggle. The poet, in a strangely Romantic setting, ‘prays to his vision and wishes ‘for the luck of the sailor’, which means for a safe escape from the mess that surrounds him’ (Emig, op. cit., 268). The Spanish Civil War has not yet been explicitly mentioned.
\textsuperscript{19} A crag is ‘a high, steep and rough mass of rock’ (www.oxfordlearnersdictionary.com).
\textsuperscript{20} The scientist, too, tries to come to terms with ‘today’s struggle’: he uses his instruments to shape the chaotic present into a measurable order, but his concern is with the fear of loss and death (cf. “the lives of my friends”).
And the poor in their fireless lodgings, dropping the sheets
Of the evening paper: ‘Our day is our loss. O show us
History the operator, the
Organizer, Time the refreshing river.’

And the nations combine each cry, invoking the life
That shapes the individual belly and orders
The private nocturnal terror:
‘Did you not found the city state of the sponge’;

‘Raise the vast military empires of the shark
And the tiger, establish the robin’s plucky canton?
Intervene, O descend as a dove or
A furious papa or a mild engineer, but descend.’

And the life, if it answers at all, replies from the heart

31 The poor ask for change and reprieve from their suffering and deprivation.
32 History is an organizing principle, a superior power to which the poet, the scientist, the poor
and the nations address their call.
33 The nations address History and ask for intervention, thinking of History as a *deus ex machina*,
a guiding principle, which descends and operates real change in the world.
34 Auden typifies nations using animal imagery: the sponge represents the city state of the
Middle Ages; the shark and the tiger represent colonial aggressiveness and violence; while the robin
is associated with the ‘canton’, the Swiss federal model.
35 In these four stanzas, the Spanish conflict is obliquely alluded to. The reality that the scientist
investigates hints at political and behavioural models (‘inhuman provinces’ and ‘virile bacillus’)
which could be taken as background causes of the war; the poor stand, more predictably, for social
injustice and inequality which inevitably produce social unrest and, ultimately, civil war; the na-
tions symbolize the outside perspective on the Spanish Civil War and, consequently, the lack of
any decisive action. History seems to be held accountable by all: poet, scientist, the poor and the
nations.
36 In the following stanzas we witness the only real poetic voice in the text, the voice to which
all statements from this line onwards can be attributed: History. Yet, significantly, History is not a
disembodied, abstract entity, but something tangible, concrete, ‘life’. This life is not a single voice,
but a collective voice: it comes from “the heart, / the eyes and the lungs”, but also from “the shops
and squares of the city”. This collective voice is far from the *deus ex machina* called upon in the
previous stanzas; it does not grant intervention and improvement, nor a resolution to today's strug-
gle. Quite the contrary: ‘It denies any request to act as an alleviating or redemptive force. Indeed
it says ‘no’ to the demands of individuals and the collective — for the sheer reason that it cannot
act as a distant saviour and authority for them, because it *is* them. Relegation of responsibility to
an elevated and potentially transcendental force is denied by the eloquent ‘life’ of the poem, since
all it can do is accept whatever decision individuals forming a collective as citizens make’ (Emig,
op. cit., 270).
And the eyes and the lungs, from the shops and squares of the city:

‘O no, I am not the mover;
Not to-day; not to you. To you, I’m the

‘Yes-man, the bar-companion, the easily-duped;
I am whatever you do. I am your vow to be
Good, your humorous story.
I am your business voice. I am your marriage.

‘What’s your proposal? To build the just city? I will.
I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic
Death? Very well, I accept, for
I am your choice, your decision. Yes, I am Spain.

Many have heard it on remote peninsulas,
On sleepy plains, in the aberrant fisherman’s islands
Or the corrupt heart of the city,
Have heard and migrated like gulls or the seeds of a flower.

They clung like birds to the long expresses that lurch
Through the unjust lands, through the night, through the alpine tunnel;
They floated over the oceans;
They walked the passes. All presented their lives.

27 ‘Life’ is not different from the people who ask for its intervention; it is them, and it refuses to offer the people an ideological framework to lean into, or support them in their decision-making processes. Whatever they decide, whatever they do, that is what makes a difference. ‘Life’ is thus faceless, it is everywhere, in every action: vows, jokes, business voices, and marriages. ‘Life’ will not do anything, but merely grant individuals and the collective what they want, whether it be the Just City (cf. St. Augustine), poetry, or the Romantic vision of life and death.

28 This is the first explicit mention of Spain in the poem. The identity of ‘life’ and ‘Spain’ can be understood by weaving together the two theoretical undercurrents of the poem: the affirmation of man’s ethics through responsible decision-making, and universal history. Spain is the chronotope to which the history of mankind has led; today’s struggle hinges upon it, it is through the Spanish conflict and its resolution that today will give way to tomorrow. The Spanish ‘struggle’ can only be resolved by individuals through decision-making. Spain and life correspond in that both are nothing but mirrors of the people; they are what the people’s actions and decisions make them.

29 The Spanish war was embraced as a defining event of modernity by a whole generation of young, politically active men. An International Brigade was formed, and volunteers from all over the world went to Spain to help in any way they could. This stanza epitomizes the conflict’s enormous resonance.

30 The conflict calls upon individuals to take a stance, choose a side, act. Spain is a magnet to which all are drawn: this stanza, like the previous two, documents the response that the conflict
On that arid square, that fragment nipped off from hot Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe; On that tableland scored by rivers, Our thoughts have bodies; the menacing shapes of our fever Are precise and alive. For the fears which made us respond To the medicine ad, and the brochure of winter cruises Have become invading battalions; And our faces, the institute-face, the chain-store, the ruin Are projecting their greed as the firing squad and the bomb. Madrid is the heart. Our moments of tenderness blossom As the ambulance and the sandbag; Our hours of friendship into a people's army.

To-morrow, perhaps the future. The research on fatigue

engendered in Europe and in the world. “Challenged by their lives to decide and act, the unnamed many who have decided to become involved in the struggle in Spain present nothing less than their lives, which enabled them to make this decision in the first place” (Emig, op. cit., 272).

31 Here Spain is described geographically. This stanza and the following two are a transition to the final part of the poem in which a hypothetical future is presented.

31 ‘Soldered’ means ‘fused’, ‘welded’.

31 The impersonal voice of universal history from the beginning of the poem is transformed, firstly, into life’s collective voice addressing an unspecified ‘you’, and, secondly, into a collective and inclusive ‘we’ (e.g. “our thoughts have bodies”). Stan Smith notes that “Communist ideology … induced in many poets a way of looking at the self as simply a physical body in a world of material objects, a fulcrum for action rather and a thinking and feeling subject” (in Stan Smith, “What the Dawn will Bring to Light: Credulity and Commitment in the Ideological Construction of Spain”, in Kendall, ed., Oxford Handbook, 245-263, 251).

34 ‘These lines symbolize the transition from every day life to military action: trivial objects and events (bodies, medicine ads, travel brochures, and facial expressions) are transformed into instruments of war and feelings of sharp alertness.

35 Here finally the heart of the struggle is named. Madrid is not simply the centre of a civil war between the people of Spain and fascist extremists, but the epicentre of an epochal change, an epochal choice.

35 ‘Tenderness and friendship, too, are transformed by the war.

37 This line marks the beginning of the concluding part of the poem, which is partly devoted to ‘tomorrow’. Whereas Auden’s portrayal of the past possesses the certainty of things acquired, the future is more tentative, uncertain, as is evident in the use of the word ‘perhaps’. Compared to the force and intensity of today’s struggle, Auden’s future sounds more trivial and mundane: ‘a potpourri of hobbies such as breeding terriers; scientific research not only into (the causes of?) ‘fatigue’, but also into ‘the octaves of radiation,’ something that would soon be known more ominously as the atom bomb. To this odd assemblage, Auden adds … an ‘enlarging of consciousness

28
And the movement of packers; the gradual exploring of all the
Octaves of radiation;
To-morrow the enlarging of consciousness by diet and breathing.

To-morrow the rediscovery of romantic love,
The photographing of ravens; all the fun under
   Liberty’s masterful shadow;38
To-morrow the hour of the pageant-master and the musician,

The beautiful roar of the chorus under the dome;
To-morrow the exchanging of tips on the breeding of terriers,
   The eager election of chairmen
By the sudden forest of hands.39 But to-day the struggle.

To-morrow for the young poets exploding like bombs
The walks by the lake, the weeks of perfect communion;
   To-morrow the bicycle races
Through the suburbs on summer evenings. But to-day the struggle.

Today40 the deliberate increase in the chances of death,
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;41

by diet and breathing,’ supplemented by suburban bicycle rides, and followed by the ‘rediscovery
of romantic love’ and/or the ‘photographing of ravens.’” (Peter Edgerly Firchow, W. H. Auden –

38 The future is imagined as a time of political freedom.

39 Political freedom is here represented by the exercise of the right to vote. Peter Firchow be-
lieves that “this peculiar catalogue of quasi-utopian activity is – and was apparently intended to be –
strongly reminiscent of Karl Marx’s vision, as expressed in The German Ideology, of what a future
communist society would be like, namely one where people would be able to ‘hunt in the morn-
ing, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner’”. (Firchow, op. cit., 138-9).

40 In the very last sequence of the poem, the future is cast aside and the present returns to the
foreground, demanding.

41 These two lines were strongly criticized by George Orwell in Auden’s time. Orwell wrote:
“Mr Auden’s brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always some-
where else when the trigger is pulled. So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire
by people who don’t even know that fire is hot;” (quoted in Scott Lucas, Orwell, Haus Publishing
Ltd., London, 2003, 44). Auden took the criticism to heart, perhaps because he felt the stinging
truth of the accusation: in Spain Auden had ended up delivering a few radio broadcasts and had
never managed to get to the frontline. Emig states that the line’s “scandalousness rests in the fact
that it describes something seemingly unpoetic …, and, worse, describes it neutrally.” (Emig, op.
cit. 275). It is possible that Auden was trying to subscribe consistently to his agenda of objective
and detached realism.
To-day the expending of powers
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

To-day the makeshift consolations: the shared cigarette,
The cards in the candle-lit barn, and the scraping concert,
    The masculine jokes; to-day the
Fumbled and unsatisfactory embrace before hurting.

The stars are dead. The animals will not look.
We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and
    History to the defeated
May say alas but cannot help or pardon.

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42 These images are a vivid rendition of life as a soldier, its simple pleasures and comradeship.
Yet Auden seems to forget his golden rule: authenticity and real-life experience. The images of life
at the front, no matter how vivid, are somewhat stereotypical (smoking, playing cards, dirty jokes).
Emig claims that “This is one of several moments in the poem when one feels that Auden hardly
came close to the realities of fighting – or Spain – during his short stay.” (Emig, op. cit., 277).

43 The final stanza of the poem is a short epilogue. In these four lines, Auden stays true to the
poem’s ethics of actions and decisions: no supernatural power (e.g. the stars or History) can take
responsibility for the course of events. Change and consolation only lie within the ability of indi-
viduals. The time we are given is limited. “Responsibility,” Emig writes, “also for hurting and killing
and making decisions, including wrong ones, is what in the final consequence makes us human.
Our ethical task, Auden’s poem argues in the context of an unpredictable civil war, which attracted
as many egotistical investments as it stimulated utopian hopes and dreams, is to turn this human
potential into attempts at civilized and humane lives.” (Emig, op. cit., 278).
Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood

The poem was written in December 1938 while Auden was in Brussels and visited the Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts. It was first published in the spring of the following year in New Writing. From Brussels, Auden wrote: “I have been doing the art gallery and trying to appreciate Rubens. The daring and vitality take one’s breath away, but what is it all ABOUT?” (Letter to Mrs Dodds, 31 August 1938, quoted in John Fuller, W. H. Auden: a Commentary, Faber and Faber, London, 1998, 266). It was Brueghel who struck Auden as having more sense of purpose. According to critics, the main source of inspiration for Musée des Beaux Arts is Brueghel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. The painting juxtaposes a momentous event (Icarus’ tragic fall and subsequent death) with “a world of diurnal unconcern.” (Fuller, op. cit., 266). Auden’s need for visual purpose was fulfilled by Brueghel: here was a painting whose complex morphology enacted a defining contradiction of human experience, the peaceful co-existence of prosaic concerns and suffering. The individual is led to believe that his/her painful experiences will have a visible effect on the outside world. Brueghel’s painting exposes the fallacy in such instinctual belief: tragedy is surrounded by indifference; the world and its natural rhythms are not disrupted. Landscape with the Fall of Icarus portrays a world in which personal tragedy is contextualized: it “is an inescapable part of the human … condition” (Firchow, op. cit., 157). Icarus, a pair of legs-flailing in sea water, drowns while the rest of the world goes on about its business: a farmer toils the land, a shepherd takes care of his herd, and ships set sail for new destinations.

Notice the marked syntax at the beginning of the poem: the subject (‘The Old Masters’) is placed after its logical predicate and complement. By beginning his text with “about”, Auden not only foregrounds precisely the sense of purpose he found in Brueghel’s painting, that feeling that Brueghel’s style was “about something,” (Fuller, op. cit., 266), but also the core of his own poetic reflection, that is, human suffering.

Right from its inception, this poem seems to contradict other works by Auden in the 1930s: firm political beliefs and sharp social critique are set aside in favour of the quiet wisdom of early-modern painters who, the poet claims, knew all there was to know about human suffering. Firchow suggests that, unlike Spain, Musée des Beaux Arts deals with suffering as a human rather than a socio-political phenomenon. Freudian or Marxist theories are useless face to face with the harsh, unheroic reality of suffering in the human experience.

Auden’s conception of ‘The Old Masters’ is problematic. To begin with, Auden’s use of the plural is curious in that there is only one Old Master being consistently referred to in the poem: Pieter Brueghel the Elder. The epithet ‘Old Masters’ is usually referred to artists from the Renaissance to the seventeenth century, who portray human suffering in a way that is consistently different from Brueghel’s: in their work suffering is the centre of attention. Brueghel must have struck Auden for his unconventional approach, consisting in a “characteristic relegation of events and people usually thought of as ‘central’ to the margins of his pictures,” and a tendency to make them “seem smaller by placing them in the background.” (Firchow, op. cit., 162)
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along 6;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth 7, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond 8 at the edge of the wood: They 9 never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom 10 must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life 11 and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree 12.

In Brueghel’s Icarus 13, for instance: how 14 everything turns away
Quite leisurely 15 from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure 16; the sun shone

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5 The word “position” has a peculiar logistical quality here: on the one hand, this can be ascribed to the visual nature of the poem’s source of inspiration, and, perhaps, to Auden’s desire to retain some of that spatial quality in his text; on the other hand, “position” best expresses the eminently peripheral role suffering is granted, both in the painting and in life.

6 Suffering happens in the midst of indifference. Yet Auden does not qualify this indifference as negative, but merely represents the fact, as Brueghel did.

7 Landscape with the Fall of Icarus is not the only Brueghel painting referenced in this poem: The Adoration of the Kings, The Massacre of the Innocents, and The Numbering at Bethlehem were all hanging together in a special alcove when Auden visited the museum in Brussels. Here, then, is a reference to Christ’s birth; problematic in that it seems to clash with the overall purpose of the poem: the ‘miraculous birth’ is obviously not an emblem of suffering, rather, it is a joyful occasion.

8 Skating children can be found in Brueghel’s Numbering at Bethlehem.

9 The ‘Old Masters’.

10 This can be interpreted as a reference to Christ’s martyrdom, a seemingly contradictory detail in a poem whose focus is human suffering; or, simply, as Auden’s embracing of Christ’s humanity in his torturous death.

11 Auden weaves some irony in his text. In fact, there are no dogs urinating or defecating in some untidy spot anywhere in Brueghel’s paintings. Auden’s sentence may be taken as a desire to exacerbate the contrast between life and suffering: the pressures of everyday life, no matter how mundane or unbecoming, are such that tragedy cannot eclipse or disrupt them.

12 Once again, not an echo from Brueghel, but rather a willingly sarcastic paradox.

13 Here is a direct mention of Brueghel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. The matter-of-fact tone of the reference, complemented by the rather discursive use of ‘for example’, give the line a slightly dry, didactic character.

14 Ellipsis here is another example of the poem’s interesting syntactical choices.

15 Icarus’ tragedy seems to have no resonance, the world effortlessly turns its back on his drowning.

16 There is bitterness in Auden’s words about the ploughman, but no condemnation: the man may have heard something, but Icarus’ failure could not trouble him as it is too far from his equally pressing concerns. A ploughman’s life is dependent on land and harvests; he is not
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green Water\(^{17}\), and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky\(^{18}\),
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

equipped to understand Icarus' failure.

\(^{17}\) The sun shines on Icarus' death, not out of cruelty, but out of necessity: the fierce river of life cannot stop its course. It is not in its nature to do so.

\(^{18}\) The ship and its crew must have seen something and must have been surprised, but the pull of necessity and purpose is too strong, and nobody can linger. This is, according to Firchow, Auden's oblique stab at Capitalism: the ship, carrying goods no doubt, is expensive and delicate and, bent on profit, cannot stop to save a boy fallen out of the sky. Yet, Auden is more interested in facts than in judgements. The ploughman, the sun, and the ship are all unwilling witnesses; their lack of reaction could be interpreted as the awareness of impotence, rather than as wilful indifference. “For what can be done to save Icarus? Should the ploughman call a nautical ambulance – or the Communist Party? Should the little ship transmute into the Battleship Potemkin? Would it make any difference if the horse stopped scratching its behind? Or the children skating?” (Firchow, op. cit. 157)
DYLAN THOMAS
(1914-1953)
Fern Hill

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs

Fern Hill is the farm of Ann Jones, Dylan Thomas’s aunt; the place where Thomas spent his summer holidays away from Swansea (his place of birth) as a child. The poem was published in 1946 as part of the collection Deaths and Entrances: it is a reminiscence of childhood, vivid, yet dream-like, coloured with the magic unity of nature and child, which is lost in adult life. “Not how it feels to be young,” Tindall writes, “the theme of Fern Hill is how it feels to have been young.” (William York Tindall, A Reader’s Guide to Dylan Thomas, Thames and Hudson, London, 1962, 280). Influenced by the poetic rhythms and tempos of his native Wales, Dylan Thomas is difficult to pigeonhole, even though his poetic efforts (especially at the beginning) are close to the so-called ‘Neo-Romantic’ movement. The Neo-Romantics reacted against the lucid complexity and distance of Modernist poetry, they were inspired by André Breton’s Surrealism and were responsible for bringing visionary qualities and the love of nature back to poetry. Thomas never signed the Neo-Romantic manifesto, but his poetry shares some of its concerns: vital energy, wild daring imagery, verbal acrobatics, and the gift of vision. Thomas is a poet of unity: life and death, man and nature, heaven and hell are all part of an organic whole whose only rule is fluidity. “The reader,” Marchetti suggests, “clearly perceives that the world Thomas presents is an irrational and apparently random description of sensations and instincts.” (Paola Marchetti, Landscapes of Meaning: from Auden to Hughes, ISU, Milano, 2001, 87). Yet randomness is but a passing impression caused by Thomas’s daunting imagery and surreal mood: Thomas was a craftsman who often had recourse to complex formal structures in his poetry. Fern Hill is expressive of both the visionary and the craftsman in Thomas: what appears like disorder is, in fact, a dream-like, surrealist perspective on life and memory; a sensual perspective through which the world is experienced synaesthetically and linguistically. Thomas was a self-confessed lover of words. “I fell in love – that is the only expression I can think of – at once, and am still at the mercy of words, though sometimes now knowing a little of their behaviour very well, I think I can influence them slightly and have even learned to beat them now and then, which they appear to enjoy.” (Dylan Thomas, “Notes on the Art of Poetry”, in Daniel Jones, ed., The Poems of Dylan Thomas – vol. 1, New Directions, New York, 2003, xv-xxii, xvi) This unrestrained love is the cause of Thomas’s linguistic profusion and subsequent complexity: avowedly a slave to the physicality of words, to their sensible, tangible aspects, Thomas weaves intricately textured poems, which often read enigmatic, their metaphors too daring, their images too distant from any semblance of verisimilitude. Thomas “admitted that he used words as autonomous entities, that is, only for their musical and rhetorical properties (colour), and not as vehicles of meaning.” (Marchetti, op. cit., 88). In a personal letter, Thomas explains his working method in the following way: “A poem by myself needs a host of images, because its centre is a host of images. I make one image … let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time.” (Dylan Thomas, “Letter to Henry Treece”, Paul Ferrries, ed., The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas, Dent, London, 1985, 281). There are two specific time references in the first line of the poem: ‘now’ and ‘was’. The first, according to Tindall, could be interpreted as “a storyteller’s opening word” (Tindall, op. cit., 280), a signature flourish of sorts; whereas ‘was’ takes the reader back to the time and experiences the
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns

poetic voice is trying to resuscitate, and relive, through words. 'Now' is also the present of poetic creation, in which the adult poet summons the past of childhood.

Even though childhood in Fern Hill is a memory the poet relives now that he is an adult, the point of view presented all through the poem is the child's. The surreal descriptions, dream-like rather than tangible, are vivid, yet elusive, because perceived through the magic-seeing eyes of a child; hence the simple similes and colourful descriptions which populate a 'child's mental world'. So, Tindall suggests, the child's 'lilting vision makes the ugly house 'lilting.' (Tindall, op. cit., 281). The noun 'lilt' is customarily used to refer to a pleasant rising and falling pattern in song or speech. Thomas's use of 'lilting' in this poem is a typical example of the poet's synaesthetic use of language, as sound ('lilt') becomes visual. Aunt Ann's house has a lilt: it is old and ugly and very asymmetrical.

'The phrase 'as happy as the grass was green' is an example of manipulation of an already existing expression, related to nursery rhymes.

A dingle is a small, wooded valley.

Time is the other great protagonist of Fern Hill. Childhood is portrayed as a passing gift of ease, happiness and freedom from all cares with which Time, the ruler of all living things, graces man and woman.

Thomas identifies childhood with two colours: green ('happy as the grass was green'), the colour of youth and fertile growth, and gold, the colour of light and preciousness. The pervasive presence of colour has contributed to the labelling of Thomas's work, and *Fern Hill* in particular, as impressionistic.

Time allows the child to make the most of his quiet youth and enthusiasm.

The child feels all-powerful: he is at one with nature and is its master at the same time.

Wordplay on the traditional fairy tale opening: 'once upon a time'. 'Once below a time' is ambiguous: on the one hand, it suggests that childhood is a moment seemingly out of time; on the other, the adverb 'below' implies a subordinate position with respect to Time, which is the sole and all-powerful master of life.

Thomas begins the second stanza of his poem by repeating the ideas at the core of his portrait of childhood: greenness and the absence of cares. Repetition is a key feature of *Fern Hill*: the adjectives 'young and easy' of line 1 are echoed by 'green and carefree'. Moreover, repetition is multi-faceted in the poem: single sounds are repeated, as well as words (e.g. green, golden, time, sun, young, happy, easy, lovely, honoured), and syntactic structures (e.g. 'Now as I was young and easy…', And as I was green and carefree…', 'Oh as I was young and easy…'; or 'Golden in the mercy of his means…', 'Golden in the heydays of his eyes…', 'Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means…', etc…).
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home**, 
In the sun that is young once only***, 
Time let me play and be 
Golden in the mercy of his means****, 
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves 
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold*****, 
And the sabbath rang slowly 
In the pebbles of the holy streams******.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely******, the hay 
Fields high as the house*******, the tunes from the chimneys********, it was air 
And playing, lovely and watery 
And fire green as grass********. 
And nightly under the simple stars 
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away********.

*** The reader is never given a realistic description of the farm: the poet scatters mentions of a yard, barns, trails, water and trees all through the poem, but there are no tangible details for the reader to hold on to. This can be explained in the light of Thomas’s stylistic and thematic choices: the holiday house of childhood is described impressionistically, for it is part of the world of “the child and of dreams, the inner world of feelings and memories where everything is possible and objects and people float in the air.” (Marchetti, op. cit., 107)

**** Fern Hill is a poem with two voices: the oneiric voice of childhood and memory, and the counter-voice of growth and change, inevitable. Thomas develops his counter-narrative slowly and discreetly, signs of it are scattered through the poem: the sun, a symbol for man, is young once only.

***** Like in the previous stanza, Time grants us the illusion of permanence. It is a benevolent, paternal figure.

******* Nature is the child’s precious jewel and he does with it as he pleases. Like in stanza 1, he is king, lord, hunter and shepherd.

******** The ‘Sabbath’ is the day of the Lord in the Jewish tradition, a day of rest and prayer: the time spent at Fern Hill is like a ‘Sabbath’, a never-ending holy day, in which nature herself seems to sing in joy.

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******** Thomas’s use of words in unexpected ways is remarkable. Here, ‘sun’ is a metonymy to indicate daytime.

******** A disappointingly ‘simple’ word, or, rather, the simple, unsophisticated word of a child.

******** This is obviously a child’s perspective: being small, the child perceives hay as being much taller than it is.

******** Another synaesthetic image: the smoke from the chimneys ‘looks’ like a stream of music, ‘moves’ like a melody, curling in mid-air.

******** Notice the repetition of several key words (i.e. lovely, green).

******** Marchetti writes: “In the boy’s mind, sleep and darkness take the farm and the world away every night to bring them back, in the morning, renewed and wet with dew.” (Marchetti, op. cit., 108)
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
Out of the whinnying green stable
On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
In the sun born over and over,
I ran my heedless ways,
My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs.

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73 Cf. ‘all the sun long’.
74 Marchetti again: ‘Little children think that the world does not exist when they go to sleep and that it is miraculously recreated when they wake up.’ (Marchetti, op. cit., 108) The cock is a symbol of the morning, but also a symbol of betrayal (i.e. Peter betrayed Christ at dawn): the passing of time betrays man.
75 In the morning, the world looks completely new and the child looks on it with the same unabashed surprise that Adam and Eve must have felt.
76 The reference to Creation is made explicit in the idea that every morning that sun is born again, ‘that very day’.
77 Repetition is key in the poem: Thomas here stresses once again the child’s feeling of dominion over the natural world.
78 Everything feels new. Every morning is a new creation: the clouds are newly born, like the sun.
79 A contradiction to the statement in the second stanza that the sun ‘is young once only’.
80 This is the dramatic moment of change: the child goes from carefree to ‘heedless’, implicitly, he goes from perfect innocence to ignorance. He ignores that something is happening underneath his glowing holy days, that Time is working against him.
81 The time he spent playing under the blue sky.
82 Here the child’s perspective is replaced by that of the grown man: the child spent his days ignorant of change, growth and eventual decay, but the adult man, now remembering the beauty of those days, has experienced the passing of Time, experienced the preciousness, and rare quality, of those happy, carefree days.
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
In the moon that is always rising,
Nor that riding to sleep I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

33 Children eventually follow Time out of childhood.
34 The days of innocence.
35 A loft is the space just below the roof of the house. This is where the child sleeps while at Fern Hill. The loft is described as 'swallow-thronged', surrounded by a large number of swallows.
36 This is the moment of realisation: the moment when the child sees that Time leads him to 'another' night (not a 'new' night), to 'another' day (not a 'new' day).
37 The idea of going to sleep as if on horseback seen in stanza three is here repeated.
38 The child now knows that Time will take the farm, the holy place of childhood, away. Days will never be new again, re-born every morning.
39 The secret permanence of childhood is finally unveiled as an illusion. The child is not 'young and easy', nor is he 'green and carefree', nor 'green and golden'; he is green (young and fresh), but 'dying' as well, as Time has its way with him.
40 The child is already in chains, he is enslaved by time like all men, only he does not know it yet. His song is his short-lived ignorance.
DYLAN THOMAS

Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright

1 Thomas wrote this elegy for his dying father. He probably started it on the occasion of his father's illness in 1945, but only finished it in 1951. The poem is a villanelle, a poetic form of popular origin, rich with the rhythms and music of orality. This villanelle is composed of five tercets and a quatrains: the first line ends the second and fourth tercets; the third line ends the third and fifth tercets. Such a rigid formal structure seems at odds with the poem's strongly emotional and personal content, but Thomas was a poet of form and wordplay and knew that the almost refrain-like repetition of lines could add poignancy and symbolic value to the poem. This elegy is a call to fierceness and dignity in death. "Do not accept death quietly, Thomas prays, but, raging, affirm life while dying." (William York Tindall, op. cit., 215).

2 The apparent misuse of the adjective 'gentle' in this line (the adverb 'gently' would have been grammatically appropriate) is, in fact, an attempt to combine two separate exhortations into a single one: going towards death and not being gentle. Only superficially can 'gentle' be taken to qualify the act of going towards the end; it serves, in fact, as a qualifier for the poem's addressee who is asked to be ruthless and die while raging full of life. The phrase 'that good night' is a metaphorical periphrasis for death (equated with night, just as life is equated with light) and no part of it seems unproblematic: the determiner 'that' grants a modicum of distance from a most feared event, and yet the event is 'good' "as end perhaps to a natural and inevitable process." (Tindall, op. cit., 216). Good night is also good-bye.

3 All the verbs chosen to describe the attitude towards death resonate with fire and fierceness, with impulsive and instinctual action.

4 This is the first example of four kinds of men who meet death. Wise men know that they must accept death ('dark is right'). 'Right' is here as ambiguous as 'good' in the first line: both may be taken to mean 'inevitable', 'natural'.

5 Wise men accept death because they know that their words are of no consequence, they have achieved nothing. And yet, that very 'inconclusiveness' is the reason why these men will not 'go gentle into that good night'.

6 "The last wave by' is both the ultimate wave of life's beckoning waters and waving good-bye." (Tindall, op. cit. 216).
Their frail deeds’ might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men⁹ who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it⁹ on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men¹¹, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes¹² could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height¹³,
Curse¹⁴, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

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⁷ Their good actions do not matter much in the end.
⁸ The good men’s morals prevent them from enjoying life to the full, that is why they cry in their last moments.
⁹ Wild men are those who try to make the most of their time and seize the day.
¹⁰ These men find out that their way of living is irrelevant; no matter how fully they lived, they must die. After all, they feel as if they had been grieving the passing of time all their lives.
¹¹ Grave men are poets. Their portentous sight, second sight, gives them away. ‘Grave’ here means serious, but also close to the grave, to the secrets of life and death.
¹² The poet’s sight is blinding, but is also a form of blindness: the poet’s eyes have been blinded by seeing too much, by the light of his gay meteors (i.e. his art).
¹³ The quatrain is dedicated to the poet’s father, who is standing on the ‘sad height’. Westphal quite rightly claims that the ‘height’ must not be interpreted literally (as a bier, for example). More than a place, it is a moment in time, the moment of utmost solitude, the point of no return when man is facing his own death and cannot turn away from it. (see Jonathan Westphal, “Thomas’s Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night”, Explicator, 52, No. 2, Winter 1994, 113-115, 114).
¹⁴ ’Curse’ can be interpreted as Thomas’s exhortation to his father, as a part of the vigilant, stubborn affirmation of life in death; while ‘bless’ is a request, Thomas’s need to receive his father’s blessing.
Once I am sure there’s nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new –
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don’t.
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
‘Here endeth’ much more loudly than I’d meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,

---

4 What Larkin proposes is the agnostic perspective on a church: stripped from its halo of sacredness, the church is a building. The cut-and-dry list of furnishings is emblematic.
5 Bunches of flowers placed in different spots of the church.
6 Another instance of detachment and criticism is found in the trivializing of the holy objects (‘some brass and stuff’) on and behind the altar (‘up at holy end’).
7 ‘Musty’ (smelling damp or unpleasant) qualifies ‘silence’, thereby weaving a beautiful synaesthesia.
8 The synaesthetic moment is prolonged through the use of the verb ‘brew’ (to make beer) with reference to silence.
9 Here the suburban ordinariness of middle-class life emerges in the mention of cycle clips (clips used to stop trousers from getting caught in a bicycle chain), hence in the oblique reference to a bicycle, which must have been left outside. The word ‘hatless’ expresses a form of reverence and respect that smack of ingrained habit.
10 The baptismal font. Notice the minor clauses, whose clipped, dry rhythm underscores the visitor’s cold detachment.
11 The stand for holding the Bible when reading in church.
12 i.e. Bible verses printed in large print. The verb ‘hector’ implies a forceful, aggressive action meant to convince someone to do something; applied to the size of Bible verses, this is an obviously sarcastic remark, in tune with the poem’s tone of cold detachment.
13 An Irish coin, worthless in England.
14 The second stanza had ended on a note of strong dismissal. Now the beginning of the third stanza brings a questioning tone to the previous dismissal and establishes a rather different course for the poem. The concessive ‘yet’, followed by a marked word order, stresses the contradiction: despite his sarcasm and uncomprehending detachment, the agnostic observer is unexplainably drawn to the church.
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches will fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?

The church seems to hold some form of appeal, which cannot be formalized, voiced or properly explained. The poet is at a loss, left with doubts and questions as to the real worth and significance of the building. Now stripped of its religious meaning, it still seems to have symbolic power, a magnetic pull that draws people in despite their disillusionment and critical attitude.

The agnostic observer stops using the first person 'I' and suddenly uses the plural 'we': the poem’s reflection on the place the church has in modern society implies a dimension beyond the mere individual, and calls for this ‘universalizing’ move.

Material made of sheep or goat skin, used for writing in the past.
A brass container, small and round, used to carry the Eucharist to the sick or the invalid.

This stanza marks the beginning of an inner monologue, reminiscent of Eliot’s Prufrock. The poet’s hypotheses as to the future of churches are in line with his secular beliefs: churches are here interpreted mostly as buildings, architectural realities whose function is in the process of being lost and is very likely to be completely lost very soon. The poet thus imagines the possible uses to which churches can be put.

The third and fourth stanzas speculate about the future. The poet wonders ‘whether churches will become merely museums, ‘A few cathedrals chronically on show, / Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,’ or will be left to moulder as ruins, ‘let … rent free to rain and sheep,’ or will become haunted places, avoided as unlucky or the secret centre of superstitious cults, or will be ravaged by ‘Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique.’’ (Peter R. King, Nine Contemporary Poets: a Critical Introduction, Methuen & Co., London, 1979, 32). On the one hand, the poet recognizes that churches resonate with the power of tradition, education and suggestion. Yet, even this power must slowly wane. Larkin delineates this progressive erosion as a three-stage process in which spiritual power turns into superstition; superstition turns into disbelief, and disbelief turns into oblivion. What, Larkin asks, happens then?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation – marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these – for which was built
This special shell? For, though I’ve no idea

22 A wild, thorny bush on which blackberries grow.
23 A brick structure that supports a wall.
24 Oblivion comes through nature: grass and weeds will swallow the church, change it out of any recognizable shape, and all purpose will be lost.
25 Those that ‘tap and jot’ (i.e. very likely tap their pencils against something and quickly write down a few notes) are architects, the only people who know that ‘rood-lofts’ are upper-galleries between the nave and choir area of a church.
26 An archaeologist. A ‘bibber’ is literally a heavy drinker, an alcoholic.
27 ‘Randy’ means sexually eager.
28 Religious fanatic.
29 A reference to priests or ministers, who wear gowns and preaching bands.
30 Someone like the agnostic observer.
31 The observer here describes himself in a rather unceremonious manner: he expresses his ennui, his ignorance, his awareness of the slow disappearance of everything that made the church a sacred place.
32 The church. The reference is to its shape.
33 Small bushes and trees.
34 The socio-cultural investigation lying at the core of the poem is finally revealed: even though going to church is routine devoid of spiritual significance, it carries a very important social and symbolic function. The church, a mere building, is the last remaining social force that is creative of unity. Reality is fraught with separation: marriage, birth, even death are broken at their very centre. The church is a ‘special shell’, a protective cocoon, meant to preserve human life and experience, as well as strong traditions.
What this accoutred frowsty barn\textsuperscript{35} is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here;  

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent\textsuperscript{36} air all our compulsions meet\textsuperscript{37},  
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete\textsuperscript{38},  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round\textsuperscript{39}.

\textsuperscript{35} The matter-of-fact tone is never lost. Even now, in the middle of the startling revelation of man's desire for continuity and unity which the church fulfils, the agnostic observer, 'bored' and 'uninformed', stubbornly holds on to his secular point of view.
\textsuperscript{36} Blended, mixed, combined.
\textsuperscript{37} The church is the place where man's scattered nature can find unity. More than that, man's desires, needs and instincts acquire dignity ('are recognized') and purpose. They become 'destinies'.
\textsuperscript{38} The social-symbolic function will endure.
\textsuperscript{39} The poem describes "a strictly secular faith; [Larkin's] speculations about what churches will become when they fall 'completely' rather than partially 'out of use' lead him to a conclusion in which the fear of death and the loss of religious belief are counteracted by an ineradicable faith in human and individual potential." (Andrew Motion, “Philip Larkin and Symbolism”, in Stephen Regan, ed., \textit{Philip Larkin}, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 1997, 32-54, 33). In this respect, Larkin shares Hardy's lack of faith in received absolutes and his firm belief in man's self-reliance. In its closing stanzas, the agnostic observer loses some of his initial cynicism and acknowledges his 'thirst' for more, for tradition, for continuity, for meaning, for something more 'serious' (notice that the word is used three times in last stanza). The poem's see-saw of seemingly conflicting attitudes has led to interpret the text as a 'debate' (cf. Stephen Cooper, \textit{Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer}, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, 2004, 145) in that it presents the reader with an eminently practical attitude as well as with a pull towards more spiritual, or, as Larkin puts it, 'serious' concerns. The agnostic observer's opinions are ambiguous: on the one hand, he affirms his middle-class, suburban agnosticism, focussing on objects and on the practical uses of the church; on the other, he constantly wonders whether there is more to the building than what he is willing to admit. The poem dramatizes an inner struggle within the agnostic observer, it expresses "the dramatic interplay of … dual-voiced, split personalities." (Wales, op. cit., 88)
PHILIP LARKIN

Talking in Bed

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far,
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.

---

1 The poem was published in 1964 as part of the collection The Whitsun Weddings. Larkin's typical irony is evident in the title: Talking in Bed implies verbal communication, which is never actualized in the text itself. In fact, the poem is about silence and incommunicability. Moreover, the title implies communication within the context of a relationship and that, too, is denied in the poem. The dialogic quality constitutive of a relationship should favour verbal interaction, but Larkin exposes the paradox of silence between two individuals, whose very closeness often causes a lack of understanding.

2 The first line already expresses the pivotal paradox of the poem: communication should be facilitated by intimacy (‘in bed’), but it is not. The conditional ‘ought’ “is the primary establisher of tone. It contains elements of wonder, desire, regret, fatalism.” (Stephen Dobyns, Best Words, Best Order: Essays on Poetry, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003, 156). The other words in the first line are mostly denotative (‘talk’ instead of ‘whisper’ or ‘chatter’, ‘in bed’ instead of ‘after sex’), so that the modal can stand out more strikingly. The superlative ‘easiest’ leads the reader to suppose there are other activities to be done in bed of which talking is the least arduous; or, simply, it could imply that talking in bed is easier than talking somewhere else. On the one hand, “flattening the other words,” (Dobyns, op. cit., 156) Larkin highlights ‘ought’; on the other, he uses ‘easiest’, and is thus able to formulate his argument that communication ought to be easy in intimacy, but it isn’t.

3 ‘Lying together’ is synonymous of ‘in bed’ and is here indicated as a natural, ages-old moment of intimacy.

4 In bed, ‘lying together’ embody a special type of closeness, unattainable elsewhere. Larkin’s punning use of ‘lying’ is interesting, in that it both attests physical presence and suggests the opposite of honesty.

5 This is the first explicit mention of silence in the poem. Leslie Jeffries suggests that since in the first stanza talking is equated with honesty, silence here can be understood as uncomfortable and awkward, or, worse, as a lack of honesty and truthfulness. (Leslie Jeffries, Opposition in Discourse: the Construction of Oppositional Meaning, Continuum International Publishing, London, 2010, 63). Moreover, while the statement initiating the poem is universal in scope, the beginning of the second stanza asserts the specificity of individual experience in direct contrast to the ‘universal rule’.
Outside⁶, the wind's incomplete unrest'
Builds and disperses⁸ clouds in the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
None of this cares for us⁹. Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation¹⁰

It becomes still more difficult¹¹ to find
Words at once true and kind¹²,
Or not untrue and not unkind¹³.

⁶ Larkin’s growing feeling of a fracture between man and nature (cf. Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: his life’s Work*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1989, 31-2), results in the choice of the word ‘outside’, which instantly serves to distinguish the room, occupied by the lovers, from the world outside. ‘Inside’ and ‘outside’ are separate and seemingly caught in the same impossibility to communicate as the two people sharing the bed. The lovers’ ‘growing estrangement … seems to lead to consciousness of the presence of nature beyond the room,’ (Rossen, op. cit., 31). It is ‘outside’ that the poetic voice looks for answers, but finds that nature, the world at large, is indifferent to the fate of two individuals and the silent distance between them.

⁷ The double negative is an interesting choice. Jeffries explains it as a visual representation of tossing and turning in bed which is attributed to the wind: in fact, the wind is blowing restlessly (‘unrest’), yet there may be quiet times, when it is at rest before picking up again (‘incomplete’).

⁸ The wind is here characterized as both a constructive and a destructive force: it is said to build and disperse clouds. ‘The clouds in the sky and towns on the horizon have no care for the couple, and no explanation for them; they neither ‘care’, nor show ‘why’ …’ (Rossen, op. cit., 31)

⁹ Nature offers no explanations as to why unparalleled closeness and unparalleled incommun- nicability should co-exist.

¹⁰ ‘Isolation’ is the inescapable condition of the individual. Intimacy is the time and place to breach this gap. A couple is uniquely distant from isolation: “the implication seems to be that being in bed with one other person is about as far as you can get from being alone.” (Jeffries, op. cit., 65) Yet Larkin chooses to express the positive concept of emotional and physical closeness by juxtaposing two words indicating the opposite. In fact, Larkin could be implying that ‘distance from isolation’ does not mean closeness to a companion at all: he draws the thin line separating loneliness from aloneness.

¹¹ ‘Talking in bed’ is not easiest. Quite the contrary: intimacy is where talking and honesty are still more difficult. The doubt Larkin insinuates in his initial statement has transformed into a certainty.

¹² The juxtaposition of ‘true’ and ‘kind’ is interesting in that Larkin creates a veritable strong collocation: words spoken in bed are required to be both honest and delicate at once. The implication is that it is easier to be kind when lying, and that it is easier to lie when one is not worried about kindness at all.

¹³ The double negative is used as a grading instrument. While ‘not untrue’ and ‘not unkind’ would be generally interpreted as meaning the same as ‘true’ and ‘kind’, here, they are to be understood as middle grounds between honesty and lies, kindness and rudeness, respectively. The implication seems to be that ‘if the lovers in their silent bed cannot find something nice … to say to each other, the least they might be able to do is say something that is ‘not untrue’ and ‘not unkind’ … There is, in other words, something less than perfection in both of these scales (truth and kindness) and that is the more realistic expectation we might have of a relationship with another human being.’ (Jeffries, op. cit., 66).
PHILIP LARKIN

Sad Steps

Groping back to bed after a piss,
I part thick curtains, and am startled by
The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness.

Four o'clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie
Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.
There's something laughable about this,

The way the moon dashes through clouds that blow
Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart
(Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below)

High and preposterous and separate —
Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!
O wolves of memory! Immensements?
No,

One shivers slightly, looking up there.
The hardness and the brightness and the plain
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

7 The reaction is typically anti-climactic, emblematic of Larkin's poetic 'doublespeak': to the suburban, yet inspired, lunar landscape the poet juxtaposes the earthy, commonplace atmosphere of a quick stop before the window after nightly urination. More than that, the suburban, middle-class night-watcher does not share the ages-old poetic love for the moon: he is fascinated, yet fundamentally untouched. By confessing to finding the moonlight landscape 'laughable', Larkin effectively deromanticizes 'the exalted atmosphere of ... nocturnes.' (Erik Martiny, 'Nox Consilium and the Dark Night of the Soul: the Nocturne', in Erik Martiny, ed., A Companion to Poetic Genre, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2011, 390-403, 398).

8 Move quickly through the clouds.
9 The clouds are not thick and 'creamy', but 'loose', almost transparent. They look like cannon smoke.

10 The moonlight, the same colour as stone, shines over rooftops, sharpening their shapes.

11 The clouds are 'loose', like smoke, and the moon is in sharp relief among them. Larkin calls it 'preposterous', a form of personification, which has more to do with the echoes associated to lunar poetry than it does with the moon itself.

12 These two lines are reminiscent of Symbolism. The elated lunar imagery is expressed through equally elated words, whose syntax and punctuation (i.e. the use of exclamation marks) exasperates the 'mockery'. Larkin's austere diction is countered by the overarching bathos. A 'lozenge' is a form of rhombus: it is used in heraldry, as part of coats of arms. The reference to heraldry is a reference to courtly love and poetry and, subsequently, to a conventional use of lunar imagery. The word 'medallion' is more easily associated to the moon for it is expressive of its round shape.

13 Larkin's see-saw of contrasting thoughts and reactions is reminiscent of the same alternations in Church Going. The unpoetic suburban landscape has been replaced by an elated symbolist tone, which is now replaced by the poetic voice's slightly moved stare.

14 The moon is personified once again: it is described as having a stare, which is wide, bright, and hard. It is plain to see that whatever fascination or emotion the reader might have glimpsed is, in fact, countered by the unemotional, cynical description of the moon as a sharp, unmerciful light, unrelated to love or any form of poetic romanticizing.
Is a reminder of the strength and pain
Of being young\textsuperscript{15}; that it can't come again,
But is for others undiminished somewhere\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{15} This is where the cynical, disenchanted vision comes to fruition: the moon's seemingly mesmerising power only serves to unveil the stark reality of lost youth and inexorable ageing. Youth is a memory, awakened by moonlight, but it is not a wholly positive memory: youth contains both strength and pain.

\textsuperscript{16} The moon, its sharpness and unapologetic bright wide stare illuminate the passing of time and the relentless marching of age. Youth, with its strength and pain, cannot come again. The moon, in this poem, symbolizes a conventional poetic tradition, a mesmerising imaginative power, and a connection with nature which is only experienced in youth. The poetic voice, middle-class, middle-aged, suburbanly cynical and disenchanted feels the fracture, the "division between himself and nature," in which the latter "often comes to represent the youth and romanticism which he feels he is fast losing." (Janice Rossen, op. cit., 36).
SEAMUS HEANEY
(1939)

Digging

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat' pen rests; as snug as a gun!

Under my window a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

The poem was published in 1966 as part of Heaney's first book *Death of a Naturalist*. Despite its title, the volume is inspired by Heaney's memories of the rural world of his childhood: his poems are dense with soil, turf, potatoes and churning butter, rich with the echoes of roots and tradition. *Digging* is emblematic, in that it celebrates and preserves the tradition of the Heaney family: the poet traces a line back to his father and his grandfather, both of them land-workers and potato-diggers, sons of the earth and the seasons. At the same time, Heaney preserves the Irish tradition and history by recalling the long-standing, tumultuous relationship between Ireland and its staple food, the potato: it is easy to read *Digging* and remember how the potato was both the blessing and curse of Heaney's beautiful fatherland (cf. Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995). A testament to tradition and the sense of belonging to both family and fatherland, *Digging* is also an affirmation of identity in difference, a marker of discontinuity. Daniel Tobin points out how the poem for Heaney is “a process of coming to consciousness rather than a static artefact.” (Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Centre: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1999, 116), *Digging* exemplifies this path of growing self-awareness and shows that the poet's “quest for self-definition begins in discontinuity;” (Tobin, op. cit., 116) by digging with a pen and not a spade Heaney is both self-made, self-taught and somebody else's son; with his pen he “hopes to define his identity in relation to his native place and ancestry, though the quest never quite permits him to rest easy in that relationship.” (Tobin, op. cit., 116).

Something that is 'squat' is short and wide in an unattractive way.

Heaney begins his poem with a marked syntactical choice: he delays the subject.

Heaney compares the ease and comfort with which he holds his pen to the casual, comfortable fit of a gun in a gunman's hand. At the same time, the poet brings together 'pen' and 'gun': the association is aural, in that the two are assonant; and ideal, for a pen can be as lethal as a gun, as any weapon.

The sound of digging is 'clean', unmistakable. Sounds are easily suggested in these lines: the spade makes a rasping (i.e. grating) sound when it sinks into the soil, hard, difficult, full of gravel. The fatigue and sacrifice of physical labour surface clearly in these lines.

‘Father’ and ‘digging’ are juxtaposed, unlinked. Two stark, naked images: a man and an activity. The two are distinct, yet matter-of-fact in their communion.
Till his straining rump⁷ among the flowerbeds
Bends low⁸, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging⁹.

The coarse¹⁰ boot nestled¹¹ on the lug¹², the shaft¹³
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops¹⁴, buried the bright edge¹⁵ deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands¹⁶.

By God, the old man could handle a spade¹⁷,
Just like his old man¹⁸.

⁷ The hardship of physical labour is rendered through the use of the qualifier ‘straining’ (i.e. ‘making an effort’) and the noun ‘rump’ (i.e. an animal’s back). The poet’s father is compared to a beast of burden, weighed down by labour.
⁸ The poet’s father is simply working in his own garden, he bends among flowerbeds; yet, the action, so familiar, so significant, brings the poet back in time.
⁹ The narrative move is here peculiarly cinematic: the poet observes his father bend low in the garden and then stand up straight again. This simple action is associated with a time gap: the man who bent low in the garden stands up straight and suddenly seems to have gone back twenty years. The change is, of course, in his son’s, the poet’s, eyes: it seems to him that he can see his father rhythmically bend (‘stoop’) through the potato drills (i.e. rows of planted potatoes).
¹⁰ Rough, harsh.
¹¹ Resting against (the lug).
¹² This is an example of Heaney’s terminological precision: the ‘lug’ is a short metal bar placed at the base of a spade’s handle. The digger’s foot is usually placed on it to provide more pressure, so that the spade sinks into the soil more easily.
¹³ ‘Shaft’ is a synonym of handle. Heaney is describing, with almost graphic detail, his father’s motions as a potato-digger: he pressed his foot against the spade’s lug, his knee resting against the spade’s shaft as a lever to work more efficiently.
¹⁴ He pulled the potato plants out of the soil.
¹⁵ The metal edge of the spade.
¹⁶ The poet remembers being a child and seeing his father work the land. He and his brothers were with him and picked up the potatoes he dug out of the ground. The memory is fresh and powerful, dense with sensory presence: the feel and weight of the potatoes are strikingly real.
¹⁷ This is a baffling display of pride, so spontaneous that it has recourse to the vernacular (i.e. ‘By God’, ‘old man’). The poet celebrates his father’s craftsmanship, the skill and professionalism he has developed in order to do his job properly. Heaney is here celebrating both his father’s skill and the skill of an entire nation: he challenges the stereotype of Paddy with a spade (the stereotypical Irish potato digger, ignorant, lazy and unskilled), and while Irishmen have a tradition for growing and sowing potatoes, there are skill and dignity in their work which often goes uncelebrated. Heaney tries to redress that wrong.
¹⁸ The repetition of ‘old man’, besides the obvious meaning of ‘father’, achieves generational
My grandfather could cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, digging down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

continuity: the poet's father was a skilled worker, like his father before him.
Turf is "short grass and the surface layer of soil that is held together by its roots." (www.oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com)
A bog is wet, spongy ground.
Once again, memories of his grandfather working are connected to the poet's childhood memories, to his fortuitous participation to this harsh, yet dignified rural world. The detail is precious: the poet, then a child, is given some milk to take to his grandfather; the milk bottle is corked with paper.
The poet's grandfather is portrayed, like the poet's father, as both a hard worker and a skilled one: he barely stops to take a sip of milk before he plunges back into digging; and he works methodically, neatly, slicing (i.e. cutting slices) and nicking (i.e. making small cuts in the bog land). The word choice implies skill and precision.
'Heaving' means 'lifting or pulling something with great effort'. A 'sod' is a piece of grass-covered earth.
The poet's memories are sensory, alive and powerful: the smell of potato mould (a potato blight) is cold (notice the synaesthesia); the peat (i.e. the decayed vegetable matter, used for burning instead of coal, that his grandfather slices) is soggy (i.e. soaking wet), the noises it makes are expressed through the onomatopoeic (and alliterating) nouns 'squelch' and 'slap'; the noise made by the edge of a spade cutting quick and sharp through roots. All these visual, aural, and olfactory suggestions awake in the poet's head as he stands at his window, looking down on his elderly father among flowerbeds.
This is the moment of truth, the break with tradition: the poet celebrates and glorifies the skill, dignity, and pride in his family's honest agricultural legacy, but acknowledges his own marked difference: he is not a man with a spade, he does not work the land. He was born of these two men he lovingly remembers, but he is not like them, not completely.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests\textsuperscript{26}.
I'll dig with it\textsuperscript{27}.

\textsuperscript{26} The poem comes full circle: the memories of the men of his family holding spades bring the poet back to his own hand, and the pen resting in it, comfortably. The spade was his father's and his grandfather's weapon, the pen is his. Pen and spade are here the same. Both are recognized as being able to achieve something similar: spades dig into the ground, they unearth roots; so does the pen, digging into history (personal history, family history, Irish history) and unearthing roots, reasons, causes, and memories. “The basic metaphor – the pen as spade – informs a great deal of Heaney's subsequent work, when it is translated out of its specifically agricultural application and into a view of poetry as archaeology, the poem as an act of cultural and historical retrieval.” (Neil Corcoran, \textit{A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney}, Faber and Faber, London, 1986, 51).

\textsuperscript{27} In the poem, Heaney first “confesses the discontinuity between spade and pen before [asserting] a willed continuity.” (Corcoran, op. cit., 51) The poet claims he has no spade and cannot follow in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, but he affirms his willingness to use his pen as a spade. In bringing together his family's craftsmanship with his own, Heaney "reconciles the distance that education and his own vocation have interposed between his rural roots and himself." (Maureen O'Rourke Murphy and James MacKillop, \textit{An Irish Literature Reader: Poetry, Prose, Drama}, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2006, 349).
SEAMUS HEANEY

Casualty'

I
He would drink by himself
And raise a weathered thumb
Towards the high shelf,
Calling another rum
And blackcurrant, without
Having to raise his voice,
Or order a quick stout
By a lifting of the eyes
And a discreet dumb-show
Of pulling off the top;

---

1 The poem was published in the volume Field Work in 1979. Its title and content refer to the death of Louis O’Neill, a friend of Heaney’s. As a Catholic, born and raised in Northern Ireland (county Derry), Heaney has a strong sense of religious and cultural heritage, a strong sense of belonging to the community, and carries the heavy burden of a difficult, fractured social reality, actively engaged in a power struggle that breeds casualties. The poetry in Field Work seeks to glorify and ‘fortify’ (Heaney to Frank Kinahan, 1982, in Corcoran, op. cit., 127) the quotidian, and to affirm the poet’s social self. The dire events of 30 January, 1972 (i.e. Bloody Sunday) when British Soldiers shot dead thirteen men in Derry, give wider scope to the meaning of quotidian in a country like Northern Ireland. Louis O’Neill died a few days after Bloody Sunday: he broke “an IRA curfew…” and was “blown up in the reprisal bombing of a Protestant pub, to which he [had] gone drinking as an habitual and instinctive drive of his nature.” (Corcoran, op. cit., 137) The everyday streak in Field Work is complemented by an elegiac streak: inspired by Dante’s Divine Comedy, which, Heaney confesses, strongly influenced him, many poems in Field Work are conversations with the dead, with Heaney’s own dead. Helen Vendler defines Heaney’s role in Field Work as that of an anthropologist, both of the living and the dead. (Helen Vendler, Seamus Heaney, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1998, 63).

2 The poem contains three sections. This, the first, concentrates on Louis O’Neill, his strong character, his presence, and his proud, humble dignity.

3 Heaney describes the silent orders of a pub regular, a drinker who needs no words to ask for his next drink: he raises a weathered (i.e. ‘eroded’, ruined by time) thumb to indicate where his usual drink is kept (the ‘high shelf’), and his rum and blackcurrant is delivered.

4 O’Neill uses a different gesture to order a different drink. Once again, it is a dumb-show (wordless hand gestures). He orders a stout beer by lifting his eyes and using his hands to mimic pulling off the top of a bottle. Ramazani claims that O’Neill’s silent manner is “Tacitly contrasted with the loud violence of his killers…” (Jahan Ramazani, op.cit., 348).
At closing time would go\(^5\)
In waders\(^6\) and peaked cap
Into the showery dark\(^7\),
A dole-kept breadwinner
But a natural for work\(^8\).
I loved his whole manner,
Sure-footed but too sly,
His deadpan sidling tact,
His fisherman’s quick eye
And turned observant back\(^9\).

Incomprehensible
To him, my other life\(^10\).
Sometimes on the high stool,
Too busy with his knife
At a tobacco plug\(^11\)
And not meeting my eye,
In the pause after a slug\(^12\)
He mentioned poetry\(^13\).

We would be on our own

---

\(^5\) O’Neill’s character and presence are so strongly established, that the grammatical subject is unnecessary, hence the elliptical sentence.

\(^6\) Waterproof boots used by duck hunters and fishermen.

\(^7\) Rainy night.

\(^8\) O’Neill is ‘on the dole’, that is, unemployed and receiving a fixed amount of money from the British Government on a monthly basis. But Heaney asserts O’Neill’s status as ‘breadwinner’ and hard worker (i.e. ‘a natural for work’).

\(^9\) Ramazani claims that O’Neill and Heaney seem to have shared a “fondness for the measured and oblique” (Ramazani, op. cit., 348). O’Neill is described as sure-footed (in the same way as the poet is sure on his ‘feet’, that is, his poetry) and sly (cunning). He is calmly detached (‘deadpan’) and oblique (‘sidling’) while being tactful. He is sharp, clever (‘quick eye’) and observant, even when he turns his back on things. From the start, O’Neill is described as independent, different from what surrounds him, much like the poet himself.

\(^10\) Heaney’s ‘other life’ is his craft, his poetry. Always moving between continuity and discontinuity, Heaney expresses at once the sense of belonging to a certain world (he is friends with O’Neill, a fisherman, a son of the people), and of being severed from it. In Digging, Heaney proudly claims a place for himself in the family tradition and yet affirms the diversity of his craft; in Casualty, he portrays a common, but not ordinary man, who embodies the controversial subject of belonging, socially and culturally, in Northern Ireland.

\(^11\) A ‘tobacco plug’ is a cake, or a small piece, of pressed tobacco to be used for chewing.

\(^12\) A quick drink.

\(^13\) O’Neill’s peculiar intelligence and sensibility are here shown through his curiosity about the poet’s craft.
And, always politic,\footnote{Diplomatic, tactful.}
And shy of condescension,\footnote{Trying to avoid being condescending or patronizing.}
I would manage by some trick
To switch the talk to eels
Or lore of the horse and cart,\footnote{Heaney managed to change the subject to fishing or horses.}
Or the Provisionals.\footnote{The IRA army.}

But my tentative art,\footnote{By calling his art ‘tentative’, Heaney wishes to propound an “anti-ideological ideology, the opposite of the revolutionary politics that helped to destroy … the fisherman Louis O’Neill.” (Ramazani, op. cit., 348).}
His turned back watches too:
He was blown to bits
Out drinking in a curfew
Others obeyed, three nights
After they shot dead
The thirteen men in Derry.
PARAS\footnote{The British paramilitary.} THIRTEEN, the walls said,
BOGSIDE\footnote{A poor Catholic district in Derry.} NIL. That Wednesday
Everyone held
His breath and trembled.

II
It was a day of cold
Raw silence, wind-blown
Surplice and soutane\footnote{The second part of the poem is gloomy: the Northern Irish Catholics gather around the victims of Bloody Sunday, mourning their loss. Notice the vivid description of the funeral: the use of synaesthesia in the definition of silence (´raw´ and ´cold´), and the strong wind blowing the priest’s garments (i.e. ´surplice´, a loose white garment with wide sleeves, and ´soutane´, a long garment usually black or red).}
Rained-on, flower-laden
Coffin after coffin
Seemed to float from the door
Of the packed cathedral
Like blossoms on slow water."

The common funeral
Unrolled its swaddling band,
Lapping, tightening
Till we were braced and bound
Like brothers in a ring.

But he would not be held
At home by his own crowd.
Whatever threats were phoned,
Whatever black flags waved.
I see him as he turned
In that bombed offending place,
Remorse fused with terror
In his still knowable face,
His cornered outfaced stare
Blinding in the flash.

He had gone miles away
For he drank like a fish.
Nightly, naturally

---

"The beauty and delicacy of the simile is staggering: the people at the funeral are like water on which the thirteen coffins seem to float, light flowers lead by the current."

Swaddling bands were pieces of cloth usually wrapped around infants. The people at the funeral are pictured as they pour out of the church and compared to a swaddling band that is being unrolled.

The sense of freedom, of breaking bonds, that the previous image conveys is immediately countered by this image, which implies bonding and bondage tighter than that of a swaddling band. The sense of community and communion is evident: the funeral is 'common', shared by all, and the participants 'lap' and 'tighten' until they become one, 'braced' together, holding each other up, 'bound'. This is the pivotal moment in the poem, where "the complex loyalties of a Northern Catholic" (Corcoran, op. cit., 137) and the meaning of belonging start to be explored.

The feeling of familiar constriction in the 'common funeral' is contrasted with O'Neill's stubborn independence. He refuses to be held at home by his own people, his own Catholic curfew.

Heaney imagines O'Neill's last moments, the expression on his face seconds before the blinding blast: he sees remorse and terror, remorse for having broken the laws of his people, terror in the face of death. Heaney imagines O'Neill feeling cornered, trapped.

The standard phrase 'drink like a fish' is defamiliarized in the following lines, as O'Neill is imagined as a fish swimming to his destination, the warmly lit comfort of alcohol."
Swimming towards the lure
Of warm lit-up places,
The blurred mesh and murmur
Drifting among glasses
In the gregarious smoke\(^{30}\).
How culpable was he
That last night when he broke
Our tribe's complicity?\(^{30}\)
‘Now, you're supposed to be
An educated man,’
I hear him say. ‘Puzzle me
The right answer to that one.’\(^{32}\)

III
I missed his funeral\(^{33}\),
Those quiet walkers
And sideways talkers
Shoaling\(^{34}\) out of his lane
To the respectable
Purring of the hearse...
They move in equal pace

---

\(^{30}\) The smoke and noise of pubs at night, in-between light murmur and noise.
\(^{31}\) The ‘tribe’s complicity’ concerns the post-Bloody Sunday IRA decree “that, as a mark of respect for the dead, all businesses including bars should close for a period of three days. It was an enforced act of communal mourning and businesses that did not comply risked being bombed.” (Stephen Wilson, “Poetry and its Occasions: Undoing the Folded line”, in Erik Martiny, ed., op. cit., 490-505, 501). By acting independently, O'Neill not only causes his own death, but betrays the bond of trust and communion within the Northern Catholic ‘tribe’. Heaney wonders if O'Neill can be held accountable for this: is he a traitor? Is he truly the cause of his own death? More than that, Heaney's real question is how to be faithful to your tribe and be your own person, how to love your countrymen without loving the struggle of which they are a part, how to respect curfew and still go out for a drink if you feel like one. ‘Louis O'Neill, fairly obviously, is a version, a partial representation of the poet, and his ‘breaking of our tribe's complicity’, reflects Heaney's own problematic relationship with the ‘tribe’.” (Wilson, op. cit., 501). Heaney seems to imply that loyalties and allegiances in Northern Ireland are not a simple matter of black or white, right or wrong.

\(^{32}\) In Heaney's mind, O'Neill is a questioning presence, looking for answers: how can you be loyal to the tribe and to yourself? How can you make sense of a Catholic killed by a Catholic bomb?

\(^{33}\) The third part of the poem focuses on O'Neill's funeral: Heaney does not attend. This act of disobedience is common to O'Neill and Heaney: O'Neill breaks the curfew and Heaney refuses to attend yet another 'common funeral'; he refuses to be 'bound' in mourning to the tribe.

\(^{34}\) A 'shoal' is a large number of fish swimming together. Heaney compares the large number of mourners to fish.
With the habitual
Slow consolation
Of a dawdling engine,\(^{35}\)
The line lifted, hand
Over fist, cold sunshine
On the water, the land
Banked under fog: that morning
I was taken in his boat,\(^{36}\)
The screw purling, turning
Indolent fathoms white,\(^{37}\)
I tasted freedom with him.
To get out early, haul
Steadily off the bottom,\(^{38}\)
Dispraise the catch, and smile
As you find a rhythm
Working you, slow mile by mile,
Into your proper haunt
Somewhere, well out, beyond...\(^{43}\)

Dawn-snifﬁng revenant,
Plodder through midnight rain,
Question me again

\(^{35}\) The hearse purrs like an engine, and the mourners, too, are like a slow engine, their movements respectful and sorrowful.
\(^{36}\) The people following the hearse start moving.
\(^{37}\) Covered by fog.
\(^{38}\) Heaney envisages his own idiosyncratic mourning. He thus revisits the memory of a boat trip with O’Neill.
\(^{39}\) The screw propeller, the engine causing the boat to move. ‘Purling’ means ‘ﬂowing with a murmuring sound’.
\(^{40}\) Fathoms are units to measure distance in water. Heaney describes at once the distance sailed and the trail of white foam that the boat’s screw propeller leaves behind.
\(^{41}\) To move away from the banks.
\(^{42}\) ‘Unlike the mourners binding themselves in a ‘ring’, poet and fisherman move outwards.’ (Ramazani, op. cit., 349). Hufstader draws a further connection between the two men: “O’Neill’s art was ﬁshing, just as Heaney’s is poetry; when Heaney went out one morning with his friend’s boat, he ‘tasted freedom with him’ (including freedom from the violent tribe) because the two men could enter the realm of art.” (Jonathan Hufstader, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence*, the University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1999, 56). The sailing metaphor, the slow moving on water until a rhythm is developed, can be seen as expressing the slow, undisturbed freedom of poetic creation. It is freedom, the longing for it, that brings O’Neill and Heaney close.
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