CHAPTER II

THE FIRST WORLD WAR: THE POETRY OF WAR

Although he was wounded in the Second World War what Vernon Scanell remembers is

Not the war I fought in
But the one called Great
Which ended in a Sepia November
Four years before my birth.

By critical analysis of the poems this chapter will bring out the significant role of poetry in the First World War. The relation between the letters and memoirs dealt with in the first chapter and the various themes discussed in the poems will be discussed. How the changing attitude to the war and the varying moods of the soldiers are transmitted through their poems to create such a strong everlasting impression in the minds of the civilians towards this Great War will be studied.

Poems analysed in this chapter are grouped as follows:

Section 2.1: Early Illusions

This section deals with poems by arm-chair poets, and poems that glorify the heroic warrior and celebrate death on the battlefield.
Section 2.2: Transitional Poems

This section deals with poems where a greater concretization of war is to be found. The poets begin to realize the gulf between the civilian at home and the soldier at the front. Poems that express complete disenchantment but not a first hand picture of the war are also included in this section.

The poems under this section are grouped as transitional as they tend to describe death and battle in somewhat general terms compared to the poetry that follows later. They do not dwell so vividly on death and the horrors of the battle.

Section 2.3: The Actual Experience of Battle

The poems in this section are further classified as follows.

Section 2.3.1: The Dehumanization of the Soldier

The poems project the dehumanization of the soldier in modern war and the soldier's response to his actions.

Section 2.3.2: Trench Poems

This section will deal with poems that project the life in the trenches.
Section 2.3.3: The War Poems of Isaac Rosenberg

Here a few poems of Rosenberg will be discussed that describe his experience of war. The characteristic way in which Rosenberg handles his themes will be examined.

Section 2.3.4: Poems of Siegfried Sassoon

This section will deal with a few poems of Sassoon that will reveal the horror of war as well as highlight Sassoon's style in poetry.

Section 2.3.5: The War Poems of Wilfred Owen

This section will analyse those poems of Owen which express the theme of comradeship, the futility of war and the fate of the survivors.

Section 2.4: Conclusion

The conclusion will contrast the poetry written at the beginning of the First World War with that of the poetry written at a later period. It will then proceed to highlight the features of the poetry of this war which appear to distinguish it from that of other wars.

2.1 Early Illusions

At the beginning of the war, poems were written by 'arm chair' poets as they were popularly known like Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and Laurence Binyon who looked at war
from a distance and patriotic ideals were uppermost in the minds of most arm chair poets.

These poems reveal the mentality of those soldiers who marched to the battlefield to fight a just and righteous war with a strong desire to die heroically for their country. Poets speak not of the body but the spirit and the courage of those who marched to the battlefield to the accompaniment of a marching song.

Edward Thomas in his poem 'The Trumpet' (PFWW, 133) asks the men to 'rise up', to the clarion call of the hour. He cites various instances where nature and man responded to such calls like the blowing of the trumpet, chasing away the dreams of men or when the first light of dawn appears how the stars become invisible. So saying he asks the soldier

Open your eyes to the air
That has washed the eyes of the stars
Through all the dewy night:
Up with the light,
To the old wars;
Arise, arise! 2

Every word in the verse reveals the idea of war held in the beginning. The poet seems to command the men to rise up with the sun and march to the war as they did during the earlier wars (old wars). The last words 'Arise, arise'
suggest an urgency in tone asking the men not to waste time but march ahead into the battlefield. The poem reflects the romantic idealism that was interwoven with the old wars.

Thomas Hardy in his poem 'Men Who March Away' expresses not his own view of war but what he imagines to be that of rather simple-minded soldiers.

In our heart of hearts believing 
Victory crowns the just.
The soldiers move to 'the field ungrieving'

Hence the faith and fire within us
Men who march away.
The theme echoing in most of these verses is that the nation had risen to fight a just war and the soldiers marched to the field with a sense of pride and a confidence that they would return soon and victorious.

Ivor Gurney in his poem 'To The Poet Before Marching' (PFWW preface) tries to inspire the poet who only later on becomes a soldier. He writes

then they must know we are, 
For all our skill in words, equal in might
And strong of mettle as those we honoured.

Make

The name of poet terrible in just war, 
And like a crown of honour upon the fight.
The poet wants to prove his strength is equal to his skill and the participation of poets will place a 'crown of honour'
on the fight. He wishes to dominate the scene as much as a professional army man and his role in the just war will be so significant as to be marked as the crowning glory in the fight.

Such verses served as an excellent vehicle for war propaganda. They did express the views of the majority at that stage though there were many prominent poets who voiced different views as already observed through their letters in the earlier chapter.

A generation of public school youth soon marched to the battlefield. Apart from patriotic idealism, this war to save 'Little Belgium' was a challenge they felt they must accept. They had only heard about great wars fought against Napoleon and now the time had come for them to chase away their dreams of war and face a real war. They responded to war as an extension of the games played in the school field.

And when the burning moment breaks,
And all things else are out of mind,
And only joy of battle takes
Him by the throat, and makes him blind.

Thus wrote Julian Grenfell in his poem 'Into Battle' (TWP, 5).

The glory of war and the fighting man is most predominant in this poem. Right from the opening lines of the poem we observe how every part of nature inspired the poet.
The naked earth is warm with Spring,
    And with green grass and bursting trees
Leans to the Sun's gaze glorying,
    And quivers in the Sunny breeze;
The poet rejoiced with nature. He says

    The fighting man shall from the sun
    Take warmth, and life from the
    glowing earth;

Apart from the warmth of the sun, and life from the 'glowing earth' the soldier enjoys the company of Heaven, the woodland trees that guide him, the kestrel and owl by day and night bidding him be alert. He has the encouraging song from the blackbird and the nobler powers like courage and patience to learn from his companion the horse.

The poet's optimism is reflected in the last verse that says

    The thundering line of battle stands,
    And in the air death moans and sings;
    But Day shall clasp him with strong hands,
    And Night shall fold him in soft wings.

All through the poem we can observe how the poet's mood and Nature vibrate in the same frequency. The poet's romantic vision of the battle is echoed through the sun, the wind, the trees and Heaven. Here if one recalls Grenfell's background that he was a professional infantry man who loved immensely his horses and all things associated with the army then the poem reflects his identification with the army. It reflects Grenfell's own mood of how he loved challenge, how
he loved to live and play dangerously with his life. The poet is in 'perfect spirits'. One is aware of a sense of exultation, exhilaration and the young poet's desire to absorb himself totally in war.

Another popular feeling that the war brought forth is expressed by Rupert Brooke in his poem 'Peace'.\(^6\) (TWP, 1). It says

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

The poet thanks God that the war had come as a welcome change. The war had broken the boredom, the routine humdrum existence and in that way God had awakened the youth who were just wasting their strength. The war would sharpen their powers. The poet expresses the feeling how the world had grown old, cold and weary.
In the last line of the poem he says

'And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.'

People were ready to accept this challenge for they had known shame, grief, agony all of which they believed, had an ending. Hence here this battle would be only with the worst friend and enemy (synonymous terms) meaning death. In death personified as abstraction (worst friend and enemy) we observe that the poet had no fear of death. Lack of fear of death at this early stage may have sprung from traditional views of the glory of death in battle.

Laurence Binyon's poem 'For the Fallen'7 (PPW, 48) begins with England's thanks giving and mourning for the dead who have

'Fallen in the cause of the free'

There is mention of immortal death and the glory of death as he says

'They went with songs to the battle' and

'Fell with their faces to the foe'.

Towards the end of the poem the poet uses a simple comparison to express the death of the soldier.

As the stars that are starry in
the time of our darkness
To the end, to the end they remain.

Just this brief quotation sums up the characteristics of the famous poems of the 'arm chair' poets who had all the time
to sit back, visualise immortal death, compare it to the
stars, sing of the glory of the fallen, beckon others to
follow their footsteps.

But this very poem seems ironic to read much later
at which stage one observes the very same immortal stars,
comrades of young soldiers are not able 'to rouse' the
millions dead in the battlefield. Wilfred Owen calls the
sun and nature for help in his poem 'Futility'.

The glorious war by then had become a futile war.
One recalls Binyon when Owen says in his poem 'Futility'

More him into the sun -
Gently its touch awoke him once,
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

And in the last two lines of his poem he says

-0 what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earths sleep at all.

Now to continue with the earlier themes on immortal death we
consider Brooke's sonnet 'The Dead' (TWP, 7). Brooke makes
death nobler when he says later

And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.

The poet is reminding the people of Britain's past history
and the battles it had waged for a just cause. The time had
come again when they could, by their own actions, add to their proud heritage. The poet uses romantic language, uses words like 'rich Dead!' 'red sweet wine of youth', 'honour', 'nobleness' and lays emphasis on 'our heritage', thus enhancing the patriotic fervour of 'Our England'.

In fact it sounds as if embattled England is a nobler England and a richer England.

Sir Winston Churchill called the voice of Brooke the voice of a joyous' 'fearless', 'versatile', 'deeply instructed' soldier. In an obituary note in 'The Times' (26th April 1915) on the death of Brooke he says:

The voice has been swiftly stilled. Only the echoes and the memory remain; but they will linger.  

And indeed it did. Brooke's most popular sonnet 'The Soldier',11(TWP, 3) was widely quoted and the poem became synonymous with the spirit of the soldier in World War I. Patriotic fervour reaches its peak in this poem. Brooke's English body (on his death) is the richer dust concealed in some foreign field, a dust of which he is very proud. Brooke regales himself and his audience as he recalls the English air, its rivers, the sun, the sights and sounds and finally his friends. Memories of his home and his England seem to offer him great comfort and in the last line he writes

In hearts, at peace, under an English heaven.
Brooke elevated patriotism to such heights that it could never have found any other form of nobler expression. To him every person is a part of a great whole England and to these people England's destiny, and interest are of more importance than their own.

It is probable that keeping this sonnet particularly in mind Charles Sorley in his letter dated 25th April 1915 writes on Brooke's death:

He is far too obsessed with his own sacrifice regarding the going to the war of himself (and others) as a highly intense, remarkable and sacrificial exploit whereas it is merely the conduct demanded of him and others by the turn of circumstances, where non-compliance with this demand would have made life intolerable. It was not that 'they' gave up anything of that list he gives in one sonnet, but that the essence of these things had been endangered by circumstances over which he had no control and he must fight to recapture them. He has clothed his attitude in fine words: but he has taken the sentimental attitude ...

From the above letter we can observe how Sorley is explicitly clear in his hostility towards jingoism and high sounding moralising so predominant in Brooke's sonnets. Also Sorley never believed in any talk of a 'just war'. He felt: 'There is no such thing as just war. What we are doing is casting out satan by satan.'

His own reaction to the war comes out clearly in his poem 'To Germany' (PPWW, 127) where he says:
You are blind like us. Your
hate no man designed,
And no man claimed the
Conquest of your land.
But gropers both through fields of
thought confined
We stumble and we do not understand.
You only saw your future bigly planned,
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,
And in each other's dearest ways we stand,
And hiss and hate, And the blind fight the blind.

The poem mirrors Sorley's view that the war was a disaster and like Germany, England was also responsible for the outbreak of the war. He is meditative over the outcome of the war and tries to express the truth wherever it may lead.

Thus we can observe from all these poems how the initial outbreak of the war was a period of euphoria when one believed the war to be a chivalrous affair that offered welcome opportunities for heroic sacrifices. Brooke's happy warrior and Grenfell's soldier who went 'Into Battle', with an enthusiasm of pure patriotism, free from hate, fear and bitterness are representative figures. They wished for a nobler death. The body of the dead soldier radiates 'unbroken glory' and Brooke wishes to blow bugles over these 'rich Dead'. There only a few dissenting voices like Sorley's.

2.2 Transitional Poems

And while the newspapers continued to publish these idealising verses the reality of war took over with the men at front.
E.A. Mackintosh in his poem 'Recruiting' (TWP, 31) bitterly attacks the arm-chair warriors. He writes:

Fat civilians wishing they
'Could go and fight the Hun'.
Can't you see them thanking God
That they're over forty-one?

He ridicules the posters put up everywhere urging the lads to join the war. In the last two lines of the poem he says:

Don't let him come over here!
'Lads, you're wanted - out you go.'

There was a gulf that was developing between the civilian population in England and the army in France, a contrast between the flag-waving good-byes and the squalor of death that the men faced.

This aspect is brought out again by E.A. Mackintosh in his poem 'In Memorium' (TWP, 12) a poem he wrote for Private D. Sutherland killed in action in a German trench on May 16th 1916 and the others who died there.

In the first two verses we are informed about David's letters to his father that do not mention the fighting.

In the next two verses the poet who is David's officer describes the loss of his fifty sons and expresses his sorrow at their death for he says his fifty sons trusted him more than their own fathers.

Their fathers knew only the -
Happy and young and gallant,  
they saw their first-born go,  
But not the strong limbs broken  
And the beautiful men brought low,  
The piteous writhing bodies,  
They screamed 'Don't leave me, sir,'  
For they were only your fathers  
But I was your officer.

The fathers could not see their sons dying like helpless little babies, they could not hear them crying for help. They were only left to weep on hearing the news of their only son's death.

Through the letters and memoirs we become aware of how the first bombardment had shattered the dreams of these youth whether they were British or Germans and slowly its impact can be observed in the poems also.

Sorley's sonnet 'When you see millions of the mouthless dead' (PFWW, 127) is full of bitter irony regarding the war. He begins the poem by describing the carnage of millions. He describes the mutilated bodies, the mouthless dead, dying all around the land. Right from the opening lines of the poem Sorley makes it clear that he does not wish for public sympathy or false pity. He says

When you see millions of the mouthless dead  
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,  
Say not soft things as other man have said  
That you'll remember. For you need not so.
Sorley just wishes to unmask the realities to these civilians who were still echoing the poems of Grenfell and Brooke. He wishes to inform them how the dreams of these young soldiers had been shattered. Looking around the ravaged land he felt that it was easier to be dead than to live after going through this hell. He tells the civilians say only this -

"They are dead."

This sentence clearly reflects how Sorley does not wish for sympathy or false pity. Towards the end of the poem we observe how Sorley had come to accept the inevitable. In the last line of the poem he says -

"Great death has made all his for evermore."

Sorley concludes on the note how 'Great death' had become the ultimate victor 'for evermore'.

Death as the victor, or the conquerer and man's heroic combat against death is asserted in the poem 'Back to rest',18 (PFWW, 77) by W.N. Hodgson, (a poem composed while marching to the Rest Camp after severe fighting at Loos.) In this poem death is more concretized than in the earlier poetry, yet not seen in its full ugliness as it affects the individual. Man is divine, not broken and pitiful.

Death whining down from Heaven
Death roaring from the ground,
Death stinking in every nostril,
Death shrill in every sound,
Doubting, we charged and conquered
Hopeless we struck and stood.
From the above lines we are made aware of the various ways man was attacked, by bullets, guns, gas, and shrapnel. Since only the men undergoing all this knew what they were facing the poet assertively say in the last two lines of his poem

We that have seen men broken
We know man is divine.

By repetitive use of the word 'Death' the poet wants to reveal the slaughter surrounding man who continues to challenge death and thus make his final assertion of man's divinity.

One can recall (here) Rudyard Kipling in his epitaph 'Bombed in London'19 (PPWW, 85)

On land and sea I strove with anxious care
To escape conscription. It was in the air!

Getting involved in the war had become unavoidable at this stage and the impact of losing a son in the battle is seen in another of Kipling's epitaph 'A Son'20 (PPWW, 86) where he says

My son was killed while laughing at
Some jest. I would I knew
What it was, that it might serve me
In time when jests are few

Apart from being full of pathos we are made aware of the fact that the war had lost its meaning. Innocent victims
were being killed and it is ironic to read how his son's death had come.

Kipling is most bitter in his epitaph 'A Common Form' (TWn, 57) where he wrote

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied

He is bitter probably because it was too late when the reality of war dawned on them, they could not justify their reasons of having gone to the battlefield (when and if questioned later) except by saying that older generation had lied to them.

2.3 The Actual Experience of Battle

Painfully the poets tried to transmit their personal sufferings the general suffering, the wounds, the dehumanization of man through their poems.

2.3.1 The Dehumanization of the Soldier

Dehumanization of the soldier is aptly brought out by Robert Graves in his poem 'Country at War' (PFWW, 67).

Observe the following lines

How furiously against your will
You kill and kill again, and kill:
All thought of peace behind you cast,
Till like small boys with fear aghast,
Each cries for God to understand,
I could not help it, it was my hand.
The first two lines emphasize the fact that it was the circumstance or the situation that was the master that had taken over man. And in the last two lines he cries for God to understand his motive in killing. He had killed against his will to defend himself. Killing had become a reflex action, a mechanical act performed by the soldier who had no control over it till the act itself was over.

Similarly in his poem 'The Bayonet' (PPWW, 66) Wilfred Gibson describes a hand to hand encounter where he kills the enemy and later explains that is was an act of self-defence. The poem's short lines enhance the soldier's intense feeling of guilt after the act, on realising his cold-blooded murder. In the end he says:

Though clean and clear
I've wiped that steel,
I still can hear
That dying squeal.

The poet by rubbing the steel tries to erase his deed while the last lines reveal that it was only a vain effort to forget what had happened.

Ivor Gurney in his poem 'The Target' (PPWW, 71) explains that his motive in shooting had been act of self-defence. To quote

I shot him, and it had to be
One of us! T'was him or me.
'Couldn't be helped; and none
Can blame
Me, for you would do the same.
2.3.2 Trench Poems

Turning now from isolated poems about face to face encounters let us examine the poems about trench warfare, the life in the trenches that no soldier failed to mention either in his letters or memoirs or in his poetry.

Indeed the first world war became synonymous with 'Trench warfare' and the poets themselves came to be known as 'trench poets'.

Hence a characteristic feature of the poetry of the First World War distinguishing it from that written during other wars is the locale or landscape of the trenches; an underground maze of passages stretching for miles. This in turn gave rise to a variety of experiences peculiar to the war and linked with these a range of moods.

The trench was sometimes dangerous, full of activity, while sometimes it was a mere broken-down passage with scattered bodies. The soldier spent tense moments before going into action while at times he watched over his dead companions.

Richard Aldington has an ironic description of his 'Trench Idyll' as he calls his poem. The poem begins as:

We sat together in the trench,
He on a lump of frozen earth
Blown in the night before,
I on an unexploded shell;
Words like frozen earth, unexploded shell used so casually depict the ubiquitous nature of war. The soldiers were getting used to living in the trenches amidst shells, shrapnel bombardment, mutilated bodies, as well as other daily sights.

With all this around them the poet and his friend talk of London, its women, restaurants, night clubs and theatres. Their conversation is only interrupted

"As a machine gun swept the parapet."

This brings about a change in their conversation. They relate to each other the death scene they witnessed and when recalling the horror becomes too much the poet says

"I shivered;
'It's rather cold here, sir, suppose we move?"

What is ironic here is even for a few moments when soldiers try to forget the war and remember the past they are brought back to reality; to the war itself. The idyll is no reality in itself and such as it was, is rudely shattered.

Edgell Rickword's poem 'Trench Poets' gives an insight into the depth of companionship and how far it was extended in the trenches. The poet watches over his dead companion for days and he says

I used to read,
to rouse him, random things from Donne like 'Get with child a mandrake root
The very fact that the poet was reading to a dead companion reveals how he was trying to keep sane by doing crazy things. Then the lines from 'Donne' that he read to his dead companion.

With great difficulty the poet decides to leave his friend only because

He stank so badly, though we were
great chums
I had to leave him; then rats ate his
thumbs.

The last part of the last line is a shocking raw image that shocks even after what has gone before.

2.3.3 The Poems of Isaac Rosenberg

Three poets whose work stands out in the whole body of war poetry are Rosenberg, Sassoon and Owen. Their poems will now be separately discussed. According to Isaac Rosenberg in his poem 'The troopship' the body in the trenches is

Grotesque and queerly huddled
Contortionists to twist.

The body looks absurd, rather queer, and the posture is like a gymnast who does a contorted twist.

He writes later

The sleep soul to asleep,
We lie all sorts of way
And cannot sleep!
Rosenberg probably wished to tell of the co-existence of the living and the dead lying crammed in the trenches. He speaks of men walking carelessly across the living and the dead. To quote

And the lurching men so careless
that should you drop to a doze
winds fumble or men's feet
are on your face

'lurching men' gives a haunting picture of the presence of the dead and the living and the word 'careless' sounds as if Rosenberg wants to express a complaint that it was a deliberate action.

Very often a tone of complaint is observed in Rosenberg's letters where he describes with distaste the unhealthy conditions at the camps. His position on being a Jew and also a private made things worse for him at the front.

In his poem 'Louse Hunting'\(^2\) (TWP, 42) he describes the terribly filthy condition of the soldiers infested by lice.

In the first verse Rosenberg describes a soldier who tore his shirt swearing at the lice, the shirt caught fire from a candle that was lit nearby.
To quote the next verse

Then we all sprang up and stript
To hunt the verminous brood
Soon like a demon's pantomime
This plunge was raging
See the silhouttes agape,
See the gibbering shadows
Mixed with the baffled arms on the wall
See gargantuan hooked fingers
Pluck in supreme flesh
To smutch supreme littleness.

Rosenberg magnifies the whole scene in the shadow that he sees. He uses words like 'demon's pantomime', 'silhouttes agape', 'gibbering shadows', 'gargantuan hooked fingers' to give this enlarged effect. In this way Rosenberg tries to bring out how the drudgery of life in the trenches made a soldier react to an otherwise insignificant act. Rosenberg captured these moments with an intensity that brings out the effort to remain alive that the war called for.

In the last verse Rosenberg credits the louse as a "wizard-vermin" since the louse was able to revel the soldiers. An obnoxious, filthy insect offering a few moments of distraction is contrasted with the immense sorrow inflicted upon the soldier by war.

A somewhat similar queer contrast is observed in Rosenberg's other poem 'Returning we hear the larks' (JWP, 28). To quote the opening lines -
Sombre the might is:
And though we have our lives, we know
What sinister threat lurks there.

A single word 'sombre' brings out the dark, gloomy, melancholic atmosphere. The soldiers are returning to their camps hoping for a 'safe sleep'. They are uncertain of what fate awaits them, yet they are in a way aware of a 'sinister threat' lurking there.

This scene is contrasted with the singing they hear of the 'unseen larks'. The poet's thoughts now move in and out of the lark's song. The lark's song is not deceptive but Rosenberg probably visualises an element of deception in anything that brings joy. Because immediately he relates the lark's song with blind man's dreams on sand where the dreamer is unaware that he is threatened by dangerous tides; the other deception is in the girl's dark hair and kisses where a serpent hides. (The second is probably an illusion to Eve).

Thus by contrasting the joy in the lark's song with the sinister thrust lurking everywhere Rosenberg may have wished to bring out how deceptive the war had turned out to be.

Rosenberg conveys something of the impersonal immensity of war when he turns his attention to an insect like the louse, or that of a lark singing.
From the poems of Rosenberg that have been considered here one can observe his handling of language. His language often tends to contribute towards a little obscurity in his poems. As he himself writes in one of his letters to Mr Seliff in 1916:

I am afraid my public is still in the womb. Naturally this only has the effect of making me very concerted and to think these poems better than anybody else's. 30

Rosenberg selected his words to express his ideas. D.W. Harding comments on Rosenberg's handling of language as follows:

Instead of the emerging idea being racked slightly so as to fit a more familiar approximation of itself, and words found for that, Rosenberg let it manipulate words almost from the beginning, often without insisting on the controls of logic and intelligibility. 31

An example of this is observed in the opening lines of the poem 'The troopship' discussed earlier.

Rosenberg's struggle with words and his express desire to gain a reputation as a poet result in an obscurity and literariness in his diction. Hence although he was very much a participant in the events he describes he appears to be more an observer.

2.3.4 The Poems of Sassoon

During the war period Rosenberg's poetry did not draw much public attention though his poems survived him and
won him belated fame. It was those poems by poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon that made the greatest impact. The slaughter on Flanders field and elsewhere only deepened. the determination of these poets to unmask the horrors of the war.

The first of Sassoon's 'outspoken' war poems (as he himself called them) 'In the Pink' was actually refused by 'The West Minister' magazine since they thought that the poem might effect recruiting.

In the Pink'[^32] (TWIP, 16) (1916) opens with a young soldier writing home to his 'sweet heart' telling her that he is in the pink of health.

In the second verse (that is the same night) the soldier is unable to sleep and thinks of his past. The Sundays at the farm, how he spent them cheerful as a lark with his 'Gwen'.

In the third and final verse the soldier thinks of tomorrow night, (that is the future). He thinks how they would have to trudge up to the trenches and he in his rotten boots would have to travel through

Five miles of stodgy clay and freezing sludge,
And everything but wretchedness forgotten.
To-night he's in the pink; but soon he'll die.
And still the war goes on - he don't know why.
In a simple conversational tone in the last two lines Sassoon conveys the message behind his poem.

Sassoon mentions in his Memoirs of an Infantry Officer that in war only the present was what mattered. You may be in the pink of health writing a letter but the next moment may be your last.

And through the last line of the poem regarding the continuity of war Sassoon expresses his belief that the war was needlessly prolonged by the statesmen who had it in their power to negotiate a settlement.

Sassoon's poems are short, simple, using unadorned language and a conversational tone the pain and terror of the wounded soldier are brought into sharp focus as in

'O put my leg down, doctor, do!' (He'd got a bullet in his ankle; and he'd been shot horribly through the guts). (TWP, 35)

The terror of a dying soldier is in front of your eyes in his poem 'Died of Wounds' (TWP, 37) where the soldier's 'wet white face and miserable eyes' brought the nurses to him.

Soon the ward grew dark; but he was still complaining
And calling out for 'Dickie'. 'Curse the Wood!'

And Sassoon heard the soldier shout

They snipe like hell! O Dickie, don't go out' ...
The next morning the soldier was dead.

We realize how the dying soldier was haunted by the noises and sights of the battlefield and his terror is increased when he suddenly remembers his friend Dickie (who may have been with him during the encounter) whom he cautions to avoid meeting his own fate.

Sassoon's main targets were the politicians, the newspapermen, and the civilians who had no idea of what the soldiers endured at the front. In his poem "Blighters" he hits out at the politicians and the Generals in his characteristic mocking tone, combined with anger. He writes

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

Words like crammed and cackle express the greedy unpleasant atmosphere. Further Sassoon uses language which is liken a brainless tingle. He is full of uncontrollable anger at their enjoyment as he feels their celebration is a mockery of the thousands of corpses lying all round. The last two lines are full of bitter pathos when he says

And there'd be no more jokes in music halls
To mock the riddled corpses round
Here we are reminded of the poem 'The Leveller' (PFWW, 68) by Robert Graves where in the last verse Graves brings out the routine of the servant while conveying the news of a soldier's death to his family. He says

Old Sergeant Smith, kindest of men,
Wrote out two copies there and then
Of his accustomed funeral speech
To cheer the womenfolk of each.

He died a hero's death and eve
His comrades of 'A' company
Send heartfelt sympathies, we shall
All greatly miss so true a pal.

The sergeant fumbles to find the right words so resorts to cliche's which he feels will keep up the spirits of the women folk at home. The women not knowing the truth cling to the consolation.

Sassoon captures the scene that transpired on hearing the news of Jack's heroic death and the reality of the death most intimately in his poem 'The Hero' (TWP, 19). In the poem the mother says Jack died the way he would have wished to die and adds:

The Colonel writes so nicely.
In a choking voice she looks up to add

'We mothers are so proud
of our dead soldiers'. Then her face
was bowed.
"Quietly the Brother Officer went out."

Quietly because he had told some 'gallant lies' to the old lady and her 'weak eyes' were shining with joy, because she thought her son had died bravely. But in reality:

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

Here Sassoon contrasts the message relayed with its reality and the reaction of the messenger and its receiver. He tries in all possible ways to awaken the civilians to grasp the reality and come to terms with it.

In fact Sassoon does not flinch from addressing the civilians as:

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye Who cheer when soldier lads march by, Sneak home and pray you'll never know The hell where youth and laughter go. (TWP, 65)

He blames the civilians as being the cause of the simple soldier boy's suicide in the trenches. He mocks at their ignorance, for the civilians cheered as the boy marched to the battlefield and later forgot about him completely.
Sassoon does not spare the bishops either. In his poem "They" (TWP, 20) Sassoon is bitter and sarcastic over the preachings of the bishop who tells the soldiers:

"They will not be the same;"

because they have gone for a righteous cause to challenge death face to face.

Sassoon repeats the same line only he changes from third person to first person:

"We're none of us the same!" the boys reply

The soldiers who had returned were none of them the same. They were either disabled, crippled in one way or other and even preferred to die.

"And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'"

The last line reveals how Sassoon would have preferred God's intervention in putting an end to the war whereas the Bishop (a messenger of God) clings to his religion and gives the lame consolation of the ways of God being strange.

There are a few other poems like 'Base Details', 'Great Men', where Sassoon openly accuses the Marshals, the ministers, the generals, to the threat they caused to the new born for they were aware of the wars that they waged. He scorns their attitude since after the war, is over and the youth all dead, these men will toddle home safely and die in their beds. As one reads Sassoon attacking the complacent
in humanity of the generals, one can gauge that the differences between being a private and an officer in the war was so wide that it often caused disenchantment among the soldiers where lives the generals sacrificed in thousands. (Rosenberg does make a mention about such differences in one of his letters).

Sassoon even managed to put his ideas into action in 1917 when he was wounded and sent back to England for treatment. In July he published 'A Soldier's Declaration' which announced that "I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it."40

Sassoon even managed to get the Declaration read out in the House of Commons but the authorities were too shrewd to risk attacking a war-hero; instead Sassoon was diagnosed as suffering from shell-shock and so was sent to Craiglockhart war hospital in Edinburgh where he met Wilfred Owen.

2.3.5 The Poems of Wilfred Owen

Owen was stimulated to an astonishing outburst of writing after his momentous meeting with Sassoon. And in the first poem that he wrote after his meeting "The Dead Beat" he imitates Sassoon's ironic, colloquial style and attacks the mentality of the civilians who still favoured the war.
The poem 'The Dead Beat' describes a soldier getting wounded and falling down. The scene then changes to describe the crowds at 'Caxton hall' where the politicians are all merry-making. In the last verse we are brought back to the present state of the wounded soldier who's been sent to the doctor. Owen says:

Next day I heard the Doc's fat laugh:
'That dirt
You sent me down last night's
just died. So glad!'

The tone, the language, all through out the poem especially in the last two lines reveal how Owen tried to imitate Sassoon. The inhumanity of the doctor, his tone, his complacency are all well expressed and this poem Owen enclosed in a letter dated 22nd August 1917 to his cousin Leslie Gunston. Owen himself admitted in the letter, "after leaving him, I wrote something in Sassoon's style." Owen doesn't succeed in capturing Sassoon's style. Sassoon never exaggerates so grossly. He is not as crude as Owen is in the last couple of lines.

Life in the trenches, the sharing of universal suffering, had given rise to an unspoken comaraderie among the soldiers. It was a bond so tightly bound with 'war's hard wire' that today it is very difficult for us to comprehend it. When Owen became an officer he felt how responsible he was in every way for every aspect of his men's welfare and remained devoted to them till his death.
He makes this clear in a letter to his mother dated October 4/5th 1916:

My nerves are in perfect order. I came out in order to help these boys directly by lending them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first. 42

Any truly Owen captures the comradeship, the compassion, the actual action, the fate of the survivors in some of his poems.

Owen's compassion towards his comrades is most touching when he appeals to the kind old sun (in his poem 'Futility') to rouse the dead boy. The sun had given life to the earth itself and yet could not restore light to the eyes of that one man. Owen uses the traditional romantic imagery of the sun to embody the futility of war, to extend tenderness towards those lying dead in the battlefield. He asks for the boy's body to be moved into the sun, because -

If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Owen uses words like 'gently', 'touch', 'whispering' that express his own compassion. And in the last two lines of the poem he writes:

- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
  To break earth's sleep at all?
Using the extraordinary term 'fatuous' Owen questions the purpose of the sunbeams and value of the labour of sunbeam in breaking earth's sleep. The technique employed here with the last two lines abruptly ending the poem in a question leaving the reader to draw his own conclusion is employed in many of Owen's poems.

Another poem where Owen writes about friendship is 'Apologia Poemate Meo' (which means a defence of my poem). Owen had written this poem as a direct answer to a letter by Robert Graves who had asked Owen to cheer up and write more optimistically.

Owen defends his gloominess by answering that although he had found cause for cheerfulness at the front, he had not tried to describe it in case the people at home might think that the soldiers do not need any pity. In the poem he writes:

I have made fellowships -
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips,
But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

Owen uses metaphors of tying together to compare the comaraderie among the soldiers and also uses military
references of wire-fencing to substitute for the images of traditional love of joy's ribbons and the interchanged looks in soft silk eyes.

In the last verse of the same poem Owen describes the state of his mind that has accepted the negation. He perceives beauty in 'the hoarse oaths' and

"Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate."

The poem is an exception in that it seems to concentrate on Owen's personal experience rather than those of his fellow soldiers.

Owen lays bare the sufferings of war sometimes as a tragic poet would do rather than an exclusively war poet. This is observed in his poem "Insensibility".45

'Insensibility', often considered as one of Owen's greatest war poems is permeated by a sense of confusion and distress. It is rather frightening and on reading there is a sense of discomfort that is felt. This is conveyed most effectively by his use of irregular stanzas. It is frightening to read:

And some cease feeling
Even themselves or for themselves.
Dullness best solves
The tease and doubt of shelling,
And chance's strange arithmatic
Comes simpler than the reckoning of
their shilling.
They keep we check on armies' decimation.
The soldier's insensibility or immunity to what is going on around him, whether it is the shelling or the slaughter, is most vividly brought out. A single word 'armies' decimation' describes the scene of slaughter reducing the number of these capable of carrying on the war. This clearly brings out the control Owen has over words and how he perfected his use of them.

Another aspect observed in this poem is how Owen uses romantic language to contrast the 'dawn' and 'dusk' of a happy soldier at home and his counterpart in the battlefield. To quote:

Happy the soldier home, with not a notion
How somewhere, every dawn, some men attack,
And many sighs are drained.

... ... ...
He sings along the march
Which we march taciturn, because of dusk,
The long, forlorn, relentless trend
From larger day to huger night.

Owen's use of 'dawn' and 'dusk' are linked with war. During the war dawn was the most likely time for an attack, when the trench and the battlefield became active and visible; while 'dusk' is the time of return, a time of memory or the 'drawing of the blinds' as he states in his poem 'Exposure'. (His other poems contain references to 'twilight' and 'darkness').
In the last verse Owen pinpoints the 'Insensibility' that was the final mental condition of a soldier after the war. He says they had no other choice but to become dullards, or stones and show immunity towards pity. The only realisation of the war was:

"The eternal reciprocity of tears."

Owen did not live to see the end of the war or its effects on those who survived but on reading his poem "Mental Cases" we realize how much he had meditated on the fate of the survivors. The reality is so vivid that right from the opening lines in a typical Owen style he poses the question to which the reader must respond:

"Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?"

'Twilight' is symbolic of a contemplative mood, of some memories that the soldiers, the living dead, cannot erase and that remain before their eyes.

Owen describes their physical disabilities as 'drooping tongues from jaws', their 'fretted sockets', even their hair, hands palms all that are sweltering with misery.

Owen asks:

"but who these hellish?"

and replies:
These are men whose minds the
Dead have ravished."

These survivors had witnessed "multitudinous murders", apart from-

Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.

Owen sinks us into the war of attrition. It is horrifying to picturise the above scene before your eyes, the soldier wading through the flesh, and the blood of the dead bodies some of their very own dear ones. Still more horrifying is the following comparison:

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink
tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a blood smear; night comes blood black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.

Here the comparison of the cycle of day and night to a wound that turns into black clot and later breaks open, along with the eyeballs shrinking (as a reflex action) unable to face the scene, is an example of Owen's mastery over technique and craftsmanship.
To quote the last four lines -

- Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
  Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
  Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
  Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

Owen himself is deeply wounded at the sight of these men. He feels implicated in what has happened to them and the final lines accept that each one of us is responsible for the fate of these soldiers.

A comparison with Sassoon's poem 'Does it Matter' 47 (TWP, 40) also is instructive. Sassoon jeers at the way the world repays the surviving soldier, because there really can't be any compensation for what the soldiers had undergone.

He talks of the people's support of lame and blind soldiers.

In the last verse Sassoon suggests to the soldier that he should drink and forget his past that haunt his dreams; And on seeing this behaviour of the soldier the people will offer the lame excuse of his having fought for his country:  
"And no one will worry a bit."

The last line is Sassoon's usual attack at inhuman complacency, that to the civilians nothing ever mattered either during the war, or after it.

A generation had gone through hell and those who survived had come back:
With loathsome thoughts to sell;
Secrets of death to tell;
And horros from the abyss. 48

(TWP, 25)

And even though the years have rolled by since World War I:

But the past is just the same - and
War's a bloody game ...
Have you forgotten yet? ...
Look down, and swear by the slain
of the War that you'll never forget. 49

(TWP, 71)

And indeed no one will ever forget this Great War.

2.4 Conclusion

After examining the poetry of the First World War
one can note how the poems initially discussed explore the
myth of the glorious war, slowly moving out to expose the
locale, the trenches, the shocking but faithful descriptions
of death in the battle.

At this stage one can contrast the later descriptions
of the soldier and his dead body with the heroic happy
warrior and his noble death depicted in the earlier part of
the war by Brooke and Grenfell.

The happy warrior of Brooke and Grenfell was a
beautiful man with strong limbs who went to the war bubbling
with enthusiasm and had no feelings of hate. He was a
patriot who died a noble death and Brooke celebrates their
death by calling them the rich Dead!
From the poems of E.A. Mackintosh, Sorley and Rosenberg we can observe the contrast in the account of the soldier. The soldier living in the trenches is filthy, infested with lice. He is 'torn by the screaming steel'.

Says Edgell Rickwood in 'Winter Warfare':

Stiffly, tinkling spurs they moved  
Glassy eyed, with glinting heel  
Stabbing those who lingered there  
Torn by screaming steel.

His end is either in a pitiable writhing body or an undiscernable body blown to bits. In death he is no longer stately as were the heroic dead of the past but part of a mutilated, decomposing mass. Those strong limbs of one time are now senseless and limp and the bodies look like the slaughtered sheep lying all over the place.

The analysis of the poems further reveals Owen's strong note of pity, and Sassoon's indignation at the civilian view apart from their poems expressing their concern for the survivors.

Most of the themes covered by these poets are mentioned in their letters but the treatment of these same themes in the poems is what makes their lines remain everlastingly in one's memory. For example the scene of slaughter comes foremost to one's mind when one recalls Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'.
What passing bells for those who die as cattle?

- Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
  Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
  Can patter out their hasty Orisons.

Finally the distinctive features of the First World War poetry can be enumerated as follows.

First is the dominant theme of illusion in the early poetry of this war. Poems glorifying war, and celebrating death in the battlefield were written and these poems served as a popular vehicle for war propaganda. There are poems written at the beginning of other wars after the First World War glorifying a cause but never war itself. In fact the later poetry of the war made it impossible for poets in subsequent wars ever to have the illusions, or write in the style of Brooke or Grenfell.

A second distinctive feature follows from the shattering of the 'early illusions'. The poets soon became aware of the gulf between the civilians at home and the soldier at the front. These poets created a landscape of the dead through their poems of the exposures, on the battlefield, the trench warfare, the dehumanization of man and thus wanted to educate the civilian at home. By skilful use of language and tone the poets give faithful, detailed descriptions of the war.
This conscious effort made by the poets to educate their readers in a way made it unnecessary for poets in subsequent wars to undertake the same task. Thus while undoubtedly poets writing during the Spanish Civil War or the Second World War present scenes of battle or of the dead they do not create the nightmare landscape of the trenches and of no man's land permeated throughout by horror and death.

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End Notes:

Since frequent use has been made of two anthologies reference to them is made in the body of the text by the use of the following abbreviations.

1. Poetry of the First World War.
ed. by Maurice Hussey (PFWW)

2. The War Poets (1914-1918)
ed. by Marshall Cavendish for The Great Writers Library (TWP)

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6. ibid, p.1.
9. TWP, op.cit, p.7.
11. TWP, op.cit, p.3.
15. TWP, op.cit, p.31.
16. ibid, p.12.
18. ibid, p.77.
19. ibid, p.95.
20. ibid, p.96.
21. TWP, op.cit, p.57.
23. ibid, p.66.
24. ibid, p.71.
28. TWP, op.cit, p.42.
29. TWP, op.cit, p.28.
30. Rosenberg, op.cit, p.
32. Cavendish, op.cit, p.16.
33. ibid, p.35.
34. ibid, p.17.
36. Hussey, op.cit, p.68.
37. TWP, op.cit, p.19.
38. ibid, p.65.
39. ibid, p.20.
41. Silkin, op.cit, p.181, 182.
43. Silkin, op.cit, p.196.
44. Silkin, op.cit., p.107.
45. ibid., p.128, 130.
46. ibid., p.199.
47. TIP, op.cit., p.40.
48. ibid., p.25.
49. ibid., p.71.
50. Caranar, op.cit., p.52, 93.