



# (In)sanity Between the Lines

## **The Relation Between Ivor Gurney's Mental Problems and his Poetry**

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## I

## “To God”

Why have you made life so intolerable  
 And set me between four walls, where I am able  
 Not to escape meals without prayer, for that is possible  
 Only by annoying an attendant. And tonight a sensual  
 Hell has been put on me, so that all has deserted me  
 And I am merely crying and trembling in heart  
 For Death, and cannot get it. And gone out is part  
 Of sanity. And there is dreadful hell within me.  
 And nothing helps. Forced meals there have been and electricity  
 And weakening of sanity by influence  
 That's dreadful to endure. And there is Orders  
 And I am praying for death, death, death,  
 And dreadful is the indrawing or out-breathing of breath,  
 Because of the intolerable insults put on my whole soul,  
 Of the soul loathed, loathed, loathed of the soul.  
 Gone out every bright thing from my mind.  
 All lost that ever God himself designed.  
 Not half can be written of cruelty of man, on man.  
 Not often such evil guessed as between Man and Man.<sup>1</sup>

This poem was written by Ivor Bertie Gurney. He was born on 28 August 1890 in Gloucester.

When reading “To God” for the first time there is one term which immediately comes to mind: disturbance. A dictionary gives several definitions of this term, but they are all based on the notion

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<sup>1</sup> Ivor Gurney, “To God,” *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 197.

that a settled condition is interrupted or interfered with. This overlying feeling of disturbance is caused by several elements within the poem.

Firstly, the title (“To God”) indicates that Gurney is praying.<sup>2</sup> The mental image that is created with this title is that of a man down on his knees, looking up to the sky and with his hands folded. A question which consequently arises is why Gurney is praying. There are many different reasons why a person might be praying; forgiveness of sins, praise, or guidance, for example. For whatever reason, it is clear that Gurney is trying to enter into spiritual communion with God. Gurney was brought up in a religious family. He did, for example, start Sunday school at All Saints’ Church in Gloucester in October 1896.<sup>3</sup> It becomes clear from the first line that it is not Gurney’s purpose with this poem to show his admiration of God, but rather his disappointment in Him. He is angry and he therefore shouts: “Why have you made life so intolerable”. An important observation to make here is that “you” is not written with an initial capital. Gurney’s choice to use “you” rather than “You” when addressing God in this poem shows that he is condemning Him, because in other poems he does refer to God with an initial capital (In “London Dawn” he uses the term “Much-Father,” for example). He is not worthy enough to be spoken to in an elevated style. God has given Gurney "life," but this life is "intolerable." This word comes back in line fourteen: “intolerable insults put on my whole soul.” The repetition of this word underlines the gravity of the predicament that Gurney finds himself in, because “intolerable” indicates an unending pain. The meaning of "intolerable" is even more magnified by Gurney, because in the first line it is preceded by the word "so." Gurney appears to be saying here that he has experienced "intolerable" before, but that was nothing compared to what it is now. In line fourteen the "intolerable insults" (note the alliteration here) are not merely "put" on his "soul," but "on [his] whole soul." Gurney's intensifies the struggle he is going through by the use of this word "whole," because there is not one tiny part of his "soul" which can escape these "intolerable insults".

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<sup>2</sup> It is safe to assume that Gurney himself functions as the speaker in his poetry. Furthermore, it is easier for the purpose of this thesis to assume that it is indeed Gurney himself who is speaking in his poems.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Hurd, *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978), 12 (most of the references on Gurney’s life are taken from Hurd’s biography).

Repetition is of great importance in this poem. In the second line, for example, Gurney shows that this "you" has "set [him] between four walls." The "four walls" can be seen as a repetition of one wall. Gurney is not merely with his back to one wall, but to several. In other words, the situation is highly difficult and he has very little room for manoeuvre. It is almost possible to envision Gurney in between these walls, looking at them one by one and realizing that he is trapped by them. "[W]alls" is not the only word in this poem which is a plural. In lines three and nine "meals" can be found. A meal is something which comes back at about the same time every single day and it is therefore repetitive in nature. This repetitiveness is emphasized by Gurney's use of the plural form. A meal does not stand on its own, but is followed by others until the day that it is no longer physically possible to eat. Gurney writes in line three that he cannot "escape meals" and in line three that they are "[f]orced meals." Gurney stresses here that he cannot run away from this repetitiveness. The way that he is able to escape these meals is "[o]nly by annoying an attendant." The alliteration and consonance in this phrase is quite heavy and it therefore bears importance. Gurney seems to be obsessed with this attendant, because this is the "only" person who can remove this ongoing repetition. This is the person who sets him in between these "four walls" and gives him "forced meals," but this is also the person who can set him free. The phrase "annoying an attendant" is followed by a full stop in the middle of the line, which is also an indication that Gurney focuses much of his attention on this "attendant." The feeling of confinement in this poem is also supported by this full stop in the middle of the fourth line, because a full stop signals an ending. Gurney is desperately trying to annoy this attendant in order to escape from the situation that he is in, but he cannot succeed. There is no more hope for him beyond this attendant, because there is only the end to follow. In line eleven Gurney writes: "And there is Orders." This word is also a plural, and it is also written with an initial capital. "Orders" are given in order to make sure that a person behaves in a certain manner. These "Orders" are the reason for Gurney's confinement and they are, like the "meals," of a repetitive nature. They cause Gurney to behave in way that he expected of him by others, but it becomes clear from the poem that this is not

what he desires. Gurney is so unhappy in his position that he is “merely crying and trembling in heart / For Death.” The initial capital of this word emphasizes the intenseness of Gurney’s wish. And this wish is repeated several times in line twelve: “And I am praying for death, death, death.” Here Gurney himself gives the answer to the question why he is praying. He does not want to continue living. In the final lines Gurney writes: “Not half can be written of cruelty of man, on man, / Not often such evil guessed as between Man and Man.” He shows here that it is indeed other people who cause him to be in this state of mind. Life has become “intolerable” because the people that “God himself designed” are acting cruelly towards one another.

In "To God" several words can be found which are repeated. "Hell," for example, appears two times in this poem: “And tonight a sensual / Hell has been put on me” in lines four and five and “And there is dreadful hell within me” in line eight. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives many different definitions of the term “hell,” but for the purpose of the assessment of “hell” in “To God” the focus will be on one. This definition is in connection with the religious air of the poem: “The infernal regions regarded in various religions as a place of suffering and evil; the dwelling place of devils and condemned spirits; the place or state of punishment of the wicked after death”.<sup>4</sup> Gurney believes that he is condemned by God and he feels that he is now going through a state of punishment. This might explain why he has so much anger towards God, because he did not think that he deserved this "hell." He does not understand why he is being punished. It is important to notice that Gurney uses two completely different, even opposite, adjectives in the two instances that "hell" appears in "To God," namely “sensual” and “dreadful.” The phrase “sensual / Hell” is already odd in itself. Gurney has separated the two words by ending line four with “sensual” and starting line five with “Hell.” The poet emphasizes the oddness of this phrase by doing so, because this separation underlines that these words are usually not to be found next to each other. The oxymoron underlines the oddness of the situation. The awkward half rhyme on “sensual“ and “Hell” supports this as well. [s]ensual” is usually regarded as something positive and pleasant, but it is also possible

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<sup>4</sup> Hell,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989.

to look at it from another perspective. Gurney feels that life has been made “intolerable,” but the activation of his senses and appetites (by “meals,” for example) show him that he is still alive. In other words, they are a signal that he still has to go on with this “intolerable” life. In this case the phrase “sensual / Hell” supports Gurney’s idea that he is being punished by God. He not only has to continue living this “intolerable” life, but he has to do this in a place of suffering and evil. It is important to notice that in this instance “Hell” is written with an initial capital. This is Gurney’s way of showing the gravity of his predicament. The phrase “dreadful hell” makes for a more logical combination of words, in spite of the half rhyme that Gurney creates here. The word “hell” does not need an initial capital here, because the feel of despair which is created by this word is pointed out by the adjective “dreadful.” Gurney writes that “sensual / Hell has been put on [him],” but “there is dreadful hell within [him].” In other words, this “sensual / Hell” is an external factor and the “dreadful hell” is internal.

The word “dreadful” itself is repeated three times in “To God”: “dreadful hell” in line eight, “dreadful to endure” in line eleven, and “dreadful is the indrawing or out-breathing of breath” in line thirteen. The repetition of this highly negative word accentuates the desperation that is prevailing in this poem. The “[f]orced meals,” “electricity,” “and “weakening of sanity by influence” are “dreadful to endure.” Especially the last two phrases are odd, because they seem to be coming out of nowhere. They raise questions as to what Gurney means with “electricity” and “influence.” It could be that Gurney is writing about electric shock therapy or perhaps he is literally being tortured with electrical currents. The poem does not give answers to these questions. The “influence” can be seen in connection to the “Orders” in the next line. Gurney is being influenced by other people through these “Orders” and this literally makes him lose his “sanity.” This idea of going insane can also be seen in lines seven and eight: “And gone out is part / Of sanity.” Gurney again emphasizes that he becomes miserable because of the way that others have been treating him. He even believes that his soul is “loathed, loathed, loathed”. In other words, he is hated or seen as something disgusting.

There is another important element which attributes to the disturbed atmosphere of this poem: the oddness of the sounds. The rhyme, for example, is irregular. Lines two and four end with the words “able” and “sensual,” and these words show a half rhyme. At other points Gurney does not rhyme, but he uses the exact same word instead. Lines fourteen and fifteen both end with “soul” and lines eighteen and nineteen both end with “man” (in line nineteen “Man”). Lines ten and eleven, on the other hand, do not rhyme at all (“influence” and “Orders”.) It is not possible to find a logical rhyming scheme in “To God.” Furthermore, the assonance, consonance and dissonance add to the disorder that is prevailing in this poem. In the phrase “intolerable insults” in line fourteen for instance, the two initial vowels are assonant, but in between Gurney has cramped as many dissonant sounds as possible. The same can be found in the phrase “merely crying and trembling in heart” in line six. The “r” is the corresponding consonant in these few words, but the rest of the phrase is made up of sounds which are completely not alike. It is this control of sounds on the one hand, and the lack of control on the other, which underlines the disturbance of “To God.”



## II

A question arises when reading the above poem and its analysis: what made Gurney write like this? What is the cause for his obsession with repetition? What experience makes him write with such despair? Why is he condemning God? In order to give answers to these questions it is important to take a closer look at some personal aspects of Gurney's life, because they will give an insight into his way of thinking.

An important observation to make is that Gurney was a man who had a musical ear. He was introduced to music at a young age when his parents bought a pianoforte in 1896. Gurney and his siblings learned to play it. A few years later he joined the choir at All Saints' Church and in 1900 he won a spot in the Cathedral Choir. He was supported by Alfred Hunter Cheesman, the curate at All Saints' and one of his godparents. When he left the Cathedral Choir and consequently King's School at seventeen, Gurney was determined to become a professional musician. He became the pupil of organist Dr. Herbert Brewer, who did not approve when he wanted to apply for an open scholarship to the Royal College of Music. However, Gurney did present himself and succeeded in getting himself accepted for education from the autumn of 1911 onwards. Consequently, Gurney left Gloucestershire and moved to London to taste the life of a Royal College of Music student. During this time Gurney seriously started to shift his attention to the writing of poetry as well. However, John Lucas believes that Gurney thought himself to be more of a composer than a poet.<sup>5</sup> He uses one of Gurney's letters written in early 1914 as evidence for this claim. The man who would later become most famous for his poetry writes: "I have done five of the most delightful and beautiful songs you ever cast your beaming eyes upon."<sup>6</sup> During his time as a soldier in World War One he found some relief from regular army life when he joined the military band playing the baritone horn in August 1915.

Gurney's musicality might contribute to his way of writing in "To God." Repetition

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<sup>5</sup> John Lucas, *Ivor Gurney* (Devon: Northcote House Publishers, 2001), 3

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

is an important element in the writing of music. In a musical piece certain elements (notes, a chord or a refrain, for example) come back several times. Gurney uses this same technique in "To God." He repeats words ("dreadful") and sounds ("whole soul"). Terms which are closely connected to repetition are consonance and dissonance. In music, a consonance is a harmony, chord, or interval which is considered to be stable. A dissonance, on the other hand, is considered to be unstable. It is difficult to point out when something is considered to be "stable" or "unstable," because this definition is culturally conditioned. Dissonance can be created by half tones, for instance, and the baritone horn (the instrument Gurney played in the military band) can create such tones. Consonance and dissonance can also be found in poetry. Consonance in poetry is characterized by the repetition of the same consonant two or more times in short succession. Dissonance is a disruption in a poem by a harsh connection of sounds. It is the poet's purpose to create a feel of disorder when he uses devices like these. In "To God" the dissonance, but also the consonance, attribute to the disturbed atmosphere of the poem.<sup>7</sup>

Walt Whitman is a poet who is greatly admired for his use of consonance and dissonance in his poetry and it happens to be so that Gurney was an admirer of his work and was therefore much influenced by the in 1819 born American. The first line of the second stanza of Whitman's famous "To a Locomotive in Winter" runs: "Fierce-throated beauty!"<sup>8</sup> At first glance the line would appear to be completely dissonant, but there is a relationship between the "i" in "[f]ierce and the "y" in "beauty." This short line is powerful, because Whitman uses as many dissonances as possible between two assonant points. Gurney's admiration of Whitman, and consequently copying of his poetical technique, is then also a contribution to why he writes like he does in "To God."

It is also important to take a closer look at Gurney personal circumstances (upbringing and family, for instance) in order to answer the opening questions of this section. Gurney was David Gurney's and his wife Florence's (*née* Lugg) second child. His father was a tailor and the family

<sup>7</sup> "consonance and dissonance," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2010, Encyclopædia Britannica Online <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/133620/consonance>.

<sup>8</sup> Walt Whitman, "To a Locomotive in Winter," *Bartelby.com*, 1999, <http://www.bartelby.com/br/142.html>.

lived in a small house in Queen Street which functioned as a shop as well. They were doing considerably well for a working-class family and moved to a more spacious house at 19 Barton Street a few years later. According to Michael Hurd, Gurney's parents were quite different in character: "He was gentle, placid, ruminative. Her temperament was much chillier, and given to anxious storms".<sup>9</sup> Winifred, Gurney's older sister, recalls: "Happiness revolved around Father. [...] The pity of it was that Mother did not seem to enjoy her children, and so far as I could see she did not win their love. Worse still, Father was not allowed to give us as much love as he had for us"<sup>10</sup> It is important to realize, however, that Winifred was perhaps jealous of her brother and therefore claimed her mother was not able to show affection towards her children. Winifred had to make sacrifices while her brother got all the opportunities to focus on his music. In the early 1950 Winifred wrote:

If we could only have broken down this terrible barrier and had a round table conference, we would have been a happier and more united family; but obstinacy and determination was so practised amongst us, I think, that we developed unbreakable control, because our emotions were so strong.<sup>11</sup>

Florence Gurney was a woman who was struggling with her own emotions and therefore had a difficult time raising four children.

Gurney's desperation in "To God" can also be explained by the difficult time he has had growing up with a mother who was mentally unstable. The repetition in the poem is then a reflection of Florence Gurney's mental problems which would come back time and again. Gurney's creation of cacophony with his use of dissonance shows the chaos in the Gurney family. He is obsessively looking for a way to break through the disturbance caused by his mother. This was the emotion Gurney felt when he was a child, but between 1914 and 1918 he experienced a kind of disturbance which would stay with him for the rest of his life.

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<sup>9</sup> Hurd, 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Blevins.

On 25 July 2009 Harry Patch died aged 111. It is miraculous that the plumber from Combe Down near Bath in Somerset reached such a high age, but this is not the only reason why the death of this man marks an important point in history. He was Britain's last surviving soldier of the Great War. Tracy McVeigh and Mark Townsend show that he was "[s]o traumatised (...) by his experiences at the 1917 battle of Passchendaele - which claimed the lives of 70,000 men - that each year Patch locked himself away in a private vigil for his fallen friends".<sup>12</sup> Gurney was also one of the young men who had experienced the horrors of Passchendaele. On 4 August 1914 Britain declared war on Germany.<sup>13</sup> First Ypres foreshadowed the course of the entire war. William P. McEvoy explains this as follows in his article on the battle: "Atrociously high casualty figures from each participating army combined with fighting and living in trenches would soon come to dominate the stalemate that was the Western Front."<sup>14</sup>

In the following four years the war in France hardly seemed to move at all. Kenneth O. Morgan gives a poignant description of the situation: "The war on the western front took the unfamiliar form of a prolonged slogging match between heavily-defended forces on either side, dug into slit trenches, and unable to exploit the new techniques of mobile striking power so dramatically tested in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870".<sup>15</sup> The conditions in the trenches were unspeakable. Niall Ferguson gives a gripping description by saying that "even when they were not cold, dirty and wet, men in the trenches suffered". He explains: "They grieved for friends who had been killed".<sup>16</sup> And it is important to keep in mind that these soldiers were almost constantly under the attack of bullets, shells and gas. It is possible to grasp a hint of the horrors of trench warfare through the many photographs and written accounts which have survived in over nearly a century. An entry of the word "trench warfare" in a web search engine results in a computer screen filled with gruesome World War One images. Gurney writes in one of his many war letters: "[I]t is not fit for men to be

<sup>12</sup> Tracy McVeigh and Mark Townsend, "Harry Patch, Britain's last surviving soldier of the Great War, dies at 111," *The Observer*, 26 July 2009, News section.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, editor of *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 523.

<sup>14</sup> McEvoy, William P. "Battles - The First Battle of Ypres, 1914," *firstworldwar.com*, 22 Aug. 2009, <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/ypres1.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan, 525.

<sup>16</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: The Penguin Group, 1998), 342.

here – in this tormented dry-fevered marsh, where men die and are left to rot because of snipers and the callousness that War needs”.<sup>17</sup> It is obvious that not only British soldiers were suffering; the men on the other side of “No Man’s Land” had to survive in the same inhumane conditions. Ernst Jünger writes the following in his diary about the German front line at Guillemont in August 1916:

“Among the living lay the dead. As we dug ourselves in we found them in layers stacked up on top of one another. One company after another had been shoved into the drum-fire and steadily annihilated”.<sup>18</sup> Although they were not fighting for the same cause, both Gurney and Jünger had to face the unmourned deaths of their comrades. It is no wonder that many men were not only suffering from physical but also from mental problems, later labelled “shell-shock,” a term which will be discussed in greater detail later on in this thesis.

When Gurney volunteered for active service on what appears to have been 8 August 1914, he could not have predicted the gravity of the situation he was getting himself into. Initially he was turned down because of his bad eyesight, but a few months later he joined the “2<sup>nd</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Glosters”. One of the main reasons for Gurney’s decision to enlist was, according to Hurd, his belief “that the physical effort of army life would somehow cure his ‘neurasthenia’ and that he would come to feel as other men: mind and body at peace with one another”.<sup>19</sup> In one of the many letters Gurney has written to friends during the war he says: “It is a better way to die; with these men, is such a cause: than the end which seemed near me and was so desirable only just over two years ago”.<sup>20</sup> P.J. Kavanagh shows in his introduction to Gurney’s *Collected Poems* that this statement “is enough to dispose of the idea that Gurney’s subsequent mental illness was entirely owing to the war”.<sup>21</sup> Most of the training of Gurney’s battalion was carried out in Chelmsford, a town to the north east of London. Hundreds of letters have survived from Gurney’s time as a soldier and they veer between several extremes of emotion. At one moment he writes, for example: “... we suffer pain out here,

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<sup>17</sup> Hurd, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Ferguson, 341.

<sup>19</sup> Hurd, 53.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>21</sup> P.J. Kavanagh, introduction to *Collected Poems* by Ivor Gurney (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), xxiii.

and for myself it sometimes comes that death would be preferable to such a life.”<sup>22</sup> At another moment he writes that “interesting things have happened”.<sup>23</sup> In February 1916 the 2<sup>nd</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Glosters engaged in Active Service Training at Park House Camp on the Salisbury Plain south-west of London and this meant that they would soon be sent to France. The 5th Gloucester Reserve Battalion arrived at Le Havre aboard H.M.T. 861 on 25 May 1916. The first trenches they saw were in front of Riez Bailleul in the Laventie sector some twenty miles to the south west of Ypres. On 15 June Gurney and his fellow soldiers had to fight for the first time when they relieved the 2<sup>nd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> Bucks in the Fauquissart-Laventie Sector. They were relieved on 21 June, but were back again on 27 June. In the battalion history it is recorded that “nothing of any further importance as far as active operations are concerned occurred” and that “judged in the light of later experiences, the Laventie front was a peaceful spot and everyone was sorry to leave it”.<sup>24</sup> Around this time Gurney writes to Marion Scott: “I am tired of this war, it bores me; but I would not willingly give up such a memory of such a time”.<sup>25</sup> On 27 October 1916 Gurney’s battalion left the Laventie sector to join the Somme offensive. In April 1917 Gurney was wounded by a bullet in his right arm and he had to be sent to the hospital at the 55<sup>th</sup> Infantry Base Depot in Rouen. Gurney writes: “It hurt badly for half an hour, but now hurts not at all; I am writing in bed with the arm resting on the clothes merely”.<sup>26</sup>

About a month later he was back with the battalion. The “later experiences” which are mentioned in the battalion history refer to the horrors Gurney and his fellow men saw while fighting in the third Battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele. They first went to the Buyssechere area and then, on 21 August 1917 to the trenches at Warwick Farm for support. The next day they assisted in the attack on a giant concrete fortress known as Pond Farm. Alfred Willcox, a private in the royal Sussex Regiment, describes a day of fighting in a little village to the north-east of Ypres called St. Julien: “There was such a screaming in the air that lead seemed to be flying everywhere.

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<sup>22</sup> Hurd, 86.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

Something whipped by and one swore that his ear had been missed by a hair's breadth."<sup>27</sup> It was here at St. Julien on or about 10 September 1917 that Gurney swallowed mustard gas and was sent to Edinburgh War Hospital.

Although Gurney has composed five songs in the trenches, his main focus was on the writing of poetry. Obviously soldiers did not have access to any musical instruments while in battle, but there is also another important reason for Gurney's fruitful war poetry writing. Lucas explains: "[s]ome men knew deep in their bones that the events of August 1914 opened a momentous, even definitive, moment in world history. There was therefore a felt need to try to be adequate to the moment: to have your say, to leave your mark".<sup>28</sup> Gurney left his mark with the publication of his two volumes of poetry: *Severn and Somme* in 1917 and *War's Embers* in 1919.

It would be no surprise if the desperation and disturbance in "To God" is caused by the events that have been described in the previous paragraphs. Gurney has to process the unspeakable images that he had seen on the battlefield. The fact that he has written so many poems during the war shows that Gurney needed to vent his emotions. The repetition in "To God" can be connected to the repetitiveness of army life: the same routine every day, but also the deaths of many men every single day.

The years Gurney was a soldier in the Great War were not the only time in his life when he was struggling with his mind and his emotions. Around the time that he left Gloucester and started school at the Royal College of Music in 1911 he began to show signs of the disturbed behaviour which would haunt him for the rest of his life. He would stay away for days on end walking in the countryside and his eating habits were out of the ordinary. Hurd explains: "He seemed unable and unwilling to sit down to a proper meal, but preferred to go without, often for long periods, and then suddenly purchase great quantities of apples or buns and consume them voraciously".<sup>29</sup> Gurney could not fully focus on the development of his musical or poetic skills at this time. London turned

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<sup>27</sup> Alfred Willcox, "Memoirs & Diaries – A July Day at St Julien," *firstworldwar.com*, <http://www.firstworldwar.com/diaries/julydayatstjulien.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Lucas, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Hurd, 25.

out to have a negative influence on his condition, because while staying there he started to suffer from deep depressions. He writes: “The Young Genius does not feel too well, and his brain won’t move as he wishes it to”.<sup>30</sup> Hurd states that “[a]t twenty-three Ivor Gurney was beginning to show signs of a marked emotional and physical instability”.<sup>31</sup> Gurney moved back to Gloucestershire in order to regain his tranquillity. Clearly he was already having mental problems before he experienced the horrors of World War One trench warfare. Persons suffering from such breakdowns were often labelled “neurasthenic” in the beginning of the twentieth century. “Neurasthenia” is a term which was first used in 1869 by the American physician G.M. Beard and, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it “was characterized by feelings of fatigue and lassitude, with vague physical symptoms such as headache, muscle pain, and subjective sensory disturbances, originally attributed to weakness or exhaustion of the nerves”.<sup>32</sup> Peter Barham observes that neurasthenia was “a generalized anxiety syndrome that had been found primarily in private hospital rooms and exclusive sanatoria”.<sup>33</sup> Although the symptoms were the same, the label “neurasthenia” was used for persons from a higher social class and the term “hysterical neurosis” for patients from a lower social class. Barham believes that Gurney “did not contest his neurasthenia, [...]”, but he was determined to make it work for him, [...] and to assert a presence in poetry and song that was palpably something else, and never just the outcrop of a diagnosis or a bag of nerves”.<sup>34</sup> In one of his letters to Marion Scott Gurney writes: “You know how a neurasthenic has to drive himself, though he feels nervy and his heart bumps in a disturbing but purely nervous fashion? Well, Ivor Gurney determined to drive himself.”<sup>35</sup>

After he had returned home from the war Gurney's mental condition was slowly changing for the worse. In a letter to Marion Scott dated 19 June of that year he writes: “My Dear Friend, this is a good-bye letter, and written because I am afraid of slipping down and becoming a mere wreck –

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> “Neurasthenia,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 76.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>35</sup> Hurd, 121.



and I know you would rather know me dead than mad”.<sup>36</sup> The poet was initially diagnosed in Lord Derby's War Hospital at Warrington with “Nervous Breakdown from Deferred Shell-shock”.<sup>37</sup> Ferguson explains that shell shock is “a term used to describe a variety of mental disorders resulting from combat stress”. He elaborates on the impact of this diagnosis by showing that “[o]ne study of 758 cases estimated that no more than 39 per cent returned to 'normal' after the war, and this did not mean complete, symptomless recovery”.<sup>38</sup> The horrors of trench warfare had had such an impact on these men that they were not able to return to civilian life as the same person they were when they enlisted. In Gurney's case, however, the doctors at the different hospitals he was admitted to initially failed to recognise that he was suffering from another mental condition. The fact that “[a] full pension was denied him because his condition was judged to have been 'aggravated but not caused by' the war” shows that Gurney's mental illness was recognised later on. However, Barham states that

Gurney was awarded only 12/- a week (...) not because there was a question about his entitlement, or because the shadow of a hereditary condition had got between him and his just deserts, but simply because at that time he seemed to some extent to be a going concern to the doctors who examined him, and not disabled enough to justify a larger or full award.<sup>39</sup>

William B. Ober shows that Cowper “managed to find an antidote for his low spirits by translating part of Voltaire's *Henriade*, (...), and he turned for further comfort to the poems of George Herbert”.<sup>40</sup> Gurney's antidote must have been the writing of music and poetry as such, because in the years following the war he wrote an enormous amount. Daniel W. Hipp believes that [t]hese poems display his strategy of fighting against his resurfacing mental illness, and the stylistic difficulties of syntax and meter perhaps display the poet's struggles to wrest the memories of

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> Ferguson, 341-2.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Barham, *Lunatics of the Great War* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 226.

<sup>40</sup> William B. Ober, *Boswell's Clap and Other Essays* (London: Allison & Busby, 1990), 161.

warfare into satisfactory shape”.<sup>41</sup> He comes to this hypothesis because in them, according to Hipp, an increased tendency can be found to return through imagination to his years as a soldier in the trenches in France. In his two volumes of war poetry Gurney uses his remembrances of Gloucester as an escape from the realities of warfare, while in these post-war poems it are just these experiences he thinks back to in order to flee from his ever more unstable growing mind. It has to be noted that some of Gurney’s best work was written in this period. Kavanagh shows that “[I]ike many men returned from France – and here the war surely does play its part – there is something inconsolable about him at this time”.<sup>42</sup> Herbert Howells, one of Gurney’s closest friends, writes to the poet’s other important friend, Marion Scott: “It is not easy to determine to what exact extent his present mood is based on simple restlessness. In my own view it is more deep-seated than any ordinary mood”.<sup>43</sup> Gurney had heard voices in his head before, but they had returned by 1922. He was suffering from pains in the head which he believed were caused by “electrical tricks” which were played on him. He had threatened to kill himself and had even called the police to ask for a revolver.

Gurney's family had no other choice than to have him transferred to Barnwood House, a private psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of Gloucester by the middle of September 1922. Peter Barham shows that “Gurney did not take to Barnwood at all, chafing at the confines of what he quickly saw was a regular private madhouse”.<sup>44</sup> He was moved on 21 December 1922 to the City of London Mental Hospital at Dartford, Kent. The reason for this transfer appears to be that his friends believed that the pressure of especially his mother would not be profitable for his recovery.

In the asylum Gurney wrote many poems and Marion Scott made it her duty to collect all his manuscripts. The more time he spent in the mental hospital, however, the more difficult it became for him to express himself in a coherent way. In November 1937 Gurney’s health was deteriorating, because over the past years he still had not started eating properly. He was diagnosed with bilateral

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<sup>41</sup> Daniel W. Hipp, *The Poetry of Shell Shock: Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2005), 127.

<sup>42</sup> Kavanagh, xxiv.

<sup>43</sup> Hurd, 139.

<sup>44</sup> Barham, 223.

pulmonary tuberculosis. According to Hurd, Gurney was even too weak to unwrap a parcel.<sup>45</sup> At 3.45 in the morning on 26 December Ivor Gurney died aged forty-seven. Alfred Cheesman took the service of the funeral and the Gloucester poet was buried in the churchyard at Twigworth.

The debate on the nature of Gurney's mental problems has been going on for a long time. In the City of London Mental Hospital Gurney was diagnosed with "Delusional Insanity (Systematized) which, according to Hurd, would nowadays be translated as paranoid schizophrenia.<sup>46</sup> Hurd is supported by William H. Trethowan, who published his article "Ivor Gurney's Mental Illness" in *Music and Letters* in 1981. In this article he claims that "Gurney's illness took the form of a paranoid schizophrenic psychosis (i.e. that form of schizophrenia characterized by persistent persecutory delusions), which ultimately became chronic."<sup>47</sup> However, Pamela Blevins has diagnosed Gurney with bipolar disorder after taking into account all the evidence, including medical records, and the advice of experts in mental illness. Blevins is of the opinion that Hurd and Trethowan "reached their conclusions more than 20 years ago at a time when mental illness in its various manifestations and subtleties was not as well understood or as clearly defined as it is today".<sup>48</sup> Blevins is supported by Linda Hart in her article "Ivor Gurney: From Triumph to Tragedy".<sup>49</sup> It is a sad observation to make then that Gurney has been misdiagnosed and therefore mistreated especially in the last fifteen years of his life and that he has only recently been properly diagnosed.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is published by the American Psychiatric Association and provides diagnostic criteria for mental disorders. It is used in the United States and a large number of different countries around the world. The latest version was published in 2000 and is a text revision of the DSM-IV which was brought out in 1994. The numbers 296.0 through 296.89 in this manual are all connected to bipolar disorder. This shows that this mental

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<sup>45</sup> Hurd, 169.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 158.

<sup>47</sup> William H. Trethowan, "Ivor Gurney's Mental Illness," *Music and Letters* 62 (1981): 300.

<sup>48</sup> Pamela Blevins, "New Perspectives on Ivor Gurney's Mental Illness," *Ivor Gurney Poet- Composer 1890-1937*, 2000, <http://www.geneva.edu/~dksmith/gurney/bipolar1of2.html#siteindex>.

<sup>49</sup> Linda Hart, "Ivor Gurney: From Triumph to Tragedy," *Contemporary Review* 291 (2009): 92.

condition is highly complex. It comes in many different forms. It was in 1854 that Jean-Pierre Falret recognised the different symptoms of the mental illness which he referred to as “folie circulaire”.

From 1899 to 1913 Emil Kraepelin established the term manic-depressive with an exhaustive study concerning the effects of depression and a small portion on the manic state.<sup>50</sup>

Bipolar disorder is characterized by at least one manic or mixed-manic (both manic and depressive elements are present at the same time) episode during the patient's life. Most patients also, at other times, have one or more depressive episodes. Between these episodes most patients are able to return to their normal state of being. The term “bipolar” is then derived from the notion that patients emotionally go from one extreme to the other. However, it does not happen very often that a regularity is seen between manic and depressive episodes. The peak onset for the first episode, whether depressive or manic, lies in the teens and early twenties.<sup>51</sup> Ivor Gurney certainly experienced the cyclical movement, which is only seen in this particular disorder and the diagnosis paranoid schizophrenia is therefore false. He had, for example, periods in which he was not able to write anything and periods in which he obsessively started writing songs and poems. Emily Hunt (one of Gurney's many female companions) wrote to Marion Scott: “I have seen him in so many moods, and the joy of life and creation is so marked. But the reaction goes deeper than with anyone else I have seen”.<sup>52</sup> He experienced his first depressive episode when he was twenty-three years old, but Blevins claims that he showed signs of the disorder from an earlier age.

The main symptoms of mania are: heightened mood, flight of ideas, increased energy, decreased need for sleep and hyperactivity. A mania often moves from hypomania to acute mania and in the final stage to delirious mania. In acute mania patients usually have grandiose delusions, together with these delusions hallucinations might occur. The range of symptoms is vast and in the delirious mania these symptoms come to an extreme. In this stage the patient does not have any

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<sup>50</sup> Kenneth R. Kaufman, “The Ups and Downs of Bipolar Disorder,” *Annals of Clinical Psychiatry* 15 (2003): 81.

<sup>51</sup> “Bipolar Disorder,” *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*, ed. Moore and Jefferson (St. Louis: Mosby Inc., 2004), [http://www.brown.edu/Courses/BI\\_278/Other/Clerkship/Didactics/Readings/Bipolar%20Disorder.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/Courses/BI_278/Other/Clerkship/Didactics/Readings/Bipolar%20Disorder.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Hurd, 43.

self-control left. It has to be noted that not all patients go through all three stages of mania.<sup>53</sup> Ober points out that “in English usage, mania encompasses a wide range of attitudes and behaviour, from folly through uncontrollable impulses to overt psychosis; it is not a restrictive term”.<sup>54</sup> As said before, Gurney's eating habits were out of the ordinary. Blevins believes that “Gurney’s obsessions with food — starving himself and then gorging himself, eating unsuitable combinations of food that would likely make him ill — suggest a deeper cause than having difficulty chewing his food”<sup>55</sup>. There were periods that he was not able to sleep and he would go on seemingly endless walks along the countryside. At one point he wrote to Marion Scott that he was visited by Beethoven and that the composer of the Ninth Symphony had told him that he was fond of him. In the year he was admitted to Barnwood, Gurney had slipped into a delirious mania and could no longer think lucidly.

During a depressive episode a patient does not have any energy. His or her mood is depressed and irritable. The general interest in life has been lost and their outlook on the future is pessimistic. Delusions and hallucinations might also appear in a depressive episode, but they are of a different nature than those in a manic episode. They are usually based on guilt and punishment. A depressive episode is especially dangerous because many patients have suicidal thoughts. Ten to twenty percent of patients with bipolar disorder commit suicide.<sup>56</sup> In one of his asylum letters to Marion Scott Gurney wrote: “Last night I wrote to Dr. Vaughan Williams to get me Death, for this I cannot endure. Rescue me to something. For Death I long for”.<sup>57</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams was a well-known twentieth century English composer who after the war became Gurney’s composition teacher at the Royal College of Music. They became friends and Vaughan Williams mentally as well as financially supported Gurney when things were at their worst.<sup>58</sup> Much of Gurney’s poetry is full of references to death, guilt, self-blame and suicidal thoughts.

Nowadays, and perhaps even more so in Gurney's time, those suffering from bipolar

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<sup>53</sup> “Bipolar Disorder,” *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*.

<sup>54</sup> Ober, 138.

<sup>55</sup> Blevins.

<sup>56</sup> “Bipolar Disorder,” *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*.

<sup>57</sup> Hurd, 159.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 135

disorder are haunted by the stigma that they are insane. Kenneth R. Kaufman attempts to remove this stigma by showing that “[t]he willingness of those who have endured the mood swings of bipolar disorder, the near catastrophic effects of such on their lives, and the benefits from psychotropic intervention to write of their experiences has placed in clear perspective bipolar disorder as simply an illness—and one that can be treated”.<sup>59</sup> If Gurney had lived at the beginning of the twenty-first century instead of the twentieth century he certainly would not have been certified insane. Hurd believes that “modern drug therapy might have controlled his behaviour sufficiently to have made asylum unnecessary, and that, as a relatively free man, his creative powers might have remained intact for at least a few more years.”<sup>60</sup> He would have had a much greater opportunity to develop his gift of writing music and poetry. Sadly, this can be said for many artists who were struggling to mentally keep their heads above water.

There is no single cause for bipolar disorder, but the main reason for the development of this mental illness in a person appears to be genetic.<sup>61</sup> However, Robert L. Leahy believes that “although there is a strong genetic component to bipolar disorder, there is considerable evidence that life events, coping skills, and family environment contribute to the expression of manic and depressive disorders”.<sup>62</sup> As said before, Gurney’s mother was not an emotionally stable person. Blevins believes that “[g]iven her mercurial, unpredictable moods running from depression to manic highs with episodes of paranoid behavior later in life, it is possible she suffered from a degree of manic-depressive illness”. A child has a 28 percent chance to develop bipolar disorder if one of the parents has the mental illness.<sup>63</sup> Gurney had three brothers and sisters and with a 28 percent chance it is very likely that Florence passed it on to one of her four children, in this case the second child.<sup>64</sup> People who have been sexually abused in the past have a bigger chance to develop

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<sup>59</sup> Kaufman, 82.

<sup>60</sup> Hurd, 198.

<sup>61</sup> “Bipolar Disorder,” *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*.

<sup>62</sup> Robert L. Leahy, “Bipolar Disorder: Causes, Contexts, and Treatments,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 63 (2007): 421.

<sup>63</sup> “Bipolar Disorder,” *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*.

<sup>64</sup> Blevins.

psychiatric issues than people who have not had this experience in their life.<sup>65</sup> However, it does not appear to be the case that Gurney experienced sexual abuse. In the twenty-first century Cheesman's quite intimate relations with young boys would have given rise to some questions, but in the 1890s they seemed to pose no problem at all. Hurd explains, however, that “if indeed he loved, he kept his love to himself, content to be guide, philosopher, and friend to such boys as had ears for his counsel”.<sup>66</sup> John Lucas supports Hurd by stating that “[t]his was after all the period of that 'Uranianism' which can be in large measure traced to Oxford, of which Cheesman was a graduate. And Uranianism was characterized ... by 'the attractions and usually the impeccable morality of boy love’”.<sup>67</sup> Although it can never be proven for certain, it is probably safe to say that Cheesman did not have inappropriate contact with his “boys”.

Clearly Gurney had a disturbed mind and this is reflected in “To God.” The poet’s mental problems explain the desperation that is present in the poem, because they were of such an influence on him that he could not function as “normally” as he would have liked to. Gurney’s mind was chaotic and he tries to incorporate this chaos into this poem.

In the preface to his book *Boswell’s Clap and Other Essays* William B. Ober claims that “literature is often a transformation of experience, and it can be illuminating to find out just what the experience was and how the writer used it”.<sup>68</sup> As shown in this section, there were several factors which were of great importance to Gurney's way of writing; his music, his family, his wartime experiences and his mental problems. Although his time as a soldier in the trenches had a great influence on him, it is not the purpose of this thesis to focus on how Gurney used his war experiences in his poetry. However, since his wartime experiences were of such great importance in Gurney’s life they will be referred to often. It is the connection between Gurney’s bipolar disorder and his poetry that is the main interest of this research. In other words, how is his experience with bipolar disorder transformed into his poetry? It is important to keep in mind, however, that Gurney

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<sup>65</sup> Josie Spataro et al., “Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Mental Health,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 184 (2004): 419.

<sup>66</sup> Hurd, 10.

<sup>67</sup> Lucas, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Ober, x.

himself did not know that he had this particular disorder. The only thing he knew was that he had serious mental problems. Gurney's poems are assessed from a contemporary view in this thesis and it is for this reason that the term bipolar disorder is used. The next step to be taken now is the re-assessment of the opening poem of this thesis ("To God") and the assessment of seven other poems in the light of Gurney's mental illness.



### III

Kavanagh states that “In Barnwood – it must from the date have been among the first things he did – Gurney wrote a sheaf of poems”.<sup>69</sup> Hurd argues that “[t]hey sound like utterances of a man whose mind may perhaps have momentarily lost its balance, but who was now being driven, little by little, into a state of total insanity”.<sup>70</sup> In the first line he shouts out: “Why have you made life so intolerable”. Gurney's choice to not write "you" in the first line with an initial capital can now also be explained as something other than his condemnation of God. Many different sources can be pointed out as to who this “you” in line one refers to when taking his predicament into consideration. It could be his brother Robert and his wife who have arranged for Gurney to be brought to the asylum. This “you” could also be seen in connection with his time serving as a soldier in World War One. The “you” are then the men in High Command who indirectly were the cause of the horrors that Gurney witnessed while in the trenches. Another view on this matter is that “you” are the voices that Gurney hears in his head. They cause him to display insane behaviour and it is for this reason that he is now “between four walls”.

As shown before in this thesis, not only in a delirious mania but also in a depressive episode hallucinations and delusions might appear. They are usually based on guilt and punishment. The poem provides clear evidence that Gurney was indeed going through a depression as well. It becomes clear from “To God” that Gurney despised the fact that he had been locked up. He asks for death several times: “And I am merely crying and trembling in heart / For Death, and cannot get it / And I am praying for death, death, death”.<sup>71</sup> Gurney sees death as the only way out of his predicament and convictions like these are very typical for persons who are experiencing a depressive episode. In November 1922 Gurney did decide to escape his confinement by throwing a large clock through a window and jumping after it, hurting himself quite badly in the process. He

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<sup>69</sup> Kavanagh, xxvi.

<sup>70</sup> Hurd, 163.

<sup>71</sup> Gurney, “To God,” line 6-7, 13.

went to a police station to ask for a revolver and from there was returned to the psychiatric hospital.<sup>72</sup>

The delusional mania which haunted the poet when he was first admitted shines through this poem as well: “Forced meals there have been and electricity / And weakening of sanity by influence / That’s dreadful to endure”.<sup>73</sup> Hurd shows that “[i]n believing himself to be under the influence of ‘wireless’ and ‘electricity’, Gurney was latching on to the latest perplexing scientific development. In 1922 it was broadcasting that amazed and frightened”.<sup>74</sup> It also becomes clear from this poem that Gurney was hearing voices. He writes that “there is Orders” and that “dreadful is the indrawing or out-breathing of breath, / Because of the intolerable insults put on my whole soul / Of the soul loathed, loathed, loathed of the soul”.<sup>75</sup> Gurney’s life becomes so unbearable because of what these voices are saying to him that each breath of air fills him with pain. The poet’s medical file of the City of London Mental Hospital, which he was transferred to in December 1922, reports the following about these voices: “They are often threatening, [and] they have been obscene and sexual. He has heard many kinds of voices”.<sup>76</sup> The threatening nature of these auditory hallucinations is illustrated by Gurney in “To God” because his “soul” is “loathed”. The voices in his head talk in such a cynical way about and to him that Gurney feels that he truly is hated.

Gurney's use of the word “hell” ties in with the fact that hallucinations and delusions as a result from a depressive episode are often based on guilt and punishment. The poet believed that he had done something wrong and that he was now chastened by the Lord because of this. The word “hell” does not only have a connection to religion, because it can also have the meaning of “[a] place, state, or situation of wickedness, suffering, or misery”.<sup>77</sup> Gurney had already seen and gone through hell a few years earlier when he served in France and Belgium with the “2<sup>nd</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Glosters,” because the situation in the trenches was indeed one of suffering and misery. Gurney gives an

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<sup>72</sup> Hurd, 156

<sup>73</sup> Gurney, “To God,” line 9-11.

<sup>74</sup> Hurd, 158.

<sup>75</sup> Gurney, “To God,” line 11, 13-15.

<sup>76</sup> Hurd, 158.

<sup>77</sup> Hell,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989.

account of the conditions around him in one of his letters: “In the front line the mud made movement of any sort practically impossible until the frost hardened the ground; (...) ration parties were held up in the mire and so we were down to one cup of cold tea per man per day....The shelling was so incessant that we were compelled to live more like rats than men”.<sup>78</sup> Gurney’s use of the word “hell” in this poem shows that his surroundings and mental state remind him of his time in the army. He has returned to “hell,” but it is now situated in his beloved Gloucester.

The voices in Gurney’s head were often of a sexual nature and this can explain Gurney’s use of the phrase “sensual / Hell”. Not much is known about Gurney’s sexual life, but Hurd claims that “[s]ex, as such, does not appear to have entered his life in any serious way”.<sup>79</sup> Although he was close to Margaret Hunt and Marion Scott, he appears to have never become intimate with them. There are no direct references to sex in his poetry. For these reasons, it is relatively safe to conclude that Gurney was sexually immature. It is no wonder then that the sexual character of the voices in his head felt to him like a “sensual Hell”.

Eating still appears to be a difficult matter for Gurney, because he does not like the fact that he has to eat regularly: “And set me between four walls, where I am able / Not to escape meals without prayer, for that is possible / Only by annoying an attendant”.<sup>80</sup> The only way that Gurney was able to avoid having to eat his meal is to behave maladjusted. In a letter to Marion Scott Arthur Townsend, the Superintendent at Barnwood House, writes: “[t]he difficulty with regard to food is irregularity, he will miss a meal or two and then eat an abnormal amount at another meal and this of course not as it should be”.<sup>81</sup> This was already the case when Gurney was still a free man and apparently he still not realized that it was important for him to eat properly after he had lost his freedom. This suggests that he tried to keep control of the situation and his mind. He has lost control of all other things, but he could still control what he ate.

In the final lines of “To God” Gurney writes: “Gone out every bright thing from my mind. /

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<sup>78</sup> Hurd, 93.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>80</sup> Gurney, “To God,” line 2-4.

<sup>81</sup> Hurd, 155-6.

All lost that ever God himself designed. / Not half can be written of cruelty of man, on man. / Not often such evil guessed as between Man and Man”.<sup>82</sup> It seems as though Gurney emphasizes in these last few lines that it is indeed not only God whom he blames for the difficulties in his life. It is God who has “designed” Gurney’s ability to live as any other human being, but it is “man” who has destroyed this gift. He has not been locked up by God but by his brother, the magistrate and a doctor. Other people besides Gurney himself decided that he did not longer have the right to live the life that he wanted live. They took it away from him, just like the lives of his comrades in the trenches were taken away by the men on the other side of “No Man’s Land”. This is what Gurney calls the “cruelty of man”. This notion is emphasized by the fact that “Man” in the final line is in both instances written with an initial capital. Gurney connects “Man” in the final line with “God” in the seventeenth line by doing so. He goes on to show that “evil” is “guessed” “between Man and Man” and not between God and Man. In other words, it is Man himself who ruins himself or others.

The “sorrow” in “Song and Pain”<sup>83</sup> from Gurney’s first volume of war poems can be seen as not only a reference to the agony of a soldier in battle, but also of himself as a civilian struggling with a life scarred by a mental illness.<sup>84</sup> The “sorrow” that Gurney speaks of is usually connected to his experiences in the war, but it is the purpose of this section to investigate an alternative reading of this poem. However, it is important to keep in mind the description of the horrors of World War One trench warfare given earlier while reading the following analyses of some of Gurney’s war poetry. His war poetry is of course influenced by his experiences in France, but it is the purpose of this thesis to assess how Gurney reflects on his bipolar disorder in his poetry. Gurney says that “Out of my sorrow have I made these songs”.<sup>85</sup> The sorrow that Gurney addresses here could possibly refer to one of the most important symptoms of a depressive episode caused by his bipolar disorder. The main symptom of a depression is, as shown earlier, a general loss of interest in the joys of life. His experiences with army life up to that point could have functioned as a trigger for the outbreak of

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<sup>82</sup> Gurney, “To God,” line 16-19.

<sup>83</sup> The full text of the poems discussed in this section can be found in the appendix of this thesis.

<sup>84</sup> Ivor Gurney, “Song and Pain,” *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 7, line 1.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*,” line 1.

such an episode. It has to be noted, however, that Gurney's letters written in that period do not support this claim. This poem could be seen as one of the first signs that Gurney used his poetry as a device to cope with his condition. The poem is not only a reflection of the despair which is caused by a depressive period, because Gurney does seem to be able to see a hint of light in spite of his mood. Lines three and four read: "Though somewhat of the making's eager pain / From joy did borrow".<sup>86</sup> Geoffrey Hill shows in his article that "[t]here is some evidence to suggest that Gurney had a depressive's gift for clowning".<sup>87</sup> It is my belief that Hill's point with this quite strange claim is that people suffering from a depression turn to humour to cope with difficult questions or situations. Humour and laughter help to defuse sensitive issues. Although Gurney certainly is not clowning in this poem, he is able to give a qualifying twist to all the negative thoughts which are going through his mind. He has an accepting attitude towards his pain: "Some day, I trust, God's purpose of pain for me / Shall be complete".<sup>88</sup> It is a joy to Gurney to know that he can trust in God and that He will someday let him enter the "House of Joy".<sup>89</sup> As shown before, ten to twenty percent of patients with bipolar disorder commit suicide. Suicidal thoughts are one of the symptoms of a depression. It is likely that if Gurney was indeed going through a depression when he wrote this poem that he wished to die in France. This might also, besides his belief in God and Heaven, be a reason why he was not afraid to die in battle. In one of his letters he writes: "I am not greatly afraid of death. I am big enough to view great things in their true proportions more or less, though not yet smaller ones".<sup>90</sup> This view seems to stick with Gurney throughout the war, because he feels that he was "fulfilling God's purposes".

The second sonnet of the five "Sonnet 1917" in *Severn and Somme* is entitled "Pain". Gurney does not aim to describe pain physically, but rather, psychologically. The first line feels as a cry (which comes back in the final line) of terrible suffering. Gurney gives his cry power by repeating the word "pain" three times. With each shout of "pain" the message of the cry becomes

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, line 3-4.

<sup>87</sup> Geoffrey Hill, "Gurney's 'Hobby'," *Essays in Criticism*, 34 (1984): 98.

<sup>88</sup> Gurney, "Song and Pain," line 5-6.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, line 7.

<sup>90</sup> Hurd, 60.

clearer. The “pain” in the trenches is “continual” and “unending,” but so are his mental problems. Kavanagh is of the opinion that “‘Pain’ shows that he was already better at indignation than self-pity”.<sup>91</sup> I do not completely agree with Kavanagh, because in my view this poem is quite rich with self-pity. Gurney says that the pain is “Hard even to the roughest”, but perhaps even more so for soldiers “[h]ungry for beauty”.<sup>92</sup> Gurney himself, being a composer and poet, belongs to this last group. This is why Marion Scott kept sending him songs, poems and books. He desperately tried to keep in touch with the beautiful things in life while he was in a situation which only caused the destruction of beauty. He emphasizes this idea by stating that “Not the wisest knows, / Nor most pitiful-hearted, what the wending / Of one hour’s way meant”.<sup>93</sup> The soldiers who were, like himself as Gurney believed, different from the others cannot imagine the struggle that he experiences in his mind. This mindset can be seen as an aspect in Gurney’s personality which can be traced back to his bipolar disorder. During a depression patients may find themselves the worst of failures, the greatest of sinners. Delusions of guilt and well-deserved punishment and persecution are common.<sup>94</sup> In the next few lines Gurney lists in what different forms the colour grey is present all around him: “Grey monotony”, “grey skies”, “grey mud”, “An army of grey bedrenched scarecrows”.<sup>95</sup> This colour helps to de-colour the setting in Gurney’s perception. The setting was not only grey for the poet, but also for his fellow soldiers. The world was grey because of all the smoke around them. The setting during a depression is grey as well, because of the bleak outlook on the world and on life. There are no colours in the mind during such a period. Daniel W. Hipp underlines this point by showing that Gurney repeats “pain” and “grey” “to give the sense of both the monotonous existence and seemingly endless exposure to and experience of human suffering”.<sup>96</sup>

Gurney does indeed become indignant, as Kavanagh claims, in the following lines. He describes the pain that he sees in others around him: “Seeing the pitiful eyes of men foredone” /

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<sup>91</sup> Kavanagh, xxviii.

<sup>92</sup> Ivor Gurney, “Pain,” *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 15, line 2,3.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

<sup>94</sup> “Bipolar Disorder,” *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, line 5, 6, 7.

<sup>96</sup> Hipp, 120.

Men broken, shrieking even to hear a gun.”<sup>97</sup> In the final line he “cries angrily out on God”.<sup>98</sup> Lucas raises the question why Gurney cries out to God and not to High Command. He gives the following answer: “Not only would crying angrily at Haig<sup>99</sup> amount to sedition, it would ensure that Sidgwick & Jackson knocked out the poem and perhaps even cancelled the whole volume”.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, under shellfire Haig will have been rather farther away than God. According to Lucas, Gurney’s “crying out” is an attack on the men calling the shots and who are safely observing the war while the common soldiers are meeting their vicious ends. Hill points to a different reason for this action: “What causes him to ‘cry out’ is the discovery that the lyric voice does not necessarily square with the facts of experience.”<sup>101</sup> In other words, Gurney is enraged because he discovers that it is not possible for him to relieve his burden through his poetry. A poem can never truly express what he feels when seeing the horrific images of war or what he goes through because of his mental instability.

"Ypres – Minsterworth" is a poem from *War's Embers* and Gurney dedicates it to his friend Will Harvey. In "Ypres – Minsterworth" his mind wanders, like in so many of his poems, to his beloved Gloucester and the wonderful time he spent and could have spent there with Harvey. Minsterworth is a small village in Gloucestershire, located on the west bank of the river Severn. It is the place where Harvey was born and raised. Ypres is, as can be read in the chapter on Gurney's life, the place where the poet witnessed the heaviest fighting of his entire military career. The word "wind" appears three times in this poem: "Apples the Severn wind / With rough play tore from the tossing / Branches" in the first stanza, "To think how that wind made / Great shoutings in the wide chimney" in the second, and "O wind of Ypres and of Severn / Riot there also" in the fourth.<sup>102</sup> Ian Sansom points out the following in his review of the latest edition of Gurney's *Collected Poems*: "Appropriately for someone subject to violent mood swings, to the mental equivalent of intermittent

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<sup>97</sup> Gurney, "Pain," line 9, 12.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, line 14.

<sup>99</sup> Field Marshal Douglas Haig, a much debated commander because of his supposed disregard of his soldiers.

<sup>100</sup> Lucas, 10.

<sup>101</sup> Hill, 117.

<sup>102</sup> Ivor Gurney, "Ypres – Minsterworth," *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 20, line 2, 8, 19.

strong winds and periods of blazing sunshine, he's also good on the weather".<sup>103</sup> Apples are roughly blown from trees and it causes a lot of noise, which shows that the wind in this poem is quite strong. Bipolar disorder is characterized by unusual intense emotional states that occur in distinct periods. These emotional states are different from the normal ups and downs that everyone goes through from time to time.<sup>104</sup> Gurney's emphasis on the word "wind" in "Ypres – Minsterworth" can be connected to his illness, because his head is shaken as badly by his bipolar disorder as the trees are by the wind. He swings back and forth, from mania to depression back to mania and so on. He had hoped that the structure and discipline of army life would cure his restless mind and stomach, but he discovers that the "wind of Ypres and of Severn / [causes] Riot there also".<sup>105</sup> The Gloucester poet cannot run from his condition, because the mighty winds of his mind will follow him wherever he goes.

The leaves which are "strewn on pastures, blown in hedges, / And by the roadway lined" by this strong wind in the first stanza show a resemblance to Gurney's manic mind.<sup>106</sup> In a manic episode the thinking process gets an energy boost and the mind rapidly switches from one subject to another. Each leaf blown from the tree can be seen as a thought which Gurney's manic mind cannot hold on to for very long. It is no wonder that Gurney wrote the bulk of his poetry while he was going through manic episodes. His mind was full of ideas and he was able to let them out through his art. Ober shows that "[m]ania in the classical sense can imply that the mind has been taken over by a god or by the muses."<sup>107</sup> Gurney does not only address mania in this poem, but depression as well. It is important to observe that the leaves which are blown off a tree in autumn are dead. During a depressive episode a patient has a loss of interest in activities which were once enjoyed and thoughts of death and suicide are very common. The fact that the leaves on the trees in this poem are dead shows a clear link to Gurney's mental illness then. His thoughts during a depressive

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<sup>103</sup> Ian Sansom, "On the Edge," *The Guardian*, 26 June, 2004, Poetry section.

<sup>104</sup> "bipolar disorder," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - National Institute of Mental Health, Publication No. 09-3679, 2009, 1.

<sup>105</sup> Gurney, "Ypres – Minsterworth," line 19-20.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, line 5-6.

<sup>107</sup> Ober, 138.



period felt to him like the dryness and paleness of fallen autumn leaves. And he remembers these times in England when he was suffering the most: “And I lie leagues on leagues afar / To think how that wind made / Great shoutings in the wide chimney”.<sup>108</sup> Even “the proud elms by the signpost” which he had found to give him some guidance in his troubled life have to “obey” this “tempest”.<sup>109</sup> Gurney is able, which is often the case in his poems, to apply a layer of positivity to “Ypres - Minsterworth”. The wind is not only the cause for unpleasant things in life, but it also “tell[s] / Of comrades safe returned, home-keeping / Music and autumn smell”.<sup>110</sup>

In the previous poems pain is a recurring motif. It appears that instead of pain, wind and trees are the subjects Gurney comes back to each time in the following poems. However, they are now used by Gurney as a device to describe the same pain he addresses in the other poems. This is the pain that is caused by his mental instability. Lucas emphasises that “[t]rees are common things, though the war made them less common. Millions were cut down to make gun carriages, munition carts, planks for trench duck-boards, and much else besides”.<sup>111</sup> Gurney wants to write about the everyday things in life, but it is perhaps impossible for anything common to exist in a situation as bizarre as war. This idea is reflected in “Ypres – Minsterworth,” for instance, in lines thirteen through seventeen: “in some German prison / A boy lies with whom / I might have taken joy full-hearted / Hearing the great boom / Of autumn”. Gurney would have enjoyed the Gloucester autumn trees with his friend Will Harvey if the situation would have been normal, but they are now in a place where this dream is impossible. Gurney had much respect for the other men in his Gloucester regiment. Hurd claims that “[t]hroughout the letters there runs the refrain of his delight in ordinary men who seemed, animal-like, to inhabit their own bodies with perfect equilibrium of flesh and spirit”.<sup>112</sup> These ordinary men were, however, brutally slaughtered in the four years it took to restore peace. There is nothing common about that and Gurney painfully became aware of this.

In “The Poplar” Gurney again uses the image of trees and wind: “A tall slim poplar / That

<sup>108</sup> Gurney, “Ypres – Minsterworth,” line 7-9.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, line 11, 12.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, line 21-22.

<sup>111</sup> Lucas, 21.

<sup>112</sup> Hurd, 60.

dances," "With this wind of autumn," "Amidst round trees," "the lone girl that dances," "lime-trees, plane-trees," "tree-folk".<sup>113</sup> The poem is dedicated to "Micky". This is Marjorie Chapman, the daughter of the Revd. Arthur Chapman. Gurney had met the Chapman family when he took post as organist at St. Michael's Church in High Wycombe just before he went to France. After the war, when his mental health was deteriorating, he "turned to them as a natural source of security and domestic affection".<sup>114</sup> A poplar is a tree which is rapid-growing but does not live as long as, for example, oaks, which can live on for centuries.<sup>115</sup> The soldiers in the trenches also had to develop themselves very quickly in order to survive, and most of them would not return home to their families. A poplar would not have been a very useful tree in the war, because the wood is relatively soft compared to that of, for example, an oak or a chestnut.<sup>116</sup> The only use it could have had then was as firewood. Perhaps Gurney sees himself as a poplar; too soft and too weak to be of any use to such a violent cause. He "dances in / A hidden corner" and he asks himself: "What is it in you / Makes communion / With this wind of autumn". The season in "The Poplar" is, like in "Ypres – Minsterworth", autumn and again the wind is shaking the tree. Gurney's mental instability is again described as an autumn wind. He feels "lonely / Amidst round trees / With their matron-figures / And stubborn knees." He sees himself as the odd one out in between these soldiers who were, in Gurney's eyes, strong and stable. Barham shows that Gurney was not the only soldier who must have thought himself unsuited for war, because "military and medical definitions of 'fitness' always remained sufficiently elastic as to accommodate an astonishing variety of human material".<sup>117</sup> However, in the final stanza Gurney concludes that although he is not as strong as those "round trees," he is "dearer / To sky and earth / Than lime-trees, plaine-trees / Of meaner birth". He kept the fire going in his own heart but also in the hearts of many men by the writing of his poetry. Although he was not the embodiment of masculinity, his art is what made him indispensable in the Great War.

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<sup>113</sup> Ivor Gurney, "The Poplar," *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 24.

<sup>114</sup> Hurd, 135-6.

<sup>115</sup> "poplar," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2009, Encyclopædia Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/470098/poplar>.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Barham, 14.

“April Gale” is one of the many short but poignant poems Gurney has written about his mental instability. He again uses the wind as a metaphor for his condition. In the first line he says: “The wind frightens my dog, but I bathe in it”.<sup>118</sup> Gurney feels that the episodes he has because of his mental problems would be horrific to other people, but they are what make up his life. He has no other choice than to accept “[t]he wind” (his illness) and try to enjoy it like a warm bath. He bathes in the “[s]ound, rush, scent of the spring fields” which the wind brings to him.<sup>119</sup> His unstable mind fills his head with all sorts of impressions, just like a spring field is full of all sorts of different sensations. They might not all be pleasant, but he has to try to have a welcoming attitude towards all of them. However, in the final two lines of this four line poem Gurney admits that accepting his illness is not an easy task. He compares himself to his dog once again: “My dog's hairs are blown like feathers askew, / My coat's a demon, torturing like life”.<sup>120</sup> The wind moves the dog’s hairs “like feathers askew” and this scares the animal. Gurney sees the dog and himself as one. What the wind does to the dog's coat is relatively gentle compared to what it does to the poet, even if he bathes in what it does and even if he is not frightened. This same wind feels so strong to Gurney that he calls it a “demon”. He then continues to compare this “demon” to life itself and he concludes that the acceptance of his disease is as difficult as actually living with the illness itself.

According to Hipp, works like “June Night” “establish exact physical or temporal locations which anchor the poems to the realities of warfare so that Gurney can grant the speaker, and thus himself, the poet who recollects the experience, the latitude to allow the imagination to wander and create”.<sup>121</sup> This might be so, but the question remains whether Gurney was trying to focus on his time in the trenches when he wrote this poem. It becomes clear from this poem that Gurney had decided to go without sleep in order to work on his music and poetry: “I shall go in to studies / Of music or verse or Elizabethans – in my labour's plans, / See lamp light – make notes and verse –

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<sup>118</sup> Ivor Gurney, “April Gale,” *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 51, line 1.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, line 2.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, line 3-4.

<sup>121</sup> Hipp, 128.

read noble words / sufficient”.<sup>122</sup> In the first few lines Gurney describes the beauty of a June sunset, but he cannot fully enjoy it because his mind is obsessed with his art. A person going through a hypomanic episode has a decreased need for sleep and an increased interest in goal-directed activities.<sup>123</sup> These characteristics of hypomania caused by bipolar disorder are to be seen clearly in Gurney throughout this poem. He cannot find his inner peace and his only goal is to create his art. In line thirteen he says: “Only to come out when the thought will not move its bent”. In other words, he will keep on working until his mind can no longer produce the songs or poems that he wants. It is also very common that during a hypomanic period the sufferer is excessively distracted by unimportant stimuli.<sup>124</sup> This is perhaps also the reason why Gurney wants to work during the night; there is no-one and nothing to distract him from his goal. This becomes evident through the following words: “All men asleep save I, in my loved – never so loved town / And my friends asleep; while I work and my honour and clear eyes keep”.<sup>125</sup> Gurney also mentions himself walking: “I, dazed a little; till walking, moving easily and lonelily”.<sup>126</sup> His dazedness might be caused by his amazement with “the dim sky”, but it is more likely caused by lack of sleep or an oncoming acute or delirious mania. Gurney would often go on long hiking trips in periods like these. In a letter to Marion Scott Herbert Howells writes the following: “It seems he walked last Tuesday from High Wycombe to a village 8 miles east of Oxford; continued on Wednesday to that city; and took a train from there to a place on the Cotswold ridge and walked across the hills to Dryhill Farm, Crickley”.<sup>127</sup> A walk from High Wycombe to Oxford is about twenty-six miles; that is a little over forty-one kilometres. The distance between Oxford and Crickley is another forty-one miles (about sixty-six kilometres). Gurney’s mind and consequently his body were so restless that he could not suppress the need to move.

Gurney wrote “Sonnet – September 1922” only a few days before he was admitted to

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<sup>122</sup> Ivor Gurney, “June Night,” *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 113, line 9-12.

<sup>123</sup> “Bipolar Disorder,” *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Gurney, “June Night,” line 19-21.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, line 15.

<sup>127</sup> Hurd, 139.

Barnwood House.<sup>128</sup> It is obvious then that at this point his mental condition reached one of its lowest points. As said before, in this period his mind was overcome by delirious mania. He had uninvited moved in with his brother Robert and his newlywed wife and it turned out that he was a great burden to them. He would shout at them and refuse to go to bed or eat properly. He flew into violent rages.<sup>129</sup> Kavanagh has interviewed Gurney's sister-in-law and she told him the following about his behaviour just before he was taken away:

In the end the police came and said we'd have to do something about him – and by that time it was either him or us – so we got a doctor and a magistrate here and when they came Ivor was just as right as rain. They said, 'We can't commit this man. There's nothing wrong with him.' So Pop [Ronald Gurney] said, 'You go into the next room, pretend to read the newspaper, and see what happens.' They did this, and sure enough, within a few seconds, Ivor had crept up to one of them and said, 'I say, old sport. You don't happen to have a revolver on you, do you? I want to shoot myself.' – and that was that.<sup>130</sup>

This anecdote now probably brings a smile on the face of anyone who reads or hears it because of the quite funny "old sport," but it is important to recognize that Gurney was seriously ill in September 1922. It is no wonder that "[b]y 1922 the poems show a darkening".<sup>131</sup> Gurney must have recognised that his life would change forever, especially after he was brought to Barnwood and later to the City of London Mental Hospital.

This development is especially evident in "Sonnet – September 1922". Gurney seems to have completely lost his ability to relativize the situation. It is impossible to find any of his previous "clowning" in this poem. He seems to have given up his ideal to live as good a life as he can with his illness. Lucas is of the opinion that this sonnet "is not the work of a madman, though it is undoubtedly the work of a poet sorely perplexed and angered by the times in which he finds

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<sup>128</sup> Kavanagh, xxxiii.

<sup>129</sup> Hurd, 145-6.

<sup>130</sup> Kavanagh, xxv-xxvi.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

himself.”<sup>132</sup> However, a few pages earlier in his book Lucas states that “at this time Gurney was in a dreadfully disturbed state of mind, a danger to himself and damnably unpleasant to others”.<sup>133</sup>

Lucas is thus inconsistent: on the one hand he believes that Gurney was only struggling with living in a post-war society and not with a psychiatric affliction, while on the other he states that the poet was indeed suffering from mental issues. “Sonnet – September 1922” is indeed a reflection of one of Gurney’s psychotic episodes and, as Kavanagh believes, it “is the most extraordinary and unforgettable”<sup>134</sup>.

The phrase around which this poem revolves is “Fierce indignation” in line one.<sup>135</sup> It is thus essential to understand what Gurney is trying to say with these two words. One of the four definitions of “indignation” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is: “Anger at what is regarded as unworthy or wrongful; wrath excited by a sense of wrong to oneself or, especially, to others, or by meanness, injustice, wickedness, or misconduct; righteous or dignified anger; the wrath of a superior.”<sup>136</sup> The seriousness of Gurney’s words is emphasized by the word “fierce”. It gives an almost animalistic or primal ring to the emotions that Gurney tries to incorporate in this poem. Gurney believes that “Fierce indignation is best understood by those / Who have time or no fear, or a hope in its real good.”<sup>137</sup> The question arises whether he sees himself as one of “those”. The answer lies already in the word itself, because “those” refers to other people beside himself. This idea is emphasized by the following line. Gurney writes that “[o]ne loses it with a filed soul or in sentimental mood”.<sup>138</sup> Lucas shows that “Gurney opposes the group to the individual, whose soul is defiled or has been filed – its rough edges smoothed away – or who has become part of the rank and file, of those who accept their lot.”<sup>139</sup> The word “indignation” is also a cliché and this underlines the idea that Gurney does not want to behave like other people. Gurney seems to isolate himself like

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<sup>132</sup> Lucas, 70.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>134</sup> Kavanagh, xxxiii.

<sup>135</sup> Ivor Gurney, “Sonnet – September 1922,” *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 192, line 1.

<sup>136</sup> “Indignation,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989.

<sup>137</sup> Gurney, “Sonnet – September 1922,” line 1-2.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, line 3.

<sup>139</sup> Lucas, 69.

a wounded animal does when it is going to die. This animal does not need to fight anymore, just like Gurney sees no purpose in “[f]ierce indignation”. It feels as though he has accepted his mental disorder and the fact that it will be part of him for the rest of his life. The rest of the octet is indeed about acceptance. Gurney shows that “the earth that ploughs / Forgets protestation in its turning, the rood / Prepares, considers, fulfils; and the poppy’s blood / Makes old the old changing of the headland’s brows”.<sup>140</sup> In all these instances the subjects have an accepting attitude towards their destinies. Lucas points out that this sonnet is even about “the acceptance of sacrifice, whether that’s the crucifixion of Christ or the slaughter of soldiers, which is surely implied in the poppy’s blood: it’s as though each season poppies worn on the headland’s brows act as a reminder of a new supply of soldiers springing up only to be mown down”.<sup>141</sup> Gurney has seen many men giving up their lives in the Great War, but he was one of the lucky ones who had survived. Perhaps Gurney had a sense of guilt towards his fellow soldiers in the 5<sup>th</sup> Gloucester Reserve Battalion, but this is only speculation. However, especially Gurney’s poetry from the years following his return home show that the poet certainly had not forgotten about the millions of fathers, sons, nephews, etcetera who had not survived. In “Swift and Slow,” for example, he writes: “Death swooped suddenly on men in Flanders / There were no tweedledees or handy-danders / The skull was cleft, the life went out from it”.<sup>142</sup> Gurney’s acceptance of his bipolar disorder then perhaps stems from his belief that the time had now come for him to sacrifice his life. This ties in with the depressive mood he was in at this moment, because during a depression thoughts of guilt and punishment are very common. He had expected to die in France or Belgium, but his death came seven years later in Barnwood House in his much cherished Gloucester.

The message of this sonnet appears to be taking a different turn by the use of the word “but” at the beginning of the sestet.<sup>143</sup> However, it becomes evident from the closing lines that Gurney is eventually not able to change his way of thinking about life. The animalistic nature of this poem is

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<sup>140</sup> Gurney, “Sonnet – September 1922,” line 5-8.

<sup>141</sup> Lucas, 69.

<sup>142</sup> Gurney, “Swift and Slow,” *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 88.

<sup>143</sup> Gurney, “Sonnet – September 1922,” line 9.

again underlined by the mentioning of “the toad” in line nine and “the butterfly” in line ten. Both these animals are plagued by the plough (“the harrow” / “that clanking thing”) when it goes through their field. The toad and the butterfly are usually not associated with anger or resistance, “but the toad under the harrow toadiness / Is known to forget, and even the butterfly / Has doubts of wisdom when that clanking thing goes by / And’s not distressed”.<sup>144</sup> Lucas believes that Gurney’s message here is that “[e]ven toad and butterfly may learn to be other than submissive or ready to live for the day alone”.<sup>145</sup> In other words, if these creatures can fight for their lives and defend themselves then surely Gurney must be able to do this as well. However, he has such a low self-esteem because of his hallucinations and delusions that he sees himself as nothing more than, like the toad and the butterfly, a “twisted thing”. And according to the poet, “[a] twisted thing keeps still”.<sup>146</sup> He is not one to speak up for himself, Gurney feels, because he is affected by his psychiatric problems. One of the symptoms of depression is that a person has a very pessimistic outlook on the future. It is very likely that the predominant cause for this thought is the very low self-esteem of the sufferer. He or she feels unworthy of life. Gurney’s self-image is especially low, because he is of the opinion that he is “easier twisted than a grocer’s bil”. To use Lucas’ words: “[T]hey [“the toad” and “the butterfly”] are like paper spills, the hapless means to others’ ends and for which they, (...), are sacrificed, cancelled from history.”<sup>147</sup> Gurney had been part of history because he had been in the trenches in World War One and especially because of the writing of his war poetry, but he now feels that he will no longer be of any importance. These kinds of thoughts are typical for a depressive episode.

In a sense Gurney did indeed disappear from history in the years after his incarceration and the years following his death in 1937. In the period from 1922 to 1926 a number of his poems were printed in magazines, but he did not publish another volume. In 1937 a symposium on Gurney was

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-12.

<sup>145</sup> Lucas, 69.

<sup>146</sup> Gurney, “Sonnet – September 1922,” line 12.

<sup>147</sup> Lucas, 70.



prepared, but sadly he died before it was finished.<sup>148</sup> The symposium was published as a tribute after his death. Jacqueline Banerjee shows that it was not until 1978 that Samuel Hynes wrote at the beginning of his review of Hurd's *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney* that "Gurney was 'more powerful, more wide-ranging, more original in his rhetoric than even Owen or Rosenberg, or even the early Graves.'" <sup>149</sup> Gurney's obsession with becoming a successful and respected composer and poet was so strong that he forgot that life has so much more to offer than that. In "I Would Not Rest," one of his later poems, he writes: "I would not rest till work came from my hand... / And then as the thing grew, till fame came".<sup>150</sup> A few lines on he realises the following: "Madness my enemy, cunning extreme my friend".<sup>151</sup> Gurney saw himself as "first war poet," by which he meant that he was the first to write poetry about his experiences in the Great War.<sup>152</sup> The term "First World War" came into existence only after 1945 of course and Gurney had already died in 1937.

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<sup>148</sup> Kavanagh, xlv.

<sup>149</sup> Jacqueline Banerjee, "Ivor Gurney's 'Dark March'—Is It Really Over?" *English Studies*, 70 (1989): 115.

<sup>150</sup> Ivor Gurney, "I Would Not Rest," *Collected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, 1982 (Manchester: Carcanet P Ltd., 2004), 298, line 1-2.

<sup>151</sup> Ivor Gurney, "I Would Not Rest," line 13.

<sup>152</sup> Banerjee, 115.

#### IV

The disturbance in Ivor Gurney's poetry immediately has become clear after the analysis of his poem "To God" in the opening section of this thesis. The next step in this thesis has been to investigate what causes Gurney to write in a way that is so odd and desperate. Several sources have been pointed out: Gurney's musical ear, his family, the Great War, and lastly, his mental problems. This last subject has been the focus of the main body; eight poems (including "To God") have been analysed in the light of Gurney's bipolar disorder. It is the purpose of this conclusion to answer the main question of this thesis: How is Gurney's experience with his mental illness transformed into his poetry?

In order to answer this question it is essential to recognize key motifs, themes and ideas in the poems that have been assessed. These have been handled more or less independently, but in order to create a new picture it is crucial to show how they work together. An important observation to make is that Gurney wrote hundreds of poems, but the length of this thesis forbade me to process them all. However, it is also possible to draw conclusions from these few poems.

Firstly, the Great War is an important theme in several of the poems. Some of them have actually been written while Gurney was in the trenches: "Pain," "Song and Pain," "Ypres – Minsterworth," and "The Poplar." His psychiatric condition seems to merge with his experiences in the trenches. The "Hell" he goes through after the war is partly autonomous, and partly reinforced by his war experiences. It is however difficult, if not impossible, to conclude whether or not his condition worsened because of the terrible war he was part of.

Pain is a recurring motif in the poems that have been investigated in the previous section. This word even comes back in two of the titles: "Pain" and "Song and Pain." Gurney especially focuses on psychological rather than physical pain. It becomes evident from the poems that Gurney's mental problems cause him to suffer. His depressions and mania give him psychological pain. This pain is mainly evident through Gurney's references to fear and death. Gurney is afraid of

what will come next because of his illness and he often seems to believe that death is the only way out of his predicament.

Wind and trees are key motifs in several of the eight poems. In “Ypres – Minsterworth,” “April Gale,” and “The Poplar” in particular wind and trees symbolize Gurney’s mental problems. Gurney aligns the wind and his bipolar disorder and shows by doing so that it has a great impact on his life. Gurney sees his mind as a tree and this tree is shaken by the wind that is his mental condition. Especially in “April Gale” Gurney emphasizes that he is struggling with his illness. Acceptance is not easy.

This thesis started off by claiming that disturbance is an important motif in “To God,” but the same goes for the other poems that have been investigated. This disturbance is caused, for instance, by the anger and sorrow that Gurney displays. At some moments he is angry (“To God”), while at other moments he does not allow himself this anger (“Sonnet – September 1922”) and is rather depressed. These emotions are usually seen in connection with a situation that is out of control. Gurney cries and shouts because he has no control over his own mind. This loss of control is especially evident in “June Night,” because the reader has the opportunity in this poem to step into Gurney’s hypomanic mind. It is possible for the reader to get a sense of the chaos in Gurney’s mind through this poem. It seems as though Gurney does not understand why he is burdened with these mental problems. He has difficulties coping with the illness.

Taking the above into account, it can be concluded that Gurney’s poetical works and his mental illness share a close connection. The emotions which arise in the Gloucester born poet because of his condition and surroundings are reflected in his poems. Gurney was paralysed by his bipolar disorder and his poetry functioned as his emotional outlet.

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## Appendix

### "Song and Pain"

Out of my sorrow have I made these songs,  
    Out of my sorrow;  
Though somewhat of the making's eager pain  
From joy did borrow.

Some day, I trust, God's purpose of pain for me  
    Shall be complete,  
And then – to enter in the House of Joy . . .  
    Prepare, my feet".

"Pain"

Pain, pain continual; pain unending;  
Hard even to the roughest, but to those  
Hungry for beauty . . . Not the wisest knows,  
Nor most pitiful-hearted, what the wending  
Of one hour's way meant. Grey monotony lending  
Weight to the grey bedrenched scarecrows in rows  
Careless at last of cruellest Fate-sending.  
Seeing the pitiful eyes of men foredone,  
Or horses shot, too tired merely to stir,  
Drying in shell-holes both, slain by the mud.  
Men broken, shrieking even to hear a gun.  
Till pain grinds down, or lethargy numbs her,  
The amazed heart cries angrily out on God.



"Ypres – Minsterworth"

Thick lie in Gloucester orchards now  
Apples the Severn wind  
With rough play tore from the tossing  
Branches, and left behind  
Leaves strewn on pastures, blown in hedges,  
And by the roadway lined.

And I lie leagues on leagues afar  
To think how that wind made  
Great shoutings in the wide chimney,  
A noise of cannonade -  
Of how the proud elms by the signpost  
The tempest's will obeyed -

To think how in some German prison  
A boy lies with whom  
I might have taken joy full-hearted  
Hearing the great boom  
Of autumn, watching the fire, talking  
Of books in the half gloom.

O wind of Ypres and of Severn  
Riot there also, and tell  
Of comrades safe returned, home-keeping  
Music and autumn smell.  
Comfort blow him and friendly greeting,  
Hearten him, wish him well!

"The Poplar"

A tall slim poplar  
    That dances in  
A hidden corner  
    Of the old garden,  
What is it in you  
    Makes communion  
With this wind of autumn,  
    The clouds, the sun?

You must be lonely  
    Amidst round trees  
With their matron-figures  
    And stubborn knees,  
Casting hard glances  
    Of keen despite  
On the lone girl that dances  
    Silvery white.

But you are dearer  
    To sky and earth  
Than lime-trees, plane-trees  
    Of meaner birth.  
Your sweet shy beauty  
    Dearer to us  
Than tree-folk, worthy,  
    Censorious.

"April Gale"

The wind frightens my dog, but I bathe in it,  
Sound, rush, scent of the spring fields.

My dog's hairs are blown like feathers askew,  
My coat's a demon, torturing like life.

"June Night"

Clouds die out in June where the sun drops -  
 The skies are clear as water when the sand stops  
 In flood time, settles; and the winds have settled now.  
 Stars as bright sand-grains remain, and the still flow  
 Of the high heavens like deep sea water not hides  
 Them, as the course of the Heavens nobly, strongly glides.  
 There are the hours' tides, the sky's and the Eternal tides  
 Over the dark day's tides.  
 But for all my worship of these, I shall go in to studies  
 Of music or verse or Elizabethans – in my labour's plans,  
 See lamp light – make notes and verse – read noble words  
sufficient.
 Only to come out when the thought will not move to its bent.  
 Longford dark worshipping upwards to the dim sky,  
 I, dazed a little; till walking, moving easily and lonelily  
 I come to the brook meadow with its line of elm trees,  
 The small bridge that has dignity and its own heart's place,  
 To turn there, and be glad that night wide is come  
 All men asleep save I, in my loved – never so loved town,  
 And my friends asleep; while I work and my honour and clear  
eyes keep
 Waiting for the dawn as first mark – and more clouds of high  
June.

"Sonnet – September 1922"

Fierce indignation is best understood by those  
Who have time or no fear, or a hope in its real good.  
One loses it with a filed soul or in sentimental mood.  
Anger is gone with sunset, or flows as flows  
The water in easy mill-runs; the earth that ploughs  
Forgets protestation in its turning, the rood  
Prepares, considers, fulfils; and the poppy's blood  
Makes old the old changing of the headland's brows.

But the toad under the harrow toadiness  
Is known to forget, and even the butterfly  
Has doubts of wisdom when that clanking thing goes by  
And's not distressed. A twisted thing keeps still –  
That thing easier twisted than a grocer's bill –  
And no history of November keeps the guy.