

AN EXAMINATION OF THE WAR POETRY OF WILFRED OWEN

by 45

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B. A., Kansas State University, 1966

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1969

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1969
P37

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I. Introduction

Is a minor poet to be held at fault because he is not major? Or should he be appreciated for what he gave, rather than depreciated for what he didn't give? Minor poets are often unfairly criticized for not doing as much as Shakespeare, for instance, rather than given proper credit for whatever meaningful experiences they give to their readers. For many people, being a minor anything is almost the same as having a stigma attached to one's name. Wilfred Owen may have been treated more unfairly than most. (Owen? Didn't he write a couple of fairly good war poems? Didn't write anything else, though, and his view of the average fighting man was highly romanticized.....) Bearing all this in mind, I would like to discuss what I like about Owen's poetry, and what makes it a meaningful experience. The most significant things to discuss from this viewpoint are Owen's use of half-rhyme, his manipulation of sound, his imagery, and his conclusions about war and about the nature of man.

II. Matters of Technique

A discussion of half-rhyme properly belongs in the same category with manipulation of sound. I have made of it a separate category because it is "a special case." It is considered by most critics to be Owen's contribution to English prosody. D. S. R. Welland, in his critical study of Owen's poetry, leaves little to be said about Owen's half-rhyme. He prefaces his discussion by

saying that "there is no magic in half-rhyme which makes it invariably superior to pure rhyme nor does it necessarily offer a release from the constriction of pure rhyme."¹ He goes on to say, however, that "the uniqueness and importance of Owen's peculiar use of half-rhyme remains inescapable; he gains far more than he loses by it."² Welland then gives his analysis of the contribution Owen's use of half-rhyme makes to his poetry.

Half-rhyme is right for this poetry because its note of haunting uneasiness, of frustration and melancholy, accords perfectly with the theme and the mood.³

...Owen deliberately chooses his vowels so that there is almost invariably a fall from a high-pitched to a low-pitched one....

There can be little dispute that this arrangement is deliberate, or that it does contribute to the dominant note of hopelessness that swells in these poems.⁴

One thing Welland doesn't mention is Owen's delight in the manipulation of sound. From A. S. Paton we learn that, from childhood, Owen was interested in words just as words.⁵ This interest extends to vowels and consonants, as well as half-rhyme, and the reader can have almost as much pleasure watching these things at work as Owen did arranging them. In "From My Diary, July 1914" we can see him consciously playing with words.

¹ D. S. R. Welland, Wilfred Owen A Critical Study, (London, 1960), p. 117.

² Ibid., p. 118.

³ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴ Ibid., p. 120.

⁵ A. S. Paton, "Wilfred Owen -- His Childhood in Birkenhead," A Tribute to Wilfred Owen, compiled by T. J. Walsh, p. 7.

Leaves
 Murmuring by myriads in the shimmering trees.
 Lives
 Wakening with wonder in the Pyrenees.
 Birds
 Cheerily chirping in the early day. 5
 Bards
 Singing of summer, scything thro' the hay.
 Bees
 Shaking the heavy dews from bloom and frond. 10
 Boys
 Bursting the surface of the ebony pond....

Although this cannot be considered one of Owen's major poems, or even a war poem, it is interesting in terms of the many techniques in sound at work in it. It not only has perfect rhyme, but also is "the earliest finished example of Owen's use of consonantal rhyming." ⁶ Manipulation of vowels and consonants is also evident, the most obvious being the use of alliteration. In line 2, Owen uses vowels preceded by "m's" and followed by "r's" to help create the sound of murmuring in accord with the sense. In line 8, the line "sings" through the use of continuous consonants such as "s," "ng," "n," and "th." Similarly in line 12, such consonants as "b," "st," and "p" help create the illusion of bursting. I should perhaps mention here that, of course, vowel and consonant sounds carry no meaning by themselves. They can take on meaning according to the meaning of the words they appear in and can underscore that meaning.

In his better poems, Owen manages the same techniques in such a manner that they seldom call attention to themselves, which would detract from the poem, but instead operate almost sub-

⁶ C. Day Lewis, editor, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, (London, 1963), p. 117.

consciously, adding much to the over-all effectiveness and impact of the poem. For just one example, consider the first two stanzas of the poem "Exposure."

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that
 knife us...
 Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...
 Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...
 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.
 Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
 Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
 What are we doing here?

The consonants "s," "st," "dz," and "v" in line 1 can all be said by barely opening the mouth; they all have something of the hissing element to them. In addition, the vowels in "iced," "east," and "knife" are front vowels which require a relatively "narrow" position of the mouth. The consonants and vowels together amplify the illusion of kniving. In line 3, the long "ow" and "oo" of "Low, drooping flares" help create the impression of seeing such flares. The "s's" in line 5 definitely give the effect of whispering. The hard "g's" in "mad gusts tugging" require enough effort in pronunciation to help create the actual feeling of tugging. The consonants and vowel of the first syllable of "twitching" act in the same way. Line 8 is particularly effective. Not only do the "n's" "m," and "bl" make the line sound like rumbling gunnery, but also the pauses after "northward" and "incessantly" underscore the idea of "flickering." One could also note here the use of half-rhyme, and see that it does indeed, as Welland says, involve a fall from a higher-pitched to a lower-pitched vowel. In such a poem as this, one is not overly aware of the poet working with

words, but aware of the whole poem, in which the credit for a large share of the impact goes to the handling of sound.

I want next to discuss Owen's imagery, of which there are five major categories; personification of weapons, infernal imagery, religious imagery, blood imagery, and natural imagery.

In his treatment of weapons, Owen makes it seem as if the weapons have minds of their own, as if there weren't any human beings back of them operating them. This may well have been a deliberate attempt to divorce the fighting man from the weapon that does the killing, because Owen clearly feels, as we shall see later, that the guilt does not belong to the soldiers of either side. In "The Last Laugh" Owen is once again consciously playing with words, although for a serious purpose.

'O Jesus Christ! I'm hit,' he said; and died.
Whether he vainly cursed, or prayed indeed,
The Bullets chirped -- In vain! vain! vain!
Machine-guns chuckled, -- Tut-tut! Tut-tut!
And the Big Gun guffawed.

Another sighed, -- 'O Mother, mother! Dad!
Then smiled, at nothing, childlike, being dead.
And the lofty Shrapnel-cloud
Leisurely gestured, -- Fool!
And the falling splinters tittered.

'My Love!' one moaned. Love-languid seemed his mood,
Till, slowly lowered, his whole face kissed the mud.
And the Bayonets' long teeth grinned;
Rabbles of Shells hooted and groaned;
And the gas hissed.

The weapons are characterized as cold and malicious. They deride human feeling. In "Bugles Sang," which is not complete, Owen speaks of "The monstrous anger of our taciturn guns. / The majesty of the insults of their mouths." Some of this same feeling is to be found in "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.
 No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, --
 The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;...

The traditional prayers of the Christian religion are mockeries, and the sound of the weapons, ironically, comes out as a more honest hymn of mourning for the young men killed in battle. "Arms and the Boy" contains Owen's most dramatic use of the personification of weapons.

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
 How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
 Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
 And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads
 Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
 Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
 Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
 There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
 And God will grow no talons at his heels,
 Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

Once again the soldier, with emphasis on his youth, is divorced from the weapons he must use, and the weapons possess the savage qualities foreign to the boy.

The transition from the discussion of weapons to discussion of infernal imagery is an easy one to make, since it is the weapons that create the hellish atmosphere of the battlefield, a fact that more than one poet has made use of. In "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" there are these lines: "With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell, / Whose world is but the trembling of a flare, / And heaven but as the highway for a shell,..." And in "Spring

· Offensive:"

Of them who running on that last high place
Leapt to swift unseen bullets, or went up
On the hot blast and fury of hell's upsurge,
Or plunged and fell away past this world's verge,
Some say God caught them even before they fell.

...The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,
And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames
With superhuman inhumanities,...

The dug-outs also form part of Owen's vision of Hell. The men in a dug-out in "Fragment: Cramped in that Funnelled Hole" are described as follows:

They were in one of many mouths of Hell
Not seen of seers in visions; only felt
As teeth of traps; when bones and the dead are smelt
Under the mud where long ago they fell
Mixed with the sour sharp odour of the shell.

"Strange Meeting" contains Owen's most famous image of Hell. In this poem, the speaker dreams or imagines "that out of battle I escaped / Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped / Through granites which titanic wars had groined." One of the "encumbered sleepers" springs up at his approach, "And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, / By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell." This Hell is strangely suggestive of a dug-out. The occupants are the young men who died in battle and the promise of whose lives has been wasted or cut off.

In "Mental Cases" we have still another image of Hell, the mental ward of a hospital.

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
...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....

Note the striking line, "Memory fingers in their hair of murders." These men can't forget the hell of the battlefield, the horrors they saw.

Does Owen's religious imagery offer any consolation for or mitigation of this vision of Hell? We shall see that, if anything, it only makes Hell worse by adding a bitter note of its own. It is well known that even before Owen went to war he had lost his religion, in the institutional sense. He makes a separation between the spirit of God and the spirit of Christ. Simply speaking, he is "for" Christ and "against" God. God, to Owen, is the stern, unloving, unmerciful old man. The Church seems to belong with God and not with Christ, whose message it has perverted. We have already seen how, in "Anthem for Doomed Youth," the prayers and bells of the Church are considered mockeries. "At a Calvary Near the Ancre" speaks of the denial of Christ by his disciples and the priests and His alliance with the soldiers.

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the soldiers bear with Him.

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

"Le Christianisme" speaks of the Church being destroyed by Hell in terms of a bombed church. "In cellars, packed-up saints lie serried, / Well out of hearing of our trouble." These lines show the uselessness of the Church. "Soldier's Dream" clearly shows who is on what side. The narrator dreams that Christ fixed all the wea-

pons on both sides so they wouldn't work. "But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael; / And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs." Michael, remember, is the warlike angel.

Welland says that Owen uses blood as an image of guilt and gives the men in "Mental Cases" as one of his examples.⁷ I don't agree with this conclusion; I think blood is the image of horror and of the brotherhood born out of that horror. Consider first the example of "Mental Cases." There is nothing in the poem to indicate that these men have to be suffering specifically from guilt, but they are certainly suffering from the memory of the horrors they have seen and that have been perpetrated on them.

...Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh....
-- Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

Nowhere does Owen present a soldier feeling guilt for what he has had to do. The guilt, as we shall see later, lies with the politicians and officials who have sent them here, the ones who have lied to the young men about the glories of war while they stay safe at home. Guilt could be part of the horror, it is true, but Owen appears to dissociate the soldier from this feeling simply by not presenting it. Whether this was an intentional omission or just something that didn't occur to him is hard to say.

The soldiers are brothers by the blood that all have shed that has mingled with the soil. In "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" Owen

⁷ Welland, p. 63.

speaks of fellowships and love as being,

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.

There is both a negative and a positive side to Owen's imagery drawn from nature. Sometimes nature is kind to the soldier and sometimes hostile. It is natural for one to consider the possibility of a thematic tie-in that would make this dual role of nature part of a systematic or logical pattern, but I doubt that such a tie-in exists. It just happens that way, because Nature partakes of both attitudes.

Consider the blood mingling with the soil that I mentioned earlier. Owen is not the only one to be aware of the fact that soldiers killed and wounded in battle act as fertilizer, as it were, for the soil. Most often this is a passive thing, as in "1914." "But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need / Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed." "The Kind Ghosts" had this stanza:

She dreams of golden gardens and sweet glooms,
Not marvelling why her roses never fall
Nor what red mouths were torn to make their blooms.

Nature in these examples seems to be a passive agent. But in "Spring Offensive," "...the whole sky burned / With fury against them; earth set sudden cups / In thousands for their blood;..."

Weaponry is frequently described in terms of natural imagery, as in "Asleep," for example. "Above these clouds, these rains, these sleet of lead, / And these winds' scimitars;..." It is the artillery and so forth that make the sky burn with fury against the soldiers in "Spring Offensive." Conversely, nature is described in warlike terms in "Exposure."

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 gray,
 But nothing happens....

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, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,
 Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp....

The weather itself, as we all know, is often an enemy of the soldier.

But nature has its friendly side too. In "Spring Offensive" the same nature that was previously presented as being hostile is sympathetic earlier in the poem.

...And the far valley behind, where the buttercup
 Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,
 Where even the little brambles would not yield,
 But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;...

Presumably, it is war that makes the difference. "Futility" presents another picture of benevolent Nature.

Move him into the sun --
 Gently its touch awoke him once,
 At home, whispering of fields unsown.
 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.

In "A Terre" it seems that nature is capable of receiving the soldier's dead body in a friendly fashion.

Friend, be very sure
 I shall be better off with plants that share
 More peaceably the meadow and the shower.
 Soft rains will touch me, -- as they could touch once,
 And nothing but the sun shall make me ware.

Nature seems to be the only one who can make anything good come

of all the slaughter, but even this is only dim consolation.

III. Subject Matter

Many men have had many things to say about war. Some have praised the glory of war, and others have lamented the tragedy of war. No one has lamented more eloquently than Wilfred Owen. His voice is the voice of experience. He was an officer in World War I, and was in the midst of the fighting. His sensitive nature could not fail to react in the face of this overwhelming human suffering, and his war poetry is the result.

Owen was a pacifist. In one of his surviving letters, he explains his position:

"Already I have comprehended a light which never will 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 skillfully and successfully indeed.... And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?"⁸

In addition to his religious opinions, his military experiences contributed to his pacifism. The following section from another of his letters seems to sum up in general his experiences on the battlefield:

"...everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night. -- and

⁸ Edmund Blunden, "Memoir," The Poems of Wilfred Owen (London, 1955), p. 25.

a week later to come back and find them still sitting there in motionless groups, that is what saps the 'soldierly spirit'."9

Something else that contributed to his pacifism was his friendship with the French poet Laurent Tailhade, whom he met while in Bordeaux. M. Tailhade was a confirmed pacifist, and had considerable influence on Owen.¹⁰ In his introduction to The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, C. Day Lewis sums up the conflict that Owen must have felt:

He had come to see the war as absolutely evil in the agonies and senseless waste 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 of 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

His imagery is, quite appropriately, that of the battlefield -- weapons, bodies, blood, barbed wire, and the rest. He also, as we have seen, makes quite extensive use of nature, which to him was the one thing that always continued where it left off with a renewed freshness. This coming together of battleground and nature makes quite an effective combination. Largely through the means of his striking and original imagery and unusual choice of words, Owen brings vividly to mind what he calls the "pity of war" -- what it's like on the battlefield, the sadness of the countless

9 Ibid., p. 20.

10 Welland, p. 89.

11 Lewis, p. 27.

lives lost, particularly the young lives, some of the effects of war on those who live through it, and the mistaken idea that war is glorious.

In telling what it's like on the battlefield, Owen does two things. He gives a physical description of the battlefield, and tells how it feels to be "out there." Those who have never experienced action in wartime can in some measure experience it through Owen's poetry. To those who have been through it, the poetry would be even more meaningful. The lines already quoted from "Exposure" call to mind war stories seen in moving pictures and on television shows, with the traditional rumbling gunnery and the rain. Owen carries this a step further with his dawn imagery, making an arresting comparison with an army. One can see the massed storm clouds advancing at dawn like troops and sense the dreariness the soldiers must have felt. The following lines from "Dulce et Decorum Est" are particularly worth noticing:

...Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod...

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.

Here one can see something of the horror and awfulness. The compound "blood-shod" is very striking and much more effective than if Owen had simply said "with bloody feet" or something similar. Also striking is Owen's choice of the word "ecstasy." The ordinary individual uses this word to describe some joyous feeling. Its use in this context serves to heighten the tension.

When considering the pity of war, one naturally thinks first

of the enormous human waste. It is appalling and sad, and Owen makes one see and feel that this is so. Sometimes he considers men individually, and sometimes en masse. The individual treatments are to be found in such poems as "Asleep," "The Sentry," and "S. I. W." Each man is, of course, himself, but one senses that he also stands for scores more like him. There is no particularizing or character development. The following lines from "Greater Love" give one a sense of numbers:

Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead...

Heart, you were never hot,
Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;

The idea of stones and bullets, both of which must have abounded beyond counting, make one draw a kind of sub-conscious analogy to the many killed by the war. One phrase from "Insensibility" is particularly striking: "...the alleys cobbled with their brothers." Such a line with its vivid portrayal of numbers stays in the memory. One cannot resist thinking of the sea of white tombstones in the cemetery for the war dead in France.

Owen pays particular attention to the death of young men, to youth cut down in all its freshness and promise. Welland says about this theme,

...for 'Strange Meeting' carries its own conviction of the irreparable loss to humanity of 'us poor lads / Lost in the ground' -- irreparable not for what they were but for what they would have been, not for what they gave but for what they would have given.¹²

Apparently this statement implies that death is not so tragic for

¹² Welland, p. 103.

older men who have had more of a chance to realize their potentials. The greater share of the men who did the actual fighting were probably of this young age group. In fact, Owen seems to have the feeling that it is the old men who sit safe at home and send the young ones out to die. "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" centers around the Old Testament story of Abram and his son Isaac. Owen takes this story and changes the ending.

...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.

The feeling in this instance is really quite bitter. In "Arms and the Boy," the weapons are presented as possessing the malice and "hunger of blood." The boy, who was meant for other purposes, is given the weapons and trained to use them. This action is entirely involuntary on his part. It is interesting to notice in the second stanza a hint that the sympathy includes both sides in the conflict. Lads are operating weapons to be used on other lads much like themselves.

As with any war, there are always the survivors. These are the ones who have to live with the effects of war. The effects spoken of in this sense are those which pertain to the individual fighting man, and not to the larger outcomes. In "Insensibility," Owen deals with those men who reach the point where they no longer feel anything. They are like robots that fight and kill but have no feeling about the suffering and slaughter that is going on around them. At first, Owen seems to think that they are better off this way, but then throws a different light on the situation

in the last stanza.

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,
That they should be as stones...
By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man.

Some men are not able to shut out the horrors of war at all and are left perhaps permanently marked by the experience. Owen poignantly describes this in "Mental Cases."

Another aspect of the effects of war is that of the soldier who is maimed in some way -- by the loss of a leg, an arm, an eye, and so on. Some are more seriously maimed than others. Everyone has read magazine features, generally accompanied with photographs, about men who have surmounted the difficulties of losing both arms or both legs and are now leading happy, fairly normal lives. Such articles seldom give an accurate "inside view" of how it really feels to be in this situation or its full impact. In "Disabled," Owen describes the feelings of a very young man who has lost both legs in the war. All he thought of before he ran away (he was under age) to enlist was the glory and the glamour. The fact that he might be so badly wounded had never entered his head. Now the "old times, before he threw away his knees" have been drastically changed.

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.
To-night 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?

Many men can share in the opinions and emotions brought out in the previous discussion and still praise war on the basis of

the "higher" view, the noble cause. Owen is noticeably without praise of war. This is because he considers it from the viewpoint of the millions of individuals who did the fighting. The issues of World War I seem not to concern him as being very important. There is almost no mention of the "they died for a noble cause" theme that is so predominant in books, speeches, and moving pictures. This line from "S. I. W." seems to sum up his opinions about this: "At the pleasure of this world's Powers who'd run amok." In "Disabled" the glory of war is a false glory, a glamorous dream. In "Dulce et Decorum Est" Owen speaks of a man dying from gas poisoning and tells the reader that if he could see this man's suffering and agony,

My friend, 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.

"Futility" presents an anguished questioning. The poet is speaking of the sun and says,

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?
-- Oh, what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

"Strange Meeting" is a kind of final summation of "the pity of war." It is this poem that the phrase comes from. This is considered by most people to be Owen's major poem. At first the scene seems to be set in a dug-out, but when the speaker meets the figure with the "dead smile," he realizes that he is in Hell. His "strange friend" tells him what he thinks is the "cause to mourn."

He grieves for what he might have done if he had lived. He says that men will probably go on fighting, and doesn't seem to hold out any hope that they will ever stop once and for all. He says, "I would have poured my spirit without stint / But not through wounds; not on the cess of war." One feels that he thinks he has died for nothing. Then, creating a strange and poignant twist, he identifies himself as one of the enemy that the speaker killed the day before. Here appears again Owen's idea of the kinship of the two sides. Owen achieves this especially by having his opinions come from the mouth of the enemy.

There is a conspicuous absence from Owen's war poetry of the grief of those left at home. He does not talk of those who lost sons, husbands, and / or brothers. There is no concern for the sorrows of the families and sweethearts who wait, often in vain, for the return of their loved ones. C. Day Lewis explains this by saying,

...how great was the gulf between the fighting man and the civilian at home, and between the front-line soldier and the brass-hat. 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 willfully ignorant of its realities.¹³

Lewis also says that Owen had no pity for women who had lost loved ones. He apparently didn't consider them to be worthy of the men.¹⁴ On the rare occasions when he does mention these women, it is not with pity for them but with emphasis on the men who were killed,

¹³ Lewis, p. 22.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

as in the conclusion to "Anthem for Doomed Youth." Owen can be criticized for his uncharitable point of view, although it is easy to understand why he felt the way he did.

IV. Analysis of One Poem as a Whole

It is appropriate at this point to consider one poem as a whole to see how the element presented somewhat in isolation work together. This will, of course, involve a certain amount of repetition, but this is unavoidable. The poem selected shows elements of Owen's poetry that I have not discussed as well as many I have. Hopefully, this will help round out the picture of Owen as poet. The poem is "Futility."

Move him into the sun --
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
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.

5

Think how it wakes the seeds, --
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides, 10
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?

This is a sonnet, divided into two stanzas of seven lines each rather than the conventional octave and sestet. Both half-rhyme and perfect rhyme are used here, the perfect rhyme at the end of each stanza serving to make the ending stronger. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this poem is the different tone of the two stanzas. In the first stanza the feeling is rather sad and gentle, while the second stanza contains a greater intensity of feeling, mounting to despair. The second stanza has more strong

accents, plus more and stronger pauses to slow it down, which lends a feeling of effort, corresponding both with the feeling of being about to give up and the idea of toil in line 13. Compare lines 4 and 11 with regard to this. (4) "Always it wóke him, éven in France," (11) "Full-nerved -- still wàrm -- too hàrd to stír?" The first stanza is slow also but much smoother, with more long vowels and continuing consonants.

The image of the sun is central. In the first stanza, the sun is kind and benevolent, but in the second stanza there is the additional, bitter reference to "fatuous sunbeams." The sun is foolish for having gone to all this trouble. The repetition of "awoke" and "once" in line 2 in "Woke, once," in line 9 helps to unify the thoughts of the two stanzas. All of this demonstrates the theme of futility -- why live at all if it's going to end like this? Man would have been just as well off if he'd never lived.

V. Conclusion

Owen's poetry is appropriate not only for World War I, but for all wars. It is not the English soldier especially, but it could be any soldier. His poetry has a certain ununiversality about it. It is worth mentioning again the fact that he took the personal, rather than the larger, view of armed conflict. The vast human waste loomed much larger in his mind than the issues. To quote from Welland again,

The war has not merely interrupted the march of mankind; it has changed its whole direction and done incalculable and irreparable damage. It is this terrible and prophetic vision of a dying world embodied in this and other poems that gives Owen's work abiding relevance, but what he mourns is not merely the men themselves. Not only 'the old Happiness' but the potentialities offered by the

past are unreturning...¹⁵

The universality of Owen's poetry doesn't stop with the nature of war. It also says something about the nature of man. It's easy enough to say that Owen's view is a narrow one, that he only presented one side of the picture, but this was because he felt that his side was the most important one, the one that had been kept in the background too long. What could be more universal than the disillusionment of the young person whose experience tells him that the platitudes he was raised with are not so? Not all adults deceive young people or raise them on myths, but far too many do. Perhaps Owen is too hard on the older generation, but he was a young man himself, writing about his own betrayal (as he saw it) as well as that of others. If he had lived long enough to cool off a little, maybe he would have been able to spare a little sympathy and understanding for those he is so bitter about in his poetry.

Owen doesn't seem to think that man will ever change in his propensity for war and there are many, particularly in our time with wars in Vietnam, China, and other places, who would agree with him. War itself, then, would seem to be part of the nature of man. If every man doesn't belong to this category, there are at least enough men in every generation to create wars which will involve the rest of us in one way or another, sooner or later. I say this particularly for the benefit of those who say that war is too topical a subject for truly great poetry.

¹⁵ Welland, p. 102.

It should be mentioned that Owen is not only a war poet, although his best and most famous poetry stems from the war. It is certain that, if he had lived, he would have found additional concerns for his poetry. There are faults in Owen's poems, of course, and critics are ever eager to point out such things. However, I would imagine that any young poet learning his craft is bound to make a lot of mistakes, and we must remember that Owen was a young poet. Although the war seems to have been at least partially responsible for his maturation as a poet, there is no reason not to expect that his progress would have continued beyond the war period. Even at his young age, he was handling his medium much better than many who aspire to be poets ever do. Instead of criticizing Owen for not doing more, we should regret that one who promised so much was killed, like the soldiers in his poems, and that we will never know what we have lost.

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Note: All poems were quoted from C. Day Lewis's 1963 edition.

AN EXAMINATION OF THE WAR POETRY OF WILFRED OWEN

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1969

MASTER'S REPORT ABSTRACT:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE WAR POETRY OF WILFRED OWEN

This report is a somewhat subjective account of those elements in the war poetry of Wilfred Owen that contribute most to making it a meaningful experience. Owen belongs to that group of English poets called "minor." There is a possibility that he might have developed into a major poet had he not been killed in World War I. Whether Owen is major or minor, this paper is interested in examining and praising rather than damning. This is also an attempt to show that Owen's war poetry is much more than occasional verse stemming from World War I, that it has a certain amount of universality.

There is first a discussion of Owen's use of half-rhyme. This discussion is limited mostly to presenting what D. S. R. Welland says about Owen's half-rhyme, since Welland's study of it is so complete it leaves little else to be said.

The discussion of half-rhyme passes into Owen's manipulation of sound in general. Owen was very much aware of vowels, consonants, and caesuras and how these can be used as a support to and dramatization of the meaning of the words.

Owen's imagery has much of the conventional imagery of the battlefield, but he adds his own touches. Five major categories are discussed: personification of weapons, infernal imagery, religious imagery, blood imagery, and natural imagery. Each category adds something to Owen's over-all conclusions about war.

These conclusions about war form the most important section of the paper. They can be summed up in Owen's own phrase, "the pity of war." Owen shows what it's like on the battlefield and dwells on the enormous human waste, particularly the young lives cut off before they've had a chance to realize their potentials. Owen is also bitter about the older generation that stays safe at home and sends the young men off to die steeped in the myth of what a glorious thing war is. To Owen the issues mean nothing in the face of the deaths of the young men of both sides.

The universality of Owen's poetry is seen in two ways. First, much of what he says may be applied not only to World War I, but to all wars. Second, in talking about war he also talks about the nature of man, particularly man's unfortunate propensity for war and the disillusionment of most young people who discover that some principle they've grown up with is a myth.

The paper closes by saying that perhaps we should concentrate not on showing Owen's defects, many of which may have had to do with the fact that he was still a young poet, but on regretting that one who promised so much for the future was not able to realize it.