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BODILY PERSPECTIVE IN BRITISH POETRY OF THE GREAT WAR

Thinking about dates and events in the history of human kind, one could point many which were of some importance to people's lives and changed their way of thinking for a couple of months or years. Part of them could be said to have a profound impact over a century or two. Just a few of them, however, pushed man's history on a totally different way of development. Such date is, for sure, 28th June 1914 which was the day of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. At that time nobody could predict how serious and long lasting effects this happening could have. The outbreak of the war was obvious but at the very beginning of what became later known as the First World War few believed that it was going to last longer than several months. Apparently, most of the people were waiting for some decisive battle to end the conflict[1], the battle which, in fact, was never to be fought. Instead, the fate that was to befall the world was much worse that anybody had ever expected. This was the horror of trench warfare.

To fully understand what trench warfare and life in the trenches were is barely possible for a person who has never experienced atrocities of war. Jacek Wiśniewski, trying to visualise a picture of everyday war scenery, describes it as:

> ... the famous landscape consisting of a complex of earth defences stretching from the North Sea to Switzerland, of innumerable rat-infested dug-outs, constant rain and mud, decomposing bodies of soldiers killed by machine-gun fire on barbed

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[1] J. WIŚNIEWSKI, *Mars and the Muse: Attitudes to War and Peace in 20th century English Literature* (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1987), 12.

> wire entanglements, of very lights and occasional whizz-bang at night, and incessant artillery barrage or snipping during the day.[2]

In such conditions, as statistics show, around 700.000 British soldiers were killed and thousands more were wounded if counting only those enlisted in Britain.[3] Those who survived were not in a much better situation. Even if they came back home before the end of the war, due to severe mutilation and inability to fight, they found themselves alienated from the society which had never experienced a war on its own.[4] Outrageous as it was, this course of action was the *status quo* maintained over the most part of the 1910s. The influence of this horrendous period of human activity was exerted, however, not only on people's everyday life but also on a domain which had never been used to report such deviations before, that is poetry. Without going into much detail and introducing any divisions at this very moment, it is of utmost importance to determine what had to change in poetry so that it could serve as a means of drawing a horrific picture of war.

The beginning of the twentieth century was a true revolution in the arts. This was the time when such artistic movements were born as, for instance, Cubism, Dadaism or Surrealism. No matter how much stir in artistic life they caused, their force of expression appears not to have been sufficient enough to fit particular needs of war poetry. Poet-soldiers were not particularly interested in depicting, to put it mildly, a larger than life idea of what war was like. On the contrary, they looked for a more down-to-earth type of describing reality adjusting aesthetic values to the vision of death they observed on a daily basis. The attitude like this unavoidably meant looking at the world from a different perspective. A perspective which in this case involved description of all the cruelty soldiers were subjected to with a special emphasis on how they died. Such new treatment of the role of poetry and new themes it was going to express brought a true revolution in both language it used and imagery it presented. In other words, poet-soldiers introduced to their poems a perspective which could be best described as bodily. What 'bodily' or, rather, a 'bodily perspective' meant in this context was depicting the atrocities of war with minute details no matter how terrible or disgusting they

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[2] *Ibid*. 6.

[3] H. ZINS, *Historia Anglii* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2001), 341

[4] P. LEESE,"Problems Returning Home: The British Psychological Casualties of the Great War." *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1997): 1056.

were. To claim, however, that a bodily perspective was just a naturalistic picture of soldiers literally torn "by machine-gun fire on barbed wire"[5] would be underestimating poets' literary skills. This technique was used in a variety of ways depending on a poet and his artistic vision. This work aims at showing how it actually functioned as a literary device and how it became a means of expressing a protest against the Great War.

Wiśniewski suggests that "the trenches changed everything: almost all poets wrote about war enthusiastically in 1914 and 1915, none did after 1916"[6]. What introduced this division was the battle of the Somme during which around 400.000 British soldiers were killed.[7] It was after this battle that poets, voicing a protest against the war, began to use on a greater scale a bodily perspective in their poetry. Thus, while the battle of the Somme historically divides WWI into two stages, the domination of the bodily perspective marks the shift from the poetry of the first part of the war to that of the second part. Before, however, giving a detailed presentation of the bodily perception of reality, it seems necessary to sketch a general picture of what poetry was like during the first part of the Great War. The reason for this is twofold. First of all, although completely different, this poetry, in some respects, was a predecessor of such later styles of writing as, for instance, Sassoon's. Secondly, putting these two types together might be quite useful in order to emphasise the brutality of the poetry of the second half of the war.

Among the most representative poets of 1914 and 1915 the most prominent name is certainly Rupert Brooke. To call him a war poet, however, is probably a gross exaggeration since he was just a mere theoretician and a patriot who, once joining the army, died on his way to the battlefield due to "blood poisoning caused by a mosquito bite"[8]. His lack of practical experience and his radically naive attitude to war can be clearly observed especially in his sonnets, to quote just a few lines:

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field

[5] J. WIŚNIEWSKI, 6.

[6] *Ibid.*, 29.

[7] S. ARNOLD, W. KURKIEWICZ, A. TATOMIR, W. ŻURAWSKI, eds. *Dzieje Świata* (Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1990), 418.

[8] J. WIŚNIEWSKI, 31.

That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

(The Soldier p. 81-82)[9]

Idealism and a kind of romantic atmosphere which dominate in this excerpt are truly astounding. The speaker of the poem is not much, if at all, concerned with inhuman conditions and all the killing which were a part of everyday life during the war. What he gives, instead, is a quasi-real picture presenting a soldier dying in a blaze of glory for its beloved country, a theme later so bitterly commented on by Wilfred Owen in his "Dulce Et Decorum Est". It is obvious that war poetry in the shape which Brooke had given to it could not survive for long, certainly not after the battle of the Somme. The reason for such a state barely demands any explanation. The clash between Brooke's vision and the horror of the war was simply so overpowering that the former had to bend and give way to a new wave of poets. They, in turn, absolutely changed their artistic strategy by abandoning the praising of the war and replacing Brooke's battlefield full of glory with a battlefield full of decaying bodies. No simple transition stage, however, can be noticed between such poets as Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen. One more poet fills the void between them as if bridging these two types of poetry. This is Edmund Blunden, whose writing appears to be a threshold of the bodily perspective.

In his artistic answer to Brooke's posture Edmund Blunden wrote:

Snow or rime-frost made a solemn silence,
Bluish darkness wrapped in dangerous safety;
Old hands thought of tidy
Living-trenches!
There it was, my dear, that I departed,
Scarce a simpler traitor ever! There, too,
Many of you paid for
That false mildness.

(Gouzeaucourt: The Deceitful Calm 110)

Clearly noticed in Blunden's poem is a visible change of attitude. He no longer argues that a war is an honourable event for men to participate in. On the contrary, he calls it 'false mildness' which stands in a stark contrast to Brooke's position. In the way he perceives a battlefield, Blunden reaches a

[9] All poems quoted after J. SILKIN, ed. *The Penguin book of First World War Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981).

higher level of insight into trench warfare. Although not naturalistic in his descriptions, as later poets will be, he will not deceive his readers into believing that war scenery does not differ much from English countryside. Unlike Brooke, he realises that soldiers are not so eager to win glory, the most crucial thing being to survive. On the other hand, as it has been mentioned above, he avoids drastic scenes. His descriptions are rather delicate and very often he engages idyllic pictures of nature. As Wiśniewski writes, "[n]early all Blunden's war writing uses the contrast of gentle and peaceful nature, and brutal, horrible destruction of it by war"[10]. In this sense Blunden is a poet of the transitional stage. He does not use a bodily perspective in the way Wilfred Owen will in his poems. Nevertheless, horrific undertones of war hide behind nature lurking like a prowling beast, which can be best observed in the following fragment:

The struggling Ancre had no part
    In these new hours of mine,
And yet its stream ran through my heart;
    I heard it grieve and pine,
As if its rainy tortured blood
    Had swirled into my own,
When by its battered bank I stood
    And shared its wounded moan.

(The Ancre at Hamel: Afterwards 112)

Lacking the literal depiction of torn, decaying bodies, this fragment consists of elements suggesting suffering and anguish. This is chiefly conveyed by vocabulary Blunden uses in his poem. Words of pain appearing here, for instance "grieve", "pine" or "moan", which are ascribed to the river, one intuitively redirects to people. The final outcome, then, is not only a picture of suffering nature destroyed by war but also a picture of whole areas covered with dying soldiers. As one can notice, Edmund Blunden created his own original style. On the one hand, he engaged a bodily perspective, which was noticeable in the vocabulary he used and sometimes in more extensive descriptions as in "Third Ypres", where death becomes more straight and everything is "splashed with arms and legs" (Third Ypres 109). On the other hand, though, his artistic vision is still rich in nature elements which are consolatory in their function. These elements are definitely absent in the poetry of the writers to be described.

[10] J. WIŚNIEWSKI, 73.

The presentation of the remaining styles of writing which engaged the bodily perspective and used it in the most representative way could, in fact, be summarised under the heading "everything but Brooke". If his vision involved a naive and almost childish perception of the reality of war, no such attitude can be observed in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen[11] or Richard Aldington, just to mention a few. Moreover, if Brooke's poetry was said to be idealistic, what the reader is going to encounter now are the limits to which disillusionment, bitterness and horror can be pushed. Such a state is not a surprise bearing in mind that, unlike Brooke, the poets mentioned above actually took part in fighting and experienced all the possible atrocities. They knew that, while on the battlefield, courage ceased to be the cardinal virtue and turned into a must caused by "intense scrutiny from one's comrades for signs of fear"[12]. This fear, no matter how carefully hidden, can be clearly noticed in one of Wilfred Owen's poems:

> 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.
>
> (Dulce et decorum est 183)

The scene of gas attack is followed by an even more terrifying and naturalistic description of one of its victims:

[11] As to Wilfred Owen, it is interesting to underline his dramatic situation after he first came to a military camp which arrival Douglas Kerr describes in his work as follows: "So Wilfred Owen joined up and went into training, entering a world whose atmosphere and language were quite alien and struck him as much more foreign than France had ever been. He was immersed in and set to learn the army's language in what must have seemed the most blatant discursive clash with what he wanted language to be. The poetry to which he aspired was romantic self-expression, and the poet for him was a hypersensitive individual prized his originality, the celebrant and creator of beauty and pleasure" (D. KERR, "The Disciplines of the Wars: Army Training and the Language of Wilfred wen." *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Apr., 1992): 287).

[12] J. BLACK, A., A. [untitled] Rev. of *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War*, by Peter Leese. Albion: *A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Winter, 2003): 700.

If in some smothering dreams you 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,

(Dulce et decorum est 183)

As one can observe in this horrifying account, Owen reports events in an absolutely different manner. Not only does he avoid using Brooke-like metaphors but he also drops Blunden's filter of nature. In other words, he perceives the world as directly as it is possible, focusing on the description of his comrade's dead body, which appears to be the central part of the poem. The imagery presented here is truly frightening. Owen does not spare his readers any details drawing a picture which moves even the most immune people. Almost anatomical data which he provides in this poem to build up the atmosphere of gruesome attack, for instance, "blood ... gargling from the froth corrupted lungs" (Dulce et decorum est 183) is not the only means he uses to shock the readers. It is also the vocabulary referring to the treatment of the late person whose body is "flung" on the wagon. Such choice of words is not an accident and clearly suggests that the speaker is outraged by what happens around him. In that way he seems to suggest that this is not the fate that people have deserved and not the purpose for which they have been born. This sort of attitude was not unique to Owen and appears in many more war poems, for example in that written by Richard Aldington:

'Well, as to that, the nastiest job I've done
Was last year on this very front
Taking the discs at night from men
Who'd hung for six months on the wire
Just over there.
The worst thing of all was
They fell to pieces at a touch.
Thanks God we couldn't see their faces;
They had gas helmets on...'

(Trench Idyll 143)

These two poems are, indeed, quite similar in their speakers' attitudes. In both cases they are outraged by all the cruelty around them and obsessed with the idea that that same fate of physical suffering and being torn to

pieces may happen to them at any moment. This world obviously becomes unbearable, hence they make any possible effort to escape it. Needless to say, physical escape is not possible altogether. Due to this fact, they try to devise many kinds of intellectual or emotional ways out of hell.[13] Such a construction of a speaker imprisoned in the world of physical suffering and having a strong desire to get out of it at least for a few moments gave the poets an opportunity to touch a wide range of subjects. In general, the protest against the war was the main thrust but the way how it was expressed was not that simple. Some of them, for instance Owen, did it in a fairly direct way saying that the words "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" are, to put it mildly, irrational. Others, like Aldington, made their speakers imagine being in a different place as it is in "Trench Idyll" where soldiers go on a mental voyage to London. Doing so the writers achieve two things simultaneously. In the first place, they draw a true-to-life picture of soldiers who were so deeply terrified that they had begun to lose their sensibility. Secondly, on this basis they raise a voice of protest against treating people as a piece of meat which was supposed to live in conditions inappropriate even for animals. As one can notice, a bodily perspective is in these poems very skilfully engaged as a means of describing the war theatre, which, in turn, serves as a starting point to more general reflections. This kind of escapism certainly worked in the case of Wilfred Owen and Richard Aldington. No such alternative was left, however, in the presented world created by Siegfried Sassoon.

In the comments on the speaker's perception of the world through physicality in one of Owen's poems, much emphasis has been put on the fact that the speaking person was outraged by the emotionless treatment of a soldier's body. As it has been stated, this was mainly conveyed by the use of the word "flung" in reference to the corpse. Quite a similar concept was used by Sassoon in "A Working Party". The idea in question appears in the following excerpt:

> Three hours ago he stumbled up the trench;
> Now he will never walk that road again:
> He must be carried back, a jolting lump
> Beyond all need of tenderness and care.
>
> (A Working Party 124)

[13] J. WIŚNIEWSKI, 67.

What the reader notices, especially in the last two lines, is a clear allusion to Owen's thought. This is not, obviously, the place to trace whether Sassoon was inspired by Owen or whether it was the other way round. What demands attention, though, is the fact that these last two lines are as if an elaboration on the word "flung" from Owen's poem. To put it differently, instead of using one word, Sassoon refers to the body as "a jolting lump / Beyond all need of tenderness and care" (A Working Party 124). One difference, however, can be observed. While the speaker in Owen's poem is utterly overwhelmed by the inhuman treatment of the dead, the one created by Sassoon merely reports what he sees. Moreover, in contrast to the presented world of "Dulce et decorum est", here one can barely find any proof of fear. The speaker is as if a medium through which certain pictures are projected. As to those pictures, it is hardly possible to imagine a more horrifying vision. Sassoon employs every tool of a bodily perspective which is available constructing almost an Armageddon-like world, which can be seen in the following excerpt:

> The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs
> High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps
> And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,
> Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;
> And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
> Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.
>
> ("Counter Attack" 129-130)

On the basis of these few lines, it is actually problematic to argue that these are decaying bodies that the speaker stops to describe. What he gives a description of are, apparently, single parts of corpses scattered across the area of the battlefield like, for instance, "clumsy legs", "trunks", "naked sodden buttocks". Furthermore, even they, in fact, fail to resemble human body parts being rather a sort of pulp dissolving in the mud. This type of depiction, presented in the form similar to a film frame, is given by a person who is exhausted both physically and mentally and, although Silkin believes that "he [Sassoon] tends...to photograph the horror and then become morally outraged"[14], it seems to be quite the opposite. Unlike in the case of Owen, in many of Sassoon's poems the speaker maintains the unfailing precision in the report of events distancing himself morally from the situation. Just as in the case of

[14] J. SILKIN, "Introduction," *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*. ed. J. Silkin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 48.

"Counter Attack", he often leaves the judgement to the reader not interfering with his opinion. This moral coldness and lack of assessment intermingling with a bodily perspective add to it much sharpness and objectivity. This, in turn, enables the poet to make his readers almost smell a dreadful stench of corpses when he writes that "the rank stench of those bodies haunt[ed him] still" ("The rank stench of those bodies haunts me still" 124).

Wiśniewski asserts in his work that "[t]he reader of English 20th century war literature discovers with delight that the best writing produced by the best poets ... can be classified in the ... category of anti-war literature"[15]. The reason for such a state needs little comment since, most certainly, what readers expect is not the idea of war which Rupert Brooke tried to put into life. Being aware of both cruelty and pointlessness of war, what many of them seek is a kind of literature in which there is a clear and firm protest against the killing. This was surely the case in the poetry of mentioned above Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Owen, Richard Aldington and, finally, Siegfried Sassoon. The main thrust of their writings was to show other people, especially those in England who obtained information filtered by the establishment[16], that war was not in any aspect as glorious and honourable as they were told. With a view to achieve this, they devised the tool which happened to be extremely powerful in their hands, that is a bodily perspective. Its extensive employment and evolution marks the shift both in the moral perception of war and in the stylistic character of the poetry of its second part. Its shape changed simultaneously with the development of the war, showing more and more explicitly, as Robert Graves wrote, "life's discovered transitoriness" (Recalling war 121). The bodily perspective becomes the dominant of the poetry of Owen and Sassoon, exposing the brutality of the war and its inhuman nature. Yet, the question arises whether what those poets tried to express had any effect on people's thinking. Let this work end with the words of Sir John Collie, the head of The Ministry of Pensions from 1916 onwards, who argued that "Strong will and a good hereditary background ... were central in the process of post-combat re-integration, but those unwilling or unable to cure themselves were responsible for their condition. Like no-war neurasthenia, war cases of psychological disturbance lingered because of weak will or a tendency to morbid introspection"[17].

[15] J. WIŚNIEWSKI, 1
[16] D. KERR, 292.
[17] P. LEESE, 1065.

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PERSPEKTYWA CIELESNA W POEZJI BRYTYJSKIEJ OKRESU I WOJNY ŚWIATOWEJ

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł analizuje ewolucję, jaka zaszła w poezji angielskiej w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej, poszczególne jej etapy oraz przyczyny zmian. W początkowej części artykułu wprowadzone zostaje rozróżnienie na dwa zasadnicze podokresy w rozwoju poezji wojennej w Wielkiej Brytanii. Punktem odniesienia umożliwiającym przyjęcie takiego podziału jest bitwa nad Sommą, która miała miejsce w 1916 r. Do okresu pierwszego zostaje zaliczony Rupert Brooke i jego, jak to jest powiedziane, naiwny stosunek do wojny jako miejsca, gdzie w chwale można zginąć za ojczyznę. Poezja Brooka w dalszej części artykułu przyjęta będzie jako swego rodzaju kontrapunkt, który ma podkreślać skalę przemian, jakie zaszły po tragicznej bitwie nad Sommą. Do drugiego okresu zostają przypisani Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Owen, Richard Aldington oraz Siegfried Sassoon. Dopiero tutaj w pełni zostaje pokazana ewolucja poezji wojennej, a w szczególności rozwój tak zwanej perspektywy cielesnej. Ta, bardzo jeszcze ograniczona w poezji Edmunda Blundena, osiąga apogeum swojej ostrości w poezji Siegfrieda Sassoona, którego poezja cechuje się niezwykłym stopniem okrucieństwa.

Streścił Maciej Czerniakowski

Key words : bodily perspective, the poetry of the First World War, war poet, poet soldier.

Słowa kluczowe: perspektywa cielesna, poezja angielska I wojny światowej, poeta wojenny, poeta żołnierz.