

# The Conception of Trauma in Depicting the Battlefields In Wilfred Owen's War Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

The paper examines the poetry of Wilfred Owen as a representative of a group of poets who write poetry out of the trenches during and after World War I. Their poetry is generally known as war poetry or trench poetry. It is mostly characterized by the processing of traumatic experience through visual imagery to invoke the readers' sense of realization to the horrors of war. Some of these poets, including Owen himself, were hospitalized due to shell shock or traumatic symptoms that affected them physically and psychologically. Such traumatic experience changes the poet's view of war and marks him a witness to its horrors. Owen, one of the greatest of these poets, tries to put the reader in the mid of the battlefield through an extensive use of images, condensed language, and paradoxical statements to show the ugly face of war and warn the people at home of its horrors and urges them not to believe the old lie of the glories of war.

**Keywords:** Trauma, war poetry, Wilfred Owen.

## 1. Introduction

The literature of trauma serves to position the reader as a witness, a vital position that makes possible the healing of the wounds of historical trauma. Herman writes "to hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins the victim and the witness in a common alliance."<sup>1</sup> This bearing witness is vital to the victim's ability to move from silence and inarticulate pain to actually putting the trauma into the form of a story, thereby giving voice to the trauma, naming the trauma, and , ultimately, articulating the trauma and relegating it to the past. But to do this, there must be a witness to carry out the traumatic story and articulate it to others, even if the others are only potential readers as to achieve the bearing witness position.

The First World War was, among other things, truly remarkable for its scope and cold mechanical efficiency.

Armed with mass produced machines of the industrial age, the patriotic young men who set off to fight in the summer of 1914 did so with an unprecedented, limitless and thoroughly unexpected ability to kill. They carry within themselves the heroic ideals of the classical heroes of the past times, marching with an increasing insistence on defeating the enemy and gaining honour and glory for their country. However, the shockingly savage nature of the opening weeks shattered these beliefs, as in the wake of artillery barrages, machine guns fire and poison gas, honour, glory and the acts of the individual lost all meanings. Instead of a quick and easy war promised by the politicians, the lost generation of Europe found themselves waiting to be killed by faceless enemies as they crouched miserably in muddy, rat infested holes. Death hovered them day and night, and they were surrounded by the horrors of the air raids and missiles as they are crouching in their trenches without any hope. "There is nothing in all this inferno but mud and thunder"<sup>2</sup> Owen wrote to his mother describing their suffering in the trenches of the front lines. British trenches, "dug where the water tables were highest, were always wet and frequently

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filled with several feet of water contaminated by feces, urine, and rats so that a soldier was continually wading in filth.”<sup>3</sup> The air, too, had a swampy, diseased quality. “You could smell the front line miles before you could see it,”<sup>4</sup> Paul Fussell writes, explaining that besides the rats and the human refuse, the “stench of rotten flesh was over everything.”<sup>5</sup> Corpses of rats, horses, and men might stay unburied and rotting for months. The narrow trenches offered no escape from any of these horrors. Even the sky above, so often a metaphor of freedom and beauty, offered no release from these horrors, but, on the contrary, symbolizes death from above for the soldiers. Enemy’s bombs could arrive anywhere at any time. “Heaven” Owen writes, rather than a symbol of hope, became merely “the highway for a shell.”<sup>6</sup>

Trench poetry, as it comes to be known later and for which Owen is a pioneer, becomes a platform for transforming the traumatic experiences of soldiers in the battlefields to those who are not aware of it and still singing for the glories of war. Owen states clearly in a preface to his poems that his “subject is war, and the pity of war, the poetry is in the pity”<sup>7</sup> and determines on expressing the ugliness of war to his fellow young men, the ugliness that he suffers from throughout his service as an officer in the British army. In a letter to his mother he wrote:

*I suppose I can endure cold, and fatigue, and the  
face-to-face death  
as well as another; but extra for me there is the  
universal pervasion of  
Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul  
language and nothing  
but foul, even from one’s own mouth (for all are  
devil ridden), every-  
thing unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion  
of the dead, whose*

*unburied bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day,  
all night, the  
most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call  
them the most  
glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night...  
and a week  
later to come back and find them still sitting  
there, in motionless  
groups, THAT is what saps the “soldiery spirit”<sup>8</sup>*

The function of poetry for Owen is, then, to dismantle “the old lie” of the glories of the dead soldiers as they are rotting in the battlefield without even an honouring funeral. In the trench warfare these glorious soldiers become “the most execrable sights on earth”, and there is not a bit of glory in their “universal pervasion of Ugliness.” The sense of ugliness Owen is referring to is not only that of the dead men’s corpses, but also to the concepts of the politicians about the war and its meanings. The ugliness is everywhere in the trenches and back home, and his main concern is to warn the population back home of the ugly experiences of war in the hope of making them share his views. This is exactly where the conception of the “bearing witness” comes into action. It is in the poet’s attempts at mentally visualizing the experiences of the futility of war “where death becomes absurd and life absurder.”<sup>9</sup> The traumatic experience of the frontline trenches was one of the most persisting pressures on the human psyche as “it stripped man of the protective layers of civilization and thrust his naked, fragile body between the ravages of industrial modernity, on the one hand, and the chaos of formless matter, on the other.”<sup>10</sup> In the battlefield the poet becomes a witness for the simultaneously existing binary opposition; namely life and death. It is strange and weird how war poetry can combine two very different, in fact opposing, sides of life. War refers to death, pain, silence, destruction;

while poetry refers to life, pleasure, and creation. So the task of writing a poem becomes an attempt at creating order in the middle of chaos and disorder in such a way that readers may be able to comprehend what is beyond apprehension. Tim Kendall states that "although a war poem may seek to justify itself as warning, a bearing witness, or an act of compassion or catharsis or redress, its primary motivation is to celebrate (even, as in Owen's case, at the expense of healing) its own achievement,"<sup>11</sup> The achievement that Owen wants to make here is the transformation of the ugly truth about war that is so complicated to be described by natural language. In "The Storyteller", Walter Benjamin observes the strange phenomenon that the soldiers returning from the First World War have grown silent, "not richer, but poorer in communicable experience", unable to articulate the "truth of war"<sup>12</sup> with any more coherence or force than Owen's soldier could utter the lie. A month before his death, Wilfred Owen wrote to Siegfried Sassoon about his servant Jones, "shot through the head, [who] lay in top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour, ... can you photograph the crimson-hot iron as it cools from the smelting."<sup>13</sup> The experience of death at war, with the poet's trials to make art of it, is what might be called the poet's dilemma: creating sense out of the senseless, or meaning out of meaninglessness. The soldiers' inability to communicate is in fact one of the symptoms of trauma or shell-shock that most of the soldiers who participated in the Great War suffered from.

Shell-shock as a term of clinical diagnosis was introduced by Doctor Charles Myers of the Royal Army Medical Corps into the Military lexicon in September 1914 when the first cases of men suffering from what appeared to be odd physical, rather than psychological, traumas began to arrive at casualty clearing station.<sup>14</sup> The men were dazed, uncommunicative, mute, deaf,

blind, amnesiac, paralyzed, trembling, subject to hallucinations, but they resembled no visible physical injury to their nervous system to account for these symptoms. At the beginning, it was thought that these men suffered from brain damage due to the blast of explosions near them. Later in the war, when cases arose which could not be ascribed to shelling but which displayed similar symptoms, the term, shell shock, was thought to be misleading. In *Shell Shock and Its Lessons* (1918), the British doctors G. Eliot Smith and T.H. Pear employ the term because it "has come to possess a more or less definite significance in official documents and in current conversation".<sup>15</sup> Later studies agreed that "'shell shock' has been a gross and costly misnomer, and that the term should be eliminated from our nomenclature."<sup>16</sup> The use of the term, they argued, presumes that a single event, rather than a prolonged exposure to the war which wore the soldiers down gradually, precipitated in the manifestations of trauma. Other terms that came to denote more or less the same set of phenomena were "battle fatigue", "war shock", "war neurosis", "hysterical disorders of warfare", and so forth. Each of these terms emphasized the notion that exposure to violence of war took its toll upon the psychological constitution of its participants.

The letters of Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) from 1914 show that at first he regarded the war as an abstraction from his perspective of safety as a tutor to adolescent boys in rural towns of France, far away from the fighting. But the pull of war intensified, and Owen enlisted in British army in October 1915 and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. Letters through most of his period of officer training in 1916 show a man able to block the potential dangers of war out of his mind, but when he began his command over a platoon of infantrymen through the Somme battle and towards the close of 1916, ignoring the brutal reality of

war became impossible. The life he was forced to endure in the trenches made the physical and psychological reality of suffering central to his experience. Owen fought from January to May of 1917, until his feelings of control over both his environment and over himself weakened and then evaporated entirely. In January 1917, a heavy barrage of German artillery fires forced Owen to lead his men into an underground dugout where they huddled in waist-deep rainwater during fifty hours of continuous shelling. Owen watched soldiers he commanded die in front of his eyes, but he and most of his men were able to escape. In April, Owen was thrown into the air by a shell explosion and rendered semi-conscious by the force of the blast. Days later, behind the lines, Owen, stammering and disoriented, displayed symptoms of shellshock which by this point in the war had become very common. He was declared unfit for service and soon arrived at Craiglockhart Military Hospital in Edinburgh, classified as suffering from shellshock, where he remained for five months. His stammer and recurring nightmares about his experiences were slowly alleviated by the means of the therapy administered by his doctor, Arthur Brock. The friendship he formed with Siegfried Sassoon, hospitalized by a different set of circumstances, and the new type of poetry about the war that Owen developed during this period of recuperation.

In his poem "The Sentry" Owen expresses his traumatic experience not only as a witness but in fact a real participator in the battlefield. The raw material of the poem comes from an event during Owen's first stint in the trenches in the mid of January 1917. The poem also establishes a battle scene whose participants are united in their common terror during the bombardment:

We'd found an old Bosche dug-out, and he knew,

And gave us hell; for shell on frantic shell  
Lit fill on top, but never quit burst through.  
Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime.  
Kept slush waist-high and rising hour by hour.  
And choked the steps too thick with clay to climb,  
What murk of air remained stank old, and sour,  
With fumes from whizz-bangs, and the smell of  
men,

Who'd lived there years, and left their curse in the  
den,

If not their corpses..... (ll. 1-10)

In these lines Owen tells one of the terrible stories of the battlefields of the Great War. The soldiers have found a German trench and moved in it, but, unfortunately, the enemy discovered that and "gave [them] hell/ for shell on frantic shell". The time they spent in the German trench and the act of waiting a shell to hit them at any moment participated greatly to the traumatic experience and shellshock that would haunt them even if they survived it. "As always, the weather is a greater enemy than the German forces. At least the shelter saves those inside it from the bombing, but the rain and cold cannot be kept out".<sup>17</sup> It seems that the soldiers are facing two enemies at the same time; the elements of nature like rain and mud work to enclose them in a small and filthy trench while the other represents a continuous life threat symbolized by the German shells. Into that trench, which Owen describes as hell, they "herded from the blast /Of whizz-bangs"(ll. 11-12). Until, all of a sudden, one shell finds its way to the door and throwing off the sentry inside the trench with a huge amount of mud, smoke, water, and dirt. Owen uses alliteration and repetition to emphasize the relentless attack of bombs and the evilness of the natural elements around them, even the continuous disturbing sound of the splashing water adds to the misery of the soldiers. The moment of crisis, the

wounding, establishes the degrees of difference between the wounded man, the speaker, and the rest of the platoon:

The sentry's body; then his rifle, handles  
Of old Bosche bombs, and mud in ruck on ruck.  
We dredged it up, for dead, until he whined,  
'O Sir - my eyes, -- I'm blind, -- I'm blind, -- I'm blind.' (ll. 16-19)

The rest of the poem focuses on the psychological conflicts that the officer of the platoon, Owen himself, is undergoing. He has a dual responsibility in protecting himself as well as the men under his command. When the sentry was thought to be dead, the poet refers to him as an inanimate, a mere corpse, but upon realizing him alive, the poet gives him life and human identity as a soldier. Kerr observes that when the sentry speaks, he "singles the officer out from the group (though he can see none of them) in an appeal *di profundis*, but the officer hears his voice as a whine, an undignified, unpleasant, and unwelcome noise."<sup>18</sup>

The poem concludes with an image of hopelessness for after addressing the "wretches" (l. 27) who bleed and spew and "one who would have drowned himself for good" (l. 28) Owen urges himself to forget these traumatic experiences. Nonetheless, his trials to forget are in vain as the image of "the sentry's moans and jumps/ and the wild chattering of his shivering teeth/ Renewed most horribly" (ll. 31-33) all the fatal experiences he has been through and post him as a witness for the young generation. The sentry's cries at the final line of the poem that "I see your lights" (l. 36) refer to the light of the crippled hope of survival for this blind soldier as the light of the other wretches "had long gone out" (l. 36). His survival, metaphorically speaking, may allude to his death which means a release from the sufferings of the war.

Owen's initial strategy of representing warfare is to

mediate the gulf between the home and western fronts. He feels that he belongs to both places and at the same time alienated from them. Most of the soldiers of the Great War suffered from this feeling of in-betweenness; fighting for the sake of their own countries and yearning to go back and be accepted there. Nevertheless, these soldiers felt that people at the home front are incapable of understanding the horrors of the war and all the trauma associated with it. They even started to realize the meaninglessness of the war and the triviality of everything they have learned as compared to the suffering of the war. In his poem "Anthem for Doomed Youth", Owen makes a clear declaration that the enemy is not Germany but the slaughter of men at the front lines:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shell;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires. (ll. 1-8)

The title of the poem is meant to be an echoing call of remembrance for those who sacrifice their lives for the sake of England. Furthermore, the "Doomed Youth" of the title broadens the poem's range of application. "It is not just for those already dead, but to all of youth whom Owen sees as being in such danger."<sup>19</sup> He wants his poem to be an anthem of warning to as many people as possible of the horrors of war and mourn at the same time those who are already dead. He describes them as cattle to be slaughtered in the war machine and mockingly exclaims at the benefit of the ringing bells of churches over carnage of the war. Nothing Owen finds suitable to mourn these soldiers but only guns and rifles as orisons, only shells as choirs, no prayers, bells,



or human voices at all.

"Strange Meeting" recounts a frightful reverie, an encounter between two soldiers in hell. Their confrontation is inspired by the horrors of war and the strangeness of the occasion. The narrator, Owen himself, meets an apparent enemy whom he has killed, and in him finds a friend who shares his hatred of the whole business of war. In the very first line of the poem Owen echoes "The Sentry" in his hopeless survival through death. The narrator here seems to have found an "escape" "out of battle" (l.1), but unfortunately his escape is no more than death leading to hell in the form of a "profound dull tunnel"(l.2) where "encumbered sleepers groaned"(l.3). He is surprised when one of these fellows jumps up; there is a moment of recognition not only between them, but also of their mutual circumstance, standing in hell:

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,

By his dead smile I knew we stood in hell.  
(ll.9-10)

McIlroy affirms that "the association of the traditional Christian notion of hell as a place of eternal torment tacitly leaves the reader with the conclusion that if hell is to be smiled through, the trenches and battlefields must have been places of incomparable horror."<sup>20</sup> In a sense, the reader is meant to participate here through witnessing these traumatic experiences that Owen manages to achieve throughout an objective dramatic scene. This kind of dramatic detachment is a characteristic of Owen's poetry whose aim is not to indulge in that scene, but to bring the reader, through detailed visual description, to be involved in it. The stranger in that tunnel happens to be a poet, like Owen himself, who mourns nothing but his inability to tell the truth about the war. Thus, "the poet's life is lost, but that loss is not to be lamented nearly as much as the loss of the truth he might have written, the 'truth

untold'"<sup>21</sup>. The ultimate tragedy is not temporary, but lasting, as future generations would be unaware of the truth of war that the poet could have recorded.

Under this inundation of violence and bloodshed, soldiers become both physically and spiritually exhausted, pushed beyond limits. The infantrymen described in "Dulce Et Decorum Est", for instance, begin the poem at the point of collapse and then, surrounded by the immense, inescapable war, face one of its most frightening dangers, an attack of nerve gas, which tests their fortitude and sanity even further. The poem's opening lines drop readers into the middle of battle, using a quick, densely delivered series of images that pile onto each other like the burdens of the soldiers they describe:

Bent double, like old beggars under sags,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed  
through sludge,

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,

And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
(ll. 1-4)

The soldiers' backs are hunched due to their walking through the trenches, their uniforms are torn out and dirty like beggars carrying their own sags, but the soldiers' sags are their burdens and the traumatic experiences of the horrors of war. What is of importance in this poem is the mastery by which Owen manages to provide the tiny details of the experience through the eyes of a witness who has actually lived it, and to a certain extent, survived it. The relatively long lines, especially the second line, and the slightly difficult words evoke the tedium and difficulty of movement in the trenches and create a tone of fatigue and weariness. The speaker of the poem speaking in a communal voice on behalf of his soldiers, he is an officer and responsible for them. However, another voice appears suddenly and seems louder than Owen's

voice as it is a warning commanding the soldiers to get to action, "Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!- an ecstasy of fumbling/ Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time" (ll. 9-10). The appearance of this voice marks a difference between Owen and his soldiers and puts him at a distance from them to be an observer of what happens to them. He witnesses the changes in the soldiers' attitude from a communal act of mechanic withdrawing from the horrors of war to an individual act of survival. The slow movement of the soldiers, marked by the slow movement of the lines themselves, abruptly changes to a quick search for the gas mask as the sole means of survival in this situation. Nonetheless, one of them hears the warning too late who is "yelling out and stumbling/ And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime" (ll. 11-12). This man is further isolated from rest of the soldiers as the only man suffering from the gas attack from which he fails to defend himself. The separation of the man is characterized by the misty panes of the gas mask from which the speaker is helplessly and powerlessly watching the suffering of this private.

This experience seems to haunt Owen even in his dreams especially the scene of the soldier "drowning" "under a green sea" (l. 14). This kind of dream haunting is in fact one of the symptoms of shell shock and trauma, bearing in mind that Owen himself suffered from this kind of traumatic, psychological disturbance and was hospitalized at Craiglockhart in 1917 where he wrote most of his war poems as a means of recovering war trauma. The haunting image of the drowning soldier adds to the suffering of the poet as the feeling of guilt increases at realizing his inability to help as an officer in charge of him. Daniel. W. Hipp affirms that "the guilt, therefore, is the result of some perceived failings in the officer's position of authority."<sup>22</sup> Owen's structuring of human relationships in the poem allows

him to explore this guilt. The officer's command to his men to put on the mask marks him as superior to his group in class, power, and authority. The suffering of others becomes in part the suffering of Owen himself. The gassed soldier's failure to follow the command has dictated that his experience will be different from the troops as well, and consequently, "Owen achieves a psychological identification with the sufferer on the basis of their common isolation from the collective body."<sup>23</sup>

In the remaining lines of the poem, Owen moves from the battlefield and the actual horrors of the war to speak to the readers directly marking himself as the mediator between them and the front line:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,- (ll. 17-24)

In these lines the main function of a war poet as a bearing witness appears through a direct address bringing the reader in the front line, just behind the wagon carrying the corpse of the dead soldier. Lane notes the striking rhetorical shift of this stanza, which moves from memory and nightmare to a direct address of the audience and argues that "Owen's attention is, to some extent outside the subject of the poem; his intention, certainly an admirable one, is to 'show' the horror to an all-too-uncomprehending audience on the home front"<sup>24</sup>. His mission, as he describes it "is not war, but the pity of war, the poetry is in the pity" and this is exactly what he is trying to accomplish in these few lines with a very sad and melancholic tone. He is

trying to put the reader in the situation of these soldiers in general and in that specific private in particular by providing detailed visual imagery in describing the ugly face of war to those unaware of it. Exposed to such kind of truth, readers would reconsider their previous thoughts of war and the glories of war. The poet, in fact, is preparing them, psychologically speaking, to the final lines of the poem that function as a conclusion to it. He urges the young generation not to believe the old lie of the glories of war:

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.*

(ll. 15-18)

Wilfred Owen tries throughout his relatively short life not to stop the war as basically he cannot, but to bring out the horrors of it to the presumably unaware home front, and especially the young generation who yearn for the glories of war. It is true that he enlisted according to his own will and with a willingness to fight, but the traumatic experience of war had matured him and brought to the surface his real feelings in the most artistic visual images which aim to provoke the readers' realization of a new consciousness that horrifies them. Being a poet-soldier who paid his life in the course of the war, Owen manages to transform his actual war experience of the front lines to the readers, acting out as a witness for what it really means to be at war.

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