

the trauma and dislocation occasioned by the war. The peace settlement itself, promoted by its framers as a new, more hopeful beginning, was widely condemned as an inadequate guarantee of international security and stability.

The Trench Poets of the First World War

The outbreak of the First World War inspired a spate of poetry; one historian estimates that more than one million poems were written in 1914 alone. Like Rupert Brooke (1887–1915), many poets initially greeted the war as a release from the dreariness of civilian life. Educated at Cambridge, Brooke composed finely crafted idealistic wartime poems, especially the sonnet series “1914,” which earned him lasting fame. However, as the war dragged on, soldier-poets’ initial enthusiasm gave way to resignation. The British poet Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), a graduate of the University of London, condemned the older generation that had allowed the war to happen and that was now refusing to end the slaughter of “half the seed of Europe, one by one.” Owen’s “Dulce et decorum est,” perhaps the most famous of all the First World War poems, is noteworthy not only for its antiwar sentiments but also for its stylistic innovation. Brooke died in 1915 on a hospital ship off the island of Skyros, Greece. Owen was killed in action in France one week before Armistice Day in November 1918.

Rupert Brooke*

FROM “1914”

I. PEACE

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with
His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from
sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened
power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,

Leave the sick hearts that honour could not
move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love!

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found
release there,
Where there’s no ill, no grief, but sleep has
mending,
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
Nothing to shake the laughing heart’s long peace
there
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is but
Death.

* * *

* From *The Collected Poems*, by Rupert Brooke, edited by George E. Woodbury (New York: Lane, 1916).

V. 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.

* * *

Wilfred Owen*

"Dulce et decorum est"

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed
through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all
blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots

* From *Poems*, by Wilfred Owen (Huebsch, 1921).

Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped
behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!
An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green
light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.¹

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why does Rupert Brooke welcome war?
2. What virtues does he find in death on the battlefield?
3. How does Wilfred Owen's perception of warfare differ from Brooke's?
4. How do Owen's and Brooke's attitudes toward patriotism differ?

¹ "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country." A line taken from the *Odes* of Horace (65–8 B.C.E.).