

## ADAM FREEMAN

### **The Compassionate Nation: The Poetic Philosophy of Wilfred Owen**

The Great War left few poets unruffled and few patriots unfurled. Siegfried Sassoon, who happened, prewar, to be both an underwhelming poet and an unthinking patriot, was sufficiently polarised and politicised by the experience of combat—along with the encouragement of certain celebrity pacifists, among them Bertrand Russell and Lady Ottoline Morrell—to find himself being forcibly resettled to the military psychiatric facility at Craiglockhart.<sup>1</sup> This turn of events is perhaps among the period’s choicest ironies, since what was intended as an establishment effort to silence Sassoon was what provided him the purpose, time, and solitude sufficient to re-establish himself, now as an iconic “war poet.” And, moreover, it was at this south Edinburgh sanatorium in 1917 that fellow patient Wilfred Owen enlisted himself as Sassoon’s junior and better.<sup>2</sup>

The complex and shifting asymmetry between the two men merits further analysis. Neither was, or would be now, noted as a formidable poet before the First World War, though Sassoon was six years older than Owen, and published. But the role of Sassoon and the war in the maturation of Owen’s poems *qua* poetry is not of great interest here. Rather, our concern is with the maturation of his poetic voice *qua* compassion. Toward this end it is instructive, first of all, to borrow Paul Fussell’s observation that in Sassoon’s self-constructed

narratives of the war—in his poetry, memoirs, and novelizations of memory—the drama is in his insistent divisions, for example, between prewar idylls and wartime loss, and between Western front knowledge and homefront ignorance.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Owen, however, I go on to draw out the more complex point that his “poetic philosophy”—essentially, his most special gift to moral and political education—derives from the wartime re-enactment of his personal, prewar identities and identifiers.

What this paper analyses in particular detail is the sense in which the war refracted Owen’-0.004 Tp1.52 re W t his “

as fellow-feeling and lived-experience Owen leaves grounded, and so renders them puny and uninteresting. And although the poem celebrates as the purpose and value of poetry its ability to *warn*, it is difficult to grasp what would be the point of warning the sun not to shine, or Mars to march left rather than right. More on this theme in the next section. For now, the most material contrast between “The Next War” and “O World of many worlds” is between the latter’s distant, distancing, and disinterested bluster, and the former’s generous, good-spirited, and group-situated compassion. Notice, for one thing, that the bragging fighters of the next war fight Death, not even “for Life”—as Owen had it in earlier drafts<sup>7</sup>—but *lives*.

This study proceeds through four further passages of analysis. The middle two sections engage most particularly with the re-enactment of Owen’s identities and identifiers. I do not put too much stock on those tags, but the basic intended meaning of “identity” is whatever we can make of Owen’s relationship to his several “speech communities,”<sup>8</sup> in particular his, as it were, “two nations”: England and poetry. For a discussion of the evolution of compassion in the poetry of Wilfred Owen, the important “identifiers” are those things that do in the end manage to fix his eye on persons, and not as objects or irrelevances. As indicated, this story starts, as it must, with Owen’s boyish pride and boy-prone lust. These two sections are book-ended by discussions, first, of the relationship between poetry and the moral imagination, and second, of how and how best Owen’s back catalogue can lend to moral education. The first of these passages amounts to a foundation for, the second an application of, the middle two, more literary, discussions.

One way of taking the argument is as a well-meaning effort to complicate the cosmopolitan reading of Owen’s war poetry which traces its insistent physicality to what must be a keenly sympathetic disposition; or, a

who dealt them war and madness,” all mark moments of physicality most striking not for their insistence or detail, but for their shocking and sexualized—indeed, shockingly sexualized—content. This observation complicates things because lust, if that is the connecting thread here, cannot be allowed to stand by itself as the mediator between embodiment and compassion. This is not a prudish point: lust is an insufficiently cosmopolitan pointer toward the moral problem of embodiment since it implies a vertical ordering of concern by beauty, or something like it, and, for most people most of the time, horizontal divides determined by sexuality.<sup>9</sup> In a sense, the present interpretation reverses the arrow between sympathy and physicality, but it also twists it by following the turn in Owen’s poetry from a concern with ideal to actual bodies, and thus to his eventual preoccupation with human frailty. This, I think, gives us a more knotted and yet more involving cosmopolitan reading; and this because it embeds a tense, and perhaps open-ended, narrative of the cultivation by Owen himself of the sensibility which he called pity, but we are calling compassion.

In part this re-reading is an upshot of my methodology, such as it is, which brackets the phrase “war poet,” and instead thinks of Owen as a “poet at war.” There are good reasons for doing both these things. “War poet” is a distracting moniker, both mischievous and misleading—mischievous because, at least during the War, the right to go under that heading was a contested business, quite literally: the 1917 anthology compiled by Galloway Kyle, *Songs of the Fighting Men*, constructed the “soldier poet” as manly, amateur, patriotic, and therefore marketable.<sup>10</sup> The term is, furthermore, misleading because, as Tim Kendall notices, “it is hard to think of a modern English poet of any significance—combatant or noncombatant—who has not contributed substantially to the poetry of war.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps “poet” would be a sufficient and simple enough alternative, but I do want to recommend “poet at war,” and for three reasons. First, the notion entertains the usefulness of reading Owen’s war

poetry in negotiation with his earlier works—

general rule. First, the flapping elephant of an argument that lies are just as easily versified as truths. The easy rejoinder is that the poet who lies is no poet at all; but now we are into a viciously circular discussion of what poetry is best taken to be. Certainly the act of writing poetry is something different or something more than truth-seeking; to think otherwise is to risk collapsing poetry into science.<sup>15</sup> And indeed, unless poets *are* doing something different from or more than telling the truth, there would be little need to pay attention to them at all.

cosmopolitan sentiments from wartime poetry seems to rub unhealthily against the reminder that Owen was writing for, and for the most part about, Englishmen. But the reverse point turns out to be more convincing: to put the argument that the poetic voice of one community cannot speak on behalf of others—especially those embroiled in a similar predicament—is to give up a cosmopolitan project altogether.

“All a poet can do today is warn” is among the several influential insights—or maybe observations—jotted down in the draft preface for the book Owen would not survive to publish.<sup>18</sup> The phrase is reprinted, as usual without context, on the back of *100 Poets Against the War*, an anthology produced at record-breaking pace, immediately as Hans Blix was giving his report on Iraqi weapons to the United Nations.<sup>19</sup> But the tradition of poetry-as-warning cannot possibly sustain the contextual leap from 1918 to 2003: “Having no more experience of war than the majority of their contemporaries, it is unclear whom, and of what dangers, contemporary poets should be warning: what do poets know that others do not?”<sup>20</sup> The intention behind the anthology is to emulate the Wilfred Owen of 1918, but the final product is more reminiscent of the Owen of 1912, with the impudent promise of insights into “wider ways,” truly “unknown.”

It is often suggested, and very famously by W. B. Yeats, who considered Wilfred Owen “unworthy of the poetso97 0 Td (he)4( 8mTr)3(e)4(d( t)-2(a]TJ -e.)-4he)4unry





in the texture of the event, and not typically in the words spoken, which may indeed be alienating. The brand of poetry considered here, however—now from the point of view of the reader—takes us further: it amounts to a “way in.”

This is all very grand and enlightening, to be sure; but some closer readings of Owen’s life and works will be needed before we can say anything much more substantive. To tie up several threads left hanging, we might add that the resourcefulness of poetry in helping us effect imaginative jailbreaks may operate independently of its truth-value; and that its educational utility is not exactly faithful to artistic merit.

### **Owen’s two nations**

With prospects of soldiering on the brain, Owen ventured in a letter to his mother, Susan Owen, that what would hold him together in battle would be the sense of “perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote.”<sup>26</sup> It is an open question whether

with the distinction sufficient for a scholarship: that England had disappointed him, betraying his sense of entitlement.<sup>29</sup> I doubt this was quite the case—Owen “fled” to France more out of Europhilia than Anglophobia—but it would not negate the importance of analysing Owen’s self-disclosed Englishness alongside his poethood. After all, families and churches do not enter wars—not recently anyway—and the “poet at war” is our topic.

While Owen was deciding whether and when to enlist, his strong but changeable opinions were framed by a series of proud self-images. In a letter home from Bordeaux, he

reports it, “any gentleman (fit etc.) *returning from abroad* will be given a Commission—in the ‘Artists’ Rifles’ ... *I now do most intensely want to fight.*”<sup>32</sup> The European in him had earlier dreamt of joining the Italian cavalry, “for reasons both aesthetic and poetical,”<sup>33</sup> but when this ambition was complicated, no doubt, by the Italians joining the other side, the Artists’ Rifles—though not in fact any longer containing many artists—must have sounded like the next best thing: fighting for Keats and country! Later, as Private Owen, TF, Number 4756, 28th London Regiment (Artists’ Rifles), Wilfred wrote home, “scattering his breathless letter with exclamation marks and declaring, by mistake or design, ‘I am the British Army!’”<sup>34</sup>

To understand the context of Owen’s vain flirtations with soldiering, and the eventual embrace—lustful at first, then fraternal—we have to backtrack a bit to consider the form of Owen’s emerging poethood. The earliest surviving poem, “To Poesy” (1909-10), opens with the following:

A thousand suppliants stand around thy throne,  
Stricken with love for thee, O Poesy.  
I stand among them, and with them I groan,  
And stretch my arms out for help. Oh, pity me!<sup>35</sup>

The poem goes on to speak of crowns and courts, and chants and hymns; and it may be another open question whether Owen-the-poet is enacting himself on the model of the citizen or the congregant. My feeling, actually, is that we do better to think of the young Wilfred Owen as a “subject” of his particular overlord, the English Romantic tradition—his engaged citizenship comes later. Indeed, “there follow poems about ‘see[ing] fair Keats, and hear[ing] his lyre,’ about a pilgrimage to Keats’s house, and about seeing a lock of Keats’s hair (indebted to Keats’s ‘On Seeing a Lock of Milton’s Hair’).”<sup>36</sup> If Owen’s proud soldierly spirit complicates the account of a young man indifferent to his country, his patriotism about poetry complicates the received view of Owen as the “poet indifferent to his art,”<sup>37</sup> who would live just long enough to write that, “Above all,” he was “not concerned with Poetry.”<sup>38</sup>

Two encounters serve to multiply Owen's self-image as a "poet at war" into the three-part conception sketched out above—of a poet at war with Germans, to be sure, but also one re-





else somehow out of character, or, as I would argue, not quite yet in character. The poem is almost entirely self-regarding. The first stanza indulges the reader's presumed expectation that once Owen dreamed of his "dead name | High in the heart of London, unsurpassed."<sup>56</sup> But this vision is trumped in the middle section, where he confesses the true nature of his dead ambition was to be sheltered "Under those holy cypresses, the same | That keep in shade the quiet place of Keats." This refers to the Protestant Cemetery in Florence—also the final destination of Shelley, effectively, the prospect of a state funeral in the nation of poets. The final stanza regretfully informs us of the hopelessness of both visions. The War means his highest hope is for an eternity of diminishing returns: the name scratched out on his army identity disc—"Wear it, sweet friend. | Until the name grow vague and wear away." The sense in which this poem marks a part of the process of Owen's reconfiguring his relationship with poetry is that, prior to his meeting Sassoon and his forthright focus only on "matter[s] of experience,"<sup>57</sup> he was already ceasing to view transcendence (escapism plus fame) as poetry's purpose. The next section pursues the notion that this exorcism of pride by fellowship was interlaced with a turn in the connecting thread between Owen and his "fellows," from lust to compassion.

### **The origins of comonfiron.**





youth's disfiguring by war with "the old times, before he threw away his knees"<sup>64</sup>—it would have to be knees. The themes are intimacy and embodiment; and no doubt what drew Owen's eye to this subject is his boyish good looks: "There was an artist silly for his face, | For it was younger than his youth, last year." But, in a reversal of the moves made in "A Navy Boy," this glazed-over moment is pointedly interrupted:

Now, he is old; his back will never brace;  
He's lost his colour very far from here,  
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,  
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race  
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh

This is an instance of what Paul Fussell terms Owen's "disciplined sublimation" of homoeroticism into the promotion of compassion.<sup>65</sup> But, to the poem overall, perhaps there is rather more doting on male beauty, and rather less negotiation between 'kneed' and 'post-kneed' lives, than I have implied.<sup>66</sup> The youth is, in effect, seduced into the army by the desires to "please his Meg," and to "look a god in kilts." But now, surveying him in his "wheeled chair," Owen writes rather too unequivocally of the youth's sexual disabling: "he will never feel again how slim | Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands | ... the women's eyes | Passed from him to the strong men that were whole."<sup>67</sup> What I mean to suggest is that the emergence of Owen's compassionate voice was a tense, non-determinate process: sometimes the voice of lust demands to be heard; and sometimes Owen's very attentiveness to embodiment is what distracts from personhood.

"Disabled" was drafted in Craiglockhart in 1917, and revised the following summer—Owen's last. "Spring Offensive" was begun that final summer, and never finally realised; but it does give a sense of the poet's mature voice:

Halted against the shade of a last hill  
They fed, and eased of pack loads, were at ease;  
And leaning on the nearest chest or knees  
Carelessly slept.<sup>68</sup>

We are well primed to notice that the fellow-feeling encapsulated in this, the poem's opening



### **Wilfred Owen and moral education**

The basement of London's Imperial War Museum houses its so-called "Trench Experience," a dimly lit and winding corridor furnished with sandbags and wax soldiers. Realism is clearly the aim: the basement trench is more roughed up than the neat and tidy "exhibition trenches" once dug in Kensington Gardens, which Wilfred Owen called "the laughing stock of the army."<sup>74</sup> We are definitely past being coddled and hoodwinked quite like that. Yet inside the "Trench Experience," one is uncertain whether one is being educated or deceived. There is no smell, no water, and no sky. Upstairs in the atrium, schoolteachers try to engage the stragglers with invitations to imagine what it must be like to fly one of the bombers strung up overhead—

the truth he can see for himself. That reading of his poetry which I have sought to complicate is heartened by how an apparently natural compassionate sensibility manages to survive (although in Owen's case, not quite) even through "war and madness." The lesson is one of humanity under fire, and in fact says nothing at all interesting about compassion.<sup>76</sup> Our view is that the voice of compassion is not something Owen brought with him to the end of the world; it is something he found there. This reading may strike as pessimistic, but only if we regret that not all of us will be so fortunate as to be enlightened by horrors—and, further, only if we negate the small but important contribution that "poetry at war" can make to moral education: Owen's attentiveness to physical particulars draws our imaginations also to both "the distortion of the dead" and to compassionate gestures among the living. To borrow Fussell's list, Wilfred Owen was always captivated by eyes, hair, hands, limbs, sides, brows, faces, teeth, heads, smiles, breasts, fingers, backs, and tongues<sup>77</sup>; but what we see by reading his poetry against its own history, as well as its historical context, is that these visions of physical particulars are transformed before Owen's own eyes from "invitations to want" to "invitations to warn."<sup>78</sup> Moreover, and as the parallel reading of "Anthem" and "Identity Disc" suggested, but did not quite conclude, what it took for Owen to come to view and value a community of sympathy, whose adventures we follow in "Spring Offensive," was to be distracted no longer by possible glories promised by imagined communities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 90-91.

<sup>2</sup> Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 267.

<sup>3</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 90-105.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>5</sup> Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. John Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983), 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Blackburn,

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<sup>10</sup> Kerr, 325-326.

<sup>11</sup> Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> John Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 227-228.

<sup>13</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*

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<sup>66</sup> Kerr, 300-302.

<sup>67</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 175-176.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>71</sup> Fussell, 291-296.

<sup>72</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 140.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-193.

<sup>74</sup> Fussell, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Winter, 222-233.

<sup>76</sup> Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 17.

<sup>77</sup> Fussell, 291.

<sup>78</sup> Chris Coker, *The Future of War: The Re-Enchantment of War in the Twenty-First Century*