

"Strange Meeting," a Fragment? A Reply to Muir's "Owen"

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In footnote 3 to his "Connotations of 'Strange Meeting'" Kenneth Muir somewhat irritably censures me, for my continued unease with "Anthem for Doomed Youth." I would, however, maintain, that questioning "Anthem" one strengthens, perhaps, Owen's greater achievements. Besides "Strange Meeting" these include "Insensibility" and "Exposure." "Anthem" is a much lesser achievement, I believe, and other poets have thought so too. In reviewing Ted Hughes' selection of poems by a poet of the Second World War, Keith Douglas, the poet Geoffrey Hill contrived to make a pungent comment on this poem of Owen's:

... it seems as if Owen's purpose is defeated, in "Anthem for Doomed Youth," between the opening question:

'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?'

and the concluding vista:

'And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.'

The fact that Owen employs irony in this poem cannot alter the fact that he takes thirteen lines to retreat from the position maintained by one. If these men really do die as *cattle*, then all *human* mourning for them is a mockery, the private and the public, the inarticulate and true as much as the ostentatiously-false. In many of his letters Owen presses relentlessly on this very point. "Anthem for Doomed Youth" seems rather to dissipate the force of testimony.¹

Not many, I suspect, would share his view; I am one who does, in part. The "sad shires" syndrome in effect buttresses the War and its slaughter

¹Reference: Kenneth Muir, "Connotations of 'Strange Meeting,'" *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 26-36.

in an unexpected way, by countering the horror at the destruction with the anodyne of consolation. This is contradictory to the statement in the Preface that "these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next."² Here, the elegiac "sad" merges with the pressure of tradition enshrined in "shire" to produce something beautiful, and effectively obscures the "monstrous anger" of the guns and their slaughter. The beautiful artefact sheds the pain of the grievers, and instead, substitutes women's beauty and their Natural correlative of feeling—cut flowers. The authenticity of this may be tested by one's asking oneself, as Owen did, elsewhere, in "Insensibility" for instance, what would be the right adjective to reproduce the pain of the bereaved. It would not be, one feels, "sadness"—'sad' evacuates any sense of pain (and sympathy for the bereaved), and effects the quite different mode of acceptable grief, elegantly cutting off further inquiry as to the state of the bereaved person's mind by the expedient of drawing down blinds—although the reader has up till then had the privilege of witness. This view may seem uncharitable. There are many enthusiastic readers who will, one suspects, disagree. On the other hand, Owen himself reacted angrily to such people who made themselves immune to pity

By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man.³

Immunity from grief and pain the "Anthem" unintentionally achieves by cloaking these primitive responses with sadness. This earlier draft, "Bugles sang," makes fewer concessions in its last five lines. Perhaps a suitable antidote to Owen's 'retreat' in "Anthem" would be a reading of Ivor Gurney's "To his Love," especially the last stanza.

Cover him, cover him soon!
And with thick-set
Masses of memoried flowers—
Hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget.⁴

And now to the notable footnote. Professor Muir writes:

Jon Silkin, however, anxious to defend the superiority of Isaac Rosenberg, regarded Owen's poem as so weak that he refused at first to include it in *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*.⁵ (34)

I think I should reply to Muir on this. His "anxious" actually refers to my desire to have some of the appreciation of the poetry of that period shared out. Thus not only Owen, but Herbert Read and Gurney. And not only these but especially Isaac Rosenberg whom I do regard as a better poet than Owen. But to suggest that I depreciated Owen's achievement, which is what I think he is implying, is itself "anxious." I am not alone in thinking Rosenberg's achievement to be considerable, and the evaluations of Leavis and Denys Harding,⁶ to mention just two, pioneered things well before I did. But I think I helped on that process, and yes, again, Rosenberg is the more interesting poet. Owen took English prosody and left it where he found it. He used it with great care and sometimes with power (rather than delicacy, I suggest). Rosenberg surpassed Owen, probably, in his use of metrical verse and certainly in his contribution to free verse, of which Owen wrote none I am aware of. Something of these considerations may be tested by comparing Owen's "Strange Meeting" with Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump"; for their conclusions are similar enough to allow overall comparison, though the verse of each is entirely different.

Such a comparison is worth going into, but I haven't the space for that here. All I wish to register is my unhappiness with Muir's implication, and all of what I say above can be easily tested. In the anthology he refers to, Owen receives 23 pages (21 if one removes the two pages of "Strange Meeting" ms.); and Rosenberg receives 20.

Moreover, Muir omits to mention my critical book *Out of Battle*.⁷ The principal chapters in it are devoted to Owen and Rosenberg, of which the former receives 56 pages and the latter 66. My admiration for Owen's poetry (not uncritical) is registered in these pages and elsewhere. My own anxiety on behalf of Rosenberg has not led me to depreciate Owen, but simply to try to sort out the strong poems of Owen's from the weaker ones.

Having tried to clean myself up a bit, I will now try to answer some of Muir's perceptions regarding Owen, as a man and soldier, and also

concerning his assertion that "Strange Meeting" is "a fragment" (30, 34). Owen, Muir writes,

wished to indicate, as Keats had done with *Hyperion*, that the poem was a fragment

"As Keats had done" is tendentious because in getting us to agree that this was the case with Keats, we shall, he seems to imply, be willing to accept it in Owen's. I don't see any reason for doing so. The poem makes, or rather coalesces, a number of considerations which I have discussed in *Out of Battle*, concerning beauty, truth and pity, and the pessimism of the conclusion. I think that Owen experienced trouble with this poem not because he wished it to be fragmentary (which is to project a fashionable and inappropriate aesthetics upon the poem) but precisely because the themes and concerns would not easily ramify together. Owen's poem concludes with a row of dots (Owen's, not an editor's), but these follow the complete sentence spoken by the "German soldier." In the last ms. in the British Library of "Strange Meeting" the workings of the famous line "I am the enemy you killed, my friend," appear to have gone thus:

enemy
am the German whom you killed, my
I was a German conscript, and your friend.

In *Out of Battle*, I attempted to argue that Owen is speaking of two enemy soldiers, one of whom (the English) has killed the German. On the whole I disagreed with Welland's interpretation of *alter ego*,⁸ and I disagree with Muir's "If Owen knew any of these stories it might have reinforced his idea of his meeting the enemy who was himself" (31).⁹ This appears to be re-cycled Welland; and I argue that apart from the war being fought by actual combatants, who destroyed each other, the textual evidence shows "German" persisting through two versions of the line. If the last version expunges "him," we may still be reasonably sure that he remains in the poem. The line and its dots were Owen's, and were pencilled in by Owen at a later stage in the process of composition, and subsequently inked in. It seems to be Owen's intention to suggest, not that the soldier's

(or soldiers') discourse is incomplete (anything but), but that the situation cannot be "undone." The very irresolution in Owen's dots constitutes poetic resolution in the form and the poem. It is (as I read it) evaluative judgement on the poet's part. It constitutes an overall view of the catastrophe of war, of which these two soldiers are, if you wish, a fragment; but the discourse concerning their condition has closure and conclusion. Owen's row of dots constitutes the *poem's* closure.

This concern with the War, of Owen's, leads to my other objection. Muir cites Owen's "fought like an angel," but a fuller quotation reads:

It [the experience of fighting] passed the limits of my Abhorrence. I lost all my earthly faculties, and fought like an angel.¹⁰

Muir omits to mention the recipient of the letter (Owen's mother) and its date (4 or 5) October 1918. In fact the date is important because it comes from the last period of Owen's experience in the Army, and shortly before he was killed. He had voluntarily returned to the Front although there had been the possibility of a safe job in England, probably training others to kill. This he rejected; and to judge from the evidence of the letter to his mother (December 31, 1917), and the poem "The Calls," Owen returned not, as I believe, out of patriotism but to be with his fellow-soldiers on whose behalf he was to continue to plead. In a sense his poetry drove him to this, for how else could he occupy such a position, in his poetry, if he were to avoid sharing their doom.

Thus the assertion by Muir that Owen "was probably echoing Henry V's speech on the eve of Agincourt" (he refers to another letter written by Owen to his mother) eases in a connotation of patriotism, which misrepresents what Owen actually wrote concerning his fighting, "It passed the limits of my Abhorrence."

By the time "Strange Meeting" was finalised, he had decided not to break ranks, but he still adhered to his symbolism. The tigress remained evil. (31)

This hardly helps corroborate the implication of patriotism in Muir's interpretation but suggests at least two things. First, that in not breaking ranks he remained the patriot that Muir appears to suggest he had become. But surely to fight bravely, or ferociously, does not of itself

evinced patriotism. Second, Muir is simply and transparently re-cycling Owen's own words "None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress." In the poem, not breaking ranks is the ironic version of marching in admirably disciplined order *from* progress. Whereas in Muir's transcription of these words he appears to be suggesting that Owen marched in patriot acceptance. Whereas I suggest that *if* indeed it may be said that he did not break ranks, it was not out of patriotism but a desire to help and plead for his fellows. As to "but he still adhered to his symbolism," what respect does this assertion show for Owen's poetry? Surely it is more than the sum of *symbolism*? Of course the tigris remained evil; but Owen "fought like an angel" within the parentheses, not of patriotism and a hatred of war, but within a sense of his being committed to his fellow-human together with his hatred of war. If Owen wished to prove himself a "good" soldier, then he did so, and, as some have suggested, did so with ferocity. But that doesn't argue patriotism, either. The unhappiest thing of all is that the war brought to the surface of his conduct that which he detested most, and before it killed him, it apparently elicited these responses in full. The letter is to his mother and in telling her "I . . . fought like an angel," he may be soliciting her approval. At any rate, it seems to me, what the circumstances of the *declaration* really need is not just the assertion as of "Anthem" that "Owen turned it into a great poem" but criticism and patient examination.

I beg to conclude with a personal remark. Like that assignment of greatness to poems Muir's enumeration of some all-too-great symbols, "Guernica, the Gulag, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and so on" does not do justice (in matter and form) to the unbelievable though all the more real catastrophes which they mean. But here I am convinced that *au fond*, Professor Muir and I are in perfect agreement.

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NOTES

¹Stand 6.4 (1964).

²Owen's "Preface."

³Owen's "Insensibility."

⁴Ivor Gurney, "To his Love."

⁵Professor Muir used the second edition published in 1981. The first edition appeared in 1979.

⁶F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932); Denys Harding, "Isaac Rosenberg," *Scrutiny* 3.4 (March 1935); Denys Harding, *Experience into Words* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963).

⁷Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The poetry of the Great War* (London: OUP, 1972).

⁸Dennis S. R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen. A Critical Study* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960).

⁹See also Muir: "In other words Owen meets his *doppelganger*" (30).

¹⁰Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, eds. Harold Owen and John Bell (Oxford: OUP, 1967) 580.