

WILFRED OWEN SCHOLARSHIP: 1919-1975

by

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Wilfred Owen's body of work is quite small and the best of his poems were written within a brief period of approximately two years. Yet his work has attracted attention from the beginning, and the extent of his influence has remained a subject of critical debate. Although Owen is usually considered to have status only as a war poet, critical and scholarly interest in his work, while never overwhelming, has increased steadily over the years.

It is my purpose in these pages to trace the progress of that interest from its beginnings to the present--from the earliest reviews of his poems in 1919 to the very recent biography by Jon Stallworthy. Since my aim is, in part, to illustrate the development of trends in Owen criticism, I have arranged the material chronologically, summarizing the main critical concerns--as well as the new critical and biographical contributions--of each decade.

At the outset, however, it will be well to name the principal resources of a student of Owen, most of them only rather recently available. There is now, besides a reliable edition of the poems, a full bibliography of secondary materials, a reliable critical introduction, and an admirable biography that sums up what is known of the man.

The biography is Jon Stallworthy's Wilfred Owen (1974[#43]).¹ Before Stallworthy's there were two biographical sources available: Edmund Blunden's "Memoir" [#3] and Harold Owen's three-volume work, Journey from Obscurity [#35]. But the first was incomplete and the second lacked the needed objectivity. Stallworthy draws extensively on Harold Owen's chronicle

¹See Bibliography, Item 43. All subsequent works on Owen are listed in the Bibliography by number, and cited by those numbers in the text: e.g. [#43].

for his characterization of Wilfred as a child and a young soldier, but goes beyond it in many ways, notably in his description of Owen's stay at Craiglockhart War Hospital (where the poet first met Sassoon). Here, he is able to draw on Sassoon's memoirs and on Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters [#5] to provide a more thorough account than is available elsewhere.

Although there was no thorough biography until 1974, the first full-length critical study of Owen's work appeared quite a bit earlier: D.S.R. Welland in 1960 published Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study [#48]. Welland discusses Owen's early ideas on poetry, and examines the impact war had on his development. Neither biographer nor critic encroaches on the other's territory: Stallworthy seldom analyzes the individual poems, and Welland does not attempt biography. Stallworthy's and Welland's books are the most notable of all the secondary material on Owen.

The fullest bibliography of works on Owen is William White's Wilfred Owen (1893-1918): A Bibliography (1967[#1]). In 1970 (The Serif [#2]) White updated his bibliography of poems, translations, editions, biography, criticism, and reviews. The entry for Owen in The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature (Vol. 4, 1972) is more selective.

The poems themselves are available in three editions: Sassoon's, Edmund Blunden's, and (currently the standard) C. Day Lewis's. The various editors have faced numerous difficulties because many of the poems are fragmentary or unrevised, and because only four of them were published before Owen was killed in battle on 4 November 1918. An additional seven were anthologized by Dame Edith Sitwell in Wheels, 1919: Fourth Cycle. It was Sitwell who largely prepared the first edition of Poems (1920[#6]). Siegfried Sassoon wrote an introduction to the volume, and he has usually

been credited with the editorship. Sitwell's greater role in preparing the edition was pointed out by Joseph Cohen ("Wilfred Owen: Fresher Fields than Flanders," [#14]) in 1964. Cohen details the deficiencies of this text, as well as those of Blunden's 1931 edition, The Poems of Wilfred Owen [#3], which included his well-known "Memoir," nine pages of notes on revisions and variants, and some poems not previously published.

C. Day Lewis's edition, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen (1963 [#4]), is more thorough in both notes and variants. Besides including many new poems, this now standard edition indicates the locations of the available manuscripts (most in the British Museum), and incorporates relevant material from Owen's correspondence to approximate the composition dates of some of the poems. Another helpful feature of this edition is its arrangement: part one brings together the war poems; part two groups the fragments and poems on other subjects; part three consists of selected juvenilia.

I

Owen's poems did not have to wait long for critical recognition. Sitwell's Wheels volume was reviewed by J. Middleton Murry in the Athenaeum in 1919. He describes "Strange Meeting" as the "most magnificent expression of the emotional significance of the war that has yet been achieved by English poetry" [#34,p.147]. Murry focuses on two aspects of Owen's poetry: his imitation of Keats, and his "monosyllabic assonances." Owen's rhyme technique, which Murry calls "the discovery of genius" [#34,p.147], became a primary topic for other early Owen critics.

With the publication of the first edition of Owen's poems, additional reviews appeared. Reviewers for the Times Literary Supplement, although

impressed by "Strange Meeting," were somewhat hesitant to praise Owen's technique. A review of 16 December 1920 includes this comment: "A curious vagary of technique may be noted in the writer's habit . . . [of using] imperfect rhymes" [#7]. Another TLS reviewer (6 January 1921) calls attention to the "peculiar type of rhyme" [#8] which, he believes, Owen uses deftly to suit his purpose.

Besides the interest in Owen's rhyming, there appeared a natural tendency in early criticism (one which continues even today) to compare Owen with the other war poets of his generation, especially Brooke and Sassoon. H. P. Collins, writing in 1925, devotes at least the first half of his chapter "The War and Wilfred Owen" [#17] to discussion of Brooke. Then, primarily as a mode of transition--or so it seems, since he does not attempt a point by point comparison or contrast--he notices the striking differences in the two poets' techniques. Collins finishes off his chapter with insightful remarks on Owen's diction.

In addition to Collins's work there are two short essays in which Owen and Brooke are compared. In "The Poetry of Wilfred Owen" [#20] Ifan Kyrle Fletcher says the two poets differ in that Brooke is continually striving for the well-turned phrase, whereas Owen consciously avoids it. Fletcher goes on to assert that Owen's greater strength lies primarily in his emotional depth and skill in presenting recollected emotional experiences. In "A War Debt That Can Never Be Honoured" C. Henry Warren says, "Owen in fact is Rupert Brooke grown up" [#46,p.110]. He believes Owen is indebted to Brooke and is surprised that the debt has not been recognized; but he neglects to illustrate the nature or extent of the alleged influence.

During the next decade, comparison of Owen and his mentor Siegfried Sassoon--whose name has been frequently linked with Owen's since his edition

of Owen's Poems--continues to be a topic of critical discussion. In The Criterion (1931) I. M. Parsons asserts that Owen's "sensibility is finer and his imagination richer than Sassoon's" [#36,p.659]. Parsons' brief comparison of the two poets distinguishes between Sassoon's satire and Owen's "sublime indignation." The superiority of Owen's verse over that of Sassoon is stressed also by David Daiches, who argues--quoting passages from both poets--that Owen's emotion is more genuine and controlled [#18]. Whereas Sassoon's vision is sometimes distorted by anger or despair, Owen's, Daiches says, is clear and penetrating. Almost the only critic for whom the comparison of these two poets is not decisively to Owen's advantage is Edmund Blunden, who allows Sassoon at least a sort of equality: "He [Owen] was, apart from Mr. Sassoon, the greatest of the English war poets" [#3,p.39].

Comparison of Owen and Sassoon is only one of the points dealt with by Blunden, and other critics, during the thirties. Blunden's "Memoir" contributes biographical information chiefly, but also touches on Owen's technique and influence. Having access to Owen's letters, from which he quotes extensively, Blunden provides information about Owen's life generally unavailable up to that time. The memoir also contains personal remembrances by two people--one a fellow officer--who knew Owen. In language which recalls Murry's earlier praise, Blunden describes the effect of Owen's pararhyme: "again and again by means of it he creates remoteness, darkness, emptiness, shock, echo, the last word" [#3,p.29]. With regard to Owen's influence on the technique of later poets, Blunden says that "imitators have been few" [#3,p.29]. He explains why this is so: "Only an innate, unconventional command over language, and a rich and loving vocabulary--in short, only a genius for poetry could for long work in that uncommon medium" [#3,p.29].

Besides Blunden, C. Day Lewis and David Daiches during the thirties expressed views on the extent of Owen's influence; their opinions differ. For example, in A Hope for Poetry [#30,p.2] C. Day Lewis ranks Owen with G. M. Hopkins and T. S. Eliot as the "immediate ancestors" of post-war poetry. Day Lewis describes the affinity post-war poets felt with Owen:

Owen commends himself to post-war poets largely because they feel themselves to be in the same predicament; they feel the same lack of a stable background against which the dance of words may stand out plainly, the same distrust and horror of the unnatural forms into which life for the majority of people is being forced. [#30,p.15]

On the other hand, in New Literary Values [#18,p.65] David Daiches asserts that whereas modern poets have been influenced somewhat by Owen's form (his experiments with half-rhyme, for example), they have remained uninfluenced by the "content" of Owen's poetry. According to Daiches, the modern poet's experience and view of reality have been too different for him to learn much that affected his writing of poetry. Daiches' and Day Lewis's views on Owen's influence, then, seem to be in direct opposition.

One of the most comprehensive early critical studies of Owen is the article by I. M. Parsons already mentioned, "The Poems of Wilfred Owen." His focus on the pity in Owen's verse marks the beginning of a dominant trend in Owen criticism, a trend stemming from the well-known statement in Owen's Preface:

My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity. [#4,p.31]

Identifying the dominant emotion in the poetry and studying the methods by which it is expressed is Parsons' chief aim. Although he devotes most of his discussion to the methods, he says that Owen's "significance is primarily one of purpose rather than of form" [#36,p.667]. He explains how Owen's

realist method--the poet's use of his own experience to convey his reaction to war--rises out of his indignation. This indignation, "or perhaps indignation chastened and restrained by pity," Parsons says, "emerges as the dominant emotion of his verse" [#36,p.660]. The conflict between indignation and pity, according to Parsons, "is responsible for the crude, hard, astringent quality" of many of Owen's poems [#36,p.660].

After describing the emotional content, Parsons moves on to investigate Owen's technique. His discussion focuses on Owen's use of alliteration, as well as assonance and dissonance, and his rhythmical structure. He points to Owen's alliterative method as new--or at least significantly different--in that it becomes an "integral part of the emotional content" of the poems [#36,p.663]. He likens the effect of Owen's use of assonance and dissonance to that of a metaphysical conceit: "it combines an element of surprise with a subsequent sense of satisfaction or assent" [#36,p.664]. And with regard to rhythmical structure, Parsons finds the poems demonstrate two particular effects. The first he describes as the "resolution of a conflict between extreme verbal emphasis on the one hand and extreme rhythmical restraint on the other" [#36,p.664]; the second effect is exhibited when the "rhythm is caught up and held, as it were momentarily above a precipice, before it topples precipitatedly [sic] in a swift cascade of sound" [#36,p.665]. In view of the technical sophistication of Parsons' article, it is perhaps surprising that no one seems to have taken this up in subsequent criticism.

Owen's methods, asserts Parsons, account for his success in communicating his experience. Only he and Sassoon adopt the realist method; but whereas Sassoon uses it more as a mode of satire, Owen lets it express a

straightforward moral anger. Owen's methods "do not lend themselves easily to imitation" says Parsons [#36,p.666]; this comment echoes closely the view expressed by Blunden. Parsons believes "Owen neither followed nor founded any school" [#36,p.666].

The pity in Owen's poetry, which is described by Parsons as "neither maudlin sentiment nor petty self-commiseration" [#36,p.669], is described in a similar fashion four years later by Stephen Spender. In a brief chapter in The Destructive Element [#41], Spender emphasizes that pity, in the best of Owen's work, is no mere subjective emotion, but a means of transcending the subjective, the limited and merely personal. Spender links Owen's pity with the tragic pity of works like King Lear.

This stress on the importance of Owen's pity continued throughout the decade, as illustrated by J. Loiseau's article in 1939, "A Reading of Wilfred Owen's Poems" [#31]. Quoting from letters and poems, Loiseau describes how Owen was tortured by the war, and how he resolved to emphasize for his readers the horror of war. He believes that Owen's greatness rises out of his pity:

Because he so intensely felt the misery of his fellow-sufferers, he rose above mere realism, satire, propaganda, or rhetoric. [#31,p.103]

Like Spender and Parsons, Loiseau stresses that Owen's pity was an expression of his humanity; his goal was realistic, truthful presentation of the suffering all around him, not satire or bitter accusation.

The similarity of Loiseau's interpretation to that of Parsons' is evident, but there is a significant difference of opinion to be noted. Parsons focuses on the conflict in Owen between pity and indignation, whereas Loiseau emphasizes primarily the pity. An assertion like Loiseau's

"his [Owen's] greatness may truly be said to rise out of his pity" [#31,p.103] is not to be found in Parsons' article. Whereas Loiseau implies that Owen's profound pity made him a poet, Parsons believes that Owen's emotion--by itself--was not enough to create poetry. Parsons writes: "It is only because his sense of values was keen enough to temper and control his indignation, that the latter could be directed successfully into a creative channel" [#36,p.668].

Loiseau, on the other hand, makes a distinction between Owen as a poet and Owen as a realistic interpreter of the brutalities of war. Referring to Owen's Preface, he illustrates how Owen felt he had to sacrifice pure poetry to carry out his mission. Owen was, above all, asserts Loiseau, a lover of beauty and tradition: "To the end, the direct, unconventional violence--what we call the modern element--in his war-verse remained alien to him, outraged his deepest instincts and beliefs" [#31,p.108]. Thus, for Loiseau, there is an irony in Owen's fame as a war poet.

II

The value of Owen's work was recognized during the thirties with critical response ranging from attention to his pity and the methods by which he expresses it, to discussion of his own poetic growth and influence on later poets. But with the coming of the Second World War, the critics' interests shifted to seeing Owen in his wartime context, and to finding his relevance to a world again at war. Criticism of the forties--and, to a lesser extent, of the fifties as well--was dominated by these interests.

Two critics of the forties who stress the relevance of Owen's war poetry to that particular time are Patricia Ledward and Patric Dickinson.

Of the two, Ledward is more insistent regarding the benefit to be derived from reading Owen's message. She says: "This great poet and messenger can perfectly express and shape our sufferings and perhaps alleviate the dark sense of doom" [#29,p.99]. Dickinson too believes that current conditions render Owen's poems especially understandable as they detail suffering another war has made familiar [#19,p.331].

Ledward's treatment is more general than Dickinson's; essentially, her article is an introduction to Owen. She outlines his brief life and cites particular poems which illustrate characteristic attitudes and techniques. Ledward explains that Owen wanted to counteract the influence of war-glorifying platitudes. But his genius, she points out, was his skill in handling rhythm and language. Her biographical summary and brief description of Owen's work, though it contributes very little that is new, is justified, Ledward feels, because of previous neglect of Owen. And she is certain that "if at all it is during this war that Owen will take his rightful place among the great English poets" [#29,p.99].

Dickinson, like Ledward, turned to Owen because conditions called especially for a war poet; but Dickinson focuses more closely on Owen's technique. He discusses Owen's concept of pity as expressed in the fragmentary Preface to his planned volume of poetry and as illustrated in his poems. Dickinson finds something lacking: "The statement of horror in terms of its actual ingredients does not necessarily make poetry or evoke the emotion which it desires" [#19,p.328]. He is not inclined to praise Owen in the generalized glowing terms common in previous criticism. Nor does he respect Owen's slant rhyme as much as earlier critics did: "often you feel that the assonances were thought of first and the lines written to fit them,

even in his best poems" [#19,p.329]. Nevertheless, in some poems Owen was entirely successful, concludes Dickinson, and left his mark on later poets' work.

These two articles are representative of Owen criticism during the forties. Critical treatment was broad in scope with little attention to particular poems. And this was quantitatively the least productive decade.

As the next decade began, D.S.R. Welland refocused attention on Owen's half-rhyme. In his article of 1950, "Half-Rhyme in Wilfred Owen: Its Derivation and Use" [#47] (most of which was absorbed into the chapter on half-rhyme in A Critical Study), Welland describes what half-rhyme is and explains that Owen uses it in its strictest form. He points out that half-rhyme was not invented by Owen; earlier English and American poets who used it include Henry Vaughan, G. M. Hopkins, and Emily Dickinson. Welland rejects these three, however, as probable sources for Owen's use of half-rhyme. More likely as an antecedent for Owen, asserts Welland, is the work of the French poet and novelist Jules Romains. Welland believes Owen was probably introduced to Romains' work by Laurent Tailhade, who guided and influenced Owen during his two year stay in France. Welland concludes, however, that no positive source from which Owen derived his technique can be traced.

Five years after the appearance of Welland's article David Masson published "Wilfred Owen's Free Phonetic Patterns: Their Style and Function" [#32] which, while drawing on Welland's work, emphasizes patterns in Owen's phonetic devices. Following a full description of Owen's "elaborate and ritualistic" patterning [#32,p.366], Masson concludes that "these internal alliterative/assonant patterns, with their kinesthetic and musical

shapefulness, function . . . as a compensation . . . for Owen's discordant half-rhymes . . ." [#32,pp.368-69]. These internal patternings probably did not stem from an acquaintance with Romain's work, argues Masson, but resemble more closely patterns in the verse of Shelley, Rimbaud, and Hopkins.

The focus on Owen's sociological relevance which characterized criticism of the forties continued somewhat into the fifties. For example, in "The Importance of Wilfred Owen" (1954) Howard Sergeant writes: "The increasing tendency today towards centralization and uniformity . . . emphasizes the validity of Owen's poetry for our own troubled age" [#39,p.11]. Another--at least partially--sociological interpretation of Owen's work is that of Dylan Thomas who (also in 1954) writes: "we can see, rereading Owen, that he is a poet of all times, all places, and all wars" [#44,pp.118-19].

Thomas's chapter on Owen in Quite Early One Morning [#44] presents the reader a sympathetic, colorful description of Owen the soldier-poet. He quotes extensively from the poems themselves and argues for Owen's influence--ranking him in that particular with W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Thomas's chapter is worth reading for its energetic, vivid discussion of Owen and his work, though it is too sketchy to serve as an introduction to Owen, and lacks detailed analyses of poems.

Joseph Cohen, the student of Owen responsible for the largest number of separate pieces of Owen scholarship and criticism, published several reports on the state of Oweniana during the fifties. For example, in 1955 his "Wilfred Owen War Poetry Collection" was published in Library Chronicle of the University of Texas [#13], and two years later his article

"Wilfred Owen in America" appeared in Prairie Schooner [#16]. The 1955 article is a report on the Owen War Poetry Collection in the Rare Books Library at the University of Texas. This collection demonstrates that Owen had certainly achieved recognition and aroused scholarly interest, at one university at least, in the United States by the mid-fifties. The report is interesting for its detailed account of available letters, micro-film reproductions of manuscripts, photostats of war documents, and how it all came to be collected.

In his later article "Wilfred Owen in America" Cohen suggests reasons for "Owen's failure to achieve popular recognition in America" [#16,p.339]. In his discussion of the identification people sometimes make with a soldier hero, Cohen comments on the sociological implications of the comparative neglect of Owen in America. He compares Rupert Brooke's popular status with that of Alan Seeger and Joyce Kilmer, and points out Owen's lack of such popular acclaim. In 1957, according to Cohen, Owen was strictly a "'poet's poet'" [#16,p.345].

In addition to adopting the sociological approach, Cohen also focuses on the biographical--as well as the structural--elements in Owen's work. His 1955 article "Wilfred Owen's Greater Love" [#15], anticipating the work of another critic later in the fifties, Samuel J. Hazo, turns attention to Owen's predominant theme. Cohen's article is a well-organized, in-depth analysis of the theme of sacrifice (or as Cohen phrases it--the theme of "greater love") in Owen's verse. Cohen seeks to "establish the point of view that Owen was above all a spiritual poet, and that the distinguishing spiritual element in his poetry is a thoroughly developed religious concept which he called the greater love" [#15,p.106]. Owen's sacrifice theme had been mentioned by earlier critics, but Cohen was the

first to suggest Owen's motivation for employing this theme and to trace its development in his work.

In his article "The Passion of Wilfred Owen" [#24] Samuel J. Hazo, although not explicitly using Cohen's work as a basis, takes up where Cohen leaves off and argues that Owen's best poems are those which incorporate the theme of sacrifice. First, Hazo divides the poems into two groups. One group, Owen's poems of "indignation," includes the poems which deal with wounded soldiers; Hazo believes these are not as good. "In an attempt to dramatize the plight of these wounded men, he has verged on melodrama" [#24,p.203], asserts Hazo, specifically of "Conscious" and "Disabled." The other group is composed of poems which equate the "soldier's suffering with the scourging of Christ--one aspect of a parallel that is at the core of Owen's best poems" [#24,p.203]. The bulk of Hazo's discussion centers on the poems in this second group, "Greater Love" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth," for example. He argues that the equation of the soldier's suffering and death with the Passion of Christ lends to Owen's verse "transcendental significance" [#24,p.208].

These articles of the fifties, specifically those treating Owen's pararrhyme and sacrifice theme, illustrate the lessening need for critics to introduce Owen. A select few of his poems had been frequently reprinted in anthologies and a substantial enough quantity of criticism and scholarship had been published by that time so that critics no longer felt obliged to explain who Owen was before they could proceed to develop their theses.

III

Criticism of the sixties began solidly with the publication of D.S.R. Welland's Critical Study. As Welland states in his preface, the work

is intended as a companion to Blunden's Poems of Wilfred Owen and, therefore, designed for the reader already acquainted with both Owen's poetry and Blunden's memoir. This small book, approximately 150 pages, contains analyses of many poems, comments on half-rhyme (as mentioned earlier), discussion of influences on Owen as well as summary of Owen's influence on later poets, and explanation of textual problems in the manuscripts.

The poems themselves which Welland calls elegies receive most of his attention. To facilitate clear description (and, to some extent, evaluation) Welland categorizes Owen's verse into three groupings: poems of "dramatic description" those of "personal response" and poems of "imaginative description" [#48,p.73]. The poems of this latter group, Welland argues, are Owen's best. Poems such as "Exposure," "Asleep," and "The Sentry" illustrate the "imaginative process of re-creation [wherein] the individual and the episode become universalised" [#48,p.75]. Welland believes these "imaginative description[s] are in many ways more far-reaching in their implications and more satisfactory as poetry" than Owen's other poems [#48,p.73].

In 1961 Philip Hobsbaum lamented the early death of Owen, and two contemporaries, because poetry was suffering from the loss. Hobsbaum begins his provocative article "The Road Not Taken" [#25] by asserting that "modernism in English poetry is beginning to seem something of an American imposition" [#25,p.860]. He maintains that the influence of American poets--specifically Pound and Eliot--has been harmful. Had three young English poets, Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen, lived, their poetry "would surely have constituted a big challenge to the prevailing standards in poetry" [#25,p.860]. The chief accomplishment of

these three, which might have prevented the bad influence of an "essentially American revolution in verse technique" [#25,p.863], is a thorough reshaping of traditional forms, argues Hobsbaum.

Since other critics of the sixties linked Owen and Rosenberg (as will be pointed out later), the particular similarities Hobsbaum finds in the works of these two should be noted. He explains, for example, that both use the first person plural narrator in their poems; yet each conveys an attitude or emotion about something greater than himself. Most important, asserts Hobsbaum, Owen and Rosenberg, and Thomas as well, contributed an advancement in technique and sensibility.

Three years after the appearance of Welland's major critical assessment, Harold Owen complemented it with the first volume of a major biography, Journey from Obscurity: Wilfred Owen 1893-1918 [#35]. Volume One was subtitled "Childhood," and was followed in 1964 by the second volume, "Youth," and in 1965 by a final volume, "War." There are strengths as well as weaknesses in this biography by a member of the poet's family. There is certainly a wealth of first-hand information; hence the story of Wilfred Owen's life is told from a not altogether objective point of view. It becomes clear, for example, that because of the Owen family's restricting financial circumstances Wilfred's educational advantages were attained sometimes at the expense of Harold's. The brothers' relationship, until only a short time before Wilfred's death, was rather strained. Harold's chronicle is not, however, unduly colored by ill feelings.

Most informative and interesting are the first two volumes. Since many critics, in dealing with Owen and his verse, emphasize his rather shy, reserved manner and compassion for his fellow man, it is interesting to see

how domineering and, at times, harsh Wilfred was as a youngster toward his younger brothers and sister. The third volume is less informative because Harold saw his brother so seldom while he was in the army. More about Owen's growth as a poet is to be learned from the writings of those who knew him during the war--from which Stallworthy's biography (see below) draws extensively.

By the mid-sixties there was no longer a need to argue for Owen's importance. Substantial evidence of it is to be found not only in such a compilation as T. J. Walsh's A Tribute to Wilfred Owen [#45], with its personal statements from such figures as Sir Herbert Read and T. S. Eliot, but also in lengthy treatment of the poems in three critical surveys of the time: English Poetry of The First World War by John H. Johnston [#26], Heroes' Twilight by Bernard Bergonzi [#9], and Frederick Grubb's A Vision of Reality [#23].

John H. Johnston's chapter "Poetry and Pity: Wilfred Owen" is a first-rate study of the poems and the poet's development. He explicates Owen's major poems, analyzing the dominant themes, the use of paradox, and the abrupt contrasts and ironic reversals. Johnston's concern with tracing Owen's development is illustrated by the way he identifies certain poems. For example, he points to "Happiness" as Owen's first poem expressing a personal reaction to the war. He identifies a different poem, "Exposure," as Owen's first important war poem; also it contains the first use of pararhyme in a war poem.

Johnston separates the poetry into two basic divisions: that written before August 1917, which was influenced by Sassoon, and that written between August 1917 and September 1918--what Johnston calls the "creative

period"[#26,p.166]. He believes those poems which demonstrate Sassoon's influence ("Dulce et Decorum Est," for example) represent a cynical attitude not really natural to Owen's verse. Johnston finds the poems of the latter period more profound, truer to Owen's inspiration. Although he considers Owen's body of poetry eloquent, Johnston concludes: "Despite Owen's extraordinary sensitivity and his efforts to reconcile that sensitivity to the demands of formal poetic art, his achievement does not measure up to the vast tragic potentialities of his material" [#26,p.205].

Unlike Johnston's, neither of the other two surveys, Bergonzi's Heroes' Twilight and Grubb's A Vision of Reality, devotes a chapter to Owen alone. Whereas early critics were inclined to compare Owen with Rupert Brooke, these more recent studies juxtapose Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, no doubt following the lead of F. R. Leavis, who had made the comparison briefly in his New Bearings in English Poetry in 1932.

In his chapter "Rosenberg and Owen" Bergonzi confines his discussion to Owen's more famous poems. He believes the two poets differ chiefly in Owen's emphasis on realistic details of maiming and death. Bergonzi does not attempt a detailed comparison of the two poets.

Grubb's chapter (somewhat more complex than Bergonzi's) "The Embattled Truth: Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg" also links these two poets without really comparing them. Grubb devotes the first part of his chapter to discussion of Owen and the latter half to Rosenberg. As a transition between the two sections Grubb writes: "[Rosenberg's] art is not obviously striking nor is he altogether a 'war poet,' but his work is founded on rare gifts and will prove to be as permanent as Owen's" [#23,p.85]. Grubb's discussion of Owen touches on imagery, colloquial modes,