WILFRED OWEN
1893-1918

Wilfred Owen was brought up in the backstreets of Birkenhead and Shrewsbury, and on leaving school he took up a post as lay assistant to a country vicar. Removed from the influence of a devout mother, he became increasingly critical of the Church's role in society. His letters and poems of this period show an emerging awareness of the poor's sufferings and the first stirrings of the compassion that was to characterize his later poems about the Western Front. In 1913 he broke with the vicar and went to teach English in France.

For more than a year after the outbreak of war, Owen could not decide whether he ought to enlist. Finally he did, and from January to May 1917 he fought as an officer in the Battle of the Somme. Then, suffering from shell shock, he was sent to a hospital near Edinburgh, where he had the good fortune to meet Siegfried Sassoon, whose first fiercely realistic war poems had just appeared. The influence of Sassoon's satiric realism was a useful tonic to Owen's lush, Keatsian Romanticism. Throughout his months in the hospital, Owen suffered from the horrendous nightmares symptomatic of shell shock. The experience of battle, banished from his waking mind, erupted into his dreams and then into poems haunted with obsessive images of blinded eyes ("Dulce et Decorum Est") and the mouth of hell ("Miners" and "Strange Meeting"). The distinctive music of such later poems owes much of its power to Owen's mastery of alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, half-rhyme, and the para-rhyme that he pioneered. This last technique, the rhyming of two words with identical or similar consonants but differing, stressed vowels (such as *groined / groaned, killed / cold, hall / hell),* of which the second is usually the lower in pitch, produces effects of dissonance, failure, and unfulfillment that subtly reinforce his themes.

Echoing Dante, Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, and the Bible, Owen puts literary and religious language into jarring new relationships with the absurdities of modern war experience. He recuperates but distorts the conventions of pastoral elegy, relocating them to scenes of terror, extreme pain, and irredeemable mass death.

In the year of life left to him after leaving the hospital in November 1917, Owen matured rapidly. Success as a soldier, marked by the award of the Military Cross, and as a poet, which had won him the recognition of his peers, gave him a new confidence. He wrote eloquently of the tragedy of young men killed in battle. In his later elegies a disciplined sensuality and a passionate intelligence find their fullest, most moving, and most memorable expression.

Owen was killed in action a week before the war ended.

Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.[0] *prayers*
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.[0] *counties*

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes

Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Sept.—Oct. 1917 1920

Apologia Pro Poemate Meo[1]

I, too, saw God through mud,—
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.
War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child.

Merry it was to laugh there—
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.

I, too, have dropped off Fear—
Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon,
And sailed my spirit surging light and clear
Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn;

And witnessed exultation—[2]
Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl,
Shine and lift up with passion of oblation,[3]
Seraphic[0] for an hour; though they were foul. *ecstatic*

I have made fellowships—
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips,—
But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

I have perceived much beauty
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
Heard music in the silentness of duty;
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate.

Nevertheless, except you share
With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,

1. This Latin title, meaning "Apology for My Poem," may have been prompted by that of Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua,* "Apology for His Life." Here an apology is a written vindication rather than a remorseful account.
2. Cf. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry:* "Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted. . . . It exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror."
3. Sacrifice offered to God.

The centuries will burn rich loads
With which we groaned,
Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,
While songs are crooned;
But they will not dream of us poor lads,
Left in the ground.

Jan. 1918 1931

Dulce Et Decorum Est[1]

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines[2] that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes[3] and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend,[4] you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Oct. 1917—Mar. 1918 1920

1. The famous Latin tag [from Horace, *Odes* 3.2.13] means, of course, *It is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet!* And *decorous!* [Owen's Oct. 16, 1917, letter to his mother].
2. I.e., 5.9-caliber shells.
3. Of the gas mask's celluloid window.
4. Jessie Pope, to whom the poem was originally to have been dedicated, published jingoistic war poems urging young men to enlist. See her poems in "Representing the Great War" at Norton Literature Online.

Strange Meeting[1]

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel,[2] long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.[0] *grooved*

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."
"None," said that other, "save the undone years,
The hopelessness. 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.[3]
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, through 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.[4]
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess[5] of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

1. Cf. Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam,* lines 1828-32:

> And one whose spear had pierced me, leaned beside,
> With quivering lips and humid eyes;—and all
> Seemed like some brothers on a journey wide
> Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall
> In a strange land.

The speaker of Owen's poem imagines his victim a poet like himself.

2. Cf. Sassoon's "The Rear-Guard" (p. 1961).
3. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity [Owen's draft preface to his poems],
4. Cf. "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears," line 203 of William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1807).
5. Luck, as in the phrase *bad cess to yon* (may evil befall you), and muck or excrement, as in the word *cesspool.*

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . ."

May [?] 1918 1920

Futility

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

May 1918 1920

S.I.W.[1]

I will to the King,
And offer him consolation in his trouble,
For that man there has set his teeth to die,
And being one that hates obedience,
Discipline, and orderliness of life,
I cannot mourn him.

W. B. YEATS[2]

I. The Prologue

Patting goodbye, doubtless they told the lad
He'd always show the Hun[3] a brave man's face;
Father would sooner him dead than in disgrace,—
Was proud to see him going, aye, and glad,
Perhaps his mother whimpered how she'd fret
Until he got a nice safe wound to nurse.
Sisters would wish girls too could shoot, charge, curse . . .

1. Military abbreviation for self-inflicted wound.
2. Irish poet and playwright (1865-1939). The passage from the play *The King's Threshold* (1906) describes the poet Seanchan's heroic resolve to die.
3. German soldier; in the fourth century a nomadic people feared for their military prowess.

And take whatever pity they may dole.
Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

Oct. 1917—July 1918 1920

From Owen's Letters to His Mother

16 January 1917

* # s

I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell.

I have not been at the front.

I have been in front of it.

I held an advanced post, that is, a 'dug-out' in the middle of No Man's Land.

We had a march of 3 miles over shelled road then nearly 3 along a flooded trench. After that we came to where the trenches had been blown flat out and had to go over the top. It was of course dark, too dark, and the ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, 3, 4, and 5 feet deep, relieved only by craters full of water. Men have been known to drown in them. Many stuck in the mud & only got on by leaving their waders, equipment, and in some cases their clothes.

High explosives were dropping all around out, and machine guns spluttered every few minutes. But it was so dark that even the German flares did not reveal us.

Three quarters dead, I mean each of us % dead, we reached the dug-out, and relieved the wretches therein. I then had to go forth and find another dug-out for a still more advanced post where I left 18 bombers. I was responsible for other posts on the left but there was a junior officer in charge.

My dug-out held 25 men tight packed. Water filled it to a depth of 1 or 2 feet, leaving say 4 feet of air.

One entrance had been blown in & blocked.

So far, the other remained.

The Germans knew we were staying there and decided we shouldn't.

Those fifty hours were the agony of my happy life.

Every ten minutes on Sunday afternoon seemed an hour.

I nearly broke down and let myself drown in the water that was now slowly rising over my knees.

Towards 6 o'clock, when, I suppose, you would be going to church, the shelling grew less intense and less accurate: so that I was mercifully helped to do my duty and crawl, wade, climb and flounder over No Man's Land to visit my other post. It took me half an hour to move about 150 yards.

I was chiefly annoyed by our own machine guns from behind. The seeng-seeng-seeng of the bullets reminded me of Mary's canary. On the whole I can support[1] the canary better.

1. Tolerate. Mary: Owen's sister.

In the Platoon on my left the sentries over the dug-out were blown to nothing. One of these poor fellows was my first servant whom I rejected. If I had kept him he would have lived, for servants don't do Sentry Duty. I kept my own sentries half way down the stairs during the more terrific bombardment. In spite of this one lad was blown down and, I am afraid, blinded.[2]

31 December 1917

Last year, at this time, (it is just midnight, and now is the intolerable instant of the Change) last year I lay awake in a windy tent in the middle of a vast, dreadful encampment. It seemed neither France nor England, but a kind of paddock where the beasts are kept a few days before the shambles. I heard the revelling of the Scotch troops, who are now dead, and who knew they would be dead. I thought of this present night, and whether I should indeed—whether we should indeed—whether you would indeed—but I thought neither long nor deeply, for I am a master of elision.

But chiefly I thought of the very strange look on all faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England, though wars should be in England; nor can it be seen in any battle. But only in Etaples.[3]

It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's.

It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.

Preface[1]

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.[2]

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.

(If I thought the letter of this book would last, I might have used proper names; but if the spirit of it survives—survives Prussia[3]—my ambition and those names will have achieved fresher fields than Flanders.[4] . . .)

1918 1920

2. This incident prompted Owen's poem "The Sentry."
3. Until 1914, a fishing port of 5,800 inhabitants, Etaples and its surrounding hills housed 100,000 soldiers on their way to and from the front in 1917.

1. In May 1918 Wilfred Owen was posted in Ripon, North Yorkshire, England, and was preparing a book of his war poems. Around this time he drafted this unfinished preface, which was published posthumously, along with most of his poems, in *Poems* (1920), edited by his friend the poet Siegfried Sassoon. The text is reprinted from *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1985), ed. Jon Stallworthy.
2. Cf. Jude 1.25: "To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever."
3. Dominant region of the German Empire until the end of World War I.
4. In western Belgium, site of the front line. The Canadian poet John McCrae (1872-1918) memorialized one devastating 1915 battle in his famous poem "In Flanders Fields."

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