

Ironic Allusion in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen

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FACED with the incredible horror of warfare in the trenches, Wilfred Owen sought to find some yardstick with which to measure its carnage. He had been nurtured on the aestheticism of the Georgians, of Tennyson, and particularly of Keats, but the irrelevance of poetry of excessive self-pity and beauty to Owen's life on the Western Front became distressingly clear. Thus the poet prefaced his poems with this remark indicating the chasm he saw between a poetry of beauty and a poetry of truth:

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.¹

Although Owen often echoes the poets he had read in a straightforward manner, many of his more effective poems depend upon ironic allusions not only to past British poets but also to at least two Roman authors and to the Bible. The irony of these allusions consists in the enormous distance between the sense of values of the writers of the past and their naive conception of war and Owen's immediate knowledge of its mindless obscenity. Byron, among the English poets of the past century, had anticipated Owen with his description of the siege of Ismail in *Don Juan*.

Owen also criticizes the religious establishment through references to the Bible which project the disparity between the

¹ *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. C. Day Lewis, 1963, p. 31, hereafter cited in text.

gentle teachings and example of Christ and the English Church's support of the war. The irony is telling because of the unquestionable authority of the soldier-poet in speaking of life and death on the battlefield. In a letter from a hospital on the Somme, he indicated the distinction he made between Christianity and Christ:

And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience? . . . Christ is literally in 'no man's land'. There men often hear His voice: Greater Love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for a friend. Is it spoken in English only and French? I do not believe so. Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism.¹

For Owen the past could not comprehend the present.

Two patriotic poems of Classical literature provide ironic parallels to poems by Owen. 'Arms and the Boy' clearly parodies the opening of the *Aeneid*, Virgil's claim, 'Arma virumque cano', and his flattery of Augustus's apparent descent from a line of gallant Trojan warriors. In Owen's poem the innocence of the boy is caustically contrasted with the Classical allusions to harpies and (possibly) to Actaeon, who had violated with his eyes the chastity of Diana:

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

(p. 43)

The young soldier's innocence is despoiled by his need to embrace bayonets and bullets. Owen is as aware as Shaw in *Arms and the Man* of the specious glow surrounding military glory.

The well known 'Dulce et Decorum Est' was written to Jessie Pope, a contemporary British poetess who had extolled the pleasure of dying for one's country, but Owen chose a more formidable poet to oppose in Horace, who had written the prototypical poem on the subject. Owen's tactic is simple: to portray the death of a soldier from chlorine gas in the most graphic terms and then bitterly end the poem with the admonition that if anyone had seen the sight of this horrible death,

¹ Quoted in *The Collected Poems*, p. 167.

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.

(p. 55)

At this early stage of Owen's career, he allows the ironic contrast to remain relatively undeveloped, or at least to develop only one side of the parallel. In later poems he juxtaposes correspondences in scrupulous detail.

Most of Owen's ironic references to the poetry of the past are to the works of the Romantics, who had influenced him deeply, particularly Keats. These allusions indicate the poet's disillusionment with the ideals of the Romantics, which sounded rapturous and inspiring in peacetime but which, to Owen, echoed hollow and fatuous in war. Just as Owen's preface emphasized the distinction between the literature of beauty and of war, an earlier poem, 'On My Songs', although written in sonnet form, manifests the poet's growing disenchantment with the poetry of his predecessors:

Yet are there days when all these hoards of thought
 Hold nothing for me. Not one verse that throbs
 Throbs with my head, or as my brain is fraught.

(p. 119)

This effort was composed long before Owen had been involved in the stark realities of war.

Several war poems exhibit an ironic incongruity of allusion to poems of the past. The eerie 'Strange Meeting' describes the man the narrator has killed (just as Hardy had done in 'The Man He Killed') as the slain soldier speaks in the role of a *Doppelgänger*, reminding the narrator of all the profitable things left undone because of his death:

Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
 I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
 Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.

(p. 35)

The last line here parodies the last line in Wordsworth's 'Intimations Ode', 'Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears', in that the speaker in Wordsworth's poem depicts the therapy that nature offers to the soul that has lost some of its original

grandeur. In 'Strange Meeting', on the other hand, the speaker would attempt a cleansing therapy in the world above which would make it see the futility of war, but death has incapacitated him, preventing him from remedying the conditions which caused both his death and the deaths of others to follow.

'*Apologia Pro Poemate Meo*' defines beauty in a context far different from that of Keats's Odes which appear as an ironic background to Owen's portrayal of the ugliness which achieves a strange beauty in war because of human courage. Truth may be beauty, according to Owen, but not because the subject in the poem is aesthetically attractive like an urn, but because a beauty is born to the human spirit amidst the ugliness of war. The poem pictures

... Joy, whose ribbon slips —
 But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong;
 Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
 Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

(p. 39)

The echo here of 'Ode on Melancholy' is most apropos in a grimly ironic sense; Keats's 'And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips' even contains the same rhyme (*lips — drips*) as Owen's portrait of Joy. Keats is saddened by the vanishing of pleasure in its act of consummation, but Owen sees a sturdier beauty in undesired human suffering.

'A Terre' and its sub-title, ('Being the Philosophy of Many Soldiers'), laconically provide a grimly witty joke at the expense of Shelley, who continually desired some kind of annihilation because life was too arduous. Owen had little patience with such self-pity and explains how the British soldier under bombardment agreed with Shelley's desire for union with the earth:

'I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone',
 Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:
 The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.
 'Pushing up daisies' is their creed, you know.
 To grain, then, go my fat, to buds my sap,
 For all the usefulness there is in soap.

(p. 65)

In trench warfare it was difficult to distinguish who was alive, who dead, who above, and who below the earth. D. S. R. Welland remarked about this poem that

Battle conditions often made it impossible to bury the dead in a fiercely contested area sometimes for weeks on end and the troops were obliged to live in close proximity to them. Many who were buried suffered an untimely and grisly resurrection through a bursting shell, a land subsidence or a digging party, and many became visibly assimilated into the squelching mud. There was no escaping the sight or smell of this putrescence.¹

'Inspection' recalls Lady Macbeth's pathological need to remove the spot of blood on her hands, which was symbolic of her guilt. In Owen's poem the spot is also symbolic of the guilt of those who send soldiers to be killed.² The dramatic irony in the poem depends upon the obtuseness of the sergeant-speaker, concerned only with the ritual of cleanliness and not with the meaning of the bloodstains he finds on the soldier's uniform during an inspection. He relates his own insensitivity without comprehending its myopia:

Some days 'confined to camp' he got,
For being 'dirty on parade'.
He told me, afterwards, the damnéd spot
Was blood, his own. 'Well, blood is dirt,' I said.

(p. 79)

[Note how the acute mark in *damnéd* emphasizes the allusion.]

Like Pilate, who insisted upon immaculate hands, the sergeant is interested in cleanliness because it is a proper virtue. The meaningless theatricality of army inspections is exposed here, but more subtly the poem suggests the metamorphosis of blood into clay, an image without irony since the trenches were continually stained with blood.

An allusion more difficult to ascertain appears in 'Soldier's Dream', in which a soldier dreams that all the weapons of war have become fouled or jammed and the war can no longer continue. Owen may have had Book Six of *Paradise Lost* in mind when at the end of the poem God sees to it that the war can continue:

But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;
And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.

(p. 84)

¹ *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, 1960, p. 65.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 62-4.

The pun on 'our repairs' indicates that the soldiers will be fixed as well, so that they can no longer function as whole human beings. It is significant that Michael becomes the symbol of divine military power and not Christ, for in *Paradise Lost* Christ is the supreme military conqueror in Heaven. Either Owen was not thinking of Milton at all but instead working from tradition, or else he had the epic specifically in mind and wanted to reserve Christ for a gentler symbolic role as the sacrificial soldier, to be discussed under the category of Biblical allusions.

The final literary reference with ironic overtones is to Gray's *Elegy*: 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave'. The line was commonplace enough, and in Owen's 'Fragment: Not one Corner . . .' the allusion, although agreeing in spirit and concept with Gray's elegy (The title of the fragment was to be *An Imperial Elegy* or *Libretto for Marche Funèbre*), ironically contrasts the concept of a glorious path with a vision of Europe as a vast soldier's cemetery:

I looked and saw.
 An appearance of a titan's grave,
 At the length thereof a thousand miles.
 It crossed all Europe like a mystic road,
 Or as the Spirits' Pathway lieth on the night.
 And I heard a voice crying,
 This is the Path of Glory.

(p. 108)

Humphrey Cobb's novel, *Paths of Glory*, also exploited the irony of Gray's phrase, but it is also possible that Owen is ridiculing the traditional *Via Mystica* in the phrase, 'mystic road', since the Christian mystics attempted to reach God through this process while the soldier reaches God with the speed of a bullet or shrapnel fragment. The soldier, however, dies not a mystical but a literal death.

Owen grew more and more to reject traditional, or perhaps the better word nowadays is 'establishment', Christianity because it was enthusiastically supporting the war, at least in its early stages, as a Crusade. Eventually he distinguished Christ from Christianity and identified Christ with the soldiers in the trenches through their shared suffering. In a letter written on 4 July 1918, he recounts his training the troops:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work — teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were not complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.¹

D. S. R. Welland points out how in 'Strange Meeting' the soldier bleeds without a wound:

I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were

(p. 36)

Welland explains, 'The implied reference to Christ's "agony and bloody sweat" is inescapable, illuminating, and wholly successful'.² The common experience of Christ and the soldier is sacrifice (as Owen's letter quoted above, indicated), not the militancy of 'Onward Christian Soldiers'.

Miss Rosemary Freeman has discussed 'Greater Love' in connection with parody, not of the Biblical text (John xv. 13), but in terms of the poem's criticism of romantic love. George Herbert and Wilfred Owen are similar in this respect:

Both adopt the formulae of love poetry but direct them to other occasions. The principle is a principle of parody, for the method without losing the emotional force of the original creates a standard which exposes the limitations of its context. The impression is not ironic, only suggestive of a more profound meaning.³

Forgotten though are the subtle overtones of Christ's crucifixion which permeate the poem. If the English soldiers are 'knife-skewed', so were Christ's hands nail-skewed; if they were contorted in death agony, so was Christ on the cross, and more explicitly the soldiers have to bear 'Your [the woman's] cross through flame and hail' (p. 41), a damaging innuendo which implies that the soldiers have enough suffering without worrying about the fidelity of their women, another cross for them to bear.

¹ Quoted in *The Collected Poems*, p. 23.

² *Wilfred Owen*, p. 67.

³ 'Parody as a Literary Form: George Herbert and Wilfred Owen', *ELC*, 12 (1963), 308.

Another poem, 'At a Calvary near the Ancre', more clearly exploits the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion as a foil to the horrors of war. The first stanza depicts the ironic situation of the image of Christ 'wounded in action':

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

(p. 82)

The civilian Christians are nowhere to be seen, just as many, including Peter, denied Christ when danger was imminent, and even more ironically, the modern soldiers bear a load just as Christ bore his cross. In the second stanza the priests who have been seduced by the sins of pride and of the flesh are 'flesh-marked by the Beast', the Anti-Christ, who opposes the suffering Saviour. In the final stanza the poem expands to condemn the noisy war propagandists in contradistinction to the quiet soldiers who offer their lives in love, like Christ:

The scribes on all the people shove,
 And brawl allegiance to the state,
 But they who love the greater love
 Lay down their life; they do not hate.

(p. 82)

The scribes and pharisees correspond perfectly to the war propagandists because both groups protest too much about their fervor.

The last poem illustrating ironic allusion to the Bible, 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' (in some MSS 'Old Men'), has been too often superficially examined because of the obviousness of the reference to the twenty-second chapter of Genesis, the story of Abraham and Isaac. Just as in other poems suggesting the sacrifice of Christ, 'The Parable' utilizes the intended sacrifice of Abraham. The irony of this allegory, however, emanates from the contrast between the relieved humanity of Abraham and the wilful homicide of the leaders of Europe. The contrast is sharpened by a rather close ironic correspondence between the Biblical text and the poem; that is, the subtle differences between the two indicate that Owen probably had the text of Genesis close by when he wrote the

poem and that he intensified the irony scrupulously. Thus, in Genesis Isaac remarks on the preparations of 'fire and wood', but in the poem he observes the 'fire and iron' of the battlefield; in Genesis Abraham simply 'bound Isaac' but in the poem:

Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there.

(p. 42)

Further, in the original Abraham sees the ram caught in a thicket as a possible sacrifice, but in the poem Abram is too blind to see, and an angel, representing a good spiritual impulse, tells Abram to 'Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him'. The ending of the poem then offers an obvious contrast in the slaying of 'half the seed of Europe, one by one' with Abraham's saving of his son. Genesis xii. 17 deepens the irony in the blessing given by God to Abraham's seed as opposed to the sterility and destruction effected by the old man of Europe: 'That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies'. Clearly the opposite, Owen prophesies, will be the result of the sacrifice in 'The Parable'.

Owen also took advantage of what is now called folk culture, as in his picture of the maimed and wounded reading the optimistic propaganda from home in 'Smile, Smile, Smile'. Every soldier knew the lines from the marching song,

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag
And smile, smile, smile.

.....
Smile, boys, that's the style.

But the smile of the casualties in the face of the glorious programmes for the youth of England depends upon the realization that the future of England was really in France:

That England one by one had fled to France,
Not many elsewhere now, save under France.

(p. 77)

For the poet this was the true 'Lost Generation'.

Wilfred Owen in his poetry found ironic allusions to literature and the Bible effective in driving home to his readers the horror of

war and the inability of the values and morality of Western Christian civilization to comprehend the nature of World War I. Originally seeking the traditions of his past and its literature to support his poetry and writing an often too derivative verse, the poet discovered that the traditional support he was seeking simply wasn't extant, and so he paradoxically found sustenance in those traditions by displaying their impotence in explaining the cataclysm of modern warfare.

Cat to stay

Round eyes at the window
Stared us out until we let them in —
Black cat with white boots
And clean clerical collar.

It paused in the door as if
It might be making a mistake,
Then paced a favourable advance
Towards the offering of milk.

From nowhere it adopted us,
Made a blanket its own
And learned the garden hazards
Of the neighbouring dogs.

A peaceful visitor, possessed
And never doubting her charm,
She stayed three days and went,
An inviolate houseguest.

Like a hospitable order
We speculated on her going
And felt some justification in
Our acceptance by those round eyes.

MATTHEW MITCHELL