

Javier: Todo son caminos ... de muerte. ¿No os dais cuenta? Es inútil luchar. En realidad todo era inútil desde un principio. Y desde un principio estaba pronunciada la última palabra.¹⁷

La existencia del hombre es incompatible con la existencia de Dios.¹⁸ La vida en la que el hombre no puede referirse a ningún sistema de criterios absolutos del Bien y del Mal le inspira angustia y le sumerge en la soledad:

Andrés: Es algo peor... [somos una escuadra] de condenados a esperar la muerte. A los condenados los matan. Nosotros... estamos viviendo.¹⁹

Javier: (*rie asperamente*). Estamos marcados, Pedro. Estamos marcados. ¿Rezar? ¿Para qué? ¿A quién? Rezar...²⁰

Pedro: (...) Apénate por ti... por la larga condena que te queda por cumplir: tu vida²¹

Y cuando Javier dice: „somos una escuadra de condenados a muerte” no se puede resistir a atribuirle a esta réplica un sentido que trasciende las dimensiones del microcosmos escénico.

Aleksandra Kedzierska

God and Death in the English Poetry of World War I

„For Death was never enemy of ours”

Wilfred Owen

Rupert Brooke's famous cycle of sonnets „1914”, one of the earliest representations of the world at the outbreak of the war, introduces God, man, and Death as the fundamental personae of the drama which was then just beginning. Brooke wrote:

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers, into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown cold and weary
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love!
Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release
there,
Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
Nought broken save this body, lost but breath;
Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is Death.

In his poetic, highly idealistic scenario, protective and caring God confronts men with the war he sends upon them as a chance of saving their humanity. Thus forced by fate, finally critical towards themselves,

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁸ „Rompannt avec la morale des absolus il [l'homme] découvre une morale historique, humaine et particulière”

¹⁹ A. Sastre, *Escuadra hacia la muerte*, p. 79.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 124.

²¹ Ibid., p. 129.

they wake up from the senseless lives they have lived, ashamed of their „sick hearts” and the status of „half-men” they have earned chasing the „little emptiness of love”. Only now, in the decisive hour of the cleansing fight, can they realize the true sense of their existence, regain that fullness of life which, paradoxically, can be won through war and death. Perceived by almost the whole generation as a blessing which will turn man into a gift „rarer than gold, Death, this „worst friend and enemy”, reveals himself as glorious and beautiful, and by restoring to man the values he has long lost: holiness, love and honour, he opens the gate into immortality.

Although, as befits the occasion, the sonnet opens with an expression of gratitude to God, the poem's structural as well as semantic closure is „Death”, the word respectfully written in a capital letter — an announcement of a new, more powerful and ultimate deity of the war world. Anticipating and representing the direction of all front-line transformations, the direction — from God to Death — outlined by Brooke may be seen as an instinctive prophecy of the poet who, far from no man's land, happened to sense the war's destructive potential. Based on an analysis of the most essential poems of the years 1914-18, this study will primarily concern itself with a depiction of an evolution in the concept of the Divine, demonstrating how God, master of life and death, gradually shorn of His dignity, in the powerful kingdom of Thanatos becomes only a shadow of his old presence.

Reflecting an image of the Creator grown out of Judaeo-Christian tradition are many poems which, produced in the initial phase of the war, express their authors' trust in God's providence as well as their understanding, acceptance too, of His severe pedagogy through suffering. Stressing God's fatherhood, the poets frequently concentrate on His close involvement in the affairs of His children and His interest in the condition of the nation. Hence the numerous references to God's

sense of justice and, resulting from this, a general conviction of the divine support in the English crusade to save „little Belgium”. Already R. Bridges announces that the greatest and most powerful of all man's allies gives His solemn blessing on Britain's liberating efforts, the promise of victory confessed by St. Paul's Cathedral in „Trafalgar Square”. God — the defender of the right — appears both in Sir Henry Newbolt's „The Vigil” and in Bridges's „Wake up, England”. The latter, despite its enthusiasm and certainty of God's assistance, also communicates — implied by the references to the flood — also an awareness of the costs to be paid for doing the right thing.

Much suffering shall cleanse thee;
But thou through the flood
Shalt win to Salvation,
To Beauty through blood.
Up, careless, awake!
Ye peacemakers, fight!
ENGLAND STANDS FOR HONOUR:
GOD DEFENDS THE RIGHT! (OU, 152)¹

Evidence of similar awareness is found in E. Thomas's „This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong” when, „one in crying” with the best and meanest Englishmen, the poet entreates God to save the beloved country which is „all we know and live by, and we trust” (G, 45). This reliance on God's supposedly sharing in Britain's patriotic sentiments is ridiculed in Sir J.C. Squire's „The Dilemma”, where, for once, the deity is invested with an ability to speak for himself:

‘Gott strafe England!’ and ‘God
save the King!’
God this, God that, and God the
other thing-

¹OU stands for *War and the Creative Arts. An Anthology*, ed. J. Ferguson, Macmillan & OUP, London 1972.

'Good God!' said God, 'I've got
my work cut out.' (OU,222)

Such freedom of expression on God's side, not to mention his unique sense of irony, will not be repeated in any other portrait of the Creator, appreciated, above all, for His protection of the combatants. In W.N. Hodgson's „England to Her Sons”, „the God of battles” keeps soldiers in good guidance and wisdom, accepted even though He sometimes „gives / Unto His beloved sleep”. But then, as O. Sitwell would ask in his „How Shall We Rise”, do not „Those whom the Gods love/ Die young”?

The divine attributes of wisdom, providence, protection, and assistance in salvation all find their completion in the fatherly love depicted in I. Rosenberg's „On Receiving News of the War”. There, one with the victims of the war, God mourns „in his lone place... His children dead”. Though Himself still alive, He is a casualty of the war whose „maligned kiss” has torn God's face and shed His holy blood.

Despite this evidence of God's desecration, the Almighty is still man's firmest rock, often prayed to for strength and help, His authority reflected through the archaic „thou”, „thy”, sometimes capitalized. R. Palmer's „How Long, O Lord?”, for instance, is a respectful plea for God's children to be saved from hate and pride:

How long, O Lord, how long, before the flood
Of crimson-welling carnage shall abate?
From sodden plains in West and East the blood
Of kindly men streams up in mists of hate,
Polluting Thy clean air...
Oh, touch Thy children's hearts, that they may know
Hate their most hateful, pride their deadliest foe. (G,100)²

²G stands for *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914-18: An anthology* selected by B. Gardner, with a foreword by E. Blunden, Methuen, London 1988.

Among the typical poetic prayers of the early period of the war one finds those expressed by Hodgson's „Before Action” where, on behalf of the serviceman, he asks God to make him a soldier, save his humanity and help him to die. However, measured by a number of prayerful poems this faith seems to be diminishing as time goes by, mercilessly unfolding the truth and the pity of war, breaking the myth of its adventure, its romance and glory.

When captured in the poetic portraits of God, this weakening of faith translates itself either into gradual disappearance of the traditional positive attributes of the Divine or into concentration on some negative characteristics of the Creator. Very quickly the flood of suffering seems to eliminate God's omniscience and omnipotence, ascribing to bugles the more exact knowledge of the last hour of man's life (Thomas's „No One..”). Ever more often God's goodness is questioned as well as his method of building the world of harmony „out of our discords” (R.E. Vrenede's „A Listening Post”).

Finally, the initial gratitude of the many enthusiastic about the war gives way to the thankfulness of those now „over forty one” and hence past recruiting (E.A. Mackintosh's „Recruiting”), or of some who, watching a zeppelin hover against the sky feel they have been given a chance of nearness to the soldiers really involved in the war, „Spending for each of us/ Their glorious blood” („Zeppelin”).

Man's exposure to the horrors of the trenchworld and his disillusionment gradually lead to a greater and ever more fierce criticism of God. The previous sense of closeness now becomes replaced with numerous implications of how distant He now is, sitting far from the fighters, in His „high heaven”, „aloft in the array / That we have wrought him, stone-deaf and stone-blind”

(Thomas's „February Afternoon”; S, 98)³). Accusations of God's indifference multiply: while his sanity is questioned, his impotence is signalled, stressed by a vulnerability equal to that of a terrified soldier-boy. Such a God, fallen from His might, reveals Himself in F. Manning's „The Face”, where He merely becomes part of a frightened face of the soldier: of „lips trembling, with a red smear, falling”; the face later identified as „The very mask of God, / Broken.”

The strange ways of God, bewildering many a combatant, are best commented upon in J. Galsworthy's „The Soldier Speaks” where the soldier cannot help wondering that God can be excited by „battle cry”, that „He can bless the moaning fight”, that God can actually be „the leading Knight” of the trampling charge, and, finally, that He yells when the bullet sings or laughs when the gun thunders. The man's stoic soul can but wonder „How great God can do such things!” (W, 25)⁴.

Eventually, not even in the face of death does man find himself closer to God. As exemplified by R. Graves's „The Leveler”, the dying soldier can but curse „God with brutal oaths” (G, 93). Also the living whom „chance kept whole” (Rosenberg's „Dead Man's Dump”) lack gratitude, instead, like G. West, they shout out their hate. In „God, How I Hate You”, ironic, even cynical in his attitude to the Creator, West compares Him to a „genial umpire”, too mild and fascinated with the game to actually want to interfere in it.

In Heaven, above

A genial umpire, a good judge of sport

³ S stands for *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. by J. Silkin, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth 1984.

⁴ W stands for *First World War Poetry*, *The Wordsworth Book of First World War Poetry Library Series*, Cumberland House, Marcus Clapham and Wordsworth Editions, Ware, Hertfordshire 1995.

Won't let us hurt each other! Let's rejoice
God keeps us faithful, pens us in his fold...

Ah, how good God is

To suffer us be born just now, when youth
That else would rust, can stake his blade in gore
Where very God Himself does seem to walk

The bloody fields of Flanders He so loves. (P, 84-5)⁵

God's love and goodness, as perceived through the bloody reality of the Flanders fields, manifest themselves in His looking down on men and simply letting them kill one another. Endless bloodshed emerges as the constitutive characteristic of this best possible of all worlds in which God's role is that He

...smiles in pity, blows a pipe at times
And calls some warriors home...

This, doubtless, is the most sacrilegious poem, slighting the Divine not only by mocking God's providence, but also by indicating that His love is centred on the bloody fields of Flanders rather than on man. Loving kindness turns out to be another war myth, like the „best possible of worlds” beneficial only for the people who delude themselves with God's sympathy and caring.

Equally cynical is Graves' „Recalling War”, stating bluntly that the only use for God in no man's land was „A word of rage in lack of meat, wine, fire, / In ache of wounds beyond all surging”. Reducing God to an invective is also E. Mueller in his „Assault” where a string of commands „Mind that hole; through the wire. / Over the top. / And Kill” finds its climax in this comment of a soldier „God. This is fun” (W, 25).

⁵ P stands for *Men Who March Away: Poems of the First World War*, ed. and with an Introduction by I.M. Parsons, Chatto and Windus, London 1982.

This disappearance of God in the traditional sense seems even more visible far from the Front, at Home where, as is claimed in sir Henry Newbolt's „The War Films”, the man so explains God's absence in the civilian's life:

We have sought God in a cloudy Heaven,
We have passed by God on earth:
His seven sins and his sorrows seven,
His wayworn mood and mirth,
Like a ragged cloak have hid from us
The secret of his birth (G,75)

Apart from the fact that the God of the war time manifests Himself first and foremost through sorrows and hardships, He loses His sacredness and, what's worse, he appears to become an epitome of sinfulness. Even, as W. Owen's „Exposure” makes clear, „love of God” is dying, thus shedding doubt on the immortality of the Deity who in the end abandons man and all creation. This is depicted by A.E. Houseman's „Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries”:

These in the days when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth's foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.
Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things to pay. (P,81)

Compromised and desecrated, God the Father - the figure dominant in the initial period of the war - recedes into shade, giving way to his son whose presence in the poetry of the years 1916-18 will become its hallmark as indispensable as the Cross,

Golgotha and death. The centrality of these motifs is stressed by Owen when in his letter to Sitwell (July 1918) he writes:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work — teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.⁶

While describing the many Calvaries of the Western Front the war poets (J.E. Stewart - „On Revisiting the Somme”, W. Owen - „At the Calvary near the Ancre”, and S. Sassoon - „Reconciliation”) stressed the sacrificial character of the war, with soldiers often compared to or identified with Christ himself. In Nicholls's „The Battery Moving Up to a New Position from Rest Camp: Dawn” it is to Golgotha that there leads the soldier's „anguished way”, the way „to make for all our lovers sacrifice”. Also in the same poem, passing by a village church, a soldier offers a prayer for his companions who have already lifted up „an overflowing cup”, entreating God

for such hearts as break
With the premonitory ache
Of bodies, whose feet, hands, and side,
Must soon be torn, pierced, crucified. (P,104)

Even more straightforward in drawing an equation between man in the trenches and Christ is Sassoon in his „The Redeemer”, a poem depicting a repair mission of the soldiers who, bent under

⁶See *The Collected Poems Of Wilfred Owen* (henceforth CP), ed. with Introduction and Notes by C.Day Lewis and with a Memoir by E.Blunden, Chato and Windus, London 1974, p. 23. All quotations of Owen's poems come from this edition.

the load of planks, are sent at night to fortify the dug-outs. In the flare a face is seen of

what had been a form
Floundering in mire. He stood before me there;
I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare,
And leaning forward from His burdening task,
Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine
Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine...
No thorny crown, only a woolen cap
He wore — an English soldier, white and strong...
He face me, reeling in his wariness,
Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.
I say that He was Christ, who brought to bless
All groping things with freedom bright as air,
And with His mercy washed and made them fair.

Also in Studdert-Kennedy's „Solomon in All His Glory”, „bloody sweaty tatters” of the soldier's uniform appear to be „the robes of Jesus Christ”, and Greater Love, so celebrated by Owen's poem, becomes a typical metaphor for the sacrifice of the soldier, the symbol of young life laid for one's country. In the topography of the trenchworld not even Gethsemane is missing, located by Kipling in Picardy („Gethsemane”), where a soldier prays „that my cup might pass”, finding his death even before the Calvary. And as Plowman preaches in „The Dead Soldiers”, killing man is always killing God”.

M. Plowman's God „wanders wide and weeps in his unrest”, weeps over the world changed into „Dead Man's Dump” (I. Rosenberg), this Golgotha which, symbolized by „many crowns of thorns”, can be found on every battle field.

Despite His suffering and dying the myriad of deaths in the trenches, Christ is nevertheless able, in the act of solidarity with the soldiers' cross, to question His Father's will. This highly desecrating split in the womb of the Sacred is depicted in Owen's „Soldier's Dream”, where bloodthirsty and angry God destroys Christ's sacrifice, condemning many people to a senseless death in war.

I dreamt kind Jesus found the big-gun gears;
And caused a permanent stoppage to all bolts;
And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts;
And rusted every bayonet with His tears.

And there were no more bombs, of ours or Theirs,
Not even an old flint-lock; nor even a pikel.
But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;
And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.

In comparison with a number of prayers and addresses to God, Christ - sharing the soldiers' hardships - receives relatively few pleas, as if this God in man's body was even more untrustworthy, unreliable than his Father. Only once, in „Christmas 1915” bombarding Christ with his many doubts P. Mackey will so question the sense of sacrifice and of war faith:

Christ! What shall be delivered to the morn
out of these pangs, if ever indeed another
Morn shall succeed this night...!
What splendor from the smother?
What new-wing'd world, or mangled god still-born?

This `nativity' poem admits a possibility of the end, the death, of the true deity, replaced by a „mangled god still-born”, as hideous as the world of war which must have conceived it. Apart

from this, only Sassoon will direct to Christ the dramatic appeal concluding his famous „Attack”: „O Jesus, make it stop”.

The line whose place in the poem excludes a possibility of any response on the part of Christ may, at the same time, reflect the lack of communication between man and God, man too desperate and embittered to want to believe in goodness, and God, as if suddenly too small for the times of so great scorn of life. Once more God loses against Death. Once more Death triumphs, and what is more, taking over some of the features traditionally ascribed to the Sacred, he appears to emerge as a new deity of no man's land.

One of the most sanctifying characteristics of Thanatos is his omnipresence, manifesting itself, among others, in its multifacetedness. Perceived both as a destructive force and a life-wrecking process, Death, however, is first and foremost a very concrete executor of killing referred to by his full name „Death” or only by an appropriate personal pronoun. Death rules in the air, at sea, and on earth (M. Baring - „1918”), transcribed into all possible ways of killing, diligently documented through ever newer information concerning the workings of various lethal weapons and through innumerable descriptions of dying and the dead.

One can, as in the case of the Sacred, multiply definitions of what Death is, but he will remain an unfathomable, insoluble mystery. In the same way as God creates people equal, Death - the leveler (Graves's „The Leveler”) preserves them in this equality, continuing his specific policy of God's justice. Baring („Our Friends”) emphasizes Death's generosity in that he offers a soldier a gift of reunion with the dead comrades, yet Death's most ennobling and sanctifying attribute is that he is a guarantor of 'immortality', a new life: transformed into the „deathless dead” (Baring — „To J.C.S.”), the soldiers „will rise like morning stars”.

The majesty of Death is well depicted in L. Binyon's elegy „For the Fallen” where, „august and royal” he „Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres”, turning desolation into music „And a glory that shines upon our tears” (OU, 149). This is how the great singer leaves his trace in the universe, announcing his power and might. Death's authority, defined in terms of his unique, peculiar patronage of „healthy dying” (sic!) surfaces in Graves's „Recalling War” while Owen's „The Show” demonstrates that Death is also „patron alone” of true companionship and of trench wisdom. Guiding a soldier with whom he watches the caterpillar war through this show's meanings, Death teaches the man the bitter truth of the annihilation of humankind and humanity. Death's power as well as his status of successful ruler are the characteristics referred to in Asquith's „Nightfall”. Looking at the angry, cloudy skies, he asks „Is this a Kingdom? Then give Death the crown./For here no emperor hath won, save He”. (G, 81)

Greatness of Death is also drawn attention to by G.H. Sorley in his famous „When you see Millions of the mouthless Dead”, the sonnet stressing the possessiveness of this lord of enslavement who „Hath made all his for evermore” (P, 163), leaving on everything his exclusive sign, erasing whatever connection there was with the previous life. This sign, the sign of tragic mutilation allows one to recognize terrifying legions of death. Sorley's poem mentions the battalions of the mouthless dead, dehumanized, „o'ercrowded mass”, none wearing the face you knew, „a spook” which acquires a totally different dimension in W.J. Turner's „Death's Men”. There, „emptied of ragged will”, the zombie-like soldiers automatically carry out their commander's orders.

The men of death stand trim and neat,
Their faces stiff as stone,
Click, clack, go four and twenty feet

From twelve machines of bone.
 'Click, clack, left, right, form fours, incline,
 The jack-box sergeant cries;
 For twelve erect and wooden dolls
 One clockwork doll replies....
 The rooks from out the tall gaunt trees
 In shrieking circles pass;
 Click, clack, click, clack, go Death's trim men
 Across the Autumn grass. (G,18)

Many other works concentrate on the rituals of these inhabitants of the grey land of Death (P. Brewsher — „Dreamers”), the acts of killing through which Death’s „grisly” (Brewsher’s „Nox Mortis”) hand „unsparing” (Plowman — „Going into the Line”) and unexpectedly reveals itself in the very middle of silence. So efficient are Death’s helpers that, as evidenced in Owen’s „The Show”, Thanatos can quietly watch their work from above - evidently no longer needed by the worms in which he finds his best allies, the perfect tools to carry out a senseless war.

It is not always, however, that one’s encounters with death take place under the aegis of horror. Quite often the soldier-poets notice Death’s qualities other than his horrid looks and the fear he evokes in man. For instance, Sassoon’s „Prelude: The Troops” pictures Death as an epitome of sorrow and suffering when he realizes his potential of transforming men into ash and dust. Sassoon, too, registers Death’s patience, his almost tender vigil by the bed-side of the dying soldier, the watch ended by the triumphant announcement „I chose him” („The Death-bed”). Apart from his moments of glory, Death, like man with whom he so often deals, must accept failures; in Fairfax’s „The Forest of the Dead”, unable to conquer the brave spirit, he must please himself only with the clay of the body.

Among many, incidentally very human, characteristics of Death there repeats itself the importance he ascribes to friendship, the bond of the „Two Fusiliers” who found beauty in Death. An attractiveness of Death unfolds itself also as the major theme of A. Seeger’s „Rendezvous”. Treated in a unique way, like a beautiful woman round whom the soldier’s life oscillates, Death seems most desirable. In his obsessive day-dreaming, the combatant’s encounters with Death outshine other romantic love affairs he can think of. As if addicted to his war mistress, the soldier knows he simply cannot fail her. He dreams of intimate moments when Death takes him by the hand, when Death will lead him to his dark land, close his eyes and quench his breath. Such Death becomes the centre of the soldier’s conquest, his greatest romance, hence, eventually, the man’s only fear is that he may somehow not manage to locate his ‘date’ or miss the rendezvous.

Apart from the role of soldier’s mistress, Death sometimes acquires the status of „dearest comrade proven” (J. Galsworthy’s „The Soldier Speaks”), the „old chum”, as Owen tenderly called him, whose companionship with men gains its fullest portrayal in Owen’s „The Next War”:

War’s a joke for me and you,
 While we know such dreams are true.
 Siegfried Sassoon

Out there, we’ve walked quite friendly up to Death;
 Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland, -
 Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in or hand.
 We’ve sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,-
 Our eyes wept, but our courage didn’t writhe.
 He’s spat at us with bullets and he’s coughed
 Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft;
 We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
 We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.

No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.
 We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
 And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags
 He wars on Death-for lives; not men-for flags. (CP, 86)

Both in Seeger's „Rendezvous” and in Owen's poem alike, it is the soldier who initiates his contacts with Death: the men walk up to Death, sit by him, dine in his nearness, and forgive him all sorts of jokes. The soldier accepts Death's presence as almost natural and, disregarding the „old chum's” specific smell and sense of humour, he bravely stands up to Death's provocations. Participating freely in the struggle which appears more playful than threatening, the soldier knows that it is not Death who is his real enemy. Hence, the old chum is never truly feared. People would curse God, but nobody curses Death, he is on the same side with the soldiers, ally with whom one never argues or against whose power one would never dare rebel.

Owen's rendering of this friendly partnership between man and Death makes one aware of how often there dominate in the portrayal of Thanatos positive rather than negative characteristics. Unlike God, distant in his „high heaven”, Death always exists near and for man with whom he develops a personal, often amicable relationship, whom he serves and whom he never fails. Stubbornly sticking by his chosen, he offers them the same gifts: breaking with the past, liberation from the present, immortality and peace. Thanks to him common people can find their long-lost hopes and become transformed into heroes.

Although in „The Next War” by Owen Death plays with people rather than threatens them, such idealization, quite typical of the poetry of 1914-18, exists side by side with many expositions of the mastery of Thanatos's art of killing, his skill in operating all sorts of weapons and in entrapping man regardless of the situation.

Always victorious, invincible, using whatever means or hands he sees fit, he approaches silently or announces his presence through the thundering of guns, attacking whole battalions or only a solitary sentry. Sometimes he marks the dead faces with a smile, but much more often he is associated with the horrendous mutilation and the grotesqueness of the victims he leaves behind, thus turning many poems into demonstrations of his devastating power, into a documentation of the deeds one would never dream to find in what after all emerges as a portrait of a new god, the war anti-Christ.

When bored with playing his games with man, Death confronts God targeting His love, which, as we read in Owen's „Exposure”, „seems dying”:

For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
 therefore, not loath, we lie out there, therefore were born,

For love of God seems dying.
 Tonight, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,
 Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.
 The burying party, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp,
 Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
 But nothing happens. (49)

In this contest God not only appears to be deprived of eternal love, but more importantly, he takes over certain attributes from Death, by which He eventually sanctions the superiority of Thanatos. The God of „Exposure” is the destructive frost which, „shrivelling hands”, and „puckering foreheads crisp” merely repeats, imitates Death's actions, thus adding, fulfilling too, the punishment of men doomed to war.

Like Death, God transforms the familiar into the hardly recognizable. He is the causative cause of the glances being turned into ice and bringing everything to a standstill, he wipes away the

hopes of the resurrection. Whereas Death always triumphs, God, it is feared, is no longer in control of the world he once created; His so far irrepressible spring losing its regenerative force, turning life into a parody of itself, a triumph of evil.

Closing our considerations on the war Calvaries, „Exposure“ contains evidence of the victory of Death, is as if Death's last word, his demonstrative cessation of all motion and action. Having absorbed man, having transformed God into an agony of love, and leading thus to an end of whatever used to be considered a value, Death becomes the sole king, the one and only ruler of the conquered world. And since, as the last verse of Owen's poem reads, „nothing happens“, Death emerges as the eternity, the only certainty of a world which controlled by this strongest of lords can know no better. The war apocalypse has reached its peak.

Izabela Lalke

„Eine in ihrer Natürlichkeit grenzenlose Lebensweise!“¹
Kampf um die Einschränkung in Kafkas
Beschreibung eines Kampfes

Die Unsicherheiten und Mehrdeutigkeiten, mit denen der Leser der *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* konfrontiert wird, beginnen schon mit der Rezeptionsgeschichte des Textes. Dieses frühe Werk ist aus Kafkas Nachlaß 1937 von Max Brod herausgegeben worden. Doch, wie es bei Ludwig Dietz in seiner Ausgabe aus dem Jahre 1969 ersichtlich ist, hat Kafka an zwei unvollendeten Fassungen des Textes in einem Zeitabstand von 3-4 Jahren gearbeitet. Max Brod hat für seine Edition, die lange Jahre als Standard gegolten hat, Abschnitte aus der einen wie aus der anderen Fassung verwendet. Wenn wir also heute mit verschiedenen Interpretationen desselben Textes zu tun haben, handelt es sich oft doch nicht immer um denselben Text. In meinem Beitrag möchte ich mich weiterhin auf die bis heute bevorzugte Ausgabe der Erstfassung von Paul Raabe berufen.

Daß der Text eine Besonderheit in Kafkas Schaffen ist, wird von Anfang an sichtbar. Schon das Inhaltsverzeichnis mit seiner detaillierten Aufteilung mutet wie ein Arbeitsplan für ein noch zu schreibendes Werk an. Dann ist ein Motto eingeschoben worden. Es ist die einzige Stelle, die zwischen dem Leser und dem Text situiert das spätere Geschehen kommentiert. Zwar wird uns ein Ich-Erzähler angeboten, was den Blickwinkel bestimmt. Doch im Grunde, so Friedrich Beißner², verzichtet Kafka auf jede Hinwendung zum Leser und behält diese einheitliche Perspektive konsequent bei. Der fehlende

¹ Kafka, Franz, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, in: Kafka, Franz, *Das erzählerische Werk I*, Berlin 1983, S. 288.

² Beißner, Friedrich, *Der Erzähler Franz Kafka*, Frankfurt/Main 1983, S. 21-47.