**In Flanders Field: First World War Poetry, Experience, and Worldview**

“This present war is essentially a spiritual war; a war waged on earth but sustained on either side by invisible powers.”—Bishop John Diggle

“To our right and below us is the river stretching across a vista of broken stumps, running water and shell pools, to the skeleton gleaming white of another village on the far bank. If only an artist could paint the grim scene now while the hand of war and death is still hovering over it. In our steel helmets and chain visors we somehow recall *Pilgrim’s Progress*, armored figures passing through the valley of the shadow. On—for Apollyon’s talons are ever near.”—Letter from Artillery Subaltern Christian Creswell Carver to his brother, March 1917

“The prevailing opinion in the trenches was that anything might be true, except what was printed.”—Remark to Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*

There are a number of ways to interpret and respond to the poetry of the First World War because such poems offer us a set of varied and often conflicting experiences from WWI. And as such they suggest a number of different ways we can go about understanding them. Several continuums come to mind:

1. They may be judged as *historical* artifacts, as well as *literary* verse of varying merit.
2. As these, they are revelations not only of *psychological and sociological* responses,
3. but also of *ethical and metaphysical* attempts at making meaning, indeed in shoring up meaning, in the face of anomic disruptions.
4. For this reason, they are also of *philosophical and theological* import.

**Metaphysics**

**Psychology**

**History Literature**

**Sociology**

**Ethics**

* What do the poems say about history and about literature?
* What do they reveal about the psychology of war and the sociology of war?
* What kinds of ethical questions and answers do they explore?
* What kinds of “big picture” (philosophical and theological) questions and answers do they explore?

They raise questions about human dignity, desire, and camaraderie; the origins and sources of violence; the justice and injustice of political causes, the meaning of modern technologies of destruction, and the presence or absence of divine compassion and judgment.

Being poems, they are particularly good at helping us grasp not only the stabilizing and destabilizing experiences of war, but also the experiences of growth and mastery and of helplessness and despair. They invite us to consider the gaining of ability and expertise in the face of overwhelming resistance, but also the sense of a loss of innocence or heroic ideals. They challenge beliefs in Progress or Divine help and vindication. At the same time, they also offer us symbols that help crystalize the feelings of nobility, loyalty, or nausea.

How we freight the natural world with significant symbols also calls us to notice echoes or archetypes of transcendence, the breakdown or adaptation of moral and religious traditions, as well as asking us questions about the way we demonize or humanize the enemy. As you read the poems, try to keep in mind the broad interactions mentioned above.

**Readings**

“The Eve of War” (Geoffrey Faber) & “This is no case of petty Right or Wrong” (Edward Thomas)

1. What are the spiritual or metaphysical visions that undergird these two poems?
2. How does each poet seek to explain war’s meaning?

“The Kiss” (Siegfried Sassoon) & “Arms and the Boy” (Wilfred Owen)

1. Compare and contrast these poems. How do the two poets personify their weapons, and what does each suggest about battle?

“First Time In” (Ivor Gurney) & “Break of Day in the Trenches” (Isaac Rosenberg)

1. How does “First Time In” merge fear and familiarity, dread and hope?
2. How does “Break of Day” describe surprising aspects of trench warfare?

“After War” (Ivor Gurney) & “Banishment” (Siegfried Sassoon)

1. How do these poems speak to what motivates a person in war?

“Canadians” (Ivor Gurney)

1. How does Gurney picture the Canadians as they enter the field of battle?

“1914: The Solider” (Rupert Brooke) & “The Mother” (May Herschel-Clark)

1. What motivates these writers to go into battle?

“Bombardment” (D. H. Lawrence), “A Memory” (Margaret Sackville), & “Soliloquy II” (Richard Aldington)

1. What ironies of battle do these poets center in on?
2. What do they reveal about the blasphemy or dignity of the dead?

“Not to Keep” (Robert Frost), “Convalescence” (Amy Lowell), & “For the Fallen” (Lawrence Binyon)

1. How does each poet describe the long-term effects after the war?
2. How does Binyon see the way later generations make meaning?

Poems that Employ Christ

“The Conscript” (Wilfrid Gibson), “Marching Men” (Marjorie Pickthall), “The Redeemer” (Siegfried Sassoon), “Nameless Men” (Edward Shillito), & “The War Films” (Sir Henry Newbolt)

Look over the following five ways in which sufferers respond to the meaning of Christ's crucifixion. Which category or categories best describe the place of Christ in these poems? What key lines would suggest one or another model?

1. *Pragmatic*: Suffering and atrocity need to be practically addressed, coped with, minimized, and possibly eliminated. The cross is a reminder of the agony and pain of suffering and a reminder to act.
2. *Existential*: The cross as a metaphor or symbol helps make meaning of the otherwise meaningless and overwhelming condition of misery.  By comparing our pain to that which surrounded the cross, we better understand our own. The cross becomes a frame or a narrative that gives a shape to formless human suffering.
3. *Exemplary*: Christ's suffering on the cross is an example for us in how to undergo affliction (cf. I Pet 2:21-25, 4:1-2, 4:12-14). Christ's own actions show us what to do when we suffer, for example, teaching us to move from self-absorption to cooperation and compassion for others in their pain.
4. *Mystical*: Some in the Christian monastic traditions believe that one can experience Christ's own suffering in moments of spiritual awareness and that this awareness allows one to transcend one's own misery. Another version of this holds that the Christian's suffering participates in some way in Christ's own anguish (cf. Col 1:24, also cf. Rom 6:1-14, Gal 6:14, Phil 3:10). Simone Weil takes this even further, arguing that affliction is God's tight embrace as a Lover and that this mystical knowledge balances off the sufferer's experience of ruin.
5. *Honorific:* The work of the cross is that of the infinite God who honors us, purifies us, and makes our lives beautiful by consenting to suffer with us as a human being in the person of Jesus, by becoming a curse for our separation from God, and by giving our lives a stable aesthetic form that allows us to tell the truth about our suffering. The work of the cross reverses the shame, impurity, and ugliness that victims feel as a result of the affliction and atrocities they have experienced.

***The Eve of War (Geoffrey Faber)***

The night falls over London. City and sky  
Blend slowly. All the crowded plains grow dark.  
The last few loiterers leave the glooming park  
To swell that mighty tide which still sweeps by,  
Heedless save of its own humanity,  
Down to the Circus, where the staring arc  
Winks through the night, and every face shows stark  
And every cheek betrays its painted lie.

But here through bending trees blows a great wind;  
Through torn cloud-gaps the angry stars  
Look down.  
Here have I heard this night the wings of War,  
this dark and frowning countenance I saw.  
What dreadful menace hangs above our town?  
Let all the great cities pray; for they have sinned.

***This is no case of petty right or wrong (Edward Thomas)***

This is no case of petty right or wrong

That politicians or philosophers

Can judge. I hate not Germans, nor grow hot

With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.

Beside my hate for one fat patriot

My hatred of the Kaiser is love true:—

A kind of god he is, banging a gong.

But I have not to choose between the two,

Or between justice and injustice. Dinned

With war and argument I read no more

Than in the storm smoking along the wind

Athwart the wood. Two witches' cauldrons roar.

From one the weather shall rise clear and gay;

Out of the other an England beautiful

And like her mother that died yesterday.

Little I know or care if, being dull,

I shall miss something that historians

Can rake out of the ashes when perchance

The phoenix broods serene above their ken.

But with the best and meanest Englishmen

I am one in crying, God save England, lest

We lose what never slaves and cattle blessed.

The ages made her that made us from dust:

She is all we know and live by, and we trust

She is good and must endure, loving her so:

And as we love ourselves we hate our foe.

***“The Kiss” (Siegfried Sassoon)***

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.

***“Arms and the Boy” (Wilfred Owen)***

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade

How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;

Blue with all malice, like a madman’s flash;

And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads

Which long to muzzle in the hearts of lads.

Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,

Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For this teeth seem for laughing round an apple,

There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;

And God will grow no talons at his heels,

Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

***First Time In (Ivor Gurney)***

After the dread tales and red yarns of the Line

Anything might have come to us; but the divine

Afterglow brought us up to a Welsh colony

Hiding in sandbag ditches, whispering consolatory

Soft foreign things. Then we were taken in

To low huts candle-lit shaded close by slitten

Oilsheets, and there but boys gave us kind welcome;

So that we looked out as from the edge of home.

Sang us Welsh things, and changed all former notions

To human hopeful things. And the next days’ guns

Nor any Line-pangs ever quite could blot out

That strangely beautiful entry to War's rout;

Candles they gave us precious and shared over-rations—

Ulysses found little more in his wanderings without doubt.

'David of the White Rock,' the 'Slumber Song' so soft, and that

Beautiful tune to which roguish words by Welsh pit boys

Are sung—but never more beautiful than here under the guns’ noise.

***“Break of Day in the Trenches” (Isaac Rosenberg)***

The darkness crumbles away.

It is the same old druid Time as ever,

Only a live thing leaps my hand,

A queer sardonic rat,

As I pull the parapet’s poppy

To stick behind my ear.

Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew

Your cosmopolitan sympathies.

Now you have touched this English hand

You will do the same to a German

Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure

To cross the sleeping green between.

It seems you inwardly grin as you pass

Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,

Less chanced than you for life,

Bonds to the whims of murder,

Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,

The torn fields of France.

What do you see in our eyes

At the shrieking iron and flame

Hurled through still heavens?

What quaver—what heart aghast?

Poppies whose roots are in man’s veins

Drop, and are ever dropping;

But mine in my ear is safe—

Just a little white with the dust.

***“After War” (Ivor Gurney)***

One got peace of heart at last, the dark march over,  
And the straps slipped, the warmth felt under roof's low cover,  
Lying slack the body, let sink in straw giving;  
And some sweetness, a great sweetness felt in mere living.  
And to come to this haven after sorefooted weeks,  
The dark barn roof, and the glows and the wedges and streaks;  
Letters from home, dry warmth and still sure rest taken  
Sweet to the chilled frame, nerves soothed were so sore shaken.

***“Banishment” (Siegfried Sassoon)***

I AM banished from the patient men who fight

They smote my heart to pity, built my pride.

Shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side,

They trudged away from life’s broad wealds of light.

Their wrongs were mine; and ever in my sight

They went arrayed in honour. But they died,—

Not one by one: and mutinous I cried

To those who sent them out into the night.

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven

To free them from the pit where they must dwell

In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven

By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel.

Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;

And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.

***Canadians—Ivor Gurney***

We marched, and saw a company of Canadians,  
Their coats weighed eighty pounds at least, we saw them  
Faces infinitely grimed in, with almost dead hands  
Bent, slouching downwards to billets comfortless and dim.  
Cave dwellers last of tribes they seemed, and a pity  
Even from us just relieved, much as they were, left us.  
Lord, what a land of desolation, what iniquity  
Of mere being, of what youth that country bereft us;  
Plagues of evil lay in Death's Valley, we also  
Had forded that up to the thighs in chill mud,  
Gone for five days then any sign of life glow,  
As the notched stumps or the grey clouds we stood  
Dead past death from first hour and the needed mood  
Of level pain shifting continually to and fro.  
Saskatchewan, Ontario, Jack London ran in  
My own mind; what in others? these men who finely  
Perhaps had chosen danger for reckless and fine,  
Fate had sent for suffering and dwelling obscenely  
Vermin-eaten, fed beastly, in vile ditches meanly.

***The Soldier—Rupert Brooke***

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there’s some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,

A body of England’s, breathing English air,

Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,

A pulse in the eternal mind, no less

Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;

And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,

In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

***“The Mother” (May Herschel-Clark)***

Written after reading Rupert Brooke’s sonnet, ‘The Solider’

If you should die, think only this of me  
In that still quietness where is space for thought,  
Where parting, loss and bloodshed shall not be,  
And men may rest themselves and dream of nought:  
That in some place a mystic mile away  
One whom you loved has drained the bitter cup  
Till there is nought to drink; has faced the day  
Once more, and now, has raised the standard up.  
And think, my son, with eyes grown clear and dry  
She lives as though for ever in your sight,  
Loving the things you loved, with heart aglow  
For country, honour, truth, traditions high,  
--Proud that you paid their price. (And if some night  
Her heart should break--well, lad, you will not know.)

***“Bombardment” (D. H. Lawrence)***

The town has opened to the sun.

Like a flat red lily with a million petals

She unfolds, she comes undone.

A sharp sky brushes upon

The myriad glittering chimney-tips

As she gently exhales to the sun.

Hurrying creatures run

Down the labyrinth of the sinister flower.

What is it they shun?

A dark bird falls from the sun.

It curves in a rush to the heart of the vast

Flower: the day has begun.

***“A Memory” (Margaret Sackville)***

There was no sound at all, no crying in the village,  
Nothing you would count as sound, that is, after the shells;  
Only behind a wall the low sobbing of women,  
The creaking of a door, a lost dog – nothing else.

Silence which might be felt, no pity in the silence,  
Horrible, soft like blood, down all the blood-stained ways;  
In the middle of the street two corpses lie unburied,  
And a bayoneted woman stares in the market-place.

Humble and ruined folk – for these no pride of conquest,  
Their only prayer: ‘O! Lord, give us our daily bread!’  
Not by the battle fires, the shrapnel are we haunted;  
Who shall deliver us from the memory of these dead?

***“Soliloquy II” (Richard Aldington)***

I was wrong, quite wrong;  
The dead men are not always carrion.  
  
After the advance,  
As we went through the shattered trenches  
Which the enemy had left,  
We found, lying upon the fire-step,  
A dead English soldier,  
His head bloodily bandaged  
And his closed left hand touching the earth,  
  
More beautiful than one can tell,  
More subtly coloured than a perfect Goya,  
And more austere and lovely in repose  
Than Angelo's hand could ever carve in stone.

***“Not to Keep” (Robert Frost)***

They sent him back to her. The letter came  
Saying. . . . And she could have him. And before  
She could be sure there was no hidden ill  
Under the formal writing, he was in her sight,  
Living. They gave him back to her alive—  
How else? They are not known to send the dead—  
And not disfigured visibly. His face?  
His hands? She had to look, to ask,  
“What was it, dear?” And she had given all  
And still she had all—they had—they the lucky!  
Wasn’t she glad now? Everything seemed won,  
And all the rest for them permissible ease.  
She had to ask, “What was it, dear?”

“Enough,  
Yet not enough. A bullet through and through,  
High in the breast. Nothing but what good care  
And medicine and rest, and you a week,  
Can cure me of to go again.” The same  
Grim giving to do over for them both.  
She dared no more than ask him with her eyes  
How was it with him for a second trial.  
And with his eyes he asked her not to ask.  
They had given him back to her, but not to keep.

***“Convalescence” (Amy Lowell)***

From out the dragging vastness of the sea,  
Wave-fettered, bound in [sinuous](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/180289#eid22608964) seaweed strands,  
He [toils](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/202914#eid18249490) toward the [rounding](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/167967#eid25037355) beach, and stands  
One moment, white and dripping, silently,  
Cut like a cameo in lazuli,  
Then falls, betrayed by shifting shells, and lands  
Prone in the jeering water, and his hands  
Clutch for support where no support can be.  
So up, and down, and forward, inch by inch,  
He gains upon the shore, where poppies glow  
And sandflies dance their little lives away.  
The sucking waves retard, and tighter clinch  
The weeds about him, but the land-winds blow,  
And in the sky there blooms the sun of May.

***“For the Fallen” (Lawrence Binyon)***

With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,  
England mourns for her dead across the sea.  
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,  
Fallen in the cause of the free.

Solemn the drums thrill: Death august and royal  
Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres.  
There is music in the midst of desolation  
And a glory that shines upon our tears.

They went with songs to the battle, they were young,  
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.  
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,  
They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.

They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;  
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;  
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;  
They sleep beyond England's foam.

But where our desires are and our hopes profound,  
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,  
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known  
As the stars are known to the Night;

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,  
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,  
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,  
To the end, to the end, they remain.

***“The Conscript” (Wilfrid Owen)***

Indifferent, flippant, earnest, but all bored,   
The doctors sit in the glare of electric light   
Watching the endless stream of naked white   
Bodies of men for whom their hasty award   
Means life or death maybe, or the living death   
Of mangled limbs, blind eyes, or a darkened brain;   
And the chairman, as his monocle falls again,   
Pronounces each doom with easy indifferent breath.   
  
Then suddenly I shudder as I see   
A young man stand before them wearily,   
Cadaverous as one already dead;   
But still they stare untroubled as he stands   
With arms outstretched and drooping thorn-crowned head,   
The nail-marks glowing in his feet and hands.

***“Marching Men” (Marjorie Pickthall)***

Under the level winter sky

I saw a thousand Christs go by.

They sang an idle song and free

As they went up to calvary.

Careless of eye and coarse of lip,

They marched in holiest fellowship.

That heaven might heal the world, they gave

Their earth-born dreams to deck the grave.

With souls unpurged and steadfast breath

They supped the sacrament of death.

And for each one, far off, apart,

Seven swords have rent a woman's heart.

***“The Redeemer” (Siegfried Sassoon)***

Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mire was deep;

It was past twelve on a mid-winter night,

When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep;

There, with much work to do before the light,

We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might

Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang,

And droning shells burst with a hollow bang;

We were soaked, chilled and wretched, every one;

Darkness; the distant wink of a huge gun.

I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;

A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,

And lit the face of what had been a form

Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;

I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare,

And leaning forward from His burdening task,

Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine

Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask

Of mortal pain in Hell’s unholy shine.

No thorny crown, only a woollen cap

He wore—an English soldier, white and strong,

Who loved his time like any simple chap,

Good days of work and sport and homely song;

Now he has learned that nights are very long,

And dawn a watching of the windowed sky.

But to the end, unjudging, he’ll endure

Horror and pain, not uncontent to die

That Lancaster on Lune may stand secure.

He faced me, reeling in his weariness,

Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.

I say that He was Christ, who wrought to bless

All groping things with freedom bright as air,

And with His mercy washed and made them fair.

Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,

While we began to struggle along the ditch;

And someone flung his burden in the muck,

Mumbling: ‘O Christ Almighty, now I’m stuck!’

***“Nameless Men” (Edward Shillito)***

Around me when I wake or sleep,  
Men strange to me their vigils keep;  
And some were boys but yesterday  
Upon the village green at play.  
Their faces I shall never know;  
Like sentinels they come and go.  
In grateful love I bend the knee  
For nameless men who die for me.  
  
There is in earth or heaven no room  
Where I may flee this dreadful doom.  
Forever it is understood  
I am a man redeemed by blood.  
I must walk softly all my days  
Down my redeemed and solemn ways.  
Christ, take the men I bring to Thee,  
The men who watch and die for me.

***“The War Films” (Sir Henry Newbolt)***

O living pictures of the dead,

O songs without a sound,

O fellowship whose phantom tread

Hallows a phantom ground—

How in a gleam have these revealed

The faith we had not found.

We have sought God in a cloudy Heaven,

We have passed by God on earth:

His seven sins and his sorrows seven,

His wayworn mood and mirth,

Like a ragged cloak have hid from us

The secret of his birth.

Brother of men, when now I see

The lads go forth in line,

Thou knowest my heart is hungry in me

As for thy bread and wine;

Thou knowest my heart is bowed in me

To take their death for mine.