

Resisting War Rhetoric: Ivor Gurney's Memory Work.

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Biography

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Abstract

Ivor Gurney was an accomplished musician, and might never have written poetry had his circumstances not prompted his choice to enlist, resulting in his presence at the front. His poems shed light on the memory that can be kept of a conflict, a poetry that desires truthfulness even as contemporary rhetoric and other patriotic poems fill people’s minds with lies. Gurney’s poetic technique gestures the reader to focus through “the dearness of common things.” In poems and letters he expresses in detail the after-effects of gas and trauma. His tragic end, internment in a mental hospital where he gradually languished into a non-creative state, resulted from “the mental torture [which] could not be expelled.”

Résumé

Musicien accompli, Ivor Gurney n’aurait peut-être jamais écrit des poèmes si les circonstances historiques de la Première Guerre mondiale n’avaient motivé son choix d’être volontaire pour le front. Ses poèmes éclairent la mémoire qu’on peut avoir de ce conflit, c’est une poésie en quête de vérité pendant une période caractérisée par la propagande et une poésie de rhétorique mensongère. La technique poétique de Gurney est une gestuelle qui invite le lecteur à se focaliser sur « la tendresse des choses communes ». Dans ses poèmes et ses lettres il exprime de manière très détaillée les effets néfastes du traumatisme d’avoir été gazé. Sa fin tragique, l’internement en hôpital psychiatrique où il languit et sombre dans un état de non-créativité résulte de “la torture mentale dont il ne pouvait se libérer.

Keywords

Ivor Gurney, *Severn & Somme* (1917), Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, trauma, shell-shock, World War I, Geoffrey Hill, C.F.G. Masterman, War Propaganda Bureau, 1914-1918, “1914”, “Sonnets 1917”, Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Ford Maddox Ford, Hilaire Belloc.

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Does it sound interesting? May God forgive me if I ever come to cheat myself into thinking that it was, and lie later to younger men of the Great Days.

— Ivor Gurney in a letter to Marion Scott, 1917.

“...eye-deep in hell” – Ezra Pound

When it comes to studying the poetry of Ivor Gurney, the task is hardly as easy as purchasing the complete works of Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, or Siegfried Sassoon. Also lacking for Ivor Gurney is a volume similar to *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg* (1979), which contains selections of poetry, prose, letters, paintings and drawings, and clearly illustrates Rosenberg’s various talents. An interesting parallel volume for Gurney would be a compilation of select musical scores, poems, and letter—or better yet—an application like the one developed by Faber and Faber for iPad allowing viewers to simultaneously read Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and hear the poem read by himself or others (Gray, 14). In Gurney’s case, there would be interpretations of his musical compositions to include. According to Leonard Clark’s “Bibliographical Note” to the 1973 edition of *Poems of Ivor Gurney 1890-1937*, chosen by Edmund Blunden, some 880 poems or more were written between 1913-1927 (27). Even the larger selection by P.J. Kavanagh (1984), revised and reprinted in 2004, contains less than half of those (some 314 poems). However, Kavanagh does a great deal to put poems not previously in print into his selection. He reprints only 14 poems from *Severn & Somme*’s 46 poems, and 9 of *War Embers*’ 58 poems, so as to give space to the lesser known texts. Kavanagh had access to “a box of notebooks” which “came to light” in the early 1970s as well as a “handwritten notebook” which “came to light in 1986” (Kavanagh 1990, 242). Yet, still seriously lacking for this poet, who figures on the tablet of ‘War Poets’ in the Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey, is a published collection of the complete poems.

Still, from the *Collected Poems* one gets a feel for his talent, which some have judged as unequal. As I see it, Gurney’s key preoccupation, from beginning to end, was memory. I shall attempt to illustrate this by focusing first on his memorial poems, then on the way his later work looks through memory’s lens, until, the excess of the past in his life leaves him too weak to recover.

Memorial Poems: “1917” vs. “1914” ; “The Lock Keeper”; “To his Love”

It has generally proven true that the poets who survived the war wrote to commemorate those who did not. But this task is not an easy one for multiple reasons. In the case of Ivor Gurney, who was one of the first poets writing from the front with an aim to counter war-rhetoric, reading Rupert Brooke was quite a challenge. Brooke’s early fame is well documented. Fifty of his poems written between 1905 and 1911 were published in 1911, and following his death, Edward Marsh collected his other poems. It would seem that Gurney’s earliest reactions to Brooke were basically negative. As early as 3 August 1915, a few short months after he had joined the 5th Gloucester Reserve Battalion in February and was completing his training in Britain, Gurney wrote to his friend Marion Scott:

The Sonnet of R.B. you sent me, I do not like. It seems to me that Rupert Brooke would not have improved with age, would not have

broadened; his manner has become a mannerism, both in rhythm and diction. (Gurney 1991, 29).¹

Despite the dislike, indeed perhaps because of it, Gurney's first book of poems, *Severn & Somme* (1917) ends with a commemorative series of five sonnets for Rupert Brooke.² Geoffrey Hill in 1984 suggested that Gurney "plainly intended his five 'Sonnets 1917' as a riposte to Brooke's '1914' sonnets" (Hill 426). Parallel to Brooke's own five-sonnet sequence, "1914," and using Brooke's choice of the Petrarchan form, Gurney's "Sonnets 1917" (1987, 49-51) are significantly different, "not so much acknowledging as challenging the propriety of Brooke's attitude to war", suggests John Lucas (10). Gurney would have read Brooke's entire sequence by the time his own poems reached publication, without finding them to be so very remarkable as noted in a letter: "Of Course, Rupert Brooke is exquisite enough, but one can always read *Friends*" to Marion Scott, November 21, 1917; Gurney, 1991, 370). Brooke's "1914" sonnets, according to Geoffrey Keynes's preface to *The Poetical Works* (1946) "were written in the last months of 1914 and were finished at Rugby while he was at home on leave... They were published in December 1914, in the fourth and last part of *New Numbers* with poems by Lascelles Abercrombie, Wilfrid Gibson and John Drinkwater" (5). They are easily available in entirety to readers today. Gurney's "Sonnets 1917" is reproduced in entirety only in his first published volume in 1917, and its reprint, *Severn & Somme and War's Embers* (Gurney's two published collections were reprinted jointly in 1987).³ The explanation may be that the sequence of poems was judged unequal by the various editors, and it does seem that the final Gurney sonnet "England The Mother" would uphold sacrifice for the state. However, I would like to consider these poems individually and in their sequence as an attempt at counter-rhetoric to Rupert Brooke's "1914" in its numbered sequence of Petrarchan sonnets. Here Gurney attempts to counterpoint Brooke, poem for poem:

	(Brooke)	(Gurney)
I.	Peace	For England
II.	Safety	Pain
III.	The Dead	Servitude
IV.	The Dead	Home Sickness
V.	The Soldier	England the Mother

Jon Stallworthy declared, "Rupert Brooke is not a War Poet. He is a poet of peace, a celebrant of friendship, love, and laughter" (Stallworthy 1990, 193), yet Brooke's sonnets in the sequence "1914" (Brooke 1970, 19-23) have most often been viewed as bellicose. The first sonnet, "Peace" suggests that the war provides the right awakening for bewildered youth, using as one of its sources the Christian hymn translated from German, which begins "Now thank we all our God" (Stallworthy 2002, 7). "Safety" follows, with the word assuming a deep counter meaning: safety comes in death. The third poem, "The Dead" borrows from Whitman with its blowing bugles, but in contrast to Whitman's questioning of the worth of such slaughter, the fact of dying in Brooke's poem gives value to men who had had none before: "There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,/ But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold." (Brooke 1994, 146). In the fourth sonnet, also entitled "The Dead" those dead provide "unbroken glory, a gathered radiance, / A width, a shining peace, under the night." (147).

Gurney does commemorate Brooke (his sacrifice) at the same time as he critically reacts to his poetry. His five "Sonnets 1917" show through their title as a

date, that he is responding to the five-sonnet sequence “1914,” and in case the first readers might have missed it, he adds “To the Memory of Rupert Brooke”. Gurney wrote about this sequence to Marion Scott (in a letter dated February 14, 1917):

These sonnets . . . are intended to be a sort of counterblast against ‘Sonnets 1914’, which were written before the grind of war and by an officer (or one who would have been an officer). They are the protest of the physical against the exalted spiritual; of the cumulative weight of small facts against the one large. Of informed opinion against uninformed (to put it coarsely and unfairly), and fill a place. Old ladies won’t like them, but soldiers may, and these things are written either for soldiers or civilians as well informed as the French what a ‘young fresh war’ means (1991, 210).

The first sonnet, “For England” asks “who/ Would willingly let slip, freely let go/ Earth’s mortal loveliness” (Gurney 1987, 49) and in the second stanza, the “white glow” echoes “a white/ Unbroken glory” in Brooke’s fourth sonnet. Gurney’s “Pain” seems to be a response to Brooke’s “Safety.” This is where the dream of heroic bravery encounters the reality of the trenches. It is probably one of the most quoted and anthologized poems by Gurney, and its final line, “The amazed heart cries angrily out on God” (50) may have inspired several lines in Geoffrey Hill’s “Funeral Music,” published in *King Log* (1968), including “Among the carnage the most delicate souls/ Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping Jesus” (Hill 2006, 34). “Servitude” suggests that the soldiers are doing their duty for England but that it is worse than keeping up a brothel, though companionship can be a consolation, as expressed in the second stanza. “Home Sickness” responds to Brooke’s “The Soldier” who dies on foreign soil. The final Gurney Sonnet, “England the Mother” has been criticized for not sufficiently countering war rhetoric. Yet, the poem ends with what might correspond to a description of Brooke’s mindset in his sonnet sequence “1914” as well as his physical beauty, his lasting reputation being that of a golden boy, a blond-haired beauty who wrote about things golden:

Death impotent, by boys bemoaned at, who
Will leave unblotted in the soldier-soul
Gold of the daffodil, the sunset streak,
The innocence and joy of England’s blue. (1987, 51)

It must be remembered that *Severn & Somme* was published under the censor’s eye and amidst propaganda campaigns. Gurney’s critique of Brooke’s poems needed to be couched in enough subtlety in order to remain in print. Peter Buitenhuis’s study of propaganda during the Great War suggests that in Britain, it was a writer’s picnic: one of C.F.G. Masterman’s ideas when he became head of the War Propaganda Bureau in 1914, was to get writers involved. On September 2, 1914, a secret meeting of major British authors was held in what was “probably the most important gathering of creative and academic writers ever assembled for an official purpose in the history of English letters” (Buitenhuis 14).⁴ The authors were encouraged to offer their services in the cause of propaganda to foster public support for the war. That call for support began in 1914 with the “Remember Belgium” campaign..

Gurney’s second published volume, *War Ember’s*, came out in 1919. It contains a memorial poem for Edward Thomas who was killed in April, 1917, written entirely in heroic couplets:

The Lock-keeper
(To the Memory of Edward Thomas)

A tall lean man he was, proud of his gun,
Of his garden, and small fruit trees every one
Knowing all weather signs, the flight of birds,
Farther than I could hear the falling thirds
Of the first cuckoo. Able at digging, he
Smoked his pipe ever, furiously, contentedly.
Full of old country tales his memory was;
Yarns of both sea and land, full of wise saws
In rough fine speech; sayings his father had,
That worked a twelve-hour day when but a lad.
Handy with timber, nothing came amiss
To his quick skill; and all the mysteries
Of sail-making, net-making, boat-building were his.
That dark face lit with bright bird-eyes, his stride
Manner most friendly courteous, stubborn pride,
I shall not forget, not yet his patience
With me, unapt, though many a far league hence
I'll travel for many a year, nor ever find
A winter-night companion more to my mind,
Nor one more wise in ways of Severn river,
Though her villages I search for ever and ever. (1987, 99)⁵

This poem demonstrates the complete admiration that Gurney felt for Edward Thomas, who was proud of his gun before the war and presumably used it for everyday purposes as an outdoorsman. The poem's description of the man might apply to the way he could be observed at war, while speaking to his fellows, but it is based on a life well-lived during peace time. The tricks of nature that were part of his knowledge, "Knowing all weather signs, the flight of birds" might have served him at the front, but apart from the word "gun" ending line one, there are few further allusions to the war that killed Thomas. The celebration of his particularities and personality is linked to the Severn river. As Lucas tritely put it, for Gurney, beauty lies in the particular, "And for him, as for Thomas, the particular means the local" (Lucas 25). Whereas Gurney had never met Brooke, he knew Thomas personally, and his friend J.W. Haines had sent him a photo of Thomas (Gurney 1991, 366). In a letter to Marion Scott from November 29, 1917, he writes:

. . . am about to send you Thomas' poems. Very curious they are, very interesting; nebulously intangibly beautiful. But he had the same sickness of mind I have – the impossibility of serenity for any but the shortest space. Such a mind produces little (375).

Gurney identified himself, and his creative inspiration, with that of Thomas. Thomas's name also occurs in later poems such as "The Poets of My Country" (2004, 257) or "The Mangel-Berry" (263). In fact, another later poem entitled "The Lock Keeper" (beginning "Men delight to praise men," 84-86) may be a further elaboration on qualities that Thomas possessed which made him so admirable to Gurney. He also set Edward Thomas's poems to music, writing songs for "The Cherry Trees" (1920),

“Snow” (1921), the song cycle “Lights Out” (a series of five Thomas poems, composed from 1918-25), “Sowing” (composed 1918, printed 1925).

Gurney thought he had lost his friend F.W. Harvey to the war as well. In response, he wrote “To His Love” (Hurd 117). Although Gurney later learned that his friend and fellow poet was still alive, but had been taken prisoner, the poem was maintained for publication in *War’s Embers*. And Gurney also wrote music for Harvey’s “In Flanders” (1917) and “Walking Song” (1919). In the poem “To His Love” a deep appreciation of nature and the local is also evident (the Severn is mentioned in the third stanza), while the knowledge of the weight of loss is expressed in the first stanza:

He’s gone, and all our plans
Are useless indeed.
We’ll walk no more on Cotswold
Where the sheep feed
Quietly and take no heed. (2004, 21)

The surprise of the end of the poem, where the wound takes on a visible quality is a bit reminiscent of Rimbaud’s “Le Dormeur du Val,” though here the death of the subject is clear from the outset:

Cover him, cover him soon!
And with thick-set
Masses of memoried flowers—
Hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget. (21)

This poem may also be considered as corresponding to the “type” of an elegy (see Lucas) that would become prevalent: the form would be open, allowing such a poem to serve as an elegy for one or the many. This kind of elegy became popular with the war poets during World War I. Sassoon’s title, “To Any Dead Officer” (Sassoon 77) proposes that such a poem might serve interchangeably.

‘The Dearness of Common Things’

Memory and memorial was the guiding measure of Gurney’s poetry, from *Severn & Somme* to his later works. During the war, Gurney’s exercise of memory was also focused on his native Gloucester, which he celebrates in poems like “West Country” (1987, 33), “Song” (36), “Influences” (38-39), “Winter Beauty” (41). For Lucas Gurney “is both celebrant and memorialist of a loved place that, without his unique vision, will not be seen by or become articulate to future generations” (Lucas 56). In “Solace of Men” which begins “Sweet smelling, sweet to handle, fair of hue/ Tobacco is.” Gurney describes its effects on his fellow soldiers and himself. It stops hunger and stills fear, and at the end of the poem is described as “The bane of care, the spur to memories.” (Severn 64). Lucas writes, “What distinguishes Gurney from nearly all other soldier poets of the Great War is the ardour of his belief in what he will later call ‘the dearness of common things’” (20), and he adds that Gurney is a historian for his native places “rescuing them from oblivion, knowing their ‘Hidden Tales’...” (21). Gurney’s attachment to the “small dear things” can be illustrated by the poem, “From Omiecourt,” dated by Lucas as written in late summer 1918 (19), and published in *War’s Embers*:

O small dear things for which we fight—
Red roofs, ricks crowned with early gold,
Orchards that hedges thick enfold—
O visit us in dreams to-night!

Who watch the stars through broken walls
And ragged roofs, that you may be
Still kept our own and proudly free
While Severn from the Welsh height falls. (1987, 97)

The “small dear things” are those that give the soldier his motivation. The particularity here is different from usual rhetoric of war, where the enemy is made to seem evil. Nothing of that kind occurs in Gurney’s poetry, where the enemy, rarely mentioned, remains human.

Gurney wrote war poems from the front, but his poetic output about the war continued long after the war ended, resulting in the more mature and meditative work of the 1920s. Gurney had much to remember, and he had it in mind to remember his comrades. Kavanagh situates “his most fruitful period” as “in and around 1922” (1990, 235). Many of the poems of *War’s Embers* were written after Gurney left the front in September 1917, after he was gassed. “Toasts and Memories” (composed in November 1917) is keen to recall his fellows who are still fighting: it is “(To the Men of the 2/5 Gloucester Regiment)” and begins by mentioning the “estaminets” of France, where the soldiers gathered together and spoke of England in a most nostalgic way:

While thoughts of Gloucester filled us—
Roads against windy skies
At sunset, Severn river,
Red inn-blinds, country cries. (1987, 66)

At the front, the third stanza suggests, the sorrow and longing for England left behind is intense. But the poem comes full circle with the poet now returned to England and longing for the companionship of his fellow soldiers:

And I, at home, must wonder
Where all my comrades are:
Those men whose Heart-of-Beauty
Was never stained by War. (1987, 67)

As his difficulties in re-integrating civilian life intensified, Gurney wrote “Strange Hells,” a poem evoking the horror of the war, and then asking about the soldiers who risked all:

Where are they now, on State-doles, or showing shop-patterns
Or walking town to town sore in borrowed tatterns
Or begged. Some civic routine one never learns.
The heart burns--but has to keep out of face how heart burns.
(2004, 141)

Even after his internment in 1922, many poems recall the experiences at the front with a strange present-like reality to them.⁶ As P. Joy King has noted about the poem

“The Bohemians,” “It is in his naming of places and people that Gurney challenges a statistical vision of war, thereby attributing significance to them and arresting the onslaught of unmarked graves and loss as calculated in numbers” (146). In 1924-25, Gurney identified himself as “First War Poet” meaning that he was the first true poet of the Great War (Lucas 36), and perhaps he was.

The after-effects of trauma and gas

One of Freud’s key texts on the subject of shell shock and trauma is found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). But Ford Madox Ford had also described it aptly:

You may say that everyone who had taken physical part in the war was then mad. No one could have come through that shattering experience and still view life and mankind with any normal vision. In those days you saw objects that the earlier mind labeled as *houses*. They had been used to seem cubic and solid permanences. But we had seen Ploegsteert where it had been revealed that man’s dwellings were thin shells that could be crushed as walnuts are crushed. Man and even Beast . . . all things that lived and moved and had volition and life might at any moment be resolved into a scarlet viscosity seeping into the earth of torn fields. . . . It had been revealed to you that beneath ordered Life itself was stretched the merest film with, beneath it, the abysses of Chaos. (Qtd Buithuis 161 from *It Was the Nightengale*, 1933)

Discussion over the amounts of gas received by Gurney in September 1917, during the third Battle of Ypres (also called Passchendaele), and how serious the consequences were for him, have persisted among his readers, biographers and critics. Is that what led to his internment in a mental institution? Would he have been unsuited to normal life anyway, even if he had never gone to the front? Was the comraderie of soldierly life a stabilizing factor that delayed internment? Were his mental problems directly linked to chemical warfare? While a clear answer to these questions may never be available to us, we owe it to the poet to have a look at his own recordings of the events, and to consider them within the larger context of the effects of the war. At times, Gurney expressed surprise at having obtained a blighty—a reprieve from battle—a kind of free-ride away from the exhaustion of it all:

Having stirred Fritz to a bombardment, and performed a solo
In a night of blackness and fear—and gone past the first Line;
Got gassed, and learnt the machine gun, how it played
Scales and arpeggios—perhaps not wholly in vain.
(...)
Chokes and gasps of gas moved a doctor’s sympathy
(Three weeks in needing rest—hoping a week to befall)
And got to Blighty—as unexpectedly as ever any
Of honest gas (but not much) got by a tale
Of five hours gas bombardment, which was true
(I brought that down) or keeping silence as to the
Real reason—which was three weeks at Ypres,
Without a rest.... (quoted in Hurd, 103-4).

Gurney mentions his experience of being gassed in letters, beginning September 12, 1917 to Marion Scott, where he relates “My throat is sore from gas; it is just (or was)

as if I had had catarrh, but only an occasional explosion of coughing is left now. No luck! One cannot smell the new gas. One starts sneezing.” (qtd Hurd 109). And in a poem written in the 1920s, he described it this way:

Went sick for contrariety and gas symptoms;
Hoping a week’s easy; with six others wheezy
(Though ready for the Line) and coughing discreetly,
(Who had walked through gas too lazy to do the easy
Thing — and wear gas masks, till it overdid us). (qtd Hurd 110).

But Hurd, who explains the passages I have just quoted with the suggestion that Gurney may have been trying to pull a “wangle” could be mistaken. Might the gas itself have thrown Gurney’s delicate balance off? Such things did happen to stronger men. His letter to Marion Scott on 25 February 1918 sounds like the real thing to me:

My Dear Friend,
My insides having been a little extra troublesome lately, I went sick and now am here! So long as the gas has no influence on my tummy after the war, I don’t mind. Well, I am trying to write, but my mind is appallingly rusty as you may well believe. By sheer will power (no musical impulse aiding) I turned out a song today. But alas! I have only two books with me, *The Shropshire Lad* and your gift of *Friends*. So if you have done with E.T. [Edward Thomas] please return him, will you (Letters 405).⁷

In his biography of Gurney, Michael Hurd suggests that Gurney’s mental torment would have been present, war or no war, and that the comradeship and daily routine of military life provided a type of helpful structuring for Gurney. That may indeed be the case, but one could make the contrary argument that the war led to his mental demise. Had there been no war, a fragile, sensitive being like Gurney might have come across other structuring forces that could have pulled him through, or at least helped him to shoulder his weaknesses. However, for such as Gurney, and for many less artistically inclined men, the horrors of war must have been close to unbearable. Far too many young men were affected by tremendous mental anguish after the war. As in more recent wars,—“Gulf War Syndrome” or “Gulf War Illness”—the “shell shocked” of the Great War were hard to reconcile with Victory’s rhetoric.

In the opening pages of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), one Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran who is tormented by visions of the death of his friend Evans in battle, speaks of suicide, and has consultations with one Dr. Holmes. When Sir William Bradshaw encounters Septimus, he immediately suggests that he be interned. Although his Italian wife Rezia is slightly relieved, Septimus’s own agitation only increases, and he commits suicide. News of the suicide reaches Mrs. Dalloway’s party in the last pages of the novel where the name is evacuated, and Septimus is only a “case”:

But she did not know what it was exactly about Sir William; what exactly she disliked. Only Richard agreed with her, “didn’t like his taste, didn’t like his smell.” But he was extraordinarily able. They were talking about this Bill. Some case Sir William was mentioning, lowering his voice. It had its bearings upon what he was saying about the deferred effects of shell shock. There must be some provision in the Bill.

Likewise, towards the close of Ford Madox Ford's *A Man could Stand Up* (1926) there is another suggestion of how widespread the psychological damage of the war was:

Hitherto, she had thought of the War as physical suffering only; now she saw it as a mental torture. Immense miles and miles of anguish in darkened minds. That remained. Men might stand up on hills, but the mental torture could not be expelled. (*Parade's End*, 714).

Gurney himself was interned after he threatened numerous times to do himself harm, and his death wish can be evidenced in a number of poems, such as "The Shame" (2004, 205), and "The Interview" (198-99). Often the memory of front line experience is intermingled with a suicide wish, as in "On Somme" where the last lines admit:

Courage kept, but ready to vanish at first touch.
Fear, but just held. Poets were luckier once
In the hot fray swallowed and some magnificence. (2004, 206).

Possibly, even in this death wish—which is a wish for release and escape from asylum—Gurney still has the fame of Brooke's death in mind at the back of his mind...

Was it really necessary to keep Gurney in such extended confinement and so cut off from the outside world? Hurd raises the question at several points, and notably using the testimony of Edward Thomas's wife Helen, who visited him in 1932 (167-169). Her idea of bringing maps of Gloucester proved an inspiration to Gurney who described the countryside to her while he traced the maps with his fingers. Memory had been Gurney's primary vector for poetry during the war, and especially in the asylum years Gurney's memory becomes a kind of totalizing inspiration. The drabness of asylum surroundings gave him no other creative sources. Hence the vivid recall of the front-line experiences, or, as he wrote in the poem "War Books": "... old Flanders went under to long ages of plough thought in my pages" (2004, 258).

But perhaps even more astonishing about the asylum poems is that Gurney also commemorates other writers, as in "Hazlitt" (209). His mind continues to reach beyond the walls of confinement. The sonnet's first lines give the gist:

Hazlitt, also, tea-drinker and joyous walker,
To him we give thanks and are grateful that
He saw Shakespeare as man, not as over-great
Above the comprehending of reader and talker. (2004, 209).

The "also" of the first line suggests that Gurney might see a resemblance between himself and this poet. In "Christopher Marlowe" there is a hoped-for resemblance, as the death wish is present (227), while Walt Whitman's towering influence is evidenced in "Walt Whitman" (233), with other poems commemorating "Henry David Thoreau" (234) and "Washington Irving" (235).

In "The Noble Wars of Troy" Gurney is aware of the presence of the past in the present (251). And in poems such as "The New Poet," one gets the impression that Gurney's desire to write against the grain of war rhetoric was constant. He suggests:

Let there be born a new poet — and let him sing

Of all the States....
A new poetry of all lights, all times; wherein swords
Are not honoured more than the shares ploughing
The coloured earth to furrows, dry or wet shards. (2004, 237).

But Gurney's continued residence in the asylum atmosphere, where in the later years he refused to go out on the grounds, undoubtedly showing a type of stubborn rebellion by attempting to exercise his will where there was no room left for freedom or personal expression, was another experience of desolation. This is felt in poems such as "To God" (197) or "Memory":

They have left me little indeed, how shall I best keep
Memory from sliding content down to drugged sleep?
But my blood in its colour even is known fighter.
If I were hero for such things here would I make wars
As love for dead things trodden under in January's stars.

Of the gold trefoil itself spending in careless places
Tiny graces like the music's for its past exquisitenesses.
Why war for huge domains of the planet's heights or plains?
(Little they leave me.) It is a dream, hardly my heart dares
Tremble for glad leaf-drifts thundering under January's stars.
(2004, 264)

Believing himself to be a war poet, one who uses memory to record a truth about the reality of what happened, Gurney conveys the depth of his despair in "It is Near Toussaints" a poem in which he recognizes that his poetic and musical vocation was being curbed by his internment in asylum:

It is near Toussaints, the living and dead will say:
'Have they ended it? What has happened to Gurney?'
And along the leaf-strewn roads of France many brown shades
Will go, recalling singing, and a comrade for whom also they
Had hoped well. His honour them had happier made.
Curse all that hates good. When I spoke of my breaking
(Not understood) in London, they imagined of the taking
Vengeance, and seeing things were different in future.
(A musician was a cheap, honourable and nice creature.)
Kept sympathetic silence; heard their packs creaking
And burst into song — Hilaire Belloc was all our Master.
On the night of all the dead, they will remember me,
Pray Michael, Nicholas, Maries lost in November
River-mist in the old City of our dear love, and batter
At doors about the farms crying 'Our war poet is lost',
'Madame — no bon!' — and cry his two names, warningly, somberly.
(*Collected* 267).

As in many Gurney poems, he himself is the subject, named in line two, the "I" of line six, "A musician" in line nine, "me" in line twelve, "Our war poet" in the penultimate line, and "his two names" in the final line. But this poem's particularity is that it figures Gurney as deceased, so he is, in effect, writing his own elegy. The choice of

“Toussaints” the French word for All Saints’ Day for the poem’s title, suggests that his death is to be linked with the war, with his experience of the French front, and so the question “ ‘Have they ended it?’ ” refers to his life, but also to the war. “[M]y breaking” in line six probably refers to an escape from asylum—though it could also refer to a break down. The cryptic formulations of the two lines following may reflect something of Gurney’s mental instability. But his hyperactive memory flashes back to the war, and when the weight of their packs was great, they sang to forget. “Hilaire Belloc was all our Master” is linked to that singing, and deserves some detailed comment. During the Great War, Belloc worked for Charles Masterman and the War Propaganda Bureau. He authored *The Two Maps of Europe* (1915) and became a correspondent for *Land and Water*, the weekly paper dealing exclusively with the war. Belloc vented his hostility to the German race and promoted the view that God was on England’s side against pagan barbarism. A letter to G.K. Chesterton written December 12, 1917 shows how Belloc could suppress the truth: “It is sometimes necessary to lie damnably in the interests of the nation. . . it wasn’t only numbers that lost us in Cambrai; it was very bad staff work on the south side. Things like that oughtn’t to happen” (qtd. Buitenuis, 39).

Yet Hill has noted Gurney’s admiration for Belloc (Hill 2008, 424) and the value Belloc and Gurney both place on the word “common” (429). Gurney had read Belloc’s *The Servile State* in 1916 (Hill 2008, 424) and *The Path to Rome*, and shared with Brooke an admiration for Belloc’s poetry—setting one of Belloc’s poems to music in 1920 (439). Hill noticed that “Have they ended it? What has happened to Gurney?” may be a throwback to the line “Where’s Gurney now, I wonder...” from the poem “Toasts and Memories” (2008, 445). The camaraderie of the soldier’s life remains an unfulfilled yearning. Kavanagh sees the poem expressing Gurney’s desire to be identified with those called war poets (Kavanagh 1990, 248-9). The names Hilaire Belloc and Gurney, stand out in “It is near Toussaints,” through their specificity of identity, (as compared to the plural: “Maries”), within the company of the saints,⁸ and by the use of the dash in lines eleven and sixteen. Perhaps one should even see an opposition between Gurney and Belloc (in the phrase “Hilaire Belloc was all our Master” the verb is in the past tense). In the final lines, when the living and the dead cry out together, “Our war poet is lost” and “Madame—no bon” they are crying out against England herself.⁹ Gurney’s loss, in other words, is a particular example of the nation’s betrayal, that his very name should come to symbolize .

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¹ This passage is quoted both by P.J. Kavanagh in his introduction to Gurney's *Collected Poems* (revised edition, 2004, xxiii) and by Lucas (11).

² Wifred Gibson, a poet of "The Muse Colony" had already dedicated his collection *Friends to Brooke* (Lucas 4).

³ Kavanagh's selection for the *Collected Poems* (1984, 2004) includes "Pain" and "Servitude" (15-16), and George Walter chose only "Pain" for the Everyman edition of selected poems entitled *Ivor Gurney* (1996, 5).

⁴ No official notes from this meeting seem to have survived, but Buitenhuis lists the participants as: William Archer, Sir James M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, A.C. Benson, R.H. Bnenson, Robert Bridges, Hall Caine, G.K. Chesterton, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy, Anthony Hope Hawkins, Maurice Hewlett, W.J. Locke, E.V. Lucas, J.W. Mackail, John Masefield, A.E.W. Mason, Gilbert Murry, Sir Henry Newbolt, Sir Gilbert Parker, Sir Owen Seaman, George Trevelyan, H.G. Wells, Israel Zangwill, and government officials. Rudyard Kipling and Sir Arther Quiller Couch were absent but offered their services. (Buitenhuis, 13-14). Few were those who refused to help. Thomas Hardy wrote no war propaganda, and Bertrand Russell and George Bernard Shaw actually wrote against the war (see G.B. Shaw, "Common Sense About the War" in *New Statesman* 14 November 1914). Meanwhile, D.H. Lawrence had gone into voluntary exile, and was writing madly against the war via his novels *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. Yeats wrote "A Reason for Keeping Silent" when Edith Wharton asked him for a war poem (the poem was published under the title "On Being Asked for A War Poem" in his *Collected Poems*):

I think it better that at times like these
We poets keep our mouths shut, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right:
He's had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth
Or an old man upon a winter's night. (qtd Buitenhuis 64)

⁵ R.K.R. Thornton notes that this poem exists in "fair copy" dated "St Albans July 1918" (Severn 144). Another poem with the same title was chosen by Kavanagh for inclusion in *Collected Poems* (84-86).

⁶ Representative of these poems are: "Varennes" (225), "The Battle" (238), "Regrets After Death" (239), "Serenade" (240), "Butchers and Tombs" (241), "Don Juan in Hell" (242), "The Signallers" (245), "To Y" (246), "The Bohemians" (249), "Of Grandcourt" (249), "The Silent One" (250), and others.

⁷ Gurney also set a great deal of Housman to music in two song cycles, *Ludlow and Teme* (1920) and *The Western Playland* (1921).

⁸ Kavanagh interprets the saints and two Maries as referring to churches "of his beloved Gloucester" (1990, 248-9).

⁹ Hill calls this exclamation "pretty grim" (446), and indeed so: the traditionally beautiful female incarnation for the nation has morphed from a figure of liberty (such as a statue of liberty or liberty leading the people) into a barmaid in an estaminet near the front (cf. Laura Fournier-Finocchiaro (ed), *Les Mères de la Patrie. Représentations et constructions d'une figure nationale*, 2006).