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.