

SOAR, FALL 2018, DOUG ROSE
THE POETRY OF WILFRED OWEN AND SIEGFRIED SASSOON
POEMS FOR WEEK 1, OCTOBER 23

"Dulce et Decorum Est" – Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots, 5
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.
Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time, 10
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime. –
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams before my helpless sight, 15
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin; 20
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest 25
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
*Pro patria mori.**

*From the Latin by the Roman poet Horace:
"It is fitting and honorable to die for one's country."

"Disabled" – Wilfred Owen

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
 And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
 Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
 Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
 Voices of play and pleasure after day, 5
 Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.
 About this time Town used to swing so gay
 When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees,
 And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim, –
 In the old times, before he threw away his knees. 10
 Now he will never feel again how slim
 Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,
 All of them touch him like some queer disease.
 There was an artist silly for his face,
 For it was younger than his youth, last year. 15
 Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
 He's lost his colour very far from here,
 Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
 And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
 And leap of purple spurted from his thigh. 20
 One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
 After the matches carried shoulder-high.
 It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
 He thought he'd better join. He wonders why.
 Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts. 25
 That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
 Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts,
 He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
 Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.

["Disabled" continued]

Germans he scarcely thought of, all their guilt, 30
 And Austria's, did not move him. And no fears
 Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
 For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
 And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
 Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits. 35
 And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.
 Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
 Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
 Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul.
 Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes, 40
 And do what things the rules consider wise,
 And take whatever pity they may dole.
 Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
 Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
 How cold and late it is! Why don't they come 45
 And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

"Dreamers" – Siegfried Sassoon

Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,
 Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
 In the great hour of destiny they stand,
 Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows. 4
 Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
 Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
 Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
 They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives. 8

. . . .

["Dreamers" continued]

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
 And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
 Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
 And mocked by hopeless longing to regain 12
 Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
 And going to the office in the train.

"Break of Day" - Siegfried Sassoon

There seemed a smell of autumn in the air
 At the bleak end of night; he shivered there
 In a dank, musty dug-out where he lay,
 Legs wrapped in sand-bags, – lumps of chalk and clay
 Spattering his face. Dry-mouthed, he thought, 'To-day 5
 We start the damned attack; and, Lord knows why,
 Zero's at nine; how bloody if I'm done in
 Under the freedom of that morning sky!
 And then he coughed and dozed, cursing the din.
 Was it the ghost of autumn in that smell 10
 Of underground, or God's blank heart grown kind,
 That sent a happy dream to him in hell? –
 Where men are crushed like clods, and crawl to find
 Some crater for their wretchedness; who lie
 In outcast immolation, doomed to die 15
 Far from clean things or any hope of cheer,
 Cowed anger in their eyes, till darkness brims
 And roars into their heads, and they can hear
 Old childish talk, and tags of foolish hymns.

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["Break of Day" continued]

He sniffs the chilly air; (his dreaming starts), 20
 He's riding in a dusty Sussex lane
 In quiet September; slowly night departs;
 And he's a living soul, absolved from pain.
 Beyond the brambled fences where he goes
 Are glimmering fields with harvest piled in sheaves, 25
 And tree-tops dark against the stars grown pale;
 Then, clear and shrill, a distant farm-cock crows;
 And there's a wall of mist along the vale
 Where willows shake their watery-sounding leaves,
 He gazes on it all, and scarce believes 30
 That earth is telling its old peaceful tale;
 He thanks the blessed world that he was born...
 Then, far away, a lonely note of the horn.

They're drawing the Big Wood! Unlatch the gate,
 And set Golumpus going on the grass; 35
 He knows the corner where it's best to wait
 And hear the crashing woodland chorus pass;
 The corner where old foxes make their track
 To the Long Spinney; that's the place to be.
 The bracken shakes below an ivied tree, 40
 And then a cub looks out; and 'Tally-o-back!'
 He bawls, and swings his thong with volleying crack, —
 All the clean thrill of autumn in his blood,
 And hunting surging through him like a flood
 In joyous welcome from the untroubled past; 45
 While the war drifts away, forgotten at last.

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["Break of Day" continued]

Now a red, sleepy sun above the rim
 Of twilight stares along the quiet weald,
 And the kind, simple country shines revealed
 In solitudes of peace, no longer dim. 50
 The old horse lifts his face and thanks the light,
 Then stretches down his head to crop the green.
 All things that he has loved are in his sight;
 The places where his happiness has been
 Are in his eyes, his heart, and they are good. 55

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

"The March-Past" – Siegfried Sassoon

In red and gold the Corps-Commander stood,
 With ribboned breast puffed out for all to see:
 He'd sworn to beat the Germans if he could;
 For God had taught him strength and strategy. 4
 He was our leader, and a judge of port -
 Rode well to hounds, and was a damned good sort.
 "Eyes right!" We passed him with a jaunty stare.
 "Eyes front!" He'd watched his trusted legions go. 8
 I wonder if he guessed how many there
 Would get knocked out of time in next week's show.
 "Eyes right!" The corpse-commander was a Mute
 And Death leered round him, taking our salute. 12

[Final poems on the next page.]

“Base Details” – Siegfried Sassoon

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel, 5
Reading the Roll of Honour. “Poor young chap,”
I'd say – “I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.”
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die – in bed. 10

“The General” – Siegfried Sassoon

“Good-morning, good-morning!” the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
“He's a cheery old card,” grunted Harry to Jack 5
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

For any or all of the poems, feel free to write down comments, observations, or questions you would like to share.