A re-evaluation of the war poetry of Siegfried Sassoon.

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A RE-EVALUATION OF THE WAR POETRY
OF SIEGFRIED SASSOON

BY

GERALD V. BAILLARGEON

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

My purpose in this thesis is to examine Siegfried Sassoon's war poetry, collected in The Old Huntsman and Counter-Attack, in the context of a close biographical investigation of the period of the poet's life before 1918, particularly as it is recollected in his prose writings.

The first chapter has a brief introduction followed by two sections: "Easin and Early Morning" discusses Sassoon's juvenilia as a product of his isolated social and physical environment; "Georgian Poet" recounts Sassoon's introduction into the Georgian poetry movement in 1913.

The second chapter has four sections: "War Poet: Old Style" shows the impact of the state of war on the Georgian poets, chiefly Rupert Brooke, who became an early symbol of the poet in war; "Absolution" measures the influence of Brooke's heroic war poetry on Sassoon's early response to the war; "The Mystic as Soldier" traces the beginnings of disillusionment in Sassoon's early war poems; "Happy Warriors" isolates the happy-warrior side of Sassoon before 1916 and measures it against the tone of the early war poems.

The third chapter has five sections: "1916: The Home-Front Split" reveals the effects of media propaganda during the first two years of the war on the credibility gap between the nation at Home and the Nation Overseas; "Georgian War Poet" analyzes Sassoon's "Georgian" use of realism in 1916 as a journalistic corrective to the media propaganda; "Inferno" traces the erosion
of Sassoon's original pastoral patriotism in the face of the desolate landscapes of battle; "Heroes' Twilight" traces the erosion of Sassoon's original concept of the romantic war hero in the light of the implementation of conscription in 1916; "Christ Figures" explores Sassoon's attempts to find some ideal to replace the loss of the traditional ideals of war.

The fourth chapter has four sections: "Incubus" looks at Sassoon's periods of sick-leave between August 1916 and February 1917, and after April, 1917; "Wounded Hero" attempts to analyze Sassoon's actions culminating in his formal manifesto against the war in June, 1917; "Craiglockhart: Bitter Safety" describes Sassoon's period of convalescence in the shell-shock Hospital where he composed the satiric poems that later appeared in Counter-Attack; "War Poet: New Style" discusses the overall tone of Counter-Attack in the context of the poet's concept of his role in the last stage of the war.

What this thesis, as a whole, shows is that Sassoon's war poetry represents a constant re-channeling of his early idealism. While his role as a satirist has been emphasized by critics of First World War poetry, the poetry of guilt arising out of the tension between his mystic temperament and his participation in the environment of humanity-at-war represents his deepest response. Furthermore, the close biographical approach reveals an influence of Nature on the determination of the poet's attitude, and of the Georgians on the determination of the poet's role that have hitherto been greatly underestimated.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

(i) Introduction

Siegfried Sassoon began publishing poetry at the age of twenty. He issued the first of a number of small, privately printed volumes of verse in December 1906. In 1913 he achieved a minor success with the publication of The Daffodil Murderer, a parody of the realistic narratives of John Masefield. Between 1914 (when Sassoon became an infantry officer in the British army) and 1918 he published two major volumes of poetry arising out of his experiences as an infantry officer. The first of these volumes was The Old Huntsman, and Other Poems, published in 1917. The Old Huntsman includes a selection of Sassoon's nature-lyrics up to 1916 and the first of his poems about the war. Most of the war poems were written between late spring of 1915, while he was training as an officer, and early 1917 when he returned a second time to the Western Front. The second volume of war poetry, Counter-Attack, and Other Poems was published in 1918. Most of the poems in this collection developed out of Sassoon's reaction to the carnage of the Battles of Arras and the Somme which began in mid-1917, and they were written during Sassoon's second period of convalescence in England in the autumn of 1917 and early 1918.

1 Masefield's poem, The Everlasting Mercy was first published in November 1911; the 11th Impression appeared in March 1913. Sassoon's The Daffodil Murderer was based on this poem; it was published in an edition of 1000 copies in February 1913.
Sassoon has left an account of his poetic development up to 1918 in three autobiographical books. The Old Century And Seven More Years (London, 1938) covers the period from his birth until 1907. The Weald of Ycuth (London, 1942) deals with the period between 1907 and his enlistment in the army. Siegfried's Journey, 1916-1922 (New York, 1946) includes part of his later experiences in the war. A more intimate record of Sassoon's mind during the war years is the semi-fictional Sherston Trilogy. The first volume in the Trilogy, Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man (London, 1928) portrays, in the character of George Sherston, the upper-class existence which Sassoon himself lived before the war. The Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (London, 1930) intimately records the powerful effect of the environment of war on a sensitive temperament. The last volume of the Sherston Trilogy, Sherston's Progress (London, 1936) follows the events of Sassoon's own official protest against the prolongation of the war in 1917, his subsequent hospitalization in Craiglockhart War Hospital for shell-shocked officers, and his inner search for a moral basis upon which to rebuild his life after the war.

My aim in this thesis is to examine Sassoon's war poetry in The Old Huntsman and Counter-Attack within the context of a close biographical investigation of his life up to 1918 particularly as it is recollected in the prose writings.

2 I will be quoting from The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston, London, 1947, which contains the complete texts of the three original volumes.

3 The edition of Sassoon's poems that I will be using is Collected Poems, London, 1947. It omits four poems from The Old Huntsman: "Special Constable," "Liquor Control," "Policeman," and "Gibbet". It omits one poem from Counter-Attack, "The Triumph". None of the omitted poems deal with the theme of war directly.
Sassoon was born at Matfield, Kent, on 8 September 1886. His father was the descendent of a wealthy Jewish family of bankers and merchants which, after three centuries of migration through Spain, Persia and India, had finally settled in England. His mother, an artist, was the sister of Sir Hamo Thornycroft, a successful sculptor. Sassoon's artistic temperament, probably acquired from his mother's family, expressed itself in the writing of verse at an early age. His solitary nature developed a strong empathy for the beautiful Kentish Weald in which he grew up, and his early poems were celebrations of Nature.

It was not until 1913 that he achieved a minor poetic success with the publication of *The Daffodil Murderer*. In this poem he ventured outside the subjective role in the portrayal of a Sussex farm-labourer who accidentally kills a bouncer at the village pub and has a religious reaction after he has been sentenced to be hanged, thus finding a viable means of transcending the cloying restriction of his early cultural and physical environment. Sassoon's family friend, Sir Edmund Gosse, brought *The Daffodil Murderer* to the attention of Edward Marsh whose *Georgian Poetry*, an anthology of contemporary poetry by young writers, had appeared in October, 1912. After a meeting with Marsh, Sassoon decided to move to London and start developing his cultural awareness. His new life was interrupted by Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914.

Sassoon, like many idealistic young men of his generation, volunteered to protect neutral Belgium from the German aggressors. After 1914, Sassoon's temperament became exposed to the unsettling environment of humanity at war. The war poetry that emerged
from this exposure evolved out of three significant influences on Sassoon's life. The first is Sassoon's early world-view which saw man and nature in harmony with a loving God. The second is the environment of the war itself. The third influence affected Sassoon's poetic—it was that of the Georgian poetry brotherhood consisting of the young poets who grouped around Edward Karsh. This last influence provided the link between Sassoon's early romantic concept of the war and his expression about the truth about war as he came to see it after 1914.

The few critical studies dealing with Sassoon's war poetry tend either to ignore the influence of the Georgians or to suggest that the Georgian influence on the war poetry was a negative one. These studies fall into two categories. The first category includes studies of war poetry as a genre. John H. Johnston⁴ and Bernard Bergonzi⁵ consider the war poetry of Sassoon within the context of the work of other major soldier-poets. Johnston cites particularly Sassoon's achievement in the evolution of the narrative form in First World War poetry.⁶ Bergonzi's study deals with the disintegration of romantic values attached to the notion of war, particularly that of the epic hero. He singles out Sassoon's later satiric poems as Sassoon's finest contribution to the poetry of the Great War.⁷ Both critics distinguish between the development of war poetry and the character of Georgian poetry before the war. Johnston makes a special criticism of the

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⁶ See English Poetry of the First World War, pp. 87ff.

⁷ See Heroes' Twilight, p. 104.
Georgian predilection for rural lyric which demonstrates both an artificial feeling for nature and a remoteness from everyday reality:

...if they achieved "a certain tremulous stability" in their meditative response to "the slow-beating rustic heart of England," this stability was attained by a sacrifice which is in the long run always fatal to poetry: the loss of contact with reality.8

Johnston also sees in the static Georgian lyric form an obstacle to the young poets in war who tried to model their war poetry on the techniques of the Georgians.9 Bergonzi sees the Georgian poets reacting to the war by "turning to simple patriotism centred on images of rural England."10 While this is true, as we shall see in our study of the early responses by the Georgian poets to the war, it is a criticism that condemns the entire Georgian movement for one aspect of its character—a predilection for self-conscious rural lyricism.

More recent critics of the poetry of the Great War have followed the example set by Johnston and Bergonzi in viewing the development of war poetry as a movement away from Georgianism. Arthur E. Lane11 attributes Sassoon's poetic development in the war solely to the environment of war when he writes: "What lay between Sassoon the fox-hunting Georgian and Sassoon the pole-

8 *English Poetry of the First World War*, p. 5.
10 *Heroes' Twilight*, p. 39.
11 *An Adequate Response: The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon*, Detroit, 1972. The quote that follows is from page 91.
micist and satirist was one inescapable fact: the experience of war." Jon Silkin, discussing Sassoon's technique of juxtaposing "pastoral lyricism" with "the horror of war", concurs with Lane's opinion, giving a more vague interpretation to the development of the poet's technique: "Sassoon may not necessarily have thought out this technique, but given his background and then his sudden and shocking experience of war, it would seem a natural development." 12 Silkin does not qualify what he means by "his background", but we might speculate that he does not intend Sassoon's association with the Georgian poets in his statement.

Michael Thorpe, in the only full-length study of Sassoon to date 13, also attributes the change in Sassoon's war poetry sociely to the environment of war. In a chapter on the war poetry he writes of the "ferocious destruction of 1916-17" 14 as the key factor in Sassoon's turning to realism and satire. The virtue of Thorpe's criticism is that it considers Sassoon's temperament when making comparisons of the poet's achievement as a war poet with that of Wilfred Owen, for example. Thorpe concurs with Bergonzi's belief that "it was circumstances rather than temperament that made Sassoon a realist," 15 when he writes that "it was not [Sassoon's] temperament to absorb raw experience." 16 Yet, neither critic considers the issue of Sassoon's conviction that the direct portrayal of reality was a viable practice for the poet in war.

14 Ibid, p. 18.
15 Heroes' Twilight, p. 95.
16 Siegfried Sassoon, p. 25.
As I hope to make clear in the chapters that follow, critics of Sassoon's war poetry have not explored sufficiently the influences out of which Sassoon's war poetry evolved. While they concur on the influence of the environment of war in creating disillusionment and bitterness in Sassoon, their tacit agreement that this disillusionment and bitterness was a direct cause of the kind of poetic response that Sassoon made stands on dubious grounds. Why Sassoon believed that it was acceptable for him as a poet to convey this disillusionment and bitterness with a graphic realism, and why he later turned to the satiric mode and took a stand against the actions of humanity at war have yet to be explored. Sassoon's poetic response to the war cannot be simply explained by the fact that he was a sensitive person shocked by the horrors of combat, as Silkin, for example, has suggested. Interpretations of Sassoon's changing poetic during the war which attribute it directly to his feeling of revulsion, fail to explain why this should be so with Sassoon, when Edmund Blunden, for example, continued to write poetry expressing a strong affinity with Nature and conveying the undertones of war up until the end of the war.17

Sassoon's war poetry seems to have resulted from three influences. The environment of warfare is a major influence that has been cited by Sassoon's major critics. What needs to be explored—and I hope to make this exploration in the following chapters—is Sassoon's early environment, particularly as it is related to a world-view that sees a harmonious relationship be-

tween Man and Nature under the protection of a good and loving God.

Another influence that should be explored is that of the Georgian poets on Sassoon's poetic role. Robert H. Ross in his recent re-evaluation of the Georgian poetry movement has demonstrated most clearly that the Georgian predilection for self-conscious rural lyricism may have hindered the development of poetry during the war, as the major critics of the war poetry have pointed out. This is certainly true with the early war poetry of Rupert Brooke, who became the early model for many poets in war. His early pastoral concept of patriotism was shared by Sassoon, and the latter poet was even moved to imitate his poetry. Much more significant to the development of modern war poetry was the Georgians' attempt to re-vitalize poetry by expanding its scope in both subject-matter and diction drawn from real experience. Georgian realism as it influenced the poetry, especially of Sassoon, during the war has yet to receive a just acknowledgement. This I hope to do.

One further influence, that of the Liberal Pacifists who, in 1917, helped Sassoon to issue an official protest against the prolongation of the war, needs to be explored. Just as the precedent of Georgian realism enabled Sassoon to write realistic poetry in 1916, the moral indignation against the war displayed by the Pacifists associated with the artists and writers of the Bloomsbury group, showed Sassoon the way for a protest against the war within his role as poet-in-war. It should also be kept

in mind that Sassoon's belief in a principle of good, deriving from his early reaction to his environment in the light of his upbringing, played a large part in the appearance of his satiric poems after 1916. His idealistic nature was not destroyed by the war; rather, the object of his idealization constantly shifted. His early wish for sainthood did not abate. Running through my biographical criticism of Sassoon's war years is the theme of the hero. For Sassoon, the hero provided a focus for his idealistic nature. At various times he embraced the epic hero (in the early war poems), the common hero (in the middle period), the Christian hero (in the transition between the poems of realism and the later satire) and the poet as hero (in the last phase). In the next section I intend to look briefly at some of Sassoon's nature lyrics written in early life in the context of his pre-war existence as he recollects it in The Old Century and in The Weald of Youth. I also intend to look at his introduction into the Georgian poetry movement in 1913 after his writing of The Daffodil Murderer, as it pointed to a new phase in Sassoon's poetry even before the war began.

(11) "Music and Early Morning"

The only pre-war poetry of Sassoon's that is widely available is the group of lyrical poems written between 1903-16 and included in The Old Huntsman in 1916. The obvious impression that is left with the reader of these poems is the discrepancy between the occasional freshness of the experiences that inspired them and the staleness of the poetic in which the experiences are persistently rendered. This discrepancy can be
traced back to the characteristics of two aspects of Sassoon's early environment: the physical and the cultural. Sassoon's physical environment was that of the beautiful Kentish Weald; but through his reading he absorbed a cultural environment created by his interpretation of the works of the Pre-Raphaelites, Swinburne and the Rhymers, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson and Edward Fitzgerald. While Sassoon loved the Kentish Weald he seemed to find it rather uninspiring at times and in the ethereal world created by these end-of-the-century poets he saw an opportunity, as Michael Thorpe suggests, "to escape into something more exciting than his own comfortable world".19 The archaic language and vague setting of Sassoon's "Night Piece" demonstrate, at its worst, the influence of the end-of-the-century poetry on Sassoon's own art:

Ye hooded witches, baleful shapes that moan,
Quench your fantastic lanterns and be still;
For now the moon through heaven sails alone,
Shedding her peaceful rays from hill to hill.
The faun from out his dim and secret place
Draws nigh the darkling pool and from his dream
Half-wakens, seeing there his sylvan face
Reflected, and the wistful eyes that gleam.

Such early poems also show that, for Sassoon, there was no direct relationship between actual experience and the role of the poet as he conceived it. In The Old Century he regollects his concept of the poet as one who is apart from the world of everyday reality: "I supposed that grown-up poets lived by themselves and felt inspired nearly all the time....I preferred to think of poets as living in statuesque aloofness....My own poetical works...were becoming noticeably aloof from ordinary

19 Siegfried Sassoon, p. 4.
affairs. While remaining an optimist outwardly, I was a most melancholy person when putting myself on paper. Eternity and the Tomb were among my favourite themes, and from the accessories of Death I drew my liveliest inspirations."20

It is not surprising that Sassoon looked to poetry as an escape into a more exciting world. His environment, though enchanting, could not challenge his imagination nor his intellect. His best poetry resulted when he drew upon scenes from Nature to create vivid word-pictures. The poem "Hymned in September," though a small success, does succeed in creating a vivid picture of a young huntsman cavorting out of doors:

> When half the drowsy world's a-bed
> And misty morning rises red,
> With jollity of horn and lusty cheer,
> Young Hymned urges on his dwindling rout;
> Along the yellowing covert we can hear
> His horse's hoofs thud hither and about:
> In mulberry coat he rides and makes
> Huge clamour in the sultry brakes.

Apart from occasional lapses such as "drowsy world's a-bed" and "dwindling rout", the vivid use of colour and of sound result in a clear and dynamic poem.

The experience in "Hymned in September" was probably drawn from Sassoon's fox-hunting adventures. His life before the war was divided between an active and a contemplative role. Most of the early lyrics do not draw upon the active role; rather, they reflect the sterility of the contemplative self that had drawn largely from the world of books. In addition, Sassoon suffered from a too-comfortable physical environment. "There is never any tension,"

20 The Old Century, pp. 147-48.
writes Michael Thorpe,\textsuperscript{21} and the lack of tension explains, in part, why Sassoon turned to the exotic works of the Pre-Raphaelites. In \textit{The Old Century}, Sassoon writes:

\[\ldots\text{I was finding much material for daydreaming in the poems and pictures of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Through them I shared an imaginative existence which, as they had intended it to do, provided an ideal escape from commonplace actualities.}\textsuperscript{22}\]

His avid appreciation for the Pre-Raphaelites focused on the remote and exotic in their work, despite the fact that they had attempted to achieve a realism by the use of vivid images.

Although Sassoon saw poetry as a means of escaping "commonplace actualities" he did occasionally find inspiration in his environment, as we have seen in "Nimrod in September". In \textit{The Weald of Youth} Sassoon comments on one of his poems in \textit{Sonnets and Verses} (1909), which begins: "What shall the minstrel sing?"

He goes on:

\[\text{But the question--what exactly should I sing?--was one which I had not so far asked myself with any awareness of the circumstances that, like many minstrels of my age, I had nothing much to sing about.}\textsuperscript{23}\]

Sassoon elaborates on this problem in an observation about his favourite subjects in his poetic writing at the time:

\[\text{It must be borne in mind that there were not many things about which I found it possible to feel poetical. In addition to this--as will already have become obvious--my contact with human affairs had been narrow and unenterprising. It is therefore no shock to discover that I had only two favourite subjects. Investigation reveals that the only two things about which I wrote with most fullness of}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Siegfried Sassoon}, p. 6.
\item \textit{The Old Century}, p. 259.
\item \textit{The Weald of Youth}, p. 23.
\end{itemize}
feeling were music and early morning. 24

Sassoon's love of music was a factor in his attempt to compensate for the lack of tension in his environment. His concept of poetry as an escape, rather than as a confrontation with reality, reveals both a limitation in his range of expression within the poetic medium, and a poverty of stimulation in his surroundings. He regretted that he could not express stormy passions in poetry the way that his governess, Helen Wirgmann, could do at the piano:

When she was playing the last movement of the Moonlight Sonata or the first page of the Pathétique, I felt that she was expressing all the stormy and tremendous things which she couldn't say in any other way, and I wanted to be able to be like that myself. 25

The poem "Tree and Sky" is a plea for stimulation that might lead to poetic inspiration:

And if there should be tempests in My spirit, let them surge like din Of noble melodies at war.

The theme of the poem is sainthood. As we shall see in Sassoon's war poems—especially "The Dragon and the Undying" in the phrase "martyred music", and in the closing lines of "The Mystic as Soldier": "O music through my clay/When will you sound again?"; and in the spiritual affirmation of "Secret Music"—music was a complex symbol embodying the sacredness of poetry and the pre-war harmony that the poet experienced with God through Nature. Music also represented the expression of the noblest passions of the soul. The late war poem "Dead Musicians" portrays how

24 The Weald of Youth, p. 35.
violently the war affected Sassoon's early feelings and attitudes. In this poem, as we shall see, the theme of music becomes associated with hysterical guilt as snatches of colloquial war jingles replace, in the poet's consciousness, the "noble melodies" of the past.

Sassoon's second recurring theme in the early poetry is that of early morning. The poems about early morning express a love of solitude as in "Daybreak in a Garden," or a mystic relationship with God in solitude as in "At Daybreak" and "Before Day". These poems reveal a longing for a transcendent spiritual experience that is more artificially expressed in "Tree and Sky":

With fervour of such blades of triumph as are
Flashed in white cri ses of saints who go
On shafts of glory to the ecstasies they know.

"At Daybreak" is a contemplative poem in which the poet expresses an experience of the presence of God in Nature:

I listen for him through the rain,
And in the dusk of starless hours
I know that he will come again;
Loth was he ever to forsake me:
He comes with glimmering of flowers
And stir of music to awake me.

This theme of a mystic union with God in early morning is deeply felt in the invocative tone of "Before Day":

When fieldward boys far off with crack and shout
From orchards scare the birds in sudden rout,
Come, ere my heart grows cold and full of doubt,
In the still summer dawns that waken me.

We must keep in mind the genuine nature of the sensitive and mystic temperament of Sassoon when considering the impact of the war experience on him. Many of the war poems, as we shall see, are set in early morning. From the idyllic bles-
sedness of "France" we can trace a gradual disillusionment and bitterness against the God of Nature in such lines as these from "Stand-To: Good Friday Morning":

Dawn was misty; the skies were still; Larks were singing, discordant, shrill; They seemed happy; but I felt ill.

or the terrifying opening of "Prelude: The Troops" from Counter-Attack:

Dim, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom Shudders to a drizzling daybreak that reveals Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky Haggard and hopeless.

There is sad irony in the contrast between the early poems and those written in the war: Sassoon's early environment was so comforting that he could not be sufficiently inspired to write moving, vital poetry; while the environment of war, so terrible as to be almost unendurable, led to a poetry that possessed a terrible beauty.

(iii) Georgian Poet

The environment of war was to put a great strain on Sassoon's mystic temperament, but the poetic role that he adopted in response to this strain was largely a result of his introduction to the Georgian poetry movement through Edward Marsh in 1913. Sassoon's need for a viable poetic theory in the years before the war found a possible solution in the concept of poetry held by Marsh. Marsh believed that for modern poetry to be vital it must be written with an eye on a more or less definite object or idea. For Sassoon, who had been escaping into the twilight of vague and archaic verse, this concept of poetry
qualified as a valuable corrective. At the same time, Marsh's suggestion that Sassoon move to London offered the possibility for the poet to flee the cloying environment of his childhood. With this in mind, it is possible that the events of 1913 and early 1914 initiated a change in Sassoon's concept of the poet's role and in his concept of the nature of poetry, even before he became a poet in war.

The first influence of a Georgian poet on Sassoon's own poetry involves a rather complex chain of events. As Sassoon's earliest poetry had been influenced by his reading of turn-of-the-century poets; a rather startling development in his poetry came about through his reading of a poem by John Masefield in 1913. Sassoon, along with many of the younger poets of his generation, needed to break out of the worn poetic conventions that survived the nineteenth century. In effect, he was trapped in a conception of what a poet ought to be that prevented him from rendering a large part of his experiences into art. H. V. Routh comments on this dilemma as it applied to the young poets at the beginning of the twentieth century:

What the age needed, amongst other things, was a new tone. The younger poets were afraid to trust their impulses, lest they should not be taken seriously as poets. It was wiser to belong to a school and convince the reader that their [own] taste was as cultured as his. So they were not free to create beauty out of any bare skeleton, clothing it with their own flesh and blood, and not even suggesting the influence of any acknowledged master, dead and buried in the nineteenth century. They were waiting for someone to show them, first how it could be done and secondly how to win thereby enough public approval for the work to be recognized as literature.

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26 The "poem" was The Everlasting Mercy. See my n.1, p. 1.

27 Literature and Ideas in the Twentieth Century, New York, 1948, p. 54.
Routh recognizes in Masefield a courage that showed the younger poets that it was possible to write strong realistic poetry that "challenged, in fact, insulted, every other tradition of English poetry, except faith in man and a sense of outward things". 28

In Sassoon's account of his enthusiastic response to The Everlasting Mercy, he shows how Masefield's poem provided an alternative to the confining poetic role that Sassoon had adopted from the end-of-the-century poets:

I had raced through the poem about twelve months before, and had been wildly excited by the impetus and naturalness which had made it so famous; and it had left me with an impression of vivid power and beauty. It had also, of course, been easy game for the parodists, owing to its startling individual idiom and occasional use of swear-words. 29

In response to The Everlasting Mercy, Sassoon began composing a parody of that poem; but it was not long before his endeavour turned serious:

After the first fifty lines or so, I dropped the pretence that I was improvising an exuberant skit. While continuing to burlesque Masefield for all I was worth, I was really feeling what I wrote—and doing it not only with abundant delight but a sense of descriptive energy unlike anything I had experienced before. 30

The poem that resulted was The Daffodil Murderer. 31 While the poem is long and imitative to a fair degree, it does illustrate an ability to construct an engaging plot that points to Sassoon's later success as a prose writer. More significantly,

28 Literature and Ideas in the Twentieth Century, p. 54.
29 The Weald of Youth, p. 124.
31 A good analysis of this poem, comparing it with The Everlasting Mercy, has been done by Michael Thorpe in Siegfried Sassoon, pp. 10-13.
Sassoon discovered that, in the writing of this dramatic monologue, he could express strong feelings with an artistic detachment. The poem also shows, as Thorpe has pointed out, Sassoon's ability to generate a feeling for the suffering victim—an ability which was to be developed and refined in his war poetry.

Edmund Gosse brought a copy of *The Daffodil Murderer* to Edward Marsh who, in Gosse's words, was "the choragus of the new poets". Marsh had co-founded, with Rupert Brooke, and had edited *Georgian Poetry I: 1911-1912*, the first volume of a proposed biennial anthology of contemporary poetry. While Sassoon had not heard of Marsh and had not read the anthology, he welcomed the opportunity to make the acquaintance of other young poets who, like himself, wanted support in their poetic careers.

Marsh read a selection of Sassoon's poems and wrote the poet a long, critical letter that was invaluable in crystallizing Sassoon's aspirations to become a really serious poet. The following excerpt points out the way in which Marsh's advice, perhaps as much as Masefield's example, helped Sassoon to break out of the poetic role that he had inherited from the end-of-the-century poets:

> I think it certain that you have a lovely instrument to play upon and no end of beautiful tunes in your head, but that sometimes you write them down without getting enough meaning into them to satisfy the mind....I believe there is a good as well as a bad sense in which there must be fashions in poetry, and that a vein may be worked

32 *The Weald of Youth*, p. 134.
out, if only for a time. The vague iridescent ethereal kind had a long intermittent innings all through the nineteenth century, especially at the end, and Rossetti, Swinburne, and Dowson could do things which it is no use trying now. It seems a necessity now to write either with one's eye on an object or with one's mind at grips with a more or less definite idea.33

With Marsh's encouragement, Sassoon moved to London in the summer of 1914. The change in his environment from rural to urban and the opportunity of enriching his cultural life pointed to a new development in Sassoon's poetry. In The Weald of Youth, Sassoon recalls a feeling of excitement about living in London:

...I was beginning to enjoy being about in London. I had grown up locking on it as a place whose grime and nitsiness made one doubly thankful for living in the country. But there came a moment during that summer when I realized that I was acquiring a liking for its back-street smells and busy disregard of my existence....There was a sort of poetry behind it all which fed my mind and created stirrings of expectation.34

By the early summer of 1914, then, Sassoon had finally broken out of the bell-jar environment that had limited his poetic response to a conventional romantic lyricism modeled on the poetry of the end-of-the-century poets. The exposure of his reclusive temperament to the sights and sounds of London promised new material upon which to exercise his "new pair of poetic legs".35 Freed at last of influences which had limited his poetic response to a diluted imitation of outworn poetic conventions, he was soon to be plunged unprepared into a way of life that carried with it its own aggregation of untested conventions. On 13 August 1914, Sassoon became a poet in war.

35 The phrase is Sassoon's. See Ibid, p. 126.
CHAPTER 2

(i) War Poet: Old Style

In brief, Sassoon's poetic role before 1914 developed in the bell-jar environment of the Kentish Weald. With the notable exception of The Daffodil Murderer, the early poetry was largely derivative of the sensuous nature poetry devolving from Keats, Tennyson and Hardy. The poetic role in the early poetry had been that of an aloof, majestic onlooker imitative of the point of view of the Aesthetic and Pre-Raphaelite poets as he conceived of them. Sassoon's introduction to the Georgian poetry movement had come through his attempt to imitate the racy, colloquial realism of John Masefield's narrative poems, particularly The Everlasting Mercy. The Daffodil Murderer, which began as a parody of Masefield's poem and evolved into a creatively innovative work, convinced Sassoon that he was able to assume a poetic role which dramatized the everyday life of humankind.

After the outbreak of the war in 1914, Sassoon's new status as the poet-in-war served to complicate the kinds of poetic roles that he could assume. On the one hand, he had a mystic sensibility, through which he apprehended an essential harmony between God and the poet through the medium of Nature. On the other hand, he had discovered an ability in himself to project an empathy with a fictional character in a kind of
dramatic milieu. Before we examine the role played by Sassoon's attitude to nature after he entered the war, it would be useful to look at the influence of concepts such as patriotism, heroism, and self-transcendence on the early poetry about the war. Especially important in this respect is the impact of the war on the Georgian poets, for it was to the Georgian poets in 1914 that Sassoon looked in adopting his own attitude about the role of the modern poet-at-war.

The immediate cause leading to the declaration of war by Great Britain on Germany on August 4, 1914—Germany's intention to attack France by marching through neutral Belgium—provided a focal point for a complex enthusiastic response by the British public. The real factors responsible for this enthusiasm are not easy to delineate. Vivian de Sola Pinto suggests two factors contributing to the English enthusiasm for the imminent war:

Part of the enthusiasm was certainly due to the sense of relief from the intolerable tension of the years immediately preceding the war and from the drabness and monotony of commercialized "civilization". Part of it also was the outcome of the moral sense derived from the English puritan tradition, which had been starved, corrupted, but not killed in a world of competitive commerce, and which now seemed to have found an outlet in heroic action.¹

The prospect of war created in the British public a sense of relief from monotony in the possibility of heroic action.

The most idealistic young men of a generation responded to France's and to Belgium's plea for help against the German aggressors.

The same simple response—a form of the romantic concept of war far removed from the actual international situation—prevailed in the early poetry about the war. Edmund Blunden writes about the changed role of the poet after 1914 when many poets became engaged in the war:

The war of 1914 began, no doubt, with the old assumption that the poets should sit in quiet corners writing majestically about it, but that attitude did not quite satisfy readers. The title "soldier-poets" became the brief reference to an altered view of war poetry, though what the extent of the alteration would eventually become was not at once foreseeable in 1914.

The emergence in 1914 of patriotic feelings attached to such abstract concepts as Right, Valour, and Glory, led to a kind of poetry that was artificial because, in the first place, it could not correspond to the real political situation, nor could it come from actual experience of warfare. C. K. Stead, in The New Poetic (London, 1964, p. 89), cites an example of such popular poetry, based on abstract concepts of war, in Henry Newbolt's "The Vigil" which sold 70,000 copies almost immediately after it was published. This is the final stanza:

So shalt thou when morning comes,
Rise to conquer or to fall,
Joyful hear the rolling drums,
Joyful hear the trumpets call,
Then let memory tell thy heart:
"England! what thou wert, thou art!"
Gird thee with thine ancient might,
Forth! and God defend the right!

The war at first left the Georgian poet without a clearly defined role. The Georgian poets beginning in 1910 tried to create a body of poetry springing from real experience and grounded in concrete observation. While the Georgian poet was dedicated to a poetry of actual experience, he could not initially write realistically about the nature of the war—the complexity of its nature was beyond his comprehension. Nor could he resort to formulistic patriotic verse, however popular it might be.

The unexpected impact of the war on the Georgians is recorded in Christopher Hassall's Edward Marsh. The Georgian poetry movement had been founded in the belief that Liberal England in 1910 was entering a period of cultural stability paralleling that of the early Georgian period. The accession of George I to the throne of England in 1715 had initiated a period of Whig stability that provided a sound basis for a neo-classic era in the arts. In his prefatory note to the first edition of Georgian Poetry Marsh suggested a comparison between the cultural stability of the historical Georgian period beginning with George I, and the Liberal England of 1912:

This volume is issued in the belief that English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty. Few readers have the leisure or the zeal to investigate each volume as it appears; and the process of recognition is often slow. This collection, drawn entirely from the publications of the past two years may if it is fortunate help the lovers of poetry to

realize that we are at the beginning of another
"Georgian period" which may take rank in due time
with the several great poetic ages of the past.4

However confident the tone of Marsh's prefatory note to
the first anthology was, the outbreak of the war showed that
his belief in the stability of Liberal England, shared by many
of the Georgian poets, had been an illusion. The Georgian
poets found themselves almost unable to cope with the new
state of affairs. Some of their correspondences with Marsh
at the time suggest that, in part, their enthusiasm for the
war was not a spontaneous response but, more likely, a
reaction against the initial shock. A few excerpts from
their letters can make this more apparent than any pro-
tracted discussion of social psychology:

[Marsh to Bottomley]: "It's marvellously interesting
and in a way exhilarating in spite of the awful-
ness of what it's all about."
[Bottomley to Marsh]: "[A]fter all this vast un-
reason is over there may be a chance of making a
wiser and more fruitful world for us to grow old in."
[Monro to Marsh]: "Everything else has sunk into
silly insignificance."
[D. H. Lawrence to Marsh]: "It is like one of
those nightmares when you can't move."
[Rosenberg to Marsh]: "Are we going to have
Tennyson's 'Battle in the Air' and the nations
deluging nations with blood from the air?"
[Brooke to Marsh]: "...two bad sonnets yesterday."

It is significant that Rupert Brooke should refer to the
first of his war-sonnet sequence as "bad sonnets". He
appears to have recognized the failing in them that

5 Quoted in Hassall, Edward Marsh, p. 292.
Charles Hamilton Sorley, when nineteen-years-old, stated with great acumen in a period when the whole nation was caught up in the war spirit: "He has clothed his attitude in fine words; but he has taken the sentimental attitude." Brooke's role in the Georgian poetry movement was a major one. It was on his suggestion that Marsh initiated the biennial anthology of contemporary poetry in 1912. Before 1914 Brooke had used realism in the details and diction of his poetry. He aimed for a poetry that was concrete and that communicated a directness of feeling to the reader. The change in his poetic from the realism of his early poetry to the romantic mode of his soldier-poetry of 1915 deserves investigation at this point, because many of the Georgian poets at war, particularly Robert Michols, Robert Graves and Sassoon, looked upon Brooke as the symbol of the poet-at-war. Sassoon, in particular, was sufficiently impressed by the sentiments expressed in Brooke's soldier-sonnets to imitate them in his own early poetry about the war.

Edward Marsh's earliest quarrel with Rupert Brooke's pre-war poetry involved the strain of unpleasant realism that the poet had cultivated in such poems as "Dead Men's Love", "Libido" and "Channel Passage". Brooke's admiration

6 From a letter to his mother dated 28 April 1915; quoted by Arthur E. Lane in An Adequate Response: The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Detroit, 1972, p. 80.

for the later Elizabethan dramatists, especially Webster, who became the subject of his fellowship dissertation, and of John Donne, whom he championed against public neglect in his reviews of Grierson's edition of Donne in 1912, reinforced his belief in unrestricted realism in poetry. The sestet in "Channel Passage" describes a sea-sick lover:

Do I forget you? Retchings twist and tie me, Old meat, good meals, brown gobbets, up I throw. Do I remember? Acrid returns and slimy, The scobs and slobber of a last year's woe. And still the sick ship rolls. 'Tis hard, I tell ye, To choose 'twixt love and nausea, heart and belly.

Marsh objected to the unpleasant realism in such poems as the "Channel Passage". He believed that there was no valid reason for the poet to make such a strong assault on the sensibility of the reader. For Brooke, however, the unpleasant realism served an important function. He described this function in an explanatory letter to Marsh:

I'm not (of course) unrepentant about the "unpleasant poems". I don't claim great merit for The Channel Passage; but the point of it was (or should have been!) "serious". There are common and sordid things --situations or details--that may suddenly bring all Tragedy, or at least the brutality of actual emotions to you. I rather grasp relievedly at them, after I've beaten vain hands in the rosy mists of poets' experiences. 8

Brooke's defense of his realism demonstrates his attempt to avoid the ethereal poetry that dominated the later Victorian period.

The outbreak of the war promised ultimately to widen the experience of the poet, but for Rupert Brooke, as for many of the young men who joined the war, the first impact

8 Quoted in Hassall, Edward Marsh, pp. 177-78.
of the news was initially confusing and depressing. Expressing the thoughts of a "friend" on the impending war, he could only conclude: "Well, if Armageddon's on, I suppose one should be there." It was not long, however, before he began to see the war as an opportunity for moral regeneration. On August 14, 1914, he was commissioned in the Royal Navy Division as a junior subaltern. It was in this period that he wrote a sequence of five sonnets on the relation of the individual soldier to the war.

The first sonnet, entitled "Peace", suggests that the war has given meaning and direction to the young men of England, whose youth had previously been wasted in a life of indolence in the absence of self-transcending values:

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,  
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping.  
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,  
To turn, as swimmers into clearness leaping,  
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,  
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,  
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,  
And all the little emptiness of love!

In the octave of this sonnet, youth is portrayed as a generation renewed and purified by the prospect of war. The honour that war will bring can cleanse the soldier from "sick hearts" and "all the little emptiness of love". The title, then, has an ironic aspect. Through war the individual living in ill-harmony with an imperfect society can obtain a spiritual peace within.

More bardic is the sonnet called "The Soldier". Brooke

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9 The New Statesman, III (1914); quoted in The Georgian Revolt, p. 140. The "friend" is Brooke, himself.
speaks through the persona of an English soldier contemplating death in battle. The kind of patriotism that the soldier speaks of is related to a concrete love of the land of his birth. It is a worship of the Motherland, not the society, or the body-politic. The octave presents the image of an English soldier, killed in some foreign battlefield and returning by natural process to the earth from which he came. In this sense, the soldier has a kind of immortality. From the dust of his body nature renews herself. The sestet affirms an immortality of the spirit—especially in the Shelleyan "A pulse in the eternal mind". The poem does transmit a genuine love of the nation that gave the soldier life. It is "bardic" in a way that is similar to parts of Tennyson's In Memoriam. The speaker transcends the personal experience in making the experience speak for the feelings of his fellow man.

Brooke's soldier-sonnets can be read as patriotic poems expressing the feelings of a nation. However, the values that they extol are really the values of a minority of the population. They do stand for the values of the whole class of young men who emerged from the public schools: comradeship, sportsmanship, a love of the countryside, a youth full of promise, but alienated from the generation that preceded them. Edmund Gosse reviewing the soldier-sonnets in the Times Literary Supplement acknowledged Brooke as the symbol of the soldier-poet: "These sonnets are personal—never were sonnets more personal since Sidney died—and yet
the very blood and youth of England seem to find expression in them." While Gosse's implications are rather grandiose, he was one of the first critics to point out the ambiguity between the bardic and the personal voice in these poems.

At the deepest level, Brooke's sonnet sequence is intensely personal. This must be made clear if we are to understand the real nature of his influence on his contemporaries who survived him. The patriotism of these poems is not an abstract pose like that of Newbolt's "The Vigil" but a romantic love of land. There is a sense in which they are "bad sonnets", for the personal feeling of love of land could not in reality be reconciled with either the aims or the nature of the British involvement in the war. This kind of poetry can only be a valid response if the Motherland has been invaded, if one's national soil must be protected from plunderers. Yet, if Brooke views war as a chance for personal moral regeneration, it is not because the "honour" of his country must be preserved; he was too much of a realist to believe that Britain's honour was at stake. He found himself in an impossible bind. His reasons for volunteering were complex and personal.

Brooke's personal life at the outbreak of the war was extremely stressful. He suffered a near-breakdown early in 1914. Apart from the fact that he would have found it intolerable to resist volunteering in the army because of the pressure that would ensue from governing officials and from the opinions of

10 Quoted in Edward Marsh, p. 313.
his own friends, the decision to volunteer and immerse himself in a higher cause simplified his life to a considerable degree. However, one must measure the patriotic resolve that seems to permeate the war-sonnets against the following excerpt from a letter Brooke wrote before he decided to volunteer in the war:

One grows introspective. I find myself in two natures—not necessarily conflicting, but—different. There's half my heart which is normal and English—what's the word, not quite "good" or "Honourable"—"straight," I think. But the other half is a wanderer and a solitary selfish, unbound, and doubtful. Half of my heart is of England, the rest is looking for some home I haven't yet found. So, when this war broke, there was part of my nature and desires that said "Let me alone. What's all this bother? I want to work. I've got ends I desire to reach. If I'd wanted to be a soldier I should have been one. But I've found myself other dreams."

The genuine side of Brooke was not that side which was "normal and English". When he tries to immolate his personal response in a patriotic gesture, especially in "The Dead", the result is "poetic" in the bad sense and conventional in a way which he would have been ashamed to admit at a time when a dedication to realism was uppermost in his poetic creed.

We can see Rupert Brooke as a war-poet in the old-style, if we consider in isolation that aspect of his


12 Arthur E. Lane in An Adequate Response, pp. 125-31, discusses this issue.
soldier-sonnets which presented a conventional picture of the soldier as a hero, sacrificing his life in "some corner of a foreign field" for his country. Two things must be made clear about Brooke if we are to be fair in distinguishing the man from the symbol of youth sacrificing itself for England. Brooke died in 1915, before the ruinous battles of the Somme. Nevertheless, the last verse he wrote, a posthumously published "Fragment", suggests that he was beginning to see his poetic role in a different way:

I would have thought of them
   --Needless, within a week of battle--in pity,
Pride in their strength and in the weight and firmness
   And link'd beauty of bodies, and pity that
This gay machine of splendour 'ld soon be broken,
Thought little of, pashed, scattered...

The early romanticism was giving way to realism as concrete as that of his pre-war poetry.

The heroic legend that grew up around Brooke after his death completely overshadowed the ultimately disillusioned Brooke who wrote the "Fragment". He died in the Gallipoli campaign on St. George's Day, 23 April 1915. The association of Brooke with the warrior-Saint, patron of England had already been made in the unconscious mind of the nation when Dean Inge read "The Soldier" in St. Paul's Cathedral on Easter Day. Winston Churchill, in a letter to the Times, officially pronounced Brooke the national soldier-poet. The letter firmly erased all traces of the man who believed in his deepest soul that a man's personal destiny is as important as his duty to his country:

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....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 days when no sacrifice but the most precious is that which is most freely proffered.13

It may be cruel to add that Brooke became ill on his way to Gallipoli, and died of a fever caused by a lip-sore before he even reached the Front; but Brooke himself knew that real life is often not heroic, not glorious, and his pre-war realistic poetry was probably a more accurate indication of the poet's world-view than the polished platitudes of Churchill's eulogy.

(ii) "Absolution"

Siegfried Sassoon's reaction to the outbreak of the war, while similar to Brooke's, was far less complex. Though he had spent a short time in London, he had lived most of his life on the Kentish Weald. His identification with the English countryside was more pronounced than that of the nomadic Brooke. Sassoon was less analytic about his attitude to the outbreak of the war than was Brooke. His earliest poetic treatments of the war were heroic pieces, citing the beauty of Nature that the poet as soldier was fighting to preserve. His other attitudes, especially about the "cleansing" value of war, are directly imitative of the patriotic tone that he

13 Quoted in The Georgian Revolt, pp. 140-41.
read on the surface of Brooke's sonnet sequence. Like Brooke, Sassoon entered the war virtually ignorant of the nature of the environment he was about to encounter. In The Weald of Youth Sassoon describes his younger self on a bicycle ride in Rye contemplating his enlistment in the army. He writes in the third person:

Observing that bicyclist from to-day, I find it difficult to imagine and share his emptiness and immaturity of mind, so clueless, so inconsequent, and so unforeseeing. Confronted by that supreme crisis, he rides to meet it in virtual ignorance of its origins and antecedents. For like most of his generation he was taken unawares by that which realistic observation had long regarded as inevitable. Confused and uncomprehending, he has no precedent to guide and instruct him.

Sassoon was more fitted to be a war-poet in the old style than Rupert Brooke. His concepts about war, like his concepts about the role of the poet, were largely received opinion based on his reading. "Being a hero," he writes in The Old Century, "nearly always meant getting killed; it seemed, but I supposed that the glory made it worth while."

He admits, too, that in 1914 his "notions of warfare had been mostly derived from drawings in old numbers of The Illustrated London News; then Russia was fighting Japan and the Turks were having battles with the Bulgarians." Young

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15 Page 273.

16 The Old Century, p. 50.

17 The Weald of Youth, pp. 276-77.
Sherston, the fictional projection of Sassoon's outdoor-self, anticipates the war as an opportunity for adventure: "I had serious aspirations to heroism in the field...." 18 However, he vaguely realizes that in modern warfare the soldier's individual part can be little more than "obscure and submissive". 19

The complexity of the causes leading to the war and of the aims of Britain in the war made it difficult, however, for Sassoon to adopt a traditional heroic attitude toward it. In the first place, as noted, the outbreak of the war came as a complete surprise to him. International events were more remote from reality than his own world of the hunt. His final decision to enlist seemed, as he put it in The Weald of Youth, "embarrassing rather than heroic". 20

In the second place, like Rupert Brooke, Sassoon felt that the side of his personality which was "normal and English" was not the genuine self, but a superficial "social self". In this light, the decision by Sassoon to join the army was based less on a sense of duty than a crassly heroic desire to serve his country.

Having spent a happy childhood in the Kentish Weald, he naturally attached a feeling of loyalty to a personified concept of Nature. An ironic passage in The Weald of Youth illustrates the tenuous connection that existed between

19 Ibid, p. 220.
20 The Weald of Youth, p. 271.
Sassoon's love for the natural environment of his youth and his decision to sacrifice his freedom to a war that really did not concern him. He must defend that which he revered:

The Weald had been the world of my youngness, and while I gazed across it now I felt prepared to do what I could to defend it. And after all, dying for one's native land was believed to be the most glorious thing one could possibly do.21

The irony is generated not only by the obvious hearsay attached to the notion of heroism in war, but also by the notion that the Weald needed defending. In the first place, it was not being directly threatened as, say, Belgium was. In the second place, the naivete of young Sherston about the aims of the war emphasizes the restricted life that enables him to idealize Britain's involvement in the war.

From the outset, the Great War was generally seen as a holy crusade.22 Rupert Brooke's war-sonnets crystallized this attitude. In his early poem "Absolution," Sassoon echoed Brooke's sentiments, in adopting the role of war-poet old-style. In Siegfried's Journey, Sassoon admits that this poem was "manifestly influenced by Rupert Brooke's famous sonnet-sequence." He goes on:

The significance of my too-nobly worded lines was that they expressed the typical self-glorifying feelings of a young man about to go to the Front for the first time.23

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21 The Weald of Youth, p. 278.


23 Siegfried's Journey, p. 25. See also my n. 14.
"Absolution" describes how participation in the war purifies the soldier's perception of the world. The dedication of the soldier to his cause both acts as a maturing force and frees him from the constraint of a divided will. The individual destiny and the destiny of the society are united in a single purpose:

The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.
War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.

There was an hour when we were loth to part
From life we longed to share no less than others.
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?

"Absolution" was written in 1915. In the spring of that year Sassoon was commissioned and training in Liverpool as an infantry officer. In November he went to France, joining the First Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers near Festubet. These early years of the war re-inforced Sassoon's romantic concept of war. He wrote a number of war poems in the romantic style in 1915. Robert Graves, a six-month veteran of the trenches, describes Sassoon's poetic style in late 1915:

At this time I was getting my first book of poems, Over the Brazier, ready for the press; I had one or two drafts in my pocket-book and showed them to Siegfried. He told me that they were too realistic and that war should not be written about in a realistic way. In return he showed me some of his own poems. One of them began "Return to greet me; colours that were my joy...". This was before Siegfried had been in the trenches. I told him, in my old soldier manner, that he would soon change his style. 24

24 Robert Graves, Goodbye to All That; an autobiography, New York, 1931, p. 213.
The fact is that Sassoon believed the traditional role of the soldier-poet to be the bardic role ostensibly adopted by Rupert Brooke. His own environment during the early part of the war consisted of the training of soldiers in an idyllic natural setting. Correspondingly, the tone of the early poems is romantic-heroic. We can examine Sassoon's early war poems to see how far his simple patriotism depended on a conviction that the soldier participated in a harmonious relationship with Nature and with the Creator whose presence the poet apprehended in the beauty of Nature.

(iii) "The Mystic as Soldier"

Sassoon's love of Nature, a trait from early childhood, and his romantic concept of the hero, largely a product of his reading and his childhood imagination, form the basis of his simple patriotism at the beginning of the war. This is well-illustrated in "France," inspired by the beauty of Festubert where he was stationed late in 1915. The first stanza presents France as a woman, whose spirit walking through Nature brings joy to the hearts of soldiers:

She triumphs, in the vivid green
Where sun and quivering foliage meet;
And in each soldier's heart serene;
When death stood near them they have seen
The radiant forests where her feet
Move on a breeze of silver sheen.

The second stanza presents the basis of the speaker's heroic sacrifice. It is a love of Nature:

And they are fortunate, who fight
For gleaming landscapes swept and shafted
And crowned by cloud pavilions white;
Hearing such harmonies as might
Only from Heaven be downward wafted--
Voices of victory and delight.

This poem demonstrates the artificiality of the poet's role
when he adopts a patriotic-pastoral-bardic tone. The most
obvious weakness is the one-sided viewpoint. The suggestion
is that France is indisputably on the side of Right. Her
landscapes are "crowned by cloud pavilions white". The word
"pavilions" has a pseudo-medieval connotation that calls up
the nature of the crusades. Then, the last lines clearly
show how an arbitrary conventional attitude leads to a false
poetic tone: the last three lines are false and inflated
rhetoric. The word "harmonies" suggests young Sassoon's
fascination with music as the means to a direct emotional
expression. This poem is dominated by an emotional elation
probably caused by a complex of good health, stimulating en-
vironment, and a naive sense of glory. While the lyric re-
response may be genuine, the opening of the second stanza sug-
gests that the poem has a didactic purpose: to demonstrate the
fortunate status of the soldier. In this context the intrusion
of an emotional ecstasy is false.

The poem "To My Brother"25 is an elegiac lyric that suf-
fers from the pose of the traditional soldier-poet. The first
stanza suggests the strong relationship between the speaker
and the brother he addresses:

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;
Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;

25 Sassoon's brother, Hamo, died in the Gallipoli fight-
ing in August of 1915.
For we have made an end of all things base.
We are returning by the road we came.

The stanza suggests a return to innocence by the speaker with the aid of his brother. The third line suggests a purging similar to that in "Absolution", but here it is more convincing because the speaker refers to a specific human relationship rather than to a number of abstract issues. The fourth line illustrates that "shame" and "all things base" pertain to some temporary sojourn which is now ended. But if we examine the speaker's qualms we see that his "shame" which is "base" refers to the state of despair and dissatisfaction at the justifications for his brother's death. This poem marks in embryo the beginning of Sassoon's increasing focus on the individual soldier betrayed by the impersonal attitude of the military leaders and of the British public. Even here, then, there is the ambiguity in the poet's role. His mystic apprehension of the value of a life sacrificed for a noble cause is undercut by the poet's implicit questioning of the "nobility" of the war-cause. The freely proffered life of his brother is the inspiration that the poem really expresses. The emphasis has shifted from an abstract and partly insincere patriotism to a patriotism inspired by the individual life freely sacrificed. The second stanza is a prayer for the enlightenment which leads to a heroism for its own sake:

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,
And I am in the field where men must fight.
But in the gloom I see your laurel'd head
And through your victory I shall win the light.
The traditional terms "lot", "ghosts of soldiers dead", "field where men must fight", "laurell'd head", and "victory" strain the elegiac tone, almost making it sound false. But the poem is intensely personal. The emphasis is on the individual "victory" rather than a national patriotism as the inspiration for the speaker. The poem might be contrasted with "The Vigil" to illustrate the concept of patriotism that Sassoon is presenting.

The vocation of soldiering put a great strain on Sassoon's essentially mystic sensibility. From his youth he had lived alternately between a state of introspective sensibility and an outdoor life largely dissociated from this sensibility. For Sassoon, the poetic personality had little in common with the more active personality in his character. We have seen that about the only similarity between Sassoon as he portrays his poetic self in The Old Century and The Weald of Youth, and Sassoon as he portrays his outdoor-self in the George Sherston of The Memoirs of George Sherston is a two-fold love of music and of Nature. As a poet who had become a soldier in 1914, Sassoon drew upon this love of music and of Nature to describe the poet and the soldier in war. In "The Dragon and the Undying" he uses the chivalric archetype of the Dragon as a symbol of the destructive nature of warfare. What the dragon destroys is the mystic sensibility of the lyric poet. The poem is basically a personal statement lamenting the eclipse of the poet's introspective creative self. This theme is the substance of the first stanza:

All night the flares go up; the Dragon sings
And beats upon the dark with furious wings;
And, stung to rage by his own darting fires,
Reaches with grappling coils from town to town;
He lusts to break the loveliness of spires,
And hurls their martyred music toppling down.

The ironic images of light associated with the destructive principle of "the flares" and "his own darting fires", suggest that the normal moral world is "out of joint". The last stanza presents an idealized picture of the slain soldiers. As in the poem "To My Brother", it is heroism without regard for its cause that absolves the destructive aspect of war. The slain are contrasted with the Dragon. Whereas the Dragon inhabits the battlefield, the slain are "homeless as the breeze"; against the negative image of the Dragon's "own darting fires", "their faces are the fair, unshrouded night". The flares (the Dragon's fires) light up the night exposing the vulnerable soldiers to destruction. The Dragon "lusts" to destroy the harmony of music, which is a metaphor for the creative product of man's deepest emotional reactions to his world. Against this destructive element, the spirits of the slain "wander in the dusk with chanting streams". The poem moves steadily to a pantheistic conclusion. The slain become "dawn-lit trees" and fulfill the celebration of God's world "with arms up-flung". There is also the suggestion here that the weapons of warfare have been discarded.

Although "The Dragon And The Undying" presents an awareness of the destructive, emotionally blunting nature of war, it still demonstrates that the poet is trying to maintain a belief in the intrinsic unity of Man and Nature. The soldier takes human life. This is contrary to nature. But, in
sacrificing his life that other lives may be preserved (a rather unreflective belief), he is re-establishing the harmony between Nature and Mankind. This belief is grounded in the experience of Christianity. Love prompts the soldier to surrender his freedom for his country. The belief in a pantheistic union of the souls of the slain with the objects of Nature is largely influenced by Sassoon's reading of Brooke's war sonnets. Sassoon's comparison of the slain soldiers to "storm bewilder'd seas" is a less optimistic rendering of the "waters blown by changing winds to laughter" in Brooke's "The Dead".

Sassoon's identification of the slain with the comforting harmony of Nature enables him to reconcile his role as soldier with his role as mystic Nature-worshipper. By celebrating the triumph of the soldier who absolves Mankind's breach with Nature in his act of love, the poet triumphs over the destruction of the Dragon, war. As long as Nature is undying, the spirit of man is undying. As the war progressed, however, Sassoon began to perceive a widening gulf between the role of the soldier dedicated to killing and the life-fostering role of the nature-poet. The fighting in France in late 1915 and early 1916 completely changed the landscape that had inspired the poet's hercism in "France". The poet makes a plea in "To Victory" for a return to the environment of his youth. The poem is perhaps not successful because it is an attempt to re-establish a relationship with the spirit of Nature as a means of escape rather than celebration and worship. The unaided
lyric force of the poetry itself is ultimately invoked to provide a surrogate for the lost relationship with Nature:

I am not sad; only I long for lustre.  
I am tired of the greys and browns and the leafless ash.  
I would have hours that move like a glitter of dancers  
Far from the angry guns that boom and flash.

Return, musical, gay with blossom and fleetness, 
Days when my sight shall be clear and my heart rejoice;  
Come from the sea with breadth of approaching brightness,  
When the blithe wind laughs on the hills with uplifted voice.

The apologetic tone of Sassoon's dissatisfaction with war in this poem suggests that he still feels guilty about choosing Nature when he must choose between Nature and humanity—at-war. But he came to realize more and more that the war was putting a great strain on his mystic sensibility. Before the war, Sassoon celebrated a harmony between himself and God through Nature. Now that he was actively involved with humanity-at-war, as a soldier dedicated to killing, his mystic role had to change from a state of contemplative celebration to one of active protest.

In the poem "The Mystic as Soldier" the tension between the roles of soldier and mystic has become painfully acute. The poet no longer sees the will of God in the war-cause. What he does feel is a growing strain on his sensitivity because of the loss of his youthful joy in Nature:

I lived my days apart,  
Dreaming fair songs for God;  
By the glory in my heart  
Covered and crowned and shod.
Now God is in the strife,  
And I must seek him there, 
Where death outruns life,  
And fury smites the air.

The poet finds that he must turn away from Nature, because the God in himself lies somewhere in the relationship between the lives participating in the war and the poet. He must shift his emphasis from the God in Nature to the God in Man. But the destruction on the battlefield "Where death outruns life, And fury smites the air" does not seem to be the domain of a kind and loving God. There is an arbitrariness about the tone of this poem. The final stanza expresses strong emotion, but it leads once more to the desire to escape into the past:

I walk the secret way  
With anger in my brain. 
O music through my clay,  
When will you sound again?

At this point, Sassoon longs to return to the simple relationship of harmony with Nature. He realizes that the conditions of warfare make it difficult for him to continue the role of religious nature-lyricist. His mystic nature fights against immersing itself in the environment of warfare. It is not surprising, then, that during a period in Flixécourt in April 1916, while he was taking a refresher course, the return to natural surroundings resembling that of his pre-war youth resulted in poems similar in tone to those written early in the war.26

26 In Siegfried’s Journey, pp. 26-27, Sassoon recounts the period at Flixécourt: "The world around me was luminous and lovely; I was filled with physical gratitude for it; and I strove to express that vision with spiritual exaltation."
Of the poems composed at Flixécourt, the elegaic poem "The Last Meeting", inspired by the death of his friend David Thomas, is written, according to Michael Thorpe, in "a lush romantic style that smothers both the subject and some strong atmospheric description beneath a spurious richness of language."

The dead soldier is first viewed in pantheistic unity with Nature. The speaker has sought everywhere for him and he finally appears "crushed to earth in scentless flowers,/ And lifted in the rapture of dark pines". Nature is seen as the deity which absolves man from sin. The spirit of the dead man instructs the poet to "Look in the faces of the flowers and find/ The innocence that shrives me". The dead man's bond of love with Nature is really that of the poet himself:

"For I was born to the round world's delight, And knowledge of enfolding motherhood, Whose tenderness, that shines through constant toil, Gathers the naked children to her knees."

The closing lines of the poem, expressing the passing away of David Thomas also portray the passing away of the poet's own state of childhood innocence. Yet, both the youth of his friend cut short by war and the poet's own idyllic youth are immortalized in the poet's "song":

So he will never come but in delight, And, as it was in life, his name shall be Wonder awaking in a summer dawn, And youth, that dying, touched my lips to song.

Not again until long after the war did Sassoon's mystical-natural temperament, under the benign influence of natural beauty, produce poetry of this kind.

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(iv) Happy Warriors

Rupert Brooke's war-sonnet sequence portrayed an attitude to war that was based largely on a conventional attitude to war rather than on personal experience. In Sassoon's early war poetry, Brooke's influence is obvious, especially in the abstract heroism and the pantheistic concept of afterlife. The optimistic attitude was re-inforced by Sassoon's strong delight in Nature. His initial heroic response was unrealistically associated with a desire to defend the Weald of his youth from defilement. His initial attitude to the heroic surrender of one's life to one's country presented self-sacrifice as an atonement to Nature for the breach caused by the state of war. The atonement allowed a pantheistic re-union of the soldier's spirit with Nature. This heroism, he believed, inspired living soldiers like himself to become heroic.

In reality, as he became accustomed to the environment of humanity-at-war, Sassoon began to realize that the sociability of youth, the stimulation of new and beautiful surroundings on a general state of good health rather than heroic idealism were often the significant factors in the soldier's positive response to the wars. As we shall see in another chapter, "happy warriorism" that resulted from the idyllic conditions of the early war, ultimately prolonged the public illusion that the war was a glorious crusade more decisively than any other factor. Under the guise of the
elder George Sherston, Sassoon points this out in Sherston's Progress:

That was how active service used to hoodwink us. Wonderful moments in the War, we called them, and told people at home that after all we wouldn't have missed it for worlds. But it was only one's younghness, really, and the fact of being in a foreign country with a fresh mind. Not because of the War but in spite of it, we felt such zest and fulfillment, and remembered it later on with nostalgic regret, forgetting the miseries and grumbles, and how we longed for it to come to an end. 28

Part of the reason for the selective memory of the soldier on leave, or home with a blighty wound, was a genuine desire to forget the horror. This is illustrated in a reminiscence by Sherston of a period of open warfare:

What we did up in the Front Line I don't remember; but while we were remounting our horses at 71 North two privates were engaged in a good-natured scuffle: one had the other's head under his arms. Why should I remember that and forget so much else? 29

On the whole, however, happy wariorism was a natural expression of the joy of youth exercising its limbs in a group activity. A case in point is the war poet, Julian Grenfell. He fought as a professional soldier in India and Africa before the war broke out. In May, 1915 he sent home a single poem "Into Battle". It was published in the London Times on May 27, 1915, the day after his death, making Grenfell a minor hero after Rupert Brooke. Grenfell's personality largely determined the nature of the poem. While he possessed a mystic sensibility, he also possessed the attributes of the happy

28 Page 636. (See Chapter I, n. 4.)
29 Memoirs of An Infantry Officer, p. 324.
warrior. John H. Johnston reports that Grenfell, as an infantry man, "made a specialty of stalking German snipers, Indian-style, and shooting them at point-blank range". 30

"Into Battle" portrays a relationship between the soldier and nature which is much more instinctual than that portrayed by Sassoon. Grenfell expresses the simple joy of being a warrior:

The fighting man shall from the sun
Take warmth, and life from the glowing earth;
Speed with the light-foot winds to run,
And with the trees to newer birth;
And find, when fighting shall be done,
Great rest and fullness after dearth...

The point of view expressed here is a primitive one that does not confine itself to the First World War. It is the expression of a way of life. It has a primitive beauty of its own, a rather dangerous attraction:

And when the burning moment breaks,
And all things else are out of mind,
And only joy of battle takes
Him by the throat, and makes him blind,
Through joy and blindness he shall know,
Not caring much to know, that still
Nor lead nor steel shall reach him, so
That it be not the Destined Will.

This is a valid state of mind of the young warrior, as Johnston points out: "The poem communicates a genuine intensity of feeling even if the reader does not happen to share the attitudes of the poet". 31

The closest Sassoon came to this state of mind is the

30 English Poetry of the First World War, p. 38.
ambiguous poem "The Kiss":

To these I turn, in these I trust—
Brother Lead and Sister Steel.
To his blind power I make appeal,
I guard her beauty clean from rust.

He spins and burns and loves the air,
And splits a skull to win my praise;
But up the nobly marching days
She glitters naked, cold and fair.

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:
That in good fury he may feel
The body where he sets his heel
Quail from your downward darting kiss.

Michael Thorpe presents some evidence that the poem is a straightforward presentation of the happy warrior state of mind: "The poem reads like an unconscious echo of the chilling paean to the Virtues of 'Clear-singing, clean slicing;/
Sweet spoken, soft finishing' in 'The Song of the Sword', by W. E. Henley (1892), whose poetry the young Sassoon had read avidly." 32 Robert Graves gives further evidence that the poem is serious in Goodbye to All That. In 1918, Sassoon wrote Graves, from Craiglockhart Hospital, berating him for interfering in his peace protest of June 1917. Graves defends himself, at the same time shedding much light on the contradictions in Sassoon's personality during the war:

I might have pointed out that when I was in France I was never such a fire-eater as he was. The amount of Germans that I had killed or caused to be killed was negligible compared with his wholesale slaughter. The fact was that the direction of Siegfried's unconquerable idealism changed with his environment: he varied between happy warrior and bitter pacifist. 33

33 Goodbye to All That, p. 327.
George Sherston's description of "The spirit of the Bayonet" lecture at the army school in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* bears on "The Kiss". Sherston's reaction to the lecture suggests that he was appalled by its warrior-like sentiment rather than inspired to celebrate the soldier's enthusiasm for killing:

But the lecturer's voice still battered on my brain. "The bullet and the bayonet are brother and sister". "If you don't kill him, he'll kill you". "Stick him between the eyes, in the throat, in the chest". "Don't waste good steel. Six inches are enough. What's the use of a foot of steel sticking out at the back of a man's neck? Three inches will do for him; when he coughs, go and look for another".34

"The Kiss" deserves close study because in its style it epitomizes many of Sassoon's later satiric-war poems. The rhyme, rhythm and diction are starkly simple. Inflated rhetoric is not present as in the earlier war poems. The poem picks up on ironies implicit in the "Spirit of the Bayonet" lecture. For example, the terms "Brother Lead" and "Sister Steel", instead of emphasizing a filial bond, convey the ironic relationship of the bullet and the bayonet to the soldier. He is taught to "trust" them as a substitute for his fellow man, the enemy. The emphasis is on a reversal of values where hatred has taken the place of filial love; hence, the ironic reversal of the final image—the bayonet which kills a man is implanting a "kiss". The term "good fury" is, perhaps, deliberately ambiguous. The reader is not sure if the

34 *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, p. 290.
fury is against the enemy or against humanity at war for sanctioning such killing. The poem succeeds best as a satire. However, it is sufficiently ambiguous in tone to suggest that, in 1916, Sassoon's happy warrior side was not yet under the control of his ethical sensibility.

It seems that in 1916 when "The Kiss" was written, the happy warrior side of Sassoon's personality was a shallow role, and that the introspective, mystic self was deeper. Both sides contributed to his personality as a poet. We find him writing the following account of a heroic act to Edward Marsh in July 1916:

Eddie, I chased 40 Boches out of a trench by Mametz Wood all by myself. Wasn't that a joyous moment for me? They ran like hell and I chucked bombs and made hunting noises. I wonder if I shall ever be able to take soldiering seriously.35

This does not sound like the same person who wrote "I walk the secret way/ With anger in my brain". Sassoon's flippant attitude may be an attempt to protect his more sensitive side from emotional damage. His happy warriorism does not seem the same kind as that of the warrior of "Into Battle". His penchant for self-dramatization36, a quality often associated with the egoism of youth, is dramatized in Graves's account of the same incident of capturing the German trench at Mametz:

I was told that Siegfried had...distinguished himself by taking single-handed a battalion frontage

36 See Michael Thorpe, Siegfried Sassoon, p. 29.
titude of the British public toward the soldiers in the war.

One incident at the New Zealand Hospital at Amiens\(^8\) illustrates this naïve attitude with classic irony:

There was a tall, well-preserved man pushing his son very slowly across the lawn in a long wheeled bed. The son was sallow and sulky, as he well might be, having lost one of his legs.... The father was proud of his disabled son, and I heard him telling one of the nurses how splendidly the boy had done in the Gommecourt attack, showing her a letter too, probably from the boy's colonel. I wondered whether he had ever allowed himself to find out that the Gommecourt attack had been nothing but a massacre of good troops. Probably he kept a war map with little flags on it; when Mametz Wood was reported as captured he moved a little flag an inch forward after breakfast. For him the Wood was a small green patch on a piece of paper. For the Welsh Division it had been a bloody nightmare....\(^9\)

Sassoon's experience with his own relatives proved to be a similar one. He could not discuss his true feelings about the war with his mother, because she refused to believe that such horrible things as British atrocities against the Germans were conceivable:

I could get no relief by discussing the war with my mother, whose way of looking at it differed from mine. For her, the British were St. George and the Germans were the Dragon; beyond that she had no more to say about it.\(^10\)

Of certain elder citizens, including his Uncle Hamo Thornycroft, Sassoon writes, resentful of their selective attitude toward the war: "Their attitude was to insist that it was splendid to be

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8 A pseudonym for the General Service Hospital, Somerville College, Oxford, where Sassoon stayed for three months beginning in August 1916.

9 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 371.

10 Siegfried's Journey, p. 40. Compare the attitude of Sherston's Aunt Evelyn in M.F.H., p. 269: "And kind Aunt Evelyn talked bitterly about the Germans and called them 'hell hounds'."
career, Sassoon was to fill out the formal use of realism by the Georgians in his realistic portrayal of the environment of battle. But the experiences he would attempt to seize and embody would constantly break violently loose from his controlling art.
CHAPTER 3

(i) 1916: The Home-Front Split

The experiences of British soldiers on the Western Front during the first two years of the war led to a disillusionment on the part of the sensitive participants who had hailed the outbreak of war with patriotic idealism. Even in 1915 Rupert Brooke's poetry, which had envisioned in the war a chance for personal moral regeneration in a self-transcending cause, was giving way to the disillusionment that permeates the realistic "Fragment" which he wrote shortly before his death at Gallipoli.

For Sassoon the war had created an opportunity to display heroism in the service of God and Country. This idealistic attitude to the war was the theme of "Absolution," a romantic call-to-duty influenced by the heroic tone of Brooke's soldier-sonnets. But soon the strain of being a soldier affected his idealistic attitude to the war, and this strain began to show its effects in the poems that followed: the destructive force of war in "The Dragon and the Undying," the loss of the joyful relationship with Nature in "To Victory," and the loss of communion with God in Nature in "The Mystic as Soldier."

While the environment of war changed Sassoon's attitude toward the nature of war as he conceived it in 1914, the British public's attitude did not really change by 1916. Sassoon became aware of the clear division that developed between the Nation at Home and the Nation overseas. His poetry after 1916 reveals an
attempt to correct this division, first by turning to journalistic realism in an attempt to counteract news propaganda, and later by resorting to satire in a stronger effort to fight ignorance and hypocrisy that would not be moved in any other way.

To understand more clearly the factors that led Sassoon to adopt these poetic roles, we might lock briefly at biased accounts of the opening of the terrible battles of the Somme (July-October, 1916). The strongest factors in maintaining Home Front ignorance of the nature of the war were the propagandist accounts of the newspapers for the State and the accounts of war of some of the Tommies themselves.

At the beginning of 1916 the war was being fought on three main fronts: the eastern (Russia), the western (Britain and France) and the southern (Italy). The war had already been disastrous for the French forces, which had suffered about two million casualties. The British had lost half a million, including the bulk of their peacetime forces. The success of the Germans in 1915 in thrusting back the Russians from East Prussia, Galacia, and Poland enabled them to transfer approximately half a million men from the eastern to the western front in an attempt to force a decision in the west during 1916. In February they launched a heavy attack on the French fortress at Verdun aimed at creating the maximum number of casualties. The fighting continued into July with the French still holding their position. The British forces had been building up strength for an offensive to relieve pressure on the French. On July 1, the British offensive which became known as the Battle of the Somme began. Because of severe losses, the French were able to con-
tribute only sixteen of the original forty divisions promised. The Germans were aware of the British strategy plans, one of which was an artillery bombardment of German positions. "After this," writes one historian, "the infantry were sent forward in broad daylight, and weighed down with 66 lb. of equipment each. According to the Official History this weight 'made it difficult to get out of a trench, impossible to move much quicker than a slow walk, or to rise and lie down quickly.'" On the first day, the British reported 60,000 fighting men wounded, missing and killed in action. The battle, which lasted until October, ultimately cost the British 420,000 casualties. For this vast sacrifice, they gained a seven-mile advance on a thirty-mile front.

The London Times naturally featured official reports of the fighting on the Somme. The Defence of the Realm Act of 1914, however, had provided for strict press censorship during the war. Consequently, news coverage of the war had to avoid facts or opinions which might have undermined civilian patriotism. The following headings appeared in the Times' coverage of the first day of fighting on the Somme:

FORWARD IN THE WEST
START OF A GREAT ATTACK
FIERCE BATTLES ON THE SOMME
A 25-MILE FRONT
9,500 PRISONERS. 2

The news which was highlighted, then, was always of an optimistic nature.


Part of the *Times* policy, acting on the advice of the War Office, was to show the British public that they would not be kept in ignorance about actual happenings on the front. The publications of daily reports of the Somme fighting represented a relaxation in censorship; however, the selective nature of the reports and the necessarily patriotic tone of the editorials, such as the following, kept the attitude of civilians from evolving beyond the idealistic attitude that prevailed in 1914:

The first impression of the opening of our offensive is that our leaders in the field have amply profited by the experience of the last two years, and that they are directing a methodical and well-planned advance, not marred by any vain and headlong rushes... We must express both to General Haig and to the War Office the thanks of the public for the steady stream of news which has been permitted to flow since the battle began. For the first time since the outbreak of the war our people are able to watch in spirit the exploits of their countrymen, to thrill with pride at the spectacle of their valour, and to follow them in their arduous struggle day by day.3

Acting upon the same principles, an "eyewitness account" of the battle demonstrates the necessity for journalists to go beyond the facts to present an optimistic face:

It must be understood that so far, in all the fighting of the last few days, no attempt has been made to gain ground. There has been no offensive in the proper sense of the word. But in the innumerable minor attacks—notably in the astonishingly successful raid by the Highland Light Infantry and in similar raids by the Irish troops, Munsters and Leinsters—we have been inflicting heavy casualties upon the enemy, quite apart from the effects of the bombardment, which, while invisible, must have been considerable.4

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4 "The Biggest British Offensive" (From Our Special Correspondent), the *Times* (Monday, July 3, 1916), p. 9.
By far, the most convincing pro-war propaganda came from the Tommies themselves. Part of their eagerness toward the war involved the "happy-warrior" complex. Part of it, too, was the spirit of comradeship in a well-organized mechanism, as they saw it. They often found it elating that the higher officers "knew what they were doing," and it was very comforting to put their faith in someone else. The following testimony of an elderly British captain on the admirable conduct of the Tommies during the German machine-gun blitz in early July, compares them to a "football team":

The Hun machine-guns were their only salvation; but wasn't it marvellous the way our chaps laughed at that fire! I've seen them pay far more heed to a sharp shower of rain. Oh, they're the salt of the earth. I've not heard of one single case of shirking. They went into it as though it was a football team scrum. And begad, they came out the other side in the same spirit, even a lot who'd got pipped.

In the previous chapter it has been demonstrated that the "happy warrior" response to war involved factors other than warfare. New surroundings, good health and the company of congenial companions were the main factors in high morale. The joy that the soldier felt was in spite of the war and not because of it. The accounts of the actions of soldiers published by the news-media probably constituted the strongest factor in the prolongation of ignorance about the terrible nature of war by the Nation at Home.

Sassoon resented the falsification of the facts of war by the news media. As we shall see, he came to believe that

5 See my Chapter 2, pp. 45ff.
6 The Times (Thursday, July 6, 1916), p. 8.
the war, in its aims and in the extent of its carnage, was morally wrong, and that the British public should share in the guilt for its continuation. Sassoon's attitude to the war led to a desire to correct this falsification, and he found that, by writing poetry with an eye on the object as Edward Marsh had suggested to him in 1913, he could bring to light those aspects of war which were being ignored by the sources of civilian intelligence about the war.

(ii) Georgian War-Poet

Sassoon did not see a great deal of the Somme fighting, but he saw enough of it to complete the change of heart he had begun to have in 1915. In Siegfried's Journey he writes:

I often felt like a student historian of those tragic vivid, and profoundly moving scenes in the Somme country... All this had changed my emotional outlook on the war, but it had, of course, been impossible to do any independent thinking about it.

The chance for reflection on the scenes of carnage witnessed in the Somme came in August 1916. In late July, Sassoon developed gastric fever and he was sent to an Oxford Hospital for officers in August.

In this period between August 1916 and February 1917, while he was on extended leave, Sassoon became acutely aware of the Home-Front split. What most impressed him was the psychological division between the Nation at Home and the Nation Overseas. Through the persona of Sherston, he looks back on this period as one of intense disillusionment with the naïve at-

7 Siegfried's Journey, p. 22.
titude of the British public toward the soldiers in the war. One incident at the New Zealand Hospital at Amiens\(^8\) illustrates this naïve attitude with classic irony:

There was a tall, well-preserved man pushing his son very slowly across the lawn in a long wheeled bed. The son was sallow and sulky, as he well might be, having lost one of his legs....The father was proud of his disabled son, and I heard him telling one of the nurses how splendidly the boy had done in the Gommecourt attack, showing her a letter too, probably from the boy's colonel. I wondered whether he had ever allowed himself to find out that the Gommecourt attack had been nothing but a massacre of good troops. Probably he kept a war map with little flags on it; when Mametz Wood was reported as captured he moved a little flag an inch forward after breakfast. For him the Wood was a small green patch on a piece of paper. For the Welsh Division it had been a bloody nightmare....\(^9\)

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\(^8\) A pseudonym for the General Service Hospital, Somerville College, Oxford, where Sassoon stayed for three months beginning in August 1916.

\(^9\) Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 371.

\(^10\) Siegfried's Journey, p. 40. Compare the attitude of Sherston's Aunt Evelyn in M.F.H., p. 269: "And kind Aunt Evelyn talked bitterly about the Germans and called them 'hell hounds.'"
in the front-line. So it was—if one came out of it safely. But I resented their patriotic suppression of those aspects of war which never got into the newspapers.11

There are several factors which led Sassoon to the composition of realistic poetry in 1916. The order of their influence would begin with the experience of war itself. The emotional reactions that the poet felt toward the atrocities of war led him to seek some means of conveying them with their original impact. Sassoon’s dissatisfaction with the war-attitude of the Nation at Home beginning in August 1916 led him to reconsider the role of the poet in war. He could no longer write patriotic poetry. His only remaining link with "civilian" life in England was with the Georgian brotherhood.

From the outbreak of the war Sassoon had been in correspondence with the editor of Georgian Poetry. In a letter to Marsh in late 1915 expressing his own literary aspirations, Sassoon demonstrated his eye for detail:

...I go blundering on, and hope someday to get quiet weeks to finish and remould the new impressions, so sharp and exciting. I wonder if you will get a typed copy of the poems you liked best sent cut to me, so that I can get an idea of the effect they make when collected. Going up a hill behind our reserve lines in the evenings I see a most wonderful and tehebrous picture—not one tree—only bare rolling slopes and folds of hills, and a disused road setting cut from nowhere along the ridge....And the booming of guns all round and the wind piping in the dead grass. O yes, this is some life—and the men almost make one weep sometimes, so patient and cheery and altogether dear.12

Robert H. Ross points out Sassoon’s practice of noting down

11 Siegfried’s Journey, p. 22.

realistic details from the front, which he then incorporated into his poems:

Even in the midst of trench warfare Sassoon laboured over his poems, corrected, inserted, emended, to bring them to 'as near perfection as he was able; he constantly made notes of the scenes he saw and the emotions he experienced so that the poems he would write from them later might have the ring of authenticity; he carefully stored to overflowing both his memory and his notebooks.\textsuperscript{13}

Poetic realism in Georgian poetry had largely been an attempt to expand the domain of "poetic" themes and diction. For Rupert Brooke, as we have seen, it represented an attack on the vague, misty nature of end-of-the-century poetry. Partly, too, it reflected a changing sensibility (or the wish for such a change), which generally corresponded to the coarseness and ruggedness of the age of Elizabeth. An example of this Elizabethan coarseness in Georgian poetry is the "Corpse-washer's Song" from Gordon Bottomley's play \textit{King Lear's Wife} which appeared in \textit{Georgian Poetry II}. The first verse is as follows:

\begin{quote}
A louse crept out my lady's shift--
Ahumm, Ahumm, Ahee--
Crying 'Oi! Oi! We are turned adrift; The lady's boscum is cold and stiffed, And her arm-pit's cold for me.'\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Ralph Hodgson's "The Bull", in the same volume, uses realism to make a particularly loathsome attack on the pastoral tradition in poetry:

\begin{quote}
Pity him that he must wake; Even now the swarm of flies Blackening his bloodshot eyes Bursts and blusters round the lake,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{The Georgian Revolt}, p.149.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Georgian Poetry II}, London, 1913, p. 41.
Scattered from the feast half-fed,
By great shadows overhead.

And the dreamer turns away
From his visionary herds
And his splendid yesterday,
Turns to meet the loathly birds
Flocking round him from the skies
Waiting for the flesh that dies.\textsuperscript{15}

In the realistic portrayal of the experience of war, Sassoon and others were to expand and justify the pre-war use of realism in Georgian poetry. Realism became a corrective to the war propaganda, presenting the soldier-poet's perspective of the war. This constituted a moral justification for the technique, and we can see that as a corrective it is but one short step to satire. John H. Johnston writes of the change in tone of certain war-poetry following the Somme Offensive:

The habit of mere personal expression, as exemplified in the verse of the early poets, was replaced by an effort to expand and intensify the lyric response, to purify it of a limiting subjectivism, and to animate it with a new purpose that was both communicative and curative. Realistic depiction of the scenes of war became a weapon against growing complacency and indifference; satirical verse was employed to scourge the abuses that had long rankled in the heart of the common soldier.\textsuperscript{16}

(iii) Inferno

Beginning in 1916, one of the central issues which Sassoon expressed in his poetry of realism was his changing concept of the Man-Nature relationship. We have already seen how Sassoon identified his early patriotic response with his love of Nature, and his desire to defend the Kentish Weald. The destruction of

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Georgian Poetry II}, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{English Poetry of the First World War}, p. 74.
French land during 1915-16 by both the Allies and the Enemy must have had a strong embittering effect on Sassoon. The poet's adoration of the spirit of Nature in "France" constituted the basis of one of his most genuine heroic poems of the early war. As his own feelings of guilt and of the guilt of humanity-at-war increased, Sassoon began to perceive that there was no essential harmony between the spirit of Nature and that of Man, or if there had been one, that it had been destroyed by Man. The notion of "landscapes swept and shafted" gave way to the landscape of hell. The soldier had turned Nature into a physical hell, and for his sin he was being punished by living in it. The poem "Golgotha" represents, after "Victory," Sassoon's first poetic expression of the loss of harmony between Man and Nature:

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

This poem is anti-romantic. In the breakdown of harmony between Man and Nature, both are diminished. Nature has become the "gloom", The sentry "huddles". The only signs of life are the sentry and the "brown rats". The final image portrays the movement of rats where we might expect to see soldiers. Irony is employed to suggest a disruption in the harmony of existence. The light struggling against the gloom is "shallow; blanching light", not the life-sustaining light of the sun. The war between men is a universalized "gloom at war with white". The "white" has a sterile, cold connotation. The sound of the guns is "mimic
thunder", but it promises no life-giving rain, rather, the next line "And mirthless laughter rakes the whistling night," suggests a thin and dry atmosphere.

"At Carnoy" is a more poignant illustration of the split between Man and Nature, because the persona longs for the restorative peace that Nature can give:

Down in the hollow there's the whole Brigade
Camped in four groups; through twilight falling slow
I hear a sound of mouth-organs, ill-played,
And murmur of voices, gruff, confused, and low.
Crouched among the thistle-tufts I've watched the glow
Of a blurred orange sunset flare and fade;
And I'm content. To-morrow we must go
To take some cursed Wood...O world God made!

The twilight atmosphere suggests the end of an era. (The poem was written on the third day of the Somme offensive). The men are portrayed in the abstract, through the "sound of the mouth-organs ill-played", and through the "confused" murmur of their voices. The speaker's relationship with Nature is highlighted; he is "crouched among the thistle-tufts"; he has just watched the sunset fade: "And I'm content". But the last two lines set up a disturbing vital tension. The speaker cannot remain in his blissful indolence. The effect of his ecstatic worship of Nature is heightened by this separation. The poet's ambivalent attitude to the "Wood" enriches the emotional response. The Wood should be an object of rejoicing—as it would be in a contemplative mood. But the military aim to take the Wood, as part of their strategy serves, first, to demean the value of the Wood, and, secondly, to make the speaker who loves Nature more than he loves anything else, curse a part of it. The last line of the poem is very ambiguous. We may read it either as a lament.
for the loss of the poet's pre-war harmony with Nature, or as a
criticism of a world that has fallen away from God's original
design.

The split which Sassoon began to see between Man and
Nature radically altered his conception of God. His early na-
ture-lyrics praised God "through Nature. His early experiences
in the war, modified this conception, and in "The Mystic as
Soldier" he resolved to seek God "in the strife". But he never
ceased to worship the healing power of Nature and the great plea-
sure it afforded him. The image of the "brown rats" in Golgotha
("the place of the skulls") introduced a new element into Sassoon's
concept of Nature—that it could be loathsome and destructive as
well as beautiful and healing.

In "Stand-to: Good Friday Morning", the speaker conveys
the feeling that there might be a destructive side to God him-
self. The breakdown in the harmony between Man and Nature con-
stitutes a sin on the part of Man. The suggestion seems to be
that God has remained on the side of Nature:

Dawn was misty; the skies were still:  
Larks were singing, discordant, shrill; 
They seemed happy; but I felt ill.  
Deep in water I splashed my way 
Up the trench to our bogged front line.  
Rain had fallen the whole damned night.

The speaker's distortion of the natural phenomena emphasizes the
split between Nature and himself. He seems to question impli-
citly whether he is fighting for an ideal, when Nature does not
seem to be on his side. The last lines of the poem seem to echo
Christ's fear that God has abandoned him on the cross. The
speaker asks, almost hysterically, for a wound:
O Jesus, send me a wound to-day,
And I'll believe in your bread and wine
And get my bloody old sins washed white!

There is a blasphemous tone in these lines. The ironic prayer for a wound (a blighty?) can be seen either as a desire for a more easeful life, if God really is loving, or as a desire for a sign that God really exists and has not forsaken the speaker. It is an ambiguous fusion of entreaty and mockery.

The ambiguity in the tone of "Good Friday" seems to pretend a loss of faith in God. Sassoon's early faith in God had been rooted in his love of Nature. Now, as part of an army dedicated to destroying life and desecrating the landscape, he began to question his early faith. The bitterness he felt at the horrors he was powerless to stop struck a deep chord. In his disillusionment about the existence of a loving God, he began to see Nature in a more sinister and terrifying light. Part of this may have been the influence of the world-view of Thomas Hardy, whose writing Sassoon took with him to the front. But the overwhelming influence was the environment of war.

In the Sherston Trilogy we can trace a changing view of God and Nature that parallels Sassoon's disillusionment in the war poetry. The closing tableau of Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man, which parallels the setting of "Stand-To: Good Friday Morning," marks a turning point in Sherston's life:

17 In Siegfried's Journey (p. 19), Sassoon writes: "Since the war began I had taken to reading Hardy...." Hardy's belief that the human situation is tragic because the force of the universe is malevolent and blind, may have chimed with Sassoon's feelings of alienation and suffering at the front.
Somewhere out of sight beyond the splintered tree-tops of Hidden Wood a bird had begun to sing. Without knowing why, I remembered that it was Easter Sunday. Standing in that dismal ditch, I could find no consolation in the thought that Christ was risen.18

From this point on, Sherston is an outsider to Nature looking in at a state of grace in which he no longer participates. With him, all humanity-at-war is alienated from the natural order. Man is a separate creature from Nature. Gradually, even Nature seems to exist apart from any benign deity. It endures long after Man. It does not participate in his sufferings, nor does it incline toward him in any conscious way:

The aspens by the river were shivering and showing the whites of their leaves, and it was good-bye to their cool showery sound when we marched away in our own dust at four o'clock on a glaring bright afternoon. The aspens waited, with their indifferent welcome, for some other dead, beat and diminished battalion. Such was their habit, and so the war went on.19

While this description portrays Nature as benign, though indifferent (from the speaker's distortion of reality) the following, more realistic description shows Nature as "just there":

Thus we "put the lid on" our days and nights in the Bocq Français sector, which was now nothing but a few hundred yards of waste ground—a jumble of derelict wire, meaningless ditches, and craters no longer formidable. There seemed no sense in the toil that had heaped those mounds of bleaching sandbags, and even the lst of July had become an improbable memory, now that the dead bodies had been cleared away. Rank thistles were already thriving among the rusty rifles, torn clothing, and abandoned equipment of those who had fallen a couple of weeks ago.20

19 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 352.
20 Ibid, pp. 353-54.
As this portrayal of disillusionment with humanity-at-war suggests, Sasscon began to realize in 1916 that his pastoral-heroic motives for volunteering in the army had been naïve and baseless. Furthermore, his disillusionment turned to anger when he discovered that men were being recruited into the army against their own wills.

(iv). Heroes' Twilight

The introduction of compulsory conscription in England in May of 1916 must have had a strong effect on the concept of heroism with which the war opened. Most of the idealistic volunteers for the "religious crusade" of 1914 were either dead or disabled. To understand the nature of the collapse of the heroic ideal that made conscription imperative we might contrast Belgium's plea for aid in repulsing the oppressing Germans in 1914 with the following newspaper advertisement that appeared in 1915 to bring volunteers into the army:

FOUR QUESTIONS TO THE WOMEN OF ENGLAND

1. You have read what the Germans have done in Belgium. Have you thought what they would do if they invaded England?
2. Do you realise that the safety of your Home and Children depends on our getting more men now?
3. Do you realise that the one word "Go" from you may send another man to fight for our King and Country?
4. When the War is over and your husband or your son is asked "what did you do in the great War?"--is he to hang his head because you would not let him go? Women of England do your duty! Send your men to-day to join our glorious Army.

God Save the King. 21

21 Quoted in Arthur E. Lane, An Adequate Response, p. 41.
The use of emotional pressure to coerce men into patriotic action was part of the changing nature of the war. The idealistic volunteer of 1914 saw the war as a religious crusade. The oppression of Belgium was a convenient focal point for the complex developments leading up to the war. As the fighting progressed and more nations joined, it basically became a struggle for territorial and economic power. The individual soldier became less important. Inhuman methods of killing on a mass-scale replaced hand-to-hand combat.

For Sassoon, the mass-conscription of troops established that the kind of war in which he had volunteered no longer existed, and this roused his anger. Speaking through the persona of George Sherstcn, Sassoon describes the effect that conscription had on his already-disillusioned concept of the nature of the war in 1917:

The raw material to be trained was growing steadily worse. Most of those who came in now had joined the Army unwillingly and there was no reason why they should find military service tolerable. The War had become undisguisedly mechanical and inhuman. What in earlier days had been drafts of volunteers were now droves of victims. I was just beginning to be aware of this.22

In Sassoon's war poetry of this period we can trace an erosion of the concept of the war hero. "Conscripts" deals with the training of the young men who entered the war more because of the emotional pressure than because of any idealism. It is a retrospective narrative spoken by an infantry officer who makes it his duty to submerge his natural idealism in a realistic attitude:

22 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 382.
The luminous rich colours that you wore
Have changed to hueless khaki in the night.
Magic? What's magic got to do with you?
There's no such thing! Blood's red, and skies are blue.

The speaker sees himself as an agent for the hard facts of life,
and he is torn with guilt:

Love chuck'd his lute away and dropped his crown.
Rhyme got sore heels and wanted to fall out.
'Left, right! Press on your butts!' They looked at me
Reproachful; how I longed to set them free!

The personification of valuable qualities in the conscrits also
serves to show the destroying effects that war has on these
qualities:

...Joy was slack,
And Wisdom gnawed his fingers, gloomy-eyed.
Young Fancy--how I loved him all the while--
Stared at his note-book with a rueful smile.

The conscrits with delicate and rare natures could not survive
harsh realities of the fighting:

Rapture and Pale Enchantment and Romance,
And many a sickly, slender lord who'd filled
My soul long since with lutanies of sin,
Went home, because they couldn't stand the din.

Ironically, the common soldiers who had neither the qualities
of frail romance nor poetic sensibilities, are the ones who
survived:

But the kind, common ones that I despised
(Hardly a man of them I'd count as friend),
What stubborn-hearted virtues they disguised!
They stood and played the hero to the end,
Won gold and silver medals bright with bars,
And marched resplendent home with crowns and stars.

The poem retains the notion of heroism but reverses the classical roles usually assigned to heroes and duds. The romantic personalities are too frail to survive the war. Consequently, the "kind, common" personalities become the heroes of the war.
In one sense the poem laments the effects of the war on the romantic personality. It can be interpreted very effectively as an allegory of Sassoon's two pre-war poetic styles. The personified conscripts could represent qualities of his lyric-romantic poetry. The "kind, common ones" represent his colloquial, realistic poetry, which had found no expression other than The Daffodil Murder, until it was "conscripted" into the army and flourished. In this context, the poem laments the failure of lyricism, which the poet sees as the superior of the two kinds of poetry. At the same time, it sees "stubborn-hearted virtues" in the colloquial realism, because it has managed to fight successfully and survive.

The demeaning aspects of the patriiotic cry for heroism are presented with subtle irony in "The Herc". The poem balances two points of view. The poem deals with Jack, "a coward" who panicked in the trenches and was blown up by a mine. The Brother Officer who brings the news to Jack's mother consoles her by telling her Jack dies honorably:

He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

The Brother Officer's true opinion of Jack contrasts the reality with the romance:

He thought how "Jack", cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

The realism is employed, not to shock the reader, but to con-
down implicitly, by juxtaposition, the false concept of heroism. The poet, in the last line, places the reader's sympathy with the "lonely" woman. The Brother Officer is being condemned in considering Jack a "useless swine" because he did not live up to the code. We can examine the notion of heroism in "The Hero". The cry for heroism is initially used as a propaganda measure. A man is a "coward" if he refuses to fight. Wives and mothers are urged to become Spartan-like in giving over their loved ones to war. This kind of heroism is grossly inhuman. Sassoon is condemning a value system that renders a man a "useless swine" because he is afraid and panics. The poem is an affirmation of the worth of the individual against some convention that disguises emotional blackmail for propagandist purposes under the mask of the heroic ideal.

"The One-Legged Man" treats heroism from a more pragmatic perspective. The persona of the poem is an amputee who has no illusions about heroism. What he really values is his renewed prospect of a harmony with Nature. "But," the poet asks, "at what price?":

Propped on a stick he viewed the August weald;
Squat orchard trees and crows with painted cowls;
A homely, tangled hedge, a corn-stalked field,
And sound of barking dogs and farmyard fowls.

And he'd come home again to find it more
Desirable than ever it was before.
How right it seemed that he should reach the span
Of comfortable years allowed to man:
Splendid to eat and sleep and choose a wife,
Safe with his wound, a citizen of life.
He hobbled blithely through the garden gate,
And thought: "Thank God they had to amputate!"

The irony in this poem comes from the strange way in which the "hero's" wound enables him to return to the Weald for which he
had been fighting. The "blighty"—a wound serious enough to send one back to England—was a highly prized goal during the war. In principle, it epitomized the real value system, if putting life before abstract values is a value system. Nevertheless, for Sassoon, as for many others like him, the war proved that life was too precious to be sacrificed in a self-transcending cause that proved unworthy of the sacrifice it demanded. Bernard Bergonzi summarizes this change in sensibility as it contributed to the disappearance of the epic hero in war literature:

This was, indeed, the central dilemma that the war forced upon so many acute sensibilities: the conviction that life was the supreme value, in opposition to the traditional patriotic ethos that is eager to sacrifice it in a supposedly higher cause, was the driving motive behind much anti-war poetry and prose.²³

(v) Christ Figures

The realism with which Sassoon expressed his feelings toward the war beginning in 1916 cannot be separated from the basically Christian-romantic morality which he brought with him into the war. In 1914, his idealism had focused on his love of his homeland. "The Mystic as Soldier" marked a turning point in Sassoon's attitude to God—in Nature by expressing a desire to follow God into the strife and seek him there. But the horrors and atrocities he witnessed led him to feel disillusionment even about the harmony of God and Man. At times he was able to accept the environment of war at face-value. Thus we find in "Golgotha" a realistic world-view, largely growing out of the Georgian poetic realism. We have already seen how Brooke's effo

²³ Heroes' Twilight, p. 189.
to expand the thematic horizons of poetry and liberate it from the narrow range of experience that had constituted what was "poetic" before his time, suggested a change in the kind of role that a poet could adopt. Encouraged through the advice of Edward Marsh, Sassoon saw fit to incorporate real details, in the manner of a journalist, into the war poetry that reacted against his early romantic-heroic poems. But he did not often use realism in the graphic manner of "Golgotha". More often his emotional reaction to the environment of war took the form of anger against the heroic-romantic attitude, especially as it prevailed in a hypocritical state that had nothing to do with real Christian morality. This was especially applicable to the Church-at-war.

Sassoon satirizes the hollow rhetoric of the Church-at-war by counterpointing it against real facts in the poem "They":

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back 'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought 'In a just cause: they lead the last attack 'On Anti-Christ.'

The notion of renewal of the imperfect individual by his self-transcending participation in a holy crusade resembles Rupert Brooke's idealism in "Peace": "Now God be thanked Who match'd us with His hour." The Bishop goes on:

'...their comrades' blood has bought 'New right to tread an honourable race, 'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

This notion of absolution of humanity by the blood of the soldier is similar to the opening lines of Sassoon's elegy "To My Brother" written in the early part of 1915:

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face; Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;
For we have made an end of all things base.
We are returning by the road we came.

Thus far, the poem represents the romantic attitude of the early war. But Sassoon takes the Bishop’s statement that “when the boys come back, they will not be the same” and gives it a realistic interpretation:

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

Sassoon’s Bishop in “They” obviously does not qualify as an acceptable Christ-figure. Christ emphasized the importance of the individual. Christ was an extreme pacifist. Christ exhorted men to love their enemies. The participation of the Chur representatives in the ideology of the war, like the participation of the early Popes in the Crusades could not help but separate the “institutional” Church from the vital teachings of Christ.

For Sassoon whose devotional pre-war poetry demonstrated an idealistic temperament, the disturbing effect of the war environment eclipsed the early romantic idealism, and the hypocritical policy of the Church-at-war prevented any possibility of an institutionally-based idealism. He looked elsewhere.

Even as early as the writing of “To My Brother”, Sassoon had implicit doubts about the moral justification of the fighting. But at this early stage, he suppressed his doubts. Yet the kind of hero Sassoon portrays in the poem is more like the

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24 See, for example “A Child’s Prayer,” “Wisdom,” and “Before Day,” in Collected Poems, pp. 56-57, 63-64, and 64.
25 See my Chapter 2, p. 34.
passive and loving Christian hero than the happy warrior of the epic tradition. "The Mystic as Soldier" marks Sassoon's idealism turning away from Nature and toward the war:

    Now God is in the strife,
    And I must seek him there,
    Where death outnumber life,
    And fury smites the air.

It was not in the war-movement itself but in the individual soldier that Sassoon first looked for a Christ-figure. His admiration for the "kind, common ones" in "Conscripts" points towards an idealization of the common soldier in Sassoon's disillusionment with the whole romantic way of life which he found too fragile to survive the war. In his Memoirs Sherston writes:

    I could never understand how (the men) managed to keep as cheery as they did through such drudgery and discomfort, with nothing to look forward to but going over the top or being moved up to Flanders again.26

In "The Road" Sassoon focuses on an individual soldier in a context reminiscent of Christ's walk to Calvary: The first lines portray a group of women, evocative of the women of Jerusalem:

    The road is thronged with women; soldiers pass
    And hilt, but never see them; yet they're here--
    A patient crowd along the sodden grass,
    Silent, worn out with waiting, sick with fear.

The rising road is portrayed with the surrealism of a nightmare:

    The road goes crawling up a long hillside,
    All roots and stones and sludge, and the emptied dregs
    Of battle thrown in heaps. Here where they died
    Are stretched big-bellied horses with stiff legs,
    And dead men, bloody-fingered from the fight,
    Stare up at caverned darkness winking white.

The final stanza presents a solitary soldier whose pathetic exhaustion makes him act very differently from the epic hero:

26 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 310.
You in the bomb-scorched kilt, poor sprawling jock,
You tottered here and fell, and stumbled on,
Half dazed for want of sleep. No dream would mock
Your reeling brain with comforts lost and gone.
You did not feel her arms about your knees,
Her blind caress, her lips upon your head.
Too tired for thoughts of home and love and ease,
The road would serve you well enough for bed.

The common soldier as Christ-figure is more directly treated in "The Redeemer". The action of the narrative takes place in the moment of flare illumination between periods of darkness along the trenches. The first stanza is a description of physical sounds and feelings in the raining night. The appearance of a flare is the occasion of a "vision" by the poet:

I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;
A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,
And lit the face of what had been a form
Fumbling in murk. He stood before me there;
I say that he was Christ; stiff in the glare,
And leaning forward from His burdening task,
Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine.
Stared from a woeful head that seemed a mask
Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine.

The poet identifies this Christ-figure with the common soldier:

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

This is admiration for the optimistic and devoted common soldier. We have seen it before in "Conscripts". Here, Sassoon idealizes the common soldier, asserting that in spirit he is capable of bringing freedom to mankind in his long-suffering endurance and willingness to self-sacrifice:

He faced me, reeling in his weariness,
Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.
I say that he was Christ, who wroght to bless
All groping things with freedom bright as air,
And with His mercy washed and made them fair.

But the vision is a fleeting one. Reality re-asserts itself;
the soldier becomes a groping mortal once again:

Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,
While we began to struggle along the ditch;
And someone flung his burden in the muck,
Mumbling: "O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!"

The juxtaposition of this oath with the poet's mystical experience gives the poem circles of meaning. Christ once more becomes a transcendental being who is "Almighty" in contrast to the weakness of groping men. In a subtle way, Christ is associated with the light of the flare that illuminated the battlefield, putting the scene into relief for the poet's imagination and allowing the men to act purposefully. There is also a level at which the final line of the poem mocks the idealism of the vision.

When we consider Sassoon's role as an infantry officer, a position of great responsibility which he took seriously (as "Conscripts" shows), we can easily see that as the war continued, he would become more anxious to attack the patriotic jingoism and hypocritical religious platitudes that were perpetuating a false concept of the nature of the war. While his experiences as an officer led him finally to renounce all value but that of the "kind, common" soldier, his sensitivity as a poet led him beyond idealization of the common soldier. Tommy, for all his qualities, was too naive to question the sincerity of the patriotic propaganda that was used, for example, to indoctrinate and put
large numbers of men into a technological nightmare.

Finally, when we consider the vision in "The Redeemer" with the poet as mystic in "The Mystic as Soldier" we realize that for Sassoon, the figure of Christ exists in the imagination of the poet. Sassoon's temperamental idealism often contributed with his outraged sensibility in the poetry of realism to adopt a poetic role similar to that of the satirist. Most of Sassoon's realistic war poetry up to 1917 either paints a vivid picture of the Inferno as in "Golgotha" and "The Road", or it implicitly contrasts some romantic concept of reality with factual details. This last kind of poetry contains its own tensions as in the hard-hitting satire "They" and in the more successful, more subtle "The Redeemer".

Beyond realism, then, Sassoon's idealistic temperament was to lead him into yet a further phase in his war poetry. After 1917 his growing sympathy with the common soldier was to bring him into contact with influential anti-war Socialists in England. At the same time, as the poets appearing in Edward Marsh's Georgian poetry anthology were to become, after 1916, further and further remote from the brutal reality of warfare, Sassoon was to become gradually estranged from them. But from the technique of realism encouraged by the Georgians he was to forge a keen satiric weapon.
CHAPTER 4

"This light and darkness in our chaos join'd,
What shall divide?--The God within the mind."
--Alexander Pope

(1) Incubus

In many of the poems emerging from Sassoon's personal reaction to the mass-bloodshed of 1916 real details describing the horrors of war make their first appearance. "Golgotha" uses the Georgian policy of poetic realism to present a realistic description of life in the trenches. In "Stand-To: Good-Friday Morning" the speaker contrasts the reality of a spell of bad weather against the tradition of Christ's death on the cross and blasphemously concludes that Christ's salvation of Mankind has nothing to do with the soldier at the front. In "Conscripts" the myth of the idealistic youthful war hero is undercut by the officer-poet's experience of the men under his charge. Heroism as a glorious transcendence of self in a higher cause is realistically examined in the emotionally-complex "The Hero". An examination of such poems as "The Road" and "The Redeemer" showed that, at this time, Sassoon was searching for God in the common soldier, having failed to find him either in Nature or in the Church-at-war.

The poet's vision of Christ portrayed in "The Redeemer" anticipates a new development in Sassoon's concept of his role as poet. The common soldier has qualities of naivete and willingness to co-operate which can be used either to build a bet-
ter world, or to destroy the world altogether. As a nature poet, Sassoon had sought to interpret the value of Nature to other men. The early poem "Arcady Unheeding" according to Edward Marsh, deals with the theme that "country folk don't pay attention to the beauties of nature":

Shepherds go whistling on their way
In the spring season of the year;
One watches weather-signs of day;
One of his maid most dear
Dreams; and they do not hear
The birds that sing and sing; they do not see
Wide wealds of blue beyond their windy lea,
Nor blossoms red and white on every tree.

In the same way, when Sassoon found himself in the environment of trench-warfare, he realized that the common man was not a reliable measure of values in the war. As we have seen, the news media and the servants of the Church held up the bravely-borne sufferings of the common soldier as the strongest motive for support of the war by the Nation at Home.

If my reading of "The Redeemer" is correct Sassoon came to feel that the representation of the common soldier as a Christ-figure, though attractive, was essentially both false and dangerous. It was false because the common soldier was rarely more than an unreflecting participant in the battle, and it was dangerous because the media could cite the Christ-like sacrifice of the soldiers in order to fool the Nation at Home into believing that it was essentially Christian to give the war full moral support. The last stanza from "Grey Knitting" by Catherine Hale, a home-front poetess, represents an association of Tommy with the Christian cause that hindered a true civilian understanding of

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1 See *The Weald of Youth*, p. 138.
the nature of the war:

I like to think that soldiers, gaily dying
For the white Christ on fields with shame sown deep,
May hear the tender song of women's needles,
As they fall fast asleep.

Sassoon came to realize that the qualities of Justice and Goodness and Mercy--Christ-like qualities--were to be found not "in the strife" itself, but in his own perspective of the war as a conscientious officer-poet. The politicians and the War-Office and the Church-at-war and the news media all perpetuated lies about war. The civilians (except for the Liberal Pacifists who subsequently had a marked influence on Sassoon's anti-war feelings), all believed these lies. The soldiers, especially the "kind, common ones" possessed qualities of courage, endurance and cheerful optimism that could possibly rebuild society after the war. But their qualities were often associated with a marked inability to think for themselves.

It is Sassoon's role as a conscientious officer-poet that we must explore if we are to understand why he turned, in poetry, from realism to satire, why in his personal life he became a pacifist and why he continued to fight in the war in 1918 despite his anti-war convictions. In our exploration we must first look at his periods of sick-leave between August 1916 and February 1917, and after April 1917. In these periods of convalescence he was able to think about his experiences at the front for the first time. Surrounded by the placid environment of civilian life, he came to view what he had lived at the front with a perspective of nightmarish proportions. At the same time.

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2 Quoted in Lane, An Adequate Response, p. 104.
time, his increasing pacifism and his growing distrust of civilians who blindly supported the war led him to establish a most improbable liaison with a group of Liberal Pacifists who helped him issue a formal protest against Great Britain for its unnecessary prolongation of the war.

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After about two months' fighting in the Battle of the Somme, Sassoon developed gastric fever in late July of 1916 and was sent home. Some of the poems for later inclusion in The Old Huntsman were written between August 1916 and early 1917 when he returned to France. While we have examined in a previous chapter most of the war poems that went into The Old Huntsman, certain poems in the volume can be discussed at this point because they anticipate developments in Sassoon's poetry which came later. "They" is one such poem. While it can be read as a realistic poem explicitly contrasting fact with abstract platitudes about war, it qualifies as a satire. This is also true of "The Hero", but the tone is more serious.

In "A Whispered Tale", addressed to Julian Dodd who was wounded in the throat and subsequently lost his voice, Sassoon demonstrates emphatically that the shame of war cannot be hushed up:

I'd heard fool-heroes brag of where they'd been,  
With stories of the glories that they'd seen.  
But you, good simple soldier, seasoned well  
In mud's and posts and crater-lines of hell,  
Who dodged remembered 'crump's with wry grimace,  
Endured experience in your queer, kind face,  
Fatigues and vigils haunting nerve-strained eyes,  
And both your brothers killed to make you wise;  
You had no babbling phrases; what you said  
Was like a message from the maimed and dead.
But memory brought the voice I knew, whose note
Was muted when they shot you in the throat;
And still you whisper of the war, and find
Sour jokes for all the horrors left behind.

The poem is important because it joins the concept of the soldier having value more real than that of "fool-heroes" with a vociferation against the war. By choosing a character whose voice has been literally destroyed by the war, Sassoon effectively silences the pro-war swagger of the "fool-heroes".

In such poems as "They", "The Hero" and "A Whispered Tale" the poet asserts what is morally right against what passes for the truth about war. All three poems depict the poet's consciousness reacting against the Home-Front split. In "They" and "A Whispered Tale" the split is satirized. In "The Hero" the response is more complicated because the mother's belief in the romantic myth about the war is inseparable from her genuine love of her son.

In "Blighters", however, the poet makes an almost hysterical attack on a show of chorus girls on revue at the Hippodrome in London. The scene depicted in the first stanza is not greatly different from that which met Moses when he descended with the tablets of stone, from Mount Sinai:

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

The second stanza presents a surrealistic embodiment of the poet's wrath in which he turns the weapons of war against the despicable light-hearted obscenity of the civilians:

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

Written in January 1917, "Blighters" reveals the extent of
Sassoon's anger about the lives given up to a society com-
pletely oblivious to the sacrifice that it had been so vocif-
erous in demanding.

Sassoon left London for France in February 1917, firmly
siding with the men at the front against the Nation at Home.
His period of convalescence following the Somme fighting had
intensified in him a bitterness against the Nation at Home that
could not be expressed by the mere physical representation of
real sensory data. To be sure, the poetry that he wrote from
now on used sensory data of the most terrifying intensity. The
cold, crisp style of "Blighters" anticipated much of his sub-
sequent poetic satires. However, he did find in London, a small
group of civilians who were to give a *modus vivendi* to Sassoon
emotional antipathy for the war and the proponents of the war.

In September 1916 when Sassoon was visiting his fellow war
poet and Georgian, Robert Graves, on leave in Harlech, he was in-
troduced to Lady Ottoline Morrell, who had seen "To Victory" in
the *Times* and had praised it highly. She was the wife of the
Liberal Pacifist, Philip Morrell. Sassoon was invited to
Garsington, the Morrell's home, a haven for pacifists and con-
scientious objectors. It was here that Sassoon heard open criti-
cism of the war for the first time and learned of the peace over-
tures that Germany was then advancing. 3

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3 In December 1916, the German Government informed the
United States that the Central Powers were prepared to undertake
peace negotiations, but when the United States so informed the
Germany's desire to end the war must have had a strong
effect on Sassoon. For some time his feeling that Germany was
"the enemy" had been undergoing a change. In a poem of personal
guilt, "Enemies," he envisions a scene of reconciliation between
a dead British soldier and the ghosts of the Germans the speaker
has shot in a "brooding rage":

He stared at them, half-wondering; and then
They told him how I'd killed them for his sake—
Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men;
And still there seemed no answer he could make.
At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand
Because his face could make them understand.

Sassoon's growing sympathy for the common soldier was beginning
to include all soldiers without respect to nation. He was be-
ginning to develop a far different poetic role than that of war-
poet, old-style with which he had initially hailed the war.

In mid-February, 1917 Sassoon was back in France. A remi-
niscence by Sherston at this time reveals the extent to which
Sassoon's privileged position as an officer began to create a sense
of guilt in him, for he was beginning to identify with his men
more and more:

As second-in-command of the Company I went along behind
it, rather at my ease. Watching the men as they
plodded patiently on under their packs, I felt as if
my own identity was becoming merged in the Battalion.
We were on the move and the same future awaited us all
(though most of the men had bad boots and mine were
quite comfortable). 4

Allied Powers, Great Britain rejected the German advances for
two reasons: Germany had not laid down any specific terms for
peace; and the military situation at the time (Rumania had just
been conquered by the Central Powers) was so unfavorable to the
Central Powers that no acceptable terms could reasonably be ex-
pected from them. Sassoon, with his propensity for simplifying
issues, no doubt saw Britain's refusal to negotiate in the worst
light.

4 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 412.
Sassoon's identification with his men on his return to the Front was given a stronger impetus by yet another period of sick-leave in April. Wounded in the neck at the Battle of Arras, he once more returned to England. This time, his physical illness was compounded by the various shocks he had received by being plunged into the thick of the battle after a respite in England.

In a poem "The Rear Guard: Hindenburg Line, April 1917" he describes a traumatic experience in a communications tunnel. The hysteria is barely controlled:

"Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw some one lie Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug, And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug. I'm looking for headquarters." No reply. 'God blast your neck!' (for days he'd had no sleep.) 'Get up and guide me through this stinking-place.' Savage, he kicked a soft unanswering heap, And flashed his beam across the livid face Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore Agony dying ten days before; And fists of fingers clutching a blackening wound.

In this poem the realism has escaped from the poet's control. The poem is, therefore, not effective in presenting war as "it really is", because its heightened sense of horror amounts to an exaggeration of reality. But its chief effect on the reader far outweighs its shortcomings as an objective presentation of

5 A more objective account of the Hindenburg trauma, either based on details recollected from the poem, or on notes from which the poem was also created, is presented in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 437: "Once, when I tripped and recovered myself by grabbing the wall, my tentative patch of brightness revealed something half-hidden beneath a blanket. Not a very clever spot to be taking a nap, I thought as I stooped to shake him by the shoulder. He refused to wake up, so I gave him a kick. 'God blast you, where's Battalion Headquarters?' My nerves were on edge; and what right had he to be having a good sleep, when I never seemed to get five minutes' rest?...Then my beam settled on the livid face of a dead German whose fingers still clutched the blackened gash on his neck....Stumbling on, I could only mutter to myself that this was really a bit too thick....That, however, was an
life at the front. It reveals the disintegrating effect of a prolonged state of warfare on the human mind.

It seems that scenes of war haunted Sassoon when he was on leave from the front. Robert Graves recalls that when Sassoon returned to England in April, he often "saw corpses lying about on the pavement" and in the London Rest Home where he was sent for convalescence, "the gramophone in the ward plagued him beyond endurance." This latter experience is recollected, again hysterically, in "Dead Musicians". The poem has three stanzas and an epigraph. The first stanza addresses "Beethoven, Bach, Mozart" recalling Sassoon's youthful adoration of music as it had given expression to his exalted dreams. The second stanza marks the change in society brought on by the war. The poet's increasing identification with the common soldier alienates him now from the culture of his youth:

You have no part with lads who fought
And laughed and suffered at my side.
Your fugues and symphonies have brought
No memory of my friends who died.

The last stanza calls up dance-hall tunes the only music by which the poet can remember the soldiers—no more the "chanting streams" of "The Dragon and the Undying"—rather:

'Another little drink won't do us any harm,'
I think of rag-time; a bit of rag-time;
And see their faces crowding 'round
To the sound of the syncopated beat.
They've got such jolly things to tell,
Home from hell with a blighty wound; so neat....

exaggeration; there is nothing remarkable about a dead body in a European War, or a squashed beetle in a cellar."

6 Goodbye to All That, p. 305.
7 Goodbye to All That, p. 305.
And so the song breaks off; and I'm alone. They're dead... For God's sake stop that gramophone.

The hysteria is controlled in this poem, but it is illuminating to compare the treatment of the theme of music in "Dead Musicians" with an earlier and more romantic treatment of the theme in "Secret Music", where the poet expresses a detachment from the destructive influence of combat:

To the world's end I went, and found
Death in his carnival of glare;
But in my torment I was crowned,
And music dawned above my despair.

This last stanza of "Secret Music" almost seems to have been written by another person in another world that has long since passed away, for in the middle of 1917 Sassoon had brought hell with him back to England. While in the hospital his tortured imagination conceived scenes such as the following nightmare described by Sherston:

Shapes of mutilated soldiers came crawling across the floor; the floor seemed to be littered with fragments of mangled flesh. Faces glared upward; hands clutched at neck or belly; a livid grinning face with bristly moustache peered at me above the edge of my bed; his hands clawed at the sheets.

Compared with this, the realism of the poetry in The Old Huntsman was mild fare. It hardly needs saying that Sassoon looked upon the civilian world that greeted him after his convalescence, as it might have been regarded by a being from another planet. The world of his imagination was his real world, and it brought him back irrevocably to France and to the horrors of the combat.

8 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 453.

9 The Old Huntsman, and Other Poems was published by William Heinemann in June, 1917.
(ii) Wounded Hero

The attitude of Sherston while the guest of Lord and Lady Asterisk at their home "Nutwood Manor" suggests that Sassoon encouraged, in part, his nightmare-hallucinations of the war. Out of guilt, lest he forget the torments from which he had managed to escape, he reminded himself that, while in England, one was too easily tempted to forget that countless men were still suffering and dying:

"(Often I took refuge in the assuasive human happiness which Nutwood Manor's hospitality offered me. But there were times when my mental mechanism was refractory, and I reverted to my resolution to keep the smoke-drifted battle memories true and intense, unmodified by the comforts of convalescence. I wasn't going to be bluffed back into an easy-going tolerant state of mind...."

This feeling of guilt which Sassoon purged by bringing his memory back to scenes of horror was probably related to the psychology associated with the notion of the "blighty wound". The colloquial song associated with the dead soldiers in "Dead Musicians" ironically comments on Sassoon's own neat wound in the shoulder at Arras occasioning his stay at the Oxford Hospital in 1916. In "Died of Wounds" written about an experience at the Oxford Hospital the speaker expresses jealousy at the extra attention that a particularly miserable-looking and vociferous patient gets from the nurses:

10 A pseudonym for the Sussex Rest Home where Sassoon was staying in May of 1917.

11 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 463.

12 See my Chapter 3, p. 74.
His wet white face and miserable eyes
Brought nurses to him more than groans and sighs;
But harse and low and rapid rose and fell
His troubled voice: he did the business well.

But the speaker's jealousy changes to a feeling of remorse, and
perhaps a realization that the motives he attributed to the
wounded man were projections of his own emotional deficiencies.

I wondered where he'd been; then heard him shout,
"They snipe like hell! O Dickie, don't go cut"...
I fell asleep... Next morning he was dead;
And some Slim Wound lay smiling on the bed.

In part, the wish for special attention and the tendency
for self-dramatization that Sassoon's speaker projects on the
suffering man in "Died of Wounds", underlies Sassoon's own com-
plex conception of heroism. Sherston recalls the feeling of
elation that followed after he had been wounded by the German
sniper at Arras:

After a short spell of being deflated and sorry for
myself, I began to feel rapidly hercical again, but
in a slightly different style, since I was now a
Wounded hero, with my arm in a superfluous sling....
A German bullet had passed through me leaving a
neat little hole near my right shulder-blade and
this patriotic perforation had made a different man
of me. I now looked at the War, which had been a
monstrous tyrant, with liberated eyes.13

On his way to the hospital Sherston records that "I was in London
on Friday evening, and by no means sorry to be carried through
the crowd of patriotic spectators at Charing Cross Station".14

In part, too, a wound represented for Sassoon a purging of
his personal imperfections. His concept of the hero in "Abso-
lution" and "To My Brother" is an earlier and more romantic

13 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, pp. 445 and 446.
concept, in which death for a self-transcending cause leads to an immortal life of glory. But in "Stand-To: Good Friday Morning" as we have seen, the speaker no longer believes in an after-life. In an allusion to Christ's salvation of mankind in the blood and water that issued from his wound, the speaker asks to be sent a wound: "And I'll believe in your bread and wine/And get my bloody old sins washed white". Sherston's elation following his being wounded can be explained by the same underlying belief in the soldier's wound as somehow related to the altruistic suffering of Christ.

It was not long, however, before being a wounded hero created a greater sense of guilt in Sassoon than he might have felt before he was hit. In the first place, his wound was slight, at least by comparison with that of many others. In the dressing-station where he had his wound attended to, he was sufficiently moved by the sight of a dying soldier to write a poem about it, "In An Underground Dressing-Station". Sherston significantly recalls that "my egocentricity diminished among all that agony". In the second place, as we have seen, being among civilians as the result of his slight wound sometimes made Sassoon fear that he was beginning to share in the easy life, oblivious to the suffering of soldiers that he had already condemned in the Nation at Home. His recurring nightmares can be seen as an attempt to

15 Not included in *Counter-Attack, and Other Poems* (1918) at the suggestion of the publisher, William Heinemann. At Sassoon request for advice about the poem, Edward Marsh stated that he found the poem quite worth putting in but not important. Its real significance to Sassoon was probably biographical rather than artistic.

16 *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, p. 447.
purge his guilt, but they still did not prevent him from believing that by playing the role of wounded hero he had contributed to the delusion about war that he found rampant in the newspapers even in the middle of 1917.

Newspaper accounts of farewell letters written by soldiers nearing death perpetuated the notion that it was glorious to die for one's country. Sherston comments on this misrepresentation of war and suggests, at the same time, a reasonable motive for his own heroic feelings at Arras in April while actively engaged in the fighting:

I had always found it difficult to believe that these young men had really felt happy with death staring them in the face, and I resented any sentimentalizing of infantry attacks. But here I was, working myself up into a similar mental condition, as though going over the top were a species of religious experience. Was it some suicidal self-deceiving escape from the limitless malevolence of the Front Line?... That was the bleak truth and there was only one method of evading it; to make a little drama out of my own experience—that was the way cut. I must play at being a hero in shining armour, as I'd done last year; if I didn't, I might crumple up altogether.17

However blameless Sherston's self-delusions about heroism may have been at the front where his only other alternative was madness, the perpetuation of a belief in the "spiritual" quality of war in the newspapers that he read on leave in 1917, met his vigorous disapproval:

What was this camouflage War which was manufactured by the press to aid the imaginations of people who had never seen the real thing? Many of them probably said that the papers gave them a sane and vigorous view of the overwhelming tragedy.... 'Naturally,' they would remark, 'the lads from the front are inclined to be a little morbid about it; one expects that,

17 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 420 and p. 421.
after all they've been through. Their close contact with the War has diminished their realization of its spiritual aspects.' Then they would add something about 'the healing of Nations'. Such people needed to have their noses rubbed in a few rank physical facts, such as what a company of men smelt like after they'd been in action for a week... 18

In "Fight to a Finish" a hysterical phantasy poem comparable in tone with "Blighters", Sassoon reveals the extent to which his idealization of the men under his command and his own idealized self-concept as "justicer" focused all his anger and mental anguish in mid-1917 on the press and the government:

The boys came back. Hands played and flags were flying,
And Yellow-Pressmen thronged the sunlit street
To cheer the soldiers who'd refrained from dying,
And hear the music of returning feet.
'Of all the thrills and adventures War has brought,
This moment is the finest.' (So they thought.)

Shattering their bayonets on to charge the mob,
Grim Fusiliers broke ranks with glint of steel,
At last the boys had found a cushy job.

I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal;
And with my trusty bombers turned and went
To clear those Junkers out of Parliament.

The phantasy represented in this poem points to one possible cutlet for Sassoon's idealistic temperament caught in the distorted nightmare world of the surrealistic imagination. His dreams and his hallucinations suggest that he was on the brink of war-hysteria. Unless he could reconcile his idealistic need to act heroically with his moral indignation against the indifference of the civilian world to the plight of the soldiers, his sanity might give way altogether. In combat, he could perform reck- less exploits to satisfy the dual demands of his personality.

18 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 464.
The praise and admiration of his men accorded him all the benefits that he sought in the heroic role, while the possibility of exposing himself to danger and a possible wound, or even death, satisfied the demands of his acute conscience which always demanded a purity of intention in himself and others.

Sassoon found an acceptable outlet for his heroic impulse in the company of the political Pacifists that he met shortly before 1917 in London. In June of 1917, while at the Sussex Nest Home he sent a letter to H. V. Massingham, editor of The Nation suggesting that Massingham should publish something frank to let the people at home know what the war was really like. On June 7 they met for lunch and Sassoon discovered that it was still impossible for a journal representing the views of the nation to publish anything which might be prejudicial to recruiting. He also acquired a number of opinions about the objections of the Liberal party to the war. In Sherston's account of the luncheon, the reader can plainly see that the young infantry officer was very naïve about the political aspects of the war.

When I inquired whether any peace negotiations were being attempted, Larkin ton said that England had been asked by the new Russian Government in April, to state definitely her war aims and to publish the secret treaties made between England and Russia early in the war. He had refused to state our terms or publish the treaties. "How damned rotten of us!" I exclaimed, and I am afraid that my instinctive reaction was a savage desire to hit (was it Lloyd George?) very hard on the nose.

19 This account is related in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, pp. 471ff. Sherston writes to "Larkin ton", editor of The Uncensorative Weekly.

20 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 474.
What particularly impressed Sassoon was Nassingham's remark that Britain's War Aims at that stage of the war were essentially acquisitive and that what Britain was really fighting for was the Mesopotamian Oil Wells. It was such simplification of the complex situation of the war by the minority party that appealed to Sassoon's idealistic temperament. It provided a simple channelling of Sassoon's emotional turbulence and of his deeply-felt anti-war attitude. At the same time it offered him a good opportunity to become the martyred hero that his being wounded had not accomplished. Sherston writes:

I stayed in London for another fortnight, and during that period my mental inquietude achieved some sort of climax. The prime cause of this psychological thunderstorm was my talk with Markington, who was unaware of his ignitonsary effect until I called on him in his editorial room on the Monday after our first meeting. Ostensibly I went to ask his advice; in reality, to release the indignant emotions which his editorial utterances had unwittingly brought to the surface of my consciousness. It was a case of direct inspiration; I had, so to speak, received the call, and the editor of the Unconservative Weekly seemed the most likely man to put me on the shortest road to martyrdom.21

Sassoon had decided to make a statement protesting Britain's conduct of the war. To the extreme pacifists, his voluntary protest of the war would mean a great deal, since he had fought bravely and won a Military Cross. But to Sassoon the decision to risk his freedom and his reputation as a hero in the war involved a much greater glory, the glory of a figurative martyrdom in the only great self-transcending cause left—the cause of the Pacifists who wanted at all costs to end the killing of innocent men of all nations. Sherston recalls that

21 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, pp. 475-76.
his decision was accompanied by "a glowing sense of martyr-
dom": "I saw myself 'attired with sudden brightness, like a
man inspired'."22

Under the guidance of Bertrand Russell23 Sassoon formulated
his specific protestation against the war:

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance
of military authority, because I believe that the War
is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the
power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am
acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War,
upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation,
has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I be-
lieve that the purposes for which I and my fellow sol-
diers entered upon this War should have been so clear-
ly 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 protest-
ing against the conduct of the War, but against the pol-
itical errors and insincerities for which the fighting
men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are
suffering now I make this protest against the deception
which is being practised on them; also, I believe that I
may help to destroy the callous complacency with which
the majority of those at home regard the continuance of
agencies which they do not share, and which they have not
sufficient imagination to realize.24

Among other persons, Sassoon sent copies of his protest to
his commanding officer at Camp Litherland, to Edward Marsh, and
a newspaper copy of it to Robert Graves. To Marsh Sassoon wrote:

I feel I must send you the enclosed document, al-
though you will not approve of my action. So I can't
say any more; except that I have sent it to my Command-
ing Officer at Litherland and shall proceed thither in
a day or two. It's a bloody performance altogether.
But I could do nothing else.25

22 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 477.
23 "Thornton Tyrell" in the Sherston Trilogy.
24 Quoted in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 496.
Playing the rebel all the way, he had cut his final Medical Board, and in a moment of either deep despair or wild theatricality, he ripped his Military Cross from his tunic and flung it into the mouth of the Mersey River. In the meantime the Liberal, Mr. Lees-Smith, M.P., wrote him an assuring letter stating that he hoped to raise the question concerning Sassoon's protest in the House of Commons.

Robert Graves, who was in a convalescent hospital when he received the news of Sassoon's protest, was very upset:

I knew...that as a gesture it was inadequate. Nobody would follow his example either in England or in Germany. The war would obviously go on, and go on until one side or the other cracked.

I decided to intervene. 26

He arrived at the Liverpool hotel near Camp Litherland where Sassoon was staying after having cut his Medical Board. He knew instinctively that Sassoon was trying to cast himself in the role of a martyr. In a letter to Marsh he voiced his fears:

It's an awful thing—completely mad—that he has done (Sassons [sic] won't let anyone hush it up). I don't know what on earth to do now. I'm not going to quarrel with Sassons [sic]. I'm so glad you realize he's not a criminal which was the line I was afraid you'd take. 27

Graves's intention when he met Sassoon was to try to create a sense of guilt in him and convince him that he could not be made a martyr by his protest. His insight testifies perhaps to a greater understanding of human nature than Sassoon, though the latter had a more emotional and idealistic nature:

I reminded him of the regiment; what did he think that the First and Second Battalions would think

26 Goodbye to All That, p. 308.
of him? How could they be expected to understand his point of view? They would say that he was ratting, that he had cold feet, and was letting the regiment down by not acting like a gentleman.23

Sassoon's account of Graves' intervention presents a slightly different perspective:

Cromlech said that the Colonel at Clitherland had told him to tell me that if I continued to refuse to be "medically-boarded" they would shut me up in a lunatic asylum for the rest of the war.29

In fact, this argument by Graves probably convinced Sassoon to reconsider his actions. Letting Graves apparently decide his fate, Sassoon prevented the overwhelming guilt of being traitor to his own convictions. "Without a court-martial and the publicity of a scandal," writes Christopher Hassall, "Sassoon saw himself deprived of the means of martyrdom in the cause of humanity."30 Graves advised Sassoon to appear before a special Medical Board and Sassoon concurred, with a significant sense of relief. Sherston writes: "I was now an irresponsible person again, absolved from any obligation to intervene in world affairs".31 His ensuing experience was to prove this false. This was even more true of his war-poet creator.

(iii) Craiglockhart: "Bitter Safety"

Sassoon's protest against the war did not cause many re-

23 Goodbye to All That, pp. 311-12.

29 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 512. Cromlech is a pseudonym for Graves.


31 Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 513. The word "absolved" points to the attitude that Sassoon seems to have taken to the whole protest affair. Like his reckless exploits in battle, it was an extreme action attempting to come to terms with his uncompromising and idealistic temperament.
percussions. Robert Graves did everything in his power to convince the Medical Board that Sassoon's emotional condition was largely responsible for his rash actions. This attitude, of course, was by no means serious, as Graves admits: "The irony of having to argue to these mad old men that Siegfried was not sane! It was a betrayal of truth, but I was jesuatical."\textsuperscript{32} The Medical Board finally ruled that Sassoon was suffering from a serious case of "shell-shock" and arranged for him to be sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital where he would be under the care of the neurologist and psychologist Dr. W. H. R. Rivers. The political intentions of Sassoon's protest were practically nullified by the news that he had been classified as shell-shocked. When the Liberal M. P., Lees-Smith, brought up a question about Sassoon's manifesto in the House of Commons, the Under-Secretary for War informed the assembly that Sassoon was suffering from a nervous breakdown, and the incident was closed.

At Craiglockhart Sassoon gradually came to see that his actions culminating in his official protest had been based on a very emotionally-biased and narrow viewpoint. "My intellect was not an ice-cold one," Sherston admits, "I could only see the situation from the point of view of the troops I had served with."\textsuperscript{33} Arnold Bennett had suggested, on receiving a copy of Sassoon's manifesto, that the young man was "suffering from spiritual pride" in Sherston's account of this period of hospitalization, the fear that "spiritual pride" had been his motive is one of the con-

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Goodbye to All That}, p. 312.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Sherston's Progress}, p. 521.

\textsuperscript{34} See \textit{Siegfried's Journey}, p. 84.
siderations that makes him still feel guilty. Surrounded by
men for whom the war had been too terrible an experience to en-
dure, his comparative health induces him to feel the same sense
of shirking his responsibility that he felt every time he was
away from the front:

And there was I, a healthy young officer, dumped down
among nurses and nervous wrecks. During my second month
at the hydro I think I began to feel a sense of humil-
iation. (Was it "spiritual pride", I wonder, or merely
esprit de corps?)

Sassoon was to spend several months at Craiglockhart. In
the period between July and December, 1917, the environment of
the shell-shock hospital strengthened rather than diminished his
anti-war attitude. While his sessions with Dr. Rivers helped
him to clarify his own attitude in the past, and to realize the
limitations of his ability to interfere with the war in the fu-
ture, his contact with the broken wills and terror-ridden minds
of some of his fellow patients gave him a new shock—the shock
that war's destructive influence can go far beyond the wounding
cf flesh. In "Survivors!" written at Craiglockhart in October
1917, he describes the psychological effects of war on the dis-
turbed officers with whom he was now living:

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'--
These boys with old scared faces, learning to walk.
Soon they'll forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,--
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud
Of glorious war that shattered all their pride...
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

35 Sherston's Progress, p. 523.
Sassoon's sympathy for the inmates of Craiglockhart is understandable, for his own nightmares and hallucinations after the battle of Arras could not be erased from his memory. Sherston describes a strange apparition that appeared to him shortly after he arrived at Craiglockhart:

"The face and head were undiscernable, but I identified a pale puff-coloured 'British Warm' coat. Young Ormand always wore a coat like that up in the line by the door. But Ormand was killed six months ago, I thought."

It seems, then, that the difference between the disturbed patients at Craiglockhart and Sassoon was one of degree rather than kind.

After twelve weeks at Craiglockhart, the happy-warrior side of Sassoon began to take over once again. The happy warrior had always been a role that managed to silence Sassoon's demanding conscience. He found easy redemption and absolution in action that was free from the burden of responsibility. Sherston, in a dialogue with himself, begins to suspect that he made his protest in order to dodge the responsibility of fighting for his men, and that he is proving nothing by taking a vacation in a 'shell-shock Hospital:

"This heroic gesture of yours—'making a separate peace'—is extremely convenient for you, isn't it? Doesn't it begin to look rather like dodging the Kaiser's well-aimed projectiles?" Proper pride also weighed in with a few well-chosen words. "Twelve weeks ago, you may have been a man with a message. Anyhow you genuinely believed yourself to be one. But unless you can prove to yourself that your protest is still effective, you are here under false pretences, merely skirmlshanking snugly along on what you did in the belief that you would be given a bad time for doing it."

36 Sherston's Progress, p. 525.
37 Ibid, p. 537.
We can see the effects of pride and conscience in Sherston's self-searchings. We can also see the need for retribution through suffering similar to the martyr-attitude in "Stand-To".

Unless he could suffer as his men were suffering, Sassoon could not make peace with his conscience. Living at Craiglockhart convinced him that the environment of the hospital, perhaps more than the environment of civilian society on the outside, was far removed from the lives of soldiers committed to the reality of the war. This attitude was very ambivalent. Sassoon seems to have believed that while the war was definitely wrong, the soldiers who believed in it and fought together for their beliefs were more admirable than civilians leading easy, uncommitted lives. While Sassoon had found it impossible to fight in 1917, his admiration for the committed lives of the troops, and for their comradeship, eventually brought him back to fight beside them. Away from the soldiers while still at Craiglockhart, he began once more to idealize the good aspects of life at the front:

Yes, we'd all of us managed to make jokes—mostly family jokes—for a company could be quite a happy family party until someone got killed. Cheerfulness under bad conditions was by no means the least heroic element in the war. Wonderful indeed had been that whimsical fortitude of the men who accepted an intense bombardment as all in a day's work and then grumbled because their cigarette ration was one packet short.

When we analyze Sassoon's feeling for his men at this time, the officer-private relationship, ordinarily a hierarchical necessity, based on loyalty, but essentially set up to insure the ef-

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38 This attitude included a scorn of the "arm-chair generals, and the non-combatant officers at Base headquarters. See, for example, "Base Details", and "The General", C.P., page 75.

39 Sherston's Progress, p. 539.
ficient carrying out of strategical war-plans, becomes an ideal-
ized and emotional state of love-based responsibility. His pro-
test of the war, though backed by Pacifists with intellectual
convictions, was not an intellectual action. Unlike the in-
tellectual Pacifists, he was unable to remain fast to an abstract
conviction:

Having pledged myself to an uncompromising attitude, I
ought to remain consistent to the abstract idea that War
was wrong. Intellectual sobriety was demanded of me.
But the trouble was that I wasn't an "intellectual" at
all....I was only trying to become one. 40

In a poem originally called "Death's Brotherhood" 41 Sassoon
expresses the feeling of comradeship amounting to almost a mys-
tic union that eventually led him back to war in spite of his
objections to it:

When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm,—
They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.
While the dim charging breakers of the storm
Bellow and drone and rumble overhead,
Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.
They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine.
'Why are you here with all your watches ended?
From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line.
In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain
I think of the Battalion in the mud.
'When are you going out to them again?
Are they not still your brothers through our blood?'

Against this idealized brotherhood, the company of the weak and
disturbed patients at Craiglockhart seems inadequate. Sherston
echoes the bitter attitude toward his life at Slateford 42 in a
rather unfair estimation of the patients:

40 Sherston's Progress, p. 536.

41 In The English Review, XXVI (January, 1913), p.5.

42 A pseudonym for Craiglockhart.
The rather harsh judgement of the shell-shocked patients, which sees their weakness as failure to live up to the ideal of heroism is a projection of Sassoon's own feelings of guilt about possible cowardice. It is a psychological reaction that we have seen before in "Died of Wounds".

(iv) War Poet: New Style

A major factor in Sassoon's progress during his period at Craiglockhart cannot be found in George Sherston's account of his sojourn at Stateford Hospital. For in one important respect, Sherston differed from his author. He was not a war-poet. Reading through Sherston's Progress, the fictional account of Sherston's experiences from July 1917 to the end of the war, one gets the impression that almost all his actions after the failure of his protest, were doomed to defeat. We have already seen that much of the guilt culminating in Sherston's despairing dialogue with himself came from his belief that though he was committed to a protest against the war he had allowed himself to be hoodwinked into a passive role as a patient in a hospital where he did not belong. 44

While in Craiglockhart Sassoon composed poems which were later collected in a volume called Counter-Attack, and Other Poems 45

43 Sherston's Progress, p. 539.
44 See my n. 38, p. 104.
45 London, Heinemann, June 1918.
unquestionably one of the strongest indictments of the war to come out of the 1914-18 experience. *Counter-Attack* represents a surer-sense of the poet's role than we find in the quasi-realistic poems in *The Old Huntsman*. Robert Graves, discussing the format of his own 1916 volume of poetry, *Fairies and Fusiliers*, remarks on the format of *The Old Huntsman* with its large proportion of peace-time lyrics:

> We defined the war in our poems by making contrasted definitions of peace. With *Siegfried* it was hunting and nature and music and pastoral scenes; with me it was chiefly children.  

By looking back to a time of peace, Sassoon's 1917 volume lacked the force that comes from a defined point of view. In the early poems, the duality created by a disenchantment on the part of the poet results in a heightened, yet unresolved tone. This is especially true of "The Mystic as Soldier" and "To Victory". The realistic poems have the qualities of distorted sketches. Such poems as "Golgotha" and "At Carnoy", to a lesser extent, leave their emotional effect upon the reader's visual imagination proportional to his ability to re-create the original experience. In "Blighters" and "Fight to a Finish", the realistic technique becomes distorted by the emotional strain of the poet's attitude. Only occasionally does the poet write with the sureness of touch that we find in "They" and "A Whispered Tale". Part of the success in these poems is that the point of view of the poet as well as the point of view of the object he satirizes are made clear to the reader. The more ambiguous poems such as "The Kiss", "The Hero" and "Died of Wounds", while capable of evoking a richer

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46 *Goodbye to All That*, p. 277.
response, seem to lack an intellectual mastery of the emotional content. Both "The Kiss" and "Died of Wounds", however, are better when they are interpreted ironically.

In retrospect, the overall impression of The Old Huntsman seems to be that the volume represents a transition between an established concept of war—that it is a romantic endeavor in which larger-than-life heroes sacrifice their mortal lives in a self-transcending holy crusade—and a pragmatic view of war which believes nothing beyond death, and defends the right of the individual soldier to demand his right to live happily and freely rather than losing his life for some unimaginably complex socio-politico-economic phenomenon that perpetuates itself by blackmailing him into obeying a set of abstract and irrelevant values. The poems of peace-time, which represent the norm in The Old Huntsman, look backward to a rural idyll toward which it had really become impossible to return. In part, these poems of peace-time are attempts by the poet to escape into the uncomplicated past.

At Craiglockhart, through the aid of Dr. Rivers, Sassoon was able to see, perhaps for the first time, that between 1914 and late 1917 lay an uncrossable channel. The world of upper-class ease where he grew to worship and celebrate Nature was no longer possible for him. Michael Thorpe summarizes the new insight that comes to Sherston in the last phase of his war career:

Sassoon leaves us with the impression that Sherston, forever divided from the old, pre-War world, must fashion for himself a new one, building as best he
can upon the insight into human existence his testing experience has granted him. 

Thus Sassoon came to see that the past was irrecoverable and... he turned from it as an escape, but not without bitterness. We can compare Sassoon's changed attitude to the past in two poems in which an individual momentarily escapes the reality of war in a vision of the past. The first, appearing in The Old Huntsman, is called "The Death-Bed." The other is "Break of Day" and it appears in Counter-Attack. In both poems we can pay special attention to the poet's point of view and the resulting tone of the poems.

"The Death-Bed" is a narrative poem combining subdued realistic details with a romantic point of view. In direct contrast to the hysterical war-poems, "The Death-Bed" shows a too-strong control over the emotional content and the result is equally unsatisfying. The poem opens with a deathbed scene. A dying soldier, through the effects of medication, drowses:

Water—calm, sliding green above the weir,
Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,
Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers
And shaken hues of summer; drifting down,
He dipped contented cars, and sighed, and slept.

His sleep is described in passive terms conveyed by the association of a soft rain:

...not the harsh rain that sweeps
Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace,
Gently and slowly washing life away.

For one stanza the reality of pain is allowed to intrude:

He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
Leapt like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.

47 Siegfried Sassoon, p. 105.
At this point the personification of death intrudes upon the psychological realism:

But someone was beside him; soon he lay
Shuddering because that evil thing had passed.
A death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and stared.

The poet's entreaty breaks in next and disrupts the third-person point-of-view:

Light many lamps and gather round his bed.
Lend him your eyes, warm blood, and will to live.
Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
He's young; he hated war; how should he die
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

The poem ends on a note of resignation that rings false:

But death replied: 'I choose him.' So, he went,
And there was silence in the summer night;
Silence and safety, and the veils of sleep.
Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.

Whereas we find a mixture of styles in "The Death-Bed"—phantasy, psychological realism, formal personification—they tend to weaken the emotional impact of the poem. The controlling art is artificial; the poet's acceptance of the soldier's death is too passive, especially the line "But death replied: 'I choose him.' So he went."—coming after the terrible description of the soldier's pain. The poet's confusion about his role results in an ambiguity that flaws the poem. The artificial calm of the soldier enforced by medication and the terrible breakthrough of his pain suggest the new role that Sassoon, as poet, was beginning to develop in 1916; but the personification of death and the subdued peacefulness of the ending go back to the pre-war poetic role of detached contemplator.

When we turn to "Break of Day", representing a radical change in Sassoon's treatment of the theme of early morning,
we can see a sureness in the poet's role and a clearly defined point of view. No longer does he plaintively protest against the unfairness of Fate. He responds to the cold cruelty of Fate with an equally cold attitude. The poem begins with a scene in the trenches. It is told chiefly from the third person point of view of a soldier. The main action of the poem occurs in dream reverie of the soldier:

Was it the ghost of autumn in that smell
Of underground, or God's blank heart grown kind,
That sent a happy dream to him in hell?

The soldier's dream takes him back to his fox-hunting days.

A nature-description follows, and then a description of the hunt:

They're drawing the Big Wood! Unlatch the gate,
And set Columpus leaping on the grass;
He knows the corner where it's best to wait
And hear the crashing woodland chorus pass;
The corner where old foxes make their track
To the Long Spinney; that's the place to be.

The hunt is described with all the zest of happy warricism.

However, it is not "old foxes", but a "cub" that becomes the prey:

And there a cub looks out; and 'Tally-c-back!'
He bawls, and swings his thong with volleysing crack,—
All the clean thrill of autumn in his blood,
And hunting surging through him like a flood
In joyous welcome from the untroubled past;
While the war drifts away, forgotten at last.

The nature-description that ends the poem is heightened in irony by the conviction of the sleeper that he has returned to the past:

Now a red, sleepy sun above the rim
Of twilight stares along the quiet weald,
And the kind, simple country shines revealed
In solitudes of peace, no longer dim.
The old horse lifts his face and thanks the light,
Then stretches down his head to crop the green.
All things that he has loved are in his sight;
The places where his happiness has been
Are in his eyes, his heart, and they are good.

Hark! there's the horn: they're drawing the Big Wood.

It is only in the last line that the poet's intention becomes clear. We cannot ignore the ironic intention of "they're drawing the Big Wood": here, the apparently innocent reverie of a fox-hunt taking place in an idyllic setting takes on grotesque proportions. The war itself becomes a hunt and it is the soldiers who are being drawn cut for the kill. The poet looks upon the idyllic past with a detachment we did not find in the ambiguous tone of "The Death-Bed" and, in one sense, he is condemning this past. The instinct to kill for sport is too much a part of the soldier to idealize its existence in the hunt. The poet's point of view in this poem is really a consistent one despite the reverie of the persona. We can clearly distinguish between the consciousness that has the reverie and the consciousness that speaks the ironic last line. The implicit comparison between the fox-hunt and the war in which machine guns often mowed down whole platoons after luring them out of hiding is startlingly effective. In this poem, despite the idyllic flavour of the speaker's reverie, there is no uncertainty in the poet's point of view. His touch is sure and his aim precise.

In part, the crystallization of Sassoon's new poetic role was due to the overt expression of his anti-war feelings in the manifesto of 1917. In the manifesto he had committed himself to a public revolt against the war. While Sherston's role
after the writing of the manifesto seems unclear, this is only because he came to doubt whether the manifesto really was an effective protest measure. Once he was convinced that nothing he could do would prevent the nation from believing his action to be an irresponsible action by an unsound mind, he gave way and let others decide his immediate future. This was not the complete picture of Sassoon's own state of mind at the time, however, for he knew that as a poet he could continue an effective "counter-attack" on the perpetrators and condoners of the war, by turning his realistic poetry into a poetry of harsh moral tone governed by his newly-acquired stability of purpose. Having proclaimed his reaction against the prolongation of the war, he was freed of the guilt that had previously strained his poetic voice—a guilt caused by a feeling that he had no right to turn his back on his duties as a conscientious officer and as a citizen of England.

The newly-acquired stability in Sassoon's poetic role as a result of the commitment to pacifism epitomized in his manifesto is clearly apparent in the "slangy, telephonic" poem, "To Any Dead Officer". 43 Sassoon's comment on the relation of this poem to his anti-war protest suggests that his resolve was fortified by the mystic belief that the dead soldiers with whom he had fought were backing him up with their support:

It was for the fighting men that my appeal was made, for those whose loyalty and unthinkingness would have been betrayed, whatever acquisitions the Peace

43 Written shortly after Sassoon finished composing his manifesto against the prolongation of the war, it was published in The Cambridge Magazine, 14 July 1917 and reprinted in Counter-Attack in 1918.
might bring to the British Empire. I went back to the statement on the table with fortified conviction that I was doing right. Perhaps the dead were backing me up, I thought, for I was a believer in the power of spiritual presences. ["To Any Dead Officer"] was addressed to one whom I had known during both my periods of service in France. Poignant though the subject was, I wrote it with a sense of mastery and detachment and when it was finished I felt that it anyhow testified to the sincerity of my protest."

The imaginary telephone conversation in "To Any Dead Officer", actually a monologue by the speaker, manages to set up a distancing device for the emotional feeling without resorting to self-transcending patriotism on the one hand, or stark realism on the other. As with "Break of Day", the poem gains force from a sureness of the poet's point of view. The colloquial use of language, which became a dominant feature in the poems of Counter-Attack, represents the poet's having turned away from romanticism toward the Wordsworthian use of the language used by real men. The first stanza of "To Any Dead Officer" establishes a tone of cynical skepticism (which only wobbles once near the end of the poem):

Well, how are things in Heaven? I wish you'd say.  
Because I'd like to know that you're all right.  
Tell me, have you found everlasting day,  
Or been sucked in by everlasting night?

The speaker looks back to the time when the officer was alive. In images of combat, he describes the officer's present state:

That's all washed out now. You're beyond the wire:  
No earthly chance can send you crawling back;  
You've finished with machine-gun fire--  
Knocked over in a hopeless dud-attack.

49 Siegfried's Journey, p. 81.

50 The blunt, slangy tone of some of these later poems may owe something to Masseyfield. However, it is usually the poet himself who speaks colloquially, and not some fictional "local" character.
This last line suggests a momentary lapse in the poet's ironic stance and it detracts from the overall effect. This lapse occurs again in the penultimate stanza:

'Wounded and missing'—(That's the thing to do
When lads are left in shell-holes dying slow,
With nothing but blank sky and wounds that ache,
Meaning for water till they know
It's night, and then its not while to wake!)

But the poet's control is re-established in the superb last stanza, especially in the ironic use of Yellow Press clichés:

Goodbye, old lad! Remember me to God,
And tell him that our politicians swear
They won't live in till Prussian rule's been trod
Under the heel of England... Are you there?...
Yes... and the War won't end for at least two years;
But we've got stacks of men... I'm blind with tears,
Staring into the dark. Cheerio!
I wish they'd killed you in a decent show.

The ironic last line expresses Sassoon's belief, not that modern Man is incapable of heroism, but that the modern world is incapable of supporting Man's capacity for heroism.

Sassoon's continuing belief in the individual man's capacity for heroism is verified in the spirited poem "The Investiture". The poem opens with a description of God's heaven transformed into a military heaven:

God with a roll of honour in His Hand
Sits welcoming the heroes who have died,
While sorrowless angels ranked on either side
Stand easy in Elysium's meadow-land.

The negative quality of "sorrowless angels" and the double sense of "stand easy" suggest that God's heaven is not the ideal place many believe it to be. The next stanza addresses a soldier who has died and come to the gates of Paradise:

The you come shyly through the garden gate,
Wearing a blood-soaked bandage on your head;
And God says something kind because you're dead,
And homesick, discontented with your fate.
The word "homesick" suggests that the soldier's real home is back on earth among his comrades. This heaven is a far cry from the Valhalla of the epic hero. It is even strongly different from the "noble" heaven inhabited by the soldiers who have died in "Golgotha" where, "Tenderly stooping earthward from their height, They wander in the dusk with chanting streams". Here, the soldier as an individual is seen in his human condition; his value is a finite human value, but it is everything. The last stanza begins with an energetic and vital joy which gradually gives way to a sober mysticism:

If I were there we'd snowball Death with skulls;
Or ride away to hunt in Devil's Wood
With ghosts of puppies that we walked of old.
But you're alone, and solitude annuls
Our earthly jokes; and strangely wise and good
You roam forlorn along the streets of gold.

Only a few poems in Counter-Attack have the calm assurance of "Thè Investiture". One such poem is "Dreamers" which, while being a poem about a wish for an escape, is certainly not an "escapist" poem:

Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,
Drawing no dividend from time's tomorrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives.

The poet's role here is that of an enlocker. He has passed the stage of seeking comfort in the past, because he knows that it can no longer be recovered except in dreams. The poem ends, however, in the middle of the soldiers' dreams:

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.

The resultant emphasis is on the value of the lost dreams. Even at this period of his life, Sassoon did not completely turn his back on Nature as he once knew it.

In "Invocation" the poet asks for a renewal of peace. It may be addressed to Christ (as the poem "Before Day" had been):

Come down from heaven to meet me when my breath Chokes, and through drumming shafts of stifling death I stumble toward escape, to find the door Opening on morn where I may breathe once more Clear cock-crow airs across some valley dim With whispering trees...

...In your gaze
Show me the vanquished vigil of your days.
Lute in that golden silence hung with green,
Come down from heaven and bring me in your eyes Remembrance of all beauty that has been,
And stillness from the pools of Paradise.

The poem suggests that Sassoon's lyric worship of God in Nature had not really been destroyed by the war, but had merely become numbed.

It is reasonable to suggest that, for Sassoon, Nature represented the norm against which the mechanized mass-killing of the war amounted to a serious aberration by Mankind. This is the theme of "The Hawthorn Tree", in which a war-mother waits in her rural setting for her soldier-son to come home. She takes for granted what she knows her son longs to regain—communion with the rural environment where he spent his youth:

51 "Before Day" was written in 1916, and appeared in The Old Huntsman. It is a poem of invocation to the God of Man and Nature.
Not much to me is yonder lane
Where I go every day;
But when there's been a shower of rain
And hedge-birds whistle gay,
I know my lad that's cut in France
With fearsome things to see
Would give his eyes for just one glance
At our white hawthorn tree.

The stark simplicity of the phrasing, and the emphasis on the rural environment rather than the reality of the trenches gives the poem an eternal quality. The woman hopes that her son might yet be re-united to the home of his childhood:

Not much to me is yonder lane
Where he so longs to tread:
But when there's been a shower of rain
I think I'll never weep again
Until I've heard he's dead.

For Sassoon, the war came to represent a senseless and destructive force that could destroy the harmony which Man was meant to share with Nature. As we turn to the satiric poems that create the overall tone of *Counter-Attack* we must keep in mind that the satiric mask constituted as much a defence for Sassoon as a means of attack. While it enabled him to "deliberately alienate the civilian reader from the poet himself", as Thorpe points out, the purpose of his alienation was not only to shock the civilian reader into a recognition of his complacency and easy patriotism. He also felt the need to protect his own mystic sense of "the God within the mind" and his apprehension of the purity of Nature. To use a metaphor, by late 1917 Sassoon's roses had grown thorns and he came to insist that the guilty wear a crown of thorns.

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One specific satiric technique that Sassoon had discovered in 1916 is discussed in Siegfried's Journey:

Nothing I had written before 1916 showed any symptom of this development....I merely chanced on the device of composing two or three harsh, peremptory and colloquial stanzas with a knock out blow in the last line.53

This technique is illustrated in the structure of "They", where the Bishop's platitudes are contrasted against real facts told in a colloquial manner. The ironic twist that ends the poem emphasizes the disparity between the romantic illusion and the real facts. Sassoon became particularly good at this technique. It is especially effective when the last line of the poem catches the reader with his guard down, as we shall see in "Lamentations" and "Remorse". In these poems Sassoon creates vividly realistic scenes of overpowering intensity and closes with a romantic platitude that breaks down pitifully under the force of contrast.

The technique is least successful when the poet's anger escapes from the controlling art, as it does in the following:

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

This is the last stanza from "Suicide in Trenches." Here, the "knock out blow" is delivered with an hysterical frenzy that is too direct to persuade at an emotional level. In any event, Sassoon's satiric technique depends on an initial gaining of the reader's sympathy followed by an abrupt volte-face which attacks some specific target. When the target is the ignorant civilian,

53 Siegfried's Journey, p. 43.
the effect is, perhaps, unjustifiably harsh.

One of Sassoon's prime targets in *Counter-Attack* was the remote ineptitude of the higher-ranking officers. While on leave in London in 1916 and 1917, he had bitterly watched many higher officers enjoying themselves in the comfort of their Clubs. He also resented the fact that many of the personnel at Base Headquarters had never been in the midst of "hell", especially since these men were initiating commands that constantly led to unnecessary wholesale slaughter. On leave in June of 1917 Sassoon had received news that all the officers of his Second Battalion, with a single exception, had been wounded in a hopeless attack on Amiens. Sherston writes of this incident as it came up in his discussion with the pacifist editor, Markington:

He listened with gloomy satisfaction to my rather vague remarks about incompetent Staff work. I told him that our Second Battalion had been almost wiped out ten days ago because the Divisional General had ordered an impossible attack on a local objective.\(^5\)

In "The General" Sassoon contrasts the smooth, professional attitude of a General with the easy, co-operative attitude of two soldiers:

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

But he did it all by his plan of attack.

The last line (especially the word "plan"), suggests a radical injustice in the General's power to risk human lives at no personal expense for an abstract scheme. The poem points to a

\(^5\) *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, p. 473.
generation gap, always present, but heightened during the war by youth's realization that it was being sacrificed en masse while an older generation carried on as though there were no need to consider the future.

This realization is also the theme of "Base Details", a poem faintly echoing Yeats's "When You Are Old":

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy, petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour. 'Poor young chap,'
I'd say—'I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.'
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed.

The impotence of the older generation which the poet hints at in this poem is more directly treated in "The Fathers", where the association of heroism with masculinity, causes two fathers to brag about their sons' war experience, while they themselves are oblivious to the hell that their sons are living through:

Snug at the club two fathers sat,
Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat.
One of them said: 'My eldest lad
Wrote cheery letters from Baghdad.
But Arthur's getting all the fun
At Arras with his nine-inch gun.'

'Yes,' wheezed the other, 'that's the luck!
My boy's quite broken-hearted, stuck
In England training all this year.
Still, if there's truth in what we hear.
The Huns intend to ask for more
Before they bolt across the Rhine.'
I watched them toddle through the door—
These impotent old friends of mine.

55 In the Battle of Arras British casualties alone totalled 132,000 killed wounded and missing, in less than a month.
The same theme is handled from a slightly different point of view, that of the soldier at the front, in "Remorse":

Lost in the swamp and welter of the pit,
He flounders off the duck-boards; only he knows
Each flash and spouting crash--each instant lit
With gloom reveals the streaming rain. He goes
Heavily, blindly on. And, while he blunders,
'Could anything be worse than this?'--he wonders,
Reflecting how he saw those Germans run,
Screaming for mercy among the stumps of trees:
Green-faced, they dodged and darted: there was one
Livid with terror, clutching at his knees...
Our chaps were sticking 'em like pigs... '0 hell!'
He thought--'there's things in war one dare not tell
Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads
Of dying heroes and their deathless deeds.'

War atrocities did not figure in the romantic concept of war that predominated in 1914, but for Sassoon, the spectacle of his own men (and perhaps himself) skewering the enemy or torturing prisoners was one of the most terrifying insights that he discovered into the nature of war. We have seen already a change in Sassoon's original patriotism in the compassionate poem "Enemies". In "Glory of Women" he attacks the notion of narrow patriotism as he finds it especially among women. The target of the poem is really an unfair one, but part of the heroic tradition of war was that bravery in war was often inspired by the faithfulness of the hero's beloved. For Sassoon, this relationship, conditioned a concept of war that showed only the most naive impression of what was going on. Sassoon uses realism in an attempt to blast the Victorian myth that young ladies should be protected from harsh reality:

You can't believe that British troops "retire"
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses--blinded with blood.
O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.
In the format of Counter-Attack, Sassoon prefaced the volume with a quotation from Le Feu by Henri Barbusse, which he had been reading in the middle of 1917.56 The quotation refutes very strongly the accepted belief that the atrocities of war are erased by the glory and heroism the war affords. Most significant for Sassoon is Barbusse's insistence that the war blunts the sensitivity of soldiers. Barbusse writes:

In the troubled truce of the morning, these men whom fatigue had tormented, rain had scourged, whom night-long lightning had convulsed, these survivors of volcanoes and flood began not only to see dimly how war, as hideous morally and physically, outrage common sense, debases noble ideas and dictates all kinds of crime, but they remembered how it had enlarged in them and about them every evil instinct save none, mischief developed into lustful cruelty, selfishness into ferocity the hunger of enjoyment into a mania.57

For these morally degrading effects of war Sassoon turned in wrath against the civilian population that even in 1918 supported a romantic view of war and expected soldiers to live up to it.

Perhaps Sassoon's most effective satires occurred when as poet, he wore an ironic mask that caricatured hypocrisy and false idealism. One such satire is "Lamentations":

I found him in the guard-room at the Base.
From the blind darkness I had heard his crying
And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face
A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying
To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.

56 In Sherston's Progress, p. 525, Sherston says of Le Feu which he was reading in English translation at Slateford: "I will not describe the effect it was creating in my mind; I need only say that it was a deeply stimulating one. Someone was really revealing the truth about the Front Line!"

and, all because his brother had gone west,
Roved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief
Howled, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was
Kneeling
Half-naked on the floor. In my belief
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

"How To Die" uses the same device of the cold, apathetic mask.

The first stanza describes a beautifully-framed death-bed scene
by a soldier. The time of day is, significantly, daybreak:

Dark clou-de's are smouldering into red
While down the craters morning burns.
The dying soldier shifts his head
To watch the glory that returns;
He lifts his fingers toward the skies
Where hclly brightness breaks in flame;
Radiance reflected in his eyes,
And on his lips a whispered name.

Having gained the sympathy of the reader, and perhaps an emo-
tional state which renders the reader vulnerable, Sassoon pro-
ceeds to stick in the knife and turn it in the wound:

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

Part of the tragedy of the war on Sassoon was that it
forced him to adopt the cold mask of the satirist. He was cap-
able of tender, sympathetic feeling, but he knew that sentiment
during the war was easily turned into emotional blackmail for
drumming up the expedient patriotism. We can contrast the ex-
ploitation of the soldier's death for satiric purposes in "How
To Die" with the subtle pathos of "The Dug-Out":

Why do you lie with your legs ungainly huddled,
And one arm bent across your sullen, cold,
Exhausted face? It hurts my heart to watch you,
Deep-shadows'd from the candle's guttering gold;
And you wonder why I shake you by the shoulder;
Drowsy, you mumble and sigh and turn your head...
You are too young to fall asleep forever;
And when you sleep you remind me of the dead.

His sensitive and idealistic nature did not disappear during the war. The satiric poems in *Counter-Attack* are very sharp weapons, but it must be remembered that weapons are used not only for attack but also for defence.

Sassoon's sensitivity received countless shocks during his career as an infantry officer. The period of nightmares and hallucinations that he had suffered in mid-1917 predicated that his emotional constitution was on the verge of disintegration.

The poem "Repression of War Experience" suggests what might have happened to Sassoon himself, had he not re-channelled his idealism into an attack against the romantic myths about the nature of war. The form of the poem, internal monologue partly unified by free-association, may owe something to the methods of W. H. R. Rivers at Craiglockhart, where Sassoon had plenty of opportunity to watch the effects of repressed trauma on shell-shocked officers:

Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth;
What silly beggars they are to blunder in
And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame—
No; no not that,—it's bad to think of war,
When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to
scare you;
And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad
Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts
That drive them cut to jabber among the trees.

The soldier's mind is filled with some vague expectation that he cannot comprehend:

You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out,
And listen to the silence: on the ceiling
There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and flutters;  
And in the breathless air outside the house  
The garden waits for something that delays.

The trees take on ominous shapes. The soldier cannot admit that,  
in them, he sees the young men who have died horrible deaths;  
instead, he thinks of the old men—the older generation upon which  
all his bitter hatred and scorn has come to rest:

There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,—  
Not people killed in battle,—they're in France,—  
But horrible shapes in shrouds—old men who died  
Slow natural deaths,—old men with ugly souls,  
Who wore their bodies cut with nasty sins.

The final stanza breaks forth in an hysterical episode that cannot be checked. It is a horrifying illustration of the disintegrating effect of the war on the human imagination:

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;  
You'd never think there was a bloody war on!...  
O yes, you would...why, you can hear the guns.  
Hark! Thud, thud thud,—quite soft...they never cease—  
Those whispering guns—Christ, I want to go out  
And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy;  
I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

One of the most effective devices in "Repression of War Experience" is the image of the moth as an objective correlative for the soldier's mind circling round and round his war experiences. Sassoon decided to return to the Front after he left Craiglockhart. As a kind of servant of Christ, he devoted his time to making the lives of his men easier.  
In July 1913 he was wounded in the head on daylight patrol. He spent the rest of the war at a rest home in Berwickshire. He was in fine health when the Armistice came on 11 November. The sudden release of his mind from the constraints of the war resulted in a "spontaneous" lyric in April 1919 called "Everyone
Sang". Sasscon writes in *Siegfried's Journey*:

"Everyone sang was composed without emotion, and needed no alteration afterwards. Its rather free form was spontaneous and unlike any other poem I have written. I wasn't aware of any technical contriving. Yet it was essentially an expression of release, and signified a thankfulness for liberation from the war years which came to the surface with the advent of spring."

The poem is indeed a unique expression of Sasscon's lyrical voice exulting over the strained guilty voice of the tortured poet of modern warfare:

> Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;  
> And beauty came like the setting sun;  
> My heart has shaken with tears and horror  
> Drifted away...0, but Everyone  
> Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

Yet, the placement of "horror" at the end of the line where a pause is certain seems to be an unconscious setting up of irony in "the singing will never be done". The horror of war is not so easily erased. War is not an anomaly. It is the horrible projection of some destructive force that is dormant in human nature. Sasscon struggled desperately in his role as a conscientious officer-poet, to discern the voice of the God within his mind among the host of demons that threatened to obliterate God's truth.

In *Siegfried's Journey* Sasscon looks back objectively on his role as a satirist in war:

...I could now safely admit that army life had persistently interfered with my ruminative and

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quiet-loving mentality. I may even have been aware that most of my satiric verses were to some extent prompted by internal exasperation.59

It should be added, in closing, that the impact of the war on Sassoon's reclusive temperament and the resulting guilt and moral searching that we have traced in his war poetry, reveal a precipitous maturing of his personality. If Sassoon's war poetry seems, at times, too immature and over-emotional, it should be remembered that the conditions of warfare did not allow for recollection in tranquility. If the poetry often lacks control it is because the forces acting on the poet were strong and ever-changing. What the war did create for the poet was a larger-than-life background against which he could develop fully his capacity for feeling.

CONCLUSION

The poetry Sassoon wrote after 1918 seldom touched the deeper chords of the human soul as disturbingly as did the poetry he created in response to the Great War. Harold Monro, writing in 1920, speculated on Sassoon's post-war career:

We still have to learn whether Siegfried Sassoon, with his red anger, his queer understanding of men, his sensitiveness, his pride, his facility in spinning a song, the absurd ingenuousness of his rhythm, but the great force and interest of his present production, will be sufficiently inspired by other subjects in the future to engage our sympathies in Peace as he has stirred our emotions in War.1

The reason for the appearance of the poetry that has "stirred our emotions in War" has been the subject of this thesis. The study of Sassoon's inner life during the war years may also yield the reason for the poet's failure to sustain his success in Peace as he had done in War.

The war matured Sassoon both as a man and as a poet. The overwhelming impact of his experiences on his personal life made it difficult for Sassoon to develop poetic roles adequate to an artistic response. Yet, as I hope to have shown, his best war poetry was that which emerged when his idealistic temperament was assaulted by the horrible reality of the environment of war. The tension that resulted created an emotionally rich response. In our study of Sassoon's changing concept of the hero we have traced the enduring pursuit of some Ideal in which he

1 Some Contemporary Poets, London, 1920, p. 137. 129
could invest his faith. As early as the writing of "Tree and Sky" he expressed a need to immaculate himself in a self-transcending ideal. He believed that the war would fulfill this need. But four years as an infantry officer radically changed his heroic childhood concept of war.

When we look back over Sassoon's poetic role before 1918 we see a steady movement away from the role of aloof contemplator and toward a vital involvement in the life of his fellow men. While we have to admit that he did not always have full control of his powerfully disturbing subject-matter, we can recognize a transition from the withdrawal of the mystic to the concern of the existentialist. Living in the environment of war he could not ignore it.

Sassoon's role as satirist shows both the triumph of his courage and the defeat of his exquisite sensitivity. The satires comprise Sassoon's most effective attack on the conditions which assaulted his idealistic temperament; yet, the powerful guilt that laces through such poems as "Stand-To: Good Friday Morning", "Enemies", "Died of Wounds" and "Lead Musicians" gives these poems a beauty that we do not find in the angry righteousness of "They", "How to Die", "Base Details", "The General" and "Suicide in Trenches".

My aim throughout this thesis has been to examine Sassoon's war poetry, not as an example of a genre which can be measured against the objective achievements of other war poets, but as a personal response of a sensitive temperament to a highly disturbing environment. From this perspective, the success of the satires is a one-sided one. The war called forth a realistic
response in Sassoon—that is good. But what lies behind the angry satire is a sort of "mental exasperation" in which the poet's capacity for feeling has been turned inside-out. He seems to have identified his own idealistic temperament with the hypocritical exploitation of ideals in the war. The cruel ending of "Dreamers" seems to cut as deeply at the faith that inspired "Tolly Brother" as it does at the Church-at-war.

In such poems as "The Dug-Out" and "Repression of War Experience," we have glimpsed a poetic role that Sassoon was beginning to develop during the very last stages of the war. In part the development of meditative poetry and poetry of pity owes something to Sassoon's acquaintance with Wilfred Owen at Craiglockhart. A few words about Owen's influence on Sassoon might be said at this point.

The war poetry of Wilfred Owen has received considerable critical attention. Most critics concur that, in original craftsmanship and moral power, Owen is the greatest of the war poets. Much has also been written about Sassoon's influence on the poetry of Owen. Sassoon was Owen's hero among the war poets. The influence seems to have been mutual, however. In Siegfried Journey Sassoon reminisces about Owen:


3 In a letter to Sassoon dated 5 November 1917, Owen wrote: "...you have fixed my Life—however short. You did not light me; I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I spun a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze." In Collected Letters, ed., Harold Owen and John Bell, London, 1967, p. 505.
The clue to his poetic genius was sympathy, not only in his detached visionings of humanity but in all his actions and responses towards individuals.... It can be taken for granted that there were aspects of him which I never saw. To others he may have revealed much that I missed, since he had the adaptability of a beautifully sympathetic nature. 4

No doubt, Owen's deep sympathy for suffering humanity conveyed in the controlled emotionalism of his war poetry helped lead Sassoon back from the poetic role of the harsh satirist.

While critics have insisted on the significant influence of the environment of war on Sassoon, his early natural environment, as I have pointed out, contributed largely to his poetic role during the war. As late a poem as "Invocation" showed that the mystic temperament of the poet was not destroyed by the war but forced, perhaps to protect itself under the mask of satire. This observation, when placed against Michael Thorpe's observation that "the intensity and hatred evinced in Sassoon's satires is ... a revelation of war's disintegrating effect upon personality," 5 may suggest why Sassoon's poetry after 1914, which continued in the satiric vein, was not successful. For Sassoon, satire functioned as a shield as much as a weapon. The ecstatic release of tension represented in "Everyone Sang" also represented a release in Sassoon's creative tension. Sassoon achieved maturation during a prolonged state of unnatural conditions. Once the environment of war disappeared, the poetic role he had perfected collapsed. Only when his mind returned to the environment that tutored his youth, could he respond with a depth of feeling.

4 Siegfried's Journey, pp. 91 and 93.
5 Siegfried Sassoon, p. 24.
Perhaps the two stanzas of "i:emory", published in 1919, provide a fitting summary of what was best in Nature and in Man as they influenced the evolution of Sassoon as a man and as a poet:

When I was young my heart and head were light,  
And I was gay and reckless as a colt  
Out in the fields, with morning in the may,  
Wind on the grass, wings in the orchard, bloom.  
O thrilling sweet, my joy, when life was free  
And all the paths led on from hawthorn-time  
Across the carolling meadows into June.

But now my heart is heavy-laden. I sit  
Burning my dreams away beside the fire:  
For death has made me wise and bitter and strong;  
And I am rich in all that I have lost.  
O starshine on the fields of long-ago,  
Bring me the darkness and the nightingale;  
Dim wealds of vanished summer, peace of home,  
And silence; and the faces of my friends.
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