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“Directed into a Bed of Trenches”: The Shift in the Language of Elegy Demonstrated by the War Poetry of Wilfred Owen

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In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry describes the ways in which torture and war affect the human consciousness, the ways in which these absolute destructions—destructions of the body, destructions of culture, and destructions of consciousness—are performed, and then how the world of people in pain must by necessity be remade. Of particular interest is the way in which Scarry argues that “War is relentless in taking for its own interior content the interior content of the

wounded and open human body” (81), and how language itself undergoes a dramatic change in conflict. Not only does the “human body” holding a weapon “become in this vocabulary an extension of the weapon”, rather than the other way around, but that “language is lent to the weapon at precisely the same moment that it is being lifted away from the sentient source of those projections” (81). The official language of war aims to make invisible the bodies, but “they cannot always achieve and maintain invisibility” (81).

There were, for example, at the end of World War I thirty-nine million corpses and at the end of World War II between forty-seven and fifty-five million corpses—and more remarkable, perhaps, than those forms of description already looked at are the particular vocabularies that arise once the injuries are seen, and that assign them to an accidental, incidental, or subordinate position: human wounds are not, as earlier, escorted out of view but are instead escorted from the center of view to the margins. (Scarry 72)

Civilization is annihilated, and with it, language and literature. The experience of war necessarily changes the formation of literature.

While neither Great Britain nor its language was entirely annihilated because of World War I, many men and women contributing to literature

were irrevocably changed by their experiences of that conflict. This was the first war of its kind, which Paul Fussell attests to in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, while the soldier-poets had unprecedented access to literature, both prior to and during the war, and therefore knew the traditional language of such poetic forms as, for instance, the elegy, that traditional language met a situation in which it was, while not irrelevant, no longer entirely appropriate. Technology changes language, too, by the need to describe new inventions or new actions which are permitted by the new inventions themselves. In the case of industrialized warfare, those new actions include a previously unattainable ability to kill. There are new ways of maiming the body, of rendering it unknowable. Not only is the consciousness of the victim of war obliterated as he is killed, but so is the consciousness of the survivor; his language must change to reflect his experience and must be recreated. Part of the job of the war poet then is to participate in what Scarry refers to as the “making” (or rather, remaking) of the world in response to the trauma which the body (and the earth) has experienced. The war objects are, as Fussell has noted, elevated and made more strange when placed into the context of the natural landscape, a world in which they cannot exist as anything but an indication of a change in how war is experienced. This becomes obvious in the war poetry of Wilfred Owen, for whom the literary

tradition of the elegy—and more specifically, the pastoral elegy—is non-applicable, necessitating the exploration and remaking of form to better match the poet’s experience.

It is useful to approach Owen’s poetry from the understanding that in the age of industrialized warfare, there comes a merging between unnatural and natural, technology and flesh. Scarry’s example of the way in which the body becomes an extension of the weapon as opposed to the weapon an extension of the body in the metaphor of how war works to an extent, but Walter Benjamin, in the epilogue of *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, gives a more elaborate explanation of the ways in which industrial war damages, which Scarry takes somewhat for granted, writing in an age where there has always been industrialized war. In the epilogue, Benjamin addresses specifically the ways in which fascism functions in a world which has become increasingly proletarianized with the advent of technology and the increase in technological production. Regarding industrialized war, Benjamin says:

The destruction caused by war furnishes proof that society was not mature enough to make technology its organ, that technology was not sufficiently developed to master the elemental forces of society. The most horrifying features of imperialist war are

determined by the discrepancy between the enormous means of production and their inadequate use in the process of production... *Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in 'human material' for the natural material society has denied it.* Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and in gas warfare it has found a new means of abolishing the aura. (1071)

Technology overtakes man because the natural cannot be used to fuel it; and if we are to consider Kazin's statement (quoted by Fussell) that "War may be the ultimate purpose of technological society" (347), then we must also accept that technology is what causes the majority of the damage in industrialized war, and that technology in particular then affects the ways in which war poets like Owen write.

The convergence of technology and human does not have to be bad (feminist critic Donna Haraway suggests more positive outlooks, for example), but in the case of the war poem, it remains that tool of destruction. The gas warfare scars, it eviscerates, without even needing to put a physical scratch on the bodies of its victims; there is no way that traditional language of mourning can encompass this unimaginable kind of destruction

and loss. In "Dulce et Decorum Est," Owen takes the traditional form of the sonnet and merges two together, the form itself a protest against the ways in which the traditional has been upturned and disrupted by the experience of new war. There is no room in this poem for the old romanticizing of battle which exists in earlier poems about warriors (Fussell, 190); Owen's soldiers are "blood-shod. All went lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots / Of gas-shells dropping softly behind" (6-8). It is easy to say that soldiers often went through multiple pairs of knitted socks a week (wearing them out after only a few days in the trenches), but it is another to be given the image of soldiers who are too tired to be fully aware of the danger launched into their trench. Perhaps something like "blood-shod" might have existed before, but even that too might best evoke another image of war, of the American soldiers during the Revolution who had no shoes. It is not consistent with the bucolic. Jahan Ramazani notes that in "Dulce et Decorum Est," as in many of Owen's war poems, that the poet/speaker is "halfway between deranged soldier and guilty onlooker," who is able to helmet "himself at the cry of 'Gas! Gas!'" while watching "someone yell and flounder" (81). Fussell's take on this same line is that it mimics, in its exclamation marks, the "Play up! play up!" of "Vital Lampada," in which war is treated like a game or sport (27). This is,

of course, another convention against which Owen is protesting; the soldiers, while perhaps innocent when they initially come to war, are not children playing at Ideal Imperial British Soldiers, but are more often thrown unprepared into trenches where there are not enough supplies to go around from shoes to socks to even gas masks, and who often, as in the case of the other soldier who does not have his mask on, are not ready to deal with the new technologies of war. By committing this fact to the literary memory, it cannot be ignored.

In several of the essays in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, Peter Sacks makes the note of the way in which dreams play into the elegy. This is the easiest way and perhaps most frequent way in which we encounter the dead, for better or worse; in the case of the traditional elegy, those dream visions offer a place for consolation of the bereaved. This is not so in “Dulce et Decorum Est,” where the speaker says, “In all my dreams before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (16-7). The “plunging” of the soldier echoes the “green sea...drowning” of the previous line; the speaker’s sight is changed by the wearing of the gas mask, which often had yellow or green glass over the eyes, as much as it is by the chaos of the moment. There is a literal reason for the change in visual perception, as well as an unreal-ing component in re-viewing the scene. The technology of the

war—in this case the gas mask—becomes a part of the soldier, protecting him while still allowing a distorted vision of the victim.

It is a crime not to remember the dead; the speaker is plagued by dreams of him, and Owen himself even remarked in a letter that he makes it a point to remember those who have died as it seems inappropriate not to. He writes, “I confess I *bring on* what few war dreams I now have, entirely by *willingly* considering war of an evening. I do so because I have my duty to perform towards War” (Fussell, 355). And so, the effects of the technology of war must be recorded and then presented in a way truthful to what those technologies do to the body.

The speaker of “Dulce” says that if their audience could only experience these war deaths—and be forced to remember them—then “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*” (25-8). Even the idea of dying for one’s country is something that belongs to an antiquated world, indicated by the invocation of the Latin phrase. The accusation against a propaganda machine which denied the actualities of war is obvious here; even as an elegiac poem for the dead unnamed soldier, who is still alive when he’s flung onto the wagon, the anger at what has become of these boys comes across in the “vile, incurable sores on innocent

tongues” (25) and the fact that no previous elegiac language could articulate what this particular war and its weapons does to the body. Further, Owen’s speaker rages against a ban on depictions of what actually was happening to men (to their bodies, to their psyches) within the press at the time. Susan Sontag notes in the book on war and trauma photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, that “the Great War saw the first organized ban on press photography at the front” (64)—though she also notes that “Censorship of the press by the British General Staff was less inflexible [than the German and French]” (64), so there was maneuverable space for the press to represent war as it was rather than just repeat the traditional beckoning to young men—the press (by the orders of the General Staff or not) often just chose not to. Sontag also refers to an earlier consumption of tragedy within the news, which was critiqued by Wordsworth:

The argument that modern life consists of a diet of horrors by which we are corrupted and to which we gradually become habituated is a founding idea of the critique of modernity.....In 1800, Wordsworth, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, denounced the corruption of sensibility produced by the ‘great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for

extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.’ This process of overstimulation acts ‘to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind’ and ‘reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor’. (106-7)

It’s impossible to know how Wordsworth would have reacted to Owen, or to the Great War. That said, the problem of how the press in particular presented the traumas of real people had been an issue for at least a century before the war. Sensationalism and lies printed in the papers create a situation in which Owen is obligated to respond; the dead dying is not something which should be treated as a kind of propaganda entertainment, in which people who are safe at home from the violations of war can get to engage with at their own leisure and then feel satisfied about. As Ramazani says, “If the poem pretended to hold a mirror up to war alone, it might give the reader the pleasing illusion of having ‘understood’ such suffering, but it also holds a mirror up to itself, echoing its own sounds and parading its allusions and figurations” (78). The language of “Dulce et Decorum Est” cannot offer consolation to a group who not only have no idea what the suffering of war actually is, but also will not offer it to a group who would otherwise treat the whole thing as something far from themselves in which they do not participate.

Regarding the way in which memory and memorial functions in the war poems of the Great War Generation, Esther Pardo-Sanchez argues in “Writing War: Owen, Spender and Poetic Forms and Concerns” that:

The first generation of war poets were able to convey powerfully a sense of the tragic dimensions of the Great War as well as a sense of their own suffering. Nevertheless, their writing failed to fulfil one of the social functions of war poetry—to commemorate and memorialize the war dead. They refused to offer consolation in their poetry, because they rejected the traditional cultural narratives that were invoked in order to make the mass destruction of war meaningful or acceptable. Instead their writing insisted upon a deeply ambivalent attitude towards the war. (105)

While Pardo-Sanchez’s argument has some merit in that it is obvious that Owen has no intention of offering the traditional consolation of earlier elegies, as in the works of Milton and Tennyson (whose consolation is even somewhat affected by the seeming arbitrariness of the end of *In Memoriam*), she misses that the act of writing these poems in the first place is an act of commemorating and memorializing the war dead.

Owen does not write a poem like “Dulce et Decorum Est” to be unnecessarily grotesque; he

writes the poem because it seems as though nobody else is telling the truth, and as a witness/participant in warfare, he has the job of memorializing the unfairly killed young men in a way that is reflective and appropriate to what has happened. The ethos of a poem like “Dulce et” is that in order to pay actual respect to the dead, those observing the war from the outside should not encourage others to join up, but to be honest about the way in which the war technologies brutalize bodies. Further, it would be dishonest and inappropriate to attempt to make the “mass destruction of war meaningful or acceptable” because, unlike the kind of previous un-industrialized war of empire which Britain had pursued (and which countless other authors and poets lauded), or any war in which Britain had participated to date, there was no reason for the British to be involved except through by proxy of their alliances with other countries. This is a point which Michael Walzer notes in *Just and Unjust Wars*; the length of the war, its seeming lack of any imaginable end, and its general purposelessness, Walzer argues, contributes to the idea of the Great War as being a particularly indefensible military pursuit. Why should Owen as a poet who is in the war want to glorify that traumatic experience, especially for the satisfaction of a group who is not also in war? Owen is not just ambivalent towards the war but rather outright upset with poor commandship, the inability of the press to

accurately report upon it, and the mechanism of the industrialized war itself, and these emotions all come across in his war poems.

It may be useful to note another shift in language which happens and is obvious in “Anthem for Doomed Youth;” the youth are plural, the subject of the mourning multiple. It is difficult to argue that Owen in particular is not interested in memorializing the dead when a poem like “Anthem” exists, even if the way in which he memorializes them is distinctly different from what audiences would be used to; the traditional mourning bells (echoing Gray’s *Elegy*) are not church bells, but “the monstrous anger of the guns” (2). The world itself has changed: nobody rings the church bells for these dying, doomed boys because there are too many. Reconstructed, what exists to tell the world that the youths are dead (or doomed to die), are the weapons which will kill them. Ramazani’s assessment of “Anthem” as being, at least for Owen, a particularly consolatory poem, undercuts the other aspect of Pardo-Sanchez’s assessment of the war poets’ disposition towards non-consolation.

James Campbell, in “Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism,” describes the divide between soldiers and civilians through the curtain of combat, in arguing that: “It can, indeed has, been seen as the ultimate rite of passage: a definitive coming to manhood for the

industrial age, in which boys become men by confronting mechanical horror and discovering their essential masculinity, perhaps even their essential humanity, in a realm from which the feminine presence is banished” (204). Campbell marks the conflation of war with combat, but in the case of Owen’s war poetry, the two are more or less interchangeable because the British civilian audience he writes for (or against) is not in the combat zone themselves. There is not, however, a real confrontation of essential masculinity for the doomed youth in this poem, because there’s no chance for them to grow from their experience of war. Scarry puts it that “dying is like living, but different; bleeding is breathing only not exactly” (77). There is still a transformation of the body happening in “Anthem”—the boys “die as cattle,” a dehumanization reflecting the attitude taken towards the boys who go to war to replace the bodies which have been transformed into the dead before them, who, too, will be transformed into and slaughtered by the mechanical. They remain, however, still boys; there is no transformation into a fully idealized adult male because Owen’s soldiers are killed before they can achieve the glory articulated in the earlier traditional mode. Dying does not elevate them, either; they cannot be raised by church bells which do not ring. The language of Thomas Gray’s *Elegy* is again non-applicable; there is no hope for something kind to be written

on headstones when the dead themselves remain unacknowledged, so instead Owen transforms the traditional so that it can better suit the new circumstances of loss. The soldiers are the “human material repayment” which Benjamin observes, and the only person who can raise them above the conception of them as cattle is Owen, who himself is cattle like them.

The most significant shift in the language between the traditional and what Owen does can best be found in the description of nature, the description of war objects, and a convergence of the two. “Spring Offensive” is one poem which reflects an invocation of the pastoral because of its setting and the language with which Owen begins—“Halted against the shade of a last hill, / They fed, and, lying easy, were at ease / And, finding comfortable chests and knees / Carelessly slept” (1-4). The men are both at ease in the military sense and the version of resting easily, with Owen’s language lending itself easily to a duality. Yet this moment of careless peace is temporary; the May breeze is “murmurous with wasp and midge” and the “summer oozed into their veins / Like the injected drug for their bones’ pains, / Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass” (9-12). If the shepherds of the traditional elegy are comforted in their loss because the entirety of nature mourns for them, they have no place in a world in which the landscape itself has become a

threat to continued survival. Fussell has mentioned the shift in the language of the flowers; Owen does not use poppies and roses but has buttercups, which are more weed-like, and against which the stain of blood would be far more obvious than the reds of the poppies. The “soft sudden cups / Opened in thousands for their blood; and the green slopes / Chasmed and steepened to sheer to infinite space” (31-3) as the “whole sky burned / With fury against them” (30-1). The reconstruction of the world is one in which even the landscape seems to want the soldier-subjects dead, welcoming in the bloodshed. Additionally, while the landscape is given a personification similar to that of the landscapes of traditional pastoral elegies, it is changed: these flowers do not mourn for the dead, but eagerly look forward to the bloodshed. This is not necessarily the technological uprising which Benjamin refers to, but rather reflects a shift in worldview overall. The technology warps the world, and the natural landscape responds in kind—or rather, doesn’t respond so much as the poet’s experience of the world changes. Perhaps this is something which begins to be seen in earlier genres like some Romantic prose and poetry, but the consolation which those poets receive from nature is not present for poets like Owen. The overwhelming power of the field of flowers comes not in the kind of transcendental experience a poet like Shelley has at the top of Mont Blanc, but

rather in a way which literally lowers soldiers into the ground. They become a part of those chasming green slopes in a downward momentum.

A poem like “Spring Offensive” articulates the change in attitude towards nature and a shift in the way natural objects figure into the landscape of a poem. Fussell notes that “For the English, nature is, as Wordsworth and his Victorian successors instructed them, a ‘stay’ against the chaos of industrial life,” (255) and that “Since war takes place outdoors and always within nature, its symbolic status is that of the ultimate antipastoral” (252). While where war takes place has changed (we see more urban warfare today than we did even 40 years ago, something which has affected how conflict is fought in particular in the Middle East), Fussell’s observation still remains true when looking at poetry of war written after the advent of the Industrial Revolution through the U.S. engagement with Vietnam. War may not have necessarily been the total antipastoral space—or, and this may be another way to further Fussell’s point, the destroyed pastoral space—it now is identified as being, had it not been for World War I in the first place. And in discussing “Exposure,” another of Owen’s poems, Fussell points out that the “pastoral details are invoked as a comfort” (256); that comfort, however, becomes manipulated in a poem like “Spring Offensive” because it is as inaccessible as the very language of

the traditional elegy. It may be easy to say that war has always had a devastating effect on landscapes, but in the English language, this is the first time that there’s an articulation of war being the source of the change, and in such a violent way. Given the relationship which Fussell describes between nature and Englishness, a war in which almost an entire generation of young men are killed would certainly also have a negative impact on the way in which the traditional comforts in times of emotional duress are interpreted and then described on the page.

While the shift in the language may be articulated best in the re-representations of nature in contrast to the mechanical—the “swift unseen bullets” of the “Spring Offensive” (35) are not so different from the wasps of the May breeze (9), except for the fact that they are metal, and that they tear through flesh much more easily than a wasp stinging—these shifts in consciousness and language are subsections of an overall change in the English elegy (and English poetry in general). Sandra Gilbert discusses a change in the experience of loss and death itself which happens in the Great War, focusing her argument in “Rats’ Alley: The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti)Pastoral Elegy” on the poetry of Wallace Stevens. She does, of course, mention Owen as a counterpart to Stevens, and says that:

Like Wilfred Owen...Stevens insists that

the unprecedentedly bleak materiality of death in the Great War necessarily revises literary as well as literal relationships to dying, death, and the dead. In fact, just as for Owen the horrifying *modernity* of ‘modern death’ resides in the gulf between the ‘divine discontent’ felt by Tennyson and the sheer bodily misery Owen ascribes to his own wartime experience (‘frozen alive, with dead men for comforters’), for Stevens death’s modernity is best dramatized by the continuum along which death as a pale rider on a pale horse ‘gesturing grandiose things in the air’ dissolves into a ‘symbol of sentiment’ that must be replaced by a new phrase... Thus, for both these otherwise very different artists, the war that was supposed to end all wars has become as crucial a turning point in the history of both death and elegy as it is in the history of warfare. (181-2)

Gilbert goes further in identifying the absurdity of any attempt to associate the pastoral—with its “vegetation gods” and “images of resurrection”—with the waste land which results from the Great War (184) and suggests that the whole idea of the pastoral elegy had to be revised by every poet, not just Owen. It makes sense to combine Gilbert’s argument that the change had to happen with Scarry’s explanation of what happens to

the consciousness during torture and war—if the change had to happen because of the war, then it is also because the war obliterates all things, including the cultural traditions of literature and poetics, as much as it destroys the physical objects of buildings, landscapes, and bodies which are sent into war. Scarry argues that “Once the populations of two nations consent to devote themselves to damaging each other, the dissolution of their language may not be itself morally disastrous; it may be perceived as inevitable and perhaps even ‘necessary’” (67). There are plenty of things in that statement which are not entirely true: not all members of a population agree to go to war, for instance—there are in fact relatively few people who are in charge of making the decision to go to war, and then once that decision has been made, governments often use newspapers as propaganda machines to coerce others into going to war on their behalf (a problem to which Owen is specifically responding). That being said, the change—or dissolution, as the pastoral elegy is dissolved by a poet’s experiences in the trenches—in language is something that can be taken for granted. At no point was there ever a question that English would survive as more or less itself through the Great War, however, it did morph with the language of the trenches, the language of new technology, the introduction of forms like parapets (which Fussell notes in the last chapter of *The Great War and*

Modern Memory), and the reinventions of symbols like flowers, whose meanings necessarily change. Other parts of the language become irrelevant or non-applicable because they cannot do for the expression of experience or loss what they used to be able to do prior to that “modernized death.” The world changes to be more mechanized, and as a consequence, more militarized; there is no chance to go back to what the world was prior to the Great War, even though plenty long for it. Owen makes clear in his poetry that pretending that these things haven’t happened would be shameful; it would be dismissive towards those who had died, and it would be dishonest. This is a world in which soldiers may not ever see the person who is killing them, nor the person who sent them out to be killed in the first place. Technology permits the dehumanization of the dead, while the language of Owen’s war poems attempts to return it to them.

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