

“Intensities”: The Sensory Dimensions of the Poetry of the Great War

Magdaleena Vaara

682382S Master’s Seminar

English Language

Faculty of Humanities

University of Oulu

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis on the topic of the senses as represented in a selection of the poetry of the First World War. Drawing from sensory studies, cultural studies and close reading, this paper aims to expand the existing corpus of research into the poetry of the Great War by introducing an approach that leans on second-hand sensory data, or ‘sensory impressions’, in the poetry, through which the sensory and experiential dimension of the War can be better understood. Aiming for a balanced approach, the corpus of poetry chosen as subject for analysis encompasses not only prominent soldier-poets, but also certain home front poets. In particular, this paper focuses on the aspect of excessive sensory stimuli as told by these poets, and the effect of these stimuli on the human sensorium, psyche and body.

Keywords: First World War, Great War, WWI, war poetry, sensory studies, sensorium

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1. Introduction

The First World War, or the Great War (1914-1918), shaped the political and cultural landscape of early twentieth-century Europe in an unprecedented way. Its impact on literature, particularly poetry, was especially pronounced. The literary efforts of soldier-poets and home front authors alike eventually led to the formation of what could arguably be called a discrete genre of poetry, with its own subtypes and conventions thereof: the poetry of the First World War. In addition to the Biblical phrase “lest we forget”, suggested by author Rudyard Kipling, whose own son was among the casualties at Loos, memorial practices pertaining to the Great War still often contain quotes from certain iconic poems written during this period, such as “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae or “The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke.

According to Daniel Hipp, different war poets had different aims: for example, some wanted to “elicit sympathy”, others sought to shock their audiences (Hipp, p. 2). Other aims that Hipp does not list are the propagandic tendency towards valorisation of the soldiers and the war experience, – as seen in some of the war poetry of home front poet Jessie Pope, for instance – and the consoling picturesqueness of certain poems, such as the aforementioned “In Flanders Fields” by McCrae. The elicitation of sympathy and the tendency towards shocking imagery are, markedly, features of the so-called lavatory school of Great War poets (Walter, xxv). Although the term “lavatory school” was originally coined by J.C. Squire in reference to specifically German war literature, George Walter, in his preface to *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, extends the concept to refer to certain English poets and authors as well, such as Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves (Walter, xxiv-xxv). Walter argues that the rise of the lavatory school in the 1920’s was a catalyst for the posthumous fame of Wilfred Owen, who generally turned away from the conventions of heroic and exalting war poetry, instead seeking to depict the wretched and brutal aspects of life and death in the trenches (Walter, xxv). The vastness of the poetic outpouring was noted already in the early years of the war: in June of 1915, the *Daily Mail* remarked on the amount of poetry which had “found its way into print in the last eleven months” as being more than “in the eleven preceding years” (qtd. in Walter, ix). Some publications, such as the *Westminster Gazette* and *The Wipers Times* (a battlefield newspaper) even had to temporarily halt the publication of poetry, or request other types of submissions from its contributors (Walter, ix-x). It should be noted that in addition to poetry, several pieces of visual art document the horrors

of war. *Gassed* by John Singer Sargent, with its long procession of soldiers blinded by a gas attack holding onto each other, surrounded by countless others laying on the ground, is a notable example of English war painting. On the German side, Otto Dix painted macabre landscapes dotted with the decomposing bodies of soldiers, along with stylised, almost crude drawings of skulls and rotting human heads. The effect of the Great War on art and culture was thus vast.

It is therefore to be expected that the corpus of poetry should be varied and reflect vastly different attitudes towards the war – not to mention being something of a still-life of the different levels of education and familiarity with poetic traditions, past and current, among its writers. The most interesting differences in the context of this paper, however, are specifically the *attitudes* towards the war and its various intensities, threats, and even joys. For example, there is a notable difference in tone between Rupert Brooke's aforementioned poem "The Soldier" and Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est". While the former ascribes a certain grace and consolation to dying in the service of one's own country, the latter denies the truthfulness of the Latin phrase, "it is sweet and glorious to die for one's country". These two poems, then, represent two vastly different ways of understanding the meaning of a soldier's death. The former suggests the inherent virtue of 'Englishness' embodied in the corpse of the dead soldier, and that his grieving loved ones should look to patriotism as a source of consolation; the latter suggests that the horror in the process of death – in this case, slowly suffocating from mustard gas – negates the glory promised by patriotic propaganda, drawing, instead, attention to the aspect of human suffering.

One persistent theme that resonates throughout many prominent examples of the poetry of the Great War, however, appears to be that the war makes no sense. While facing this tumult of death and suffering, the war poets were, at the same time, taxed with the task of trying to convey their experiences in a tangible way, one that those on the home front could understand. (Fussell, qtd. in Hipp, p. 2). But what kinds of means did they utilise to put into words something as senseless as the War? On one hand some, such as Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), gave their poetic minds over to bloody descriptions of physical and mental suffering, describing the battlefield as a place "Where death becomes absurd and life ab surder" ("Apologia Pro Poemate Meo", 6). The emblems of war – "the unburied dead, the waterlogged dugout and the ubiquitous poppy" (Walter, xxi) – also carried unique *sensory* implications. Thus, many poets, including Owen, likewise attest to the extreme sensory onslaught of the battlefield with its offending sounds, sights and smells. In "To

the Poet Before Battle" Ivor Gurney writes about how the war's "mere noise numbs/The sense of being" (Gurney, lines 5-6). Mary Borden describes the ever-present mud, how it "mixes in with the food of the soldiers", and how "Its monstrous belly reeks with the undigested dead" (Borden, lines 22; 34). Edmund Blunden's "Festubert, 1916" plaintively contrasts the heightened sensory experiences of wartime with the duller peacetime sensorium. While the Great War may have been senseless in one regard, it was rife with sensory experiences and excesses.

The concept of 'excess' I shall occasionally refer to is borrowed in part from Fred Botting's *Gothic*, where he delineates the concept as it pertains to the Gothic *zeitgeist* thus: "imagination and emotional effects exceed reason. Passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws. Ambivalence and uncertainty obscure single meaning" (Botting, p. 2). Furthermore, Botting identifies "an over-abundance of imaginative frenzy, untamed by reason and unrestrained by conventional eighteenth-century demands for simplicity, realism or probability" as general attributes of the period (Botting, p. 2). While the period at hand is far from the eighteenth century and in the middle of the birthing pains of the modern age and Modernism, the essence of Botting's observations resonates well within the social and cultural outlines of the Great War. This was a period of profound societal change, of total war and the associated terrors, which bears a resemblance to the "[u]ncertainties about the nature of power, law, society, family and sexuality" and "threats of disintegration" central to Gothic writing (Botting, p. 3). In the aesthetic realm of the Great War, vast landscapes of burned trees, waterlogged earth and buildings shelled to ruins resemble the archetypal domain of the Gothic imagination. In this paper, I have extended the concept of excess to refer to relentless sensory stimuli and experiences that seem to push the boundaries of human endurance and understanding. Using sensorily evocative language seems to have been one very prominent way in which these poets tried to make sense of the Great War – something which seemed to make very little sense – and to convey their own notion of it to their readership. These reports that lean heavily on sense-based observation provide a valuable research topic for helping modern-day readers to better understand what the poets sought to express.

That the soldier-poets would use language so rife in sensory impressions is no coincidence. The literary backdrop for the war was provided by the Imagist and Georgian movements: of these, the former highlighted exactness in poetic expression, the latter accessibility through its conventions

of “colloquiality, simplicity and realism” (Walter, xii-xiii). However, what should be kept in mind is that awareness of poetic conventions was not available to everyone and can, as Walter delineates, be “traced [...] in much of the poetry written by the *better-educated* during the war” (xiii, emphasis mine). While the Great War reverberated across every class in British society, not everyone had the tools to consciously write about it according to a certain set of ‘rules’ or conventions. But to those to whom these tools were available, both of these schools would have lent themselves to the full spectrum of sensory experiences. In particular, it stands to reason that the Georgian movement’s dedication to accessibility and frankness in expression would have allowed for the depiction of unpleasant, even vulgar, sensory impressions.

As the poetry of the Great War abounds in sensory language, the methodological framework for this thesis is provided by sensory studies. Sensory studies is an emerging, cross-disciplinary field of study which posits that the senses are an important cultural actor, and that sensory experiences are imbued with symbolic significance (Howes, pp. 3-4). According to Constance Classen, “sensory perception is a cultural, as well as a physical act”, meaning that the senses dwell in the realm of *cultural* systems of perception and classification as much as they do in the physiological and psychological world (Classen, qtd. in Howes, n.pag.). David Howes has characterised the approach taken by sensory studies as using “the empire of signs” to “enter the empire of the senses” (p. 4), in that the linguistic or pictorial dimension can be used to grasp the dimension of the senses. Sensory studies is not, however, merely concerned with an artificial, reconstructed reanimation of the physical world of the senses, but also with the social meanings that sensory information and “sensory values” can mediate (Howes, p. 4). In this way sensory studies can be used as a tool for analysing society, culture and values by closely inspecting the way the senses are represented in the cultural products of a certain age, and by researching what kinds of attitudes different cultures have attached to the senses at different times, for example. Images and symbols in literature are deliberate, therefore an instance of touch is not merely the coincidental meeting of two surfaces, one or both of which are sensate. Rather, one must consider questions such as: what is being touched, who does the touching, and why is this particular device utilised in this particular poetic environment – what cultural motivation did the poet have to approach the practice of touch in this particular manner? Researching how the senses are represented in the poetry of the Great War is therefore more than just a recounting of the senses themselves: it is an exploration of cultural and personal anxieties, values, and the impact of wartime literary efforts.

Extensive research into the topic of the poetry of the Great War has been carried out over the decades. *The Great War and Modern Memory* by Paul Fussell, for example, is a pioneering work in this area. However, popular memory as well as academic writing on the topic appear to have one major flaw: they focus, perhaps too much, on English poetry. In addition to this, the remembered, quoted and researched corpus often consists of a selection of ‘the greats’: certain revered poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. If history is written by victors, so, it appears, is its poetry. An exploration into the sensorium of the poetry of the Great War requires a more balanced approach than this, because participants (and by extension, poets) on different sides of the War lived in different sensory worlds. A tangible example of this is the difference in trench architecture between the Allied forces and the Germans: whereas Allied trenches were transitory and therefore more prone to becoming waterlogged and muddy, German trenches were built to be sturdier, and even had electricity (Leonard, n.pag.). It therefore stands to reason that the iconic muddiness of the battlefield, an important sensory dimension, may have played a more prominent role in wartime sensory associations on the Allied side than it did on the German side. These kinds of differences have possibly carried implications for the sensory world represented in poetry. However, as this is a paper on English literature, the topic of Great War poetry written by soldier-poets of other nationalities must be left to scholars in those fields and languages.

This paper is divided into six thematic sections. Each section will introduce different kinds of enmeshments of sensory and cultural motifs, based on thematic similarities. The central point of departure for these sections is not necessarily a ‘one sense at a time’ approach, for this would likely hobble the dialogue between, and fluidity of, different aspects of the poetry and the surrounding culture or cultures. The division of the sections between different poems depends on their similarity in content, or whether they perhaps share the same author. In the first section of this paper I will analyse poems that seem to focus on going to battle – familiarising oneself with equipment, the environment, even the enemy. The second section is concerned with poetry that speaks of the impact of the war on the human sensorium, introducing themes of a *wounded or traumatised sensorium*. The third section of the paper brings to the forefront the *wartime landscape, natural environment, and the sensorium therein*. Cues for this thematic structuring have, in part, been taken from *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (ed. George Walter), the index of which is ordered by theme instead of author or title; and much like in this paper, the

poems in the first section of the collection depict first impressions of the war, and the last section is concerned with the poetry of a newly-established peacetime.

2. Going to War

For most young and inexperienced soldiers, The Great War was their first personal, intimate brush with international conflict. Life on the front introduced a new way of life: discipline, obedience, and an environment often lacking in the creature comforts many had come to take for granted. In addition to this, there was the constant presence of weapons, their role as almost an extension to a soldier's body. These things certainly brought with them a series of new sensory experiences, and some of these novel experiences affected the poetry written by these soldiers.

In this section, then, I am going to discuss poetry that conveys a sense of newness, or of familiarising oneself with something to do with the War, through sensory impressions. This may take the form of a sensory exploration of weaponry, such as in the case of Wilfred Owen's "Arms and the Boy", or of training barracks, as in Siegfried Sassoon's "In Barracks". Their inclusion in this section should not be taken to mean that they all joined the War during its first months. The War itself may not have been new when these poems were written; rather, they convey a sense of newness of personal experience.

2.1. "How Cold Steel Is": Wilfred Owen's "Arms and the Boy"

In Wilfred Owen's "Arms and the Boy" senses, namely touch and tactile exploration, are used as a means of meditating on the act of killing. In the first and second stanzas, the speaker assigns a young soldier the task of touching the bayonet of his weapon and bullets:

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. (Owen, lines 1-8)

While the "boy" in question is clearly a soldier, he is never referred to as such. The third and last stanza of the poem elaborates on why the speaker sees him in this way:

For his 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. (Owen, lines 9-12)

The reason why the boy is only “boy” is that the speaker does not see the role of a soldier as befitting him. He is not intended for a life of violence, which is represented in the last two lines in a transformation into a horned, taloned beast – a transformation which, according to the speaker, God did not intend for the boy to undergo. Instead, the speaker seems to say, the boy’s purpose in life seems to be carefree, sensual enjoyment, embodied in the apple between his teeth.

On the one hand, the purpose of this tactile exploration could be seen as a harshly didactic one: to break through the boy’s innocence, and to teach him about the reality of attacking and killing. As touch is “the most proximate” of the senses (Segal, p. 30), “dissolute in its merging of self and other” (Classen, p. 70), as well as a sense that mandates undivided attention to the subject of touching or holding (Le Breton, p. 97), this exercise in touch also symbolizes the symbiotic relationship between a soldier and his weapon. Killing is not possible without a weapon, and the weapon will not find its target without human action. Despite the fact that the poem assigns to the metal objects desires and aims as if they were sensate, through touch the poem nonetheless consolidates the notion that it is the boy himself who actively kills – not his bayonet or bullets. The speaker’s own desire is for the young man to understand this connection, to pay sufficient respect to the power of the objects he is holding, as well as that of his own, in deciding the life and death of enemy combatants.

On the other hand, touching the blade of his bayonet and the tips of the bullets is, perhaps, intended as an exercise in empathy. To feel, first hand, the coldness of the steel and the roundness of the bullets could be meant as a way to better understand what it feels like to be at the receiving end of their merciless, deadly efficiency. The sensory impressions conveyed through the boy’s imagined tactile experiences could thus also be seen as carrying an anti-war sentiment in them: as the touch acts as a reminder to the boy of how it feels when steel meets skin, it does the same to the reader. The message in Owen’s poem appears clear: touch, and you shall learn.

2.2. “You Are Blind Like Us”: Charles Hamilton Sorley’s “To Germany”

In a great deal of the canon of Great War poetry, expressions of friendship and compassion are reserved for the poet’s or speaker’s own brothers-in-arms. Poets will make references to the unique camaraderie and friendships they forged with those fighting by their side – often in sensorily evocative language – but rarely does the poetic imagination reach across No Man’s Land into the enemy side in an expression of compassion. Against this, then, “To Germany” by Scottish poet Charles Hamilton Sorley is an interesting example of a poem’s speaker relating to the enemy soldiers. The poem posits soldiers in both sides into a similar predicament, expressed in sensory terms as a visual fugue, a blindness. The speaker remarks how the German soldiers “are blind like us”, and how their animosities towards each other are incomprehensible “fields of thought” through which they “grope” and “stumble”, unable to see or understand why they must do this (Sorley, lines 1-4). This senseless hatred has led to a stand-off where “the blind fight the blind” (Sorley, line 8). The war has made both sides equally unable to see each other as human beings – which is, however, something that Sorley’s poem implicitly calls into question by humanising the enemy soldiers. This politically induced ‘blindness’ to the other’s humanity is what allows them to continue killing and maiming each other. Pierre Henri has suggested that culturally, blindness is often used to denote stupidity, inability to reason, and untruthfulness. (Henri, qtd. in Le Breton, p. 32). From Henri’s analysis of the negative traits associated with blindness, David Le Breton has also extrapolated the inability to “discriminate” (Le Breton, p. 32). In Sorley’s poem, therefore, both sides are made to see each other as less than human, forced to adopt a cognitive dissonance and the ‘obtuseness’ often culturally (and unfairly to those actually blind) associated with blindness. Eyesight, which under normal conditions is free to roam, is caged, and its “naïve” (Le Breton, p. 32), subversive potential for perceiving the humanity of the enemy is bridled for the benefit of the war machine.

As a contrast, the speaker suggests that, come peacetime, the blindness falls away and will be replaced by “new-won eyes”, allowing the soldiers on both sides of the conflict to “view again ... each other’s truer form/[a]nd wonder” (Sorley, lines 9-11). According to David Le Breton, “[s]eeing is the necessary path to recognition” (p. 33); as the soldiers are able to see again, they are able to perceive each other as they are, not as they are indoctrinated to do. Under these new circumstances, the old enemies will “grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain” (Sorley, line 12),

once again able to touch one another in a friendly manner instead of with the intent to hurt or kill. Thus, under the lack of politically constructed enemyhood, humanity can again be observed in its full form, even becoming a cause for awe. All of this, however, is predicated on the ability to truly see another person. Le Breton refers to the intrinsic relation between seeing and knowing: ‘I see’ is synonymous with ‘I understand.’ (p. 33). Until such time as this indiscriminatory blindness is no longer required, “[t]he darkness and the thunder and the rain” (Sorley, line 14) will continue to reign, evoking the sensory experience of a thunderstorm and equating it to battle. The “darkness” will obscure the faces of the enemy, “the thunder and the rain” punish them with the fervour of a force of nature (Sorley, line 14). Sorley’s speaker thus acknowledges his own inability to appreciate the humanity of the enemy, counting himself among the blinded, but with a benevolent prescience is able to imagine a time when such blindness is no longer mandatory. It is then that both sides may finally emerge from their trenches, having won back their eyesight, and lay their eyes on not the enemy, but a fellow man.

2.3. Siegfried Sassoon’s “In Barracks”

Siegfried Sassoon’s “In Barracks” opens with a description of “the barrack-square” which, under the winter sun, “Shines wet and wintry-grey and cold” (Sassoon, lines 1-2). This synesthetic combination of colour and temperature gives way to a depiction of “young Fusiliers” (Sassoon, line 3), busy with training for battle. The coldness of the winter’s day is broken by the sun, which

– looks over the barrack gate,
Warm and white with glaring shine,
To watch the soldiers of the Line
That life has hired to fight with fate. (Sassoon, lines 5-8)

Here, the sun is afforded a role as a sentient onlooker. In addition to assigning it a role as if that of a benevolent god looking over the soldiers, the sun is given the sense of sight, and the ability to appraise their activities.

In the second stanza, night begins to fall and the day of training is over. The cold light of the day changes into “windowed light” (Sassoon, line 11) shining from the barrack buildings. As the seeing eye of the sun disappears from the sky, so, too does the speaker encourage the soldiers to

Shut your brave eyes on sense and sight
And banish from your dreamless ears
The bugle's dying notes that say,
'another night; another day'. (Sassoon, lines 13-16)

The suggestion here seems to be that it would be better for the soldiers to assume a state of senselessness, ignoring the passage of time in the form of shutting their ears against the sound of the horn alerting them to the passing of yet another day. It appears that the sound of the horn signals not only the passage of time, but also the approach of a time when they are shipped off to battle. The speaker thus encourages them to essentially make themselves deaf to the sound that signals the approaching of this fateful day. The emergence here of the motif of a denial or deadening of the senses resonates throughout the poetry of the Great War, and shall be discussed further in the sections to come.

3. The Senses, Wounded

The senses inhabit both the body and the mind. Nerves connect skin, eye, and nose to the brain, where each stimulus is separated, analysed, and interpreted. In order for this process to be carried out unhindered, both the sensory organ as well as the mind must be capable of functioning correctly. War, however, takes its toll on both the body and the psyche. In addition to the very concrete, often constant threat of dying, frequent injuries and physical distress caused by the environment, the soldier-poets had to endure long bouts of mental strain and fatigue. It is thus expected that these factors affected the way the senses are depicted in the poetry of the Great War. For example, Robert Desjarlais has described how, when exposed to intense and threatening stimuli for prolonged periods of time, the human senses can “[become] dulled in response to excessive and brutal demands on those senses” (Desjarlais, 372). These violent and terrifying intensities dwell in the same space as do the senses.

This section is concerned with the *wounded sensorium*. The wound does not have to be physical, as in some cases its source and nature cannot be inferred from the poem itself. In fact, in some poems, the physical and mental suffering are inextricably merged through the interlocking sensory impressions, and it is impossible to tell where descriptions of physical pain end and those of purely mental anguish begin. The wounded sensorium is thus challenged in terms of both the physical and the mental realm: in the body’s ability to transmit sensory data to the brain, and the brain’s capability of literally making sense of these stimuli. The poetic mind steps into the chasm between objective reality and perception altered by injury or shock, interrogating the discrepancies, nightmare visions and mirages the mind encounters when trying to reach out for meaning and finding nothing but empty space.

3.1. “And Some Cease Feeling”: Shell Shock and Wilfred Owen’s Hobbled Sensorium

Between the years 1914 and 1917, 28,533 soldiers were documented to have been afflicted by a mental condition called shell shock (Hipp, p. 7). Shell shock was a complex psychological phenomenon and its diagnostic criteria were difficult to define in a universally applicable manner, but it is generally thought to have been caused by prolonged anxiety in combat conditions

(MacCurdy, qtd. In Hipp, p. 16; Hipp, p. 16). While shell shock bears many similarities to what would later be called “war neurosis” or “post-traumatic stress disorder”, it would be anachronistic to apply such terms retroactively. The conditions of the Great War were, and remain, unique due to its historical, social and cultural circumstances.

Interestingly, while many combatants were blinded or deafened due to physical injury, shell shock, too, affected the sensorium in ways that could not be directly tied to explicable physical causes. One case, documented by E.E. Southard, is that of a soldier who became deaf-mute after an exploding bomb buried him under a pile of dirt (Southard, qtd. in Hipp, pp. 16-17). Besides deafness and mutism, other common symptoms of shell shock included psychosomatic paralysis, vision problems, and stuttering (Hipp, pp. 17-18). The way shell shock manifested in each patient was, however, often tied to the event that triggered it: for example, affected vision was often precipitated by the patient’s witnessing “particularly horrible sights” (Salmon, qtd. in Hipp, p. 18).

Due to the high number of shell shock sufferers, its effects inevitably bled into some of the poetry of the Great War. According to Daniel Hipp, for example, themes of shell shock are particularly visible in the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Ivor Gurney, although only Owen’s diagnosis appears to be undisputed (Hipp, pp 2-3). While all of these poets are discussed in this paper, in the context of shell shock and the wounded sensorium, Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) – perhaps the most famous English World War One poet – is the most interesting. The corporeal immediacy and psychological acuity of his particular poetic voice, and unassuming eloquence, are challenged by the physical and mental dissolution brought on by the war, but also lend a perceptive eye to describing it in vivid detail. In this section, then, I am going to discuss a selection of poetry by Wilfred Owen in the context of shell shock and, in particular, a loss or confusion of the senses.

Owen suffered shell shock in 1917 and was consequently admitted to Craiglockhart hospital to recuperate for five months (Hipp, pp. 10-11). It has been suggested that this experience had a notable effect on the formation of his particular poetic style of expression (Hipp, pp. 10-11). Some of Owen’s poems describe situations where the senses – those of either the speaker or of other people – are affected. In many cases, senses are missing, lacking, or otherwise mixed and confused as a result of physically or mentally traumatizing experiences. However, Daniel Hipp has

made the surprising claim that those of Owen's poems where a voice affected by shell shock can be heard are not autobiographical – that is, according to him, Owen never actually wrote himself into the role of a shell shock patient (Hipp, 13-14). This is a curious and somewhat controversial remark, for it begs the question of to which extend we can reliably call poetry autobiographical or non-autobiographical. Surely we cannot say, in retrospect, that a poet could *not* have lived the emotions he or she wrote about. These considerations aside, the phenomenon of shell shock and its strange effects on the human sensorium nonetheless provide a valuable cultural background for reading Wilfred Owen's poetry. Resembling the case studies about shell shock patients, these poems describe instances where psychological and physical strain affect human beings to such an extent that their perception of themselves and their environment becomes distorted. What philosopher Michel Serres has termed “the ceaseless unravelling and reknitting of the body”, the process of meaning-making through physical feedback, is here interrupted (Serres, qtd. in Howes, p. 358). The senses of the soldiers populating these poems are no longer under their own control, and shell shock, like a spectre, haunts the poetic imagery.

One of these sensory scenarios is introduced in Owen's poem “Dulce et Decorum Est”. The first stanza of the poem describes the march of a band of bone-tired soldiers, on their way to a place where they may rest (Owen, line 4). Their fatigue is described in terms of a numbness of the senses:

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge
[—]
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-nines that dropped behind. (Owen, lines 2; 5-8)

In this passage we can observe three different sensory impressions that are somehow affected or altered. The first one – touch – is implicit. The soldiers are walking upon a muddy ground without any shoes; the skin on their feet is bloodied (Owen, line 6). The poem does not divulge details as to what time of the year it is situated in: but it is worth mentioning that the “sludge” mentioned on line 2 could be either mud or slush. Thus the element of cold is also implicitly present. The second locus is sight: the soldiers are “all blind” (Owen, line 6). The third impression, or lack

thereof, is hearing: they are “deaf” to the extent that even the sound of the bombs falling behind them does not penetrate their consciousness (Owen, line 7). Sensory stimuli that under normal circumstances would register as intrusive thus do not seem to be able to affect the soldiers anymore.

The second stanza of the poem describes a gas attack. One of the soldiers cannot get his gas mask on in time. His death throes become, in a sense, frozen in time, for the speaker keeps on reliving this horrible vision later in his nightmares:

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. (Owen, lines 15-16)

While the march is described in the past tense, this short but evocative dream-sequence is told in the present tense. Indeed, it appears to be more flashback than a dream, its vivid sensory impressions in stark contrast with the numbed ones of the march.

The state of senselessness described in the first stanza could be due to two things: either sheer fatigue, or an oversaturation of the senses. Contrasting this poem with examples from Owen’s other poems suggest the latter. In another poem, titled “Insensibility”, Owen’s speaker describes how some soldiers “cease feeling/Even themselves or for themselves”, because “Dullness best solves/The tease and doubt of shelling” (Owen, lines 1-4). They are free of pain also, for “Their old wounds, save with cold, can not more ache” (Owen, line 4). Nor do gory sights bother them anymore, as

Having seen all things red,
Their eyes are rid
Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever.
Their hearts remain small-drawn.
Their senses in some scorching cautery of battle
Now long since ironed,
Can laugh among the dying, unconcerned. (Owen, lines 5-11).

Witnessing the sight of a world painted in blood has rendered the soldiers in this poem apathetic to its painful implications, allowing them, in a sense, a symbolic blindness. Although sight is often considered the primary sense, a facilitator of successful navigation in the world, and its loss a great

personal tragedy (Le Breton, p. 31), the blindness these soldiers experience is not presented as a tragic event. Rather, the experiences of war have cauterised their senses against any further trauma or anxieties, and this is presented as a relief, for those who succeed in shutting themselves off into this sensory limbo are described as “happy” on several occasions – capable of mirth even with people dying around them. Owen therefore presents this numbing of the senses as a defense mechanism against the sensory distress and anxiety to which the war has subjected the soldiers. Like the shell shock patients who lose their vision as a psychosomatic response to witnessing gruesome sights (Salmon, qtd. in Hipp, p. 18), the minds and bodies of these soldiers spare them from fully experiencing the intensities of the war by limiting the responsiveness of their sensoria.

While the soldiers depicted in these two poems might benefit from their state of partial senselessness, a loss of the senses is not, however always represented as a blessing in disguise in Owen’s poetry. In the last stanza of “Insensibility”, the speaker curses “dullards whom no cannon stuns/That they should be as stones.” (Owen, lines 1-2). Here a lack of sensory response is equated with moral shortcomings and presented as a lack of empathy: “By choice they made themselves immune/To pity and whatever moans in man” (Owen, lines 5-6). It appears that while a numbing of the senses as a result of emotionally taxing experiences is seen as an understandable and even positive thing, being generally and, importantly, voluntarily hardened and unresponsive is represented as morally reprehensible. Some develop calluses; others are merely callous.

In some cases, Owen’s poetry presents a lacking or discombobulated sensorium as a locus of anxiety instead of relief. In “Conscious”, the speaker wakes up in a hospital in a state of dazed confusion. The first part of him to surface is his hand: “His fingers wake, and flutter; up the bed” (Owen, line 1). This tentative exploration by means of touch is then followed by the awakening of the sight, for the speaker spots a vase of yellow flowers which acts as a sensory mooring post to help him regain fuller consciousness. After this, his sensory impressions become more integrated and coherent, and he becomes awestruck by the perfectly ordinary details of the ward he is now able to perceive:

What a smooth floor the ward has! What a rug!
Who is that talking somewhere out of sight? (Owen, lines 5-6)

This joy the speaker takes in rediscovering a world of mundane sensory impressions is short-lived. It appears he experiences some kind of a flashback, for he suddenly finds himself back in the hectic world of the field of battle:

[–] sudden evening blurs and fogs the air.
There seems no time to want a drink of water.
Nurse looks so far away. And here and there
Music and roses burst through crimson slaughter.
He can't remember where he saw blue sky...
The trench is narrower. Cold, he's cold; yet hot –
And there's no light to see the voices by...
There is no time to ask... he knows not what. (Owen, lines 9-16)

In this world, wildly incompatible sensory experiences can exist side by side, for the calming and ordered trifecta of flowers, smooth floor and the nurse's chatter in the ward is replaced by the macabre and dissonant coexistence of "music [...] roses" and "crimson slaughter" (Owen, lines 12). He knows there is such a thing as "blue sky", but he is unable to reconcile this knowledge with any tangible, sensory memory, much less a current experience (Owen, line 13). The sense of space becomes cramped, as he senses the trench narrowing around him. His ability to sense temperatures is conflicted and oxymoronic, as he is simultaneously cold and hot (Owen, line 14). Disembodied voices are speaking, for there is not enough light to see the speakers, and this is expressed as a synesthetic confusion of the sensory faculties: he cannot "see the voices" (Owen, line 15). From the neatly-ordained sensory impressions of the ward he is plunged back into the chaotic sensorium of the trenches.

It is also worthwhile to notice the ellipses and the dash on lines 13-16, as these choices of punctuation appear to convey a scattered, confused and unsure tone. By the end of the last stanza, the speaker seems to have forgotten the ward entirely, and to have been completely immersed in the sensory world constructed by the flashback. He has forgotten that he meant to ask the nurse for a glass of water. Consequently, the line between reality and hallucination becomes blurred: it is difficult to tell which of these two sensory worlds is real.

In Wilfred Owen's poetry, a confused or damaged sensorium is thus presented as a convoluted and conflicted phenomenon. On the one hand, numbed sensory perception can act as a protective

barrier against the terrible reality of war, and the sensory excesses (Botting, 2) therein. On the other hand, such a sensory disposition can betray a deep disregard towards human suffering, and a willful shutting out of one's own capabilities for feeling empathy. The main difference between these two moral values seems to be deliberation: is this hardened cocoon born organically as a result of distressing experiences – thus, is it like shell shock; or is it created consciously, by choice? These poems tie into Owen's poetic mission of finding a voice with which to convey the experiences of those who were not capable of telling their own stories (Hipp, 14). These poems, then, document Owen's attempts at giving a voice to an intense plight that often found its manifestation in the body and the senses, in the form of shell shock (Hipp, 14). They describe suffering and strain so intense that the senses must shut down as a protective measure, and relate the stories of confused psyches struggling to make sense of their environments through this disarrayed sensorium.

3.2. “Après la guerre fini”: Ivor Gurney’s “Strange Hells” and the Scars of Interwar Society

Like Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney also devoted much of his war poetry to the discussion of a soldier's mental state, drawing from different sensory impressions. Daniel Hipp groups Gurney together with Owen and Siegfried Sassoon as a shell shock poet, although the exact nature of his troubled mental state was likely more complicated than this (more discussion on Gurney's mental affliction can be found in section 4.4 of this paper). In “Strange Hells”, Gurney elucidates the complicated, indeed sometimes conflicting or irrational reactions that soldiers experienced as a result of being exposed to the constant, incredibly taxing sensory stimuli, and the likewise unyielding threat and reality of death and injury.

Indeed, “Strange Hells” opens with an already syntactically jumbled and somewhat internally conflicting collection of lines. This appears to suggest the themes of mental confusion that are to follow:

There are strange Hells within the minds War made

Not so often, not so humiliatingly afraid
As one would have expected – the racket and fears guns made. (Gurney, lines 1-3)

It appears that Gurney's speaker is attempting to express that the "strange Hells" (Gurney, line 1) that the war has created in the minds of the soldiers do not always have anything to do with fear and can, in fact, act as a shield against it. However, the syntactic structure lends itself to a double interpretation: are the "Hells" war-made, or the minds that contain those "Hells"? Instead of fear, these "Hells" sometimes express themselves in irrationally mirthful behaviour:

One Hell the Gloucester soldiers they quite put out;
Their first bombardment, when in combined black shout
Of fury, guns aligned, they ducked lower their heads
And sang with diaphragms fixed beyond all dreads,
That tin and stretched-wire tinkle, that blither of tune;
'Après la guerre fini' till Hell all had come down,
Twelve-inch, six-inch, and eighteen-pounders hammering Hell's thunders. (Gurney, lines 4-10)

Here, the "Gloucester soldiers" are taken over by a *folie à deux*, in which they begin singing a song – "Après la Guerre Fini", "After the War Ends" (Gurney, lines 4-9). Gurney's speaker describes their voices in synaesthetic terms: it is a "black shout", its tension reminiscent of "tin and stretched-wire tinkle" (Gurney, lines 4; 6). This all takes place while the shells falling around them play a demented *continuo* to their melody. Here, again, the sensory landscape is as conflicted as the geopolitics of the day: joyful song is accompanied by the sounds of the bombardment crashing down around the singing soldiers.

In this poem, sound is at the forefront. The paradoxical coexistence of the song and the bombing paint a picture of a "strange Hell" (Gurney, line 1) indeed. David Le Breton writes that "[p]enetrated by sounds against our will, we are in a position to welcome or reject sounds, but less so to act on them" (p. 63). Indeed, according to Le Breton, we are much more at the mercy of sound than, say, sight, against which we can close our eyes, but can never fully shut out our hearing (p. 63). In the context of war and war poetry, the verb used by Le Breton, "penetrate" (p. 63), is of interest, as it is reminiscent of penetration by bullet or bayonet, as well. Here, then, the soldiers seem to cope with not being able "to act on" (Le Breton, p. 63) the sounds by raising their own voices in response to them, against all rationality.

In the third stanza, Gurney's speaker brings attention to the plight of the ex-soldiers in the interwar era:

Where are they now on State-doles, or showing shop-patterns
Or walking town to town sore in borrowed tatters
Or begged. Some civic routine one never learns.
The heart burns – but has to keep out of face how heart burns. (Gurney, lines 11-14)

After the war, many of the surviving soldiers fell through the gaps of society. While they and their fallen comrades were celebrated as heroes in a symbolic sense, the reality was bleak (Eksteins, p. 343). Physical and mental afflictions, such as shell shock, made returning to civilian life all the more challenging for many. Unable to work, many had to resort to begging or other ways of survival. Modris Eksteins has noted that the housing the War's "heroes" were promised was never realised, and the realities of postwar economic scarcity led to a "disillusionment", contrasting with the lofty notions of what life after the War would be like (pp. 340-341). After the war has ended, the soldiers in Gurney's poem are on welfare, reduced to a drifter's life, or resorted to begging (lines 11-14). In addition to this, they now have to struggle to keep their "burning hearts" from showing on their face (Gurney, line 14).

Gurney's poem juxtaposes the irrational response of the Gloucester soldiers to the bombardment with the treatment of ex-soldiers during the interwar period. Instead of receiving the rewards promised to them as a boon for joining the War (Eksteins, pp. 340-341), many found themselves in situations much worse than they had been before the War. According to Modris Eksteins, this led to the war being "relegated to the realm of the unconscious, or, more precisely, to the consciously repressed" (pp. 343-344). This, he argues, led to the "hedonism and narcissism" of the 1920's (Eksteins, p. 344). While many of the ex-soldiers lived in squalid conditions and suffering from untreated mental and physical ailments, "the roaring twenties", indeed, roared around them as had the shells years before. This conflicting decade was thus bifurcated: on the one hand, the *zeitgeist* was drunk on the nectar of modernity and the ever more acute knowledge of mortality; on the other hand, the heroes of yesterday were, in many cases, reduced to shadows skulking in the streets without a home, begging in order to stay alive. Wounded in mind and body, many still possessed by the "strange Hells" (Gurney, line 1) they saw and experienced during the War, these soldiers were all but forgotten. The song of the soldiers, a celebration in the face of death, and

sensual and sensory gluttony of the twenties, while in the underbellies of society these soldiers were scrounging to get by, are thus juxtaposed.

3.3. “Counter-Attack” by Siegfried Sassoon

Much like Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est”, Siegfried Sassoon’s “Counter-Attack” opens with a scene of weary soldiers, who, despite their state of fatigue, seem to be facing some success in their strivings. They have “gained their first objective”, and although they are “[p]allid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke”, “[t]hings seemed all right at first” (Sassoon, lines 1; 3-4). In the first stanza, the sensory impressions surrounding the speaker and his comrades consist of the macabre contrast of on the one hand the mundane sound of the shovels used to dig the trench deeper, on the other hand, the fact that the trench is “rotten with dead”, their legs, torsos and even severed heads littered everywhere, with mud coating this gruesome tableau (Sassoon, lines 6-12). When rain begins to fall, washing away some of this grime, it is greeted by the speaker with an exlamation of joy. (Sassoon, line 13).

Two central characters appear in the poem: a soldier and an officer. Both, it appears, are saturated with the sensorium around them to the point of exhaustion or hysterics, but the effects of this exposure are depicted differently for both. The soldier, introduced in the second stanza, is yawning from fatigue even while anticipating a German attack, the landscape’s “bleariness” mirroring his tiredness; and when the hammering of the bombs around him begins, he is rendered “[m]ute in the clamour of shells”, “dizzy with galloping fear, [s]ick for escape” (Sassoon, lines 14-15; 19; 22-23). If the soldier’s terror leaves him mute, aching for a way out, the officer’s fear renders him a barely competent figure, losing his composure and “[g]asping and bawling” his orders (Sassoon, lines 25; 27). As the officer is inevitably shot, the bullet that kills him is described merely as a “bang” (Sassoon, line 33), the sound disembodied from the projectile. The use here of synecdoche, of using a part to refer to the whole – in this case only a sound as a stand-in for the gun and the bullet fired from it – seems to anonymise the death of the officer. His death becomes merely a part of the sensory background. Furthermore, as the officer dies a slow death, ignored in his last moments at the bottom of the trench, the soldiers around him continuing their futile counter-attack, his body joins the ranks of the dismembered corpses already populating the ground. As the mud drowns him while he bleeds to death, he still attempts to fight the “flapping

“veils of smothering gloom” (Sassoon, line 36), his personal, fruitless counter-attack against the ultimate enemy.

As in the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Ivor Gurney, here, too, we can observe a representation of the effect of the war’s constant sensory stimuli on the human psyche. The soldier becomes stunned and mute, the officer flailing and bumbling, forgetting to shoot back and being hit almost instantly after he finally understands to return fire. Of these two opposing responses to the sensorium of the war – inertia and hysteria – the latter appears novel in context with the poems discussed until now. Typically, in the poetry of the Great War, the response to being exposed to these kinds of sensory impressions is a shutdown of the senses, or an incapability to act, as in the soldier’s case; but the officer’s reaction is typically not something that the speakers depict. A similar example, however, can be found in Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est”, where a soldier’s fumbling prevents him from equipping his gas mask in time. In both Owen’s poem and “Counter-Attack”, this kind of behaviour is a harbinger of impending death, whereas sensory numbness and inertia are often depicted as a means of survival.

4. The Wartime Landscape

Like the human body, war leaves its marks – scars, poison, shrapnel – into the earth. Images of the battlefields in France and Belgium turned into valleys of mud pockmarked with waterlogged shell-craters and foxholes are some of the most poignant photographic mementos of the Great War; and in addition to photographs, this motif is visible in many paintings depicting the battlefield, as well. These unique characteristics of the landscape are also depicted in various poems. Mud, for instance, was a constant companion for the soldiers, and few depictions of the Great War go without addressing the ever-present mud somehow. Depending on the poet, the landscape is depicted as a theatre of different sensory impressions: for example, for some poets this muddiness represents an enemy in itself (Leonard, n.pag.), for others, the battlefield is a place of beautiful, enriching sights, even a lost object of plaintive memories. This section is devoted to analysing these different ways of interpreting and representing the landscape, and the various sensory impressions therein.

4.1. Eating in a Theatre of War: Mary Borden's All-Consuming Mud

In accounts of the Great War, mud is often a persistent element, for the battlefields were exceptionally muddy. This was partly due to environmental and weather circumstances: in addition to the high water table in the areas where many of the battles were fought, rain began to mercilessly beat the battlefields in Belgium in December of 1914, causing widespread flooding (Leonard, n.pag; Eksteins, pp. 149-150). But the mud as the soldiers – and the Western cultural consciousness – would come to know it was created by human activity, for in addition to the natural ingredients of water and earth, this sludge was a battle-churned mixture of excrement, vomit, blood, spilled food and rotting body parts (Leonard, n. pag.). The muddy reality of the war experience was initially not acknowledged back in England: for example, model trenches constructed in Kensington Gardens were very clean and neat, and – possibly due to wartime propaganda – the muddiness was rarely addressed in the media at the time (Fussell, qtd. in Leonard, n.pag.; Leonard, n. pag.). Embarrassingly, this issue also mostly affected the Allied trenches (those housing British, Russian, American, Italian and French soldiers); German trenches by contrast were more structurally advanced and therefore dry and clean (Leonard, n. pag.). Many contemporary accounts attest to the terrible smell and sliminess of the mud (Leonard, n. pag.).

which, it should be mentioned, evokes the sense of substances excreted by human bodies rather than normal, earthy mud. As we are about to learn, the mud even impinged on the taste buds. It was thus a multi-sensory, repulsive experience.

In a long poem titled “At the Somme: The Song of the Mud”, war nurse and author Mary Borden (1886-1968) describes the mud in the battlefield of the Somme. Much like the characterisations by Matthew Leonard above, Borden also describes the mud as something almost unnatural and hostile. Instead of the usual fertile brown, it is “yellow” and “grey” (Borden, lines 2-3). It sticks to the skin, clothes and hair of the soldiers (Borden, lines 8-10). Furthermore, it

[—] wriggles its way into battle.

The impertinent, the intrusive, the ubiquitous, the unwelcome,

The slimy inveterate nuisance,

That fills the trenches,

That mixes in with the food of the soldiers,

[—]

That sucks the guns down and holds them fast in its slimy voluminous lips,

That has no respect for destructions and muzzles the bursting shells;

And slowly, softly, easily,

Soaks up the fire, the noise; soaks up the energy and the courage;

Soaks up the power of armies;

Soaks up the battle.

Just soaks it up and thus stops it. (Borden, lines 18-22; 25-31)

In this passage, the mud is personified as a rude, unwelcome intrusion in the lives of the soldiers. The ultimate insult is its mixing in with the food the soldiers eat, a disturbing regurgitation whereby this mixture containing human excretions and rotting body parts demands entry back into the body. Therefore, this passage also carries implications of unwilling cannibalism. It has been argued that the consumption of human bodies by other humans is the most prominent sensory taboo in the West, and for example Marshall McLuhan has described it as a “sensorial heart of darkness”, where no distinction is made between the human and the natural. (Howes, p. 3; McLuhan, qtd. in Howes, p. 3). This taboo is broken as the remains of human bodies are inevitably consumed within the mud.

According to David Le Breton, *disgust* is felt when a “real or symbolic threat to our sense of identity” is perceived. (Le Breton, p. 229). In Borden’s poem the mud is represented as a threat to

the existence of the soldiers: this hungry, perverse, sentient grave threatens to assimilate them into its anonymous body, and wants in turn to be assimilated into theirs through ingestion and latching onto their clothes and skin. Following Le Breton's argument, it therefore threatens their identities and existence by forcing them to "disgusting" practices through the unwitting consumption of human flesh, and the threat of anonymisation it carries. (Le Breton, 229).

From a more mundane and less symbolic viewpoint, the mud is a concrete reminder of the mortality of the soldiers, for it literally contains their deaths, as well as substances and pathogens that carry the risk of making a person violently ill. Eating it is therefore not only akin to cannibalism and therefore a gross infraction in the symbolic order of the senses, but also the ingestion of an embodiment of the existential dread of death, as well a threat of the same, for it is almost certainly toxic to ingest.

In addition to being eaten, the mud, too, eats. Lines 25-31 describe its progressive spreading and consuming of the theatre of war. It "sucks" on the guns with its "slimy voluminous lips" (Borden, line 25) in an obscene, grossly sensual manner. It spreads over everything, quenching eventually the very institution of warfare:

Soaks up the power of armies;
Soaks up the battle.
Just soaks it up and thus stops it. (Borden, lines 29-13)

Although the mud eventually stops the battle by absorbing the tools and actors of warfare, this is not, however, presented as a relief. Apparent peace is merely a side effect of the mud's monstrous consumption of equipment and brave young lads with all their promise, morale and vigour. Although warfare means death, here its stoppage is also a death in itself, a drowning caused by the greedy, unstoppable hunger of this pernicious sludge. It is a cold, wet end of the world where this mud-monster finally consumes everything. This idea of the mud consuming and eating human bodies is further explored in the next stanza:

This is the hymn of mud-the obscene, the filthy, the putrid,
The vast liquid grave of our armies. It has drowned our men.
Its monstrous distended belly reeks with the undigested dead.

Our men have gone into it, sinking slowly, and struggling and slowly disappearing.
Our fine men, our brave, strong, young men;
Our glowing red, shouting, brawny men.
Slowly, inch by inch, they have gone down into it,
Into its darkness, its thickness, its silence. (Borden, lines 32-39).

This passage is reflective of the attitudes at the time: according to Modris Eksteins, at the time of the worst onslaught of the winter rains, the soldiers' journals suggest that the weather was a more prominent topic in their minds than was the enemy; and Matthew Leonard has stated that the mud was often seen by the soldiers as an enemy unto itself (Eksteins, p. 150; Leonard, n.pag.). In this stanza the brave men's advance into the waiting maw of the mouth resembles the practice of "going over the top", emerging from the trenches to charge at the enemy. However, there is no mention of enemy armies, rather the mud is indeed the enemy – but, as Borden's poem appears to imply, it cannot be fought. It drowns the soldiers with a slow inevitability, and leaves their bodies decomposing and smelling. This "liquid grave" (Borden, line 33) therefore does not even afford them the decency of properly covering their desiccating bodies. In a final act of absorption and dehumanisation the mud sucks the soldiers down into a sensory void with no sounds or sights. It turns them into itself: a blind and deaf embodiment of death.

In Mary Borden's "The Song of the Mud" the mud is, therefore, a locus of multiple sensory anxieties. On one hand, her poem draws from the common theme of sensory excess (Botting, p. 2) that is often present in the poetry of the Great War. The mud subjects the soldiers to the unpleasant onslaught of its noxious smell, its slimy texture, and perhaps even the uncomfortable implications of the taboo subject of cannibalism it forces them to face. On the other hand, it also threatens the soldiers with the threat of annihilation – which could also be characterized as an excess (Botting, p. 2) of absence – both physical and sensory. It is presented as a cauldron of death: a mixture of body parts and a cold, deafening and blinding belly into which one drowns during the futile efforts of battle.

Borden's poem was published in 1917, the same year as the *Daily Mirror* pronounced the battlefields in Flanders, Belgium "One Vast Quagmire" (qtd. in Leonard, n.pag.). However, this headline appears to have been an isolated incident, as the issue of the mud was rarely addressed on the home front in England, and the trenches represented as dry and tidy (Leonard, n.pag.) In

this regard, Borden's poem with its vivid sensory language, could be understood to address the disparity between the propagandised, idealised war experience and its mud-caked reality.

4.2 Edmund Blunden and the Post-War Countryside

Towards the end of his life, Edmund Blunden (1896-1974) wrote that the First World War had never quite left him alone, and that he had occasionally felt like he was still living in it (Blunden, qtd. in Fussell, p. 255). His poem, "Festubert, 1916" voices similar sentiments, although on its face it does not appear that its speaker is bothered by the war so much as he is troubled by its absence. He relates a state of deep alienation from the present moment, owing to his difficulties in finding a place in the civilian world again after returning from the war. His memories constantly cast him back to the war in what resembles a daydream, comparing the sights and impressions of *now* with those of *then*. He describes his situation thus:

Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,
I sit in solitude and only hear
Long silent laughters, murmurings of dismay,
The lost intensities of hope and fear; (Blunden, 1-4)

In the first stanza, then, we are introduced to a grief-numbened mind. This state of numbness appears to be exacerbated by a lack of sensory stimuli, for the "long silent laughters" and "murmurings of dismay" (Blunden, 3) remind the speaker of "the lost intensities of hope and fear" (Blunden, 4) that he experienced during the war. It is, however, difficult to say with any certainty as to whether these sounds he now hears are part of the sensory landscape of the remembered wartime past, or the current peacetime present. This brings to mind the sensory simultaneity of the past and the present in some examples of Wilfred Owen's poetry. Regardless of this, the sentiment conveyed by line number four, "The lost intensities of hope and fear", is perhaps the most important clue as to the disposition of the speaker. The present moment makes him "dull" and prematurely old (Blunden, 1); intense sensory and emotional experiences already belong to the realm of the past, leaving the present grey and uninteresting. Consequently, these lines convey a nostalgic attitude: unable to feel at home in the calm sensory environment of peacetime, the speaker appears to be almost yearning for the intense sensorium of the war. Modris Eksteins has noted that despite its terrible nature – or, perhaps, *because of it* – the war was an "evocative

force" of vigorous exuberance, leading to an outpouring of creativity and contemplation (p. 292). Instead of death, in some ineffable way, the War came to represent life (Eksteins, p. 292). Blunden's poem seems to echo these sentiments. The newfound inner richness found by those sent to the war's crucible is reflected in the sensory impressions of the landscape he describes in the stanzas that follow, which attest to the intensity of these experiences:

[—] green places here, that were my own;
But now what once was mine is mine no more,
I seek such neighbours here and find none.
With such strong gentleness and tireless will
Those ruined houses seared themselves in me,
Passionate I look for their dumb story still,
And the charred stub outspeaks the living tree.

[—]

Deep red the rose burned in the grim redoubt,
The self-sown wheat around was like a flood,
In the hot path the lizards lolled time out,
The saints in broken shrines were bright as blood. (Blunden, 10-16; 21-24)

Interestingly, according to Paul Fussell, Blunden saw the English countryside as "magical" (p. 257). Here, however, the magic appears to have lost its lustre. The rural idyll has instead turned into a web of anxieties which, with its absence of wartime sights, reminds the speaker of what he has lost. The countryside lacks any stimuli that the speaker can find engaging, resembling instead a grey limbo where he, feeling older than he should be, waits alone doing nothing, except perhaps awaiting death. It is a sensory plateau with no high points that would impress themselves on the speaker as did the sights, sounds and actions on the battlefield. This sharp polarity of life and death represented by the destroyed and blooming plant life contrast strongly with the dullness of the peacetime sensorium, speaking of the heightened experience of life in the constant shadow of death.

Line 24, the memory of the brightly-coloured images of saints, casts the speaker back again:

Sweet Mary's shrine between the sycamores!
There we would go, my friend of friends and I,
And snatch long moments from the grudging wars;
Whose dark made light intense to see them by ... (Blunden, 25-28)

This section of the poem introduces another object of longing: the speaker's "friend of friends" (Blunden, line 26). The "long moments" they are able to "snatch" together in the privacy of the shrine (Blunden, 27) are represented through the visual motif of light and dark, their pleasantness (light) intensified by the context of the War (dark). On the relationships between soldiers, Modris Eksteins has noted that these could be "spiritual bonds" that did not, however, fare very well in civilian life, "when men were forced to confront the complexities of the 'real' world" (pp. 313-314). Eksteins goes on to argue that these relationships were temporally unique, and that their "intensity and companionship" were something that "belonged to a singular time and place" (p. 314). This friendship, then, is part of the tableau of things the speaker has irrevocably lost, and which he sorely misses in his failure to adjust to civilian life.

Despite Blunden's love for on one hand the English countryside, and on the other hand his difficulties in understanding the destruction of the "green fields and plumpy grey-green trees" at the front, "Festubert, 1916" appears somewhat antithetical to his disposition (Fussell, 257; Blunden, qtd. in Fussell, 261). As the sight of "the charred stub outspeaks the living tree" (Blunden, 16) and the general sensory dullness of the formerly pleasant rural landscape accentuates the speaker's grief and a sense of not belonging, this poem does not seem to be an ode to the English countryside at all. In this sense it is like an anti-pastoral, portraying instead the front as a locus of idyllic life in the nature. Nor does it describe the sensorium of the war as pernicious or taxing to the human mind as, for example, some of Wilfred Owen's poems do. Instead, the speaker plaintively harkens back to the sights and sounds of a landscape touched by war: the burned tree and broken houses, the burning intensity of roses, and the flood-like abundance of wheat (Blunden, 21-22). In addition to missing his comrades and friends, the speaker thus appears to underline the sensorium as the major locus of his postwar anxiety. In this poem, then, the implications of the wartime and peacetime sensoria are reversed: wartime excess (Botting, p. 2) makes the speaker feel alive, and the calm, rural sensorium represents a kind of sensory stagnation, even death.

4.3 “Now You Have Touched This English Hand”: Isaac Rosenberg and the Rat

Isaac Rosenberg's (1890-1918) "Break of Day in the Trenches" opens with morning arriving over the battlefield. As the speaker prepares for the day, he feels a rat scurry over his hand, after which he reaches to pick a poppy:

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. (Rosenberg, lines 1-12)

The rat is represented as having no allegiances: it scuttles freely between the trenches and does not discriminate between whom it touches. The speaker sarcastically muses how the rat's indiscriminate touching would also make it a traitor in the eyes of the authorities. According to Constance Classen, touch is "dissolute in its merging of self and other" (Classen, 70). By touching the German soldier, the rat would therefore be imbued with his otherness and enemy status, but also with whatever the English soldier, Rosenberg's speaker, represents. The rat is an outsider in the power hierarchy and therefore in the fight itself, and has sensory freedom in the sense that it can touch whomever it likes, see and go everywhere. This sudden intrusion of the natural world with no hierarchies, warfare or allegiances into the ordained world of the War is also echoed in the speaker's picking of the poppy from the edge of the trench. Reaching one's hand out from the trench could have meant the loss of that hand to an enemy sniper's bullet, or indeed the loss of one's life as a result of a lapse in attention. Furthermore, pinning a bright reddish-orange flower behind one's ear could likewise make one a better target for shooting. The speaker pays no mind to the potential risks in this act, nor does he express disgust at being touched by a vermin which, realistically, is probably on its way to gnaw on foodstuffs and the nearest dead body, possibly in the reverse order. In addition to this, trench rats were no ordinary vermin. According to Modris Eksteins, "[r]ats the size of cats were reported in the trenches", and "existed in even larger

numbers around rest quarters" (p. 208). The natural world is his desired object, and it appears that by reaching out to the natural sensorium, the speaker temporarily forgets cultural taboos and even proper military conduct.

The cultural symbolism of the rat has been described as conflicting. On one hand, rats destroy and contaminate ("Rat/Mouse", p. 290). They can see and fit into small, enclosed spaces, and therefore concretely and symbolically invade one's privacy ("Rat/Mouse", p. 290). On the other hand, rats have also been used as symbols of human resourcefulness and heroism – in part due to their excellent and fine-tuned senses – as well as the human subconscious, due to their domain being relegated to the unseen underbellies of the world ("Rat/Mouse", p. 290). This ambiguity or conflicted nature of the rat as a symbol is visible in this poem, as well. As was discussed in the above, the ambiguity is evidenced by the speaker's identification with the rat, and the fear he assumes it to experience when witnessing the horrors of war, as well as his lack of disgust at being touched by it.

The speaker continues to meditate on what the rat might see on its travels across the trenches:

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 your 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. (Rosenberg, lines 13-26)

This section of the poem focuses on the rat's imagined viewpoint, speculating on what visions it may witness as it moves freely where human mobility is limited and ordained. The speaker ascribes to the rat a certain schadenfreude upon seeing human suffering and conflict, as well as an outsider position in its higher chances of survival; all this, but also fear, for despite the rat's lack of

rank or nationality, the animal is nevertheless also victimised by the falling bombs and the terror therein. Despite the sarcastic disposition of the rat and its seemingly carefree nature, the speaker's indifference by the rat's touching him, as well the fear the man projects onto the rodent, seems to underline a similarity between the two rather than an aversion. In contrast, Wilfred Owen, too, wrote about the life of a trench rat in "A Terre", where he compares the life of a soldier to that of the rat, remarking:

Not worse than ours the lives rats lead –
Nosing along at night some safe rut,
They find a shell-proof home before they rot. (Owen, lines 37-39)

While the rats and the soldiers inhabit the same spaces, in Owen's poem the rats lead a safer life, finding protected nooks where humans cannot fit. In "A Terre", the natural world is generally seen as privileged: the stoic belonging of flowers and the joyful multiplication of microbes are objects of envy (Owen, lines 40-44). This coveting towards the natural world parallels the reaching out towards nature in Rosenberg's poem.

The reversal of desire and duty in the picking of the poppy, and most prominently in the visual sensory impressions mediated by the rat, therefore seem to represent a moment when unhierarchical and unordained nature, through the senses, makes itself known to the speaker in the solitary dusk of morning. The speaker's reaching out to touch and grab the poppy, and the poetic outpouring inspired by the touch of the rat suggest a reach out towards the broader natural sensorium amidst the harrowing events of the War. The motif of sensory excess (Botting, p. 2) is not as readily visible in this poem as it is in some of the examples discussed in the previous sections, rather it appears in the background, implicitly inscribed into the "whims of murder" and the "torn fields of France" (Rosenberg, lines 16;18) into the earthen tombs of which human bodies descend and are left in the wake of deafening artillery fire. These things the rat – and as mediated by its busy, imagined sensorium, the speaker – are able to witness through the imaginary eyes of nature.

4.4 “Prelude of my Delight”: Ivor Gurney’s Musical Synesthesia

In Ivor Gurney’s (1890-1937) “Bach and the Sentry”, the speaker is standing guard at night. The darkness of the landscape suddenly evokes in him the notion of a particular musical piece, a prelude by J.S. Bach:

Watching the dark my spirit rose in flood
On that most dearest Prelude of my delight.
The low-lying mist lifted its hood,
The October stars showed nobly in clear night.

When I return, and to real music-making,
And play that Prelude, how will it happen then?
Shall I feel as I felt, a sentry hardly waking,
With a dull sense of No Man’s Land again? (Gurney, lines 7-8)

Despite the Romantic visual sensorium of the starlit sky, prompting a stirring in the speaker’s mind with the memory of the musical piece, his mental state is in stark contrast with the bright stars and the cool air. The speaker is struggling to stay awake on sentry duty, dangerously teetering on the verge of sanctions, even death. The “low-lying mist” that “[lifts] its hood” from over the landscape has settled over the speaker’s mind instead, causing him to experience a deep-seated fatigue, the “dull sense of No Man’s Land” (Gurney, lines 3; 8). It could therefore be argued that the beauty of the initial visual imagery conceals a physical and mental anxiety, and the sinister threat of a court-martial, or an enemy bullet, should the speaker succumb to his tiredness and fall asleep.

In the second stanza the speaker also contrasts the present moment with a prospective future. His post-war practices he calls “real music-making” (Gurney, line 5), as opposed to the mental music of the night and shadows he now hears. He wonders whether playing Bach’s Prélude after the war will cause a similar synaesthetic reaction as he experienced under the October sky, this time in reverse – whether he will then be reminded of the now, of the dullness of No Man’s Land.

In the last line of the poem, the speaker describes the sensory impression awakened in him by the wartime landscape as “dull” (Gurney, line 8). This resembles the protective insensate state the soldiers experience in some of Wilfred Owen’s poetry, and it is likewise an issue that Gurney

himself wrote about in another poem of his, “To the Soldier Before Battle”. In the aforementioned poem Gurney’s speaker describes the War’s sensory effect as eventually “numb[ing]/The sense of being” (Gurney, lines 5-6). The sense of numbness, therefore, appears to be the War’s primary sensory dimension in both of these poems, and likewise it appears to be the result of prolonged, taxing and overflowing sensory stimuli. In “Bach and the Sentry”, however, this dullness is in stark contrast with the vivid sensory memory of Bach’s piece awakened by the sights and impressions of the landscape.

The central motif of music can be contextualised by Gurney’s life, for although his legacy is mostly attributed to his poetry, he was also a musician (“Ivor Gurney”, n.pag.). The last stanza does not treat survival from the War as a question of “if” but of “when”: the speaker is planning his return to musicianship. Indeed, this turned out to be the case with Gurney: he survived the War, and did eventually return to his “real music-making” (Gurney, line 5). But while Gurney’s life was spared by the War, his psyche did not survive unscathed. He battled with schizophrenia, which eventually led to his permanent hospitalisation. There has been some debate regarding the precise diagnosis of Gurney’s illness, and whether or not it was precipitated or exacerbated by the War (Hipp, p. 109), but as the final collapse of his mental state occurred only some years after he returned from the front, one can speculate that the war may have contributed to it. By the late 1920’s, Gurney’s poetic and musical efforts had been stifled by the tidal wave of his illness, and he was unable to write and play (Hipp, p. 108). It is therefore a strange coincidence that the last stanza of this poem should meditate on this very topic, whether the dull sensory effect of the front will return to him during his music making in the civilian world. This dullness and silence eventually took over Gurney’s mind, as the illness destroyed his artistic capabilities. “Bach and the Sentry” describes a battle between this soporific fog slowly engulfing a darkened field of war, and the bright, shining star of a beloved musical piece nestled deep within the memories of a creative mind.

5. The Home Front

The poems discussed thus far in this paper speak of the sensorium of the battlefield. They describe the horror of soldiers in a world where the hammering sound of bombardments is as constant as the rain, and the bodies of their comrades rot in the mud that covers everything. Some also describe life on the front as a source of joy and intense experiences, finding peacetime difficult to adjust to. However, one group of English war poets is yet to be explored: those at the home front. Those English citizens who did not take part in the fighting itself were not entirely safe from directly experiencing the War, as the Germans bombed English cities (Kempshall, n.pag.). While these bombings were not on par with the London Blitz of the Second World War, they introduced a presence of constant danger into the lives of those at home. But this was not the only way in which the War was present in Britain: there was the fear, anxiety, perhaps also pride of those whose loved ones were shipped across the Channel and into the gaping maw of battle. For each casualty, wounded or missing soldier, there was a circle of family, friends and lovers who keenly felt this loss. It has also been said that during calm weather, sounds of battle from the Continent could be heard on the Southeastern coast of England. (Kempshall, n.pag.). The sense of war was a constant companion, both literally and figuratively.

Another interesting facet of the division between the battlefield and the home front is gender politics. While not all of those who stayed home were women, and not all of those who took part in the action in one way or another were men, historical writing tends to underline the temporary ‘feminisation’ of English society at the time. As most working-age men were tied up in the War, women had to take on jobs typically only done by men. And, as the men on the battlefield wrote poetry about their experiences, so did the women at home. In this section I am going to discuss a selection of poetry by home front authors; and by necessity, this section is dominated by female poets. In undertaking this, it is, at the same time, my intention to draw attention to this often overlooked, in some cases even ridiculed, demographic of war poets, and explore questions such as how the sensory experiences of those at home and on the battlefield differed, and if there were any similarities between these two ways of experiencing the Great War.

5.1. Jessie Pope – A Misunderstood Poet?

In the British Museum's collection there is a draft of Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" bearing the dedication "To Jessie Pope etc.", as well as another one with a slightly different, although equally biting, "To a certain poetess" (Bebbington, 82). Owen eventually omitted this dedication altogether, although the "friend" (Owen, line 25) addressed at the end of the poem is still considered to be Pope and others who were seen as glorifying the war, cushioning its reality in "sing-song", "jingoistic doggerel" (Bebbington, 82; Potter, n.pag; "Jessie Pope", n.pag). It is nearly impossible to find articles on Jessie Pope without a mention of Owen's resentment towards her; and it seems that Owen's status as a celebrated war poet has hopelessly shrouded Pope's memory in a cloud of indignation.

The inclusion of both Owen and Jessie Pope (1868-1941) in this paper might seem like a controversial choice, given Owen's enmity towards her. Indeed Pope's simplistic, formulaic verse brings to mind nursery rhymes more than anything else, but she was a successful writer in her own right; and although her war poetry has been criticized harshly, it was popular during the war years – and, perhaps surprisingly, among civilians and soldiers alike (Bebbington, 82; Potter, n.pag.). This means that even though her war poetry does not enjoy a reputation like Owen's or Siegfried Sassoon's, for instance, the things she chose to write about – and to omit – certainly impacted the readership of the poetry of the Great War. Another factor which may make it seem counterintuitive to include a subsection on Jessie Pope in a paper about the sensory dimensions of this poetry is the fact that Pope's poetry seems to largely eschew sensory impressions in favour of depictions of jaunty, idealistic lads' capers and feminine household activities. However, the apparent lack of a sensory world as rich as in certain other poems is noteworthy in itself. Perhaps part Pope's "middle-class squeamishness" (Swinnerton, qtd. in Potter, n.pag), part societal expectations concerning topics appropriate for a female author to explore, despite this apparent omission, Pope's poetry should, however, not be thrown aside as unremarkable or irrelevant.

Pope's "Socks" depicts the speaker sitting by the fireplace, knitting a pair of socks. In the second stanza her thoughts begin to turn to the predicament of a man who, we can assume, is most likely her son, considering the expressions of apparent maternal worry she extends towards him later in the poem. She reminisces on his departure and the front of braveness he put on, but despite this,

she was able to see that “his lip/[q]uivered when he said good-bye” (Pope, lines 6-7). In the third stanza she compares her comfortable position by the warmth of the fire with what she assumes are his harsher conditions:

“Never used to living rough,
Lots of things he’s got to learn;
Wonder if he’s warm enough –
Knit 2, catch 2, knit 1, turn. (Pope, lines 9-12)

What is noteworthy about this stanza is that here Pope acknowledges, if obliquely, some aspects of the hardships of a soldier’s life. Furthermore, this acknowledgement is not sweetened by promises of glory, or justified as a necessary sacrifice for the greater good of England. In a similar vein, Pope here touches upon the sensory aspect of life on the front, recognizing its difficulty; and although her approach is not as candid and detailed as that of some of the other war poets such as Owen or Borden, it should not be disregarded as less important. The fourth stanza reveals that the speaker, in fact, has her own source of sensory discomfort: the “shout” of the newspaper sellers that she wishes could be “suppressed” (Pope, lines 13-14). Hearing this noise, she remarks, makes her feel anxious, presumably anticipating bad news (Pope, line 15). A parallel can be seen between the way this messenger of the war attacks Pope’s speaker’s senses, and the onslaught of noises certain other war poets wrote about experiencing on the battlefield.

The Jessie Pope of “Socks” is not the Jessie Pope of “Play the Game”, where the war is equated to a football game, and ‘playing’ it deemed a moral mandate:

Englishmen, play the game!
A truce to the League, a truce to the Cup,
Get to work with a *gun*.
When our country’s at war, we must all back up—
It’s the only thing to be done! (Pope, lines 20-24)

“Socks” does not therefore have the undertones of “jingoistic doggerel” that Pope has been widely accused of proliferating (“Jessie Pope”, n.pag). Rather, it is a very intimate poem that does not preach the virtues of taking part in the fight, focusing, instead, on the private anguish of a mother worrying about the well-being of her son. Even though the poem does explicitly condemn the war either, it however demonstrates empathy with the soldiers’ predicament, and sheds light on the anxiety of those on the home front reluctantly awaiting news of their loved ones. And,

while the sensory dimension of the poem is muted, concerned with domestic decorum, Pope nonetheless recognizes the sensory aspects of living on the front: sleeping outside, and having to brave the cold air.

5.2. “Last sight of all”: Eleanor Farjeon and Sensory Mortality

If the speaker of “Socks” harkens back to the moment her son left for the War, the speaker in Eleanor Farjeon’s (1881-1965) sonnet clings to each furtive meeting with her lover who is about to be shipped out into battle, knowing that each one could be the last. However, despite her keen awareness of the dwindling hours spent with her lover, and the tragedy that could await them in the future, she appears to fight against the tension this knowledge threatens to introduce into their meetings:

I must not strain the moments of our meeting
Striving each look, each accent, not to miss,
Or question of our parting and our greeting,
Is this the last of all? Is this – or this? (Farjeon, lines 5-8)

Here, the speaker resists the urge to absorb each sensory impression of her time together with him. This urge, she knows, is informed by the knowledge that he may never return. In the same vein, she tries not to think of the possibility that each of their encounters could be the last, trying, instead, to receive every moment as if the threat of death did not loom in the future. The sensory motif of the first stanza is carried over into the second one:

Last sight of all it may be with these eyes,
Last touch, last hearing, since eyes, hands, and ears,
Even serving love, are our mortalities,
And cling to what they own in mortal fears [...] (Farjeon, lines 9-12)

In this stanza, the speaker divulges her belief that the sensory organs – “eyes, hands and ears” (Farjeon, line 10) – are instruments of mortality through their desire to possess the sensory impressions that flow through them; this desire being, at the same time, a reminder of the transience of these impressions and experiences. She attempts to reject the hunger of her senses, driving her to attempt to experience as much of him as she can, for this hunger acts as a constant

reminder of the fact that she is threatened with losing him. The senses are also a locus of “mortal fears” (Farjeon, line 12), contrasted by “immortal love, which has no first and last” (Farjeon, line 14). The speaker tries to embrace this “immortal love” (Farjeon, line 14), shunning the sensory world in favour of an affection which, it is implied, transcends even the bounds of death. The common motif of the corporeal dimension as something inferior, to be overcome or cast aside in favour of the mind or the soul, is here approached through the speaker’s attempt to reject the urgency of her senses.

Farjeon’s sonnet utilises what can, at this point, justifiably be called a typical motif in the poetry of the Great War: the sensory world as a source of anxiety and pain. However, unlike the soldier-poets, whose sensory world is filled with the roaring of shells and the stench of rotting bodies, her anxiety is a more private kind: the fear of losing someone she loves. This fear, of which the sensory world is an engine, is also fear of death – but not the death of oneself. However, in attempting to alleviate this fear by focusing on transcendental love instead of the material world, the speaker inadvertently makes the latter all the more prominent. As she is keenly aware of the possibility of a “[l]ast sight [...] [l]ast touch, last hearing” (Farjeon, lines 9-10), those thoughts have, without a doubt, already coursed through her mind; she has written them into existence. The acuteness of the words betrays the intensity of the sentiment behind them.

5.3 “The horror and the anguish and the glory”: “A War Film” by Theresa Hooley

Unlike in the two poems we have discussed before, the speaker of “A War Film” does not have a loved one in the war. Theresa Hooley’s (1888-1973) poem, however, is still tinged with the fear of loss, although this fear is personified in the speaker’s son, who – as she is painfully aware – could one day take part in a conflict and be subjected to horrors like those of the Great War.

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker sees what is presumably a short newsreel or “cinemagazine” about the Mons Retreat while attending the cinema (“About Newsreels and Cinemagazines”, n.p.). These kinds of programmes were commonly shown in British cinemas, until they were eventually discontinued due to the rising popularity and availability of TV news (“About Newsreels and Cinemagazines”, n.p.). The Mons Retreat, or “The Great Retreat”, followed the battles of Mons and Le Cateau, of which Mons had been the first British battle of the Great War

(Hart, pp. 84; 149). The battle has been characterised as “confused”, with a lack of “executive control”, leading to 1,638 British and an estimated 2,000 German casualties; in addition to this, the retreat itself was taxing, and involved the retreating troops marching a distance of 200 miles in the course of five days while suffering from a lack of water and provisions. (Hart, pp. 106-108; 169; 178). However, news of the war was filtered heavily through a lens of propaganda, meaning that the version of events presented to the home front audience was most likely a glorified version. The name given to the retreat operation itself – The Great Retreat – alone is a testament to this. As Peter Hart has noted, the British have a tendency to valorise their retreats. (p. 148).

Despite what were no doubt efforts by the propaganda machine to paint the Mons Retreat in a favourable or heroic light, the newsreel leaves a lasting impact on the speaker. While watching the film, she experiences “[s]orrow and pride” (Hooley, line 3), but upon leaving the theatre, she appears to be in a fugue state, “[s]till hearing machine-guns rattle and shells scream” (Hooley, line 9). The sensory experience of what she has just witnessed, if only a second-hand and editorialised version, has left her shocked enough that the noises of the battle still echo in her ears. The acute impression of sound is, however, a conflicting presence in the poem. The years of the Great War were the reign of the silent film, which suggests that, unless post-production sound effects were added or supplemented by an orchestra, the film most likely did not include the authentic noises of those “machine-guns” and “shells” (Hooley, line 9). It appears that the film has made such an impact on the speaker that she has had a synaesthetic experience, or one of extremely strong identification. The sensorium of the War has bled into and upended her civilian life, leaving her as shaken as if she had been at the front herself.

6. What Comes After: The Sensorium of Peace

The poems discussed in this paper so far have elucidated the fact that many soldier-poets found the sensorium of the war a unique experience. Attitudes to what comes – or might come – after the guns have ceased have been varied. Charles Hamilton Sorley expects a newfound comradeship with the enemy in “To Germany”, anticipating that the sightless hatred that has affected both sides in battle will wear off, revealing to each side the true humanity of the other. Edmund Blunden, on the other hand, has lost his dear comrades, and the life-force of the front which has sustained him in battle. Some poems are not about the end of war itself, merely the ceasing of battle. One might expect poems contrasting the vastly different sensoria of war- and peacetime to underline the newfound sharpness of the latter, for it seems like a common enough motif in poetry (and literature in general) to appreciate – figuratively speaking – the calmness and sunshine after the storm has passed, moreso than before. However, as some of the poems discussed so far have shown, the sensorium of peacetime is not necessarily a *peaceful* sensorium. The contrast and even conflict between these two sensoria is fascinating enough to warrant a dedicated section.

6.1. “We Know That it Was Good”: “Back to Rest” by W.N. Hodgson

“Back to Rest” by William Noel Hodgson (1893-1916) depicts a moment where, it appears, the fight has ceased very recently, and the soldiers are afforded a brief respite from the strain of battle. As Hodgson died in 1916, this poem cannot be about the end of the War per se, rather only a brief cessation of battle. The poem opens with an idyllic depiction of a green, summery landscape; and as in Isaac Rosenberg’s “Break of Day in the Trenches”, here, too, the natural world is suddenly introduced into the midst of a world touched by battle:

A leaping wind from England,
The skies without a stain,
Clean cut against the morning
Slim poplars after rain,
The foolish noise of sparrows
And starlings in a wood –
After the grime of battle
We know that these are good. (Hodgson, lines 1-8).

The “leaping wind from England” (Hodgson, line 1) brings with it the promise of home; no billows of smoke are visible in the sky, and the battle is far away enough for the delicate trees and the birds to go on unmolested, their sensory pleasure readily enjoyable to the speaker. The second stanza, by contrast, depicts the sensorium of the battlefield in terms that have already become somewhat familiar in this paper. Here, again, the battle is depicted as a deafening, foul-smelling whirlwind of intrusive sensory impressions:

Death whining down from Heaven,
Death roaring from the ground,
Death stinking in the nostril,
Death shrill in every sound,
Doubting we charged and conquered –
Hopeless we struck and stood.
Now when the fight is ended
We know that it was good. (Hodgson, lines 9-16).

There is a juxtaposition between the battle- and death-sodden sensorium, and the natural one, with its sights and sounds untouched by death omnipresent in the second stanza. Indeed, the first stanza carries with it implications of a Romantic naïveté almost, and the possibility of it being entirely imaginary, for the “[d]eath whining down from Heaven” and “roaring from the ground” may already have leveled the “slim poplars” and made the “starlings” and “sparrows” flee in terror (Hodgson, lines 4-6; 9-10). The “wind from England” (Hodgson, line 1) may be a simple whiff of homesickness, triggering sensory memories of the summery forest back home. However, what makes this poem interesting is the fact that these two – the virginal, natural sensorium, and the one permeated by the onslaught of the battle – are both portrayed as good in their own right. Where the poems discussed so far in this paper have almost unanimously depicted the intrusion of death upon the human sensorium as a foul and obscene thing, Hodgson’s speaker suggests that there is an inherent value to this kind of suffering. Here it should be reiterated that the field of the poetry of the Great War is varied, and the disposition of poets like Owen or Borden are not to be viewed as universal ‘truths’ in this regard. While, culturally and historically, the Great War is often depicted as something of a ‘great disillusionment’ stripping Western society of its innocence and decorum, the experiences of individual soldiers (particularly when it comes to extremely subjective representations like poetry) do not always reflect this.

While the previous two stanzas have been concerned with the already-familiar natural sensoria of nature and the battlefield, respectively, the last stanza of the poem goes on to describe the human aspect of the war. Although this stanza is not as rich with sensory language as the previous two, its inclusion here is vital, as it contributes to the way in which Hodgson's poem can be seen to go against the grain of other war poems discussed in this paper:

We that have seen the strongest
Cry like a beaten child,
The sanest eyes unholy,
The cleanest hands defiled,
We that have known the heart blood
Less than the lees of wine,
We that have seen men broken,
We know man is divine. (Hodgson, lines 17-24).

Here, the speaker describes the full spectrum of human behaviour and expressions of emotion that the war has brought out. "The strongest" has been reduced to "a beaten child" (Hodgson, lines 17-18); innocent, "clean hands" (Hodgson, line 20) have been figuratively soiled by killing. An "unholy" mien has taken over "the sanest eyes" (Hodgson, line 19), the sensory world therein having been saturated with terrible sights. Blood has become a sight more familiar than wine, in a passage reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's "Insensibility", where: "Having seen all things red/Their eyes are rid/Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever." (Owen, lines 5-7.) Yet, even after all this havoc wrought by the war on decency and decorum, Hodgson concludes that "man is divine" (line 24). What is interesting about Hodgson's poem is that it seems to reverse the process of disillusionment seen in many other war poems. The human experience, having been mangled and stripped of its innocence by the machinery of war, refuses to paint it as hellish – concluding, instead, that it was simply "good" (Hodgson, line 16). However, Hodgson's speaker does not readily explain why he sees it in this way. There is no appeal to patriotism, or any higher justification for that matter, for why both war and peace have, in his mind, had their own inherent goodness. In the last stanza, the divinity (Hodgson, line 24) of man could be seen to be the result of having seen the vulnerability and complex nature of human beings – perhaps harkening back to Eksteins' notion of the "spiritual bonds" between soldiers (p. 313) – but the perceived goodness of the war itself remains, nonetheless, a curious mystery.

6.2. “Recalling War” by Robert Graves

If W.N. Hodgson’s “Back to Rest” seems to be situated in a moment where the guns have only just gone silent, and the world is still raw with the memory of battle, “Recalling War” by Robert Graves (1895-1985) takes place years after the end of the War. The temporal distance to the War is signified in the first lines of the poem, where “[e]ntrance and exit wounds are silvered clean” (Graves, line 1); the redness of new wounds has been replaced by white scar tissue, signifying complete healing, and injury “aches only when the rain reminds” (Graves, line 2). Even lost limbs are forgotten: “The one-legged man forgets his leg of wood,/The one-armed man his jointed wooden arm” (Graves, lines 3-4). “The blinded man” has adapted to his new sensory reality, “seeing”, instead, “with his ears and hands/As much or more than once with both his eyes” (Graves, lines 5-6). The acuteness of this newfound sight and the normalcy of changed physiologies are echoed in the memory of the War itself, now twenty years in the past, having “assume[d] the nature-look of time” (Graves, line 8). The War is seen in a synaesthetic manner, as if a faded picture, rather than a collection of sensory memories. It is compared to a moment where “the morning traveller turns and views/His wild night-stumbling carved into a hill” (Graves, lines 9-10), as if it were a meandering, aimless, man-made trail scarring a natural sight. Emerging from his blind nighttime wanderings, he can now see clearly what is behind him. This passage, then, taps into what appears to be a common theme among the poets of the Great War: to compare the War to a state of blindness.

In the second stanza, blindness as a metaphor of the war segues into a direct questioning as to what the War actually was, as if the speaker had to remind himself of what he saw during this blind period. He responds to his own question by stating that it was not “mere discord of flags/But an infection of the common sky” (Graves, lines 11-12); not, therefore, just a clash of nations, but something akin to a disease which has taken over the very sky above. And, like tissue polluted and made throbibly painful by an infection, this sickly sky “sagged ominously upon the earth/Even when the season was the airiest May” (Graves, lines 13-14). The sky “presses down” upon the soldiers, who “oppressed, thrust out/Boastful tongue, clenched fist and valiant yard” (Graves, lines 15-16). Here, then, another sensory impression is introduced, beyond the already somewhat ‘classic’ motif of blindness: a feeling of being pushed downwards by an unnaturally “sagg[ing]” (Graves, line 13) sky. Although novel in its singular form of expression, this notion of being

blanketed by an oppressive sensory environment is not wholly new among poems of the Great War. Harkening back to the previously discussed poem by W.N. Hodgson, for example, it appears to be a common motif in many war poems to refer to the sensory environment of the War as a constant hammering of caustic stimuli from above, as well as everywhere around the speakers. In this regard, as well as with the concept of blindness as a metaphor, “Recalling War” echoes a common manner in which poets of the Great War depicted the sensory stimuli to which they were subjected.

In stark contrast with this sense of living under an oppressive sky, the third stanza depicts the joys of life on the front. The speaker remarks how “Sick with delight/At life’s discovered transitoriness,/Our youth became all-flesh and waived the mind” (Graves, lines 20-22). The looming, constant threat of death intensifies the moments spent alive, making the young soldiers abandon the trappings of sense, turning, instead, wholly to a carnal and sensual, or sensory, existence. This leads to a unique kind of “antiqueness of romance/Such tasty honey oozing from the heart” (Graves, line 23-24). Ominously mirroring the blood which might also burst forth from the heart in battle, the speaker here depicts an outpouring of mirth and escapism into antiquated notions of romance. There is also a return to appreciating simple creature comforts: “Wine, meat, log-fires, a roof over the head,/A weapon at the thigh, surgeons at call” (Graves, lines 26-27). In the front where access to food, warmth and shelter is often scarce, the speaker reminisces on the newfound appreciation of these simple, yet vital things.

Continuing with the structural juxtaposition of conflicting themes in the poem, the fourth stanza goes on to depict the “foundering of sublimities”, the War’s destruction of lofty ideals and “each happy art and faith/by which the world has still kept head in air” (Graves, lines 32-34). Instead, the war “was return of earth to ugly earth” (Graves, line 31), a reminder of the baser expressions of (human) nature. This stark, almost oxymoronic contrast between the escapist, Romantic ideals to which the speaker appeals in the third stanza, and the notion of a loss of idealism and the emergence of foul and base things, recalls the coexistence of beauty and terror in Edmund Blunden’s “Festubert, 1916”, for instance. However, unlike in Blunden’s poem, Graves’ speaker does not appear to miss the war, nor does he discuss the difficulties of adapting to civilian life. Instead, he depicts the mundane reality of healed injuries, and the clarity of retrospection with regard to conceptualising the War. Graves’ speaker is thoroughly used to this new peacetime

reality; his reminiscences of the War contain a balanced acknowledgement of both the beautiful and the wretched sensory and experiential aspects of it.

The fifth stanza, curiously, returns to one precise sensory impression the speaker can recall from the war: guns, and the sights and sounds they created. He remembers them “nibbling the walls of factory and church” (Graves, line 39), having no thought for the sanctity of the latter. The speaker then goes on to compare the War to a child’s shenanigans, and this metaphor continues as “Machine-guns rattle toy-like from a hill,/Down in a row the brave tin-soldiers fall” (Graves, lines 42-43). Here the speaker seems to distance himself from the deadly reality of battle, drawing, rather, from an analogy of toys and child’s play. The sensory impression of the guns is depicted as that of a rattling toy, which leads to a discordant juxtaposition between a highly sophisticated killing machine and the innocence of childhood. This is then followed with a projection into the future, where “yet more boastful visions of despair” (Graves, line 46) are unleashed. Despite the temporal distance to the War and the relative stoicism at the beginning of the poem, it ends with a pessimistic notion of the future, speculating that these sensory experiences will teach us a yet more effective way of creating chaos.

6.3. “Aftermath” by Siegfried Sassoon

Much like Ivor Gurney’s “Strange Hells”, Siegfried Sassoon’s “Aftermath” juxtaposes the harrowing sensory intensity of the War with the seeming forgetfulness that came after it. Indeed, the words “[h]ave you forgotten yet?...” are repeated three times throughout the poem (Sassoon, lines 1; 8; 22). As the “gagged days” of wartime are past, the floodgates of normalcy have opened, and “the world’s events have rumbled on” (Sassoon, line 2). Likewise, for the individual soldier, “the haunted gap” of wartime terror in his memories has been spackled over by his return to civilian life, giving him back his freedom and allowing him to “[take] [his] peaceful share of time, with joy to spare”. (Sassoon, lines 5-6).

Beneath this veneer of ordinariness, however, in the speaker’s mind there is an uncomfortable awareness that this all has come at the risk of forgetting his experiences at the front. Here he repeats the mantra of “[h]ave you forgotten yet?...”, followed by “[l]ook down, and swear by the

slain of the War that you'll never forget" (Sassoon, lines 8-9). After this comes the transition to the second stanza, where the speaker returns to the sensory memories of the front, seemingly addressing both himself and a prospective reader thus:

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz –
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on parapets?
Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench – (Sassoon, lines 10-13).

These sensory memories contrast with the mundanity of post-war society, where the newfound normalcy is compared to "traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways" (Sassoon, line 3). Suddenly, the speaker is transported back into a world where 'normal' means something very different: life in a dugout, and the constant presence of rats and dead bodies left to rot around him. It appears curious that the speaker should even have to ask himself whether or not he remembers this – perhaps, then, it is meant to be a reminder to society at large, a warning not to forget, conveyed through the disturbing sensory impressions of his experiences. This, together with the repetition of the question of forgetting is reminiscent of another iconic Great War admonition to remember: Rudyard Kipling's famous "lest we forget". Both Kipling and Sassoon had a personal stake in the Great War: Sassoon, obviously, took part in it himself, Kipling lost his son at Loos. Both these writers seem to have foreseen the price that would be paid by a society keen on returning to normalcy: the forgetting of individual sacrifices, suffering, and the enormous toll that this took on millions of people. Kipling's memorial-worthy, sanitised adage and Sassoon's expressive, chilling reminiscences both serve a purpose of reminding those that read these words of the importance of not forgetting, both in terms of honouring these sacrifices, but also to avoid a similar carnage from taking place again. Indeed, after recounting these events, Sassoon's speaker also poses the question: "[i]s it all going to happen again?" (Sassoon, line 15).

The third stanza retains the acuity of the second one, this time focusing on the speaker's tormented comrades and their hardship. He recalls seeing their "doomed and haggard faces", and the "ashen-grey/[m]asks" quenching the lifeforce of these young men (Sassoon, lines 18; 20-21). The speaker underlines the suffering of these soldiers by referring to their joyful natures, making their humanity more visible in this contrast of mirth and misery. His treatment of this subject is reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's "Arms and the Boy", where the awful irony of an angelic young

man's sensory interaction with instruments of death is made visible. In this stanza, too, the sensory dimension is readily detectible through the vision of the speaker. Throughout this poem, then, the senses are used to reanimate the events and experiences of the War, in an attempt to prevent them from being forgotten. This uneasy act of returning to these terrible sensory experiences seems to be an act of repentance, both private and communal, and perhaps also an expression of survivor's guilt on the speaker's part. The question of forgetting seems to address both the speaker himself, as well as everyone else.

7. Conclusion

The sampler of Great War poetry in this paper has been varied and, hopefully, represents a balanced cross-section of English WWI poetry. Some of these poems were written by men, some by women; some during the war, some after. Likewise, the sensory worlds that these poems have opened for us are wonderfully nuanced. These nuances show us that in large part, the poetry of the Great War is concerned with contrasts. The whistling of the shells and lethal chattering of machine-guns, and the green mist of mustard gas rolling over the muddy ocean of the battlefield are but one side of the whole picture. On the flipside, tortured minds find some solace – no matter how fleeting – in the sight of a pot of flowers, or a piece of music; and amidst the desecration of an idyllic landscape, the company of a beloved fellow is a diversion worth reminiscing for years to come.

Despite this variance, we can also point to some commonalities. Firstly, almost all war poets have attested to the fact that the War's sensory theatre is so oppressively intense that a total loss, or desensitization, of the senses ensues from prolonged exposure to it. This theme of sensory intensity is, however, present in the less pernicious aspects of the wartime experience, as well. Closely following the motif of contrasts mentioned above, sensory pleasures rise to a surprisingly central position in the poetic imagination, made all the more poignant by the constant pressure faced by the human psyche, body, and sensorium.

In the previous pages, then, we have encountered poetic minds, often bewildered and conflicted, traversing the sensory worlds of the home front, the battlefields of the Great War, and its aftermath. These sensory worlds can be divided into two categories: internal and external. These signify, respectively, the sensorium of the outside world, the senses therein; and the sensorium of human beings themselves, their internal capability to sense and process sensory stimuli. The external sensorium is often described as a web of various kinds of intensities in these poems, as evidenced by for example Edmund Blunden's description of the wartime sensorium as having contained "the lost intensities of hope and fear" (Blunden, 4), as well as Isaac Rosenberg's duality of on one hand the joys of the natural sensorium, and on the other hand the sensory implications of "the torn fields of France" (Rosenberg, 18). As these external intensities intersect with the internal human sensorium, the result is either a moment of calm, like in Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches", or a chaotic, disarrayed confusion of the senses, as is described in Wilfred

Owen's "Conscious". These often excessive (Botting, p. 2) sensory intensities can also lead to a state of literal senselessness, as is described in Wilfred Owen's "Insensibility" and Ivor Gurney's "To the Poet Before Battle". In these cases, the figuratively senseless world of the War translates into literal senselessness by cauterising the human sensorium in its harrowing, pernicious, and relentless excess (Botting, p. 2).

What, if anything, can we learn from these poets? Literature and stories have always had a key role in shaping our lives, attitudes, and notions of history. Identification with the other, through listening to their narrative, is a prerequisite for empathy. It is my hope that through the acuteness of these sensory impressions, new ways of identification will be explored and discovered, and the reality of war understood better through the contemplation of those who either lived through or died in it. Surely, there is no better way to relate an experience than to be able to say: "here is what I saw, felt, tasted, smelled". These poets invite us to read with not only our eyes, but our bodies, as well. For this reason, further research is required to better understand the sensory worlds of other Great War poets, particularly those writing in languages other than English.

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