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### **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’s visions of his own poethood and others’ personhood. As a young man, both visions were glazed with what at times ought to be diagnosed as “pride,” but more often the right word is “lust.”<sup>4</sup> Given especially that neither lust nor pride is a sensibility most of us need assistance in cultivating, my preference is to derive the value of Owen’s war work from measuring the revisioning of these early identifiers, later as voices of fellowship and fragility. As a suggestive example, we have the affected yet radical individualism of “O World of many worlds,” first sketched in 1912,<sup>5</sup> to compare with “The Next War” of 1917, which contains one of Owen’s most lucid moments of fraternal anti-nationalism:

We laughed,—knowing that better men would come,  
And greater wars: when every fighter brags  
He fights on Death, for lives; not men, for flags.<sup>6</sup>

In the earlier poem, Owen imagines the trajectories of men—and I mean men, not people: “mortal brothers,” as he puts it—as being as far apart and alien from one another, yet also as “fixed” and “foreplanned,” as those of the planets and stars. But in view of his proud self-identification as a poet, Owen fixates on an idea of himself as a “meteor, fast, eccentric, lone, | Lawless; in passage through all spheres | Warning the world of wider ways unknown.” (Certainly this misty-eyed vision of poetry-as-creed and poets-as-community is built out of a pretty mixed comprehension of astronomy.) The main business of the poem is to set up his own poethood as something fundamentally freeing, elevating, and valuable; thus, such things

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, at least, which exploits the former for the cultivation of the latter. In “Mental Cases,” for instance, the “drooping tongues,” “jaws that slob,” the hair fingered by memory, and the hands “plucking at each other; | ... Pawing us

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—not always a pleasure, but, I think, revealing. Second, and something I return to in the advertised discussion of poetry-as-warning, it enables us to keep hold of the sporting distinction between combatants and noncombatants. And third, another matter to be discussed later, which is that Owen would come to envision himself as at war with poetry itself. The less interesting part of this “war” entailed the hostile targeting of pro-war poets such as Jessie Pope, who was the author of such nefarious, propagandist nursery rhymes as “The Call,” beginning as it means to go on with the sinister, grasping question, “Who’s for the trench — | Are you, my laddie?”<sup>12</sup> In two of the four surviving drafts, Owen actually dedicates “Dulce et Decorum Est” to this “certain Poetess,” without regards; in the final version Pope is framed as “you | ... My friend.”<sup>13</sup>

### **A poetic philosophy**

The very idea of a “poetic philosophy” might be an oxymoron were it not anyway something of a nonsense. But if the point is to measure the extent to which we can argue for such and such principle or emotion (in this case, compassion) as a point of entry to whomsoever’s (in this case, Wilfred Owen’s) poetry, and, further, to apply our findings to moral education, then “poetic philosophy” sounds like useful shorthand for an artistic notion that is, nevertheless, progressive in the double sense of being enacted in stages and being enlightened. I shall say no more. Overall, this section works to orient the poetic imagination in relation to moral identity. Wilfred Owen himself had a couple of hunches on roughly this matter: one, that poetry is a depository of truths; and another, that it is a distributor of warnings.<sup>14</sup> I proceed by critiquing those hunches.

Even without carrying ourselves away into discussions of what telling the truth really amounts to, or of whether it is always a sensible thing to do, we can isolate more than enough concern with the idea of poets-as-truth-tellers to establish it as more or less useless as a

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. We may note that when poets do lie, or else misconstrue or mislead—perhaps as with Jessie Pope’s rhyming child-catcher—often the effect is to re-empower one’s sense of what is proper, as if the imaginative exposition of its opposite provides a firmer context for our commitments. Indeed, in light of the ethical and political sensibilities we would today bring to the table—personal choice, individual heterogeneity, and so on—Pope’s militarist reconstruction of the “Who’s for tennis?” formula provides us, in a flourish, with material for an imaginative recovery of a world and a cluster of sensibilities we could not, in short order, construct with the tools of science or history.<sup>16</sup>

The “truth for whom?” dilemma is also worth reflecting on. The most present-relevant version of the question challenges the sense in holding up poetry as a valuable depository of knowledge about the Great War, since this was an event that drew in a great number of speech communities. Poetry in particular, because of its reliance on the marriage of sound and sense, is always better off in its language of first composition. Yet still we are disappointed to find that a decade ago Wilfred Owen’s poems were unavailable in French; that the first translation of Sassoon was rendered in 1987; and that there is still no French version of Fussell’s much admired and valued book, *The Great War and Modern Memory*. These facts gesture toward a sort of “cognitive dissonance,” even between the allies France and Britain, in terms of contemporary imaginings of the period.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not this really matters may depend on one’s priorities. In one sense, the mission to derive broadly

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 poets’ corner of a country newspaper,” that Owen has been massively overrated as a poet, in largest part because of the embarrassment of posterity at the horrors of trench warfare: “rather than no poetry after Auschwitz, no lit. crit. after Passchendaele.”<sup>21</sup> This level of critical self-effacement gives us a second pointer toward a more contextual and sustainable reading of Owen’s preface. What distinguishes poets at war from noncombatant war poets, and indeed what saves them from a withering critical reception, is their status also as *witnesses*. My sense—although this may be too generous—is that when Owen at last writes, “All a poet can do today is warn,” he is doing everything but

offering a mature reassertion of his juvenile connection, in “O world of many worlds,” of poetry with warning as if to defy gravity. The key word is “today.” What he is saying in 1918 is something in the manner of the following: here I stand at “existence’s brink,”<sup>22</sup> and all I, Wilfred Owen, can do today is warn.

This resolution finds itself doubly appropriate once we, with Jonathan Glover, tag trench warfare as the paradigm case of war as a “trap”—with violence motivated primarily by entrapment rather than aggression—which closets and negates the possibilities of soldiers’ moral resources, such as respect and sympathy.<sup>23</sup> What I have in mind is that the distinction between Owen’s two models of warning turns on two quite distinct understandings of “escape.” For the Owen of 1912, poetry is escapism; for the Owen of 1918, poetry is a “way out”—a way to give voice to soldiers’ moral identities, and even to penetrate through to “the outer guard” of Glover’s trap: the civilians who believe what they read in the *Daily Mail*.<sup>24</sup> (An upshot of this new formulation is that we may have been too easy on Todd Swift, editor of the Iraq anthology: *100 Poets* expresses neither escapism, nor need of escape; only marketing.)

In several informal discussions of “witnesses” in the formation of modern memory—former soldiers, survivors of genocide, etc.—historian Jay Winter brands them visitors “from another planet,” “another world, one which we ignore at our peril,” or that “speak to us from the other side of a veil.”<sup>25</sup> These descriptors are at once wrong and confused, and powerfully useful. One is tempted to wish these were visitors from another world, and not what they are, which is evidence of the fragility of this one; indeed, if they were alien visitors, then ignoring them might be the least perilous course of action. During a war crimes tribunal we may be struck by the true dissonance between the lazy theatrics of courtroom decorum and eyewitness descriptions of brutality. Yet insofar as these events amount to poetic moments for the re-disclosure of distant mental landscapes—other worlds, as if it were—the poetry is

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 he means the English language—in his favourite applications—or poetry itself. Interpreters do like to point out that England was never an “existentially strong community” for Owen growing up. Douglas Kerr structures his monograph around the premise that one cannot fully discern the intonation of Owen’s poetic voice without appreciating it as a singular disclosure of larger linguistic contexts; Kerr lists family, church, army, and indeed poetry, but not nation.<sup>27</sup> This may be fair, but then again Britain’s assumed security during the period that coincided with Owen’s upbringing meant that the voice of patriotism was pretty muted all round.

At the outbreak of war, Owen happened to be in Bordeaux teaching English to the boys of a French family.<sup>28</sup> This sojourn on the continent is sometimes taken to confirm what one might expect from a young man born into a family that was downwardly mobile although upwardly inclined, and who had failed and failed again to pass his university entry exams

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 expresses a cluster of sentiments one might have thought unknown to the writer of “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” In the first instance, he fits himself as an Englishman, opting to follow “the perfect English custom of dealing with an offender: a Frenchman duels with him: an Englishman ignores him.” But then the remainder of the letter must be read to be believed:

I feel my own life all the more precious and more dear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe. While it is true that the guns will effect a little useful weeding, I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds which were to have excelled the civilization of ten thousand years, are being annihilated—and bodies, the product of aeons of Natural Selection, melted down to pay for political statues. I regret the mortality of the English regulars less than that of the French, Belgian, or even Russian or German armies: because the former are all Tommy Atkins, poor fellows, while the continental armies are inclusive of the finest brains and temperaments of the land.<sup>30</sup>

This brief passage finds space enough to display self-centredness, a sort of pan-European elitism, sympathy for social Darwinism, and the kind of distasteful insensitivity to nationality that makes one want to root for the patriots. Rather compelling is that although Owen does, in a sidenote, affect regret at the military commodification of human bodies—although not quite their exposure or mutilation—his concern seems to be on behalf of da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, not the particular hands, cheeks, eyes, and limbs of boys that had already captured his poetic imagination—“Warm-sleeping knee to knee and cheek to cheek,” in the opening line of a Bordeaux fragment.<sup>31</sup> All in all, this and all his subsequent visions of citizenship, with or without the obligation to fight, are composite creations of Englishness and poethood. Back in London, and warming to the romance of battle, Owen is engaged by a notice that, as 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-enacting his poetic voice to cope with pitiful realities, and, in the process, politicizing his relationship with poetry itself: his return to France, this time for warring; and his relationship with Sassoon. Chronologically, the war comes first:

Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language and nothing but foul, even from one's own mouth (for all are devil ridden); 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 we sit with them all day, all night ... and a week later to come back and find them still sitting there, in motionless groups. THAT is what saps the 'soldierly spirit.'<sup>39</sup>

Owen's frustration with poetry, which is an after-effect of the hideousness, vileness, and foulness of direct experience, is pointed outward at the jingoism of many of his unseeing contemporaries, but also inward at his own lingering predisposition to linger on the beauty of broken bodies—the thread in this narrative that the next section deals with more carefully. Thus his war on poetry opens on two fronts. The first we have already flagged up: the voice raised against the ignorance and callousness of "certain poets," and the civilians they falsely hearten.<sup>40</sup> For instance, the unsparing gruesomeness of "A Terre":

I have my medals? — Discs to make eyes close.  
My glorious ribbons? — Ripped from my own back  
In scarlet shreds. (That's for your poetry book.)<sup>41</sup>

The direct experience which had Owen dispatched to Craiglockhart was a near miss in a shell attack in April 1917. Awakening from concussion, Owen remained—was "trapped"—in his shell-hole for several days, sheltering beneath corrugated iron.<sup>42</sup> I will not go over the details of their friendship, but suffice to say that Owen's encounter with Sassoon—both the man and his published collection, *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems*—affected the realisation that he too could write poetry about the army. Of course, Owen had already been writing about the war, for instance in "With an Identity Disc," to be discussed in a short while. But not one frontline experience made it into a poem before August 1917.<sup>43</sup> Sassoon

de-inhibited Owen by demonstrating that one could do army poetry in a way that was fiercely loyal, and indeed to “England”—the “England [that] one by one had fled to France.”<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, given its fuller context, this line from “Smile, Smile, Smile” might as well be a paradigmatic case of Owen’s poetry at war operating both as a “way out” and a “way in:”

Nation? — The half-limbed readers did not chafe  
 But smiled at one another curiously  
 Like secret men who know their secret safe  
 (This is the thing they know and never speak,  
 That England one by one had fled to France,  
 Not many elsewhere now, save under France.)

The more interesting second front in Owen’s war on poetry runs right through his own mind: his necessary re-enactment of an aesthetic tradition; necessary in order to refit his stargazing, star-struck Romanticism to document “the march of this retreating world.”<sup>45</sup> Two flashpoints on this front come to mind. The first is the opening salvo of ‘Exposure:’ “Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us.”<sup>46</sup> This line takes direct aim at the quintessential Romantic lyric, Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” with its genteel beginning: “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains my sense.” Owen deliberately corrupts and uglifies Keats’s vision, with the aim of showing there could be nothing traditionally beautiful about the predicament of the “Exposed,” who “only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.”<sup>47</sup> Given his formative engagement with the Romantic tradition, Owen’s new line of work as a soldier poet enacts an imaginative rebirth of that tradition, even as it knives it in the front.

The second flashpoint is contained in Owen’s indecision over what to title his own book. Originally he was content to carry over the title first intended for a collection of sonnets: *With Lightning and with Music*—this being a quotation from “Adonais,” Shelley’s elegy for Keats.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps his sense was that this evoked the imaginative centre of Romanticism, even amidst the “haunting flares” of war.<sup>49</sup> Also up for consideration was *English Elegies*, a regretful recollection of Tennyson’s *English Idylls*.<sup>50</sup> But the title Owen

chose, *Disabled and Other Poems*, was both a homage to Sassoon and a forward positioning of himself in the vanguard of a new tradition, rather than in the retreating march of the old.

Given that I am moderately more interested in getting to the heart of things than getting to their truth, I conclude this section with the conjecture that the two poems, “Anthem for Doomed Youth” and “With an Identity Disc,” mark liminal moments in the enactment of Owen’s identity as an English soldier and poet. A lesson of this discussion is that these identities tend to fold into one another—note that I can no longer really sustain this distinction as one between Englishness and poethood. The following conjectural reflections will be of use later on when the task is to extract something for ourselves from Owen’s staged cultivation of a compassionate sensibility.

The first of these poems is well-enough known not to require lengthy quotation. Dominic Hibberd gets close to my own reading of “Anthem” when he brands it “a mirror of the author’s poethood up to mid-1917.”<sup>51</sup> The alteration I would make is to say that the poem is a kind of “translucent” mirror—meaning that it permits a dim sighting of the character Owen’s poetry would take in his last year; for instance, the theme of grief will be revisited over and over in “Futility” and “Conscious,” which even echoes the earlier “drawing down of blinds,” with its “blind-chord,” which “drawls across the window-sill.”<sup>52</sup> Further, “Anthem’s” personification, and simultaneous perversion, of weaponry (“the monstrous anger of the guns”) prefigures “Arms and the Boy,” where we meet a “bayonet-blade,” “with famishing for flesh,” and “bullet leads,” which “long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads.”<sup>53</sup> Yet overall the romantic, ennobling, even patriotic references to “sad shires,” “patient minds,” and “bugles calling” cannot add up to the evocation of a distant mental landscape—at least not in 1917; quite the contrary.<sup>54</sup>

“Identity Disc” is marked “Doubtful” on Owen’s contents list for *Disabled*.<sup>55</sup> Thus either he considered it beneath the calibre of the thirty or so poems marked for inclusion, or

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 compassion**

Wilfred Owen's early, self-explorational poems are captivated by kisses, knees, and Keats. Already we have explored how Owen's Romanticism supplied the creative centre for a forceful new poetry at war; but still we have to consider his re-disclosures of intimacy and embodiment. The voice of lust in the prewar poems can be overbearing. The sexualized imagery of a 1912 effort, "The Rivals," is the beginning and end of its conceit, which effectively tempts the jealousy of "my Maid" by means of an affair with the shrubbery: "Ruddy pout the mouths of roses | More I kiss, more each uncloses."<sup>58</sup> But the feminine Maid

is either a foil or an uncertain placeholder. Owen's homosexual gaze is elsewhere keenly evident, for instance, in "Impromptu" ("Now, let me feel the feeling of thy hand — | For it is softer than the breasts of girls"<sup>59</sup>) and "A Navy Boy" ("His words were shapely, even as his lips"<sup>60</sup>). One could go on and on compiling lustful images, all the way through from the fondling flowers of "The Rivals," to the nuzzling weaponry of "Arms and the Boy." Indeed it is almost precisely my point that one cannot draw a line dividing Owen's prewar expressions of lust and his wartime turn to compassion: the second identifier is in important part a re-enactment of the first. So in "Greater Love," Owen's contemplation of men's lips—"Red lips are not so red | As the stained stones kissed by the English dead"<sup>61</sup>—is recast as a moment for compassion.

In Owen's final army poems the male subjects will be grisly and pitied, but his formative visions are godlike and pristine—literally in his ode to Christ, "Flawlessly moulded, fine exceedingly | ... His outlines changed, from beauty unto beauty."<sup>62</sup> And the Navy Boy comes to deserve *his* poem on account of his own outline, "so prim, so trim," and with "his silken muscles hiddenly." The poem recounts a conversation aboard a train, with the youth describing his trip to Hong Kong—"a ten months' run," with "no shore leave"—and the money he is taking home to his mother, whose mention brings the poem to an awkward end. In every verse but the one about the mother, the poet's mind drifts away to adore some "golden," "fresh," or "noble" feature—indeed, "all of him was clean as pure east wind."<sup>63</sup> The dynamic between the poet and his subject is entirely voyeuristic; for the reader the Navy Boy is simply a prop in a narrative of truncated flirtation. The war had already begun by 1915 when this poem was completed; but Owen, his encounters with the trenches and Sassoon still ahead of him, had hardly noticed.

For the remainder I rely on close readings of two further poems, "Disabled" and "Spring Offensive." "Disabled" is a case where the drama is in the attempted integration of a

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

bar, is hugely derivative of Owen's elsewhere versified lust. Yet its negotiation of embodiment and personhood is non-objectifying and tenderly defined: the young men eased by food, rest, and sexless intimacy. Even the slight innuendo of their "careless sleep" is forgiven by its simultaneous evocation of restlessness and comfort. Compassion, for sure; but framed in a way that only Wilfred Owen could have realised. The poem's disciplining of lust into compassion had been intimated earlier in "Disabled," as discussed, but also in "Apologia" ("I have made fellowships — | ... For love is not the binding of fair lips"<sup>69</sup>) and "The Send-Off" ("Their breasts were struck all white with wreath and spray | As men's are, dead"<sup>70</sup>). And though we cannot miss that not all these efforts are as successful or powerful, Fussell puts the general point well: Owen "harnesses his innate fondness for dwelling on the visible sensuous particulars of boys in order to promote an intimate identification with them ... To speak of 'sufferings' is not enough; one must see and feel the bloody head cradled dead on one's own shoulder."<sup>71</sup> And with "Spring Offensive," we are invited to experience the cradling of living, bleeding heads—an image that amounts to a satisfactory resolution of Owen's evolving appreciation of both fellowship and fragility. Indeed, the remainder of the poem—though certainly imperfect and incomplete—is all but a study of these themes.

In a sense, and perhaps actually, these are the survivors among the "lame," "blind," "stumbling," "flound'ring" gas attack victims met in "Dulce et Decorum Est."<sup>72</sup> By now, Owen's boys—his England fled to France—find they are at "the end of the world," its "verge," or "brink."<sup>73</sup> (This being the actual stopping-off point for Jay Winter's "otherworldly" witnesses.) The sounds and symbols of war ("bugles") and nation ("high flags") that would claim to define their relationship to the world, and to each other, lose all resonance; their role served by "a lift and flair of eyes." What clears and deepens Owen's gaze, and his poetic voice *qua* compassion, is a clear appreciation of the simultaneous tenuousness and togetherness of life at the brink.

**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—as if this were a kite museum, or the National Centre for Extreme Sports.

These are exhibits of a very different kind from those we find at the Historial de la Grande Guerre, at Péronne, Somme—named after its intended confusion of history and memory ("memorial")—where the battle for which the region is remembered is represented by nothing at all; instead, a blank wall confronts visitors with the impossibility of representation. The "experience" of the trenches is conjured without affected realism, but rather with pristine, white, shallow dugouts, arranged with uniforms and the stuff of ordinary life in the trenches. The Historial's "eyes down" approach distracts from heroic, exhilarative discourses of war to focus on the space occupied by the dead men who once lived in this "horizontal" landscape, as geographically proximate as it is mentally distant.<sup>75</sup>

I must not put the point too bluntly, since there are fine and engaging exhibits in both museums, but I do mean to gesture to the idea that what distinguishes the two is very like the difference between Wilfred Owen's modes of warning: escapism and escaping. While the Kensington Gardens trench and Jessie Pope's poetry have their purpose in the firm enactment of received opinions—they are as "Discs to make eyes close"—Owen comes to value only

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, *Lust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

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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*, 292-297.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 535.
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 532-534.
- <sup>16</sup> Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, 227-228.
- <sup>17</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 119.
- <sup>18</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 535.
- <sup>19</sup> Kendall, 239.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.
- <sup>22</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 193.
- <sup>23</sup> Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001), 155-156.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.
- <sup>25</sup> Winter, 30, 49-50, 271.
- <sup>26</sup> Stallworthy, 113.
- <sup>27</sup> Kerr, 169, 2.
- <sup>28</sup> Fussell, 24.
- <sup>29</sup> Kerr, 172.
- <sup>30</sup> Owen, *Collected Letters*, eds. Harold Owen and John Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 284-285.
- <sup>31</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 441.
- <sup>32</sup> Owen, *Collected Letters*, 341 (his emphasis).
- <sup>33</sup> Stallworthy, 123.
- <sup>34</sup> Hibberd, 164-165.
- <sup>35</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 3.
- <sup>36</sup> Kendall, 49-50.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>38</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 535.
- <sup>39</sup> Owen, *Collected Letters*, 431-432.
- <sup>40</sup> Kerr, 323.
- <sup>41</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 178.
- <sup>42</sup> Hibberd, 240.
- <sup>43</sup> Kerr, 309.
- <sup>44</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 190.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.
- <sup>47</sup> Kerr, 7-8; Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 185.
- <sup>48</sup> Kerr, 278.
- <sup>49</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 140.
- <sup>50</sup> Kerr, 278.
- <sup>51</sup> Hibberd, 269.
- <sup>52</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 99, 158.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.
- <sup>54</sup> John Pittock, "The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen: a Dissenting Reappraisal," in Patrick J. Quinn and Steven Trout, eds., *The Literature of the Great War Reconsidered: Beyond Modern Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 212.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 539.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.
- <sup>57</sup> Owen, *Collected Letters*, 510.
- <sup>58</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 27-28.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.
- <sup>62</sup> Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 73.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-80.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.
- <sup>65</sup> Fussell, 291.

<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* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 113.