

## The War Poet and His Shell Shock: The Journey that Spoke for the Great War

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The definition of a war is often ongoing and ever fluctuating, influenced by a plethora of individuals and theories emanating from scholars, politicians, the general public and the soldiers themselves. The voice or ideology that finally triumphs does so due to vast and often untraceable subtleties and understandings which are refined and redeveloped according to the needs of each subsequent generation. The Great War, lasting from 1914-1918, has a generally established didactic historical message that has permeated popular thought, namely a lesson in the futility and carnage of a war with no justification, characterized by senseless destruction. Scholarly thought attributes a more profound stigma to World War I as the harbinger, or indeed the catalyst, for the modern age. There is a strong tendency to associate the war with figures that promote this line of thinking, and often these prominent individuals are literary ones.

The emphasis on literature in World War I can be regarded as a manifestation of the decidedly "bourgeois" conflict; a war characterized by the middle-class soldier, who was more highly educated and who filled the ranks in an unprecedented way.<sup>1</sup> As the common soldier was more likely literate than not, at least those from powerful nations such as Britain, France and Germany, the possibilities and perspectives left to history are numerous; however particular visions that adhere to our current developed notions of World War I do hold sway.

One such perspective given to us, and revered as an excellent portrait of this conflict comes from the literary figure, Wilfred Owen, whose poetic contributions rule supreme in the modern memory of this war. Hailed almost universally by academics of English and History, Owen emerges as *the* poet of the war. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell, in attempting to "supply contexts, both actual and literary, for writers who have most effectively memorialized the Great War," names poets "of very high literary consciousness like David Jones, Isaac Rosenberg, and of course Wilfred Owen."<sup>2</sup> The "of course" in Fussell's statement, which attempts to delineate those that have made a substantial impact on the memory of World War I, makes clear that Wilfred Owen is not considered by the academic community to be one of many, but *the* one; he is the "of course" that is less choice and more accepted compulsion.

Texts that only briefly touch upon war literature and poetry find it difficult to avoid Wilfred Owen. More often than not sources explicitly define him as the foremost poet of World War I, "one of the greatest English poets of the twentieth century," and at least one of the most significant contributors to the modern age of literature.<sup>3</sup> While it is easy to accept this prevailing wisdom as to Wilfred Owen's dominant status, closer investigation reveals discrepancies to any flowing historical

narrative that might depict the popularity and sovereignty of Wilfred Owen as *the* war poet from his own contemporary time to ours. One might assume that what we call the most important poet of World War I would occupy a similar pedestal during the war itself, but in reality Wilfred Owen's poetry did not resonate with the general public, even in his own country, until later. The messages about World War I that have been distilled so thoroughly in successive ages were not widely accepted in their own time. Wilfred Owen's experiences as a soldier-poet in World War I did come to have profound meaning for a society grappling with war-related issues, albeit not for some ten years after the conflict itself.<sup>4</sup> Wilfred Owen's work was not even published until 1920, two years after the war's termination, thereby making its effect upon any public (that in actuality was predominantly unreceptive to messages akin to Owen's that were published in war years) impossible.<sup>5</sup> The question that emerges is, what about Owen's poetry came to be so emblematic for the public consciousness of the war and why did this apparently profound significance not become widespread or important for at least ten years, or even longer after his death? The answer can be found in Owen's initial motivations and incentives for writing war poetry, which were born not only of a writer and poet's desire to communicate experiences but his struggle to comprehend and process his repressed memories of the horrors he had witnessed at the front, which were revealing themselves as 'shell shock' or what we would now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

This process of literary exploration of personal psychological trauma, termed "self-healing" by Daniel Hipp in his book *The Poetry of Shell Shock*, was the impetus for Owen's war poetry, revealing the quandaries and difficulties of the World War I soldier, particularly the shell shock suffering soldier.<sup>6</sup> This journey towards healing, of dealing with and overcoming the trauma of war, seems to have been illustrative of issues facing society as a whole after the war, obvious in their identification with and glorification of Owen's efforts to deal with shell shock.

Wilfred Owen's war poetry was written based on his duty as a soldier in early 1917 at the Somme front, where he underwent extremely traumatic experiences, experiences that would ultimately lead to his brilliant war poetry, but not before wreaking havoc upon his psyche and rendering him unfit for duty.<sup>7</sup> In May 1917 Owen wrote to his mother that he was detained by his doctor from going with his battalion into battle due to being diagnosed with "Neurasthenia," another term for shell shock.<sup>8</sup> Although Owen made light of the doctor's orders in his letter, "[d]o not for a moment suppose I have had a 'breakdown'...I am simply avoiding one," he had in fact fought in considerably brutal circumstances, the primary of which was an incident occurring in April 1917. While sleeping, he was thrown into the air by a large shell exploding in his proximity. He was then forced to hide in a hole for days with the dismembered parts of a former fellow officer.<sup>9</sup>

Owen was sent to Craiglockhart, a military hospital opened for the specific purpose of treating officers suffering from psychiatric problems related to their war service.<sup>10</sup> There, Owen was put under the care of Dr. Arthur Brock, a proponent of the so-called "ergotherapy," or shell shock recovery through "work and activity." He also believed in confronting one's demons by "facing up strenuously to what they represented and resolve[ing] to do better," and was prone to encourage Owen's artistic endeavors.<sup>11</sup> The range of shell shock symptoms that manifested in soldiers were

numerous, including "withered, trembling arms, paralysed hands, stumbling gaits, tics, tremors and shakes, as well as numbed muteness, palpitations, sweaty hallucinations and nightmares..."<sup>12</sup> It would appear that Wilfred Owen's shell shock materialized as terrible nightmares that only plagued him at night. Those around him, like his friend Siegfried Sassoon, could have easily assumed that Owen did not suffer from an extreme case of shell shock. For as Sassoon himself noted during their stay together at Craiglockhart, Owen always appeared "consistently cheerful."<sup>13</sup> However, as evidenced by poems that Owen wrote while attempting to confront his issues, he was sufficiently disturbed and suffering under agonies of guilt, horror, powerlessness and the senselessness of war.

One of Wilfred Owen's earlier poems, and admittedly his most famous, is "Dulce Et Decorum Est" which was written in October of 1917 and later revised in early 1918.<sup>14</sup> Academics including Daniel Hipp and E. H. Johnston view "Dulce Et Decorum Est" as a rather undeveloped poem, before the full growth of Owen's style, with only a newly emerging shadow of the quality of sophisticated psychological work than he would later achieve.<sup>15</sup> However, Hipp characterizes this poem as an important one not only due to its pervasive popularity but as a "precursor," or the first step in the healing process and indicative of his progression from mere imitation of modernists and anti-war poets like Sassoon to his later, more masterful works, displaying the culmination of his maturity as a poet and his route towards self-healing.<sup>16</sup>

"Dulce Et Decorum Est" possesses many of the traits of his later works in a less developed way and, as it was one of his initial attempts to confront his own haunting war experiences, utilizes structures and poetic tools he would later discard. This poem speaks directly to some of the shell shock trauma that Owen was suffering from, touching upon his guilt that emanated from his position as an officer, which left him feeling both responsible for his men and yet helpless to prevent their deaths; the powerlessness of the soldier to truly protect himself from the ghastly mechanics of war, the horror of death, and the inane justifications offered for the gruesome and apparently senseless slaughter of young men. The introductory stanza of the poem seeks to depict the soldiers in the most weary and exhausted light possible as "bent double," "coughing like hags," "drunk with fatigue;" He wrote that they "limped on," and "cursed through sludge."<sup>17</sup> Hipp portrays this introduction as an attempt to demonstrate the "collective experience" of the soldiers, and the "communal bond" that Owen has with his men which he can utilize "to combat his psychological trauma" by becoming a voice for not only himself but for them.<sup>18</sup> This so-called "collective experience" is splintered by the entrance of a voice within the poem "Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!" a sounding alarm issued, presumably by the commanding officer, and perhaps meant to be Owen himself speaking to his men.<sup>19</sup> Although the warning initiates "An ecstasy of fumbling, Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time" it is not enough and "someone still was yelling out and stumbling," apparently a soldier did not, or could not, heed his superiors warning and had fallen prey to the gas.<sup>20</sup>

There is then a shift in the poem in which Owen reverts to a removed voice, "In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning", a voice that is reflecting upon these apparently past events rather than of them. This sudden departure makes very clear that Owen himself feels responsible for this man's death, if indeed the poem reflects a true incident. If not, it could simply be

a manifestation of the guilt that Owen felt when he was not able to protect his men by the means given to him, when the "Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!" was not enough and an individual for whom he felt responsible succumbed to the horrors of a most likely gruesome death.

Owen's guilt for his inability to protect those under his command and his helplessness at not having the resources to preserve them as he obviously felt obligated to do is evident in poems, as seen in "Dulce et Decorum Est" or "The Sentry." Owen goes on to speak directly to the reader to describe the terrifying death of the poem's gas victim who is "flung" in a wagon, and this explicitly depicted death, clearly meant to disturb the reader, is made into a lesson for those unacquainted with the appalling methods and horrors of a World War I death. His final stanza warns that could the reader have been witness to this horrific end, "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."<sup>21</sup>

Owen's attempt to educate a general audience about the horrific conditions of a war they did not participate in, and yet still urged sacrifice for (albeit with a superficial understanding of its significance), is not unexpected. Owen, like many soldiers, was acutely aware of the ignorance of the civilian population to the daily hell to which they were subjected. However, as Daniel Hipp astutely observes, "the direction of this anger towards an ignorant populace removed from the experience deflects attention away from the real situation of the poem—Owen's personal confrontation with the traumatizing experience and his own feelings of guilt, not his audience's."<sup>22</sup> Although Owen attempted to directly confront the psychological issues that plagued him, he was, as of the unwinding of this poem, unable to really delve into these feelings without a hasty retreat through a shift in focus from personal reflection to the lecturing of its (presumably civilian) audience. However, in this final stanza Owen was really doing more than providing a dramatic physical description with which to validate his anger, for in retelling the scene he did not simply proffer the opinion that any individual could not spew patriotic rhetoric after being witness to it, but rather said "If in some smothering dreams you too could pace," or "if you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs."<sup>23</sup> In effect, if the audience could feel his sufferings, recall his horrors or experience his dreams, they would be unable to endorse the war and its ensuring deaths.<sup>24</sup> Owen was asking his audience to be sympathetic to his torment, and more specifically, his "smothering dreams" or his shell shock itself. Owen was offering his personal experience of war to the reader, and then detailing its effects in terms meant to garner empathy. This poem has become synonymous with a particular historic understanding of World War I, and any reading commonly elicits instant identification with the prevailing understandings of the conflict—that it was not only an unjustifiable exercise in human slaughter and suffering but left indelible destructive marks upon all it touched.

"About 10 million soldiers died in the war," states historian Hew Strachan in *The First World War*, and he furthermore maintains that "those who mourned needed to find meaning in their loss," a statement hard to refute as much of the developed world faced its bereavement with the war's termination.<sup>25</sup> The sacrifice, or the near sacrifice, of an entire generation of young men, later termed "the lost generation" in Britain, could not be avoided and society initially clung to the sweeping moral

justifications and cultural values that had previously made war glorious and sanctified. Poets like Rupert Brooke whose poetry lauded the valor and heroics of war with a strong patriotic bent continued to be popular, but as C.G. Jung observed, in 1926 "the war...was not yet over, but was continuing to be fought within the psyche."<sup>26</sup> The circumstances of the peace treaty of Versailles in 1918 were unsatisfactory to most involved and lacked the final qualities and ringing triumph that the battered European powers and their populations were seeking.<sup>27</sup> Unable to face the dawning truth, a truth of which the war's soldiers had been acutely aware for some time, that the war was possibly not only senseless but worthless, society was left without a language to describe what had happened or an ability to cope with its obvious ramifications. Traditional values like honor, freedom, or valor could not be reconciled with what had passed, and new words and understandings were required to confront the war and its ultimate significance.<sup>28</sup> For years however, society apparently could not face either the terrifying truth about the war or the modern principles it had beget.<sup>29</sup>

With the success of *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque in 1929, however, came an onslaught of war memoirs, eagerly consumed by a society that apparently identified with depictions of an individualistic war experience demarcated by the recognition of the irrational and brutal nature of the Great War.<sup>30</sup> Such a sudden crystallization of mass opinion on the war almost ten years after its end, where prior alternate and often conflicting interpretations had co-existed, speaks to society's dire need to at last face the quandary in which it found itself: still struggling not only to establish normality in the wake of sweeping destruction of man, land, language and ideology, but to even define themselves in relation to it.

This challenge, mired in psychological trauma, a struggle to confront emotionally charged issues and a reckoning with the significance of the war bears resemblance to Wilfred Owen's poetry and his similar attempts to come to grips with his shell shock. That a society forming a perspective on World War I as a waste of human life and attempting to cope with the implications of such a recognition and its lasting toll, would relate to, and value, poetry that dramatically tracks an individualistic journey of a similar nature is unsurprising. In a way, society had repressed its fears and dilemmas about the war and, like in shell shock cases, the underlying issues emerged and had to be dealt with through their recognition and exploration, as evidenced by the explosion in the popularity of war novels and memoirs (often colored not only subtly but obviously by anti-war beliefs). In a way, Wilfred Owen's attempts at self-healing through poetry and direct confrontation with the past are a perfect embodiment of society's own endeavors ten years after the fact to come to terms with the war. Perhaps one could even say that society itself experienced a sort of 'shell shock,' crippled by a war that violated every former principle or ethic by which it operated and struggling to cope not only with the realities of the war but the symptoms of the non-recognition of the war and its undeniable effect.

The belated war perceptions that emerged in the late twenties and throughout the thirties were decisive in establishing the historical angle from which World War I would be viewed, a highly cynical viewpoint that characterized the conflict as naught but carnage in vain on a massive scale that produced subsequent generations that, although not directly affected, were still left to grapple with the modern age that the war had precipitated. In essence, Wilfred Owen's poetry is representative of the

journey of society after the war to face up to the toll of the conflict and its enduring consequences. Both must delve into the war in retrospect to answer current questions about identity and the future, both find it necessary, rather than avoid or downplay the painful circumstances, to wallow in the horror, and both emerge, if not cured, at least with a solidified understanding of self and a definite perspective on the war. Wilfred Owen's poetry represents how future ages came to view the war, embodying not only the experience of the soldier in World War I, but a societal attempt to deal with and define it in such a way as to gain perspective and initiate "self-healing."

Whether or not Wilfred Owen achieved the "self-healing" he began at Craiglockhart is unknowable, as on November 4, 1918, he was killed in combat in France, cutting short his young life a week before the war's end.<sup>81</sup> His tragic demise makes Wilfred Owen yet further an exemplary of the war; his early death not unlike the millions of other promising young men that met a similar fate in the war, cutting short the potential they embodied as the future generation. Some of Wilfred Owen's last poems still displayed the violent and haunting disquiet that was a result of his shell shock; however, we can only hope that through his poetic journey he was able to ease at least some of his psychological burdens. In the last line of Owen's last letter to his mother, Wilfred states "I hope you are as warm as I am; as serene in your room as I am here."<sup>82</sup> Apparently, three days before his death Owen was able to be as serene and warm at the front as was his mother hundreds of miles away in England. Although this claim to serenity may be a pretty lie for his mother's sake, one would prefer to hope that the greatest poet of World War I was able to achieve some of the serenity and warmth he claimed, comfort if not relief from the extensive pain and trauma that led to such enduringly magnificent poetry.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2000), 177.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), ix.
- <sup>3</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), xvi.
- <sup>4</sup> Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), 368.
- <sup>5</sup> Hibberd, 367.
- <sup>6</sup> See Daniel Hipp, *The Poetry of Shell Shock: Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon* (London: McFarland & Company, 2005).
- <sup>7</sup> Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, xvii.
- <sup>8</sup> John Bell, ed., Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, Casualty Clearing Station, May 2, 1917, in *Wilfred Owen: Selected Letters*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 239-240.
- <sup>9</sup> Bell, ed., 240.
- <sup>10</sup> Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 33.
- <sup>11</sup> Hipp, 56-61.
- <sup>12</sup> Peter Lense, *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 3.
- <sup>13</sup> Hipp, 55.
- <sup>14</sup> Hipp, 74.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> See Hipp.
- <sup>17</sup> Jon Stallworthy, ed., *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 117.
- <sup>18</sup> Hipp, 76.
- <sup>19</sup> Stallworthy, ed., 117.
- <sup>20</sup> Stallworthy, ed., 117.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Hipp, 78.
- <sup>23</sup> Stallworthy, ed., 117.
- <sup>24</sup> Hipp, 79-80.
- <sup>25</sup> Strachan, 337.
- <sup>26</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffe, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: 1963): 203, quoted in Fussell, 113.
- <sup>27</sup> Eksteins, 253.
- <sup>28</sup> Eksteins, 281-282.
- <sup>29</sup> Eksteins, 276-277.
- <sup>30</sup> See previous.
- <sup>31</sup> Hibberd, 364-366.
- <sup>32</sup> Bell, ed., Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, France, Oct. 31<sup>st</sup>, 1918, 361-362.