

WILFRED OWEN'S RESPONSE TO PROPAGANDA, PATRIOTISM AND THE LANGUAGE OF WAR

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ABSTRACT

Wilfred Owen was of the opinion that the First World War was prolonged by stirring the fires of patriotism through the use of propaganda. His feelings about this are mirrored constantly in many of his later poems. This article presents a general picture of the state of propaganda and censorship in Britain during the First World War and leads into a study of some of Owen's poems which reflect his rejection of the hypocritical attitudes of the politicians and clergy of the period. At the same time, Owen's attempts to counteract the public's ignorance in such matters become obvious.

The subtle manipulation of public opinion through the use of propaganda during the 1914-1918 conflict fuelled the embers of patriotism to such an extent that the vast majority of people came to believe that military victory over Germany was the major objective and that aggression would have to continue until triumph for the allies could be guaranteed.

CONTEMPORARY PROPAGANDA

During the First World War, censorship became essential to control the flow of positive and negative information to the civilian population and to soldiers fighting abroad. It was also necessary as a means of controlling the transmission of information by enemy agents operating within British territory. Propaganda was born of censorship.

Prior to the First World War, propaganda as a weapon in war was unheard of but by the end of the conflict, the British government had developed a most highly effec-

tive war propaganda organisation. The government had learnt that public opinion could not be ignored but politicians had also come to realise that it could be manipulated and controlled. Referring to the introduction of conscription, the recruitment of a female work-force into factories, the bombing of some of England's east coast towns, Zeppelin raids, the attempts of German submarines to starve Britain and other "traumatic experiences for a nation learning the rules of modern warfare", Michael Sanders and Philip Taylor explain how propaganda came to be so important: "In such a struggle, morale came to be recognised as a significant military factor and propaganda began to emerge as the principal instrument of control over public opinion and an essential weapon in the national armoury."¹

There were only 160,000 men in the British Army when war broke out in August 1914, but approximately one month later, 30,000 men a day were volunteering to serve their country. According to Sanders and Taylor, the early attempts to raise a volunteer force in Britain represented the first systematic propaganda campaign directed at the civilian population by the government. In their opinion, "the successful partnership of propaganda and recruitment had demonstrated the value of more positive forms of action at a time when the military authorities badly needed volunteers" (51). Lord Kitchener, the War Secretary, had been successful in his appeal for men to defend their King and Country. However, this success was short-lived. There were no signs of the conflict ending, the numbers of wounded and dead soared by the minute and the initial enthusiasm felt by many people rapidly began to wane. By mid-1915, there was such a severe shortage of volunteers that conscription was introduced in January 1916. With conscription, the role of propaganda became even more important because if patriotism had not been enough to make new recruits enlist freely, then propaganda had to be powerful and convincing enough to make these men feel that it was worth fighting for their country.

As far back as December 1904, The Committee of Imperial Defence had proposed a bill that restricted the freedom of the press during periods of national emergency and with this control, the press clearly became the most obvious means to use in spreading propaganda and influencing domestic opinion during the 1914-18 war. Politicians wanted newspaper publicity to be exploited to the maximum.

At first, Fleet Street and the political press bureau were at constant loggerheads as the journalists on Fleet St. felt that the laws governing censorship were unsatisfactory and that quite often, censorship was being mis-used in order to withhold or filter information. A clear example of the atmosphere of discontent that abounded in Fleet St is provided by Sanders and Taylor who point out that many reporters felt that those who were acting as censors also came to act as propagandists. They refer to the controversial military correspondent of *The Times*, Colonel Repington, who, as early as the end of 1914, was arguing that the censorship was being used "as a cloak to cover all political, naval and military mistakes."²

Censorship was seen as just as valuable a source in aiding the shaping of public opinion as were publicity and propaganda. By December 1915, censorship of much of the "sensitive" material relating to foreign affairs was lifted, as Lord Robert Cecil, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs at the time, saw the untapped propaganda potential of the press. Consequently, journalism became part of the official propaganda machinery of the war and during the course of the conflict, different committees and sub-committees were established and the Ministry of Infor-

mation came into being in order to ensure that the liaison between the government and press became and remained politically solid, efficient and effective.

Those journalists who were allowed to become war correspondents underwent careful selection so that their reports would contain only “politically correct” information. The press was used as a vehicle to report only what was considered convenient, to promote recruiting and to control the responses of the general public to the war. Unfortunately, the public was content to accept the war fiction doled out by the popular press. Kenneth Simcox writes that the press’:

... message seemed to alternate between the sickeningly sentimental and the shrilly martial. ... complex issues were reduced to simple slogans and the victims of this policy were honesty and truth. Without knowing it the average person viewed the war ... as if he or she were standing in a hall of mirrors. Distorted images proceeded out of manipulated minds.³

The lack of truth or the telling of only half-truths was sorely felt by war poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who, being equipped with first-hand war experience, had decided to tell the complete truth from their point of view. In Dominic Hibberd’s opinion, “The sorrows of the nations needed better interpreters than the newspapers would provide”⁴.

Owen’s poem “Smile, Smile, Smile” is a bitter criticism of the hypocritical attitudes found in the press during the First World War. Here Owen recognises the power of the press and politicians in shaping public opinion. The title of the poem was probably taken from a popular wartime song and possibly also reflects the type of “smiling” photographs that were published in the newspapers during the war but which did nothing to reflect what was really going on at the front. In the poem, Owen referred to the *Mail* which was a popular newspaper at the time and noted how names of war casualties were printed in small type whilst reports of victory were printed in large type. The press achieved its aim as “the public continued to be swayed by the false political rhetoric and to be deceived by smiling pictures”, writes Jennifer Breen.⁵

John Bull was a blatantly anti-German newspaper that was edited by the seemingly unscrupulous and excessively loud Horatio Bottomley who was described as “a rabble-rousing former M.P. whose recruiting speeches had helped to fill Kitchener’s army and had made him famous, and his paper was what he was — jingoistic, loud, inflammatory, and very popular...”⁶ Bottomley did nothing to help educate the general public and therefore serve the soldier. Rather, with his bellicose pronouncements he promoted feelings of hate against the Germans whom he portrayed as barbaric beasts worthy only of bloody slaughter. Under no circumstances would the belligerent Bottomley have tolerated Owen’s anti-war poems, particularly ones like “Strange Meeting”, where a sense of comradeship between a British and a German soldier is found:

I am the enemy you killed my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now... (40-44)

Here, there is no feeling of enmity or resentment shown between the two men. An attitude of total forgiveness and therefore of peace reigns, although there is regret for what has been lost. In removing all hostility from between the dead soldiers, both British and Germans alike are placed on an equal footing. In this way, Owen is condemning the war that has divided or created differences between two groups of people who are fundamentally the same.

PROPAGANDA AND ART FORMS

Many established literary figures supported the war, particularly in its early stages and newspapers were constantly used as a means of encouraging patriotism. Dominic Hibberd writes that, "Clearly, literature could contribute to the nation's morale and to the recruiting campaign. Writers agreed that the response to Germany had to be moral and cultural, not just military ..."⁷ Large public meetings were held and well-known writers were often invited to speak at them. In fact, on 2 December 1914, approximately twenty distinguished writers met at the new propaganda department in London for a secret conference, "to discuss how they could use their talents in the service of the nation" (55). As a result of this conference, Thomas Hardy wrote his recruiting poem "The Song of the Soldiers" or "Men Who March Away" and fifty two authors issued a lengthy public statement under the title "Britain's Destiny and Duty / Declaration by authors" in which they showed their support for the Allied Cause. From amongst the fifty two signatories, Hibberd has mentioned J.M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, Laurence Binyon, Bridges, G.K. Chesterton, Conan Doyle, Galsworthy, Rider Haggard, Hardy, Kipling, Masfield, Newbolt, and Wells. Several well-known literary figures were sent to the United States to give lectures whilst others were allowed to visit France and then encouraged to write in positive terms about what little they had been allowed to witness in the war zone.

Sanders and Taylor explain that other forms of written propaganda, "... consisted of official publications such as the Bryce Report on German atrocities in Belgium, official white papers, ministerial speeches, messages from the king and various documentary publications relating to the origins of war produced by most of the belligerent governments."⁸

Wilfred Owen was possibly not aware of the great "literary weight" that was added to much of Britain's war propaganda but he knew he had to fight against the swirling tides of emotion that swayed the public towards feelings of hate-bathed ignorance and so, along with Siegfried Sassoon and a few other writers, he assumed the public role of defender of soldiers and teller of the truth. He had no option but to resort to shock tactics as he knew that truth veiled in gentleness would be ineffective against the influence of many authors and civilian poets like Jessie Pope or Laurence Binyon who continued to write poems that were aimed at encouraging men to be brave and willing to die for their country. Samuel Hynes informs us that the great mass of war poetry was not written by soldiers or by those who had had experience at the front: "A recent bibliography of English poetry of the First World War lists over 3,000 works by 2,225 poets; of these poets, less than a quarter were in uniform. Another quarter were women. So more than half must have been male civilians ..."⁹ For

Desmond Graham, far from being a politically inappropriate medium, "poetry as it was popularly understood and applauded at that time, was steeped in the political cant and illusions which helped to make and sustain war."¹⁰

It must be acknowledged that poetry, particularly with its recruiting verses and slogans, was an extremely useful propaganda weapon. However, discerning soldiers and poets recognised propagandist poetry for what it was. C.K. Stead tells us that it was "interesting to note that as this public form of poetry began to be used for the 'writing up' of campaigns, intelligent soldiers rebelled at its dishonesty—not on artistic grounds—but simply because (as poetry of this sort had done for years) it distorted the truth for the sake of an optimistic picture."¹¹

Wilfred Owen was not prepared to tolerate further distortions of the truth and one of his most vehement attacks against propaganda is seen in "Dulce et Decorum Est" where he passionately claims that it is neither a sweet nor a decorous thing to die for one's country. In fact, in the poem, Owen describes in chilling and repulsive terms what it really was like to die for one's country in war. First, there is the chronic suffering of the combat weary soldiers, who, retreating to a rest area, are "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags ..." (1-2). Since all their senses have been numbed through exhaustion, they are described as "lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue; deaf ..." (6-7) and once a shell has been dropped and gas breaks out and seeps into the soldiers' crumbling humanity, their suffering becomes absolutely vile. The soldier affected by gas is described as having "white eyes writhing in his face, / His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin" (19-20) as his innocent blood came "gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs" (22). And so Owen asks how could anyone tell "To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro Patria Mori". (26-28). Given that it was Owen's intention to foil Jessie Pope's patriotic poetry with his poetry of protest as well as to criticise the public's misconceived notions of heroism in wartime, it is hardly surprising to find that the first two drafts of the poem bear the epigraph, "To a Certain Poetess" and a third was addressed, "To Jessie Pope."¹²

Owen's less savage "Arms and the Boy" could also be interpreted as a deterrent against war propaganda. According to Jon Stallworthy, "this poem was classified by WO [Wilfred Owen] in his draft list of contents ... under 'Protest—the unnaturalness of weapons'."¹³ Douglas Kerr has suggested that this poem, "can be seen as another kind of answer to Jessie Pope, an alternative version of what ought to be taught to innocent youngsters on the brink of war."¹⁴ In "Arms and the Boy", the poet suggests that inexperienced and blameless adolescents should be allowed to handle the weapons of war so that they can come to understand the dangers of them:

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads,
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
Or give him cartridges whose fine zinc teeth
Are sharp with sharpness of grief and death. (1-8)

In Owen's opinion, young boys were not born to fight; in their purity, they should be left to enjoy life. It is as if Owen feels that youngsters should not be tempted to taste the fruits of war that would damn them for ever, just as Adam was damned after eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Of the innocence of the boy in the poem, Owen writes:

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls. (9-12)

Pictorial propaganda, which often took the form of films, magazines, photographs, lantern slides, picture postcards and posters, also played an important persuasive role during the First World War. Undoubtedly, illustrations were an effective means of propaganda particularly if the people at whom the propaganda was aimed were illiterate or had poor reading skills.

Until the end of July 1915, the poster was the most popular and perhaps one of the most effective ways of promoting war propaganda. Moral blackmail seemed to be the order of the day and on every street corner and in every public place, the bulk of posters was aimed at persuading, cajoling and even shaming the male population into enlisting. Comparatively few posters considered the civilian war effort.

One of the most popular wartime posters which read "Your King and Country Need YOU" showed Lord Kitchener pointing his finger directly at the reader, calling for volunteers willing to do their duty. As time passed and the number of new recruits began to decrease, the style of the posters showed signs of change and they "began to assume a more pressing tone by depicting those who were already fighting and, by implication, suggesting that there were those who were not doing their fair share. Hence the message: 'Who's absent - Is it You?' with John Bull pointing an accusing finger."¹⁵ Other posters contained simple but succinct messages: "There are three kinds of men;/ Those who hear the call and obey;/ Those who delay;/ And - the others".

Wilfred Owen was fully aware of the existence of these propaganda posters and to a certain point, he fell victim to them. From mid-May to mid-June 1915, Owen was in England and then returned to France where he took a room in Bordeaux. From there, he wrote to his mother, "I noticed in the Hotel in London an announcement that any gentleman (fit etc.) *returning to England from abroad* will be given a Commission - in the 'Artists' Rifles'."¹⁶ Given that Owen seemed keen to improve his social standing, this type of announcement would most probably have appealed to his sense of vanity and social and intellectual snobbery. The idea of being considered a gentleman would probably have been attractive to him and the possibility of receiving a commission in the Artists' Rifles and thus becoming an officer amongst creative men of letters would have been most tempting. He continued, "Such officers will be sent to the front in 3 months ... I don't want the bore of training, I don't want to wear khaki; nor yet to save my honour before inquisitive grand-children fifty years hence. But I *now do* most *intensely want to fight*".

Owen's comments on saving his honour "before inquisitive grand-children 50 years hence" possibly stemmed from the type of propaganda poster that appealed to

a man's sense of male strength and family pride. Posters containing slogans like "Women of Britain Say Go" and "What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?" were not uncommon.

Owen's poem "The Calls" contains references to British propaganda during the First World War and, to a point, could be considered autobiographical in the sense that the title itself could be taken as an indirect reference to calls for volunteers at the outbreak and during the preliminary stages of the war. At first, Owen ignored these calls and only decided to join up when he felt that the time was right for him. In the earlier stanzas of the poem, the poet did not respond to the different calls from sirens, bells and bugles. It was only the suffering implied in the last two stanzas that caused him to react. Likewise, Owen the civilian ignored all bellicose activity until he became more aware of the personal advantages that joining up offered. In fact, the silent appeal for help from the unprotesting soldiers who were fighting at the front during the days stages of the war was of little or no importance to him. According to Owen, his return to the front in 1918, after quite a lengthy period of hospitalisation and recuperation, was made easier because of the feelings of empathy and sympathy he experienced with respect to the soldiers' suffering. It was their misery and anguish rather than his sense of patriotism or his desire to defend King and country that made him act. It was the calls of these men that Owen took as his call to duty:

For leaning out last midnight on my sill,
I heard the sighs of men, that have no skill
To speak of their distress, no, nor the will!
A voice I must know. And this time I must go. (24-27)

More direct references to propaganda and war profiteering are seen in the lines "I see a food-hog whet his gold-filled tusk / To eat less bread and more luxurious rusk" (18-19). Jon Stallworthy has suggested that the "food-hog" was "perhaps a reference to 'the stinking Leeds & Bradford War-profiteers mentioned to Susan Owen in a letter on 10 August 1918'."¹⁷ Dominic Hibberd has pointed out that the reference to eating less bread came from a Food Economy Poster of 1917. The poster itself contained the slogan "Save the Wheat / and / Help the Fleet / Eat / Less Bread". Hibberd explains that the Food Controller had sent a circular to all householders in May 1917 telling them, 'We must all eat less food, especially we must all eat less bread.'¹⁸

The use of photographs and motion pictures was also recognised as a valuable medium for official propaganda. In their book *British Propaganda*, Sanders and Taylor have explained that the use of films and photographs:

provided an 'illusion of reality' at a time when it was generally believed that the camera could not lie ... but film, whether still or motion, could only depict what the cameraman wanted it to depict. The images presented were, in fact, carefully staged. While there were often several apparently quite realistic camera shots of wounded soldiers at the front, they were usually stage-managed in order to show fatigue being accompanied by cheerfulness. Wounds were always freshly dressed and there were rarely pictures of Allied dead, although dead Germans did feature more often" (155).

Owen was aware of the tactics used by the propagandists in their war films as can be seen from a letter he wrote in March 1917 to his mother: "From letter of last night I hear you have seen the illusory War Films". He expressed the hope that they might contain some element of truth, "... they must hint at the truth, and if done anywhere on *this* Front, would not be quite devoid of realism."¹⁹ Popular films like "Our Navy" and "With the Royal Flying Corps in France" were screened all around the country as the Department of Information allowed five cinema vans that were fully equipped with screens and projectors to tour the country and thus capture the public's attention.

Artists were also called upon to do their patriotic duty. Muirhead Bone was the first "official war artist" to go to the front and paint his impressions on canvas. Naturally, his talents were used to support the Allied Cause. C.R.W. Nevison was another artist who recorded on canvas what the war was all about, only his impressions revealed the truth somewhat more starkly. So faithful to the facts was his painting "The Paths of Glory" that he was forced by the authorities to withdraw it from exhibition in 1918. The propagandists were most certainly not in favour of the highly unpleasant, gory and realistic paintings that told stories of dreadful suffering and depicted the mangled bodies of dead and injured soldiers caught up in the bloodied tangles of barbed wire. Paul Nash, who served in the infantry at Ypres, was perhaps the most shocking and therefore in a sense, perhaps the most "successful" of all war artists and as such he did his best to re-create the horrors of war in his work. D.S.R. Welland quotes a letter Nash wrote to his wife in November 1917:

I have seen the most frightful nightmare of a country more conceived by Dante or Poe than by nature, unspeakable, utterly indescribable. In the fifteen drawings I have made I may give you some idea of its horror ... Sunrise and sunset are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen clouds all through the bitter black of night is a fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes more evilly yellow, the shell-holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black, dying trees ooze and sweat and the guns never cease. They alone plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave and cast upon it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and curious. I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate will be my message, but it will have a better truth and may it burn in their lousy souls.²⁰

Nash was a man who drew and painted his message. Wilfred Owen was a man who transmitted his message in words, but through their work both of them hoped to create an awareness of war in others. Welland has compared Nash's work to Owen's, suggesting that Nash's work is the pictorial equivalent to poems like "The Show", "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Strange Meeting". Welland considers that what John Rothenstein wrote of Nash is also applicable to Owen:

It is no injustice to the others to say that none of them interpreted the landscape of the Western Front so incisively, with such poetic intensity or with such se-

vere economy as Paul Nash. Out of the chaos and the squalor he made an ordered poetry of form, which, even at those moments when it seemed to be most arbitrary, in fact never relaxed its hold upon objective reality. This innately gentle artist may be said to have discovered the full poetic potentialities of modern warfare (31).

Like Nash, Owen reproduced his experience at the front with such poetic intensity that he was able to transpose it into a beauty that was so horrific that even the most detached of readers could not fail to be moved. Owen also created order from disorder without losing touch with reality. He too had discovered the full poetic potentialities of modern warfare and had quickly learnt that Art in all its forms did not necessarily have to be propaganda in favour of the war.

POLITICIANS, PATRIOTS AND PATRIOTISM

Despite all their propaganda campaigns and attempts to fire civilians with patriotic enthusiasm, a great many politicians had very little to do with the actualities of war, and safely sheltered by their political obligations, these men successfully mis-managed it. In Wilfred Owen's "The Dead-Beat", the dying soldier's condition was not caused by fear of the Germans or by seeing mutilated dead bodies. Rather, it was the people at home, his wife, his relatives and the politicians who were responsible for his madness and eventual death:

..... A low voice said,
 It's blighty, p'rhaps, he sees; his pluck's all gone,
 Dreaming of all the valiant, that *aren't* dead:
 Bold uncles, smiling ministerially;
 Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun
 In some new home, improved materially.
 It's not these stiff's have crazed him; nor the Hun. (8-14)

Political corruption was rampant during the war and the soldiers felt disgust at the deception and dishonesty practised by those in public life. In *The First World War* Dominic Hibberd quoted H.G. Wells: "When we look for the wisdom of statesmen we find the cunning of politicians; when open speech and plain reason might save the world, courts, bureaucrats, financiers and profiteers conspire" (161).²¹ Instead of calming the population, politicians encouraged anti-German feelings. Hibberd explains that after the first ships were torpedoed and coastal towns bombed or shelled, the public was outraged. This rage soon turned to fury when London suffered its first Zeppelin raid and the civilian liner the "Lusitania" was sunk as it was crossing the Atlantic Ocean. The desire for revenge began to grow and it was fanned by the flames of battle-thirsty politicians and propagandists.

Even though the power and effect of propaganda probably was not fully understood by many of those who used it, politicians saw it as a necessary evil of war that had to be exploited to the full. Quoting from Arthur Ponsoby's *A Falsehood in War-*

time where he explains that “the injection of the poison of hatred into men’s minds by means of falsehood is a greater evil in wartime than is the actual loss of life. The defilement of the human soul is worse than the destruction of the human body” (18), Sanders and Taylor make it quite clear that the moral responsibility attached to the use of propaganda was heavy.²²

Whether the propaganda used was based on truth or not seemed, at times, to be immaterial. One story that was spread around told of Germans setting up a corpse factory where the bodies of allied soldiers were used to manufacture such things as soap. Wilfred Owen indirectly referred to this atrocity story in “A Terre”:

To grain, then, go my fat, to buds my sap,
 For all the usefulness there is in soap.
 D’you think the Boch will ever stew man-soup?
 Some day, no doubt, if ... (48-51)

The aftermath of such stories was horrendous as they did not just cause psychological damage during the First World War. Their effect was more far-reaching and mortal than anyone could have imagined, as Sanders and Taylor have explained: “The effect of British atrocity propaganda during the First World War and the failure to substantiate the stories in the years that followed led to a general disinclination in the 1930’s and 1940’s to believe atrocity stories about the Nazi treatment of the Jews. The distortions of the First World War therefore served to obscure the realities of the Second” (163).

Sasi Bhusan Das has described Owen’s “A Terre” as an attack on cheap patriotism and the glory of war. The use of satire “exposes the hollowness and mockery of the laurels in the battlefield.”²³ In his poem, Owen wrote: “I have my medals? —Discs to make my eyes close./ My glorious ribbons?— Ripped from my own back / In scarlet shreds ...” (8-10). On reading these words, any romantic views held about war are shattered by a harrowing reality. Those at home are disparagingly called “buffers” and referred to as “puffy, bald and patriotic” (13-14). The moribund soldier knows that once he dies, he will be soon forgotten, “My soul’s a little grief, grappling your chest, / To climb your throat on sobs; easily chased / On other sighs and wiped by fresher winds” (61-63).

In “Disabled” the soldier-boy was seduced by the romantic notions of heroism that had been doled out to him by people at home. Owen places the weight of responsibility for the boy’s tragic condition on those who encouraged him to sign up. Although the poet considers that much of the blame lies in the laps of ignorant women, he also feels that those in authority, those officials and politicians who allowed underage lads to march to their deaths were also guilty: “He asked to join. He didn’t have to beg; / Smiling they wrote his lie; aged nineteen years” (28-29).

Owen felt that for the common soldiers, betrayal occurred at every cornerstone that formed society and the structures that held it together. For them, it seemed that people at home, statesmen and men of the cloth had colluded with each other to engineer the deaths of thousands of innocent men. Even the army, the institution to which the soldiers belonged, had betrayed them. In “Disabled”, it was those representing the army who finally made the lad’s drafting possible when they allowed him to lie about his age. One of the ironies of the poem is that because the young lad was so eager to join the institution of the army, he became part of the very institution that

rejected him once he could no longer serve a useful military purpose. On becoming militarily useless, he was condemned to live another type of existence in a very different kind of institution and society's responsibility for him was reduced to the mere formalities that constitute institutionalised concern. The poor youngster had become a victim of the patriotism of others.

Although Owen's main intention was to criticise the attitude and behaviour of the Church in "At a Calvary Near the Ancre", he also condemned the attempts at political brainwashing and the feelings of the hatred against the Germans that politicians tried to instil in the British civilian population: "The scribes on all the people shove / and bawl allegiance to the state" (9-10). Even though the word "scribes" in this context probably refers to the politicians who took care of the administrative side of the war and merely carried out the paperwork without giving a thought to the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for others, it could also refer to the journalists of the time who just wrote what the politicians bade them to write in the newspapers so that the population would be in favour of the government's war policies.

When Owen referred to the soldiers as being nothing more than "gaps for filling: / Losses, who might have fought longer" (9-10) in "Insensibility", he was showing his awareness of how the government viewed the soldiers. They were not thought of as individuals and so really neither their lives nor their deaths were of importance.

Owen made veiled political statements in several other poems. For example, in "Strange Meeting", he felt that:

Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress. (26-29)

To Owen, it seemed that for many of the countries leaders, political and territorial gain was far more important than spiritual enhancement and so therefore, with feline cunning and speed, warring nations would continue to fight, irrespective of the possible consequences.

Owen wrote that leave, minor injuries and even death were withheld from the boy-soldier "At the pleasure of this world's Powers who'd run amok" (20) in "S.I.W.". Here, Owen's views on the immorality of politicians in wartime are obvious. For him, European rulers had behaved in a violent, uncontrolled and unpardonable manner. But even worse was the fact that they had permitted unnecessary suffering to continue indefinitely —and this suffering would last for as long as they deemed necessary because the world's Powers did not want the war to end; it would go on at their pleasure. The use of the word "pleasure" hints at the almost masochistic delight that Owen felt those in power might have derived on allowing others to suffer. By beginning the word "Power" with a capital letter, Owen draws the attention of the reader to the strength and scope of influence that lay behind the political powers of the time.

Infantrymen at the front were aware of the constant dangers they were exposed to in the war zone. In "The Chances", Jimmy talked about what could happen to a soldier in battle: "There ain't no more than five things as can happen, —/ You get knocked out; else wounded, bad or cushy; / Scuppered; or nowt except you're feeling mushy"

(4-6). But Jimmy was not altogether correct in his assessment of the physical and mental effects battle could have on soldiers. One of his companions explained what had eventually happened to poor old Jim:

But poor old Jim, he's livin' and he's not;
 He reckoned he'd five chances, and he had:
 He's wounded, killed, and pris'ner, all the lot,
 The flamin' lot all rolled in one. Jim's mad. (13-16)

Jimmy had defended his country, he had done what the politicians and statesmen had wanted him to do, and the only reward he had received was total isolation in complete and utter madness and so, like the child-soldier in "Disabled", he would probably "... spend a few sick years in institutes" (40) until he died. But unlike the soldiers in "Disabled" and "A Terre", Jimmy is not aware of his suffering.

The patients in "Mental Cases" live a twilight existence as "purgatorial shadows" (2), rocking themselves fearfully between dawn and dusk, between night and day. Their uncontrolled and pitiful madness has condemned them to a living inferno. The poet asks who these hellish men are and he receives an answer:

These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished,
 Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
 Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
 Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
 Treading blood from lungs that have loved laughter.
 Always they must see these things and hear them,
 Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
 Carnage incomparable, and human squander,
 Rucked too thick for these men's extrication. (10-18)

Because of what these men have had to endure, they are now unable to be free of the pain and torment of war. They are condemned to absolute madness and although, thankfully, in their madness they are perhaps allowed to be unaware of their present tragic circumstances, there is no way they can escape from their brutal past. However, the readers of the poem—those responsible for sending these men into the dead-end gulf of lunacy—are not permitted to remain unaware of the suffering and anguish. The patients' hands may unconsciously pluck at each other but really, they are: "Snatching after us who smote them, brother / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness" (27-28). There is absolutely no doubt in Owen's mind as to who is responsible for the suffering of the front line soldiers.

In yet another poem, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", Owen shows his disgust at the European statesmen who are represented here by Abram. Instead of heeding what true Christianity preached and rather than swallowing their bellicose pride, these men sent their young soldiers off to war and consequently caused the death of "half the seed of Europe, one by one" (16).

There is no doubt that Owen felt strongly about the attitude of the non-combatants who seemed to so carelessly disregard the masses of soldiers who were sent to the front

and he used his poetry as a means of communicating his disgust at and rejection of the behaviour of those who were not directly involved in the conflict. As an officer and poet, he learnt to draw his own feelings and artistic ability together in order to make a personal statement about what he considered to be the mis-management of the war.

Notes

- ¹ Michael Sanders and Philip Taylor 3.
- ² Sanders and Taylor 24. (They quote from P. Towle's, "The Debate on Wartime Censorship in Britain, 1902-14", *War and Society* 113).
- ³ Kenneth Simcox 60.
- ⁴ Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* 109.
- ⁵ Jennifer Breen 295.
- ⁶ Samuel Hynes 213.
- ⁷ Dominic Hibberd, *The First World War* 52.
- ⁸ Sanders and Taylor 108.
- ⁹ Hynes, *A War Imagined* 29.
- ¹⁰ Desmond Graham, *The Truth of War* 32.
- ¹¹ C.K. Stead, *The New Poetic* 91.
- ¹² For further reading, see W.G. Bebbington's "Jessie Pope and Wilfred Owen", where Bebbington considers the possibility of ambiguity and hidden irony in Pope's work, which would make her less of the patriotic poetess she appeared to be, 82-93.
- ¹³ Jon Stallworthy (Ed.), *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments* 154.
- ¹⁴ Douglas Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices* 322.
- ¹⁵ Sanders and Taylor 138.
- ¹⁶ Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters* 341.
- ¹⁷ Jon Stallworthy, 168. The letter Stallworthy refers to can be found in Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters* 568.
- ¹⁸ Dominic Hibberd, "Some Contemporary Allusions in Poems by Rosenberg, Owen and Sassoon", 333-4.
- ¹⁹ Owen 440.
- ²⁰ D.S R. Welland 30. Nash's letter is published in his book *Outline*, 210-11.
- ²¹ Hibberd quoted Wells' "The War Aims of the Western Allies" from *In the Fourth Year* 84.
- ²² Sanders and Taylor 250.
- ²³ Sasi Bhusan Das 98.

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