



## ‘What storms did shake Macbeth’: Ivor Gurney and his Ironic Music-making

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Ivor Gurney's (1890-1937) poems, songs and music are considered to be churned out of the strife of the Great War, which had left deep psychological scars on his bipolar mind. Yet, Gurney can hardly be classified as a pacifist, anti-war poet like Owen or Sassoon. Rather, his poetry mingles the notes of patriotic pro-war poets with the pathos of death and loss. Moreover, his long strife with mental illness had broadened the metaphor of war to a considerable extent – it was no longer merely an external conflict with armed combatants; it became a prolonged battle with one's inner self. Gurney's poetry also puts forward important issues concerning the shaping of modernity in England. The dissonance which is generally associated with ideation of modernity – the dissonance of Pound and Eliot in verse, the dissonance of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg in music – does not form the key note of Gurney's aesthetic practice. In fact, the angst-laden cynicism which we associate with the poetry of the Great War is to a large extent a product of a myopic, selective reading of the War Poets. This offers a 'highly distorted' (Walter xxii) picture of the war. The distortion becomes quite evident the moment we turn to Gurney.

Gurney's first volume of poetry, *Severn and Somme* (1917), offers us several bits of what Tim Kendall calls 'memorial poetry' (Kendall 87). These wisps of images from his past bear a dominant repetitive trope – they reminiscently explore memories of his country – of the Cotswolds, the Severn valley and the forests of Gloucestershire. Notes of desolate hankering ring through these lines, notes which apparently lack a sardonic counterpoint:

God, that I might see  
Framilode once again !  
Redmarley, all renewed,  
Clear shining after rain.

And Cranham, Cranham trees,  
And blaze of Autumn hues.  
Portway under the moon,  
Silvered with freezing dews. (Gurney, *Severn and Somme* 17)

Gurney had joined the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Gloucester Regiment and the nostalgic lucubration about native landscape was presented in his first volume as the collective effort of purgation, deemed necessary amidst the horrid brutalities of war. In the Preface he states:

Most of the book is concerned with a person named Myself, and the rest with my county Gloucester, that whether I die or live stays always with me – being in itself so beautiful, so full of memories, whose people are so good to be friends with, so easy-going and so frank. (*Severn and Somme* 7)

Thus Gurney's sense of selfhood extends to his comrades in his platoons as they collectively face the grimness of war. This collective effort also bestows upon them a camaraderie which war can threaten but not efface. As he states in "To Certain Comrades" :

Such friendship is not touched by Death's disaster,  
But stands the faster ;  
And all the shocks and trials of time cannot  
Shake it one jot. (*Severn and Somme* 13)

In fact, for Gurney, friendship is an extension of his love of nature. Gurney could steadfastly assert, 'Your hills are not only hills but friends of mine' (*Severn and Somme* 23). Thus friendship defies the restrictions of time. This assurance about the persistence of human friendship is also permeated by a deep belief in the immortality of human spirit, a transcendent presence which surpasses the decimation of war. This, quite expectedly, would make many of his poems sound optimistic – even to an extent which might sound to the modernist ears to be shallow and vapid. Consider, for example, the following lines from "Eternal Treasure", published in his second volume of poetry:

Why think on Beauty as for ever lost  
When fire and steel have worked their evil will,  
Since beauty lasts beyond decaying dust,  
And in the after-dark is lovely still? (*War's Embers* 17)

What is also evident is this obsessive use of rhyme, an obsession which sounds even more forced in lines which would have irregular syntax. Gurney perhaps had a hint of this, as his words in the Preface of *Severn and Somme* would have us believe:

All these verses were written in France, and in sound of the guns, save only two or three earlier pieces. This should be reason enough to excuse any roughness in the technique. (*Severn and Somme* 8)

Gurney, in other words, did not consciously adopt dissonance in his poems. If they are present in his poetry, it does not serve the same purposes as, for example, Owen's half-rhymes. In fact, unlike Owen and Sassoon, Gurney thought that he was involved in a 'just war' (*Severn and Somme* 17), a war which would end in an inevitable serenity. The lines from "Afterwords" bring out:

Those dreadful evidences of Man's ill-doing  
The kindly Mother of all shall soon hide deep,  
Covering with tender fingers her children asleep,  
Till Time's slow cycle turns them to renewing  
In other forms their beauty—no grief, no rueing  
Irrevocable woe. (*Severn and Somme* 17)

Nothing can be more starkly different from Owen's realisation of the futility of human civilisation. Gurney's assurance about the persistence of Beauty is not Hellenistic pantheism; rather, it might be recognised as Christian belief in providential justice. Gurney could assuredly say, 'Nor steel nor flame has any power on me, / Save that its malice work the Almighty Will' (*Severn and Somme* 25). Isaac Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump" brings out an antithesis to this belief in Christian piety as he probingly questions about dead soldiers:

Is their soul's sack,  
Emptied of God-ancestral essences.  
Who hurled them out? Who hurled? (Rosenberg 101)

And Owen would add a mocking counterpoint in "Spring Offensive", describing the massacre of soldiers who lead an offensive up a mountainous slope:

Some say God caught them even before they fell. (Owen 79)

Yet, Gurney would also have his moments of doubt. These doubts were not about the presence of a providential order, rather it was about its distorted usurpation by the tyrants and governments of the world. Gurney rarely juxtaposes the Divine and the worldly orders and does not adhere to the notion that chaos in the worldly realm must be reflective of the vapidness of Divine benevolence. Rather, his dissatisfaction and doubts are limited to his immediate temporality, as is evident in these lines from “Strange Service” :

Little did I dream, England, that you bore me  
Under the Cotswold hills beside the water meadows,  
To do you dreadful service, here, beyond your  
borders  
And your enfolding seas. (*Severn and Somme* 23)

Moreover, like other Trench Poets, he criticises notions of chivalric heroism which overshadows the real images of suffering and dread on the battlefield. Incredulous and defiant, he addresses his own nation:

Are these the heroes—these ? have kept from  
you  
The power of primal savagery so long ?  
Shall break the devil's legions ? These they are  
Who do in silence what they might boast to do ;  
In the height of battle tell the world in song  
How they do hate and fear the face of War. (*Severn and Somme*, 28)

These doubts about chivalry are often self-doubts, voices in his mind whispering to his soul insecure questions about his courage. In “The Silent Ones”, he contrasts his timid self-preservation to the carefree martyrdom of another soldier:

Who died on the wires, and hung there, one of two -  
Who for his hours of life had chattered through  
Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent:  
Yet faced unbroken wires; stepped over, and went  
A noble fool, faithful to his stripes - and ended.  
But I weak, hungry, and willing only for the chance  
Of line- to fight in the line, lay down under unbroken  
Wires, and saw the flashes and kept unshaken... (Walter 60)

These probing self-doubts would often haunt him; he would meet ‘three jeering, fleeing spectres’ (*Severn and Somme* 43) which would have variant things to say about his courage and eventual fate. These spectres, reminiscent of the witches in Macbeth, are products of intense self-doubt. In “Influences”, Gurney would etch vividly the macabre shades of these hallucinatory visions:

When woods of home grow dark,  
I grow dark too.  
Images of strange power  
Fill me and thrill me that hour,  
Sombre of hue.

The woods of Dunsinane  
I walk, and know  
What storms did shake Macbeth,  
That brought on Duncan's death,  
And his own woe.

Strange whispers chill the blood  
Of evil breath ;  
Such rumours as did stir  
Witch and foul sorcerer  
On the lone heath. (*Severn and Somme* 46)

In “Time and the Soldier”, the spectre that haunts is identified as Time itself. Time moves slowly, delaying poet’s reunion with the countryside that he loves. Hence, he challenges its cruel hold on his life:

How slow you move, old Time ;  
Walk a bit faster !  
Old fool, I'm not your slave. . . .  
Beauty's my master !  
You hold me for a space. . . .  
What are you, Time ?  
A ghost, a thing of thought,  
An easy rhyme. (*Severn and Somme* 45)

Yet, there is never any doubt that a reunion would be eventually accomplished. The Severn valley, the Cranham lanes, the Maisemore would be met again and the poet knows that spring would ‘exorcise’ all weakness with ‘one bluebell’ (*Severn and Somme* 46). However, after the war, as Gurney returned to England and was released from the army– the visions of war haunted him. In “Camps”, he reveals the persistence of these hallucinatory spectres:

Out of the line we rest in villages  
  
Quiet indeed, where heal the spirit’s scars,  
  
But even so, lapped deep in sunshine and ease  
  
We are haunted for ever by the shapes of wars. (*War’s Embers* 23)

He struggled to forget the memories of the unnumbered dead. After the war, he elegiacally sings about one such soldier:

Cover him, cover him soon!  
And with thick-set  
Masses of memoried flowers  
Hide that red wet  
Thing that I must somehow forget. (*War’s Embers* 45)

Even during the war, Gurney had suffered from mental instability. His first documented phase of nervous breakdown happened in the Spring of 1913 in London, when Gurney studied in the Royal College of Music. He consulted a doctor in early June and it was a three month break in the countryside (mostly in his native Gloucestershire) which led to his regaining of health (Blevins 77-79). As is suggested by Gurney’s Preface in *Severn and Somme*, his mates in the battalion ‘have wondered’ (7) whether he was crazy or not. Gurney was gassed in September 1917 and suffered from a severe mental breakdown in March 1918. The traces of a bipolar disorder, perhaps a persistence of the earlier mental illness and exacerbated by a rejection from Annie Drummond (Blevins 142-145), continue to impede his creative efforts. By 1922, he had been declared insane. His friend and confidante Marion Scott referred to his state of insanity as ‘deferred shell-shock’, hence validating the argument that the hallucinatory spectres of war led to his mental degradation. This mythic portrayal of Gurney is however negated by recent research.

That Gurney’s memories of war were not merely hallucinatory is evident in many of his poems. In “Toasts and Memories” (*Wars Embers* 30-31), Gurney traces this dialectical movement of memories. During the war, he had fondly remembered Gloucestershire. Now, that he is on the other side of the English Channel, he cannot ‘help but think/ Of friends who stifle longing/ With friendly food and drink’. In fact, to be in the companionship of such friends, he was willing to go through all the pains of war:

I’d not have missed one single scrap of pain  
That brought me to such friends and them to me (*War’s Embers* 62)



Gurney turns back nostalgically to the memories of comradeship during the war as those which offered him a rare repose of mental stability – something which he lacked both in the pre as well as the post-war years. It is this paradoxical realisation of repose and pain which must arise from memories which shape the contours of Gurney's vision of the war. This ironic double-vision had inevitable consequences in framing his aesthetics. Unlike many other archetypal modernist poets, Gurney was not rebelling against the conventional ideations of sonority – be it in his poems or in his music. While listening to his music – be it his music to lyrics spurred by war (“In Flanders”, “By a Bierside”), his *War Elegy, A Gloucestershire Rhapsody* or his Elizabethan songs– one is struck by his determination to stay rooted in traditions.

This is also perhaps because tradition was not necessarily the ‘convention’ in early twentieth century English music scene, as a generation of composers tried to unravel the treasure of English folk idioms and carve out a distinctive English sound in Western Classical music. Like the legendary Ralph Vaughan Williams, his teacher at the Royal College of Music, Gurney also considered himself to be a member of a ‘musical citizenship’ (qtd. in Holmes 47) which had been developing a new idiom of lyricism and an indigenous pastoral/ elegiac tradition of music which immortalised a distinctively English world of haunting, everlasting beauty – the Cotswolds, the Severn valley and forests of Gloucestershire. For Gurney, radicalisation was a return to the roots. It is important to note that the Eliot of the *Four Quartets*, if not the Eliot of *The Waste Land*, was also traversing a similar route to a rooted beginning. While it is inevitable that the modernist departure is traced to a new state of disenchantment and alienation reflected in the products of symbolism, surrealism and serialism – it is equally important to mark its roots, especially in England, in a continuity of artistic forms. Gurney's suffering in the trenches and the hospital wards demands an affirmation of this truth.

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