

WILFRED OWEN

1893-1918

EVERYONE, GANDHI SAID, MUST HAVE A TEXT TO EXAMINE, TO compare, and to test his or her life against. For this purpose, the writings of recent poets and artists have been especially valuable sources of inspiration and wisdom for people working in social justice. Since the Vietnam war this has been especially true for the writings of Wilfred Owens, a young poet who died in the First World War, whose poems also provided the text for Benjamin Britten's moving oratorio, *War Requiem* (1963).

Among modern writers, no one understood and revealed the philosophical and religious implications of modern warfare better than Wilfred Owen, writing from the Western Front, 1916-18. In these letters and poems, he struggled with the basic conflict between his life as a soldier and the Christian commandment of love, between his everyday condition and the ethics of nonviolence.

In Owen's writings, "the language of the Bible rises like water in the well of his subconscious mind, polluted by war, like the ravaged countryside where he fought and died," his biographer, Jon Stallworthy, has said. Owen's letter to a friend in June 1918, for example, spoke in this way of having drilled his troops with helmets and rifles the day before:

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 thirst till after the last halt. I attended his supper to see that there were no complaints, and inspected his feet to see that they would be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands to 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.

The passage is a characteristic one, a statement, like so many of his poems, that is self-accusing without self-pity. In it, Owen indicates a sound awareness of how, as an officer in charge of troops, he could not extricate himself from the barbarous task of war. By his acts, he implicated himself as surely as Pilate's soldiers or Caesar's armies involved themselves in the death of Christ at Golgotha, "the place of the skull." Owen speaks not of hereditary or generalized guilt, but of his personal responsibility for actions on the side of death.

Wilfred Owen was, at the time of this letter to Osbert Sitwell, twenty-five years old. The oldest child of a lower middle-class family, he was born in Ostwestry, England, on March 18, 1893, and attended grammar schools in Birkenhead and Shrewsbury, but did not qualify for a university scholarship. He educated himself, nonetheless, through courses at the university college in Reading, an hour west of London, and through work as a tutor in England and France before the war. Those years included time as a lay assistant at the vicarage of Reverend Herbert Wigan, in Dunsden. At nineteen, Owen thought seriously of becoming an Episcopal priest himself, but went through a religious crisis prompted by a disillusionment with conventional Christianity. About the same time, he rediscovered the poems of John Keats, and once in the army rapidly matured as a poet.

Wounded at the front, he returned to England in 1917 at Craiglockhart Hospital, near Edinburgh. There he met Siegfried Sassoon, a published poet, who encouraged him; eventually Owen published a few lyrics in leading periodicals, powerful poems suggesting an acutely modern sensibility, revolutionary for the time. By June 1918, he was back on the Western Front, in the north of France, and on November 4 of that year, one week before the Armistice, after successfully leading his troops across a canal near Ors, he was killed. Although Owen left only a small body of work, his posthumously collected poems are generally regarded as some of the masterworks of modern literature and, indeed, in the canon of English poetry.

A good example of this achievement is "Futility," written about the same time as the prose statement quoted above. The speaker in the poem is a soldier who stands above the body of his dead comrade, asking, in despair: "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" Dazed, the speaker wonders why the sun, that once brought life and stars out of the cold earth, is now powerless to raise his comrade from the dead?

Futility

Move him into the sun –
 Gently its touch awoke him once,
 At home, whispering of fields unsown.
 Always it woke him, even in France.
 Until this morning and this snow.
 If anything might rouse him now
 The kind old sun will know.
 Think how it wakes the seeds,—
 Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
 Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides,
 Full-nerved—still warm—too hard to stir?
 Was it for this the clay grew tall?
 —O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
 To break earth's sleep at all?

The questions in the second stanza are posed to no one in particular, yet the implication remains that God, in a sense, is on trial. Why did He bother creating the earth if—in the end—a young man at the height of his powers, in strength, beauty, and intelligence, must die so meaninglessly? Why did He make the sun so powerful, if it cannot—in all its glory—raise this young man, the end point of a diverse and complicated evolutionary process, to life?

The questions posed by Owen's poems seem almost instinctive. How can anyone, particularly a religious person, he asks, stand casually by while the forces of death triumph all around? Such provocative questions with psychological

and political as well as religious implications suggest at least two reasons for the continuing importance of his work: (1) Owen understood the significance of the First World War, in that it would profoundly alter the nature of religious belief, destroying the past or rendering it useless for many people. Human beings, in discovering the scale of destruction possible in mechanized warfare, were literally unhinged by that awareness, as Ernest Hemingway and T.S. Eliot would indicate in stories and poems of the 1920 s; (2) Owen understood also how he, as an actor in history, was responsible for war's destruction, preparing his men, his other Christs, for the crown of thorns. He recognized that even with the best intentions, people capitulate to the forces of death, out of conformity, laziness, moral indifference.

Such cooperation with death eventually undermines not only a person's belief, but also the nature of the church, Owen said to his mother, in a 1917 letter.

Already I have comprehended a light which never will filter into the dogma of any national church; namely, one of Christ's essential commands was. . . be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. It may be chimerical and an ignominious principle, but there it is. It can only be ignored, and I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skillfully.

In the same letter, Owen complained, "The practice of selective ignorance is one cause of war. Christians have deliberately cut some of the main teachings of their code."

For Owen, the main teaching that had been cut was Christ's disavowal of killing, and anyone trying to live as a Christian in this century is likely to be rather shocked by Owen's pointed remark. In his poems, also, he gave a realistic view of warfare, after the idealized view projected by the Romantic and Victorian traditions. His antiwar sentiments, in fact, resembled those of Leo Tolstoy's pamphlets on Christian tradition of non-violence thirty years before. Coincidentally, during the early days

of the war, Owen lived in the home of a French poet influenced by Tolstoy's writings, and sent home drawings of wounded soldiers brought by train to the south of France.

Out of the depth of his imagination, Owen dramatized the threat to life rendered by modern warfare. In ironic poems such as "Dulce Et Decorum Est" and "Insensibility," he asked conventional believers to recognize their failure to uphold the teachings of Jesus and thereby focused attention on a major dilemma for contemporary Christians.

Simone Weil's statement, during the Second World War, that the distance separating the individual or the church from the essential Christian message of peace results in a painful spiritual state. In his poems and letters, Wilfred Owen arrived at a similar truth thirty years before. It is one that must be recognized, he thought, if the ethics of Christianity are ever to inform people's lives and actions. This is especially true in an age when everyone, as Owen said, lives on an extended battlefield and where, in a nuclear age, "Christ dies daily in No Man's Land."

BY WILFRED OWEN

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ABOUT WILFRED OWEN

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