Mycroft Lectures.

Adapted Transcript for:

Wilfred Owen's

Dulce et Decorum Est.

(Mycroft lectures always provide sentence-by-sentence parsing, paraphrasing and explanation of each poem. However, each lecture also presents extra information to enhance appreciation and understanding of the poem under discussion. As the Mycroft lectures are not read from a script, a transcript of a lecture contains the imperfections of a spoken presentation. To avoid the embarrassment of having the spoken performance thought to be an essay and being quoted as such, I have made occasional changes to the spoken lectures for the purposes of clarification. What follows is the transcript of a lecture, not an essay.)

Chronology of the Lecture.

1. The lecture starts by giving the background for the poem as an anti-First World War propaganda piece.
2. Initial comparisons with Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier*. (Links between the two poems are made throughout the lecture.)
3. The poem is read through.
4. During the reading of the poem, a diagram of how the First World War trench warfare was fought will be shown, illustrating the movement of Owen and his troop.
5. The poem is parsed, paraphrased, explained line by line in simpler English. Various complications noted, or areas of interest raised and questioned, are:

- The initial similes setting the tone (how Owen compares the soldiers to beggars, old women and animals).
- The use of the adjectives 'tired' and 'clumsy'.
- The gas attack.

- How the addressee in the poem becomes important in the third stanza.
- How Munch's painting *The Scream* may help us to see some of these lines.
- The acoustic brilliance of Owen's lines.
- To whom is Owen addressing the poem?
- A read through of Jessie Pope's *Who's For the Game*, a First World War recruiting poem.

6. On Wilfred Owen.
7. The poem is read through for a final time.
8. The iambic pentameter of the poem is examined.

From the lecture: "So when this genuine military hero says this about the act of warfare, the realities of warfare, this is somebody we have to listen to. This is someone saying, 'If you are going to be sending young men out to fight, let's make sure you understand the realities of what's actually going on there.' And he does it through this poem."

Note: Explanation of "cursed through sludge" contains profanity (10:00 – 10:25).

Transcript for the *Dulce et Decorum Est* Lecture

This is a First World War poem. For many people it is *the* First World War poem, the poem that most brilliantly, most accurately, most informatively sums up the horrors, the fears, the terror of being a combatant, of being a soldier in that particular military engagement.

The poem is written in 1918. It is written by a man who soldiered in that war, a man who experienced what he is talking about in the poem itself.

The poem's title, *Dulce et Decorum Est*, is Latin. It's from the Latin poet Horace, and *Dulce et Decorum Est* means, 'it is sweet and fitting to die for your country'. Other translations of this may be 'it is sweet and right to die for your country', or even 'it is sweet and glorious to die for your country'.

Now Owen writes *Dulce et Decorum Est* at a time when military propaganda to get young men to enlist to join up and fight is still going on. The actual horrors of what the

soldiers are experiencing on the front lines have not been made fully apparent to the British public at the point when Owen gives the world this particular poem. So Owen is questioning the statement *Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori* at a time when it is not very popular to have that statement questioned? This is a time when Rupert Brooke's poem *The Soldier,* which can basically be summed up as meaning 'If I die, all I want you to think about my death is that I have died for my country', is popular. This is a time when that particular sentiment very much sums up the *zeitgeist* of the time. That is the sentiment which people in power want young British men to feel and think.

So Owen's poem here is very much questioning that. This poem is very much an anti-recruitment poem.

Now, to explain the poem to you, I'll do it in three main sections. I'll read the first stanza, and explain that. For the second part, I'll look at the section of the poem between 'gas, gas, boys--an ecstasy of fumbling' and 'he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. And for the third part, I'll look at the final stanza of the poem.

Then, at the end, I'll give you an example of the type of propaganda poetry that Wilfred Owen is addressing in writing *Dulce et Decorum Est*.

So this is the first read-through of Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est*.

Make sure you have a copy of the poem in order to annotate as we go through this when I explain the poem to you.

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
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 floundering 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.

That's Wilfred Owen, 1918.

To understand what is going on in this first stanza of this poem, it's helpful to have a diagram of the way the First World War was fought. The First World War was fought through trench warfare. If you look at what we have here, at the top, we have the German Trenches; the bottom, we have the English trenches; and between those is No Man's Land. The idea behind the trench warfare way of military engagement is that one side will charge the trenches of the others, they would hope not to get mown down by the machine guns which were at the front line of those trenches, and hopefully, some of the soldiers would get into the trenches and be able to engage in hand-to-hand combat with their enemy, killing enough of their enemy in order to overrun the trenches. It was usually done in groups of three. The British soldiers would charge the German machine guns - the first line would almost inevitably be mown down – and hopefully some from the second and third lines would be able to get into the trenches in order to wipe out the German soldiers in those trenches.

Now, you can imagine being on the front line in these trenches, and these trenches are water-logged, rat-infested, freezing cold, hell-on-earth places. And from these trenches, you are being asked to charge across No Man's Land to kill your fellow men in the other trenches.

At the point when the poem opens, Wilfred Owen and his troop have done their latest stint on the front line, and they are walking away from the front line, they are going to be walking along here to come down away from No Man's Land, away from the trenches, to get to their *distant rest*. Now remember, at the time when this poem is written, the English soldier is thought to be, or the English soldier is promoted as, the clean-limbed, young, Adonis-like, handsome young man marching off to war for King and country, and happy to do so.

Bent double.

So straight away we have this image that the soldiers aren't upright, young men marching gleefully off to war. They're 'bent double'. He describes them as 'like beggars under sacks'. The sacks are presumably their uniforms. 'Knock-kneed', they can't walk properly. They're 'coughing like hags'. Hags are ugly old women.

So within the opening lines of the poem, the soldiers have been reduced by the reality of warfare from these clean-limbed young men marching off to war to being compared to beggars and ugly old women.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge.

And I love this line, 'cursed through sludge'. It's the idea that the earth that they are walking on is this earth that Rupert Brooke was to write of in *The Soldier* as,

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

This is that corner of that foreign field.

The*re shall be in that rich earth a richer dust concealed,* says Brooke. That rich

earth, and that richer dust, is this sludge which he is walking through.

We cursed through sludge.

And you get this image of the soldiers bent double, absolutely exhausted, and they're moving through this wet, horrible, cursed earth, and they're going 'F***ing hell...'

And it's only their hatred of the actual earth that they're walking on that's enabling them to move in the first place. Hatred can be a very useful, energizing factor. And the way he describes it, 'We cursed through sludge.' 'Cursed' is not a verb of movement, but Owen makes it one here.

I'll read that opening line again.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge.

Even the way that you read it is a great example of the form, the way that the poem is written, enhancing what is being written about. It's not written in a sort of jaunty, jolly, iambic pentamer, of

If I should die, think only this of me.

When you read this, the difficulty of reading it is very much like the difficulty of the movement that the soldiers have. It's almost as if the line is difficult to start up. I imagine reading it like... for some reason, it puts the image of someone trying to start one of those old airplane engines with it. You put the crank in to start.

And the soldiers are there,

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge.

And any way you read this, it is not making their appearance look pleasant, and the way that you say it is not making their movement look easy.

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs

And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Note that it's trudge, not march. The 'haunting flares' are the flares of No Man's Land. They light up No Man's Land so the soldiers can see each other to kill each other. Wilfred Owen and his men are walking along the front line and they've turned their backs on the haunting flares of No Man's Land to get towards their distant rest. So down here, they have their time away from the front line and some well-earned rest.

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep.

They're not literally asleep, but they're so exhausted that it's as if they are asleep.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod.

What a fantastic line that is.

'Many had lost their boots': the soldiers haven't got their full uniforms. Literally, that's what it means, many of the soldiers have lost their boots, but they limp on, blood-shod. 'Blood-shod' is the great phrase here. 'Blood-shod' means... well we shoe a horse, when we put a shoe on a horse's hoof, when we put a metal shoe on. But these soldiers are blood-shod, it's as if they haven't got their own boots, but where they have bled, through the soles of their feet, the blood has coagulated and hardened, and it has formed a protective coating on the soles of their own feet. The soldiers are blood-shod. And of course, this whole idea of the soldiers being shod in the same way that horses are shod, they've been reduced to animals here.

At the start of the poem, Owen has reduced the soldiers to, or the reality of the warfare that the soldiers are engaged in has reduced the soldiers to, beggars, old hags, and animals.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle? says Owen in *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, another of his poems.

Many had lost their boots. But limped on, blood-shod.

All went lame.

'Lame' is another word we usually associate with animals; we don't usually talk of humans going lame.

All went lame; all blind; Drunk with fatigue;

When he says they've gone blind, he doesn't literally mean they've gone blind. They're so exhausted, they can't see properly. They are so tired, they are 'drunk with fatigue'.

This is not the 'Wahey, let's go and have a party' type of drunk, this is the 'slumped at the edge of the bar at the end of the evening so exhausted that you can't remember what you're doing there in the first place' type of drunk.

Deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Deaf? They can't hear.

The hoots of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind

The 'Five-Nines' are a particularly disruptive type of German artillery. A bomb, if you like. And they are now out of the range of the Five-Nines. If you look at the graphic - if you imagine the blue line, that's the range that the Five-Nines can reach. So if they are still within that range, they can be killed by the Five-Nines. But they've 'outstripped the Five-Nines', they've got far enough away so they can't be killed by the Five-Nines any more.

Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

The 'hoots', the sound like an owl, is obviously the sound that the Five-Nines make as they fall behind the soldiers, as the soldiers turn their backs on the haunting flares of No Man's Land, and get towards their well-earned rest.

Now I'll read this opening stanza through one more time and then I'll show you one of

the words in this poem that I cannot make myself like.

So, the poem starts with:

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
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Now the word I don't like there is 'tired', because literally speaking, a bomb can't be tired. It can't be tired, it can't be enthusiastic. To call a bomb tired is surely, it's actually, a bad piece of writing. That particular line was rendered in original drafts of the poem differently. It wasn't 'of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind'. Owen wrote, 'of disappointed shells that dropped behind' in one of the drafts. And another version was, I think, 'of gas shells dropping silently' or 'softly behind'. 'Or gas shells dropping softly behind'.

But the line he went with was, *Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind*. So, he thought it through. But a bomb can't be tired. Literally, a bomb can't be tired.

If I want to try and redeem the line, perhaps we could say that the soldier himself is so exhausted that he projects onto his environment so that everything he sees, he sees in the same way that he experiences things himself. So that the bombs are tired in the same way that he is tired. But why I don't like that line is I think it can almost be thought of as comic if you're not careful. It's the idea that the bombs could get him... if they were not quite so tired. The bomb comes flying over and the bomb goes, 'Ah, I'm just too tired. I can't be fired, I'm too exhausted'. And the soldiers only escape because the bombs are too tired to actually get them. And this is not the case. You are either within the range of the bombs, or you are not. So I don't like that line.

We'll now come to the second section of the poem, which is the gas attack.

The soldiers are out of range of the Five-Nine bombs, they're away from No Man's Land, they're out of the trenches, and we hear

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys! -- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering 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.

So what has become apparent here is that although the soldiers are out of range of the artillery, they are not out of range of the gas bombs. And there has been a gas bomb attack.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling.

I think this is a terrific line, this 'ecstasy of fumbling'.

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time.

Plainly, the clumsy helmets are the gas masks the soldiers have to put on to stop themselves from breathing in the gas. It's mustard gas that was used in the trenches. The soldiers have got to get their gas masks on.

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time.

The 'ecstasy of fumbling' he speaks of here is the adrenaline rush that invigorates the soldiers, the exhausted bodies of these soldiers who know they've got to get the gas masks on, otherwise they're going to breathe in the poison gas and die. And they get the helmets and they're trying to put the helmets on and they can't do it, they're too tired, they're fumbling, this 'ecstasy of fumbling' that they feel 'fitting the clumsy helmets just in time'. The pumping of adrenaline that would go through you under those conditions. 'An ecstasy of fumbling' - terrific line.

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time.

And if I just draw attention to the word 'clumsy' here. Really, a helmet can't be clumsy in the same way a bomb can't be tired. You can put the helmet on in a clumsy way,

but the helmet itself can't be clumsy. And yet I don't particularly mind that word, because a clumsy helmet is more an accusation made by the soldier against the helmet. He's having trouble putting the helmet on so he calls the helmet 'clumsy'. That fits in perfectly with the soldiers' thought process at this time, I think. But to call the bombs tired seems to have a little too much sympathy for the bombs. Whereas, as I say, to call the helmet clumsy is a nice accusation against the helmet, totally in character with the soldiers' thought process.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time.

They just got their helmets on in time to survive the gas attack.

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.

Someone's not managed to get their gas mask on in time. They're calling out, this person is calling out, he's floundering like a fish out of water. Fire and lime are things which burn people. So if you can imagine this man staggering towards Wilfred Owen as if he's on fire, calling out to him.

Floundering 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.

The dim panes, dim through the misty panes. The misty panes are the panes of the gas mask. The gas mask would make everything appear to be green. Mustard gas is yellow, but seen through a gas mask, it'll be green. Owen sees his friend come staggering towards him, as if he is on fire and he is unable to help him.

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

He imagines him drowning on dry land in the poison gas, which destroys your lungs, of course.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

Owen can't forget this. By 'dreams' here of course he means nightmares. Each dream he has is a nightmare of his friend staggering towards him, *'guttering, choking, drowning'*.

'Guttering' is the sound of a candle - the way that a candle goes out is to 'gutter'. I think that word is used more for its sound than for its image. The image of a candle going out is often very beautiful, very serene. And I don't think that's what Owen wants to convey. What he wants to convey here is done more by the sound of 'guttering'. *Guttering, choking, drowning*.

So I'll read that gas attack section once more.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering 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.

And now we come to the final stanza of the poem, which is an extraordinary piece of writing, as if what has gone before isn't extraordinary enough. Owen gives us this. And note how the addressee of the poem changes. Previously, he's just being explaining an incident. Now the poem is specifically addressed to someone, to a 'you', to a person he later calls, 'my friend'. But I'll read it through first and then do the close reading of each line.

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.

So . . .

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in

Obviously, Owen and his fellow soldiers have picked up the soldier who has breathed in the poison gas, and the soldier is not dead yet, so they've picked him up and they've put him in the back of a wagon, I imagine the wagon as a rickety, old, wooden wagon, with old wooden wheels which the soldiers are pulling. But Owen himself is pacing behind it. Note the word he uses to describe the way the soldiers have placed their wounded comrade in the wagon: 'flung' him in.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in

They flung him in. They haven't placed him in, they've flung him, they know he's going to die.

If in some smothering dreams.

I love 'smothering dreams' here. Obviously, they're nightmares again that he's talking about. But it's the idea of smothering. Smothering, usually we use that word to explain a fire. You get 'smothered' by a blanket. When something smothers us, it takes all the oxygen away, it takes all the life out of us, and it's as if these dreams, these nightmares that Owen has, they've smothered the life out of him. And he's saying to the person he's addressing the poem to:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in.

Owen is pacing behind the wagon, looking at this wounded soldier in the wagon in front of him, and he says, *If you could watch the white eyes writhing in his face*, it's as if the pupils and irises of his eyes have just shot up. They're writhing around like that. They're - if you wanted to be very pedantic about it, eyes can't really writhe, but we know exactly what it means. If there was a situation where an eye could writhe in the agony usually associated with the human body and not just the eye, this would be it.

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin.

'His hanging face.' Presumably Owen means a face that looks like someone who's just been hanged. I tend to imagine 'his hanging face', rather like Edvard Munch's painting,*The Scream*. It's that picture that I see when I hear *His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin.*

'Like a devil's sick of sin' may be even more difficult to imagine. What does the face of a devil who is sick of sin look like? I get the idea when I hear that line that the devil who is seen to be responsible for all the evil of the world is watching this, and is just saying, 'I'm just sick of this. This is too disgusting. Even I have got a line.' The implication being here that human don't have a line. To me it's more prescriptive of the way the devil feels about what's actually going on. 'This is just disgusting, I'm sick of it.' Any way you try to imagine the idea of the face of a devil that is sick of sin, the idea of a hanging face, the idea of white eyes writhing within a face, any way you imagine those images, it is not going to be something pleasant that your mind concocts.

And after that, we come to, for me, two of the most acoustically powerful lines in poetry that I am aware of. If there's a better line for conjuring, acoustically, the horrors of someone choking to death, I don't know what it is.

Listen to this. The sound that this line actually makes.

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, --

If you could hear, at every jolt. So as the wagon comes away from the trenches, we can assume it is going to jolt quite often. [Jolt, jolt, jolt] And every time it jolts, Wilfred Owen hears the *blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs*. That's what the mustard gas attack has done to his friend. His lungs are corrupted, there's froth within, the blood is coming from his mouth.

The blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs.

In fact, it doesn't come from his mouth, it comes all the way from his lungs.
Fantastic line.

Obscene as cancer.

I have to say, I don't particularly like this. I don't like it because 'obscene as cancer' seems to me to be a lazy simile now. Whether or not it was a lazy simile in 1918 is a different matter completely.

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues.

Cud is what a cow chews when it regurgitates its food. And partially, for me, this line achieves the idea of Owen regurgitating the image; he can't get rid of the picture of his friend staggering towards him, *guttering, choking, drowning*.

Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues.

The *'vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues'*, conjures up an image of syphilis to me. That was how syphilis presented itself. These 'vile, incurable sores on *innocent* tongues'. And it's innocent, meaning, sexually inexperienced. The unfairness of the sexually inexperienced boy dying of syphilis. The bitterness, the unfairness of it.

Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues.

And of course the soldiers who are in this war can be seen as innocent. They don't really know what they're doing. They're not experienced at life, they're young, very young men, fighting this war.

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues.

Then Owen says,

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.

'My friend'. We'll come back to who that friend is later.

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest. 'Zest' is keenness, enthusiasm. 'My friend, you would not be so keen to tell *children ardent for some desperate glory*.' Children who want to be heroes, that's what 'ardent for some desperate glory' means. Keen to be a hero. Owen is saying, 'If you have seen what I have seen, you would not be so keen to tell young men, kids, who want to be heroes, "It is sweet and fitting, glorious, right, to die for your country". Because I have seen those young men die for our country, and there is nothing fitting, right, or glorious about it.'

It's worth noting what Owen actually asks you to do here, in this final stanza, which is one sentence, incidentally. In that final stanza, he doesn't ask you to imagine what it is like to be the soldier who breathes the mustard gas. He doesn't ask you what it is like to be one of those soldiers who is dying for his country. All he asks you to do is be him, be the person who has watched one of his friends dying for his country. Be the person who has heard *the blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs*. He doesn't say *see* 'the blood coming gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs' in that line either. He says if you could *hear* 'at every jolt, the blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs'. In the act of attempting to hear

it, we inevitably see it as well. What Owen asks the addressee of the poem to do here, it shows a lot of integrity. He's not asking the person he addresses the poem to to do anything that he hasn't done himself.

So of course, the question now must be raised: who is he addressing the poem to? Now, there's another Mycroft Online Lecture which we've done on Rupert Brooke's pre-First World War poem, *The Soldier*. And *The Soldier* was a very popular poem, as I mentioned at the start, for recruiting young men for warfare. And it was very successful for that, and it would be very apt if Wilfred Owen was addressing Rupert Brooke, who wrote *The Soldier* in this poem. It would be very apt, but in fact, he's not. The poem was originally addressed to a woman called Jessie Pope. It was later addressed to 'a Certain Poetess'. Jessie Pope was a woman who wrote very patriotic verses; the sort of woman who would hand out white feathers to young men to go and encourage them to get their limbs blown off in the trenches of Flanders. If we wanted to be kinder to the type of propaganda which was believed in and expounded by people like Jessie Pope, perhaps we could argue that before poems like *Dulce et Decorum Est* got written, people didn't actually know what the reality of the First World War trenches was.

Until brave young men like Wilfred Owen experience the horrors of that existence, and have talent enough to write about it, and bring these horrors back for the public to read and understand, perhaps it could be argued that the propaganda machine at the start of the First World War literally thought that what they were saying was the truth. And perhaps it could be argued that they didn't as well.

I'll finish by reading Jessie Pope's early First World War recruitment poem, *Who's for the Game*. This is the type of poem that seems to see warfare as some sort of over-zealous rugby match.

So I'll read this out, and then read you, for the final time, Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est.*

Who's for the game, the biggest that's played,
The red crashing game of a fight?
Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he'd rather sit tight?
Who'll toe the line for the signal to 'Go!'?
Who'll give his country a hand?
Who wants a turn to himself in the show?

And who wants a seat in the stand?

Who knows it won't be a picnic – not much -
Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?
Who would much rather come back with a crutch
Than lie low and be out of the fun?
Come along, lads – But you'll come on all right –
For there's only one course to pursue,
Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
And she's looking and calling for you.
Jessie Pope, 1915.

Now, as the antidote to this, we get Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est*. And let's remember that Wilfred Owen was not what we would call a 'pacifist'. Wilfred Owen was a full-on soldier in that war. Wilfred Owen elected to go back to the front line at the end of the war, to see the war through to the end. And when Owen returns to fight on the front line, he is killed. He dies in the final week of warfare. He dies almost one week to the hour before the final armistice. So, when this genuine military hero says this about the act of warfare, the realities of warfare, this is somebody we have to listen to. This is someone saying that if you're going to be sending young men out to fight, let's make sure you understand the realities of what's actually going on there.

And he does it through this poem. *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
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 floundering 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.

And I thought for a long time why Owen ended the poem in the way that he does like that, and the conclusion that I've come to is that it works as if Owen has turned his back on the natural rhythm of the poem, in the same way that he has turned his back on the old lie that is *Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori.*

So we hear,

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.

And Owen turns away, leaving the [dm dm dm] that we expect to follow the sentiment, behind.

That was the Mycroft Online Lecture for Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est*.

I am Dr. Andrew Barker.

Thank you very much.

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Some extra notes:

1 On the line, *like a devils sick of sin*. 'I get the idea when I hear that line that the devil who is seen to be responsible for all the evil of the world is watching this, and is just saying, “I'm just sick of this. This is too disgusting. Even I have got a line.”'

The implication being here that at this point in history humans do not have a line. It has long been crossed. Even a devil would be appalled by what Owen is witnessing. We cannot ignore, however, that beyond any literal meaning the acoustics add much to this line. The repeated S's in the line, particularly the 'Si' sounds, create a line redolent with the disgust Owen wants to convey.

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