EPIC AND LYRIC IN WAR POETRY: A SUGGESTION
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I would like to share an insight about war poetry that cost me some time and effort to find, in case it may be useful to others who are interested in the subject.

As a longtime student of the First World War, and especially of Britain in that war, I gradually became familiar with most of the English soldier poetry of the war. Almost all of it is lyric poetry -- poems short enough to be songs (i.e., lyrics), expressing a vivid emotion in memorable, metaphorical, and often surprising language. Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney, and Edmund Blunden are now famous among the English lyricists of the war, and they and a few others were my education in war poetry.

But then about six or seven years ago I finally managed a project I should have done long ago--a close reading of In Parenthesis, David Jones's long autobiographical prose-poem about an Anglo-Welsh battalion of the British Army before and during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Unlike the lyrics of the war, most of which were written during or shortly after the war, Jones's narrative was the result of prolonged reflection and composition beginning in 1928 and published in 1937. In the course of trying to understand the work, I reaped the bonus of getting to know the man himself, a remarkable, self-educated Londoner who was both painter and poet.

Reading and studying In Parenthesis revealed three things to me. First, it showed that combat on the Western Front could be represented as more than a sequence of episodic, personal events, as much lyric poetry does. It was possible to narrate these events in an epic format with just as much vividness and dramatic power as in poems such as Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est." Second, the epic format allowed a deeper expression of a culture at war than lyric poetry could. For example, the blend of classes and dialects in Jones's battalion, most of whom were from London, approximate the social makeup of that city. Third, while many writers portray the First World War as a unique, industrial war unlike any other, In Parenthesis was and is a powerful reminder of the important connections the war of 1914-1918 has with previous wars, going all the way back to a battle in what is now Yorkshire between Britons and Anglo-Saxons ca. 597 A.D. Also, the epic form allowed Jones to work into his story tropes and allusions to myth, especially Arthurian. The allusions to the historical and mythical testimony of other wars and the poetry they inspired is one of the hallmarks of In Parenthesis. As critic John H. Johnston says, Jones's epic shows "the fundamental unity of human experience."

This, of course, is not to say that epic is superior to lyric, or that In Parenthesis is a better poem than "Break of Day in the Trenches" by Isaac Rosenberg, for example. But there is a great complementarity between them, combining lyric's power of immediacy and metaphor with the perspective that epic can obtain through narrative and literary history.
So here is my suggestion. If you haven't yet read *In Parenthesis* or would like to re-read it, try doing so by interspersing some of the great lyrics of the war, as if counterpoint to the seven parts or movements of Jones's symphony. Here are some lyrics that might work well:

Part I. Thomas Hardy, "*Men Who March Away*"
Part II. Trench song: "*Hush! Here Comes a Whiz Bang*"
Part III. Isaac Rosenberg, "*Break of Day in the Trenches*"
Part IV. Ivor Gurney, "*Serenade*"
Parts V-VII. Edmund Blunden, "*Thiepval Wood*
   Edward Thomas, "*In Memoriam (Easter 1915)*"

Then compare the almost mystical *dénouement* in part VII of *In Parenthesis* to Wilfred Owen's profound dream poem "*Strange Meeting.*" Here, in what may be their finest achievements as epic and lyric poets, Jones and Owen bring together British and German soldiers in a final reconciliation.