In the unfinished Preface to what seems to have been intended as a volume of his war poems Wilfred Owen wrote:

This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.
Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.
Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The poetry is in the pity.

This is a personal statement rather than a poetic manifesto, and quite possibly does not contain Owen’s final, considered judgement on his own work. But it is strikingly modern. The implicit reaction against the celebration of ‘glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power’ voices a feeling which became widespread during the First World War among troops fighting on the western front (if not among civilian stay-at-homes), and the rejection of ‘Poetry’ with a capital ‘P’ reflects a sense of disillusionment and disgust with a rhetoric which seemed out of touch with the degrading realities of trench warfare.

What is probably the most frequently quoted of all Owen’s poems, ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’, details the horrors of a gas attack, and insists on the difference between that and the falsified image of war cultivated for the benefit of youth by an ignorant and unthinking patriotism:

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,

R. P. Draper, *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*
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The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

*Pro patria mori.*

The Latin phrase, meaning 'It is sweet and meet / decorous to die for one's country' (Owen's own translation), is taken from Horace's Odes III, ii, which formed part of the staple of a classically educated middle class; and the poem as a whole was dedicated ironically 'To a certain Poetess' – Jessie Pope, a writer of patriotic verse. The poem is thus both an illustration of, and comment on, reality and illusion as reflected in the actual fighting conditions and propaganda of the First World War. Verbally, too, it is in conscious revolt against poetic conventions which gloss over unpleasant realities. The imagery of 'old beggars under sacks' and the graphic horror of

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{the blood} \\
\text{Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,} \\
\text{Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud} \\
\text{Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues}
\end{align*}
\]

are also part shock-tactics, part determination to replace 'poetic' diction by a language adjusted to contemporary facts of a kind which leads elsewhere to Kiplingesque dialogue based on working-class rather than middle-class speech:

I mind as 'ow the night afore that show  
Us five got talkin', – we was in the know.  
'Over the top to-morrer; boys, we're for it.  
First wave we are, first ruddy wave; that's tore it!'

('The Chances')

Censorship is still at work here – 'ruddy' is almost certainly semi-polite substitution for the universal military (and here more appropriately alliterative) 'f' word; but the overall impression is one that cuts through elegance to crude immediacy. 'The Chances' is modern, too, in that it is attributed to a persona. Owen does not speak in his own voice, but in that of the common soldier. Nevertheless, awareness of a significant difference in register is communicated through the speaker's ironic reference to being taken prisoner: 'An' one, to use the word of 'ypocrites, / 'Ad the misfortoon to be took be Fritz.' Hypocrisy in this context is middle-class and