



War Poets as a Brand – Unpacked by Corpus-Derived Subtext

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Abstract

Scientific approaches to the explication of poetry have been around since antiquity. However, whilst the apparent deeds of mankind at war are often full of pagan sentiments such as ‘*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori...*’, protests at the very notion of war are often brushed aside by society. But can we rely upon the logical empiricism of the whole language, as represented by a reference corpus, to be the latent apologist for our deepest sentiments *and* to express them by the probability of *induction* alone? In common with the business theme of our conference, this paper will examine the brand of the War Poets, and in particular of some of Wilfred Owen’s ‘first lines’, as we recall that in business, the *ethos* of a ‘... brand of something such as a way of *thinking or behaving* is a particular kind of it (Cobuild English Language Dictionary, Second Edition, 1995). In this paper, the collected subtexts of the War Poets will be used to create their brand, beyond what used to be called analogue induction, beyond the information given (Bruner, 1974).

1 Introduction

In the world of business a firm’s *brand* is its most cherished possession. It embodies the *ethos* of all that the firm stands for that is reliable, trustworthy, good and persuasive. It is charismatic and inspires loyalty. The brand, in common with subtext and inductive reasoning (as we shall see later), involves more than is immediately apparent and often goes beyond the information given. A firm’s success will often have been accomplished by and through its trade secrets and its traditions that go back in time.

And this is also the case with regiments and the military. However, armies are in the service of rulers and governments and their alliances; and ideally they *sell* nothing. Armies and regiments, of course, also have *secrets*: they are often traditional but they are always *tactical and strategic*. Communication is conducted during times of war by means of codes. A strategic objective subsists permanently within the safeguarding of one’s own codes and the breaking of the codes of the enemy.

5 nting to be understood. It seems so soulless and, well, stupid. Great writers be
 6 oo, to impart wit or personality to soulless animation. The voice cast includes
 7 bottles have been consigned to the soulless anonymity of a large cardboard box.
 8 s a time before the arrival of such soulless anti-heroes as Freddy Krueger, Robo
 9 ng full of sub-Osbornian bile about soulless bankers, the death of enterprise, a
 11 disdainful Anglo-Saxon image of the soulless civil servant. To be a fonctionnair
 12 g queues at Verbier or tired of the soulless commercialism of Tignes, where they
 13 vitable. As Scully wanders amid the soulless continentals who befriended his tro
 14 by the use of Murrayfield for those soulless district games where the yellow-jac
 15 after his fine performance it was a soulless end. As early as the ninth minute
 16 the modern world is a distressingly soulless environment. Indeed, supplying an i
 17 tmare of what he calls "impersonal, soulless" estates. The emphasis at all the v
 18 exclusively local affair, and this soulless exhibition game can have convinced
 19 ing the car to Sainsbury's may be a soulless experience compared with a trip dow
 20 tual dimension provides a bleak and soulless experience." Mr Portillo, seen as
 22 re natural wedding picture than the soulless flash-saturated snaps that are take
 23 ambition. Welcome, instead, those soulless games of unremitting tedium, played
 24 day programme that brought them two soulless, goalless draws and precious little
 25 do not help Palace, neither does a soulless ground. The faithful did their best
 26 nd delivery renders it all a little soulless. Hancock himself hammers in some
 27 t NT houses, I do not long to live: soulless, imposing rooms full of guilt and fi
 28 than a hotel, our hero's home is a soulless lair, where females are welcome onl
 29 wo great clubs to make way for some soulless, made-for-TV Humberside monster. "I
 30 o extending either sequence in this soulless match at the Memorial Ground on Sat
 31 re an iniquitous, corrupt, immoral, soulless, materialistic, dumb, dangerous dec
 32 her hand, Colombia hit one of their soulless moods, woe betide the spectators.
 34 cupied since 1982. "Compared to the soulless multiplexes nearby, it is a work of
 35 e La Belle Vivette from Offenbach's soulless music, says PAUL DRIVER. La Belle
 36 hic should not be confused with the soulless neo-preppy gear of khakis and T-shi
 37 00 pages, but the result is a drab, soulless novel: the characters are shallow,
 38 he City end after lunch. It was a soulless occasion, no real way to anticipate
 39 esidential area into a wasteland of soulless office blocks. Nor is the grandio
 40 tasteless, uncomfortable, ugly and soulless on five continents, but never have
 41 omplex, or alongside a reassuringly soulless one-way street. But these are excep
 42 ear. City centres are abandoned for soulless out-of-town shopping and business "
 43 h the towering condos of the rather soulless Pelican bay community are an eyesor
 45 talinist past, with its bare, grey, soulless piazza and anorexic television towe
 46 xander's scrupulous direction, this soulless piece almost comes to life. The act
 47 MM's 60,000) and feature clean-cut soulless pretty boys, such as Take That, who
 48 tered the Guild Hall via a scruffy, soulless shopping precinct beneath the build
 51 at pass for apartments in Palermo's soulless suburbs. The American team, appar
 55 royed, soon to be replaced by those soulless tower blocks looking like upright c
 56 s and rehousing the inhabitants in "soulless" tower blocks. These "monuments to
 57 f England: the peeling streets, the soulless tower-blocks and dingy hotels and l

3 Finding all of the empiricism: to the point that subtext reads text and discloses what is *prior*

The findings of subtextual techniques in stylistics now transcend the boundaries between stylistics, linguistics and philosophy to demonstrate that the theories themselves of several disciplines leap across boundaries to bolster the truth of one another. Collocation within our disciplines is their long-undervalued catalyst: the science of the phenomenon is referred to by its inventor, the philosopher, William Whewell (born 1866) as the *Consilience of Induction*. Of this phenomenon and discovery, Mautner says the following:

He also argued that one path of progress of science is through the incorporation of several known laws from different fields into a single, more comprehensive theory, as Galileo's and Kepler's laws had both been incorporated into Newton's theory. Whewell called this 'consilience of inductions' and claimed that no theory which achieved it had subsequently been found to be false (Mautner, 2005: 654)

Wittgenstein vacillates between the view that events are logical to the point of having necessary meaning. He is equally keen to stress that there is no such thing as logical events, as we see in the *Tractatus*, 4.0312: 'My fundamental idea is that the 'logical constants are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the logic of facts' (Wittgenstein, 1922).

Because of intuitive opacity, Wittgenstein could not see all of the variables that occur or remain latent as collocates of the wildcarded constants. These variables are recoverable not as mere metaphysics but as entailed by their relationship with the constants of natural language logic.

This reveals that inside natural language collocation and logic operate as a relationship of consilience that allows constants and their collocates to become 'representative'; and hence necessary. Whewell could not have seen this either, because of intuitive opacity, but computers have proved his theory. This first occurred as part of the code-breaking by Alan Turing at Bletchley Park in December 1942 (Louw 2016).

The form of collocation that is most opaque to intuition is that of *grammar* and *lexis*. The most frequent lexical variables within a grammatical string can only be known through access to a large reference corpus. Yet, being the most frequent, they represent the *a priori* knowledge of the impact of their grammar, and help interpret a particular authorial lexico-grammatical collocation in much the same way in which fractures in semantic prosody may be used to shed additional light on the meaning of a particular text. These most frequent lexical variables within or immediately preceding/following a grammar string have been termed quasi-propositional variables [QPVs], and constitute corpus-derived *subtext*. The idea itself finds its confirmation in Russell's notion of logical language (Louw 2010). Thus philosophy of language and corpus linguistics combine to yield better stylistic interpretation.

It was Rudolph Carnap who said that a word can always appeal to its own empiricism. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in Owen's poem 'Move him into the sun'. The subtextual empiricism of the first line, and simultaneously the title, is vast, and the Times corpus includes a reference to the poem as an enacted short play. Intertextuality of this type is the hallmark of a successful piece of writing. But note that it is the consilience (see reference to Whewell earlier) of the collocates that refer to *light* that sets up the antithesis between the 'sun' as an *a priori* reference and 'limelight' and 'spotlight' as pagan references to human idolatry (for a full discussion of the subtext of this first line see Louw and Milojkovic, 2015).

The ability of the subtext of the first line to refer to the content in the rest of the text has been termed *prospection* (Louw, 2013). The poem entitled 'The Letter' by Wilfred Owen introduces the theme of wry humour. In the poem the letter is composed under fire by a low ranking soldier and is to

be sent to his wife at home in England. The bitter irony of war is accomplished before the poem is completed; but the brand is 'true grit' as ever.

The Letter

With B.E.F. Jun 10. Dear Wife,
 (Oh blast this pencil. 'Ere, Bill, lend's a knife.)
 I'm in the pink at present, dear.
 I think the war will end this year.
 We don't see much of them square-headed 'Uns.
 We're out of harm's way, not bad fed.
 I'm longing for a taste of your old buns.
 (Say, Jimmie, spare's a bite of bread.)
 There don't seem much to say just now.
 (Yer what? Then don't, yer ruddy cow!
 And give us back me cigarette!)
 I'll soon be 'ome. You mustn't fret.
 My feet's improvin', as I told you of.
 We're out in the rest now. Never fear.
 (VRACH! By crumbs, but that was near.)
 Mother might spare you half a sov.
 Kiss Nell and Bert. When me and you-
 (Eh? What the 'ell! Stand to? Stand to!
 Jim, give's a hand with pack on, lad.
 Guh! Christ! I'm hit. Take 'old. Aye, bad.
 No, damn your iodine. Jim? 'Ere!
 Write my old girl, Jim, there's a dear.)

The poem is carefully crafted in such a way as to have the bare-faced lies (that all is well) set out in the body of the poem, while all the text in parentheses gives away the lie as the reader works out the dire circumstances of the troops and the intensity of the bombardment and its dangers.

The soldier is missing the warmth of home and its comforts, expressly sex which is only hinted at in the first lines and the last lines. The hints take the form of colloquial expressions, such as having no lead in his pencil at the beginning of the poem and in the last lines where he is about to mention their shared intimacy, but is fatally hit. He is hit as he tells his mate to help him put on his back pack in order to move out of harm's way. In his last words he asks his friend Jim to complete the letter and impliedly to comfort his wife as he knows that he is dying.

This is the subtext of the first line ('I am in the *'), revealed by the first fifteen most frequent variables in the Google Books – UK corpus (Davies, 2011-).

1	I am in the habit	2956
2	I am in the Father	1880
3	I am in the midst	1517
4	I am in the right	1385
5	I am in the wrong	1182
6	I am in the same	835
7	I am in the way	821
8	I am in the middle	813
9	I am in the world	765
10	I am in the hands	761
11	I am in the country	713
12	I am in the dark	559
13	I am in the presence	469
14	I am in the process	400
15	I am in the humour	365

The quasi-propositional variables point to both spiritual and mundane predicament of the narrator, foretelling the imminent transition at the end of the poem. The mundaneness of his situation is

highlighted by ‘habit’ (position 1), ‘same’ (position 6), ‘middle’ (position 8) and ‘process’ (position 14). ‘Father’, ‘midst’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘hands’, ‘dark’ point to the narrator’s spiritual issues. Even ‘humour’ at position 15 hints at a current peculiar mood that must have afforded the inspiration necessary for writing. The persona’s inner conflict in all its nuances is reflected in the reference corpus.

For the sake of comparison, inner conflict does not appear to be present in the famous poem by Rupert Brooke:

The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

The search line ‘If I should *’ was studied in the BNC (Davies, 2004-). Only those contexts were studied where ‘should’ was used hypothetically, as in Brooke. The QPVs were ‘die’ (7), ‘have’ (6), ‘say’ (5), ‘tell’ (4), ‘be’ (3), ‘ask’ (2), ‘plant’ (2), ‘wish’ (1), ‘wonder’ (1), ‘try’ (1), ‘tear’ (1), ‘remark’ (1), ‘need’ (1), ‘happen’ (1), ‘miss’ (1), ‘fall’ (1), ‘change my mind’ (1), ‘chance to run over a cad’ (1), ‘by accident die’ (1). Surprisingly, only one out of the seven instances of ‘If I should die’ was actually a quote by Brooke. ‘Have’ in the second position, when not followed by a perfect infinitive, yielded one ‘if I should have children’ and two contexts from 1 Corinthians 13:

And **if I should have** prophecy and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and **if I should have** all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

The majority of other contexts referred to a hypothetical act involving daring, albeit on a more or much more trivial scale. Thus, the first line of Brooke’s famous patriotic poem prospects its content without betraying inner conflicts found in the poem by Owen.

4 War as conversation and the demands that it makes

Paradoxically, politicians often demand that war be forgotten and put behind us; but war veterans demand that it be *remembered and never forgotten*, as we see in the poem below. Swearing on oath may be a convention that in peacetime we encounter only in courts of law, but the agony of war readily imports the practice into its ‘war’ poetry. The loss of fellow soldiers is so keenly felt that that the poem we are about to read requires that we *swear* never to forget. We see it also in Shakespeare, where the ghost in *Hamlet* puts his son on terms to avenge his father’s murder. How can reference corpora assist us in comparing the demands of a ghost with those of the survivors of war? Is war merely legalised murder? Do war poems contain elements of vengeance? Are politicians responsible for placing their citizens in harm’s way? What price patriotism and glory and the notion of Wilfred Owen: ‘*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*’? The latter are so respected so deeply that Rupert

Brookes's poem, discussed above, is at least as memorable as the others mentioned in this paper. The moral status of war is embedded in culture, and this may differ sharply from one culture to another.

And yet even high ideals vanish in time, and ninety years after WWI, a reference corpus search in 44.5 million words of The Times newspaper for '*swear by the*' leaves our ideals looking washed out into trivia by delexicalisation. The world in peacetime has much to *swear by* and more pleasant things than war to remember. Lawrence Binyon sees the recollection of war as a form that we relegate to a fixed time: '*At the going down of the sun and in the morning...*'. While commercial brands remain in our active memory by means of incessant forms of advertising, the recruitment poster that features General Kitchener with a pointing finger and the slogan 'Your Country Needs You!' is more easily disregarded in peacetime, as shown by the 1995 Times corpus:

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MicroConcord search SW: swear by the
80 characters per entry
Sort : 1R/SW    unshifted.
  1 t even though creators of CD-Roms swear by the Macintosh as the best computer on
  2 s not get carried away. Those who swear by the market have to take some note of
  3 it will be overripe. Experts also swear by the smell test. Watch the locals in a
  4 html), and my Windows-using chums swear by The Windows Shareware Archive (http:/
```

In his poem 'Aftermath' Siegfried Sassoon writes (March 1919):

Have you forgotten yet?...
 For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged days,
 Like traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways:
 And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow
 Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you're a man reprieved to go,
 Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.

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.

A constant theme that sets the war poets against their own brand is *guilt*. It was felt in battle and also long after the guns fell silent in victory, as Louw's grandfather was rebuked for being one of the very few who came back. A woman attacked him with both fists, asking why he and not her son had returned. The lines of Yeats went through his mind:

Those that I fight I do not hate,
 Those that I guard I do not love.
 ('An Irish Airman foresees his Death')

A stanza from Paul Bewsher's poem '*Nox Mortis*' runs like this:

Death, Grief and Pain
 Are what I give.
 O that the slain
 Might live - might live!
 I know them not for I have blindly killed,
 And nameless hearts with nameless sorrow filled.

Nameless implies the anonymity of those we are to kill in this war as part of our duty. However, what underlies the guilt which is undoubtedly felt is the subtext of helplessness, the inability to counteract fate, because the predicament far exceeds human powers to change anything. The subtext of 'O that

the *’ in the Google Books corpus (Davies, 2011-) is ‘O that the **Lord**’ (424), ‘O that the **salvation**’ (104), ‘O that the **world**’ (81), ‘O that the **earth**’ (73), ‘O that the **good**’ (68), ‘O that the **Spirit**’ (62). These are the first most frequent variables.

This inability to influence events is echoed, albeit from a different perspective, by Owen’s ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, whose first line is ‘What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?’ Interestingly, the Google Books – UK corpus yielded ‘what healing thoughts’ (189, but in fact a quote by Wordsworth), ‘what trifling circumstances’ (84, but in fact a quote by Mungo Park: ‘I mention this to shew from *what trifling circumstances* the mind will sometimes derive consolation..’), ‘what teaching methods’ (80; diverse contexts), ‘what coping strategies’ (77; diverse contexts), ‘what sparkling eyes’ (75; diverse contexts) as the top most frequent strings. The positive semantic aura of Owen’s string probably reveals his wish to redeem the doomed boys from their cattle-like status.

5 The laughter of loss and oblivion

One of the best defence mechanisms in distress is laughter, but it moves quickly from the laughter of bravado to stagnation during a long war, to oblivion as the young are made prematurely old by war. We witness all three states in this poem by F.W. Harvey.

Prisoners

Comrades of risk and rigour long ago
 Who have done battle under honour’s name,
 Hoped (living or shot down) some meed of fame,
 And wooed bright Danger for a thrilling kiss, –
 Laugh, oh laugh well, that we have come to this!
 Laugh, oh laugh loud, all ye who long ago
 Adventure found in gallant company!
 Safe in Stagnation, laugh, laugh bitterly,
 While on this filthiest backwater of Time’s flow
 Drift we and rot, till something set us free!
 Laugh like old men with senses atrophied,
 Heeding no present, to the Future dead,
 Nodding quite foolish by the warm fireside
 And seeing no flame, but only in the red
 And flickering embers, pictures of the past: –
 Like a cinder fading black at last.

Being forgetful is normally a characteristic of the elderly, but war reduces young, shell-shocked men to mindless inmates of institutions. Harvey’s most successful term for corpus stylistics investigation is *atrophied*. The concordance from the 1995 Times corpus shows us what exactly gets atrophied within the human condition: war merely accelerates that process.

MicroConcord search SW: atroph*

80 characters per entry

Sort : 1L/SW shifted -1 characters.

1 my piece all right." An ageing, atrophied Arsenal team have now lost their la
 2 base was growing more elderly and atrophied. Something had to be done. The an
 3 last month. "The institutions are atrophying under mounting bad debt burdens".
 4 Anthony La Paglia, feels his brain atrophying. It is as though he is himself dyi
 5 he word exists, yet it has all but atrophied from neglect. Such a statement wi
 6 ociation", without which democracy atrophies in the face of tyranny. They are wh

7 ention for a while, but eventually atrophy, most of their programme taken over b
 8 a ruling party that has opted for atrophy when the electorate is demanding chan
 9 joint pains, palpitations, genital atrophy and loss of libido. Tridestra shows e
 10 nt therapy begin to notice genital atrophy, which often exacerbates a prolapse t
 11 he principal reasons for a gradual atrophying in many parts of the Church of Eng
 12 culinary soul. Our taste buds have atrophied permanently as a result of the drea
 13 e other, EMU is trying to flap its atrophied wings. Neither need prove a fears
 14 The bumpitiousness that will later atrophy into a cynical, cigar-wielding schtic
 15 dman, the cartoonist, is a pile of atrophied vomit that God's wife died giving b
 16 a faulty gene causing one type of atrophy in mice and dogs to a mutated gene in
 17 's critics, that is ample proof of atrophy. To industrialists and analysts who j
 18 DNA of patients with Leber's Optic Atrophy, a form of blindness transmitted down
 19 erious public debate to take place atrophy young. Compared with the liberal ar
 20 y will always find a way to resist atrophy and degeneration. As Pemble's absorbi
 21 ible is called progressive retinal atrophies. In humans, retinitis pigmentosa is
 22 catalogue is suffering from sales atrophy. Having bought the simplified, hits-r
 23 or whenever it is the brain starts atrophying. I used to know, of course. The
 24 utely does nothing to disguise the atrophied state which that particular form of
 25 litical triumph and adversity, the atrophy of the party organisation has continu
 26 democratic procedures explain the atrophy of English local government and the g
 27 currency, the loss of empire, the atrophy of the industrial base or the collect
 28 he appointment. He revitalised the atrophying Post Office by making it more cust
 29 caused their traditional trades to atrophy and obliged them to eke out what livi
 30 ysical tasks which they used to. Atrophy of the anterior horn of the spinal co
 31 simply useless. Parliament will atrophy if it limits its scope to representin
 32 s of parliamentary democracy would atrophy and our liberties would be in danger.

Of course, the institutions that we see in the above concordance are said to atrophy, but the sad irony is that those soldiers who survive the physical and mental scars of battle are themselves often in no condition to recognise the atrophy of the very institutions that they have sacrificed their own sentient faculties to protect in a freshly reconstituted free society.

Humour continues in the poem 'From the Somme' by Leslie Coulson. The penultimate stanza says:

I played with all the toys the gods provide,
 I sang my songs and made glad holiday,
 Now I have cast my broken toys aside
 And flung my lute away.

The subtext of 'I played with all the toys the gods provide' in the Google Books corpus, contained in the top ten lines, is as follows:

'I *ed with all *

1 I wished with all my 252
 2 I tried with all my 135
 3 I listened with all my 134
 4 I communed with all that 98
 5 I hoped with all my 87
 6 I prayed with all my 83
 7 I loved with all my 75

- 8 I shouted with all my 58
 9 I resisted with all my 55
 10 I entered with all the 51

The QPVs bring us back to the puny nature of human desires and their inability to influence the forces far surpassing them in strength. (One might point out that, strictly speaking, all these lines but that at position 10 are in fact different grammar strings from the one in the poem. In that case, if we search for ‘I *ed with all the’, we get ‘I entered with all the (51; one and the same quote from Samuel Johnson) and ‘I loved with all the (41; diverse sources); these yield even more precise subtext.) This is supported by other war poems. The glory of war is never as much a feat of choice as it is a requirement of duress. Deserters were shot by firing squads as we see poignantly in Gilbert Frankau’s poem, ‘The Deserter’. In the first stanza the soldier apologises to a commissioned officer, who give the nod to a Sergeant-Major for the execution to take place.

‘Fire!’ called the Sergeant-Major,
 The muzzles flamed as he spoke:
 And the shameless soul of a nameless man
 Went up in the cordite-smoke.

This was the alternative to respectable death under conditions where both forms of death were both possible and likely. Those who transgress the rules of the regiment are dealt with ruthlessly. The discourse is curt even for minor transgressions:

Regimental Sergeant-Major (to soldier): ‘You! What’s your name?’
 Soldier (at attention): ‘Jones, Sir!’
 Regimental Sergeant-Major: ‘You’ve lost it!’

Losing one’s name means earning it back through extra duties and patrols; but desertion earns only death. The choice is usually no better than binary, even in jest, as we see in the poem ‘Breakfast’ by Wilfrid Gibson.

Breakfast

We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
 Because the shells were screeching overhead.
 I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread
 That Hull United would beat Halifax
 When Jimmy Stainthorpe played full-back instead
 of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head
 And cursed, and took the bet; and dropt back dead.
 We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
 Because the shells were screeching overhead.

When the search line ‘*ing on our *s’, as in ‘lying on our backs’ was searched in the Google Books corpus, the corpus yielded that very line as the most frequent. ‘Lying on our backs’ appears in the corpus 173 times. However, the contexts that do not quote Gibson’s poem are mostly positive, invoking moments of leisure. Although there are those of restricted movement, similar to Owen’s, the norm does not suggest life danger in a position other than lying down. Interestingly, the contexts of ‘after breakfast’ in the BNC are less trivial than one might assume. Still, the lived reality of breakfasts in the trenches is eating them lying on ones back. Standing up to gamble involves more than one stake. The troops resume their breakfast even in the face of death. It is part of a brand of sheer grit.

6 The sounds of battle speak

In a brilliant piece of protest satire, and without sacrificing the brand, Wilfred Owen causes the very weaponry to comment on the passing of a soldier from life to death. The use of *onomatopoeia* (in Greek ‘the creation of names’) in ‘The Last Laugh’ is unparalleled in all war poetry for the callousness of its alliance with the powers that place men in harm’s way.

The Last Laugh

‘O Jesus Christ! I’m hit,’ he said; and died.
Whether he vainly cursed or prayed indeed,
 The Bullets chirped—In vain, vain, vain!
 Machine-guns chuckled—Tut-tut! Tut-tut!
 And the Big Gun guffawed.

Another sighed,—‘O Mother,—mother,—Dad!’
Then smiled at nothing, childlike, being dead.
 And the lofty Shrapnel-cloud
 Leisurely gestured,—Fool!
 And the splinters spat, and tittered.

‘My Love!’ one moaned. Love-languid seemed his mood,
Till slowly lowered, his whole face kissed the mud.
 And the Bayonets’ long teeth grinned;
 Rabbles of Shells hooted and groaned;
 And the Gas hissed.

The second line of the poem says ‘Whether he vainly cursed or prayed indeed’. These are all the contexts in the Google Books corpus yielded by the search line ‘whether he *ly *ed’:

- 1 whether he **really believed** 290
- 2 whether he **really wanted** 136
- 3 whether he **really intended** 114
- 4 whether he **really possessed** 57
- 5 whether he **really wished** 57
- 6 whether he **really existed** 47
- 7 whether he **merely wished** 44
- 8 whether he **merely desired** 43
- 9 whether he **seriously believed** 42
- 10 whether he **really liked** 40

The *a priori* values of a human life – beliefs, wishes and intentions – are shattered unthinkingly at a stroke, leaving ‘really’, ‘merely’ ‘and seriously’ as question marks as to their exact nature and even existence. Death is lived more intimately in the trenches than on the battle field itself because it offers the illusion of normality whilst simultaneously reducing all that we take for certainty and making it utterly precarious. Wilfred Owen imports the metaphors of intimacy and surprise into the very moment of death. Even bleeding to death is compared, as we see in the last line of the first stanza, with the loss of sweet food on a picnic to ants.

Asleep

Under his helmet, up against his pack,
After so many days of work and waking,
Sleep took him by the brow and laid him back.
There, in the happy no-time of his sleeping,

Death took him by the heart. There heaved a quaking
 Of the aborted life within him leaping,
 Then chest and sleepy arms once more fell slack.
 And soon the slow, stray blood came creeping
 From the intruding lead, like ants on track.

Whether his deeper sleep lie shaded by the shaking
 Of great wings, and the thoughts that hung the stars,
 High-pillowed on calm pillows of God's making,
 Above these clouds, these rains, these sleets of lead,
 And these winds' scimitars,
 -Or whether yet his thin and sodden head
 Confuses more and more with the low mould,
 His hair being one with the grey grass
 Of finished fields, and wire-scrags rusty-old,
 Who knows? Who hopes? Who troubles? Let it pass!
 He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous, less cold,
 Than we who wake, and waking say Alas!

Interestingly, the string underlying 'like ants on track' in the last line of the first stanza (like *s on *) yields, in the Google Books corpus, the line 'like soldiers on parade'. (It comes from various sources, whereas the other three lines that come up are in fact much quoted lines of particular authors: 'like phosphorus on sheets' by Lord Byron, 'like statues on horseback' mostly by Sir Walter Scott, and 'like bats, on parchment wings' by Jonathan Swift.) Even blood must show discipline, if one line is at all enough to yield any interpretation whatsoever.

In the second stanza the link with nature and the ants allows Owen to immortalise the 'sleeping' soldier by reincarnating him within all of nature and the universe. For the corpse, the 'sleets of lead' and the 'winds' scimitars' have placed it beyond fear as it is experienced by the soldiers who survive, and their duty to express forms of pity to which they have become inured.

He sleeps less tremulous, less cold
 Than we who **must** awake, and waking, say Alas! (our emphasis)

The customary *hail* of bullets have become a *sleet*.

Here we see a temporary apotheosis of a dead soldier, but in 'Arms and the Boy', Owen celebrates the humanity of a boy being trained for the cruelty of war. The images of innocence and love almost outnumber those of war and come together most poignantly in the line about bullets that 'long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads'. God made him whole but war will likely atomise his elements.

Arms and the Boy

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-leads,
 Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
 Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth
 Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

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.

If anyone doubted the *a priori* nature of the boy being confronted with evil, this concordance from the 1995 Times corpus brings the significance of the encounter home. The image of gentle nuzzling is used to describe the act of killing.

MicroConcord search SW: nuzzl*

80 characters per entry

Sort : 1R/SW unshifted.

1 e, from 1763, is filled with gentle, nuzzling affection, a vision of animal pare
 2 in the dance, John Kilroy bends and nuzzles against Gill Clarke in a birdlike m
 3 n from mythology. Acis and Galatea nuzzle amorously in a painting alive with o
 4 s, off her. He'd touch and press and nuzzle, and entwine limb to limb, like a 16
 5 e also talks constantly to her dogs, nuzzles and strokes them. But she objects t
 6 immer figures, they are also able to nuzzle into inlets, ease gently up rivers;
 7 Says that part of the reason she was nuzzled into the comfort zone of Carling is
 8 g predatory mince or, once trusting, nuzzling Maurice with an arm-length swaying
 9 he could, so he leaned across. As he nuzzled me, he said again, 'You really smel
 10 ens allowing calves to see, lick and nuzzle one another, providing a less lonely
 11 eek the same head was snapped gently nuzzling over the shoulder of Pitman as she
 12 its time cooing over the computers, nuzzling over the spiffily futuristic vid-p
 13 d pink knees of Bradford businessmen nuzzled the sun." b. "I have lost count o
 14 Smith entered their enclosure. They nuzzled the keeper and he tickled their ear
 15 ing. Both sports allow the camera to nuzzle up so close to the players' faces th
 16 bably won't be allowing my horses to nuzzle up to me quite so much. But if nothi
 17 is a cousin of the calf or lamb that nuzzled up to them at the farm-park, but al

Data from the following files:

TIMES95.TXT

The brand ensures that we see bullets that kiss and kill.

7 Conclusion

The brand of the War Poets, when viewed through corpus stylistic tools, and in particular corpus-derived subtext, emerges as consistently anti-war, bar the famous exception of the famous patriotic poem 'The Soldier' by Rupert Brooke. While the subtext of the first line in this poem prospects inevitable life danger and contains no allusion to inner conflict, other poems studied in this paper are openly contemptuous of the doctrine that places victory above human life. Corpus-derived subtext uncovers two interwoven themes. One is the absence of choice, either when it comes to killing others or to being killed. The overwhelming forces of politics and history have rendered the individual choiceless when it comes to matters of life and death. The other theme revolves around the individual's private wishes and deep desires that are annulled and remain at the level of subtext. Even blood shows discipline when trickling out of a soldier's wounds, as if freedom could not be achieved at least in death. One of the deep desires that the individual gets parted from is sexual love, which is replaced by the gentleness of bullets. Corpus-derived subtext renders War Poetry even more heart-

rending than the actual text. Concordances from the 1995 Times newspaper corpus additionally pinpoint the trivialization of what constituted the basis of patriotism in 1914-1918.

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