

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET

WILFRED OWEN

By JON STALLWORTHY

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ONE hundred and fifty years after Thomas Chatterton passed from his garret—not two miles north-east of here—into literary mythology, another West Country poet whom the gods loved rose from the dead with the posthumous publication of his poems. ‘Wilfred Owen! . . . a name that has gathered a continual accretion of fire.’ Strange to look back from this age of the instant reputation to the slow accretion of his. Strange to remember that poems now so central to our thinking about the Great War were, with four exceptions only, unpublished at its close. Their subsequent appearance in periodicals, in the anthology *Wheels*, and in the edition prepared by Siegfried Sassoon—published fifty years ago today—won Wilfred Owen the only fame he coveted: the recognition of his peers. That three of them in turn should have edited his poems, a distinction shared by no other English poet, is eloquent witness of this recognition. Edmund Blunden’s 1931 edition and Cecil Day Lewis’s in 1963 brought an increasing number of poems to an increasing number of readers. And then, in 1962, Benjamin Britten nobly repaid his debt to the poet whose work had inspired his *War Requiem* by introducing those elegies to a still wider audience of listeners as well as readers.

Strangest of all to compare the slow rising of Owen’s star with the seeming suddenness of its fiery genesis. The Poet Laureate undoubtedly speaks for most readers of these poems when he says that

Wilfred Owen must remain, in one respect at least, an enigma. . . . The bulk of his best work was written or finished during a period of intense creative activity, from August 1917 (in one week of October he wrote six poems) to September 1918—a period comparable with the *annus mirabilis* of his admired Keats. The originality and force of their language, the passionate nature of the indignation and pity they express, their blending of harsh realism with a sensuousness unatrophied by the horrors from which they flowered, all these make me feel that Owen’s

war poems are mature poetry, and that in the best of them—as in a few which he wrote on other subjects—he showed himself a major poet.

The enigma [concludes Dr. Day Lewis] lies in this maturity.¹

It is the 'enigma' that I wish to examine this afternoon.

Keats wrote once that 'If Poetry comes not naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.' If all English poets had been of this opinion, a good many literary critics would be out of work, but there can be no disputing that Keats's analogy is beautifully apt. Poems derive their substance from deep and hidden roots. Not surprisingly—since botany was his earliest passion—this image commended itself to Owen, who quoted it in a letter to his mother. The first indication of his interest in the natural world is to be found in another letter, probably the second he ever wrote. It dates from 1902, when he was barely nine:

Dear Mother,

Grandpa has given me as much garden as what you see from the dining room window only where the bricks are and I have got about six potatos planted, I have made another path and on the right side of it is the Vegeatble Garden and on the left is the fruit and the one you saw is the flower. . . . We are going to Market this afternoon and I might buy some seeds.²

To the soil of that Vegeatble Garden can be traced, I believe, the tap-root of the tree that was to put forth his poems. Their earliest stirrings were felt, as he later recorded in the fragmentary draft of an unfinished poem,

at Broxton, by the Hill
Where first I felt my boyhood fill
With uncontainable movements; there was born
My poethood.³

The note of Wordsworthian revelation was appropriate, as Harold Owen makes clear in his beautiful evocation of those holiday weeks in the golden summer of 1907:

It was in Broxton among the ferns and bracken and the little hills, secure in the safety and understanding love that my mother wrapped about him with such tender ministration, that the poetry in Wilfred,

¹ Introduction to *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 1963, p. 11.

² Harold Owen and John Bell, eds., *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, 1967, p. 21.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 352 n.

with gentle pushings, without hurt, began to bud, and not on the battlefields of France.¹

Years later, from those battlefields, Wilfred was himself to endorse his brother's judgement: 'was there not', he wrote, 'Broxton Hill for my uplifting, whose bluebells it may be, more than Greek iambics, fitted me for my job'.² Harold Owen records that, at Broxton, Wilfred and his mother 'spent many hours either on the warm hillside or in the cottage reading to each other'. One would like to know what they read. I suspect that one book may have been the *Poems* of Keats.

Wilfred Owen was already under Keats's spell when he composed his sonnet entitled 'Written in a Wood, September 1910'.³ This exercise in the tradition of pastoral elegy, though a complete poem, is less revealing of its maker than an unfinished fragment to be found among the unpublished papers that Harold Owen has generously put at my disposal. It seems likely that this fragment was also intended to be a sonnet, and its title, 'Before reading a Biography of Keats for the first time', proclaims its descent from Keats's 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'. The fragment may be reconstructed as follows:

With doubt as well as thirst I come to drink
Thy store of Knowledge fresh, O unknown Book!
From seeing Keats through thee I long did shrink
Lest cold clear changeless records mar the look
Of heroic beauty that he seems to wear.
I now behold him through a glimmering mist,
The glittering rain of his own words,
How like a god on high uprist, . . .

Owen came to Keats as Keats to Chapman's *Homer* and grew to worship him in an almost religious sense. This is made explicit in a letter to his mother written in 1912, probably a year after that fragment was written. He has been reading W. M. Rossetti's *Life and Writings of John Keats* and says: 'I never guessed till now the frightful travail of his soul towards Death; . . . Rossetti guided my groping hand right into the wound, and I touched, for one moment the incandescent Heart of Keats.'

In all probability the biography that prompted Owen's poem was Sidney Colvin's *Keats*, which he bought in Torquay in April 1911, writing to his mother: 'I . . . began this morning "with fear and trembling" to learn the details of his life.' That

¹ Harold Owen, *Journey from Obscurity*, vol. i, 1963, p. 103.

² *Collected Letters*, p. 535.

³ *Collected Poems*, p. 149.

copy remains, inscribed 'Wilfred E. S. Owen. / Torquay. / Spring 1911', and its underlinings enable us to see Keats as his disciple saw him. He has marked, for example, the word *Celtic* in the sentence: 'In the gifts and temperament of Keats we shall find much that seems characteristic of the *Celtic* rather than the English nature.' Attempting to account for this, Colvin mentions that 'His father was a native of either Devon or of Cornwall; and his mother's name, Jennings, is common in but not peculiar to Wales.' Owen, who was proud of the Celtic origins proclaimed by his own Welsh name, was delighted to read that Keats, too, had a mother that was devoted to him, and he underlined the statement that she 'humoured him in *every whim of which he had not a few*'. Again, his indelible pencil marked Colvin's quotation from the reminiscences of Edward Holmes: '*He was a boy whom any one from his extraordinary vivacity and personal beauty might easily fancy would become great—but rather in some military capacity than in literature.*' Time and again Colvin returns to the Celtic strain that distinguishes his portrait of Keats. The importance of this book in Owen's development justifies one last quotation:

Such intuitive familiarity with the blithe activities, unnoted by common eyes, which make up the life and magic of nature, is a gift we attribute to men of primitive race and forest nurture; and Mr. Matthew Arnold would have us recognize it as peculiarly characteristic of the Celtic element in the English genius and English poetry.

Owen's early investigations of 'the life and magic of nature' led him on to the study of geology. He and his cousins Vera and Leslie Gunston had in 1907 formed themselves into an Astronomical, Geological, and Botanical Society of three; and two years later geology and botany led him on to archaeology. In August 1909 he wrote to his brother Colin:

We went to Uriconium yesterday & found some bones & pottery in the same mound that you & I dug in. It rained most of the day, so we sheltered & had lunch in a barn opposite the field.

Today we have cycled to the Wrekin, calling at Uriconium on the way.

Perhaps in that barn he read his copy of George Fox's *Guide to the Roman City of Uriconium* with its grim description of its fate: one thing is certain [wrote Fox], that the city and its inhabitants perished by fire and sword. Everywhere, when the earth which covers its remains is turned over, it is found to be black from the burning, and plain traces of the massacre of the citizens showed themselves when the ruins, amongst which the visitor strays, were excavated. Skeletons of

men, women, and children lay amongst the blackened walls. In their terror some of the unhappy people had sought refuge in the hollow floors of the baths. The skeleton of an old man, near whose hand lay the little treasure he hoped to save, was discovered crouched between the pillars of the hypocaust of chamber 5, and not far from him were also the skeletons of two women. The dark and narrow hiding place did not avail to save the fugitives, for the beams of the blazing roofs in their fall blocked all way of escape, and they perished stifled by the smoke of the burning buildings.

In Fox's *Guide* Wilfred Owen would also have read that

An old Welsh poem an elegy still extant, ascribed to a bard named Llywarch Hen, who is said to have lived in the latter part of the sixth century of our era, describes, in vivid language, the destruction of a city on the Welsh border, and the slaughter of the chief to whom the city then belonged. The chieftain was named Kyndylan the Fair, and his town was called by the poet 'the White town in the Woodland'. It has been sought, with great likelihood, to identify the town mentioned by the old bard, with the Roman city of *Uriconium*.

Also running through Owen's head may have been Housman's poem 'On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble', ending

The gale, it plies the saplings double,
It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone:
To-day the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon.

Sometime in 1911¹ Owen's archaeological experience and his reading generated a spark that kindled his imagination. The catalyst perhaps was Colvin's description of the genesis of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': 'The sight, or the imagination, of a piece of ancient sculpture had set the poet's mind at work, . . . conjuring up the scenes of ancient life.' In something of the same spirit Owen sat down to write 'Uriconium/An Ode'. Striving to catch his reader's attention, his voice at first is self-consciously rhetorical:

It lieth low near merry England's heart
Like a long-buried sin; and Englishmen
Forget that in its death their sires had part.
And, like a sin, Time lays it bare again
To tell of races wronged,
And ancient glories suddenly overcast,
And treasures flung to fire and rabble wrath.

¹ Internal evidence, cited below, suggests that 'Uriconium' was written after Owen read Colvin's *Keats* in April 1911; while the handwriting of the manuscript has marked affinities with that, dated 1911, of 'On a June Night'.

As the eighteen-year-old poet warms to his subject, the archaic diction falls away and is replaced by a rich particularity. He is able to invest objects under glass in the Shrewsbury museum with a dramatic vitality:

For here lie remnants from a banquet-table,
 —Oysters and marrow-bones, and seeds of grape—
 The statement of whose age must sound a fable;
 And Samian jars, whose sheen and flawless shape
 Look fresh from potter's mould.
 Plasters with Roman finger-marks impressed;
 Bracelets, that from the warm Italian arm
 Might seem to be scarce cold;
 And spears—the same that pushed the Cymry west,
 Unblunted yet; with tools of forge and farm,
 Abandoned, as a man in sudden fear
 Drops what he holds to help his swift career:
 For sudden was Rome's flight, and wild the alarm.
 The Saxon shock was like Vesuvius' qualm.

Those 'Bracelets . . from the warm Italian arm' probably owe something of their warmth to Keats: Colvin had particularly admired the 'warmed jewels' that Madeline unclasps on the Eve of St. Agnes. Even so, in this one stanza alone, the Samian jars 'fresh from potter's mould', 'Plasters with Roman finger-marks impressed', the bracelets, and the spears 'unblunted yet' all reveal an intensity of sensuous perception uncommon in so young a poet. His Ode ends on a high rhetorical note:

Above this reverend ground, what traveller checks?
 Yet cities such as these one time would breed
 Apocalyptic visions of world-wrecks.
 Let Saxon men return to them, and heed!
 They slew and burnt,
 But after, prized what Rome had given away
 Out of her strength and her prosperity.
 Have they yet learnt
 The precious truth distilled from Rome's decay?
 Ruins! On England's heart press heavily!
 For Rome hath left us more than walls and words,
 And better yet shall leave; and more than herds
 Or land or gold gave the Celts to us in fee;
 E'en Blood, which makes poets sing and prophets see.

One would like to know whether Lieutenant Owen, sorting through his manuscripts, ever perceived the prophetic ironies of that stanza.

Uriconium was not the only site with a violent history to inspire him with 'apocalyptic visions'. In July 1912 he 'spent 4 or 5 hours on Flodden Field; and saw the whole thing enacted', as he said, 'to my great satisfaction';¹ and exactly three years later wrote to his mother from Bordeaux: 'I want to visit the battlefield of Castillon, where, in 1453 Talbot Earl of Shrewsbury suffered the defeat which lost Guienne and Bordeaux to the English for ever.'²

Probably within weeks of completing 'Uriconium' he started another Keatsian ode, entitled 'On a June Night'. His imagination, clearly in a state of ferment, threw up images of physical violence that have little apparent connection with each other or with the sunset that is the poem's avowed theme:

Who feeleth not, when June bereaves our land
Of easeful Night,
Some weariness, some fear, some hate
Of evening Light,
Hot Light, both earlier and more late,
Beneath our eyelids thrusts a flaring brand?

The poet listens to the birds, 'As might a sick man mid a boistrous crew', while

... a guilty mystery
Hangs in the air
As if the sun had slackened his march
To spy and stare
(His solemn face love-flushed and arch)
Upon his sister Night incestuously.

The sun sinks and, in the fifth stanza of his ode, Owen introduces an image strangely prefiguring his later style and subject-matter:

And so her holy works are left undone,
And new day glares
On the armies of forced-marching men,
From prayers to cares
Hurried before they reach the amen;
Mercilessly driven by the tireless sun.

Images of bereavement, physical violence, incest, and war are succeeded, in stanza six, by one of murder:

O never will the western brilliance die?
As it might chance

¹ *Collected Letters*, p. 150. Harold Owen gives a full account of this day in *Journey from Obscurity*, vol. i, pp. 232-3.

² *Collected Letters*, p. 348.

A murderer murdering in a dream
 The victim's glance
 Though checked, will not close down its gleam,
 And the body will not cool, nor the spirit fly; . . .

There can be little doubt that this hectic and unsatisfactory poem is an unconscious expression of the normal frustrations of adolescent sexuality.

'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower' prompted another poem of this period,¹ 'The Rivals'. In this, the poet tells his Maid that she has a rival in Nature, whose charms he sensuously describes:

Many a slim tree, dark of tresses,
 Whispering, gives me strange caresses.
 Steadfast shines Narcissus' eye
 When I would his beauty try.
 And he loads my sighs with scent,
 Not with frowns of discontent.
 Water-lilies all tranquil lie
 When their secrecies I spy.
 Ruddy pout the mouths of roses—
 More I kiss, more each uncloses.

This description of Nature in terms of the human body, conventional though much of it is, yet suggests the first stirrings of that sense of the indivisible union of all living things that was to become a major theme of the later poems. In essence, of course, this is a religious sense, and its development in Owen's mind would have been encouraged at this time by his belief that he was destined for the Church. In this he was much influenced by his adoring and strong-willed mother, who, as Harold Owen has written,

was much taken up with surface religion and cultivated the various Church of England clergymen who seemed to abound in [Shrewsbury], and would encourage their prayerful visits to the house. (My father disliked them all except one who seemed to be much more interested in cricket than the prayer book . . .)²

For a brief period, Wilfred's preoccupation with religion equalled and perhaps exceeded his preoccupation with litera-

¹ The manuscript is dated '1910 Dunsden', which cannot be correct, since Owen did not go to Dunsden until autumn 1911. The style of the poem and the form of the handwriting suggest that the date rather than the place is correct.

² *Journey from Obscurity*, vol. i, p. 150.

ture, and Harold Owen gives us a vivid picture of one of the more extreme manifestations of this religious fervour:

'Wilfred's Church'. Aided and encouraged by my mother, Wilfred would on Sunday evenings arrange our small sitting-room to represent a church. The table would be moved away, all available chairs collected and arranged for pews, an armchair turned backwards making a pulpit and lectern. At first it was all very simple but as his enthusiasm grew and his imagination took wing, it became more and more elaborate and my mother was kept busy making altar cloths, stoles, and a perfectly fashioned small linen surplice, all most beautifully worked, for she was a superb needlewoman. Finally she made a bishop's mitre. This was most extraordinarily effective; it was made from Bristol boards, white and glossy and cunningly enc scrolled with gold paint. Wilfred would spend a long time arranging the room, after which he would robe himself and, looking very priestlike in his surplice and mitre, would call us in to form the congregation. He would then conduct a complete evening service with remarkable exactitude and would end by reading a short sermon he had prepared with great care and thought.¹

In October 1911 he took up residence with the Vicar of Dunsden, the Reverend Herbert Wigan, as an unpaid lay assistant and pupil. In return for help with his parish duties, the Vicar was to coach Wilfred for the university entrance examination. Closer acquaintance with the Church of England brought him back to literature, and almost at once he entered upon a period of creative activity only to be equalled in intensity by that of 1917-18. One of the first poems that he wrote at Dunsden would seem to have been occasioned by the double funeral of a mother and child. He sees them reunited with Nature.

Deep under turfy grass and heavy clay
They laid her bruised body, and the child.
Poor victims of a swift mischance were they,
Adown Death's trapdoor suddenly beguiled.
I, weeping not, as others, but heart-wild,
Affirmed to Heaven that even Love's fierce flame
Must fail beneath the chill of this cold shame.

As with 'Uriconium', a somewhat stilted opening is followed by a passage at once more relaxed and powerful:

So I rebelled, scorning and mocking such
As had the ignorant callousness to wed
On altar-steps long frozen by the touch
Of stretcher after stretcher of our dead.

¹ Ibid., pp. 150-1.

This is a good example of a dark, Gothick strain in Owen's imagination that manifested itself in a degree of hypochondria to be detected in his letters, particularly those to his mother. She enjoyed fussing about his health and liked to think him more delicate than he was. As Harold Owen writes,

Keats was ever-present in his mind, and he was given to this absorption in the life and work of men in all the arts who had died young; he was also wont to compare the histories of these talented short-lived lives with his own plans for his writing of poetry. He could never divest himself of the parallel this comparison implied. I know that Wilfred was beginning to be convinced, and deeply convinced, in his own mind that high attainment and the expected period of life were impossible to combine, and he was inclined when working well to fear it denoted early death; and when feeling robust and healthy to fear that this was a signal of lack of talent and a negation of all his hopes for literary achievement.¹

This morbid concern with disease sharpened his sense of compassion, as his letters from Dunsden show:

I mean to give some [ginger-breads] to a gentle little girl of five, fast sinking under Consumption—contracted after chickenpox. Isn't it pitiable? She is going to a hospital (weeks hence, *of course*), and may be beyond reach of doctors by that time. She can't take unappetising food, poor Violet; but how is aught else to be provided her; when the Father is perennially out of work, and the Mother I fancy half-starving for the sake of four children. This, I suppose, is only a typical *case*; one of many *Cases*! O hard word! How it savours of rigid, frigid professionalism!²

Owen's compassion at this time is more often extended to the young, for whom he had a special sympathy, than to the old. Nowhere is this better illustrated than by the sonnet 'Maundy Thursday':

Between the brown hands of a server-lad
 The silver cross was offered to be kissed.
 The men came up, lugubrious, but not sad,
 And knelt reluctantly, half-prejudiced.
 (And kissing, kissed the emblem of a creed.)
 Then mourning women knelt; meek mouths they had,
 (And kissed the Body of the Christ indeed.)
 Young children came, with eager lips and glad.
 (These kissed a silver doll, immensely bright.)
 Then I, too, knelt before that acolyte.
 Above the crucifix I bent my head:

¹ *Journey from Obscurity*, vol. i, pp. 161–2.

² *Collected Letters*, p. 126.

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.)¹

The opposition of the Christ figure, 'thin, cold, and very dead', with 'the warm live hand', and the final dismissive noun 'that held the *thing*', give this poem a brilliantly shocking conclusion. In a manuscript fragment of blank verse, probably written earlier, Owen attempts a description of Christ the man:

Flawlessly moulded, fine exceedingly,
 Beautiful unsurpassably—so much
 More portraiture were fond futility
 For even thought is not long possible,
 Becoming too soon passion: and meseemed
 His outline changed, from beauty into beauty,²
 As change the contours of slim, sleeping clouds.
 His skin, too, glowed, pale scarlet, like the clouds
 Lit from the eastern underworld; which thing
 Bewondered me the more. But I remember
 The statue of his body standing so
 Against the huge disorder of the place
 Resembled a strong music; and it triumphed
 Even as the trend of one clear perfect air
 Across confusion of a thousand chords.
 Then watched I how there ran towards that way
 A multitude of railers, hot with hate
 And maddened by the voice of a small Jew
 Who cried 'Away with him!' and 'Crucify him!'

Poem after poem describes, often luxuriantly, the beauty of the human body and, with hardly an exception, it is the male body that is celebrated: Keats, Narcissus, Eros, the server-lad, Christ. This fact must not be overlooked, for it is relevant to a proper understanding of the later poems, but neither must it be overemphasized. Instilled with the principles of a dominant and puritanical mother, Owen recoiled from everything covered by her definition of uncleanness, and sublimated his natural sexuality, as do most boys at some time or other, into the admiring contemplation of 'clean' male beauty. A sense of sin, frequently associated with such an upbringing, may perhaps account for the masochistic note to be detected in certain poems

¹ *Collected Poems*, p. 136. Poems quoted in this lecture, for which no reference to the *Collected Poems* is made, are previously unpublished.

² An echo of the line 'Changed from glory into glory' from the hymn 'Love divine, all loves excelling'.

of this period. In the 'Lines Written on my Nineteenth Birthday', for example, he imagines himself in the throes of an almost Christlike suffering that has unmistakable sexual overtones:

. . . there have been revealed
Heart-secrets since the coming of this day,
Making me thankful for its thorn-paved way.
Among them this: 'No joy is comparable
Unto the *Melting*—soft and gradual—
Of Torture's needles in the flesh . . .'¹

Influenced perhaps by Keats's dictum, quoted by Rossetti in his *Life and Writings of John Keats*, that 'A long poem is a test of Invention, which I take to be the polar star of poetry, as Fancy is the sails, and Imagination the rudder', Owen in 1911 embarked upon a verse rendering of Hans Andersen's fairy tale 'The Little Mermaid'.² It is not difficult to see why he chose this particular tale. A romantic story of sacrificial love and acute bodily suffering nobly borne, it offered scope for those painterly descriptions of physical beauty that he so enjoyed. A mermaid heroine would have appealed to an admirer of Keats's 'Lamia', and he chose the 8-line stanza of 'Isabella'. The texture of the verse is markedly Keatsian, but it moves with ease and assurance through its seventy-seven stanzas. Thus the description of the mermaid's treasure-seeking:

Her sisters joyed to find such curious things
As foundering ships let fall to their domain;
But she cared not for showered coins or rings,
And claimed no share of all that precious rain
Except a marble statue—some boy-king's,
Or youthful hero's. Its cold face in vain
She gazed at; kissed; and tried with sighs to thaw;
For still the wide eyes stared, and nothing saw.

So Isabella had tended Lorenzo's severed head:

She calmed its wild hair with a golden comb,
And all around each eye's sepulchral cell
Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam
With tears, as chilly as a dripping well,
She drenched away:—and still she comb'd, and kept
Sighing all day—and still she kiss'd, and wept.

The Little Mermaid falls in love with her prince and follows his ship into the storm that is to sink it. Owen's description of this

¹ Owen's italics.

² See *Collected Letters*, pp. 74 and 161.

contains another of those images that so astonishingly anticipate his poems from the Western Front:

It is late. Starry lamps and fierce fusees
 Fade out. The stunning guns are dumb. All ears
 Hark to a grumbling in the heart of the seas.

It is hard to believe that 'The stunning guns are dumb' was written in 1911 or 1912 and not 1917, and one wonders by what leap of imagination Owen obtained foreknowledge of the ear-drum-pounding concussions of an artillery barrage.

The steady narrative momentum of 'The Little Mermaid' gives no indication of the crisis towards which its poet was moving in the winter of 1912/13. Doubts about his religious vocation gave rise to doubts about the very nature of Christian orthodoxy. On 4 January 1913 he wrote to his mother:

Murder will out, and I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it. If not, adieu to the still falser creeds that hold the hearts of nearly all my fellow men.

Escape from this hotbed of religion I now long for more than I could ever have conceived a year and three months ago.¹

Four days later he wrote to her:

I have had further talks to the Vicar; and our relations are taking more definite shape every day. The very crux to which events have been tending for months and months is now upon us.²

Harold Owen gives an account of a Sunday afternoon walk and conversation with Wilfred at this crucial time, which reveals the cause of the turmoil in his mind:

The powerful influence with which my mother's confined, almost bigoted, orthodoxy had encompassed him made it difficult for him to accept the findings which his own probings made obvious to his independent intellectual awareness—thereby causing a distressful conflict to take place inside himself; all of which churned him up very badly. He was delicately sensitive about all this and passionately loyal to my mother, so that any thought of departing from her prescribed teaching and influence seemed to him to be a disloyalty.³

On 7 February he left Dunsden, and there remains among his manuscripts—scribbled between a quotation from 'The Eve of St. Agnes' and a verse fragment of his own—notes for a letter:

To Vicar—solely on the grounds of affection. I was a boy when I first came to you, and held you in the doubtful esteem that a boy has for his

¹ *Collected Letters*, p. 175.

² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³ *Journey from Obscurity*, vol. ii, p. 201.

Headmaster. It is also true that I was an old man when I left. . . . The Christian Life affords no imagination, physical sensation, aesthetic philosophy. There is but one dimension in the Christian religion, the strait line upwards whereas I cannot conceive of less than 3. But all these considerations [?] are nothing to the conviction that the philosophy of the whole system as a religion is but a religion and therefore one Interpretation of Life & Scheme of Living among a hundred, and that not the best most convenient.

The wildness of the handwriting suggests that this may have been written from the sickbed to which Wilfred retired, with congestion of the lungs, on his escape from Dunsden. 'In this way', writes Harold Owen, 'his bodily succumbing to the physical illness which seized him immediately after he had returned home acted as a safety-valve; it came just in time to prevent a nervous breakdown.'¹

These crises—physical and spiritual—were followed, not surprisingly, by a period of troubled uncertainty that is reflected in a long poem written in late 1913 or early 1914. Entitled, naïvely, 'Supposed Confessions of a Secondrate Sensitive Mind in Dejection', this opens with a recollection of the satisfaction once afforded by the contemplation of the sorrows of 'poets dead and gone':

Time was when I have loved the bards whose strains
Saddened the heart, and wrought a heavy mood;
Aye, and my spirit felt a joy to brood
O'er melodies which told of ancient pains.

Now he is himself confronted by the Gorgon-figure of Despondency:

But face to face, she fixed on me her stare:
Woe, woe, my blood has never moved since then;
Down-dragged like corpse in sucking, slimy fen,
I sought to feel the breath of that Despair.

He asks her

'Then why dost thou, O Curst, the long night steep
In bloodiness and stains of shadowy crimes?'

In a passage that looks back to Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide and forward to his own later poem 'Arms and the Boy', he considers a 'bare bodkin':

So that I may not handle a keen knife,
But flashes to the mind a fearful use
That men have made of it, to loose

¹ *Journey from Obscurity*, vol. ii, p. 263.

The heavy-weighted burden of their life
And make an end. But death is not the end:

He apostrophizes the poet, beloved by Keats, in whose honour this lecture is given:

No death for such as thou, O Chatterton!
Until the Second Death; and I do shun
The thought that death is misery's friend.

The outbreak of war found him, recovered from his depression, tutoring the mother and daughter of a highly civilized French household in the Pyrenees. Writing to his mother, he expressed his first, rather callous, reactions to the conflict in terms of euphemistic natural imagery:

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.¹

A few weeks later he wrote to his brother Harold in a very different strain:

I went with my friend the Doctor Sauvaître to one of the large hospitals one day last week, where he is operating on the wounded. . . . First I saw a bullet like this [and he draws it] cut out of a Zouave's leg. . . . One poor devil had his shin-bone crushed by a gun-carriage-wheel, and the doctor had to twist it about and push it like a piston to get out the pus.²

He describes several other such cases in remorseless detail, illustrating them with gruesome little sketches, ending on a superior, elder-brother note: 'I deliberately tell you all this to educate you to the actualities of the war.' This and Owen's other references in his letters to illness, physical injury, and hospitals³ must remind us that his mentor was a doctor and had a surgeon's trained eye for the human body in all its forms—beautiful as well as mutilated.

The transition, recorded by these two letters, from ignorance to understanding of what the war involved is mirrored in Owen's poems. 'The Ballad of Purchase Money' provides a more extreme example of ignorance than anything from the pen of the maligned Rupert Brooke:

O meet it is and passing sweet
To live in peace with others,

¹ *Collected Letters*, p. 282 (the italics are my own).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 284–5.

³ See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 249 and 291.

But sweeter still and far more meet
To die in war for brothers.

This sentiment he dramatically reversed in the more famous conclusion of 'Dulce et decorum est'. 'The Ballad of Purchase Money' ends on a Housmanic note:

Fair days are yet left for the old
And children's cheeks are ruddy,
Because the good lads' limbs lie cold,
And their brave cheeks are bloody.

The poem 'Long Ages Past', written in October 1914, presents a darker, more compelling vision:

Long ages past in Egypt thou wert worshipped
And thou wert wrought from ivory and beryl.
They brought thee jewels and they brought their slain,
Thy feet were dark with blood of sacrifice.
From dawn to midnight, O my painted idol,
Thou satest smiling, and the noise of killing
Was harp and timbrel in thy pale jade ears:
The livid dead were given thee for toys.¹

Owen joined up in October 1915, but it was not until January 1917 that he had first-hand experience of 'the livid dead'. The following month he wrote his first poem from the trenches, 'Exposure'.² Jon Silkin, in a forthcoming book on the poets of the First World War that contains the most perceptive critique of Owen's poetry that I know, points to the fact that Nature, in 'Exposure', is seen as a malign rather than a benevolent presence: 'the merciless iced east winds . . . knife us';

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.

The 'air . . . shudders black with snow'; 'Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces'. If Nature has turned against man, so has God:

To-night, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.
The burying-party, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
But nothing happens.

The reader must pause, too, shocked by the daring brilliance of

¹ *Collected Poems*, p. 134.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

that semi-pun (another legacy from Keats), 'All their eyes are ice'; their eyes have hardened into ice.¹

The view of God as hostile to man appears also in Owen's letters: 'God so hated the world that he gave several millions of English-begotten sons, that whosoever believeth in them should not perish, but have a comfortable life.'² In the poem 'Soldier's Dream',³

... kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;
And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts; ...
But God was vexed, and gave all powers to Michael;
And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.

Though God is seen as the Old Testament Deity, Owen continued to reverence the person and teachings of Christ.⁴ 'Christ', he wrote to his mother, '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.'⁵

The grimmest view of the battlefield in Owen's poetry is to be found in 'The Show',⁶ a vision of hell-on-earth described in terms of the human body diseased and mutilated:

¹ See the 'iced east winds' above. For other of Owen's semi-puns see 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' ('The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall') and 'Miners' ('Of boys that slept wry sleep, and men / Writhing for air').

² *Collected Letters*, p. 544.

³ *Collected Poems*, p. 84.

⁴ Joseph Cohen argues convincingly (in a not always convincing article, 'Owen Agonistes', *English Literature in Transition*, viii. 5, 1965) that 'Soldier's Dream' is to be read 'in the light of Owen's attitude towards his own father and his transference of affection to Jesus, i.e., one who is young and suffering and passively subjected, as Owen felt he was, to an overwhelming authority'.

⁵ *Collected Letters*, p. 461.

⁶ Geoffrey Mathews has pointed out a possible debt to Shelley's poem 'The Triumph of Life', but a more immediate source of 'The Show' is surely Chapter 1, 'The Vision', of Brian Rhys's translation of *Under Fire* by Henri Barbusse:

The man at the end of the rank cries, 'I can see crawling things down there'—'Yes, as though they were alive'—'Some sort of plant perhaps'—'Some kind of men'—

And there amid the baleful glimmers of the storm, below the dark disorder of the clouds that extend and unfurl over the earth like evil spirits, they seem to see a great livid plain unrolled, which to their seeing is made of mud and water, while figures appear and fast fix themselves to the surface of it, all blinded and borne down with filth, like the dreadful castaways of shipwreck. And it seems to them that these are soldiers.

We know that Owen read *Under Fire* in December 1917, a date that I think more likely for 'The Show' than November, as suggested by Harold Owen and John Bell in the *Collected Letters* (p. 14).

. . . a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,
 Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
 And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues. . . .

(And smell came up from those foul openings
 As out of mouths, or deep wounds deepening.)

Nature has become disnatured by man. The macrocosm reflects, sympathetically, the murderous convulsions of the microcosm. This view Owen makes explicit in a letter to his mother, dated February 1917:

There is not a sign of life on the horizon and a thousand signs of death.

Not a blade of grass, not an insect; once or twice a day the shadow of big hawk, scenting carrion. . . . 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.¹

In 'Spring Offensive' Nature is at first presented as beautiful and benevolent. The soldiers are ominously 'Halted against the shade of a last hill':²

Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled
 By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge,
 For though the summer oozed into their veins
 Like an injected drug for their bodies' pains,
 Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass,
 Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.

The image of summer oozing into their veins introduces the general theme of Man's unity with Nature, only to puncture its gentle associations with a dark prophecy of the morphia needle. While they can, the soldiers turn their backs on 'the imminent line of grass', and

Hour after hour they ponder the warm field—
 And the far valley behind, where the buttercup
 Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,³
 Where even the little brambles would not yield,
 But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;
 They breathe like trees unstirred.

The brambles are humanized and the soldiers naturalized, if one may so use the word. Then the attack is launched

. . . And instantly the whole sky burned
 With fury against them; earth set sudden cups
 In thousands for their blood; . . .

¹ *Collected Letters*, pp. 430–1.

² *Collected Poems*, p. 52.

³ For the source of this image, see Harold Owen, *Journey from Obscurity*, vol. i, p. 176.

As Jon Silkin observes, 'The benign flower becomes a chalice expectant for their sacrificed blood.' Summer had 'oozed into their veins', and now their veins ooze back into summer.

The same process can be seen in the poem 'Asleep',¹ which probably owes something to Rimbaud's 'Le dormeur du val', though its immediate source is given in a letter to Leslie Gunston: 'I . . . send my [lyric of 14 November]', he wrote, 'which came from Winchester Downs, as I crossed the long backs of the downs after leaving you. It is written *as from* the trenches. I could almost see the dead lying about in the hollows of the downs.'² His poem focuses on one such soldier:

Under his helmet, up against his pack,
After the many days of work and waking,
Sleep took him by the brow and laid him back.

The description of his death, sketched with Owen's customary economy and precision, leads into philosophical speculation marked by a sudden and significant change of tone:

Whether his deeper sleep lie shaded by the shaking
Of great wings, and the thoughts that hung the stars,
High pillowed on calm pillows of God's making
Above these clouds, these rains, these sleets of lead,
And these winds' scimitars; . . .

This first alternative is stated—or, rather, over-stated—with such high-flown pulpit-rhetoric that the reader is more impressed, as he is surely meant to be, by the reality of

. . . *these* clouds, *these* rains, *these* sleets of lead,
And *these* winds' scimitars; . . .

Unlike God's 'calm pillows', these elements are inimical to man. The second alternative reverts to the realistic language of the poem's opening:

—Or whether yet his thin and sodden head
Confuses more and more with the low mould,
His hair being one with the grey grass
And finished fields of autumns that are old . . .
Who knows? . . .

We are left in little doubt of the alternative that Owen thinks more likely.

¹ *Collected Poems*, p. 57.

² *Collected Letters*, p. 508.

In the poem 'Futility',¹ Nature is the progenitor of man. As with many other poems, its opening is dramatic, almost Shakespearian, reminding us of Owen's intention of writing, if he outlived the war and came safe home, 'blank-verse plays on old Welsh themes'.² Unlike most of his trench poems, however, 'Futility' presents a universalized meditation. Nature, in the person of 'The kind old sun', awoke the Unknown Soldier

. . . 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.

Repeating the words 'wakes', 'woke' like a refrain, the poet moves back through the sun's history in search of hope:

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?

The answer is yes, and the poem ends on a Sophoclean note:

—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

There remains among Owen's unpublished papers a revealing exposition of his thoughts about Nature, in the form of a lecture, entitled 'Do plants think?', delivered with some success at Craiglockhart War Hospital in July 1917. He set out, as he said,

to demonstrate by a number of instances, that Plants have all the elements of perception, and if not consciousness, at least *senscience*: that they have the glimmerings of sight; that vaguely and sleepily, they feel; they feel heat and cold, dryness and damp, and the contact of bodies, that they are even able to smell, and are as well aware of the force of gravity as any of the animals. And further, taken as a whole, the Plant Kingdom exhibits what I can only call Forethought. The same motives which make us wear tin-helmets in certain environments, and carry bayonets, much the same motives which prompt us in youth to wear gorgeous socks & neckties, and persons over-age to dress soberly, and to hoard food: also actuate a plant, when it produces special protective

¹ *Collected Poems*, p. 58.

² *Collected Letters*, p. 551. The dramatic element in his work—as exemplified in the use of direct speech, for example—is considerable and of crucial importance.

coverings, sharpens its spines, wastes its young substance in riotous colours, allows those colours to fade immediately fertilization is accomplished.

Six months before delivering that lecture he had written his first poem from the trenches; fourteen months after delivering it he was dead, his best work written in his last year. 'The enigma', said Dr. Day Lewis, 'lies in [the] maturity', and certainly there is no more dramatic development of a poet's gifts in the history of twentieth-century English poetry. But it is now possible to see that his gifts were not only gifts of genius, but other gifts that only the gods bestow. He came to his great trial with his imagination in large measure conditioned and prepared to receive and record the experience of the trenches. Botany and Broxton, Uriconium, and Keats, his adolescent hypochondria, his religious upbringing and later doubts, all shaped him for his subject, as for no other. He wrote more eloquently than other poets of the tragedy of boys killed in battle, because he felt that tragedy more acutely, more personally. His later elegies spring from his early preoccupations as flowers spring from their stem. Two poems will illustrate this, though their comparison, like a botanical diagram, cannot of course explain the ultimate enigma of the energy that generates the flower. The first poem, undated but probably pre-war, was never finished, but this much can be salvaged from one of its three drafts:

But pale skin, your pearl skin
 Show this to me and I shall have surprise
 Of every snow-lit dawn before it break.
 But clear eyes, your fresh eyes
 Open: that I may laugh, and lightly take
 All air of early April in one hour.
 But brown curls, give me your curls
 Full of September mist, half gleam, half glower,
 Let me pass through them like a field of corn.
 Your plum mouth, your rose mouth,
 Give me with this the fulness of the sum
 Of all my summers that are yet to come.

Significant elements of this sub-Keatsian fragment—mouth, eyes, and the haunting phrase 'half gleam, half glower'—reappear in a later fragment, one might almost say a later version, written with the disciplined sensuality, the passionate intelligence that distinguish Owen's poetry at its best:

I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell,
 Like a Sun, in his last deep hour;

Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,
Clouding, half gleam, half glower,
And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.
And in his eyes
The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,
In different skies.¹

The skies are different and at the same time indifferent. So,
on the bank of the Sambre Canal, it was for Owen

. . . in his eyes
The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,
In different skies.

And so he took his place with Chatterton, with Keats:

. . . burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
The soul of Adonais, like a star,
Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

¹ *Collected Poems*, p. 110.

Rooi Els, Cape, South Africa