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Owen, Britten and pacifism

At twelve noon on 11 November 1918, while bands played and bells rang as the crowds gathered to celebrate the Armistice which had just brought the First World War to a close, a telegram arrived at the home of Tom and Susan Owen in Shrewsbury. It informed them that their son, Lt Wilfred Edward Salter Owen MC, serial number 4756, had been killed in action in the early morning of 4 November while helping his troops to cross the Sambre Canal near Ors in north-east France. He was twenty-five years of age, and the news of his death had taken exactly one week to reach England.

The death of any soldier in action so close to the cessation of hostilities acquires a special poignancy, but Lt Owen had been no ordinary officer. He left behind him a small body of poetry, the finest examples of which – written during the last two years of the long and bloody war – make a passionate and eloquent outcry against man’s inhumanity to man as he had witnessed it played out on the mud-drenched fields of Flanders. The vividness of Owen’s trench scenes, coupled with a formidable poetic technique uniting verbal economy and emotional profundity, have assured him an enduring posthumous reputation as the greatest of the First World War poets. It was logical, therefore, that Benjamin Britten should have chosen in 1960 to set nine of Owen’s finest war poems in his *War Requiem*, juxtaposing them with the Latin Mass for the Dead to create a unique pacifist statement fully in keeping with the composer’s lifelong hatred of the violence and destruction of warfare.

Britten’s pacifist inclinations are well known, and are discussed on pp. 11–19 below. Owen too, perhaps partly because of the association with Britten which the phenomenal success of the *War Requiem* has brought to his war poetry, has been seen in some quarters as the archetypal pacifist poet. But was Owen really a ‘pacifist’ in Britten’s understanding of the word? Britten’s pacifism, largely because of his firm refusal to fight in the Second World War, is far clearer-cut than that of Owen, who had himself made an equally firm decision to take an active part in the fighting. (Such is the

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emotive power of Owen's anti-war poetry that it has become necessary to remind ourselves that he was not conscripted.) The complexity of Owen's changing attitudes to both war and religion raises a number of conflicting issues of great relevance to Britten's own interpretation of Owen's poetry as revealed by his treatment of it in the *War Requiem*.

As was to be the case with Britten, the domineering influence in Owen's upbringing had been that of his mother. Susan Owen was a woman of formidable evangelical fervour with a strong streak of puritanism who, like Britten's mother, expected great things from her talented son from a tender age. Born in 1893 and the eldest of four children, Wilfred grew up to share his mother's religious and literary interests: indeed, the latter were kindled with a strength analogous to Britten's mother's cultivation of her son's musicality. The possessiveness of Wilfred's mother caused something of a rift in the Owen family, with the intellectual Wilfred becoming increasingly distanced from his down-to-earth father, while his rebellious younger brother Harold sided with their father and pursued the nautical career he had wished for all his sons.¹ Failing to enter university with the ease he had anticipated, Wilfred opted to work as an unpaid lay assistant in the parish of Dunsden (near Reading) in 1911, and there the stuffy atmosphere soon began to smother the fervent evangelism he had shared with his mother as a teenager. Writing to his sister Mary from Dunsden on 1 February 1913, he declared that 'no religion is worth the having', while recognizing the value of Christian spirits 'independent of what man can do unto them, either for evil or good'.² Less than a week later, he left Dunsden permanently. Seven months later he had moved to France to teach English in Bordeaux.

The most intriguing aspect of Owen's increasing antipathy towards conventional religion is his dissatisfaction with the mechanisms of liturgy and ritual, the complacency of which Britten also sharply criticizes by effective textual juxtapositions in the *War Requiem*. Owen highlighted the impersonality of orthodox worship in the poem 'Maundy Thursday', probably written in France during 1915 and among the best of his early writings:

Above the crucifix I bent my head:
 The Christ was thin, and cold, and very dead:
 And yet I bowed, yea, kissed – my lips did cling
 (I kissed the warm live hand that held the thing.)

That same Easter, Owen had written to his mother from Merignac to say:

It is Easter Sunday morning, and we have just come back from High Mass: real, genuine Mass, with candle, with book, and with bell, and all like abominations of

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desolation: none of your anglican simulacrum. On Good Friday I went also. Always I come out from these performances an hour and a half older: *otherwise unchanged*.³

The futility of conventional religion in atoning for the sin of warfare is suggested by the overtly ecclesiastical imagery of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', Britten's setting of which is provocatively placed soon after the beginning of the *War Requiem*.

Fourteen months elapsed between the declaration of war on 4 August 1914 and Owen's decision to enlist in the autumn of 1915, and during this period his letters home from France begin to show a developing awareness of the international and humanitarian issues involved in the conflict. One week after the outbreak of war, he wrote to his brother Colin and echoed a stereotyped sentiment prevalent at this early stage in the hostilities:

After all my years of playing soldiers, and then of reading History, I have almost a mania to be in the East, to see fighting, and to serve. For I like to think this is the last War of the World! I have only a faint idea of what is going on, and what is felt, in England.⁴

In a postscript to the same letter, Owen added 'Down with the Germans!' His poetic expression of warlike sentiments at this time is dramatically opposed to his later outlook, and a poem originally entitled 'The Ballad of Peace and War' (probably written in late 1914) provides a striking contrast to the later and considerably better-known outcry in 'Dulce et Decorum Est':

O meet it is and passing sweet
 To live in peace with others,
 But sweeter still and far more meet
 To die in war for brothers.⁵

A visit in September 1914 to a Bordeaux hospital, where Owen could see for himself the horrific wounds inflicted on both French and German troops, immediately softened his attitude; but November saw him first thinking of the possibility of enlisting himself. He wrote to his mother: 'It is a sad sign if I do: for it means that I shall consider the continuation of my life of no use to England.'⁶

Although several important English writers (including Bertrand Russell and Lytton Strachey⁷) were already pacifists or conscientious objectors, it was a meeting with the influential French poet Laurent Tailhade at about this time which first seems to have opened Owen's mind to the cause of pacifism. The Frenchman had published two controversial pamphlets on pacifist themes (*Lettre aux conscrits* in 1903 and *Pour la paix* six years later),

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but opted to 'shoulder a rifle'⁸ in 1914 at the age of fifty-nine, a development which must have done little to help Owen make his decision whether or not to fight. In December 1914 Owen first became painfully aware of the now legendary hostility in England directed against young men who refused to wage war for their country. A typical example was the statement by 'A Little Mother' whose letter to the *Morning Post* declaring that 'we women, who demand to be heard, will tolerate no such cry as "Peace! Peace!!" where there is no peace' was reprinted as a pamphlet and allegedly sold 75,000 copies in one week of circulation. Owen's comments on the subject to his mother have much in common with Britten's later attitude towards conscientious objection:

The *Daily Mail* speaks very movingly about the 'duties shirked' by English young men. I suffer a good deal of shame. But while those ten thousand lusty louts go on playing football I shall go on playing with my little axiom: – that my life is worth more than my death to Englishmen.

Do you know what would hold me together on a battlefield?: The sense that I was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote! I do not know in what else England is greatly superior, or dearer to me, than another land and people.

*Write immediately what I am to do.*⁹

The turning-point was to come in June the following year, when Owen decided to take a commission in the Artists' Rifles, having toyed also with the possibility of joining the Italian Cavalry 'for reasons both aesthetic and practical'.¹⁰ He told his mother: 'I don't want the bore of training, I don't want to wear khaki; nor yet to save my honour before inquisitive grandchildren fifty years hence. But I *now do most intensely want to fight*.'¹¹

Owen joined the Artists' Rifles on 21 October 1915 and, after basic training, was commissioned into the Manchester Regiment in June 1916. Further training followed before he finally entered active service, embarking for his first base camp at Etaples on 29 December and assuming command of 3 Platoon, A Company, in the Second Battalion of the Manchesters on the Somme in January 1917. He fought continuously (apart from a brief hospitalization for concussion) until falling victim to shell-shock in May, whereupon he returned to England for rehabilitation at the Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh. During his four months of recuperation at this convalescent home for neurasthenics, his outlook on both poetry and war rapidly matured through the friendship and mutual admiration he established with the poet Siegfried Sassoon, who was also a patient at

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Craiglockhart. Owen's poetry had been up to this point thoroughly Keatsian in structure and subject-matter,¹² and he had received encouragement and criticism from Harold Monro shortly before joining up.¹³ Shelley, too, had been a strong influence, especially in developing Owen's interest in par-rhyme: it was Shelley's poem *The Revolt of Islam* which provided both the title and the theme for Owen's later masterpiece 'Strange Meeting' (the centrepiece of the final movement of the *War Requiem*).¹⁴ But it was only with his inspirational exposure to Sassoon's outspoken views and poetical expertise that Owen's poetry began to achieve tangible mastery.

Like Owen, Sassoon reached full maturity in his poetry only when directly confronted with the horrors of war. Posted to France, but not yet in action, Sassoon met his fellow poet Robert Graves at Béthune in November 1915. Graves had been fighting since the spring, and showed Sassoon a draft of his first collection of poems: Sassoon 'frowned and said that war should not be written about in such a realistic way. . . I told him, in my old-soldier manner, that he would soon change his style.'¹⁵ Graves's comment proved to be prophetic, and Sassoon soon became renowned as a war writer cultivating vivid realism. By the time he met Owen in Edinburgh, he had already published poems in the overtly pacifist *Cambridge Magazine* – the offices of which were ransacked by patriotic Royal Flying Corps cadets.

Writing to his mother from Craiglockhart on 15 August 1917, Owen commented:

I have just been reading Siegfried Sassoon, and am feeling at a very high pitch of emotion. Nothing like his trench life sketches has ever been written or ever will be written. Shakespere [*sic*] reads vapid after these. Not of course because Sassoon is a greater artist, but because of the subjects, I mean. . .

I have not yet dared to go up to him and parley in a casual way. He is here you know because he wrote a letter to the Higher Command which was too plain-spoken.¹⁶

Sassoon had arranged for a question to be asked in the House of Commons during the previous July on his belief 'that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest'. He argued that 'the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it', and concluded his statement with the words

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of

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agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.¹⁷

Sassoon, who held the rank of captain, ran the risk of court martial in making this bold stand against aggression, and as he had been shot in the chest his physical and mental well-being already left much to be desired. Graves (who was also encouraging Owen's poetical aspirations at this time) intervened to avert impending disaster, persuading the War Office to send Sassoon to Craiglockhart (or 'Dottyville', as Sassoon came to call it) for further medical attention and thereby draw a veil over their public embarrassment. As Ivor Gurney put it, 'they solved it in a becoming official fashion, and declared him mad, and put him in a lunatic-asylum'.¹⁸ Before he went to Edinburgh, Sassoon threw his Military Cross into the sea. The decoration had been awarded for his rescue of a wounded man from a mine crater near enemy lines. Early in 1917 he was also recommended for the Victoria Cross (the highest military decoration) when, having been shot, he continued fighting; the award was declined because the action had proved unsuccessful. In every way 'Mad Jack' Sassoon was a war-hero of the kind the British Government longed for, and it was his voice they chose to silence. After his 'convalescence' at Craiglockhart, Sassoon again returned to active service (his poem 'When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm' tells how his conscience was pricked by the ghosts of old soldiers criticizing his absence), and he later survived a bullet wound to the head. Like Owen, he felt the need to participate actively in the conflict in order that his pacifist statements were seen to be beyond reproach.¹⁹

Sassoon's defiance helped Owen to formalize his own pacifist views, and these differ from Britten's later stance in one crucial respect: both Sassoon and Owen had been prepared to fight in the name of 'defence and liberation', but not to further the aggression of their own nation. This is the message Owen was to express so succinctly in the concluding sestet of the sonnet 'The Next War' (set by Britten as part of the 'Dies irae' of the *War Requiem*):

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
 We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
 No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.
 We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
 And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags
 He wars on Death – for lives; not men – for flags.

In June 1917 Owen had told his mother that his aim in war was the 'Extinction of Militarism beginning with Prussian'²⁰ and, responding to a

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statement by H. G. Wells in the *Daily Mail* on 22 August which called for peace between belligerents and pacifists and the defeat of 'militant imperialism', Owen declared:

As for myself, I hate washy pacifists as temperamentally as I hate whiskied prussianists. Therefore I feel that I must first get some reputation of gallantry before I could successfully and usefully declare my principles.²¹

In the mean time, Owen could do no better than to compensate for the home front's lack of 'imagination' by adopting Sassoon's vivid style in his own war poetry, beginning with 'The Dead-Beat', written in excited haste immediately after the first encounter between the two poets. Sassoon continued to encourage him in his creative writing, and suggested Owen adopt the highly appropriate title 'Anthem' for his sonnet 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' – a poem which, along with 'The Next War', he described as 'my two best war Poems'.²²

Owen's increasingly pacifist inclinations formed the last remaining link with his earlier strictly religious upbringing. Writing to his mother in May 1917 he stated:

Although I have comprehended a light which never will filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace; but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill.²³

He added 'am I not a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?' and concluded his observations on the subject with the following remark: 'Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism.' But his ideas were still far from inflexible, and some three months later he wrote again to his mother in terms which constitute a conscious turning against his earlier biblical exemplar:

While I wear my star and eat my rations, I continue to take care of my Other Cheek; and, thinking of the eyes I have seen made sightless, and the bleeding lad's cheeks I have wiped, I say: Vengeance is mine, I, Owen, will repay.²⁴

In this more defiant spirit, his ideas on pacifism still confused, Owen returned to active service on the Somme in August 1918 after eight months of military duties in England.

Not surprisingly, antipathy towards religion was widespread in the trenches. Graves noted that 'hardly one soldier in a hundred was inspired by religious feeling of even the crudest kind', and attributed much of the fighting man's scorn for the Church to the rule which forbade Anglican

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chaplains to risk their lives at the front line.²⁵ Praising mankind's resilience and (like many others) expressing theological scepticism arising from God's refusal to intervene and prevent bloody conflicts, Gurney commented that 'the contrast between the magnificent behaviour of Man to that of the apparent callousness of God is most striking... [God's] debt to Europe, to the world, is very great'.²⁶ This irony surfaces in Owen's poem 'Soldier's Dream', written between October 1917 and the following summer:

I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;
 And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;
 And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts;
 And rusted every bayonet with His tears.

And there were no more bombs, of ours or Theirs,
 Not even an old flint-lock, nor even a pikel.
 But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;
 And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.

His feelings on the subject were clarified in 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' (set by Britten in the 'Offertorium') where Abraham's refusal to sacrifice the 'Ram of Pride' results in the death of his son and 'half the seed of Europe'. In 'At a Calvary near the Ancre' (the focal text of Britten's 'Agnus Dei'), pride is again viewed as man's principal failing and the conclusion takes the pacifist standpoint to its ultimate extreme:

But they who love the greater love
 Lay down their Life; they do not hate.

On the other hand, patriotism was treated just as cynically in the trenches as religious sentiment, being 'rejected as fit only for civilians, or prisoners. A new arrival who talked patriotism would soon be told to cut it out.'²⁷ All in all, the common soldier at the front line remained remarkably neutral in outlook and even retained fraternal feelings towards his enemy, as described by Gurney: 'In the mind of all the English soldiers I have met there is absolutely no hate for the Germans, but a kind of brotherly though slightly contemptuous kindness – as to men who are going through a bad time as well as themselves... The whole thing is accepted as a heavy Burden of Fate.'²⁸ This sense of paradoxical fraternization is the starting-point for Owen's 'Strange Meeting'.

No pacifist sentiments are to be found in the letters Owen wrote during the last two months of fighting before his death. In addition, it is interesting to note that the humanitarian arguments quoted above are exclusively to be

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found in correspondence dating from his year of convalescence in the United Kingdom. It is perhaps not surprising that letters written home while on active service do not contain comments which could be misinterpreted as symptomatic of cowardice: Owen was himself responsible for censoring outgoing letters written by the men in his charge and had to set an impeccable example, although he did relax his principles by employing a secret code in his own letters to inform his mother of the exact location of the battalion at the time of writing.²⁹ From the moment he joined up, his letters had frequently revealed a grim sense of humour (no doubt a defence mechanism) which made light of his perils. In July 1915, for instance, he had quipped 'It takes a lot to give me a headache; – let's hope it won't need a bullet!' and shortly after he started fighting he reported excitedly: 'This morning I was hit! We were bombing and a fragment from somewhere hit my thumb knuckle. I coaxed out 1 drop of blood. Alas! no more!!'³⁰ It is disconcerting to find the 'pacifist' poet plundering a German Albatross biplane which crashed near his position on 8 April 1917 and retaining the dead pilot's bloodstained handkerchief as a souvenir, or ensuring he remembered to send his brother Colin 'some loot, from a pocket which I rifled on the Field'.³¹ Such unsentimental realities of war were not, it is interesting to note, recounted by Owen in letters to his mother.

Owen's courage on active service was officially recognized by the award of the Military Cross for 'conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in the attack on the Fonsomme Line on 1st/2nd October 1918'.³² Again, it is paradoxical to read in the official citation that Owen inflicted considerable casualties on the enemy with the German machine-gun he had captured single-handedly. Owen told the story in his own words in a discreetly toned-down version contained in a letter home, written immediately after the incident and marked 'Strictly private' (i.e. not to be shown to anyone outside his closest family):

I lost all my earthly faculties, and fought like an angel.

If I started into detail of our engagement I should disturb the censor and my own Rest.

You will guess what has happened when I say I am now Commanding the Company, and in the line had a boy lance-corporal as my Sergeant-Major.

With this corporal who stuck to me and shadowed me like your prayers, I captured a German Machine Gun and scores of prisoners.

I'll tell you exactly how another time. I only shot one man with my revolver (at about 30 yards!); The rest I took with a smile. . .

I came out in order to help these boys – directly by leading them as well as an

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officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first.³³

Exactly one month later, while helping to lay duckboards at the bank of the Sambre Canal, Wilfred Owen was shot dead.

Owen's final assessment of his achievements is modest, for the body of poetry which became his legacy to posterity truly speaks of the suffering he had witnessed in the trenches. Here, far more than in his often self-conscious letters to his family, does the profundity of his abhorrence of warfare shine through. Yet his poetic maturity came too late for him to have seen more than a handful of his poems in print.³⁴ While retraining at Scarborough in 1918 he had drawn up a draft list of poems to be included in a first collection under the provisional title 'Disabled & Other Poems', sketching out the famous Preface which Britten selectively quotes on the title-page of the *War Requiem* and which has become the poet's most celebrated summary of his literary and humanitarian aims:

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.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

(If I thought the letter of this book would last, I might have used proper names; but if the spirit of it survives – survives Prussia – my ambition and those names will have achieved themselves fresher fields than Flanders. . .)

Even here, with Owen's specific hope that the spirit of his work will survive Prussia, the emphasis suggests anti-militarism rather than unqualified pacifism. The poet's pacifist stance was never fully clarified, and the strength of his poetry lies more in compassion than conscientious objection. Indeed, his apparent inability to find a simple explanation for his own mixed feelings about the horrors of war prevents his poetic utterances from ever falling into the trap of dogmatism. His internal conflict is perhaps one 'every honest poet must face under the conditions of modern total war; for, if he refuse to take any part in it, he is opting out of the human condition and thus, while obeying his moral conscience, may well be diminishing himself as a poet'.³⁵

The stupefying atrocities perpetrated by Hitler's Government during the