

## Owen's DULCE ET DECORUM EST

Googling the title of Owen's poem is still little preparation for the shoals of Web pages that swim into view, clamoring mutely for our attention and testifying to the text's status as the "best known poem of the First World War." They offer everything from *explications de texte* to quibbles and glosses on the Latin title; from detailed accounts of the provenance of the earliest version (with its indignant dedication to the glib pro-war poetess, Jessie Pope) to photo-assisted descriptions of the circumstances of its composition at the Craighlockhart Hydro between the 8th and 15th of October 1917 (when Owen was twenty-four, temporarily invalidated from the front, and recently galvanized by the wonderful chance of his acquaintance there with Sassoon) . . . And yet, for all this explanation, description, contextualization—industry of all kinds—one wonders whether there can be in this poem anything new to know or question. Certainly, the undeflectable intensity and antiwar intent of "Dulce et Decorum Est," and Owen's concern, as he said, with unconsoling truthfulness and the "pity of war" (*Letters* 31), has made it possibly the most taught of any poem, the most unfailing resource for teachers in schools and universities everywhere. In this context, it may seem scarcely credible to imagine that this most overtly communicative of poems could harbor or intimate a more enigmatic, cryptic dimension of personal significance. However, this is indeed what I want to suggest (as my reading latches on to powerful possibilities in the poem that I have never seen discussed in the critical or biographical literature). At the same time, this reading, in my view, adds a new resonance to the poem's specification of the horror and the cost of war.

My reading will center on the two-line stanza in the middle of the poem where Owen describes the death of his maskless comrade in the gas attack:

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. (15–16)

This recurrent nightmare is the climax of the poem's tendency, in its first half, toward an unfolding of the poet's interiority, his personal responses, amid the texture of events it describes. So, from the opening line, the impersonal world of high literary culture, patriotism, and upstanding soldierly endeavor conjured in the title (and to a degree in the early dedication) yields with a jolt to the antithetical world notated with such feeling in the first stanza. What is perhaps most striking about this stanza as a whole, though, is the way Owen's poetic voice characteristically combines simulative exactitude with fellow-feeling, so that his voice circulates from seeing the men physically from the outside (*them*, as it were), to conveying their shared feeling (*us*). On the one hand, then, the inimitable account of the soldiers' reduced state ("bent double, like old beggars," "like hags," cursing, some asleep, "lame," "blind," "drunk with fatigue," "deaf" ), and on the other, the evocation of what is experienced,

despite the dehumanizing factors of the situation, as a common predicament, “we cursed through sludge, / Till on the haunting flares we turned *our* backs, / And towards *our* distant rest began to trudge” (2–4; emphasis added). In this last phrase, “towards our distant rest,” the words reach furthest, movingly conveying how—even in this situation—transporting and motivating moments of longing and hope, and fellow-feeling, were not extinguished. At this point, we detect the characteristic tender sympathy that motivated Owen throughout the war and that marked probably the last sentence he ever wrote, to his mother, “Of this I am certain you could not be visited by a band of friends half so fine as surround me here” (*Collected Letters* 591).

In the second stanza, the anonymous panic of the gas attack places the reader more incontrovertibly within the skin of the speaker, who is himself pitched into responding to the opening injunction, “‘GAS! GAS! Quick, boys!’” The low-key mutuality of near comatose trudging has now become fragmented into isolated, adrenalized “ecstasy” (9). And, as no reader can forget, the poet fumbles with his gas mask before ending the stanza observing the “flound’ring” (12) figure of the gassed soldier before his eyes, in lines that seem like the lexicon and sensibility of Keatsian reverie transposed into a world of unavoidable nightmare: “Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light / As under a green sea, I saw him drowning” (13–14). The word “dim” itself seems to flounder in obscurity for a moment, as we do not know initially whether to take it (and hence the whole phrase it trails with it) as adjectival (which could attach itself to the soldier, or even speaker) or as adverbial (as seems more likely, attaching itself to the speaker’s viewing of the scene, though “dimly” would then seemingly have been a more definite choice). In a poem of such linguistic vigilance, there can be little doubt that Owen is exploiting such ambiguity to convey the lurching, rending sense here that the traumatic experience precisely does not stabilize into an objective scene, any more than the haunting image of the man as drowning in a “green sea” could simply be psychologically processed, or rationally explained, as a subjective effect of the “facts”—the combination of gas and the “misty panes” of the mask. The speaker needs to separate himself from the drowning man, but cannot simply do so, both because of his inevitable sympathy for him and also, I will suggest, because there is a strong suggestion even that he needs to protect himself physically from him. At this moment, though, the inner and outer words are in oscillation, as (to take a lesser example) when a bird is trapped in a room and flies straight at you, so that its terror exchanges itself with your own. At such moments, as in the more extreme case of war, the instinctive reaction is one of a certain self-defensive recoil, an overwhelming need to resolve the situation and regain one’s self-possession, even at the expense of the other, however mixed this might be with opposite emotions of solicitude and pity.

It is, as I have said, in the third stanza where this sense of the innermost horror of the poem can be detected. Certainly, this is where the poem's sounding of the poet's interiority is at its deepest. "In all my dreams," Owen begins, indicating his profound inability to extricate himself from the unconscious repetitions of the scene that have infiltrated his psyche like an incubus, renewing their assault on him on a nightly basis. What I am asking is whether the poem may secrete in these lines—as the word "plunging" secretes the word "lunging"<sup>1</sup>—that in the haunting scene, the man was repeatedly attempting to pull off Owen's own mask, and that Owen resisted this. (The present simple "plunges" is again nicely ambiguous, so that we cannot really tell whether the repetitions were at the time, or since, or both.) My conclusion would be that, insofar as the poem suggests or accommodates such a reading, it also can seem to broaden and deepen its grasp, even so far as to acknowledge covertly that the deepest, complicating iniquity of war is that its events can dispossess one of one's best self, dividing oneself from oneself and others and overwhelming one's most humane of responses toward pity and truth.<sup>2</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. And as the word "guttering" secretes the sense of a gutter overflowing as well as a candle dying.

2. A year or so after writing the poem, of course, on returning to the front, Owen would be awarded the Military Cross for gallantry in resisting an enemy counter-attack, on the Fosse Line, when he "inflicted considerable losses on the enemy" through his use of a machine gun. Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974) 279. Of this episode, he wrote to his mother the half-truth, "I only shot one man with my revolver" (580).

#### WORKS CITED

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### Tolkien's THE LORD OF THE RINGS and Dante's INFERNO

Whatever one thinks of *The Lord of the Rings* as a literary work, it is undeniable that J. R. R. Tolkien was a well-educated and intelligent man who drew on his erudition in writing his trilogy. Reading the novels carefully, one can see that just as he takes pieces from *Beowulf* and from Norse and Celtic