

Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth:" The Making of a Classic World War I Poem

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Anthem for Doomed Youth

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 shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes

Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

In *Regeneration*, the first novel in her World War I trilogy, English novelist Pat Barker revives the story of an actual friendship which began in 1917 between two English poets, Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) and Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), one consequence of which was the completion and publication of Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth," a sonnet which quickly attained the status of a modern classic and also entered the national heritage by its inclusion in *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*, as well as through its selection by Philip Larkin for inclusion in the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*.

At the time they met, the two men were British Army officers convalescing at the neurological sanitarium at Craiglockhart, Scotland. Sassoon had been sent there as part of an effort by his friends, especially fellow officer and poet Robert Graves, to avoid Sassoon's being court-martialed for insubordination or treason following publication (and subsequent questions in the House of Commons) of his letter declaring further combat to be pointless and calling for a negotiated peace. Sassoon's extensive service in France as a respected infantry officer and leader of his men allowed the authorities to dismiss his letter as a case of "combat fatigue," leading a medical board of examination to order his hospitalization at Craiglockhart. Wilfred Owen was in the same sanitarium recovering from a nervous breakdown caused when his position in the trenches was literally blown up during an intense artillery barrage which he somehow survived.

In *Siegfried's Journey*, Sassoon describes how Owen first came to his room in August 1917, with copies of a book of Sassoon's poems which he wanted to have autographed. It had taken Owen two weeks to gather the courage to speak to the older poet, and he only mentioned at the end of the visit that he himself was an (as yet unpublished) poet. Sassoon thought he had not been quite quick enough to immediately realize the range of Owen's poetic gifts, but he instantly understood the value of "Anthem for Doomed Youth" when he first read it.

It was, however, not until some time in October, when he brought me his splendidly constructed sonnet 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', that it dawned on me that my little friend was much more than the promising minor poet I had hitherto adjudged him to be. I now realized that his verse, with its sumptuous epithets and large-scale imagery, its noble naturalness and depth of meaning, had impressive affinities with Keats, whom he took as his supreme exemplar. This new sonnet was a revelation. I suggested one or two slight alterations; but it confronted me with classic and imaginative serenity. After assuring him of its excellence I told him that I would do my best to get it published in *The Nation*. This gratified him greatly. Neither of us could have been expected to foresee that it would some day be added to *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*.

As we shall see when we look at the earlier drafts of "Anthem," Owen made use of only one "technical" suggestion of Sassoon in this poem. However his influence went far beyond the ordinary. His gesture of defecting from the war took the same courage and daring that had made him such a successful and aggressive combat officer. Sassoon's influence on Owen was both poetic and political, in that Owen was confronting a man focusing his entire being on forcing the civilian population of Britain, still psychologically "behind the times" about the war due to its taking place

almost entirely across the English Channel, into an awareness of how awful war was and of (as described by George Sherston) “the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.” Sassoon brought out, in the rather religious and compassionate Owen, the “war” poet and activist writing with both indignation and compassion, the focal points of his moral sense, against those responsible for the ongoing carnage. Sassoon’s influence was not so much one of “style,” since he was a rather different type of writer, but of assisting in a refocusing of energy in Owen, articulated by shared deep concerns.

Early Sketch for Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth”

“Bugles sang”

Bugles sang, saddening the evening air,
And bugles answered, sorrowful to hear.

Voices of boys were by the river-side.
Sleep mothered them; and left the twilight sad.
The shadow of the morrow weighed on men.

Voices of old despondency resigned,
Bowed by the shadow of the morrow, slept.

[] dying tone.
Of receding voices that will not return.
The wailing of the high far-travelling shells
And the deep cursing of the provoking [].

The monstrous anger of our taciturn guns.
The majesty of the insults of their mouth.

Draft Versions of Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth”

1. First Draft

passing
What ~~minute~~ bells for these who die so fast?
~~solemn~~
- Only the monstrous anger of our guns.
Let the majestic insults of their iron mouths
 requiem
Be as the ~~priest words~~ of their burials.
Of choristers and holy music, none;
Nor any voice of mourning save the wail
The long-drawn wail of high far-sailing shells.

 to light
What candles may we hold ~~for these lost? souls?~~
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
 shine the ~~tapers~~ the holy ~~tapers~~ candles.
Shall / many ~~candles; shine; and I will light them.~~
Women's wide-spread arms shall be their wreaths,
And pallor of girls' cheeks shall be their palls.
 mortal
Their flowers, the tenderness of ~~all men's~~ minds,
 comrades'
 rough men's
 each slow
And ~~every~~ Dusk, a drawing-down of blinds.

2. Second Draft

for
Anthem ~~to~~ Dead Youth

What passing-bells for you who die in herds?
 the
- Only the monstrous anger of ~~more~~ guns!
- Only the stuttering rifles' rattled words
Can patter out your hasty orisons.

 choirs
No chants for you, nor blams, nor wreaths, nor bells
 shells
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,
And long-drawn sighs
~~The shrill demented choirs~~ of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for you from sad shires.

What candles may we hold to speed you all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall S ~~and gleams~~ our
~~Shall~~ shine the holy lights / of ~~long~~ goodbyes.
 must
And pallor of girls' brows shall be your pall.
 broken simple frail
Your flowers, the tenderness of ~~mortal~~ minds,

~~pain white~~
~~grief wh innocent~~
comrades'

each slow
And ~~every~~ dusk, a drawing-down of blinds.

3. Third Draft

What passing-bells for these dumb-dying cattle?
- Only the monstrous anger of more guns!
Only the stuttering rifles' rattled words
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No chants for them, nor wreaths, nor asphodels
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,
The shrill demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may we hold to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy gleams of their goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' cheeks shall be their pall.
Their flowers, the tenderness of silent minds,
And each slow dusk, a drawing-down of blinds.

4. Fourth Draft

Doomed
Anthem for ~~Dead~~ Youth
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.

~~music for all them~~ nor no nor
No mockeries for them; ~~from~~ prayers or bells;
now
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,
ented
The shrill, ~~demonic~~ choirs of wailing shells;
for them from sad
And bugles calling ~~sad across the~~ shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
And The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
~~silent~~ patient
Their flowers the tenderness of ~~sweet white~~ minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

The only specific suggestion of Sassoon's finally adopted by Owen was the replacement of "our" in line 2 with the more impersonal "the" in the second and final versions. However, even this slight change is itself emblematic of the overall shifts in emphasis as the sonnet took shape. The first draft's opening section resembles the call to sound the cannon at the end of Hamlet, in which the instruments of war are used to salute the fallen heroes. This is followed by a quieter, less "official" but lasting mourning on the part of those who remained in Britain. The second draft shows the shift toward the cattle image in line 1, and it is probably the impersonality of this overarching sense of meaningless death that causes the subsequent abandonment of the many instances of the pronouns "we" and "you." Owen distances the poem from an expression of the memorialization of dead soldiers who were his former comrades and moves it toward a vision of the universal pathos of so much death amid the symbols and tools of an impersonal, uncaring civilization. The instruments of war even make a mockery of traditional religious ceremonies to honor the dead and thus to help the living complete their grieving. All that remains that is worthy of this task are the young who are not to blame for what has happened, and those who can now only quietly remember their lost loved ones, even as they turn away from a society that destroyed them.

The development of Owen's "Anthem" may also be seen as a progression along the four stages of consciousness noted by Jon Silkin in World War I poetry. The first stage is not so much a matter of consciousness as it is the poem's being a vehicle for prevailing patriotic commonplace ideas and generalized social abstract notions. Rupert Brooke's war poems contain a great deal of this, as do the earliest war poems of Siegfried Sassoon. But in his later poems, Sassoon moved to a second stage of awareness, protesting against the war by a sharp rendition of its real horror; in satire and anger and through ironic distance. Sassoon came to see the necessity of protesting against both the war and the callous complacency of the civilians responsible for the political mistakes and lies in the name of which the soldiers were being sacrificed, as in his poem

"Base Details:"

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour. 'Poor young chap,'
I'd say - 'I used to know his father well;

Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die - in bed.

The next stage is that of compassion, and this is what most distinguishes Owen from Sassoon, even though it was Sassoon's determined protests that activated Owen's poetry of compassion in a way that for the most part prevented it from lapsing into conventional escapist pieties. In "Anthem" and in his work as a whole, Owen had to struggle against a kind of official late-Victorian response to compassion, elevating it into quasi-religious sentiment, causing it to lose connection with the reality that evoked it and making impossible any consideration of the real state of the victim and the true reason for his or her suffering. Owen's compassion seems to work best when it is in active cooperation with his anger, without tending to self-indulgence or attempting to explain away the horror of war or the guilt of those responsible.

The final stage of consciousness is seen as one in which compassion and anger are merged into a hoped-for process of change. This is perhaps best found in the war poetry of Isaac Rosenberg, where a wide, human generosity of compassion merges with an ability to closely attend to the specific details of a poetic moment. Rosenberg's poetry combines a complexity of concern with rich imagery that has an alertness to it which makes it seem more "modernist" than Owen's work.

(from "Dead Man's Dump")

A man's brains splattered on
A stretcher-bearer's face;
His shook shoulders slipped their load.
But when they bent to look again
The drowning soul was sunk too deep
For human tenderness.

They left this dead with the older dead.
Stretched at the cross roads.

This accomplishment of Rosenberg's may shed light on the dilemma faced by Owen, who by temperament and poetic "heritage" felt he had to be more preoccupied by the "universal" or "representative" in poetry, tending to make his language sound a bit too established or

spokesmanlike. Owen may be seen as embodying both the traditional and the modern. He was strongly influenced by the Romantic poets, but also by immediately preceding ones. Even his strong yet non-establishment religious sense tied him tightly to a tradition that had grown flaccid and formalistic. But Owen's ties to earlier poets also gave him access to a tradition, a community of language within which he deplores the war and in which he forms his statements of compassion for its victims. Owen saw tradition as something living, in which the past is continuously present in the present time. He quickly recognized the war as something totally different, forcing him to change his writing. Some critics have even judged "Anthem" to be one of Owen's weaker poems, merely tidying up the savage response to men dying as cattle, as embodied by the juxtaposition of the elegiac "sad" and the pressure of tradition in "shires," to anesthetize the reader against the horrible sounds embodying the reality of the war dead in the first part of the sonnet, just as the following section aestheticises and privatizes it. But if we simply refuse to judge Owen from a "modernist" perspective, and instead give him credit for wanting to feel compassion for those "left behind," who must grapple forever with a lost personal world and a pitifully inadequate tradition with which to grieve for it, then we may see how this poem extends the sorrow and the pity of war into civilian realms which had heretofore been ignorant, but which now will at least not refuse the truth of their losses.

It was Sassoon's tough specificity that helped Owen avoid the danger of fatuous abstractions. There is a strong tension in Owen between his strict sense of morality and the sensuous pleasure he felt in creating a poem as an aesthetic artifact. The problem he faced lay of course in the gap between his subject matter and the ideology that had become attached to aesthetic ideas of poetry. In Sassoon, the morality is far stronger than the sensuousness. He sensed the gap between his extremely visual aesthetic sense and the formal pastoral tradition that had become conventional for it. He filled the traditional forms of iambic pentameter with the awful reality of war, creating a double shock, of content and of form filled with a content heretofore totally unknown.

Both Owen and Sassoon share a common realism, specific and concrete, confronting the truth of warfare in the trenches. They share a mode of confrontation with civilian and governmental coldness and willful ignorance. Before Owen met Sassoon, his capacity for specifically expressing these realities lay dormant. The older poet made it possible for Owen to give form to the serious compassion that was a part of his being, as well as to link it to his war experiences, in the creation of poetic artifacts that could be true to the horror behind them yet sensuous and beautiful in a way that makes possible a genuine transmission of human sympathy.