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WILFRED OWEN: A SPOKESMAN
FOR THE COMMON SOLDIER

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Marvin Fraley Austin, Jr.
August 1968

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Marvin Fraley Austin, Jr. entitled "Wilfred Owen: A Spokesman for the Common Soldier." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Lewis C. Tatham
Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:

Warren E. Strong
Dean of the Graduate School

WILFRED OWEN: A SPOKESMAN
FOR THE COMMON SOLDIER

War and the human actions to which it gives impetus have frequently afforded poets material for their expressive efforts; and certainly, the First World War which erupted upon the European continent during the summer of 1914 was replete with substance deserving of poetic treatment. The call to so record the various experiences of war was answered by a number of young men, and one of the most outstanding of these "war poets," as they are now known, was Wilfred Owen. The subject matter of his verse was--as he stated in the preface he was preparing for his poems--"War, and the pity of War."¹ No doubt, it was his place to write of such things since he saw and felt all the ravages of war firsthand while serving on the bloody, battle-torn Western Front. In fact, it was here that he lost his life, and the promise of future poetic production from this young Englishman was ended.

As the previous quotation from Owen's preface suggests, he was a man profoundly affected by his wartime experiences. It was his keen sensitivity which made him

¹The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. C. Day Lewis (London, 1965), p. 31.

aware, more than most, of the awful tragedy wrought by modern warfare. Owen's verse is blatantly anti-war and characterized, primarily, by a deep and ever-present sense of compassion and pity for the suffering individual as he stands amid the throes of warring nations and their vague ideologies. In order to appreciate fully and comprehend the significant import of this attitude, it is necessary to understand, first of all, something of his personal involvement in the conflict and the turmoil which, as a result, raged in the depths of his conscience.

Most of what is known about Owen's purely personal reflections is found in the letters which he wrote home to his mother. These were often written, like some of his poetry, during lulls in the fierce trench fighting. Of the area known as the Front, he wrote:

It is pockmarked like a body of foulest disease, and its odour is the breath of cancer. I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have perceived it, and in the darkness felt.²

These lines convey Owen's awareness of death's constant presence and foreshadow the ensuing familiarity with this dread spectre which he was later to discover in himself and others. It was the type of familiar acquaintance which came as a result of earnest, feeling men being

²Edmund Blunden, "Memoir," The Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. Edmund Blunden (London, 1931), p. 18.

pounded and shelled into a state of utter insensibility. This state of mind enabled a man to watch his friends and companions cut down by enemy fire and feel virtually nothing, think virtually nothing. This absence of human emotions had one definite advantage: it often enabled a man in battle to maintain his sanity. In his poem "Insensibility," a work which concentrates upon this particular aspect of a soldier's experience, Owen says:

Happy are men who yet before they are killed
 Can let their veins run cold.

 Having seen all things red,
 Their eyes are rid
 Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever,

 Their senses in some scorching cautery of battle
 Now long sense ironed,
 Can laugh among the dying unconcerned.³

Owen knew the horror of war. However, he, like so many other men, after so much death had passed before their eyes, was forced to exist in an insensible state. This explains, in part, why probably the best and most productive period of his career was during the one-year break he had between stints of active service in France; for, quite obviously, he was not in this insensible state when he wrote his poetry. In another of his letters, he says:

³Citations from Owen's poetry in my text are to The Collected Poems, ed. C. Day Lewis (London, 1965).

. . . I cannot say I suffered anything, having let my brain grow dull. . . . My senses are charred. . . . I shall feel again as soon as I dare, but now I must not. I don't take the cigarette out of my mouth when I write Deceased over their letters. But one day I will write Deceased over many books.⁴

The pity and waste of war were "always in his thoughts, and he wished that an obtuse world should be made sensible of them."⁵

To arouse the sensibilities of a seemingly indifferent world, to make known the horror and destruction of war, this was Owen's awesome poetic, and moral, task. Owen once wrote of his work:

. . . 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.⁶

He strove always to be one of these "true Poets," and the intensity of his desire to fulfill this goal is nowhere better expressed than in "Strange Meeting." In this poem, Owen confessed his own somewhat unusually motivated fear of death; for he feared not so much the end of his own life as the possibility that it might come before he had given the "truth" full expression in verse. As Owen's brother, Harold, says in his biography Journey from Obscurity: "He was able

⁴Blunden, p. 36.

⁵Blunden, p. 134.

⁶Lewis, p. 31.

to accept. . . the death of his body. What he could not accept, and never did, was the death of the poetry in him not yet written."⁷ Here, the poet-narrator relates his meeting in the dark recesses of an underworld with a stranger whom he--unknowingly--had killed in battle on just the preceding day. Before he discovers the stranger's identity, however, he learns of his profound grief. The stranger poignantly relates to the poet-narrator that

Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; . . .

He too had desired to write, but because of his untimely death, his message must remain

The truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

The revelation of this truth had, of course, been his desire and his task, but death rendered that quite impossible.

As one critic has pointed out:

Had he lived, the apparition would have had the insight and the skill to voice his protest, to tell the "truth untold" about war, to assert his faith in the values that men relinquish for the "Vain citadels. . . ."⁸

Now a victim himself, his work unfinished, there is nothing of real significance left to say; he can only invite the

⁷Harold Owen, Journey from Obscurity: Wilfred Owen 1893-1918, iii (London, 1965), 123.

⁸John H. Johnston, English Poetry of the First World War (Princeton, 1964), p. 197.

man who has killed him to join him in an eternal sleep:

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. . . .

The personal feelings expressed in this poem are greatly intensified by the fact that Owen himself is so closely associated with each of the characters. He is both the poet-narrator and the stranger who passed from life with his work left undone. Thus, it appears that Owen recognized an underlying duality in the role he was playing in the war: he was the poet who yearned desperately for further opportunities to speak the truth, but he was also a part of the war machinery, the very force which he opposed. The conflicting nature of these roles placed the poet in what was essentially a moral dilemma: ". . . in one of his simplest but most effective phrases Owen indicts himself as much as anyone else for the destruction of that opportunity: 'I am the enemy you killed, my friend'."⁹ In view of Owen's opinions and the position he took concerning them, it is not unreasonable to ask why he continued to take such an active part in the fighting. It must be remembered that he was a man racked by inner conflict,

⁹Dennis S. R. Welland, Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study (London, 1960), p. 103.

a man who keenly sensed that he was playing morally opposing roles. And, of course, he himself once said: ". . . am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?"¹⁰ C. Day Lewis offers what seems to be an adequate explanation of Owen's "conflict":

He had come to see the war as absolutely evil in the agonies and wastes it caused: on the other hand, only as a combatant could he conscientiously and effectively speak for the men who were suffering from it. . . . This conflict within himself. . . was a basic motive for the war poems. It is a conflict every honest poet must face under the conditions of modern total war; for, if he refuse to take any part in it, he is opting out of the human condition and thus, while obeying his moral conscience, may well be diminishing himself as a poet.¹¹

In a very real sense, then, Owen allowed a transgression of his moral conscience so that he might record, through his poetry, the truth about war. This consideration of Owen's own sacrifice brings to mind these lines from "Insensibility":

We wise, who with a thought besmirch
Blood over all our soul,
How should we see our task
But through his blunt and lashless eyes?

Owen, no doubt, saw his task through the eyes of the common soldier, and the young poet-soldier did not fail to accept the challenge which was called out to him--to give the

¹⁰Blunden, p. 25.

¹¹Lewis, p. 27.

suffering of the individual combatant meaningful expression.

Most critics agree that Owen's war poetry is best considered from a one-dimensional perspective--that is, as it reveals his curative intentions, or conveys his message. There is, however, a valid reason for employing this particular approach; Owen once wrote of his work: "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry."¹² At first this seems to be a rather curious statement, but upon reflection we see that it is a declaration of high moral purpose: he refused to lessen the intensity of his poignant message for the sake of mere prosodic effect. As one critic has pointed out:

The word "poetry" [in Owen's statement] . . . seems to mean "poetry" in the conventional, romantic sense of the word. His "poetry" was not to be found in beauty of rhythms or images. It was "in the pity." He did not write about his pity. His poetry was his pity.¹³

This method demanded that Owen set certain priorities in the treatment of his material; in short, he had to take meaning as his primary consideration and make all other factors subsidiary to it. Of course, no true poet can for long ignore the technical aspects of prosody if his verse is to have lasting worth, and in spite of what Owen's

¹²Lewis, p. 31.

¹³Vivian de Sola Pinto, Crisis in English Poetry: 1880-1940 (New York, 1962), p. 147.

statement implies about this matter it should not be concluded that he was totally oblivious to such matters, especially when refined technique and prosodic effects could be employed as aids to meaning. And Owen's extensive experimentation with pararhyme is evidence enough of this. Actually, "Owen was not a technical innovator except in one respect--his consistent use of consonantal and rhymes (grained/ground; tall/toil)."¹⁴ The principal advantage of his method over pure or full rhyme is that it makes rhyme a somewhat less noticeable structuring device; and in what is essentially didactic poetry with suffering and death as a central theme, the less overt evidence there is of careful artistic development the better. However, some critics have made a particularly close analysis of Owen's use of pararhyme and drawn some very interesting, though highly speculative, conclusions. For example:

It has been noticed how Owen tends to have a lower-pitched vowel following a higher one as its rhyme (brother/flowers; fooling/filling; shores/shares); and this has been explained as a method of stressing the nightmare quality or the disillusionment of the experience about which he was writing.¹⁵

The principal support for such a conclusion lies in a report by one of Owen's acquaintances that he had on one

¹⁴Lewis, p. 25.

¹⁵Lewis, p. 26.

occasion discussed "his idea of substituting a play of vowels for pure rhyme, and spoke of the effects that could be obtained from this device. . . ." ¹⁶ Of course, Owen could have meant practically anything by this comment; and since he made no conclusive statements concerning this matter, it is likely to remain merely a topic for speculation. C. Day Lewis has put forth the most plausible explanation of this matter:

. . . lacking a theoretical statement by Owen about his rhyme, we should be cautious in attributing its workings to any methodical practice. Poets, when they have such urgent things to say as Owen had, seldom attend so consciously to musical detail; the harmonies of the poem and its discords, are prompted by the meaning rather than imposed upon it. ¹⁷

Thus, all that can be definitely ascertained is that Owen did use pararhyme and that he probably did so in order to avoid the possible jingle of full rhyme, a characteristic which would not have been appropriate to the type of verse he was writing. The important point to be made about Owen's work in this regard is that when he turned his attention to purely technical matters, it was not merely for the purpose of ornamentation but, rather, to promote or reinforce the meaning--his theme of compassion and pity.

The truth which Owen tried to articulate in the

¹⁶Blunden, p. 135.

¹⁷Lewis, p. 26.

brief time afforded him consisted of the harsh realities and ugliness of war, and it had the power, he believed, to evoke the compassion and pity of a world whose senses had grown dull. The method he employed was that of describing, in all its many aspects, the horrible physical and mental suffering which man inflicted upon man in the course of waging war. In anger and disgust, Owen struck out at the cursed "dullards" of society who allowed, and even propagated, such conflicts either for their own ends or for their foolishly romantic notion about the nature of war. By telling the truth, by describing the reality which existed before him, Owen attempted to defend the multitudes of individuals who were cast like so many pawns upon the fields of France to suffer and die in the name of some vague cause and, also, to educate those at home who so fervently supported the general conduct and course of the struggle. In time he even came to equate figuratively the common soldier in his singularly unfortunate role with Christ; for he felt that these young men were being needlessly sacrificed by an unthinking, unfeeling society much as Christ himself had been. As C. Day Lewis says in partial explanation of Owen's attitudes:

To the soldier, those on the other side of the barbed wire were fellow sufferers; he felt less hostility towards them than towards the men and women who were profiting by the war, sheltered

from it, or wilfully ignorant of its realities.¹⁸

In turning towards the collected body of Owen's poetry to examine more fully his method or technique and the poetic revelation of his personal attitudes and feelings, it will be both helpful and enlightening to consider these factors in relation to other poets of the same period and their works. Though Owen was only one of several young writers producing at this time who have since been labeled as "war poets," he is generally recognized by critics as the most outstanding. His place above and apart from these other men is due, in part, to his compassionate point of view and sense of moral dedication to revealing what he saw as the horrible truth about war. That such characteristics should so distinguish Owen's work may well surprise the modern reader who has grown thoroughly accustomed to a literature which is almost exclusively anti-war. In actuality, however, the poetry of the First World War can be separated by just this very point into two rather distinct types. The first of these is the poetry written, for the most part, during the early stages of the conflict when hopes for a quick Allied victory were very much alive and "the nation was swept by a wave of popular enthusiasm that

¹⁸Lewis, p. 22.

has few parallels in modern history."¹⁹ These early poems express an almost naive belief in the complete moral rightness of England's cause and maintain the absolute necessity of complete involvement in--and support of--the war.

It was such an attitude as this which led Rupert Brooke to express in his sonnet "The Dead," the romantic notion that the death of a soldier in battle was, in fact, the selfless sacrifice of a man who by dying for his country's moral cause hoped to achieve some noble gain for future generations:

These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhopd serene,
That men call age; and those who would have
been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.
.....
Honour has come back, as a King, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.²⁰

Owen dealt with much the same theme in "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young." He also saw the soldier's death as a type of sacrifice, but his attitude was, as might be expected, altogether different. Here he drew upon the Biblical tale of Abram and Isaac to form the vehicle for

¹⁹Johnston, p. 21.

²⁰The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke, ed. George E. Woodberry (New York, 1915), p. 113.

his poem, and in this short lyric, Isaac becomes a symbol of the young soldier and Abram represents those who, directly or indirectly, support the war. Owen's version of the story, however, differs markedly from the original as he had Abram defy God's will and slay his son:

. . . an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Though Owen did not mention war specifically in this poem, there can be no doubt as to how he viewed the nature and ultimate significance of the soldier's sacrifice: it was certainly not a willing departure from life, and it was not made for some future good as Brooke's work suggests. The tone of the poem nears that of bitterness and contempt, and as such, it reflects both the intensity of Owen's compassion for the slain youth of Europe and his hatred of those who refused to forfeit their "Ram of Pride."

Brooke's work and the ideas which it expresses are quite representative of the early war poetry; for like much of the verse produced at this time, his is--though technically and artistically superb in its own right--not really about war at all. It is not about a real war (as is Owen's) where suffering and death are cold, hard facts with which the individual must contend on a realistic level; rather, it

is a war pervaded by such romantic conceptions as Honor, Noble Actions, Glory. No better example of this can be found than these lines from "The Soldier":

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. . . .²¹

Brooke was obviously inspired by the crisis of war, but rather than describing, defining, and explaining that crisis from an objective point of view which would have lent universal significance to his reflections, he merely related his own personal and subjective responses to the experience.²² He did not write of war as it is, but as his own romantic preferences imagined it to be.

Another poet of this early phase was Julian Grenfell, a professional soldier, for whom the war provided a major opportunity to practice his chosen trade (Owen later condemned such men for their insensibility). He took great pleasure in the violent physical activity and danger of the conflict as these lines from his "Into Battle" make quite clear:

And he is dead who will not fight;
And who dies fighting has increase.
.....
The fighting man shall from the sun
Take warmth and life from the glowing earth;. . .²³

²¹Brooke, p. 115.

²²Johnston, p. 30.

²³Johnston, pp. 38-39.

For Grenfell, then, the war was both a welcomed and necessary occurrence, but such an attitude hardly reflects a realistic appraisal of the actual situation:

If Brooke indulged himself in romantic fantasies which sentimentalized his own and others' motives, Grenfell, in attempting to sublimate his fighting instincts is just as remote from the condition of modern war.²⁴

In fact, Grenfell's attitude invites comment by way of quoting from Owen's treatment of such men who enjoy some sense of personal gratification in war. He wrote:

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,
That they should be as stones;
Wretched are they and mean
With paucity that never was simplicity.

Owen's idea, which is partially expressed here, is that some men are oblivious to the pity, terror, and suffering of war not because they have never seen its horror, or because they have seen too much and have let their senses go numb; instead, they are oblivious because they chose to be, ignoring the fact that their road to personal fulfillment was paved with the broken bodies of their fellowmen. Such men as these are the "dullards" of whom Owen spoke in the preceding lines.

In all fairness to Brooke and Grenfell, however, it must be pointed out that they were in no way prepared by

²⁴Johnston, p. 42.

their background to adequately cope with the situation in which they found themselves. The First World War was, of course, the first conflict on such a grand scale; indeed, it was the first in which the advancements made by man's discoveries in science and technology were so fully adapted to war and loosed upon the combatants to inflict suffering and death. These poets of the early phase simply did not grasp the full significance of that to which they were the initial witnesses; and so, their reflections upon the war remained on a much too limited, personal level and ignorant of the conflict's ultimate meaning. As would be expected, however, it did not take long for the horror and terror of modern warfare to sweep away the romanticism which shaded the war's early stages. The fighting did not end in a few months, and thousands of young Englishmen were spilling their blood on the fields of France.

The tide of the original idealistic enthusiasm, as it came to an ebb in 1916 and then quickly reversed, combined its own flood of embitterment with accumulated feelings of disappointment and frustration to produce the negative attitude that so strongly marks the verse written in the later stages of the war.²⁵

One of the first English "war poets" to perceive the true significance of the struggle was Charles Hamilton Sorley whose work clearly presents the attitudes of soldiers

²⁵Johnston, p. 71.

who have experienced at firsthand the horror of war. Central also in his poetry is a sense of being caught up in some purposeless, meaningless action, of being a small, insignificant part of the huge and inhuman war machine. Inherent in his work is a new reaction to those who have been killed in action. Death in battle is no longer romantically viewed as being honorable and heroic; it is, instead, seen as a tragic waste of the greatest proportions.²⁶ The contrast between Sorley and the earlier poets previously discussed is apparent in both the tone and attitude of the following lines; indeed, they reflect a much more realistic conception of war and death:

When you see millions of mouthless dead
 Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
 Say not soft things as other men have said,
 That you'll remember. For you need not so,
 Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
 It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
 Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
 Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.²⁷

The mere mentioning here of the "gashed head," "blind eyes," and "deaf ears" places Sorley's poem far beyond the work of Brooke and Grenfell as a realistic depiction of war. In a somewhat more shocking vein, perhaps, Owen would later continue this trend towards realism and devote much of his

²⁶Pinto, pp. 140-141.

²⁷Pinto, p. 141.

attention to a vivid description of the wounds and scars (both physical and mental) inflicted in war. Probably in no other poem did Owen more strikingly capture the horror of a soldier's death throes than in "Dulce Et Decorum Est," in which he described the victim of a gas attack:

. . . 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, . . .

Such description has led to Owen's being criticized as "all blood and dirt."²⁸ Certainly, he did dwell quite often upon the more gory aspects of war in some of his verse which dealt so realistically with battle; but, quite significantly, this was not his primary concern, as a reasonably close reading of his work should make clear. Owen, in fact, never lost sight of the greater moral and humanistic implications inherent in the tragedy of the war. The intense physical suffering which he both witnessed and described never became a barrier or a stopping point, but, rather, it served as the impetus to a thorough examination of the war's ultimate meaning and significance to man. After writing home on one occasion of one of the war's less pleasant occurrences, Owen explained that he had written of such

²⁸Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley, ed. Dorothy Wellesley (London, 1964), p. 113.

things in order to educate those at home to the "actualities of war."²⁹ This is not the expression of a conceited young man who intends to set the world aright in accordance with his own standards, but it is, as further consideration of Owen's poetry of pity will make apparent, a sincere statement of moral dedication by an extremely sensitive, compassionate man. In seeking to "educate" as such, then, he often found it necessary to shock the uninitiated with the harsh and ugly realities of modern warfare--"but never for the mere sake of shocking."³⁰ Of course, few people respond favorably to so direct an assault upon their feelings, especially if it means being shocked out of their deep-seated indifference. Still Owen continually strove to "educate," to tell the "truth" about war.

A poet whose work embodies an intent similar to that of Owen's is Siegfried Sassoon who, through his own verse and close personal friendship, exerted a very significant influence upon the other young poet. In fact, Vivian de Sola Pinto in commenting upon Sassoon's work remarked that it

. . . is notable for other reasons besides its own intrinsic merit. Its immediate influence was

²⁹Lewis, p. 20.

³⁰Lewis, p. 20.

considerable and it stimulated the development of the most remarkable of all the English poets of the First World War, Wilfred Owen. . . .³¹

Sassoon's work is characterized by the most caustic comments to be found on the subject of war. His attitude towards the ultimate meaning and significance of the conflict is diametrically opposed to that expounded by Brooke and Grenfell; and though he seems relatively similar in this respect to Sorley, the intensity of his hatred for the war and for those who he felt propagated it sets him quite apart from all the early writers.

Most of Sassoon's verse is in the form of short, jarring lyrics which both continue the trend toward realistic details and add to it the author's own personal touch of biting irony. The following lines from "'They'" show how his poetic mood and temper functioned when he was on the attack:

"We're none of us the same!" the boys reply.
 "For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone
 blind;
 "Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to
 die;
 "And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
 "A chap who's served that hasn't found some
 change."
 And the Bishop said: "The ways of God are
 strange."³²

³¹Pinto, p. 145.

³²Johnston, p. 93.

The bishop, of course, has nothing to say to these men, the suffering victims of war. His response to them which concludes the poem is the statement of a man who attempts to explain the meaning and mystery behind the realities of war with one of the empty clichés of his doctrinal faith; however, this is of no consequence to the men who stand before him. They are not concerned with solving the mystery of God's ways or reflecting upon the intricate scheme of things, for their needs are rooted in the crucial moment of the present and, as such, cannot be met by some abstract doctrinal theory. They are suffering now. As John H. Johnston has pointed out, this poem is, then,

. . . an attack leveled directly at the fatuities and empty consolations of formal religion (a theme which Owen would later develop in several of his poems, especially "Anthem for Doomed Youth"), whose representatives, for the most part, had dismally failed to grasp the physical and moral havoc wrought by the war.³³

In "How to Die" Sassoon gets in an additional thrust as he ironically deflates the conventional attitudes toward death in battle; he "caricatures these attitudes with a decorous gravity that barely conceals his own underlying wrath."³⁴

You'd think, to hear some people talk,

³³Johnston, p. 93.

³⁴Johnston, p. 104.

That lads go West with sobs and curses,
 And sullen faces white as chalk,
 Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses.
 But they've been taught the way to do it
 Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
 And shuddering groans; but passing through it
 With due regard for decent taste.³⁵

Sassoon was concerned, of course, with the pain and suffering of the individual soldier; however, rather than develop this into a central theme (as Owen would do) to evoke some type of redeeming attitude or reaction, he based the success of all his curative efforts on his ability to shock or inflame.

The previous discussion of Owen's work in conjunction with these other "war poets" and their treatment of the war experience should make his poetry stand out much more distinctly as a unique effort and expression. His attitude towards war obviously lacked the naive romanticism inherent both in Brooke and Grenfell, and at the same time, he invested his with ideas and feelings which are noticeably absent from the work of Sorley and Sassoon. In particular, where Sassoon did not provide anything to replace the old myths about war which he had so thoroughly shattered, Owen did. As has been previously stated, Owen's poetry is that of compassion and pity, and it may be added that these feelings found their life originally in his own particular, and

³⁵Johnston, pp. 104-105.

singularly moving, interpretation of the concept of "greater love." It is this "greater love" which Owen manifest through his poetry to those who, like himself, despair of war and all the suffering it entails; it becomes, in fact, the only humane alternative to the horrors which give rise to compassion and pity.

It is in his poem entitled "Greater Love" that Owen is most vivid and explicit in his portrayal of the common soldier as a suffering, Christ-like figure. The last few lines of the poem picture the soldier as the one who carries, across the battlefields of Europe, the banner of his country's political doctrine or ideology--just as Christ bore His cross and fulfilled His appointed destiny in various foreign lands. This analogy is reinforced by the Biblical allusion (John 20:17) in the final line which equates the wounds of the soldier with those of Christ:

And though your hand be pale,
Paler are all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail.
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.

It is very important to clarify at this time a possible point of confusion. In comparing the common soldier to Christ, it appears that Owen was himself guilty of heavily romanticizing the tragedy of war (though in an opposite manner from the early poets) by attributing to those men qualities which were never their own. However, he did not make such

an analogy for use in any of the conventional forms which would give rise to this criticism; for he appears to have seen Christ and the soldier as the victims of both God and society. The will of God and the ends of society often demand, without adequate explanation or justification, sacrificial victims; and Owen's keen sense of moral rightness forced him to question these previously unquestioned "bulwarks" of authority. In light of this, his comparative treatment can hardly be termed romantic--at least, in the usual sense of the term. A quotation from one of Owen's letters may provide further insight; in it he speaks of training troops for duty in France and, in so doing, reveals the true measure of his feelings:

For fourteen hours yesterday I was at work--teaching Christ to lift his cross in numbers, and how to adjust crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt; I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.³⁶

While it is obvious that Owen saw the common soldier as a Christ-like figure, his conception requires much clarification in order to avoid the conventional interpretation of a comparison that is, in fact, rather unconventionally applied.

³⁶Welland, p. 84.

The general attitudes which he expressed towards the war and his compassion for the men caught up in the conflict have a definite Christian tone of the highest nature; yet in what seems to be something of a paradox, he often reacts negatively toward both the church itself and, on occasion, even toward God--who often seemed to Owen "not to care." Behind this seemingly contradictory attitude lies the fact that Owen saw institutionalized Christianity as advocating, at best, an impure form of the faith. Indeed, how could the church support as it did the entire war effort which claimed the lives of so many young men? Here, then, is one of Owen's principal attacks upon the "dullards whom no cannon stuns, . . ."--and who, in this case, are the spokesmen for the church. In another of his letters, Owen expresses his feelings and makes his stand:

Already I have comprehended a light which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely, that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. It may be a chimerical and an ignominious principle, but there it is. It can only be ignored, and I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skilfully and successfully indeed. . . . And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience? . . . Christ is literally in 'no man's land'. There men often hear his voice: Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for a friend. Is it spoken in English only and French? I do not believe so. Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit with pure patriotism.³⁷

³⁷Blunden, p. 25.

Holding such an opinion of the situation, Owen adopted his own rather personal form of "pure" Christianity which celebrated not so much God as it did Christ and his "greater love." The importance of this concept of "greater love" to Owen's work has already been discussed, and certainly, it is from just this perspective that his poetry is best viewed and realized in its full significance.

Owen had not always held to these particular attitudes, but they gradually developed and took form as he witnessed the infinite suffering caused by war and stood appalled at the callous indifference with which many people seemed to view the tragedy daily unfolding before their eyes. In the face of these things, his extremely sensitive nature triggered a change in attitude which culminated in his profound disillusionment with both the traditional spiritual and political values of the time. His disillusionment resulted from his growing awareness of society's own confusion of these two systems of values, for during the period of war, the "purer" elements of church and state were weakened as religious ideals were consciously employed to justify what often seemed, at best, a rather dubious political end. Such a practice, of course, led eventually to a defilement of each. In the first of Owen's war poems, "Exposure," there is only a hint of his approaching change in attitude, but it shows that he had begun to discern

certain incongruities in the usual justifications put forth for the war. The concept expressed in these following lines from that poem appear to be quite conventional; the sacrifice of one's life for the preservation of the homeland is charged with religious significance:

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
Nor ever 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.

The illusion presented in these lines is, however, shattered by the very tone of the poem; it is quite still and very quiet, and it portrays a sensitivity which is acutely aware of death's presence. It is almost as if the men are lying quiet and still, waiting only for death's inevitable approach. Evident at no point in the poem is there the sense of triumph and fulfillment which usually accompanies events or actions taken--as these are suggested to be--in a religious sense. Echoing throughout the poem and dispelling any notion that the soldier is somehow the noble instrument of any god's will, that he is fulfilling any meaningful purpose, are such lines as: "But nothing happens" and "What are we doing here?" The sentiments, then, expressed in the above passage are but the pitiful, searching reflections of soldiers about to face death, hoping against hope to find some consolation, desiring that their sacrifice

answer is that it makes no difference at all, for as Owen says, such prayers would be but "mockeries now for them." They have need of "no prayers nor bells/Nor any voice of mourning. . . ." Certainly, their passing calls for the necessary incantations; but in this case, it becomes a very special type of ritual, relevant to the soldier's situation in a way Christianity has ceased to be. The sounds appropriately heard in their honor are:

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

Two of Owen's later works, "At a Calvary near the Ancre" and "Le Christienisme," continue and greatly extend this same theme. If in the earlier poems he voiced questioning concerns about his faith and the role of the church, he writes ". . . in these last two late lyrics. . . with the casual bitterness of a man whose doubts have settled into convictions."³⁹ In "Calvary," for instance, Owen again concentrates upon the close similarities between the soldier and Christ, suggesting that they have been drawn together and united through common suffering:

In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him.

Once the association is made, however, Owen immediately

³⁹Welland, p. 202.

extends the theme of the poem and develops it into one of his most caustic criticisms of the church and, particularly its officialdom. He implies that just as Christ was condemned and crucified by the religious leaders of his time so has the modern soldier been betrayed and sacrificed by the church's continued support of the war. The principal implication of this poem is that the soldier--through suffering himself and viewing the pain of others with compassion and pity--has come closer to the Christian ideal than those who are, supposedly, its chief defenders:

The scribes on all the people shove
And brawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

In "Le Christienisme" he goes even further and pictures the total collapse of institutionalized Christianity:

So the church Christ was hit and buried
Under its rubbish and its rubble.

The church had not met--he felt quite certain--its moral obligation to vigorously oppose the war, and as a result of this failure, the war itself destroyed any relevance which the church may have had to modern man and his world. The church and what it had come to stand for lie buried under the rubble of the conflict just as any other ruin.

Owen's presentation of the soldier as a Christ-like figure and his concentration upon the growing disintegration of the church as a viable force in the modern world

are not at all extraneous to his basic purpose manifesting with compassion and pity the tragic suffering wrought by war. Actually, in view of his aim, what would have been a more obvious way to convey his message; what vehicle would have provided a more familiar context for the reading public? Through Owen's poetry, a society founded upon the principles of Christianity has been accused, and virtually convicted, of having betrayed and sacrificed its young men to a vague and less than ideal end. And, once again, it should be pointed out that by making the analogy between Christ and the common soldier, Owen did not romanticize the men who died in battle. There are no connotations of beauty, or glory, or rightness in what he pictured; but he revealed, instead, the horror of the sacrifice, the suffering, and the agony.

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