

Literature Review: Disillusionment in Poetry During the Great War

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In June of 1914, the death of one man would be the first domino to fall that would lead to the death of thirteen million. Arch-Duke Ferdinand was to be the next Habsburg to ascend to the Austro-Hungarian throne, but his destiny was cut short by a Serbian nationalist. While the Great War did not immediately start from this spark, the fuse had been lit. In July of that same year, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. This was followed by old alliances dragging major powers into the conflict. Germany, France, and Britain were now at odds with one another. The stage was set for one of the bloodiest wars in human history. Britain was not totally prepared for this and, with the exception of its navy, was not ready to begin fighting immediately. The U.K. was also struggling with problems at home in the form of the Irish question of Home Rule. These troubles at home were the focus of British attentions, but whenever World War I broke out, the issues abroad became more urgent than the issues at home.

The idea of war was not tangible to the English public even as Austria-Hungary and Serbia declared war. It was not until danger posed to France and Belgium became real, in the form of neighboring German aggression, that the English people swiftly changed to an attitude of overwhelming patriotism. Many newspapers throughout the British Isles told of long lines outside of recruiting stations. Recruitment surged and the men of England went off to wage war against the Germans and Austrians. The European conflict started off with the assumption of a short conflict. That expectation dispelled after only a few months of fighting. War had changed, and gone was the warfare of the past with all of its rules and regulations. No longer was it a giant game of chess for the powers of Europe to play. It was now an exercise in survival and attrition. Among those who documented their feelings on this change were the “war poets” of England. These men would look at war and see only death and destruction, and their disdain for the death and misery that came along with their time fighting in Europe leaked into their poetry. Their

works beg certain questions that trouble historians today and created a view of the European conflict in the early twentieth century that a few have begun to challenge. Were their feelings and experiences representative of a whole nation? That question is what stimulated an attack on the old way of thinking about World War I.

There are two paradigms that exist within the literature on World War I and disillusionment. The old paradigm is the idea that the soldiers of Britain went off to war full of patriotic fervor and faith, and at the halfway point during the war, specifically the Battle of the Somme in 1916, they became disillusioned with all that they had been raised to believe about the nature of war. This is referred to as disillusionment. Disillusionment is described as, and will further be referred to as, the process by which British soldiers transitioned from serving with patriotism to a cynical, hopeless view of war. The new paradigm is an argument that has arisen in the last few decades to challenge the old, and attacks the fact that the old paradigm relies heavily on the views of a select few poets of the period. The war itself is not a point of contention between scholars; the war is a historical fact and the casualties and realities of the war are documented. The major works on disillusionment come from a mixed group of interested scholars. Poets, researchers, historians, and classics professors make up the authors who have contributed the most to the literature. Curiously, the scholars who have written the most significant works that assume the old paradigm are almost universally poets. The new paradigm is much more diversified in the backgrounds of its writers. The interpretation of these works are produced by men on the ground, and whether poets that are toted around by scholars who ascribe to the old paradigm, like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, are reflective of all soldiers that fought in the war, is a topic of debate. The literature on disillusionment during the Great War is

split into two camps, and all literature on this topic, whether directly argued or not, falls into one of these categories.

While the idea of disillusionment appeared as early as in the 1930s in the form of the book *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, the first scholar to analyze this phenomenon was Jon Silkin. He contributes the most to the literature with two works of his being staples for the literature on poets and disillusionment during the Great War. Silkin's first book, written in 1972 and followed by a second edition in 1998, was *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*. His books cover the same topic but at different angles, *Out of Battle* attempts to provide historical context and use it to explain the factors that influenced the English poets of the period. Silkin makes the argument that, "The war sharpens their alertness to their society as a whole. . . ."<sup>1</sup> He explains that the poets were the best to provide commentary and insight into the war and the society they lived in. His second book is more of an analysis of poets themselves and their attitudes. A compilation of poems forms the majority of the book. This book essentially began the literature by providing a more detailed analysis of disillusionment. Other authors explain that it was a simple one-two process, patriotism was present until 1916 and disillusionment thereafter. Silkin offers the idea of four stages of disillusionment that occurred in English war poets: the passive ideas of patriotism, the protest of the war through dark satire and the "recreation of physical horror,"<sup>2</sup> the move toward compassion, and finally the merging of compassion, anger, and intelligence that make an effort at change within the society. Silkin wrote

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*, 2nd ed. (Houndmills, England: Macmillan, 1998), 346.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Silkin, *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1979), 31.

extensively on the subject with over two dozen books on English poetry under his belt. He himself was a Jewish poet and the old testament was a significant influence on his work. His work on disillusionment would not stand alone, and in the same year he wrote *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, an English professor would contribute to the old paradigm with a new level of attention to detail, supported by primary sources.

Hilda D. Spear, in her 1979 book *Remembering We Forget: A Background Study to the Poetry of the First world War*, has a heavy reliance on primary sources with excerpts from letters and newspapers to back up her argument that poetry and newspapers aid in tracking disillusionment, “Writer after writer expressed the feeling of lassitude and enervation which had overcome them. They had put all their energies, all their efforts into war and now there was nothing left. . .”<sup>3</sup> Spear continues later in the book to explain the result of disillusionment among the rank and file, “Men had ceased to believe any longer in the cause they were fighting for; this resulted in feelings of guilt that they were the instruments by which the war was being prolonged. . .”<sup>4</sup> While the works that ascribe to the old paradigm are fairly homogenous, Spear’s work on this book is advanced in the literature due to her extensive support by primary documents. Up to this point, the idea of disillusionment was simply assumed to be correct, even Silkin assumed that the reader agreed with him in his assertions and provided little evidence beyond the poetry of English “war poets” like Sassoon and Owens. Spear takes the time to comb through newspapers, journals, and letters to find evidence to support the old paradigm and show the reader all the information that supports her argument. Her work on this monograph won her

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<sup>3</sup> Hilda D. Spear, *Remembering, We Forget: A Background Study to the Poetry of the First World War* (London, England: Davis-Poynter, 1979), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Spear, 20.

several awards, and she spent many years teaching in secondary schools and various universities throughout the U.K. with a focus on English literature. Lastly, an old paradigm supporter is John Lehmann, an English poet and publisher.

In his 1981 book, *English Poets of the First World War*, Lehmann adds to the literature the idea that, “Two separate worlds were developing: the world of make believe at home, and the enclosed, entirely male, comfortless world of bombardment and slaughter, ruled by martial discipline and illumined only by camaraderie and heroic selflessness.”<sup>5</sup> He argues that there was a stark contrast between how soldiers and people at home viewed the world. The time soldiers spent in combat drastically altered their world view and led them to cynicism. While some authors that follow the old paradigm, a phrase coined by American classical scholar Elizabeth Vandiver, explain the old paradigm is the only way to understand the soldiers of the Great war and more specifically the poets, Lehmann just assumes the reader knows this is the “proper” way to look at the war. He claims this lens of the old paradigm was “fundamental to understanding the English literature that inspires the First World War.”<sup>6</sup> His book on the English poets is not his first book and he has written other pieces that focus on specific poets in the past, and wrote poetry extensively throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Of the writers that ascribed to the old way of thinking, Lehmann uses the least amount of evidence in his claims. He uses the poets as primary sources, which presents problems due to the subjectivity of poetry, and he relies very heavily on the assumption that this traditional way of thinking is simply known to be the correct way to view the Great War and the men that fought in it.

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<sup>5</sup> John Lehmann, *The English Poets of the First World War* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Lehmann, 11.

The assumption that John Lehmann relied so heavily on, is the very assumption that Samuel Hynes works to refute. Samuel Hynes was the first to contribute a major piece of literature that claims that not only was the universal disillusionment a myth, but so too was the idea of universal enthusiasm at the beginning of the war. In his book, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, he argues that the depiction of the war in art and media skewed the view of things with the increased association of madness with war and the new type of hero, the sacrificial victim. He talks about how following the war the creation of the myths of butchery, sacrifice of the young, mindless hatred, and the cruel patriotism took hold. Through writers like H.G. Wells and T.S. Elliot the common myth emerges: civilization is ruined, and the past is lost. Hynes argues that many things continued and did not change. He argues that as the myths became novels and poets' autobiographies and anti-war films came out that cemented the myths as fact in the collective conscious. He shows through primary and secondary sources that while generals and critics argued against the myths, the politically active generation in the 1930s believed it as the truth, and it influenced their attitudes toward war. In an interesting departure from the writers that ascribe to the old paradigm, Hynes is the only one to have fought in World War II and also is not a poet. He was a literature professor and also, contrary to those in the old paradigm, is American. His work arguing against the old paradigm would stand alone for over 17 years until two works came along to further support what he argued.

In his book *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History*, and Brian Bond argues that the myths perpetuated by authors and media should have already been done away with due to the access that modern historians have to primary documents and historical records. Bond expresses the hope that a time is coming when the Great war can be seen simply as a historical event without any kind of spin. He goes on to lament that this has not yet

happened, stating, “the gulf between serious historical studies and popular misconceptions, encouraged by the media, may even be widening. This is a somewhat depressing state of affairs which historians must do their best to remedy.”<sup>7</sup> Bond then goes on to explore a group of books and popular media that perpetuate the myths first created in the post war years. He criticizes the old paradigm and how it has been allowed to have a hold on the popular view of the war. Unlike other Hynes, Bond directly attacks plays, movies, and tv shows as perpetuating ignorance and stereotypes. He adds to the literature by criticizing not just the literature but the results of that literature in media, critics, and historians alike. Bond is a Royal Army veteran and a military historian, not a poet, and has written multiple books on topics of British military history. A theme is beginning to emerge, perhaps the poets of the old paradigm are clouded by romantic views of their heroes, to the point where they can no longer look at them objectively.

The second writer to follow Hynes was Janet Watson. In her book *Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare*, Watson uses diaries, letters, and poetry to go after the claims of the old paradigm. She falls in line with Bond in her assertion that the disillusionment idea came after the war and was a creation of novels and publications after the fact. “The war itself was overwhelmingly popular, and the nation came together to a remarkable degree. . .”<sup>8</sup> What makes her take unique however is her approach to sources not found in the other new paradigm works. She takes primary sources of wartime accounts that were written during the experience, and those written in retrospect. She also brings in the unique angle of gender and the shifting definition of patriotism between various classes and jobs. She argues against the idea

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<sup>7</sup> Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75.

<sup>8</sup> Janet S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

that the front and the nation back home were different worlds and clearly lays out why the assumption of general disillusionment was a fabrication, “. . .we must acknowledge and give credence to other portrayals of the war experience which are not uniformly negative.”<sup>9</sup> While Watson’s contributions to the new paradigm side are substantial, the author who brings all the information and arguments of the new paradigm to bear in one book is Elizabeth Vandiver.

The final and most recent work on disputing the old paradigm was *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War*. This book written in 2013 by Elizabeth Vandiver written is the most comprehensive of displaying the two arguments and then proceeds to explain why the old paradigm is wrong. She restates the argument of the old way of looking at things and expresses disbelief over the fact that this way of thinking is still prevalent two decades after the excellent work of Samuel Hynes. She comes outright and states that the old paradigm is a lie and presents anthologies that were published during the war that show that “. . .a great many poets continued to write in unironic terms about duty, glory, and honour throughout the war and afterwards.”<sup>10</sup> A common theme among the war poets that the writers of the old paradigm point to is that they are the same handful of poets, and Vandiver is the first in the literature to make that point stating, “Limitation of the canon to ‘a consensual group of no more than ten or twelve writers has produced a decidedly warped image of the English First World War poetry in general, and especially of the protest writing.’”<sup>11</sup> The issue with the literature of old view of world war assumptions is that they always are propping up the same

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<sup>9</sup> Watson, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Vandiver, 4.

men and citing the same sources for evidence of their claims. The critical look at this argument however is not restrained to such limitations. Vandiver's constant citing of not only primary sources, but also the secondary sources on the other side of the debate and refuting them one by one is powerfully convincing and is the culmination of the anti-disillusionment line of scholarship. Her work refuting the popularly held view for the last hundred years is without a doubt the most significant addition to the literature.

Literature on disillusionment in World War I has changed over time, but the public assumptions on the war have not. Despite access to more and more primary sources and more and more literature being written refuting the old paradigm it is still firmly entrenched in the collective conscious. The two paradigms are split on two major issues that divide the two viewpoints right down the middle: the idea that there were two separate world and a disconnect between citizens and soldiers, and that all soldiers and war time poetry was subjected to a process of disillusionment. More and more scholars are trying to turn around the course the literature has been following for over 100 years, and as more voices speaking out against the old paradigm are put to paper, their hope may yet come to fruition. This debate needs to be settled, and the authors of the old paradigm have yet to respond to the criticism of the newer works on the Great War. The old literature vs. the new literature is a stark contrast and ripe for continued investigation and debate. More works on the newer argument against disillusionment should be explored as it turns common acceptances of fact about the war on its head. The two paradigms are firmly entrenched with the old ignoring the new, and the new fighting to make its voice heard; only time will tell which argument wins out in the end.

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**I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received  
unauthorized help on this work.**

William Harrison

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William Harrison". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'W'.