

REGENERATION

A memory of my schooldays: Marlborough College, 1947 – exploring the college chapel one day as a new boy, and being confronted in the ambulatory by what seemed to be an imposing catafalque. It was made of a beautiful blond wood, quite austere: it still appeared almost new. But when I looked closer and started nosing about, it revealed itself as a gigantic filing cabinet. The drawers came out smoothly, and were filled, packed with cards. On each was a name, together with a small photograph; dates were provided, along with details – the school house, the rugby team, and so on. But it was the stare that arrested me, the same stare: candid, unfledged. It was as though I were looking at myself. This was the Roll of Honour: the Old Boys who had given their lives in the Great War. It looked like hundreds of them.

Here is the voice of another old Marlburian, Siegfried Sassoon.

AUDIO: Siegfried Sassoon *'The Dugout'*

I've taken the title of my talk, 'Regeneration', from the remarkable trilogy of novels of the same name by Pat Barker, in which Sassoon appears, one of the patients of the maverick psychologist, W.H.R. Rivers, who at Craiglockhart near Edinburgh endeavoured to put people together again after they had been broken, so they could be returned once more to active service. The term 'Regeneration' refers here to the repair of damaged tissue, nervous as well as physiological. Nobody came out of that conflict without damage. They all had to deal with it, as best they could: instinctively, stubbornly, with whatever reserves remained intact. As Ivor Gurney put it in one of his letters to Marion Scott - (and I shall be drawing from these letters as 'tropes' throughout this talk) – 'War brings greater self-control – or breakdown. You also must have mastery of yourself, or perish. And whether the pain be one of complaining nerves or of waiting on age-long nights of cold and wet to pass, it is all the same...'

The issue is, what do you do - if you were lucky enough to be alive - when you get back? Well, in a sense, Gurney like so many others never did get back: the redouts and trenches of Crucifix Corner, like the water-meadows of Maisemore, remained his terrain inescapably, a night-walker in his broken mind for ever. Vaughan Williams – older, maturer, more stable, did manage to 'pick up the pieces'. But let nobody be in any doubt that he had a vile war like everybody else.

He had volunteered promptly, along with Butterworth, R.O. Morris and other friends, within days of war being declared. Lacking the proper qualifications, they joined the ranks; and Ralph found himself first in the Special Constabulary, where he swiftly rose to the rank of sergeant, then in the R.A.M.C a step downward - Pte. R.V. Williams. Here, due to his 'flat feet' he was appointed a 'waggon orderly'; but for the time being there were no wagons and no horses. Instead, bound by the inexorable logic of the British Army, he was required to go on endless route marches, and of course 'square-bashing' (parades), and a bit of medical training too. Eventually, on June 22nd 1915, they disembarked for Le Havre, and from there moved on to Écoivres, in the lea of the hill on which stood the little village and ruined towers of Mont St. Éloi.

He described his situation in a letter to Holst: 'I wish I could write you an interesting letter – but one is hardly allowed to say anything. However I am very well and enjoy my work – all parades and such things cease. I am 'waggon orderly' and go up the line every night to bring back wounded and sick in a motor ambulance – all this takes place at night except an occasional day journey for urgent cases'.

This sanguine report belies the constant danger he and his comrades had to undergo – 'up the line - again and again; it also conveys nothing of the horror to which they were exposed. Photographs of VW – sometimes alongside his indispensable mate, Harry Steggles – tell a different story: those eyes had seen terrible things. After going through many months of this, the unit was transferred south to Salonica; but VW then elected to return to Blighty in order to be commissioned as a lieutenant in the Royal Garrison Artillery before re-embarking for France in March 1918 in time for the big German attack.

'The war has brought me strange jobs – can you imagine me in charge of 200 horses!! That's my job at present, I was dumped down into it straight away, and before I had time to find out which were horses and which were waggons I found myself in the middle of a retreat – as a matter of fact we had a very easy time over this - only one horse killed – so we were lucky'.

Anyone who has read Michael Morpurgo or seen 'War Horse' at the National Theatre will realize that this was a far from 'cushy' posting, and if anything more harrowing and dangerous than what he had been through before. So how did this evidently sensitive man, already in his early forties when war began, keep 'mastery of himself', as Gurney put it?

We can't presume to say. He scarcely ever talked about the war, then or later; and his letters home - unlike Gurney's, which are frequently introspective and self-analytical – give us no clue. Certainly music helped: the resort to familiar activities – bringing the men together to sing, organising choirs, bashing out accompaniments to sentimental ballads, parlour music – provided some sustenance. And occasionally maybe some kind of transcendental grace or proof: like the famous carol-singing on Christmas Eve of 1916, when he was still in Salonika. As Ursula describes it in her book: '...snow-capped Olympus, the clear night, the stars, and Ralph's choir singing carols from Hereford and Sussex with passionate nostalgia... No one who was there ever forgot'. Eventually his skill and value in this kind of work was recognized, when he was made Director of Music, First Army BEF (1919).

Besides making music, organizing music, on a deeper level the streams of his creative consciousness continued to flow, though not so instantly productively as Gurney's, who managed to complete at least two songs while he was in the trenches, and whose poetic gifts were first unlocked under that duress. For Vaughan Williams the experience – or rather a particular moment – ultimately resulted in one of his most ambiguous works, the Pastoral Symphony, which reflects the same paradox found in many of Edward Thomas's poems: the apprehension of a pristine natural beauty – landscape, wide skies, birdsong – on the very edge of Hell. As he said in a letter to Ursula much later, 'It's really war-time music – a great deal of it incubated when I used to go up night after night with the ambulance waggon at Écoivres and we went up a steep hill and there was a wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset – it's not really lambkins frisking at all most people take for granted'.

It is awesome that anyone should have been able to retrieve such idyllic beauty from the 'war to end all wars'. There is no overt glimpse here of the violence and carnage depicted so unflinchingly in the 'war poetry' of Owen, Sassoon, and indeed Gurney.

Whether a composer can – or should – depict such extremes of physical reality in his music was a matter already debated in the trenches. Ivor Gurney, writing in 1916: '...I wonder whether any up-to-date fool will try to depict a strafe in music. The shattering crash of heavy shrapnel. The belly-disturbing crunch of 5.9 Crumps and trench mortars. The shrill clatter of rifle grenades and the wail of nosecaps flying loose. ... All nonsense about the rhythm of war! Dr (Walford) Davies has said that the noise of the guns etc. etc. But then, it is only what one expects him to say... There are better things to treat though, and among them are sunsets such as the last'.

The noise and horror of mechanized modern warfare had already been musically prefigured in Holst's 'Mars', actually fully sketched in May 1914 – though I have always felt that this music conveys more an implacable *moral* brutality, a negative 'auto-destruct' like Ravel's 'La Valse' or 'Bolero', rather than a depiction of war. But it was only in 1936 – 18 years after the Armistice, and on the threshold of another war – that Vaughan Williams could bring himself to recall in music – re-enter – the appalling 'sound-world' of 1914-18. Even here, in his setting of lines from Whitman's 'Drum Taps' – the 2nd movement of *Dona nobis pacem* – for all its astonishing pre-empting of Britten's *Dies Irae* – there is not so much a resort to mere tone-painting, illustration, which can only fall short: instead we are confronted by a terrifying psychological insight into the chaotic insanity of war – its mindless exultation; the sense of panic passing from voice to voice; the din; and most of all, the lack of foundation or tonal stability, like the shifting of tectonic plates: 'the centre can not hold'.

AUDIO: *Dona nobis pacem* – 2nd movement.

Who knows what it costs a man, an artist, to recapitulate such searing experience: to compose and orchestrate – 'stylize' – trauma of this magnitude. According to Ursula, Ralph used sometimes to wake up screaming in the night, from nightmares of the War. When I heard of that – in the recent anniversary programme on Radio 4 – I was put in mind again of Pat Barker's 'Regeneration': the hospital in Edinburgh, in the wards of which, for the patients passing through, nightmare was endemic, inescapable.

One faculty for dealing with all this, recognized at the time as typical in such patients, came to be defined as 'Disassociation': a sometimes involuntary strategy for blanking out impossibly painful experiences and their resultant memories. Perhaps we can see this 'disassociation' at work in the ecstatic outpourings of the Pastoral Symphony. Likewise in his letters and poems, Gurney constantly 'escapes' from present harsh reality – the trenches of Normandy, the mud and wires of No Mans' Land – to the cherished countryside of his beloved Gloucestershire. The title of his first published collection of poems, 'Severn and Somme', says it all: an intensely imagined repatriation.

15 July 1917

‘... Last night there was a pure colourless October Sunlight, and I could smell apples in the Minsterworth orchards and feel for a moment that soon we should go in and company with Bach, to talk of books and things of peace. How later I should go swiftly under the night towards Orion, home; there to smoke and read myself sleepy, and not go upstairs this side of consciousness’.

For all of them there was something entranced, even synaesthetic, exalted in those moments of reprieve. For VW, the Corot landscape remains intact, indestructable – like Mathew Arnold’s ‘signal elm’ later on. Also, transcendental, universal in a Whitman sort of way.

AUDIO: *Pastoral Symphony*, 1st movement.

We can recognize in those gently oscillating, floating figures from the opening of the Pastoral Symphony a profound image of healing and rest: an echo of the ‘husky nurse’, ‘endlessly rocking’. Here is another example of the same musical image: the Sanctus from his Mass for double choir, composed around the same time.

AUDIO: *Mass: Sanctus*

When he was finally demobbed, in January 1919, Vaughan Williams was more fortunate than most in that he had a mass of unfinished business lying around, as well as fresh responsibilities. Let’s have a look at his agenda. He had been promptly recruited, along with Holst, to take up a position at the Royal College teaching composition. But before term began he still had time to recuperate in Norfolk with Adeline, where he set out to revise a number of those works upon which his pre-war reputation had been built: the Sea Symphony, London Symphony, Tallis Fantasia, Towards the Unknown Region. What better way to sharpen his pencil?

Besides these, other works, hitherto unperformed, required attention: the ballad-opera ‘Hugh the Drover’, composed long ago (1907-10), but only eventually performed in 1924; the ‘Four Hymns’ for Tenor, viola and strings, originally scheduled for the Three Choirs Festival of 1914. (We are reminded of the deferred performance of ‘Dies natalis’ in 1939). And then the work he did on ‘the Lark Ascending’ – self-evidently a pre-war piece, and one of his most avowedly ‘Georgian’, in its unclouded serenity: its revision – apt word - appears to me to represent a conscious effort at recovery. In revising it and preparing it for performance in 1920, it is almost as though he were erasing, blanking out, the intervening years. Continuity; ‘business as usual’; the resumption of the daily task. (He had also taken on the direction of the Bach Choir and the Handel Society...).

And then there were the new projects, which display not only new stylistic features – in colour, harmony, and suppleness of rhythm and phrase-structure - but also a consistency in their expression: a sort of quietism. This has much to do with his reading. His interest in John Bunyan was re-awakened; and for the time being the rhetoric (and idealism) of Whitman was replaced by the more sober, concentrated diction of the old English poets. ‘Merciless Beauty’, three Chaucer settings for high voice and string trio; and ‘The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains’, the ‘pastoral

episode founded upon the Pilgrim's Progress' both appear to open a new page: striking in a composer just turning 50. The kinship that he sought with George Herbert and others, already prefigured in the Four Hymns, chimed with his deep absorption in Tudor church music, so much of which was currently being brought to light in the collections edited by E.H. Fellowes, and through the work of Richard Terry at Westminster Cathedral.

This was borne out in the Mass, originally intended for Gustav Holst with his Whitsuntide Singers at Thaxted: in which he returns to the perpendicular symmetries and tensile polyphonies of the Tallis Fantasia, also written for a double choir - of strings with soloists. A Mass, in Latin, composed by an agnostic: nevertheless an affirmation; also a discipline. Probably the first new music he composed after all those years of silence: it stands, like the white tower of Gloucester cathedral for Gurney, as a pledge of stability and permanence.

Here is the Agnus Dei, with its 'dona nobis pacem': no clamorous outcry as in the later work, but a contained prayer for peace.

AUDIO: *Mass in G minor - Agnus Dei*

All this industry and professional activity enabled VW to move forward, facilitated the process of healing, so that eventually he was able – in a coded fashion – to grieve. He had foreseen his plight in a letter of 1916: 'I sometimes dread coming back to normal life with so many gaps – especially of course George Butterworth... Out of those 7 who joined up together in August, 1914 only 3 are left'. Others followed. Strikingly – though not surprisingly – Vaughan Williams refrained from giving vent to memorial tributes: no 'Morning Heroes', no 'World Requiems'; instead, a more internal, contemplative strain of grieving. Roger Norrington's reading of the Pastoral Symphony – one of the most eloquent ever recorded - is of what he calls 'actually an epitaph for the 1st World War. And it's desperately, desperately sad, laying this ghastly war to rest'. And indeed, beneath the passing shadows and shifting lights of this music there is a sombreness, and from time to time a wringing of hands.

Much later too, in 1936, the note of mourning is sounded again: in both cases dignified by an attitude of resignation and acceptance: the 'Reconciliation' from 'Dona nobis pacem', the setting of Whitman's song of love and pity, 'Word over all', in which the young enemy soldier is embraced as a brother after death. And even more piercingly in 'Riders to the Sea', where the keening of the islanders, and Moura's lament for all those sons who never came back, gives voice to a grief shared by a whole generation.

AUDIO: *Riders to the Sea: Moura's lament*

And lastly the ‘Oxford Elegy’, for speaker, chorus and orchestra, to me one of Vaughan Williams’s most deeply felt works, for all its oddity. It has a complex history. As early as 1901 he was contemplating writing an opera, based on Matthew Arnold’s poems, ‘The Scholar Gypsy’ and its pendant ‘Thyrsis’; and throughout his life he toyed with the idea. Taken up again in 1947, after the firestorm of the 6th symphony, it marked a return to the same high-Victorian elegiac tradition as Meredith’s ‘Lark Ascending’. The first poem recounts the mythic tale of the poor Oxford scholar who ‘dropped out’, as we would say, and took to wandering with the gypsies and mysteriously disappeared. ‘Thyrsis’, the sequel, written 20 years later, was inscribed to the memory of Arthur Hugh Clough, a fellow student of Arnold’s and poet, who similarly failed to live up to promise and died young.

As far as I can make out, the Oxford Elegy is the only work in which Vaughan Williams – so often held to be a prophet – looks back. It is a pre-lapsarian paradise that he evokes, not unlike the opening pages of Job: sun-drenched, drowsy; literally pastoral, with its shepherds and ‘wattled cotes’: pre-industrial, pre-war.

AUDIO: *Oxford Elegy* – opening

The underlying tug of regret and nostalgia is unmistakable. And later on it bursts forth in repeated cries of grief: for lost companions – not just the one friend, maybe his confrère Holst, whose quiet processional is echoed here; but for all those of his youth as well – Cambridge, the Gatty’s, Butterworth, Dennis Browne and the others. Maybe too, Adeline, as she had been all those years before, and for whom he arranged a private first performance in the living room at Whitegates, spoken by Stuart Wilson, himself a veteran of 1914-18, with tears streaming down his face, according to Ursula.

AUDIO: *Oxford Elegy* – conclusion

When I was first asked to give a talk about Vaughan Williams I had not long finished Pat Barker’s novel: it was inevitable that my mind should be coloured by that reading. I still have around me ghosts of all those I had known before who had themselves been affected by the 1st World War: the masters at my prep-school in the 1940’s who had not been called up – one had a limp, one had hideous facial disfigurement, one had been gassed and couldn’t breathe properly – all casualties as very young men; I remembered visiting the Star and Garter home in Richmond as a boy, a huge kind of hydro on the hill, filled with middle-aged wrecks, lying around in corridors.

I thought of VW as he must have been during that war: this big man in his 40’s: dutiful, doing more than his bit, probably a bit clumsy, shambolic in appearance, kept in place by Harry Steggle. At one point I thought the best, and most penetrating, way of presenting a picture would be simply to read Whitman’s ‘The Wound Dresser’ – he must have known that poem: and I wonder if that wasn’t one of the triggers for his volunteering to join the R.A.M.C.? – with the Pastoral Symphony as a backdrop.

I'd like to end with another quotation from Ivor Gurney: his letter of 15th December 1916, written to Marion Scott from the front:

‘After all, my friend, it is better to live a grey life in mud and danger, so long as one uses it – as I trust I am doing – as a means to an end. Someday all this experience may be crystallized and glorified in me; and men shall learn by chance fragments in a string quartett or a symphony, what thoughts haunted the minds of men who watched the darkness grimly in desolate places. Who learnt by the denial how full and wide a thing Joy may be, forming dreams of noble lives when nothing noble but their own nobility (and that seemed tiny and of little worth) was to be seen. Who kept ever the memory of their home and friends to strengthen them, and walked in pleasant places in faithful dreams. And how one man longed to be worthy to celebrate them in music and verse worthy of the high theme, but did not bargain with God, since it is best to accept one’s Fate when that is clearly seen’.

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(Talk given at a Symposium on Vaughan Williams at Cambridge University on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his death).