

WILFRED OWEN
1893-1918

subject of war has always been a favorite of poets, but the pity—as distinguished from the heroism—of war is a modern subject. "The Poetry is in the pity," Wilfred Owen wrote in the preface to a book of verse he did not live to see published. Yeats, who regarded pity as an unsatisfactory theme, was not impressed by Owen's verse, which he dismissed as "all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick." Yet blood, dirt, and death are not by nature impossible ingredients. If Owen preserves his youthful idealism, or at least a shell of it, he uses it to counteract the horrifying scenes of trench warfare, just as he poses his own youth against the age-old spectacle of men dying in pain and futility. In a letter of February 4, 1917, he speaks of "hideous things, vile noises, foul language . . . everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the bodies of the dead, whose unburialable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all day, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious."¹ In verse, such contrasts are made tense by lines like, "Red lips are not so red / As stained stones kissed by the English dead." The half-rhymes which Owen discovered for his verse seem to be a reflection, in terms of technique, of the displacement of the old relationships that held together grandeur and patriotic sacrifice.

Owen was born at Oswestry, England, on March 18, 1893. His father had a modest income, and the family's limited means had their effect on Owen's life. In a letter he wrote her on January 4, 1913, he melodramatically announced, "I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it. If not, adieu to the still labor creeds that hold the hearts of nearly all my fellow men."² She sympathized with his poetic ambition, which began when, at the age of about ten, she took him for a holiday to Broxton by the Hill. It was there, he wrote her, "I felt my mind fill / With uncontrollable movements; there was born / My poethood." Owen attended Birkenhead Institute from 1900 to 1907, then Shrewsbury Technical School, and did some work at University College, Reading, in botany, but then matriculated at the University of London. Unfortunately there was no money for fees, so he had to withdraw. He then went to Dunsden, Oxfordshire, as a pupil and lay assistant to a vicar.

At first the notion was that he should take orders, but Owen developed sympathy for the sufferings of the parishioners without a compatible confidence in Christianity's power to relieve them. He also felt profane impulses in the midst of ceremonials in the church, as he indicates in "Maundy Thursday":

Between the brown hands of a server-lad
The silver cross was offered to be kissed . . .
Then, I, too, knelt before that acolyte.
Above the crucifix I bent my head:
The Christ was thin, and cold, and very dead:
And yet I bowed, yea, kissed—my lips did cling.
(I kissed the warm live hand that held the thing.)

As a result of his dissatisfaction, he left this post in August 1913 and went to teach at the teachers' school in Bordeaux. He stayed in the city for two years, the second as a teacher for two boys. The coming of war made him resolve at "this deflowering of Europe," as he called it,³ so he returned to England in August or September 1915 in order to fight. He was trained and then commissioned in the Manchester Regiment, which

1. *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. David Lewis (London, 1963), p. 22.
2. The same, p. 17.
3. The same, p. 19.

went to the western front in January 1917. The weather was extremely cold, the fighting was fierce. In June Owen became ill and had to be moved to a hospital and then sent back to England to recuperate. Moved again, to a hospital in Edinburgh, he had the pleasure of meeting Siegfried Sassoon, an army captain and already known as a war poet. "I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me," he wrote to Sassoon in November.⁴ Sassoon encouraged him to write more poems, and introduced him to other writers. He also optimistically assured him, when the time came for Owen to return to the front, that his new experiences would help his poetry. Owen went back to France on August 31, 1918, and was killed a week before the Armistice, on November 4. His poems were published posthumously by Sassoon in 1920.

Most of his best poems were written during a period of thirteen months, from August 1917 to September 1918. He felt a burst of energy and confidence during this time. In a characteristic letter to his mother, of December 31, 1917, he wrote her, "and so I have come to the true measure of man. I am not dissatisfied [with] my Bordeaux; bouts of amazing pleasure in the Pyrenees, and play at Craiglockhart; bouts of religion at Dunsden; bouts of horrible danger on the Somme; bouts of poetry this year a poet, my dear mother, as which I did not enter it. I am held peer by the Georgians; I am a poet's poet. I am started. The tugs have left me; I feel the great swelling of the open sea taking my galleon."⁵ Owen succeeded in writing some of the best war poems of the century. His best poems are astringent rather than sentimental; they are not patriotic, they are not self-deceptive, they express community—the intensity of a lover and the accuracy of an honest man.

The source of our Owen texts is *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, edited by Jon Stallworthy, New York, 1986.

4. The same, p. 171.

5. The same, p. 172.

Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?¹
—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.²

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.³

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;

1. Owen may have been responding to the Prefatory Note to *Poems of Tennyson: An Anthology* (1916): "This book has been compiled in order that boys and girls, already perhaps familiar with the great classics of the English speech, may also know something of the newer poetry of their own day. Most of the writers are living, and the rest are still vivid memories among us; while one of the youngest, almost as these words are written, has gone singing to lay down his life for his country's cause."

... there is no arbitrary isolation of one theme from another; they mingle and interpenetrate throughout, to the music of Pan's flute, and of Love's viol, and the bugle-call of Endeavour, and of the passing-bells of Death. (For this and other footnotes to *Wilfred Owen*, we are indebted to Jon Stallworthy, ed., *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, New York, 1986).

2. Prayers.

3. Counties.

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.
September–October 1917

1920

Dulce et Decorum Est⁴

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-Nines⁵ that dropped behind.

5

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And foundering like a man in fire or lime. . . .
Dim, through the misty panes⁶ and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

10

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

15

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 here, 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,⁷ 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.

25

October 1917

1920

Strange Meeting

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

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

5

4. "The famous Latin tag [from Horace, *Odes* 1.2.13] means, of course, *It is sweet and meet to die for one's country*. *Sweet* and *decorous*" (letter from Owen to his mother, October 16, 1917).

5. Of the gas mask's celluloid window. ⁶ Jessie Pope, to whom the poem was originally dedicated, was the author of many prewar children's books, as well as *Jessie Pope's War Poems* (1915).

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, "there is no cause to mourn."
"None," said the 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;⁸
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tresser.
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 cess⁹ of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

January—March 1918

1920

Futility

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awake him once,

8. Owen, at the time of his death, was preparing a volume of poems. A sketch of the Preface read: "This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or hands, 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 to-day is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful."
9. As in cesspool.

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

Greater Love¹

Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
Kindness of wood and wooer
Seems shame to their love pure.
O Love, your eyes lose lure
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

5

Your slender attitude
Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,²
Rolling and rolling there
Where God seems not to care;
Till the fierce love they bear
Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude.

10

Your voice sings not so soft,—
Though even as wind murmuring through raftered loft,—
Your dear voice is not dear,
Gentle, and evening clear,
As theirs whom none now hear,
Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed.

15

Heart, you were never hot
Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;
And though your hand be pale,
Paler are all which trail³
Your cross through flame and hail:
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.⁴

20

October—November 1917

1920

1. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).
2. That is, distorted by (or like?) a knife.
3. In the military sense of "trail arms": that is, carry a rifle with the butt end near the ground and the muzzle pointing forward.
4. "Jesus said unto [Mary Magdalene], Woman, why weepest thou? . . . Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father" (John 21:15-17).

Mental Cases⁵

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms
Misery swelters: Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

—These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable, and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains; because on their sense
Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.
—Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.

—Thus their hands are plucking at each other.
Picking at the rope-knots of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

May 1918; July 1918

Disabled

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
Voices of play and pleasure after day,
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

• • • • •
About this time Town used to swing so gay
When glow-lamps budded in the light blue trees,

5. The opening of each stanza of this poem echoes and parallels the structure of the King James version of Revelation 7:13–17: "What are these they? . . . These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on

the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (noted by Mark Simfield in a letter to Jon Stallworthy, *op. cit.*, p. 147).

And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim, —
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,
All of them touch him like some queer disease.

• • • • •
There was an artist silly for his face,
For it was younger than his youth, last year.
Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.

• • • • •
One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
After the matches, carried shoulder-high.⁶
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,⁷
He thought he'd better join.—He wonders why.
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts,
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts⁸
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years,⁹
Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilt,
And Austria's, did not move him. And no fears
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
For daggers in plaid socks;¹ of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
Esprit de corps;² and hints for young recruits.
And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.

• • • • •
Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
Thanked him; and then enquired about his soul.

• • • • •
Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,
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?³

October 1917; July 1918

6. Compare A. E. Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young," lines 1–4: "The time you won your town the race / We chartered you through the market-place; / Man and boy stood cheering by, / And home we brought you shoulder-high."
7. Brandy and soda (sang).
8. Capricious girls.
9. That is, the recruiting officers entered on his enlistment form his lie that he was nineteen years

old, the age to enter the army.
1. Kilted Scottish Highlanders used to carry small ornamental daggers (*skene-dhus*) thrust into the top of a stocking.
2. Esteem for the honor and spirit of an organization—here, the army; "pay arrears": back pay.
3. "Domine, Hibberd calls attention to a mocking echo of the slogan on a recruiting poster, probably put out in 1914, which shows soldiers in

Exposure⁴

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us⁵ . . .
 Weared we keep awake because the night is silent . . .
 Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient⁶ . . .
 Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
 But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
 Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
 Northwest, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
 Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
 What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow . . .
 We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
 Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
 Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,⁸
 But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
 Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,
 With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew;
 We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,
 But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces—
 We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dozed,
 Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fuses,
 —Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed⁹
 With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;

action and in need of reinforcements. The slogan reads, "Will they never come? . . ." The parallel in this poem between playing football and serving in the Army reflects the recruiting drives that had been made at football matches earlier in the war. The Imperial War Museum preserves the following rather amateur poster: "Men and Millwall / Hundreds of Football enthusiasts / are joining the Army daily. / Don't be left behind. / Let the Enemy hear the TON'S ROAR. Join and be in at THE FINAL / and give them a / KICK OFF THE EAR!" ("Some Contemporary Allusions in Poems by Rosenberg, Owen and Sassoon," *N&Q*, n.s., xxv, no. 4 [August 1979], 353). Quoted in Stalworthy, p. 154.

4. This poem depicts Owen's tour of duty in the trenches which began in January 1917 on the Somme battlefield. In letters home he describes the conditions: "At the base . . . it was not so bad. . . . After those two days we were let down, gently, into the real thing, mud. It has penetrated now into that sanctuary, my sleeping bag, and that holy of holies, my pyjamas." (January 4). "It was beginning to freeze through the rain when we arrived at our tents. . . . As I was making my damp bed, I heard the guns for the first time. It was a sound not without a certain solemnity." (January 7). "The artillery are doing a 49 hours bombardment. At night it is like a stupendous thunderstorm, for the flashes are quite as bright as lightning." (January 9). "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 'ding-out' [cave in the side of a trench] 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" (January 16). "We are not a long way back in a rural village, all huddled together in a farm. We all live in the same room where we eat and try to live (January 19). "In this place my platoon had no dig outs, but had to lie in the snow under the dead wind. By day it was impossible to stand up, or even crawl about, because we were behind only a little ridge screening us from the Boche's [Germans'] periscope" (February).

5. Compare John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), lines 1-2: "My heart aches, and / drowsy numbness pains / My sense. . . ."

6. Places where the front lines jutted out into enemy territory and where the fighting was at its worst.

7. Matthew 24:6: "wars and rumours of war."

8. The German soldiers wore gray uniforms. 9. Glowing + glazed. A popular song is cited in the preceding words: "Keep the home fire burning. . . . Though your lads are far away the dream of home."

For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
 Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed, —
 We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
 Nor even suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit,
 For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
 Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
 For love of God seems dying.

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,
 Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.
 The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
 Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
 But nothing happens.

December 1917; September 1918

30

40
1920

35