

A reader asks about the poetry of Wilfred Owen

8 April 1999

To: Harvey Thompson

Hello, I recently read your article entitled, "The war poet Wilfred Owen 80 years on," and believe that it gives a clear and insightful picture of Owen's life and contribution. I appreciate your calling attention to this poet so significant for our time of increasing wars and bombings. I'm a Vietnam Veteran who opposed the war before, during and after I was drafted into the infantry of the US Army and sent to Vietnam. I'm very much against the explosion of US imperialism and sympathetic with social equality and internationalism.

I have read Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est" and am trying to better understand his "Strange Meeting" so as to compare and contrast the two with Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" in a literature paper. I'm learning to analyze and criticize so that I can grasp how poetry and literature such as this can help end new imperialist wars.

You said that the latter poem is "perhaps Owen's finest work." Why do you think this is so? Does it go beyond the anti-patriotism of his other war poems to show the necessity for a unity between workers-soldiers of all nations?

I was hoping that you could help me to comprehend certain passages. I'm not sure what he means in the passage that you quoted beginning with "I went hunting wild . . . and ending with "And of my weeping something had been left, / Which must die now."

When you say that this poem is auto-biographical, in what way do you mean? Isn't the author expressing some REGRET for the soldiers on both sides, including himself, not doing more to end war? The passages such as "Here is no cause to mourn . . . Save the undone years, / The hopelessness;" also, "Now men will go content with what we spoiled." Then again "I WOULD have poured my spirit without stint / But not through wounds; not on the cess[?] of war."

What is meant by "and I had mastery; / To miss the march of this retreating world" [into senseless fortresses of battle]? Is he regretting joining up for the war?

One last comment: Is there supposed to be a period after the word frowned in the fourth to last phrase of "Strange Meeting"? The copy on the web site had one and this might change the meaning of the next phrase. I copied the complete version from another web site and it had no period or punctuation after the word "frowned." If it reads "for so you frowned / Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed," then it would mean that the killer was killing a part of himself, i.e., another member of the oppressed working class, thus showing a unity between the two opposing worker-soldiers.

By the way, have you read Randall Jarrell's, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"? If not, here it is. It is also somewhat haunting.

*From my mother's sleep I fell into the State
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flack and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.*

Thanks for your great articles,

Robert Louis

* * *

"You shall not hear their mirth:

You shall not come to think them well content

By any jest of mine. These men are worth

Your tears. You are not worth their merriment."

(From: *Apologia pro Poemate Meo* by Wilfred Owen)

Dear Robert,

Thank-you for your e-mail expressing interest in the article on the life and poetry of Wilfred Owen. You rightly point out that, in exploring the work of this great poet, the reader is continually reminded of its contemporary significance.

Before addressing the specific literary issues you raise, it would perhaps be useful to briefly take an overview of Owen's development.

As the article sought to illustrate, the journey from Owen the shy and aspiring young writer of interesting but immature verse, to Owen the bold army soldier and war poet was a long and difficult one.

When Owen eventually made up his mind to enlist, it was after much soul-searching and he carried with him all the contradictory feelings about the war. He later described himself as "a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience". The more Owen came to experience the terrible reality of the war, the more his indignation toward the warmongers increased and so did his sympathy for the plight of the ordinary soldier. He saw young men, with their full lives in front of them, being sent into battle to kill each other.

At the same time, Owen could not withdraw from the senseless slaughter. To do so would be to desert those he had the most affinity with and stand alongside those for whom he had nothing but contempt; the people who spoke about the "glory" and the "honour" of the war from a safe distance, hundreds of miles from the trenches.

For Owen, there was neither glory nor honour in the war. As he explained in the short preface he wrote for a collection of his poems, "This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity. Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful."

It was the search for this truth--to reveal the real nature of the war to those that could not or would not see it--that marked the steady maturity of Owen's work. And herein lies the enormous significance of Owen's encounter with Sassoon. Up until that point, Owen had a very different idea of what kind of poetry he wanted to write. He had striven to describe all the things that filled him with the joy and wonder of life. And so he wrote, very skilfully, about love and passion, music and song, about storms, dreams, and the feeling of happiness. Even after having fought at the battlefield and witnessing much bloodshed and carnage, he determined not to write about the brutality and horror of the war. It was as

if, amidst a world being torn asunder in the most horrible and senseless way, this young poet was trying to preserve something untainted by the hideous savagery around him. For Owen his poetry was the antithesis of everything the war represented.

Sassoon's achievement was in turning Owen around to face the war head-on and to write about what he saw. With a war raging across Europe there was an added immediacy to everything. Owen realised, in order to impart the preciousness of life, it was essential to write about the ugliness and brutality taking place. All the anger and indignation towards the war that had been building up inside him now found an outlet.

Once he began to "face the war" nothing seemed to escape his gaze. Nor did he flinch from the full horror of what he saw. He wrote about the disabled and disfigured young men, the mental destruction taking place in the trenches, the vast numbers being sent to be slaughtered, the callous inhumanity of the army generals and the men in power, and the unbearable imminence of death. Owen's poems did not exhibit the fury and bursts of anger that were characteristic of many of his contemporaries--which included some of the finest poets in the English language. Instead, Owen began to constructively fuse these sentiments with a feeling of pity and compassion for the ordinary soldier. It is this ability to combine such powerful emotions in a particularly graphic way that marked Owen's work out from so many others and gives them an enduring quality.

We can already see this in poems like *Anthem for Doomed Youth* (completed under the tutelage of Sassoon), but in much more developed form in later works such as *Exposure* and *Insensibility*. In my view, the highest expression of this development is to be found in the awesome *Strange Meeting*. This not only drew from the wealth of Romantic poetry on the Napoleonic wars and borrowed directly from Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*, but it was also inspired by the finest verse of the turn of the century. Oscar Wilde's famous line from *The Ballad of Reading Goal*--"Each man kills the thing he loves ... "--is discernible towards the end. Sassoon, who called this verse "Owen's passport to immortality", was wide of the mark when he described it as a lament for the unknown soldier. Even critics who have said, had all of Owen's other works perished, this one poem would be enough to guarantee his place as a major poet, have often failed to fully understand it. Thankfully, in recent years there have been attempts to appreciate the complexity of Owen's feelings about the war and this has served to cast a new light on many of his later poems.

In the poem, Owen discovers he has somehow escaped from the scene of the trenches. He finds himself in another place that is strangely reminiscent of the battlefields with its litter of corpses and wounded. On being confronted with another soldier, he discovers that he has died and is in hell. "By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell."

This is a rebuttal of all the patriotic attempts to portray the allied armies as morally superior. By taking part in the slaughter, both men have condemned themselves. It is here we see the regret and frustration that Owen felt. The two men are so closely identified, it is difficult not to conclude they are meant to express Owen's own conscience. In the passage you refer to, the second soldier laments the tragic waste, the senselessness of all the death and destruction. To quote the passage in full:

"... *Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled ... "*

The second soldier is reminding the first (who we learn is the man that killed him) of the essential tragedy of the war. He too was a man very much like his killer. He shared the same hopes and dreams. His search for beauty in the world also transcended ephemeral pleasures as he strove for the eternal wonders of life. Now, even his sorrow is pointless. I believe that the last line is essential in making a full appraisal of the passage. Through the "pity of war", Owen is considering what has been lost. He seems to be saying that these two men/poets who knew the fullness of life, had the ability to lift the minds of other men to these truths. Now, being dead, they are helpless to retrieve the message that has been lost in the ensuing madness. This leads to the inevitability of future wars.

"... *Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled ...
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were ... "*

You correctly point out the sense of regret that permeates this passage, but it is, as elsewhere, tempered by recognition of a harsh inevitability. Owen again stresses the many qualities that animated men who were being turned into killing machines. The idea seems to be that an extension of the same courage and wisdom might have saved the terrible ruin of society. "Vain citadels" could also be read as a reference to the different nations involved.

I hope these lines have been helpful. Also you might wish to consider a couple of Isaac Rosenberg's poems *Break of Day in the Trenches* and *Dead Man's Dump*, for the sake of comparison. I am not familiar with the works of Randal Jarrell, but I will look into this.

Finally, it is worth noting that, had Owen not been killed in 1918, he would most likely have lived to see the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the onset of the Cold War, and most probably the conflict in Vietnam. This illustrates how Owen in every sense of the word was a poet of our time. I think we can reflect with some confidence over the sentiments you express about the role of poetry in opposing the recent imperialist wars. As Owen did, there will be those who are prepared to speak about "the truth untold".

Yours sincerely,

Harvey Thompson

P.S. The period after the word frowned was a mistake in the article.



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