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# "Joy—Joy—Strange Joy"

Spiritual Experience in World War One  
Poetry

*Ryder Seamons*

The academic study of spirituality does not belong to just religious studies. The fields of psychology, biology, neuroscience, art, and literature recognize the salience of human spirituality both inside and outside the confines of religious tradition and theological belief. Each field utilizes varying definitions and attitudes in their academic pursuit to understand spirituality and spiritual experience. As a result, the word "spirituality" often evades a singular definition. Scholar and theologian Sandra M. Schneiders claims that the term is "unavoidably ambiguous, referring to (1) a fundamental dimension of the human being, (2) the lived experience which actualizes that dimension, and (3) the academic discipline which studies that experience" (678). American psychologist William James, who attempted to approach the study of spirituality as a pseudoscience, claimed that part of the difficulty of understanding mystical and spiritual experience lies in the fact that

“it defies expression . . . its quality must be directly experienced” and “cannot be imparted or transferred to others” (515). The difficulty and ambiguity of spirituality for scholars is thus twofold: defining the phenomenon itself and explaining how the phenomenon manifests itself in the most unspoken, personal depths of the human psyche. These lived manifestations of spirituality we will refer to as spiritual experiences.

The studies of spirituality and spiritual experience conjure a number of different academic responses, ranging from zealous fanaticism to skeptical disapproval. While some scholars recognize the validity of spiritual experiences as deeply meaningful, psychological experiences beyond the scope of scientific understanding, others might argue that such experiences are simply the fruits of a disturbed mind. Scholars like Wesley J. Wildman recognize the compelling nature of spiritual experiences not only as a means of confirming religious feelings of ultimate truth and social identity but also as a fundamental aspect of the human condition (Wildman). And even though research on spirituality in the past has favored traditional Christian paradigms, the academic field has grown more expansive to include an understanding of other religious traditions, including an understanding of spirituality that is divorced from religious belief altogether. Wildman writes that “there has been an average increase in sophistication” in the academic study of spiritual experience “as researchers gradually became aware of and subsequently tried to overcome simplistic assumptions about [religious and spiritual experiences] deriving from theistic and usually Christian religious and theological frameworks” (53). This all-encompassing understanding of human spirituality and the universality of spiritual experience will more properly suit our purposes in this study.

There is likewise no sole definition of what constitutes a spiritual experience. However, in literary studies spiritual experience can be described as a spontaneous swelling of the emotions, a momentary euphoria, a perfect union of the body and mind, or an epiphanic sense of ultimate meaning. For my purposes, I will focus on how spiritual experience is expressed and interpreted through poetry. Poetry presents a thoughtful medium to explore the inner workings of the human spirit, as it seeks to articulate aspects of the human experience that are unseen and hold ultimate meaning. The poetry of World War I in particular presents a fascinating portrait of human spirituality. To imagine a spiritual experience occurring amid the trench warfare, mustard gas bombings, and ecological destruction fundamentally characteristic of World War I seems almost paradoxical. Yet, British soldier-poets Isaac Rosenberg

and Edward Thomas, who both wrote poetry as soldiers and were killed in battle, portrayed wartime spiritual experiences in their works. The depiction of spiritual experiences in their poetry, on one hand, captures the Romantic glorification of a sublime spiritual experience and its fruits of joy and deeper understanding. On the other hand, the spiritual experience simultaneously reflects the twisted depravity of World War I and the increasing secularization of the modern era. This literary tension led these soldier-poets to portray spiritual experience in nuanced and contradictory ways.

In order to understand the spirituality found in the poetry of Rosenberg and Thomas, I invoke Schneider's assessment that the study of spirituality must have "an understanding of the discipline which is not necessarily theological" but includes "non-Christian and even nonreligious spiritual experiences" (687). Rosenberg and Thomas present provocative notions of spirituality that are strikingly similar, despite their theological differences. Rosenberg, an Orthodox Jew, and Thomas, a disenchanting Christian, both tether their depictions of spiritual experience not to a concept of religion, theology, or even divinity ("Isaac," Longley). They portray wartime spiritual experience anthropologically, as a universal feature of the human condition accessible to all people in all places—even the darkest of trenches. This type of spirituality is detached from theological meaning and carries the potential to be shared universally. By avoiding religious framing in which to interpret their respective spiritual experiences, Rosenberg and Thomas suggest that the transcendence of their spiritual experiences tethers them to their humanity and to the natural world. Yet, the poets also suggest that the horrors of the War are so terrible that it prevents them from fully basking in the magnificence or higher meaning of their spiritual experiences.

To Rosenberg and Thomas, spiritual experience entails a sensory and emotional awakening from the dull and numbed life of a soldier. These experiences are depicted as an approach to a transcendent sense of ultimacy or broader reality that occurs through communion with nature. I argue that Rosenberg and Thomas—who belonged to the Georgian poetic movement—both hearken back to the Romantic poetic tradition that preceded them, particularly by linking the spiritual experiences in their poems to birdsong. In these poems, birdsong creates a spiritual experience that is reminiscent of the Romantic sublime, in that the key to spiritual awakening is a spontaneous interaction with the unseen beauties of the natural world, which leads to an enhanced acuteness of one's place in time and space. The Romantic elements

in Rosenberg and Thomas's poetry are also brought into dialogue with modernist angst—a typical feature of English poetry during and after World War I. I argue that the psychological trauma caused by the War and the existential stress of modernity leads these poets to interpret their spiritual experiences as life-threatening and dangerous rather than life-sustaining and fulfilling. Thus, spiritual experiences in these poems are portrayed as a transcendent moment of beauty or existential clarity, but they are interpreted by the poets as an unwanted distraction from the dangerous reality of imminent death at wartime. Finally, because the spiritual experiences themselves pose a threat to survival for these soldier-poets, I reason that Rosenberg and Thomas find spiritual solace in the formal elements of poetry itself instead of in their lived spiritual experiences. The act of writing poetry becomes a spiritual exercise whereby Rosenberg and Thomas can capture a fleeting, threatening moment through language, and—within the formal elements of the poem—grapple with existential stress, imminent death, and the spiritually numbing life of a soldier.

Both Rosenberg and Thomas were far from the typical British soldier. After returning from a stay in South Africa in December 1915, Isaac Rosenberg enlisted in the British army to fight in France. Only twenty-four years old, Rosenberg enlisted not out of duty or desire for glory, but to financially support his impoverished family. He determined as a young school boy to establish himself as a literary visionary of great imagination and depth, and he had already published several poems before enlisting. Although his Orthodox Jewish heritage discouraged engagement with art and English literature, Rosenberg exhibited a gift in writing from an early age and was encouraged by mentors to study English poetry vocationally. He became a student of many Romantic poets and felt a “strong affinity” for the Romantic painter-poet William Blake (Maccoby 14). He continued to write poetry on scraps of paper in the muddy trenches of France and had a few poems published while serving. On April 1, 1918, Rosenberg was killed in man-to-man combat. His family engraved words upon his headstone which, for Rosenberg, would have been “the highest title which a human being can bear: . . . ‘Artist and Poet’” (Maccoby 124).

Edward Thomas was many years older than Rosenberg by the time Britain declared war in August 1914. At this point in his life, Thomas already had a family and a well-established writing career. However, it is apparent that the conflict abroad quickly consumed all of Thomas's thoughts, for it

soon became the primary subject of his letters and writings. That same year, Thomas's closest friend, the American poet Robert Frost, had encouraged him to utilize his writing talents to compose poetry. Thomas lacked a substantial education in English literature, but, like Frost, he held a deeply emotional connection with landscape, and his poems paint idyllic portraits of pastoral England. Echoing the views of Romantic poets that preceded him by a century, Thomas's poems revere the beauty and simplicity of the natural world and the psychological relationship between nature and man. While considering for months the possibility of enlisting, Thomas made World War I the focus of most of his poems. Thomas's indecisiveness became the subject of Frost's poem that would one day become one of his most famous: "The Road Not Taken." Thomas's internal battle of whether or not to join the War so consumed him that it became a spiritual matter, taking place "in his spiritual world," as his wife later wrote (Hollis). "Frankly I do not want to go . . . but hardly a day passes without my thinking I should," he wrote to Frost (Hollis). At age thirty-seven, he enlisted with the Artists Rifles, and like Rosenberg, continued to write poetry during his military service. Thomas was killed less than two years later in the Battle of Arras when his body was obliterated by an enemy shell. Though Rosenberg and Thomas came from different religious backgrounds, both soldier-poets were acutely aware of the impact World War I had on human spirituality. In Rosenberg's poem "Returning, We Hear the Larks," and Thomas's poems "The Owl" and "Adlestrop," we find spiritual experiences—stripped of any trace of theology and existing wholly within the realm of nature—whose beauty and simplicity are manipulated by the brutal horrors of the War and the collective angst of the secularized modern world.

The works of many great soldier-poets from the early twentieth century often avoid literary categorization, since they neither entirely adhere to the Georgian or Romantic influences that preceded them, nor do they fully embrace the modernist attitudes that were largely born out of the terror and uncertainty of World War I. The Georgian poetic movement, which was "in vogue when war broke out," resembled the poetry of the Romantic period nearly a century earlier, as it focused on the tranquility and majesty of the natural world and the cultivation of the human spirit ("Voices" 2017). Georgian poetry "represented an attempt to wall in the garden of English poetry against the disruptive forces of modern civilization" ("Voices" 2017). Hoping to avoid the controversies surrounding the precise art of dating and

defining different literary movements, my mentions of Modernism refer to the literary movement that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century that was largely defined by feelings of alienation, angst, and an increased focus on the inner world of the human psyche. The modernist literary movement also included a shift towards secularization and a growing disdain for all things spiritual, religious, or mystical. In essence, “the unsettling forces of modernity profoundly challenged traditional ways of structuring and making sense of the human experience” (“Introduction” 1889). Though both Rosenberg and Thomas exhibit Romantic aptitudes and interests in their poetry, the trauma of their wartime experience allows modernist angst to seep in, creating a more unusual depiction of human spirituality.

Rosenberg ties his depiction of spiritual experience to humankind’s relationship with nature in his poem “Returning, We Hear the Larks.” Written in 1917—one of Rosenberg’s final poems before his death in April 1918—“Returning, We Hear the Larks” portrays a battered group of soldiers returning to camp, seeking a moment of safety and sleep.

Sombre the night is.

And though we have our lives, we know

What sinister threat lurks there.

Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know

This poison-blasted track opens on our camp—

On a little safe sleep.

But hark! joy—joy—strange joy.

Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.

Music showering on our upturned list’ning faces.

Death could drop from the dark

As easily as song—

But song only dropped,

Like a blind man’s dreams on the sand

By dangerous tides,  
 Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,  
 Or her kisses where a serpent hides. (Rosenburg 15)

He begins the poem with the phrase "Sombre the night is," establishing a blatantly solemn tone. This group of soldiers seems to be on the brink of death. An additional day of survival is no cause for celebration, for "though we have our lives, we know / What sinister threat lurks there." The threat is shrouded in mystery but is imminent. The soldiers' pessimism is warranted; the ambiguous, sinister threat belongs to the night and thus the darkness. Rosenberg continues this tone in the second stanza by employing synecdoche, using dismembered "anguished limbs" to describe the surviving troops. For a soldier to drag his own anguished limbs suggests a total disconnect between body and mind. This constant anxiety of combat results in his dehumanization. The visualization of dismembered and "anguished" limbs also implies the physical toll of horrifying trench warfare. Echoing the first stanza, Rosenberg again writes, "we . . . know." In the first stanza, the men know that a "sinister threat" lurks in the night; in the second stanza, they know that "this poison-blasted track opens on our camp." Rosenberg plays with the surety of the word "know," as if to touch on the inevitability of a brutal death. Though unspoken, he and his fellow soldiers "know" it, and not even a "little safe sleep" can remedy the existential stress they consequently suffer.

With the sombre tone and physical and emotional numbness firmly established thus far, Rosenberg begins his third stanza with a phrase that indicates both a change in tone and a shift towards the spiritual—"But hark!" The third stanza begins as something akin to the announcement of a heavenly visitor: "But hark! joy—joy—strange joy." Joy repeated three times also carries subtle Biblical precedence, as a repetition of three often creates a superlative in Hebrew rhetoric. Fellow Jewish poet and World War I soldier Siegfried Sassoon wrote of Rosenberg's poetry as having a "biblical and prophetic" scriptural quality that linked back to Rosenberg's Jewish heritage (Sassoon IX). A devout and believing Jew, Rosenberg's use of Biblical language points his readers to something of spiritual significance. However, the word "strange" hangs eerily, as if waiting to taint the pure spiritual experience soon to be enjoyed collectively by Rosenberg and his comrades.

The next line clarifies what Rosenberg and his peers hearken to—"Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks." The birdsong of larks in the night awakens spiritual sensitivities and brings an unexpected joy in a moment of pain and trauma. The larks provide the soldiers with a repose that contrasts directly with their sombre emotional state and "anguished" physical state. This spontaneous overflowing of emotion recalls the concept of the sublime in Romantic British poetry. The sublime indicates a spiritual state of "grandeur, power, and awe that may be inherent in or produced by undomesticated nature" (Glossary 1075). According to philosophers like Edmund Burke, a necessary element of the sublime is the presence of potential danger or terror; the escape from which produces intense emotions of joy and relief.

More importantly, the presence of larks in the poem carries a literary history in the tradition of British poetry that points to the spiritual significance of these birds. For many British poets, larks and their songs convey mystical and spiritual properties. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's "To a Skylark" and William Wordsworth's poem published five years later of the same name, the lark "represents divine inspiration" (Hendry 68). The lark's song acts as a spiritual muse that speaks truths of ultimate value. Specifically, Rosenberg's poem engages intertextually with Shelley's "To a Skylark," which was published in 1820. Rosenberg and Shelley both refer to the skylark as "unseen," which points to an aspect of spirituality that has heretofore gone unmentioned: its immateriality. The fact that both Rosenberg and Shelley's larks remain formless and immaterial throughout their poems expresses the concept that the larks exist in a spiritual, unseen realm, and therefore they inspire a spiritual reaction from humans that transcends the material universe. Further, both poets describe the lark's melodious song as a showering rain. In both poems, the immaterial larks appear as a grace, providing spontaneous and unwarranted repose from the gloom and darkness of life. Rosenberg's use of intertextuality thus further implies the spiritual significance of the lark's song and the transcendent awakening it inspires among the soldiers. His spirituality appears in the third stanza as a moment of pristine ecstasy—the shadow of a Romantic sublime cast into the twentieth century. He and his soldiers experience momentary stillness and spiritual solace in unexpected communion with nature by means of unseen songbirds.

Rosenberg's final stanza, consisting of seven lines, cuts the emerging spiritual experience to an abrupt end by directly asserting what has been

implied from the very beginning: “Death could drop from the dark.” This poem ends by returning to its beginning. Death, danger, and ruin are still imminent. The poem encapsulates a sublime spiritual experience of three lines between two three-lined stanzas at the beginning and a final seven-lined stanza of sombre reality. Not even a spiritual experience shared collectively can awaken us to a greater transcendent meaning behind the War and its bloody conflict. This implication is further established in the formal elements of Rosenberg’s poem. The first two tercets that serve to establish a sombre reality, as well as the final seven-line stanza, are written in free verse without apparent rhythm or rhyme. The third “sublime” stanza, however, adheres to a more traditional poetic structure. Its lines appear orderly, and the meter resembles iambic pentameter. The stanza is also united by meaningful rhymes: “hark” rhymes with that which the soldiers hearken to, “lark”; and “heights” rhymes with “night.” The third stanza thus presents itself as a more formal poetic whole, surrounded between two halves of chaotic, unstructured language, as if Rosenberg is suggesting that the peace and wholeness of his sublime spiritual experience is but a tiny, fleeting moment, tainted by the chaos and confusion caused by World War I.

Thomas touches on a parallel spirituality in his poem “The Owl,” in which a weary and insensate soldier is stirred by the call of a nocturnal bird. Published after Thomas’s death in 1917, this poem was originally composed in February 1915—a few short months before he would voluntarily enlist in World War I (Hollis). Though not based on his own experiences in combat, this poem exhibits Thomas’s keen mindfulness of World War I and those suffering at its hand.

Downhill I came, hungry, and yet not starved;  
Cold, yet had heat within me that was proof  
Against the North wind; tired, yet so that rest  
Had seemed the sweetest thing under a roof.

Then at the inn I had food, fire, and rest,  
Knowing how hungry, cold, and tired was I.  
All of the night was quite barred out except  
An owl’s cry, a most melancholy cry

Shaken out long and clear upon the hill,  
No merry note, nor cause of merriment,  
But one telling me plain what I escaped  
And others could not, that night as in I went.

And salted was my food, and my repose,  
Salted and sobered, too, by the bird's voice  
Speaking for all who lay under the stars,  
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice. (Thomas 10)

The poem begins much like Rosenberg's. The narrator has narrowly escaped the dangers of another day of battle and seeks shelter as night falls. In the first quatrain, it is apparent that the narrator's sole motive is to extend his survival one more night. He desires only the necessities of life—warmth, food, and rest—and he finds them at a nearby inn, "knowing how hungry, cold, and tired was I." He invites the reader into this moment of silence, writing "all of the night was quite barred out," but the silence is broken by "an owl's cry." In this second quatrain, Thomas rhymes "I" in the second line with "cry" in the fourth. This rhetorical strategy links the narrator's sense of self with the sound of the owl. It is important to note that, despite the poem's title, "The Owl," the emphasis here is placed on the owl's cry and not the bird itself. In fact, the bird remains immaterial and is never seen nor depicted in the poem—another noteworthy parallel to Rosenberg's "unseen larks," which present themselves as formless spiritual emissaries.

The experience spawned by the owl's cry awakens the narrator to a transcendent understanding of his exact place in time and space. In the third quatrain, we read that the owl's cry was "shaken out long and clear upon the hill." The phrase "shaken out," paired with "long and clear," seems somewhat oxymoronic. A sound that is "shaken out" suggests it is choppy or halting—not a particularly apt description of a typical owl's call. Though there is the possibility of catachresis here, there are also other explanations for this description that contribute to the poem's meaning. To "shake out" a "long and clear" call perhaps suggests that the noise was repeated continuously as if each long and clear cry was shaken out one after the next. Considering the narrator's resonance with the cry, as shown by the rhymed

pair of “I” and “cry,” one could also argue that the “shaken out” cry implies a narrator that is psychologically or spiritually “shaken” by the violence he barely escaped. The owl’s cry does not stir up an ecstatic jubilation like the larks in Rosenberg’s poem but produces a subtler effect. The narrator experiences a moment of enhanced mental and emotional clarity as a result of the hooting song. The owl’s spiritual call is instructive; it is “no merry note, nor cause of merriment,” but is a call “telling me plain what I escaped / And others could not.” Something about the owl’s call communicates a comprehensive message to the narrator. Herein lies the spiritual experience; the penetrating call of the owl unlocks the narrator’s spiritual capacity for a transcendent understanding of human suffering. The narrator is awakened to an enhanced awareness of his place in time and space and to the boundless suffering around him. The narrator came “downhill” to the inn at the beginning of the poem, and he hears the owl’s call coming from “upon the hill.” The call anchors him to an understanding of what he escaped “upon the hill” and what “others could not, that night.”

The owl’s sobering call and the subtle depiction of spiritual experience points to the narrator’s sense of ultimate value and meaning. Initially, the narrator only aspires to secure that which is necessary for his own survival—much like an animal. However, the “bird’s voice” “salted and sobered” the narrator’s food and repose. The sound that is initially described in the second and third stanzas as a singular “cry” and “note,” suggesting a musical, one-dimensional quality, is described as a “voice” that is “speaking” in the final stanza. This rhetorical shift indicates the narrator’s act of interpretation as the bird’s cry begins to carry significant spiritual meaning. The voice carries a distinct message of ultimate value, explained to him in a “plain” manner, as if the owl uses human language to articulate it. The bird’s melancholy song, or voice, awakens the narrator to the melancholy reality of human suffering, but it also adds flavor and meaning to the narrator’s meal and rest, as if to indicate that ultimate value is found in something beyond just daily survival. The poem celebrates the owl as a champion of the human spirit—its song speaks “for all who lay under the stars, / Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.” The owl’s call points to the idea that the human spirit requires more than just the necessities of life to thrive; there is something innately spiritual that allows humans to transcend from an animalistic mindset that aspires only to live another day. This spiritual experience fits well with what Wildman describes as an experience of ultimacy, which involves “engagement with an

ultimate reality” that imbues one’s life with renewed purpose (85). The owl’s melancholy cry laments the spiritually stifled—soldiers facing impending doom, poverty-stricken individuals without hope. The spiritual experience allows the narrator to cognitively approach a sense of ultimate value and grasp the reality of the human spirit, but also allows him to comprehend the depth and horror of human suffering both within and without the War.

As we examine the similar portraits of spiritual experience in both “Returning” and “The Owl,” the influence of Romanticism is most evident in the form of spiritual communion with nature. In both poems, the narrators are awakened from a spiritually catatonic state by an unexpected communion with the natural world. The songs of unseen birds provide a fleeting moment of clarity, joy, and transcendence reminiscent of a Romantic sublime. In “Returning, We Hear the Larks,” the narrator and his comrades pose with “upturned list’ning faces” in what appears to be a state of momentary ecstasy upon hearing a chorus of immaterial larks. Rosenberg describes the music as “showering” down upon their faces like rain, suggesting that the music takes on a metaphorically physical form; the senses are all engaged as the music is both heard and *felt*. The spiritual experience spawned by birdsong in “The Owl” is characterized less by joy and more by clarity; an enhancement not of physical senses but of emotional perceptions. The owl’s call brings the narrator closer to discovering a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose amidst arbitrary violence and horror. However, both poems end with a return to a bleak reality. The Romantic elements of these poems clash with a modernist attitude as both narrators are unable to bask in the mystical joy or clarity of their respective spiritual experiences. The true focus of these poems becomes not the budding human spirituality but the horrors of the War and the existential stress of surviving modern battle.

The clash between Romantic elements and modernist nuances, particularly evident in the narrators’ inability to relish the Romantic sublime, suggests that, for these writers, spiritual experience during wartime is life-threatening rather than life-saving. The authors succeed in creating a shadow of the sublime as the narrators connect with nature through birdsong, but the fleeting spiritual experience, in the end, serves not to inspire or protect. Spiritual experience during wartime creates a distraction from focusing on the imminent threats all around. In “Returning, We Hear the Larks,” Rosenberg’s “strange joy” lasts only for a short three-lined stanza before the narrator’s focus returns to the threats of the night. Robert C. Evans writes that the “romantic impulses”

within this poem “are in dialogue with impulses that are non- or even anti-Romantic” (132). Death has been momentarily replaced by beautiful birdsong, but the spiritual awakening that consequently follows feels more “like a blind man’s dreams on the sand / By dangerous tides.” The spiritual experience of enjoying the lark’s chorus initially activates sensitivities and stirs the narrator from a dulled state; and yet, the narrator correlates the “joy” with blindness—a sensory deficit. Rosenberg’s poetry before the War seems obsessed with exploring man’s relationship with the divine. Participation in the War did not change this obsession, but rather warped it: “in the trenches the growing search for the God-idea disappears; instead God is only apparent by His absence” (Maccoby 153). The spiritual experience for Rosenberg is a pleasing mirage that provides ephemeral joy but ultimately distracts him and his comrades from their most pressing task: survival. Their communion with an otherworldly, spiritual realm does not satisfy the human soul but deprives it of its much-needed sensory awareness.

The birdsong in “The Owl” indicates that human life transcends basic animalistic survival and that ultimate meaning and growth can only be obtained on a spiritual level. In the poem, the narrator discovers that the human spirit is constricted and degraded when all of its faculties are focused only on survival. But during times of war, in the face of imminent death and existential fear, survival must become one’s sole mission. Thus, the poem puts the desire to awaken spiritually at odds with the absolute necessity of surviving the danger of war.

Both Rosenberg and Thomas create spiritual experiences that distract and endanger rather than fulfill or enrich. Wildman touches on a similar argument in his study “Religious and Spiritual Experiences” when he writes, “[Religious Spiritual Experience]s are not only beautiful and valuable, but also potentially dangerous” (26). Wildman claims that all spiritual experiences are subject to personal interpretation and that the danger arises when that interpretation leads one to harbor beliefs that advocate violence and oppression, as has been the case historically (26). However, the danger of Rosenberg and Thomas’s spiritual experience differs in two ways. First, the danger lies not just in the interpretation but in the experience itself. It is in the very moment of experiencing something beautiful and transcendent that the narrators find themselves at risk. Second, the experience ironically threatens only the experienter.

To feel that one's life is put at risk by a transcendent moment of joy and mental clarity suggests the true extent of depravity that World War I soldiers were subject to. For Rosenberg, Thomas, and many others, World War I functions as a symbolic embodiment of the great spiritual dullness of the modern era. Deborah Maccoby wrote that "to Rosenberg, the First World War was something uncanny, weird, sinister, breaking out from the hidden, subterranean levels of human consciousness" (154). Though in Britain the War was overly glamorized and soldier's efforts were often glorified, the soldier-poets engaging in actual battle in mainland Europe "soon realized the full horror of war, and this realization affected both their imaginations and their poetic techniques" ("Voices" 2017). For these poets, the Great War and the technological advancement of the modern era represented an irreversible turn from the simplicity of the past. World War I and Modernism presented themselves as the bastard children of an advanced society that placed too much emphasis on progression and too little emphasis on the fragility of the human spirit.

Thomas's poem "Adlestrop" encompasses the conceptual difficulty of reconciling the rapid shifts of modernity with the stillness of nature. This poem was written in January 1915, one month before he wrote "The Owl" and several months after the War began in mainland Europe. It also presents a spiritual impression, generated by the song of a bird, that pairs nicely with "Returning" and "The Owl." The piece describes a personal experience from June 1914 when Thomas took the train to visit Robert Frost. Though the poem does not depict or even reference war, "Adlestrop" can be found in most anthologies of World War I poetry, since it thoughtfully captures the peace lost during wartime. Composed a few months after Britain's entry into the War, Thomas writes about an unexpected stop at the platform in Adlestrop en route to visit a friend. "The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat. / No one left and no one came / On the bare platform" (Thomas, Adlestrop). The train rests at the Adlestrop station for only one minute, but "for that minute a blackbird sang / Close by." There is no further movement in the poem, nor action nor event. The climax of the poem is the bird's song.

The poem speaks to some final moments of calm before the destruction of World War I, but one could also read "Adlestrop" as a comment on the increasingly uncomfortable trajectory of the modern era. Thomas indicates tension in the poem between movement and stillness. The noise and rattle of the moving train are contrasted with the song of the blackbird, only audible

once the train has stopped completely on the platform. The train, symbolic of industrialization that ushered in twentieth-century modernization, is contrasted with the sweet music of nature. Only when the train stops and passengers become silent does Thomas realize that “all the birds / Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire” are singing. A character in Ian McEwan’s novel *Sweet Tooth* marvels at the spiritual power of the poem “Adlestrop” and remarks on “the sense of pure existence, of being suspended in space and time, a time before a cataclysmic war” that the piece inspires (169). The poem reads like a spiritual reflection on man’s once intimate and sensory relationship with the natural world—a reflection of Romanticism cast into a modernist mold. This tension between Romanticism and Modernism and their respective attitudes toward spirituality plays a role in both Rosenberg and Thomas’s poems and reveals their perception of human spirituality during wartime.

Since spirituality is unable to be savored as a beautiful, enriching experience in these poetic moments, I assert that the act of writing poetry becomes a spiritual exercise for these poets that allows them to explore complex concepts of human spirituality. The act of composing poetry creates a literary safe-haven; the poems themselves become a source of solace as the poets capture fleeting spiritual experiences. In “Returning” and “The Owl,” the narrators seek temporary safety and solace by returning to protected abodes—the camp or the inn. They seek both physical safety from the foe’s bullets and shells, as well as spiritual safety from the numbing and psychologically-damaging stress of facing impending death. Ironically, both narrators secure physical safety by the end of the poem, and they both also describe transcendent spiritual experiences. However, by the end of both poems, neither narrator feels secure, and instead the poems end with a lingering sense of doom and despair. The poetry, then, with its meticulous construction of lines and stanzas, creates a sense of order amongst the chaos of the outside world that the poets fail to obtain in either their physical abodes or their lived spiritual experiences. The poem becomes the one place where the narrator is able to navigate the complexities of the human condition and the vast depths of human existence, all within the bounds of a structured rhythm and meter, because to do so during the fighting would create a distraction that would in turn become life-threatening. The beauty these poets experience in poetry can be enjoyed without leaving them feeling endangered, unlike the spiritual experience that occurs spontaneously during wartime. Thus, poetry creates a proxy spiritual

experience for these authors. Rosenberg and Thomas help demonstrate the spiritual potential of poetry by assessing its formal capacity to immortalize moments of transcendence, clarity, and sublimity during confusing and chaotic war. This function of poetry closely reflects the purpose of studying spirituality academically, according to Philip Sheldrake: to navigate “the broad understandings of the numinous (sometimes embodied in nature or in the arts), the undefined depths of human existence or . . . the boundless mysteries of the cosmos” (3). This is perhaps why many soldier-poets, particularly Rosenberg and Thomas, chose not to use poetry as a means to describe the horrors and death they witnessed fighting abroad, but instead as a medium to explore how these horrors impacted their psyche and spiritual development. They chose to depict not the violence of battle but the aftermath of battle; they chose to depict not the trench warfare but the trenches themselves. The form of poetry itself provides a structural security—a spiritual solace from the dangers of war and the stress of modernity.

Even during times of mass death and destruction, Rosenberg and Thomas still entertain spiritual experience in their war poetry. For these writers, human spirituality is a living force that awakens sensory capacities and provides peace, clarity, and transcendence. The Romantic feelings of spiritual union with nature cause tension in the poem as it grapples with the modernist uncertainty so commonly found in World War I poetry. And though Rosenberg and Thomas recognize the potential beauty of spiritual experience, in these poems we find a rare form of modernist animosity towards spirituality as the authors admit the reality of spiritual experience but deny its function of enriching human life. Finally, these poems provide a fascinating study of spirituality that is not theologically grounded but is born out of an anthropological paradigm. Rosenberg and Thomas’s writings suggest that spiritual experience is not dependent on proximity to the divine or consciousness of religious beliefs. Spiritual experience is an anthropological element of the human condition, accessible to all people at all times regardless of religious belief or practice. Yet, the horrors of war and the uncertainty of modernity restricts the development of human spirituality and distorts one’s perception of the beauty of spiritual experience.

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