

Owen's strange "Meeting": A Note for Professor Muir*

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After Professor Muir's gentle note concerning me as a poet and co-editor of *Stand* what may I say but "thankyou"?

Then wherein lie our differences? It is, for instance, not that I don't love Owen's poetry, albeit critically, but that I believe I am trying to locate the conflicts in Owen's expressive responses as a poet.

I think many would now accept that Owen indeed "wrote something in Sassoon's style": the earlier version (and I believe the preferable one) of "The Dead-Beat" signals this, and, more importantly probably suggests that Sassoon, as both complex human being, and poet, provided the catalyst that enabled Owen to transpose the substance of his moral outrage, and pain at human suffering, which he expressed first in his letters, into his poetry (see my *Wilfred Owen: The War Poems*, 1994). Although there are prior sensitive registrations of this pain that, sadly, are not followed through in the poetry *post*-Sassoon. Owen's war poetry shows him to be working to a programme, the substance of which may, largely, be found in the last sentence of Sassoon's by now famous "Statement" which he used to signal his defection from the army, on moral grounds. So the programmatized energy which itself creates, or enables, the channel for his responses to the war would for me constitute one of Owen's modes. Or perhaps, it is a genre which enables a variety of modes.

Another one of these would be that of the cloying anodyne which is a constituent in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (and several other war poems), and which perhaps more than anything re-inforces my sense

*Reference: Kenneth Muir, "Connotations of 'Strange Meeting,'" *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 26-36; Jon Silkin, "'Strange Meeting,' a Fragment? A Reply to Muir's 'Owen,'" *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 186-92; Kenneth Muir, "'Strange Meeting' Yet Again," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 318-20.

that "Anthem" advises a consortium of messages *contrary* to Owen's outrage and, yes, to take up an earlier disagreement, with Dominic Hibberd, contrary also to the true elegy.

Then there is, in Owen's composite poetry, a realistic strand which in general tends to produce his minor poems, such as "Inspection," "The Letter" and, operated on its own, "The Last Laugh." These derive stylistically more than programatically from Sassoon, and thus their energy-span is short, and the product limited. This was Sassoon's zone, and, contrary to received opinion, I believe he did this (forgive me, Professor Muir) "better" than Owen. "Counter-Attack" and "Repression of War Experience" are fine instances:

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
 You'd never think there was a bloody war on! . . .
 O yes, you would . . . why, you can hear the guns.
 Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft . . . they never cease—
 Those whispering guns—O Christ

Yet another mode is Owen's capacity for reasoning-through the bitter contradictions (not paradoxes) which engage much of his intelligence (see "Exposure"). This may be seen in the pervasive problem typified in his adjoining the destructive and unnatural energies of combat with the natural growth and normal life of creatures and plants. This indeed is the underpinning of Owen's war poems (he really *is* a war poet) and the energy to which I refer is that of Owen's rational intelligence. This can be instanced in the even-handed registration of both the shame and the courage of soldiers:

With superhuman inhumanities,
 Long-famous glories, immemorial shames—
 ("Spring Offensive")

These last two energies are relevant here. One of them might approximately be called realism and the other, an intellectual wrestling with an intractable problem; ("And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?" *Letter* [?16] May 1917, to his mother).

I've taken time to reach what may be the source of the disagreement between Professor Muir and myself, with respect to "Strange Meeting,"

and it is to do with the intersection of the energies of realism and intellectual argument in that work. Indeed one reason why the composition of the poem presented Owen with such difficulties (as the many Mss of the poem indicate) is that several energies and poetic approaches are confluent in it.

I hope I may count on Professor Muir's agreement that the dialogue in the poem is one of debate, and that it is (contrary to Douglas Kerr's *confused*, non-reading of the later portion of Owen's poem) a debate of some intellectual strength complete with Biblical reference and (self-aware) irony.

My final point, however, centres on the realism. Owen went to some lengths to establish, harmoniously, in the poem, elements of a war-darkened hell where the "encumbered" (kit-laden) sleepers lie, and "no guns thumped." The denial in "no guns" establishes a proximity of external, recognizable reality.

I have already argued that the German soldier is a real soldier in Owen's text, that is, right up to the last version, and I won't further tax Professor Muir's or anyone's patience on this; anyone interested may consult my note to the poem in my *Wilfred Owen* (above). Perhaps the argument might be deposed this way. A debate inside oneself provides no mutually exclusive grounds for denying the existence here of two real soldiers, as I think "German" suggests. Nor perhaps the reverse; a "realistic" reading of the poem accomodates also an internal psychological argument within oneself. Perhaps Owen's difficulties with the poem, in part reflect the difficulty of accomodating these two projections; but I would argue for not the sexual element some readers suggest may be present, but the physical component of war, and thus the otherness of the other soldier: "Of whose blood lies yet crimson on my shoulder where his head was—and where so lately yours was—I must not now write" (Letter 662, to his mother; 4th [or 5th] October 1918). The letter was written after the poem "Strange Meeting," but the letter reveals how strongly the physical (and sexual?) nature of experience imprinted itself on Owen's psyche. The letter, typically, is part of the way towards a poem in the making.