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EDMUND BLUNDEN’S WAR VERSES: NATURE AS THE UNSEEN VICTIM OF THE GREAT WAR

 Hüseyin ALHAS*

ABSTRACT

War leaves a lasting mark not only on the lives of those directly involved but also on the natural environment profoundly, an aspect frequently overshadowed by the stark human tragedies. Edmund Blunden, a World War I poet, focuses on the environmental destruction caused by war. This article aims to analyse Blunden’s poems “Preparations for Victory” and “Thiepval Wood,” exploring the themes of desolation and the interconnected destinies of soldiers and nature through his resonant poetic expression. These poems provide a compelling lens to view an often-neglected aspect of warring: its effect on the natural world. Moving beyond traditional representations where nature is merely a setting for human struggles, Blunden portrays it as a primary victim, subjected to the harsh transformations and devastation of war. Accordingly, this study illuminates how Blunden articulates nature’s suffering and alteration fundamentally intertwined with human strife, offering a critical voice in understanding the multifaceted impacts of military conflicts.

key words: Edmund Blunden, war poetry, World War I, Battle of The Somme, nature

Edmund Blunden’ın Savaş Şiirleri: Büyük Savaş’ın Görünmeyen Kurbanı Olarak Doğa

ÖZET

Savaş, ondan doğrudan etkilenen kişilerin hayatlarında kalıcı izler bırakmasının yanı sıra doğayı da derinden etkiler. Bu etki, genellikle insan trajedilerinin gölgesinde kalmaktadır. I. Dünya Savaşı şairlerinden Edmund Blunden, eserlerinde, savaşın gölgede kalan bu çevresel yıkımına odaklanır. Bu makale, Blunden’in “Victory for Preparations” ve “Thiepval Wood” adlı şiirlerini çözümlemeyi ve şairin eserlerinde, askerlerle doğanın iç içe geçmiş kaderlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu şiirler, sıklıkla göz ardı edilen savaşın doğa üzerindeki etkisini ele almaktadır. Blunden, geleneksel temsillerin ötesine geçerek doğayı yalnızca insan çatışmalarının geçtiği bir yer olarak değil, savaşın yarattığı şiddetli dönüşümlerin ve yıkımların bir kurbanı olarak tasvir eder. Bu doğrultuda, bu çalışma, Blunden’in doğanın dönüşümünün ve çektiği eziyetin insan kaynaklı çatışmalarla iç içe geçtiğini canlı ve çarpıcı betimlemeler aracılığıyla ifade ettiğini gösterir. Dahasında, bu çalışma şairin, doğa ile insanların kaderlerinin savaş ortamında derinden bağlantılı olduğunu vurgulayarak savaşın çok yönlü etkilerini yansıttığını ortaya koyar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Edmund Blunden, Savaş Şiiri, Birinci Dünya Savaşı, Somme Muharebesi, doğa

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Introduction

War leaves a lasting mark not only on the lives of those directly involved but also on the natural world, a dimension often overshadowed by the stark human tragedies. War devours both people and nature, unveiling a landscape of loss that extends beyond the human casualties on the battlefield. As conflicts rage, they consume forests, rivers, and fields, transforming green sanctuaries into desolate wastelands. This devastation mirrors the physical and emotional scars borne by soldiers and civilians alike, illustrating a dual narrative of destruction that underscores the interconnectedness of human and environmental fates.

Despite the frequent oversight of environmental destruction in discussions about war, the soldiers who have experienced the front-line battles encounter its severe realities directly. Many war poets, immersed in these devastated landscapes themselves, skilfully integrate the theme of environmental destruction into their poetry. Their work goes beyond simple battle narratives to explore the profound relationship between human conflict and environmental harm. As the firsthand witnesses of the devastation wrought by war, these poets provide a distinct and genuine perspective that connects human experiences with ecological consequences. These poets highlight the complex effects of military conflicts, illustrating how the destinies of nature and humanity are intricately linked with the calamity of war. Through their expressive imagery and emotional depth, war poets shed light on this often-neglected aspect, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the conflict. Their poetry serves not only as a testament to the scars left by war on the landscape but also as an exploration of the intertwined fates of the natural world and human beings, providing a richer, more nuanced view of the catastrophic consequences of war.

Among the poets who documented the destruction of nature, Edmund Charles Blunden (1896–1974) stands out. His experiences during World War I, particularly as a member of the Royal Sussex Regiment in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, deeply influenced his literary output. Blunden, one of the longest-serving First World War poets, endured continuous front-line action from 1916 to 1918. His post-war friendship with Siegfried Sassoon, another notable war poet, reflects a shared traumatic legacy. Sassoon famously regarded Blunden as “the poet of the war most lastingly obsessed by it” (Silkin, 1972: 102). Blunden’s struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder persisted throughout his life, profoundly shaping his poetry and perceptions. He sadly reflected a year before his death, “[m]y experiences in the First World War have haunted me all my life, and for many days I have, it seemed, lived in that world rather than this” (qtd in Kendall, 2006: 83). Blunden’s legacy, therefore, not only encapsulates the immediate horrors of war but also the enduring psychological scars that such conflicts etch on individual lives and collective memory. On Blunden’s war poetry, Thomas Ware comments that he “had a keen sense of visual composition, which tended to make his comments read as if they were descriptive of gallery paintings — and in many instances, they were, in fact, recollections of moments in those galleries” (2003: 78). This characteristic of his poetry especially makes the impact of the portrayal of battle quite striking.

1. Edmund Blunden and Nature

Edmund Blunden’s war poetry is deeply intertwined with his reverence for nature. Bernard Bergonzi captures this relationship, noting, “Blunden’s world of nature is not particularly wild or wayward in a Romantic fashion: it is ordered and in harmony with man, and it offers, above all, an image of civilization, the pattern of a pastoral, pre-industrial society” (1965: 68). This depiction highlights how deeply Blunden’s keen interest in nature, fostered during his early years in the southern English countryside, influenced his poetic vision.

Blunden's formative experiences in rural settings imbued his early literary works with rich pastoral imagery. His initial publications, notably the collection titled *Pastorals* (1916), reveal a landscape that is "pleasant, ordered, and in harmony with people," as Dollar articulates (2000: 20). This connection to nature continued to manifest vividly in his post-war poetry and literary essays. For instance, Blunden describes a particularly captivating moment in his memoirs after the war, while waiting to change trains in Buire-sur-Ancre: "The willows and waters in the hollow make up a picture so silvery and unsubstantial that one would spend a lifetime to paint it" (1929: 275). This reflection not only underscores his enduring appreciation for nature's beauty but also his poetic sensibility to the subtle nuances of the natural landscape.

Moreover, Blunden's post-war role as a literary critic further emphasised his deep connection with nature. His seminal work, *Nature in English Literature* (1929), explores the pervasive influence of the natural environment on English cultural expressions, suggesting that the pastoral elements are integral to understanding the essence of English literature. This critical examination reaffirms the significant role that nature played throughout Blunden's literary and personal life, showcasing how his experiences and observations of the natural world shaped his artistic and scholarly pursuits.

Both in his poetic and critical writings, Edmund Blunden consistently emphasised the importance of nature, presenting it as a living, feeling entity that is integral to both his creative and analytical literary work. Paul Fussell encapsulates Blunden's perspective, asserting that for the poet, "both the countryside and English literature are 'alive,' and both have 'feelings'" (2013: 281). This belief underscores Blunden's conviction that nature, with its inherent vibrancy and sentience, plays a crucial role in the literary arts.

Bernard Bergonzi further highlights Blunden's literary persona by remarking that the poet "has every claim to be regarded as a Georgian. He, too, was absorbed in country scenes and folklore, into which the reality of war made a brutal intrusion" (1965: 68). Despite the pervasive influence of conflict, Blunden maintained his deep connection to nature. Blunden's seminal memoir, *Undertones of War*, encapsulates this synthesis of his poetic focus and personal inclinations; he describes himself metaphorically as "a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat," a line that powerfully blends his pastoral interests with his wartime experiences (1929: 276). John Silkin clarifies this relationship, explaining how Blunden integrates these themes: "He writes of nature and war, or rather, of events within a rural pattern. Nature is made to contain war, as best it can, as the sanative framework of an otherwise disrupting experience" (1972: 102).

Blunden's wartime poems are particularly moving, highlighting the devastating impact of war on the natural world. He was deeply affected by both the loss of human life, including those of several close friends, and the brutal destruction of a countryside reminiscent of the rural England he cherished. This devastation of both human connections and beloved landscapes influenced his literary expression, imbuing it with a sense of mourning for the natural world. This dual loss—of human life and natural beauty—greatly shaped Blunden's literary output, infusing it with a deep sense of mourning and reverence for the natural world. Thus, Blunden's works offer a touching testament to the enduring resilience of the natural world, even in the face of human conflict, serving as a sanctuary that mitigates the disruptions of war. Both "Thiepval Wood" and "Preparations for Victory," the poems that are the topic of this study, serve as literary reflections of the poet's emotional response to the battles in this region. These works not only illuminate the tactical oscillations of retreats and advances inherent in military engagements but also vividly portray the resultant devastation inflicted

upon the natural environment. The poems extend beyond mere historical recounting to encapsulate the dramatic impact of conflict on both human and ecological levels.

In these compositions, the poet meticulously documents the battle's dynamics. However, the focal point of his narrative shifts to the broader consequences of such warfare, particularly the irreversible harm to the natural landscapes. The texts explore how once-green forests and fields are transformed into barren wastelands, serving as testaments to the war's capacity to fundamentally and perhaps irrevocably alter natural settings. By interweaving personal sentiment with factual military history, the poet enhances the historical narrative with a deeply personal perspective that offers insights into the emotional and environmental tolls of war. These poems thus contribute significantly to our comprehension of the multi-layered impacts of military conflicts, emphasizing the often-neglected ecological casualties of war alongside their human counterparts.

Both "Thiepval Wood" and "Preparations for Victory," the poems analysed in this study, encapsulate Edmund Blunden's early experiences during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, as Crawford highlights (1988: 159). The Battle of the Somme, which raged from July to November 1916 near the Somme River in France, stands as one of the largest and most devastating conflicts of World War I. It was characterised primarily by an Allied endeavour to penetrate German defences and alleviate the pressure on French forces at Verdun. Notable for its massive deployment of tanks, the battle inflicted severe casualties, with over one million men wounded or killed, thereby marking it as a pivotal moment in the Great War. The conflict epitomized the brutalities of trench warfare and the persistent stalemate on the Western Front, ultimately magnifying the tremendous human cost of the war and altering public perceptions of modern, industrialized warfare.

This prolonged and intense battle deeply influenced Blunden, shaping his subsequent literary works. Despite the strategic intentions of the Allies, their efforts to swiftly secure the region were thwarted, leading to protracted skirmishes characterised by frequent shifts in control. The German forces often advanced, compelling the British troops into defensive retreats. Yet, the resilience of the British eventually facilitated a strategic regrouping and successful reclamation of the contested territories (Webb, 1990: 61-62). Such enduring conflict wreaked havoc on what was once a lush natural landscape. Particularly, the Thiepval woods became emblematic of the severe environmental toll exacted by the war. Blunden's direct involvement in these battles granted him a unique perspective, fostering his acute sensitivity to the environmental destruction wrought by human conflict. His touching observations of the devastated landscapes are intricately portrayed in his poetry, reflecting a deep engagement with both the human and ecological impacts of the war.

Accordingly, this article aims to analyse "Thiepval Wood" and "Preparations for Victory," exploring the echoes of desolation and the interwoven fates of soldiers and nature in the poetry of Edmund Blunden. These pieces provide a compelling lens to examine a frequently overlooked aspect of war: its impact on nature. Blunden's verse reveals not only the human calamity wrought by war but also its destructiveness toward nature. Unlike conventional portrayals where nature serves merely as a backdrop for human conflicts, in Blunden's work, it emerges as a primary victim, enduring the violent transformation and devastation that war brings. This analysis illuminates how Blunden, through vivid and striking depictions, articulates nature's suffering and alteration as fundamentally intertwined with human strife, offering a critical voice in understanding the multifaceted impacts of military conflicts, where the fates of nature and humanity are deeply interconnected in the realm of war.

2. "Preparations for Victory"

"Preparations for Victory" comments on the situation connected with the British retreat from the Thiepval wood in the Battle of the Somme. The first stanza of Blunden's poem strikingly juxtaposes the terror of war with moments of untouched natural beauty. The speaker begins by addressing their soul, urging resilience against the metaphorical "pestilence" that devastates the landscape: "My soul, dread not the pestilence that hags / The valley" (1-2). This pestilence can be understood as both the literal impact of war and the psychological dread it instils. The appeal to the soul not to flinch in the face of "great shouting smokes and snarling jags / Of fiery iron" (3-4) illustrates the intense sensory experiences of the battlefield, marked by noise, chaos, and danger.

However, amidst this chaos, the stanza introduces a contrasting image of tranquillity and untouched nature: gardens with moss-covered boughs laden with apples, whose "bright cheeks none might excel" (8), and a house still intact, "as yet unshattered by a shell" (9). This imagery not only highlights the stark contrast between the serene beauty of nature and the violent disturbances of war but also serves as a reminder of what is at stake—the everyday beauty and normalcy that war threatens to obliterate.

The poet's instruction as "Manly move among / These ruins, and what you must do, do well" (6-7) reflects a stoic acceptance of duty in the face of devastation. This call to action amidst the backdrop of both beauty and destruction encapsulates the complex interplay of courage, mourning, and the relentless push for survival that defines human experience during war. It underscores the resilience required to navigate and protect these remaining pockets of peace, even as the spectre of total destruction looms.

The second stanza of the poem deepens the exploration of internal conflict and desolation wrought by war, reflecting a dialogue between the soul and the body, each responding to the ravages of conflict in their own way. The soul's response, "I'll do my best" (10), introduces a tone of resignation and melancholy. It pledges to acknowledge the remnants of untouched nature—"the yet unmurdered tree" (11) and "The tokens of dear homes that court the eye" (12)—as the symbols of normalcy and peace in a landscape largely defined by destruction. The "yet unmurdered tree" (11) stands as a striking symbol of nature's enduring innocence and beauty amidst the chaos of war.

This tree, still untouched by the direct violence of battle, is very important since it becomes a vivid emblem of the residual beauty that persists amidst the surrounding devastation. Blunden's use of the term "unmurdered" ascribes human features to the tree, elevating it from a passive element in the landscape to a sentient witness and victim of the horrors of war. This singular, surviving tree also offers a stark contrast to the otherwise devastated landscapes depicted in Blunden's work, highlighting the selective and random nature of war's destruction. It not only serves as a symbol of resilience but also shows what once was and what remains at risk. The tree's presence allows the soul in the poem to cling to remnants of a more peaceful past and hold onto the hope for future restoration. Furthermore, the description of the tree as "unmurdered" implies a looming threat of impending destruction, emphasizing the precariousness of its survival in a war-torn environment. This survival is portrayed as temporary and fragile, mirroring the transient and fragile state of peace in wartime conditions. The ongoing threat suggests that this temporary reprieve from violence might soon end, placing the natural environment in continual jeopardy from the advancing destructiveness of human conflict.

As Blunden's portrayal unfolds, nature is seen not merely as a setting but as a central casualty of war's violent and transformative impact. Thomas Mallon observes that "[n]ature

suffers as hideously as man, and Blunden paints that suffering in human terms and imagery” (1983: 57). Through the symbol of “the yet unmurdered tree,” Blunden indeed vividly illustrates how nature itself becomes a casualty of war, enduring not just physical scars but also symbolizing the spiritual and emotional wounds inflicted by human conflict. This tree, as a living entity that witnesses and endures the war, enriches the narrative of war’s impact, reinforcing the idea that the consequences of human strife extend far beyond the immediate human costs to include the severe suffering and transformation of the natural world. This thematic exploration deepens the content of Blunden’s work and invites broader reflection on the ecological and moral implications of war, highlighting the interconnected fates of nature and humanity in the theatre of conflict.

Later in the poem it is indicated that the soul’s vision is clouded, as it admits, “And yet I see them not as I would see” (13). This line poignantly captures the psychological impact of war; the soul can no longer perceive these symbols, “the unmurdered tree” and “the tokens of dear homes,” with the innocence or joy that it might have been before. Silkin indicates that “[t]he soldier’s mind, wracked by battle, cannot see them except through the filter of [...] spoliation” (1972: 108). The presence of a “ghostly enemy” (14) further illustrates the pervasive and haunting effect of war, tainting even the light, making everything appear “poisoned, withered, wan.”

The description of the body as “poor unpitied Caliban” (17) draws upon the character in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*—a figure often perceived as misunderstood, brutish, and pitiable. This metaphor underlines how, in the crucible of war, the physical self is stripped down to its most elemental form, engaged in a relentless battle for survival, as indicated by the phrases “parches and sweats” (18). This struggle to maintain even a vestige of humanity, encapsulated in the effort to “grunts to win the name of Man” (19), highlights the immense physical toll and the process of dehumanization that soldiers have to endure. The depiction of the body’s battle as both visceral and strenuous accentuates the severe impact of war on the human condition. This second stanza therefore beautifully intertwines the deteriorating psychological and physical states of those caught in war’s grip. The soul and body’s experiences are depicted as parallel declines, with both the mental and physical self being eroded by the constant pressure and pervasive destruction of war. This dual depiction enriches the poem’s exploration of the war’s impact, emphasizing that the damage extends beyond the battlefield to infect the very essence of human existence.

The final stanza of “Preparations for Victory” intensifies the bleak and harrowing depiction of war’s impact, using vivid and evocative imagery to convey a sense of relentless, cyclical suffering and environmental devastation. The opening lines, “Days or eternities like swelling waves / Surge on, and still we drudge in this dark maze” (20-21), utilize the metaphor of time as an unending and oppressive force, likening days to “swelling waves” and life during war to the struggle of finding a way through a “dark maze.” These lines capture the disorientation and the ceaseless nature of conflict, where time blurs and each moment feels both transient and eternal.

The reference to “bombs and coils and cans by strings of slaves” (22) vividly portrays the mechanical and dehumanizing aspects of war, where individuals are reduced to mere cogs in the war machine, bound to the relentless production and deployment of weapons. The phrase “borne to serve the coming day of days” (23) alludes to a climactic battle or end; yet this anticipated resolution remains grim and ominous.

“Pale sleep in slimy cellars scarce allays / With its brief blank the burden” (23-24) depicts the soldiers’ dire living conditions and the minimal relief they find in sleep, which is neither restful nor sufficient to ease their physical and psychological discomforts. The

environmental destruction wrought by the conflict is poignantly captured in “The sky is gone, the lightless, drenching haze / Of rainstorms chills the bone; earth, air are foes” (25-26). Here, nature itself turns hostile, with the obscured sky and chilling rainstorms enhancing the sense of despair and entrapment. The closing line, “The black fiend leaps brick-red as life’s last picture goes” (27) is particularly striking. It could symbolize a final explosion or a vivid flash of violence, with “the black fiend” perhaps representing death or destruction itself, which leaps forward in a visceral display of red, signalling the end of life or the conclusion of a horrific episode. This vivid portrayal serves as a powerful conclusion to the poem, encapsulating the totality of war’s destruction—both human and environment—in a single, haunting visual image. Overall, the stanza—and the poem as a whole—effectively conveys the pervasive impact of war, intertwining the themes of environmental devastation, human suffering, and the altered perception of time and reality under the strain of continual conflict.

The concluding lines of the poem, “The body [...] / Parches and sweats and grunts to win the name of Man,” are profoundly significant. John Silkin elucidates the essence of these lines by noting, “[w]hat the last line does is to show what man has to do to win his name, and the question implicit in the statement is whether or not the burden put on the soldier can in any sense be justified” (108). This reflection becomes even more striking when considered in conjunction with earlier parts of the poem where Blunden emphasises the destruction of nature alongside the human conflict.

Blunden’s narrative suggests a critical examination of the concept of heroism, which traditionally justifies battles and fighting for a just cause. He questions the validity of any rationale employed to justify war, given that it inevitably leads to the destruction of both humanity and nature. This interconnection underscores the naked truth: both men and nature suffer at the hands of human conflict, making them concomitant victims regardless of the war’s purported cause.

Furthermore, Blunden implies that the ravaged state of nature, deeply marred by war, serves as a compelling indicator of the flawed human actions associated with war. The devastated natural landscape powerfully illustrates that the consequences of war, driven by human decisions, are inherently detrimental. This portrayal not only challenges the justifications for war but also highlights the irreversible impacts on both human and ecological fronts, suggesting that the true cost of war transcends immediate human losses and extends to the intense degradation of the natural world.

3. “Thiepval Wood”

Another important poem by Edmund Blunden, “Thiepval Wood” (September 1916), powerfully captures the profound devastation inflicted by war, impacting both human lives and the natural environment. Although not published until a decade after the war concluded, Brandon notes that the poem vividly reflects the era’s mentality, characterised by the intricate interplay between the natural and human worlds (2010: 123). Employing a rich array of sensory images, the poem depicts the harsh convergence of soldiers and nature, illustrating the brutal impacts of war through vivid and compelling descriptions.

The poem’s title is derived from Thiepval Wood, a forested area situated near the village of Thiepval in northern France. This region, positioned on a rising plot of ground, played a significant strategic role in the Battle of the Somme during World War I. It offered a tactical advantage crucial for commanding the surrounding areas. Prior to the war, Thiepval Wood was a green paradise, beautifully adorned with a rich tapestry of various plants and trees, presenting a natural beauty that starkly contrasted to its later role in the conflict. Even in his memoir

Undertones of War, Blunden reflects on moments during the war when he wandered the less affected parts of the wood, experiencing fleeting spells of peace that felt as if “there were no war” (1929: 32). He describes his walks along the Canal back toward Essars, “swinging [his] stick, and noticing the twined flowers, the yellowhammer, and the wagtail [...] linnets and butterflies,” evoking a scene of pastoral tranquillity amidst chaos (1929: 32-33). He further adds that “while life was nevertheless threatened continually with the last sharp turnings into the unknown,” underscoring the ever-present danger lurking amidst the natural beauty (1929: 33). This memory serves as a reminder of both the area's inherent beauty and the looming threats that characterised its wartime reality. The wood became a focal point of intense fighting, as both Allied and Central Powers forces recognised its importance in achieving dominance in the battlefield. The relentless conflict within and around Thiepval Wood not only led to severe casualties but also transformed the landscape, turning what was once a serene woodland into a devastated war zone. This transformation and the fierce battles that occurred here epitomize the brutal nature of trench warfare and the profound impact of war on natural environment.

The opening line of the poem, “[t]he tired air groans as the heavies swing over, the river-hollows boom,” (1) immediately immerses the reader in a soundscape of war—air that groans and booming hollows. This personification of air as ‘tired’ subtly suggests war's exhausting impact on the natural world, a theme that Blunden develops throughout the poem. The use of “heavies” colloquially refers to heavy artillery, setting a tone of dread and imminent destruction. As the poem progresses, the image of “shell-fountains leap from the swamps, and with wildfire and fume / The shoulder of the chalkdown convulses” (2-3) vividly portrays the land as suffering physical agonies. The metaphor of the land's shoulder convulsing under the assault of artillery powerfully fuses the human and the geographical into a single entity of suffering. This not only conveys the physical scarring of the landscape but also mirrors the bodily trauma experienced by soldiers during combat. It is essential to note that the term “chalkdown” refers to a terrain characterised by rolling hills and downs primarily composed of chalk. Such landscapes, prevalent in places like Sussex, England—where Blunden spent his childhood—feature soft, white chalk that forms distinctive, smooth, and lush hills. This chalk, a type of soft white limestone composed mainly of calcium carbonate, is emblematic of the region. This connection highlights the influence of English natural scenery on Blunden's poetry, as his early experiences with these chalk downs are echoed in his portrayals of the war-affected landscapes in France, bridging his pastoral memories with the settings of his war poetry.

The phrase “jabbering echoes stampede in the slatting wood” (4) further intensifies this melding of human and environmental destruction. The ‘jabbering’ of echoes suggests a cacophony of confused voices, perhaps mimicking the chaos of soldiers' commands and cries melding indistinctly with the sounds of nature in distress. The choice of ‘stampede’ typically associated with frantic, uncontrolled movement, underscores the chaotic energy released by the barrages of war. Blunden's description of “ember-black gibbet trees like bones or thorns protrude / From the poisonous smoke” (5-6) is laden with images of death. The trees, once symbols of life and growth, are reduced to ‘gibbet trees,’ evoking images of gallows and thus death by hanging. Hence, Blunden underlines the death by suffocation through smothering by smoke and strangulation by being hanged. The comparison of “gibbet trees” to bones and thorns projects an image of nature stripped to its bare, painful essentials by war's destructive power.

Blunden's observations in the poem resonate deeply with those he presents in his memoir, *Undertones of War*. Here, he vividly describes Thiepval Wood's transformation during the conflict, characterised by a “black vapour of smoke and naked tree trunks or charcoal,” which starkly illustrates the environmental devastation wrought by armed conflict (1929: 91). The woods, formerly teeming with lush vibrancy, are depicted as a charred wasteland,

epitomizing the severe degradation of nature under the relentless pressures of human conflict. Blunden's employment of words such as "naked" and "charcoal" emphasizes the complete exposure and finality experienced by the landscape.

Here it should be noted that there are other critics who observe Blunden's engagement with nature from a different perspective. For instance, Bernard Bergonzi critiques Edmund Blunden's engagement with nature in his poetry, particularly highlighting the poem "The Unchangeable" (1917). In this work, Blunden reminisces about the beauty of nature amidst the ongoing war. Bergonzi contends that "poems such as this inevitably direct at Blunden the charge of escapism, of retreating ostrich-like from the reality of battle into a pastoral dream-world" (1965: 70). This criticism suggests that Blunden uses pastoral imagery as a means of psychologically distancing himself from the horrors of war.

However, it is important to recognize that Bergonzi's critique is based on a selective reading of Blunden's oeuvre. Other poems by Blunden do not suggest a retreat into nature but instead bring nature to the forefront of war's narrative context. In these works, nature is not depicted merely as a tranquil backdrop or an escapist refuge; rather, it is portrayed as a direct victim of human conflict. Blunden's "Thiepval Wood" is an example of this. Through this poem, Blunden presents nature enduring alongside humans, deeply affected by the same destructive forces unleashed by war. This perspective shifts the interpretation from escapism to a striking acknowledgment of the interconnected fates of nature and humanity, highlighting the environmental casualties of human conflicts. Thus, Blunden's engagement with nature in his poetry can be seen as a complex exploration of its role and impact within the context of war, rather than a mere escape from its brutal realities as seen in the case of "Thiepval Wood."

This nuanced perspective is further supported by Blunden's descriptive passages in his memoir. For instance, he reflects on a moment when returning to the Colonel's headquarters, noting "the whispering shadow of aspen trees in a row" (1929: 92), which casts a peaceful, almost idyllic veil over the grim military environment, symbolising the enduring yet fragile state of nature amidst chaos. This serene imagery starkly contrasts with his depiction of Mailly-Maillet, once "a delightful and flourishing little place," now diminished to "the sere and yellow" with a chateau wall "broken by the fall of shell-struck trees" (1929: 92). These accounts do not suggest an escapist intent; rather, they emphasize the severe transformation and degradation of natural landscapes due to war and highlight the broader ecological consequences of war. Through these vivid observations, Blunden draws attention to the dual impact of war on both human constructs and the natural environment, enriching his narrative with a layered exploration of war's comprehensive devastation, encompassing both human and environmental dimensions.

"The Thiepval Wood" concludes with a depiction of irreversible loss: 'To them these silvery dews can never again be dear, / Nor the blue javelin-flame of the thunderous noons strike fear' (7-8). This expression articulates the immense desensitization experienced not only by soldiers, who are profoundly affected by the horrors of war and have become numb to both the beauty and terror of the natural world, but also by nature itself, which is personified within the poem. As the landscape and its components are endowed with human-like characteristics, they too undergo a metaphorical numbing, reflecting the soldiers' diminished sensitivity.

This theme of desensitization links back to another of Blunden's poems discussed earlier in this study, "Preparation for Victory," where the soul confesses, "And yet I see them not as I would see" (13). In this line, Blunden emphasizes how war desensitizes soldiers, impairing their ability to perceive and appreciate beauty. "The Thiepval Wood" extends this desensitization to nature itself, which, personified, no longer perceives or enjoys the world as before. War has

altered nature so fundamentally that there is no return to its pristine state, echoing the irreversible transformation described in "Preparation for Victory."

Further elaborating on these lines at the end of "The Thiepval Wood," Gifford highlights how Blunden frames this changed landscape with references to a once-pleasant September wood, noted by 'these silvery dews' in line seven. He observes a significant metamorphosis in the poem's landscape, where the 'shoulder' of the land 'convulses' under the strain of war, and the trees, 'past all impulses,' signify a shift from a typical pastoral romantic setting to one utterly incapable of experiencing pleasure or fear (1995: 53). In this context, the 'blue javelin-flame' symbolizes the harsh intrusion of war into this pastoral scene and serves as a vivid reminder of how natural phenomena have been transformed into instruments of war. This metaphorical shift not only underscores the theme of loss and desolation but also reinforces the dramatic and lasting impact of conflict on both nature and humanity.

Conclusion

Hence, the exploration of the intertwined fates of soldiers and nature in Edmund Blunden's war poetry, particularly through "Preparations for Victory" and "Thiepval Wood," offers a striking narrative of loss and transformation that surpasses mere historical recounting. Authored during the Battle of the Somme—a crucial conflict from July to November 1916 near the Somme River in France, which stands as one of the largest and most devastating battles of World War I with over one million casualties—these poems extend the portrayal of war's horrors beyond the human experience to include the natural world. They present a stark depiction of the environmental desolation that accompanies human conflict. In this context, Blunden's works act as poignant reminders of the extensive impacts of war, emphasizing that the scars inflicted by battle are borne not solely by humanity but are shared profoundly with the environment.

Blunden's literary journey, infused with his acute sensitivity both to the beauty and the tragedy of the natural world, enriches the war poetry by offering a broader ecological perspective. His poems and memoirs collectively underscore a critical message: the ravages of war spare neither man nor nature. Through his poetic and narrative choices, Blunden challenges the reader to consider the full scope of war's destructiveness, highlighting the dual narrative of environmental and human devastation. This dual focus not only deepens our understanding of the historical impacts of World War I but also invites a reflection on contemporary conflicts and their toll on the nature.

Information Note

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

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