Summary Notes for World War One Poetry lecture, October 15, 2014

KEYWORDS: LANDSCAPE, PASTORAL, SACRIFICE, DISILLUSIONMENT

We began by considering Robert Browning's *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* as an example of a Victorian poem that seemed ro reflect disillusionment with the chivalric idealism of works like Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

We considered how the speaker's despair is reflected in his description of the landscape, which he sees as blighted, diseased, and warped. Many of the poems we read for this class suggest, through their descriptions of landscape, the speaker's state of mind.

I read you a quotation from Allen J. Frantzen's book *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War*:

> "The Middle Ages and World War I were inextricably linked by the enduring power of chivalry to symbolize both prowess and principle in warfare. Setting off to defend the weak, uphold his king's honor, and find glory in combat, the armored knight supplied a vigorous model for the modern soldier."

And I showed you part of the poem *Vitaï Lampada* by Sir Henry Newbolt; the poem linked the values inculcated on the school playing field with military valour:

> The river of death has brimmed his banks,
> And England's far, and Honour a name,
> But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
> "Play up! play up! and play the game!"

We then moved on to consider what happened when that chivalric ethos, taught to young men in schools and through literature, encountered the brutal reality of trench warfare.

Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier* accords with the idealistic view of romantic self-sacrifice in war in its formal elegance, calm tone, and pastoral imagery.

Winston Churchill's obituary for Brooke in *The Times* is in the same vein:

> Joyous, fearless, versatile, deeply instructed, with classic symmetry of mind and body, ruled by high undoubting purpose, he was all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in the days when no sacrifice but

> the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is that which is most freely proffered.

Brooke died in 1915 of blood poisoning, on his way to Gallipoli; he never saw the full conflict that shaped the other war poets we are reading.

Siegfried Sassoon did see action, and was bitterly disillusioned by his experiences. We looked at the declaration he wrote against the war in June 1917:

> I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the contrivance of agonies which they do not, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

Sassoon's poem *They* contrasts the voice of the bishop, who represents the official sanction of the "lie" denounced by Wilfred Owens in *Dulce et Decorum est*, with "the boys," whose parade of disabilities stand in stark contrast to the official story; there is deep irony in the final line, "The ways of God are strange." Sassoon survived the war.

Isaac Rosenberg's *Break of Day in the Trenches* shows the poet reflecting grimly, through the rat, on the inevitable fate of the "Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes." Rosenberg was killed in 1918.

Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et decorum est* takes its title from a Latin phrase meaning "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country." The title suggests a world like Brookes's imagining of the war—a world in which young men willingly make noble sacrifices, with no reference to the horrible realities. Owens's poem, however, stresses the mud, chaos, gas, and grotesque death characteristic of the war as Owens had come to know it, and declares the sentimental patriotism of Brooke "a lie." Owens was killed in 1918.

Robert Graves survived the war. *Recalling War* was written in 1938. It is a meditation by a survivor, written as Europe is on the brink of another conflict. We considered the images relating to children in the last lines: war is a foolish game, and war is also the thing that eats young men (children), as the guns eat away at the landscape.