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# **Conversations with Wilfred Owen: The Pity is in the Poetry**

Owen's powerful verse, describing the horrors of the First World War and its effects on those who experienced it, continues to move readers nearly 100 years after it was written. Here it is demonstrated, however, how Owen's poetry can also have a theological significance when placed within a broad hermeneutical framework which allows the bringing into conversation of theology and secular literature. In so doing, Owen's works continue to provide a prophetic voice to the evangelical church, despite him eventually rejecting the faith it professes.

## **Introduction**

Time was when I have loved the bards whose strains  
Saddened the heart, and wrought a heavy mood;  
Aye, and my spirit felt a joy to brood  
O'er melodies which told of ancient pains. 1

Time in dreams is frozen. You can never get away from where you've been. 2

I early accustomed myself to look for the hand of God in the minutest occurrence, and to learn from it a lesson of morality and religion, and in this light every circumstance I have related was to me of importance. 3

The death of Harry Patch, the last serving British WWI soldier, in 2010 marked the end of a generation and a continuing fascination with two World Wars, a fascination which marked my growing years and continues *willy-nilly* to colour my thinking into older age. Two great-uncles killed in the Great War, and an uncle mentioned in despatches for bravery in the Second are the least of it. I was brought up on the romance of the Dam Busters and the Wooden Horse, but shared before my tenth birthday the general public's dawning awareness of the horrors of the Holocaust. (And as I write this, a Lancaster bomber flies overhead on its way to the Air Museum at Duxford, no doubt to the plaudits of the waiting crowd!)

This is not a simple narrative. To juxtapose Stephen Spielberg's 2011 film *War Horse* with the BBC's outstanding 2012 serialisation of Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* is to hold romance, heroism and loyalty up against violence, obscenity and madness. This juxtaposition is masterfully illustrated by Alan Wilkinson: 4 on the one hand, we have Bishop Winnington-Ingram of London, 'untroubled by doubts, ambiguities or much self-knowledge', saying that 'the Church encouraged every young man under its influence to volunteer at once as a duty to God as well as to the country.' 5 On the other, there is a Mirfield Father 6 writing to his brethren about a priest who led men into battle and also said Mass for them in the trenches: 'I wish I knew if he is right to go on like this, as it seems to me so incongruous.' 7

Of this complex cultural narrative in which I have a small personal stake, two theological questions have to be asked: In the great scheme of God's plan, what does all this have to say to us, and what spiritual authority might it carry?

In an article of this brevity, I cannot fully interrogate a small part of this war. I propose a much more modest approach: to use the poetry of Wilfred Owen as a small contribution to the interrogation. In doing so, I hope to rescue the writer himself from the over-used title of 'War poet'; to explore the spiritual journey of a child of the Evangelical movement who *may* have lost his faith, but never lost the language of that faith; and to illustrate a way of doing theology in conversation with secular literature which ought to be much more common in an age utterly suspicious of certainty but desperately hungry to find meaning and purpose.

In what follows, 8 I use the language of metanarrative unashamedly, believing that no Christian theology worth its salt can dismiss even the smallest event as meaningless in the heart of God: 'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.' 9

## The Life

The bare bones of Owen's life can be told simply, though biographers struggle with the fact that his brother Harold destroyed many of his letters and journals, presumably not least because of the homosexual elements they may have contained. 10 Born near Oswestry, Owen moved with his family to Birkenhead and then to Shrewsbury. Sometime in his early schooling, perhaps as young as 7, Owen began to show a deep interest in poetry. Stallworthy memorably says that,

His enthusiasm for poetry – seemingly kindled in 1903 or 1904 – was growing, but was for some time exceeded by a preoccupation with religion. Under the strong influence of his devout mother he read a passage from the Bible every day and, on Sundays, would rearrange her sitting-room to represent a church. Then, wearing a linen surplice and cardboard mitre she had made, he would summon the family and conduct a complete evening service with a carefully prepared sermon. 11

Failing to get a scholarship to University, he took an unpaid internship with the evangelical Herbert Wigan, vicar of Dunsden near Reading. A revival in 1913 saw many converts join the church, but Owen found the village poverty hard to reconcile with Christian triumphalism, as he saw it. He went to Bordeaux as a tutor, and was there when war broke out.

Enlisting in 1915 on return to the UK, Owen saw two periods of active service, separated by a spell in Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh. This time of recovery also marked the beginning of a short but deeply influential relationship with Siegfried Sassoon. Owen died one week before the Armistice, shot while attempting to lead his men across a canal in Northern France.

## The Faith

Both Hibberd and Stallworthy recognise that the roots of Owen's faith are evangelical, and that he never entirely lost 'his belief in the person and teachings of Christ'. Hibberd remarks

"The adult Wilfred cannot be understood as man or poet unless his youthful experience of Evangelical religion is remembered." 12 By the end of his life, however, that belief and faith was far from orthodox. Additionally, the consensus is that he, like Sassoon, had become strongly antagonistic towards a church which no longer took the fifth commandment seriously: 'Although both poets were, by this time, fiercely critical of the role of the church that had forgotten the biblical commandment "Thou shalt not kill," both had a fundamentally religious outlook.' 13

The transition took place, ironically but unsurprisingly, in the vicarage at Dunsden. There has been a tendency to blame Herbert Wigan, Tractarian turned Evangelical vicar, but the reality is more complex. It was here that Owen's childhood faith faced the challenge of his growing love of poetry. Hibberd notes that "he was now reading and hearing Keats in that same Evangelical spirit, and the poet who had longed for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts spoke to the heart of the adolescent schoolboy more powerfully than the Bible ever had." 14

Here too Owen's deeply felt compassion for suffering humanity came into conflict with the certainties of evangelical faith. In the face of the tragedies of fatal infection or accident, Wigan's general response was 'May we all learn anew the much-needed lesson of the absolute uncertainty of life.' In the face of the worst tragedy Dunsden had ever known, when a carter's wife and child were killed by bolting horses, Owen's response was markedly other:

I, weeping not, as others, but heart-wild,  
Affirmed to Heaven that even Love's fierce flame  
Must fail beneath the chill of this cold shame. 15

Owen's own reflection on the break with Wigan is found on the back of the first draft of his poem 'The Unreturning'. He drafted a letter to the vicar explaining what had happened to him in terms of the fact that Christianity is one system among many and, sadly, a system which leaves no room for imagination, physical sensation and aesthetic philosophy. This might be described as his aesthetic objection to evangelical faith.

The other major theological issue for Owen was what we might call the clash of hermeneutics. As he began to see the world in modern (though not modernist) terms, the influences of romanticism (Keats and Shelley); of humanism (in the sense of the centrality and centredness of humanity); and of an innate scepticism of closed and self-sufficient systems created in him a liberal objection to evangelical faith.

So in his journal, during his time at Dunsden, he says that "All theological lore is growing distasteful to me" and perhaps more seriously that "I am increasingly liberalising and liberating my thought, in spite of the Vicar's strong Conservatism." 16 Just before the crisis of his departure, he bids farewell to traditional evangelicalism:

Murder will out, and I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it. If not, adieu to the still falser creeds that hold the hearts of nearly all my fellow men. 17

From this point onwards, the traditional measures of credal statement, church attendance and rule of life no longer help us plot Owen's search for 'a true creed,' and that search has to be discerned – if at all – through his poetry. My general justification for using 'secular' literary

texts for this theological purpose follows. After it, I shall return to the task of listening to Owen's own poetic voice.

## Approach 1: A Story Not Yet Finished

My fundamental and relatively uncontroversial premise is that there is a single coherent narrative to the story of the world, that this narrative is 'owned' by God, and revealed to us through his Word. Its coherence does not depend on our ability to grasp it fully, nor on our agreement over it. It is simply the underlying premise that God's story is the story of everything, and all partial stories relate to that metanarrative, whether or not that is their authorial intention. This is the first theological principle, and it allows those of us who hold it to read 'secular' narratives in the light of the great narrative. Of course it does not protect us from error, and the theological conclusions we draw are provisional. It does, however, give us a way of reading that transcends authorial intention *and* reader response.

This leads me to the second and related principle. In this way of theological reading, the 'secular' narrative (in this case, Owen's poetry) and my personal and social narrative meet or collide. When I read Owen in the light of the gospel story, I am not detached from the process. The theological task draws me into the reading so that I may hear the voice of God *in relation to my own experience*. Theological reading is both objective in so far as it presumes God's sovereignty over all narratives, and subjective in so far as I participate through my partial narrative. In both senses, God speaks. He speaks to Wilfred Owen in agreement or in judgement, and to me through Owen's voice. I am not at all suggesting that somehow Owen's poetry becomes part of the canon of inspired scripture, simply that it is one of the ways in which, through God's Holy Spirit, the outworking of God's inspired Word touches, engages with and changes me.

The third principle is that of limitation. From the Christian point of view, the story is still being written; the writer is not autonomous. Wilfred Owen's poetry is part of a wider text. To put it another way, the cross is the limiting point of God's will in the face of the world's continuing freedom to be, the *limen* or threshold of God. When this encounter is applied to literature, Michael Edwards suggests that we consider the text to be 'dialectically charged, motivated by heaven and by hell and capable of the processes of possibility. The realising of its potential: the renewing of language, and beyond, in acts of renaming, is the work of writers.' 18

But while writers are free to write whatever they choose, they can never have the last word. Al McFadyen comments that the Christian perspective is to recognise that while we 'can refuse to enter into dialogue' we cannot, however, 'avoid being in relation with God. Our freedom is limited to determining what form that relationship, our response, is to take.' 19

Our stories are derivative, finding their source in the Creator who has given us life and freedom. More riskily, but I think correctly, the corollary of this third principle is that the story of God is incomplete until our derivative stories are written back into the divine narrative or text. Detachment is not a Christian option, not for me, not for Owen, but also not for God. The self-emptying of God has since Thomasius 20 been understood as God's chosen risky self-limitation; God chooses not to close the metanarrative until our stories are finally and fully drawn back into his.

## Approach 2: Personality, Community And The Nature Of God

Why are stories so important, even or especially when they marginalise God? Stories are written by persons, and each person's story is limited, individual and unique. Telling a story is a fundamental way of expressing one's humanity. But because humanity is defined both by individuality and by interdependence, the telling of stories locates each story-teller within the human community. McFadyen writes:

Personhood is a social gift given in processes of social communication in which one is addressed by and responds to others. Personhood and participation in communication are therefore coincident, for person indicates a subject of communication rather than a private subjectivity. 21

Furthermore, the individuality and interdependence of each human person within the human community is a reflection of the nature of God, three individual, distinct persons within the unity of the one Godhead. As a consequence, storytelling not only locates us within the human community but within the divine narrative as reflection of the divine character. We who are created in the image and likeness of God (together and never apart) reflect who God is and what God is doing in our limited, individual and unique stories. Then, as readers, we may read into the stories of others, the nature and purposes of God, if we have faith and discernment.

Story which remains in the private domain might be 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' like Macbeth's own despair, a 'walking shadow... that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more.' 22 For the story of the individual or of the community to have more than a mere subjective coherence or chaotic disjunction, it has to find its place within the all-encompassing story of God as the one in whom all human stories co-inhere. Our stories are to be understood as 'creaturely dialogue-partnership with God' 23 in which the primacy is God's, the response and reflection ours. Our story, as our humanity, takes meaning from its relationship with other stories, including and first of all the story of God.

Tom Wright famously describes the canon of scripture as analogous to a lost Shakespearian play which is recovered with the last act missing. 24 The rewriting of the lost last act, the current story (whether autobiography or story of a community) can only be done in sympathy with an intuitive understanding of the recovered text. In this light, one may attempt to read an individual narrative as the personal continuation and/or completion not so much of the canon of scripture but of the *mysterium salutis*. 25

Conversely, God's story provides the frame within which the lost last act makes sense. It is the Christian vision, the Christian memory of the over-arching story of Jesus Christ, which provides humanity with an external referent to deliver it from its own circularities, with what Charles Elliott calls the counter-memories that are the story or destiny of Jesus. 26 These counter-memories do three things.

First, they relativise, or truth-test, our own debilitating memories: 'seen against the destiny of Jesus, the destructive power of our own memories is sapped.' 27 Relativising does not deny the truth of our memories, but it stops them from becoming the mainspring of our decisions.

Secondly, they contain or limit our memories: 'When the destiny of Jesus is properly internalised, Jesus becomes a container for the individual and the group in the sense that either can project their negative emotions on to him and repossess them in a way they can handle, mediated through the memory of loving acceptance and forgiveness that lies at the heart of his destiny.' <sup>28</sup> And finally, relativisation and containment enable me to take responsibility for what is genuinely my affair. Elliott calls this 'explanation': the history of Jesus helps me to see myself in a more honest light. He relates this 'redemptive effect' to the Christian tradition of repentance, the 'decisive cutting of the roots' of our original self-understanding.

A theological reading of a secular text, then, enables us to interweave the author's narrative with ours and with the over-arching story of God. It encourages us further, to read all such narratives as testimony to our interdependent humanity, reflective of the divine image as well as of our fallenness, offering the possibility of redemption if – and only if – the counter-memories of the gospel story are given primary place.

So I return to Wilfred Owen, and my reflections on his specific story. <sup>29</sup>

## **Imagination, Physical Sensation and Aesthetic Philosophy**

Owen uses these three phrases to describe what he finds missing in the Christian gospel as he had experienced it. This emerging new 'faith' is clearly expressed in a poem begun in 1912 while he was still at Dunsden, and completed after he had moved to France. Hibberd, followed by Stallworthy, suggests that 'O World of Many Worlds' is written in reaction to the strictures of the Epistle of Jude against the intruders who have 'stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.' <sup>30</sup> The language certainly echoes Jude strongly.

The first key theme of the poem relates to the rich complexity of life, countering the bare simplicities and certainties of the Christian gospel as he had experienced it at his mother's knee and then at Dunsden. This complexity, rich as it is, offers perplexity as well as an aesthetic thrill: 'O World of many worlds, O life of lives, / What centre hast thou? Where am I?' In this poem, as in many of Owen's, there is a spiritual dizziness which replaces the ecstatic experience of Christian mysticism.

Then too, there is a tension between his desire for centredness, countered by a powerful sense of poetic vocation, to go where few have dared to venture: 'the floor is crossed, and I am where but few advance.' This too, thrills him, though it is an inherently lonely vocation. He would rather have this than the certainties of those who have 'faith unmixed', 'destinies foreplanned', who 'hold course unalterably fixed.' Owen is 'a meteor, fast, eccentric, lone, / Lawless... / Warning the earth of wider ways unknown / And rousing men with heavenly fears.' On more than one occasion, he pities those who, 'stunned by their life's explosion into love / ...stay deaf and dizzy ever after / ...Nor heed they more of sorrowing and laughter.' <sup>31</sup>

The role of the poet-prophet carries the conviction that experience and passion take precedence over morality. This is not a hedonistic or libertinistic stance, but one that privileges hot ecstasy over dispassionate reason and order. It may of course contain an

allusion to his suppressed homosexuality, and an implicit plea for greater understanding. But there is none of the decadent eroticism of the likes of Aubrey Beardsley in this. [32](#)

The poem leaves us in no doubt that there is a cost to this lonely prophetic vocation. The cost is described clearly and appropriately in a poem entitled 'To Eros' [33](#) in which Owen turns Eros into the divinity to be worshipped. The cost is the sacrifice of all he holds dear, but it is difficult to know whether he is the one who pays the price of abandoning that which he sacrifices, or whether the things he lets go are a gift whose price he is glad to pay:

In that I loved you, Love, I worshipped you;  
In that I worshipped well, I sacrificed.  
All of most worth I bound and burnt and slew:  
The innocent small things, fair friends and Christ.

And so he ends by celebrating those who share his vision, self-determined with 'self-radiated aureoles' who in the end are 'greater than this system's Sun.' The double reference to this solar system and the Sun of Righteousness would not have been lost on him.

## The Compassionate Heart

Though Owen's vocation as a poet could be a lonely and misunderstood one, he was no misanthrope. He loved life and longed to experience it to the full, longing also that others should have the same experience and passion and be valued for who they were. There are many strands to this compassionate heart, but I will single out three: a longing for intimacy, a care for those in need and an angry realism about human suffering.

### A longing for intimacy

Owen found it easy to love, and much of his expression of intimacy is couched in deeply romantic language. The 1915 poem written at Bordeaux says: [34](#)

Yield me thy hand a little while, fair love;  
That I may feel it; and so feel thy life,  
And kiss across it, as the sea the sand...

The poem ends with a verse containing a statement of ultimate values, a sort of theological reflection on the eternal strength of love. The eyes of the subject of the poem 'hold me as the great star holds the less':

They reach me by a sense not found in man,  
And bless me with a bliss unguessed of God.

Much of Owen's writing is erotic, sometimes homoerotic, but it is unclear whether his sexuality was ever fully expressed: 'I guessed not half / Life's symphony till I had made hearts beat' [35](#) in 'Music' and 'I fall in love with children, elfin fair' [36](#) in 'Perversity' are recurring themes, drawing both on his Keatsian obsession and his own inner fire. But it would be a mistake to read all this passion as mere lust. Owen's writing about love privileges

intimacy, not exploitation, albeit couched in deeply physical language of a kind that was revolutionary for its age.

Love is also playful ('Love, racing between us two, has planned / A sudden mischief' 37); caring of those whose life's circumstances are full of pain ('I thought of all that worked dark pits / Of war, and died / Digging the rock where Death reposes / Peace lies indeed' 38); and the cause of much suffering ('The cruellest thorn, I know it, / For having kissed the Rose' 39). And in a very moving early sonnet, he reflects on the character of motherhood, asking the question 'whether you regard / The poetess as nobler than the Mother.' 40 Owen's writing about love shows someone who reads the hearts and lives of others, empathises almost too easily, and pours himself out, sometimes exhaustingly in and for others.

### **A care for those in need**

Owen's compassion was fuelled by his Dunsden experience, and even while he still journals with a Christian voice, he speaks with care and with pain of 'the wretched hovels of this parish', those who 'pass their old age shrouded with an inward gloom' and those who are 'beyond the reach of doctors.' In describing one such case, he berates himself for even using the word 'case': 'How it savours of rigid, frigid professionalism!' 41 It is worth noting that he picks up on the word in his much later poem 'Mental Cases', using the cold professionalism with painful irony.

As a child whose background and upbringing balanced precariously between financial stringency and material well-being, and as an unusually thoughtful boy, it is not surprising that he had a particular care for the 'lower classes'. At a trip to the Keswick Convention in 1912, when he was 19, he speaks of a young Northumbrian miner whose faith awes him far more than the faith of any of the famous speakers. The way he expresses his awe shows that he is more struck by the dignity of the young man in the face of brutish employment than he is by any doctrinal 'soundness': 'this youth lets no profane word pass his lips, tho' pricked with piercing pain and surrounded by the grossest human mud that ever sank to a pit's bottom.' 42

It is this care for the struggling and innocent suffering ones that blossoms in the language of the war poetry, with the 'grossest human mud' of the mine translated into the 'tall clay' of 'Futility', his anger at the exploitation of the working classes translated into an outrage at the use of the soldier classes as cannon fodder in the fields of Northern France. So in 'The Send-Off', written at Ripon in 1918, as he imagined another trainload of soldiers leave for the front, he speaks of their transportation as of a great evil:

So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went.  
They were not ours:  
We never heard to which front these were sent; 43

Perhaps the angriest, most passionate words come in 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', a reworking of Genesis 22, in which Abram refuses to stay his hand:

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one. 44



In a draft Preface for a book of poetry that Owen intended to publish in 1919, the relationship between his compassion and his writing is made clear in what are his most famous words: 'Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.' 45

### **Human suffering**

As one would expect, Owen's poetry does not contain the classical language of sin and the Fall. In all that he says about human suffering, death and the final state of humanity, however, he retains some echoes of the Christian understanding, but really only in respect of what we would call social sin. Much of his writing about love rails against the constraints of traditional sexual morality. In 'The Time was Aeon', his vision of 'the Flesh' in the form of a naked boy 'flawlessly moulded' leads on to a reworking of the Passion narrative, in which not Christ but the vision of beauty is hounded to death:

Then watched I how there ran towards that way  
A multitude of railers, hot with hate,  
And maddened by the voice of a small Jew  
Who cried with a loud voice, saying 'Away!  
Away with him!' and 'Crucify him! Him,  
With the affections and the lusts thereof.' 46

The word 'sin' appears but rarely, and the only example of traditional language ('Ineffable God, give pardon that I sinned' 47) occurs in a vision of a sunset over Edinburgh, making of the earth a temple and of his tears a rosary. There is some ambiguity in the poem, and there is just a possibility that Owen might be appealing to God in a classical sense. If so, however, this would be unique in his writing.

It is Death that takes centre-stage from early on. Its finality and its fearsomeness dominate. In the teenaged 'Dread of Falling into Naught' he says 'I, only, mourn, because I cannot tell / What spring-renewing wakes the sleep of Men.' 48 Immortality is nothing more than memory. Of death's finality, commenting on the cart tragedy at Dunsden, he says,

I will go counsel men, and show what bin  
The harvest of their homes is gathered in. 49

Early on, death is the price one pays for being human, a worthwhile price:

it were well that human Being  
And Birth and Death should be, just for the freeing  
Of one such face from Chaos' murky womb,  
For Hell's reprieve is worth not this one bloom. 50

Inevitably, as the war dragged on, Owen's own experience helped him to a position where death is no longer something worth going through for the experience of having lived. Now it becomes the ultimate obscenity, the substitute for the eternal Hell that he had learnt to believe in, however briefly, at Sunday School. The Dantesque apocalyptic vision of 'Mental Cases' is the fullest description of this vision of the Hell of War:

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?  
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,  
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,  
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked? 51

In the end, Hell is nothing more than the battlefield and the destiny of those who give their lives on the battlefield: 'They were in one of many mouths of Hell / Not seen of seers in visions.' 52 Hell is the present experience, and Hell is how the wartime dead are remembered. Most poignantly, in 'Strange Meeting', Hell is the place where erstwhile enemies meet and lament the lost years and the hopelessness:

'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...' 53

## The Atonement

The traditional orthodoxy of Christ's sacrificial death for the sins of all humanity is unpicked by Owen in a number of ways. In 'Inspection', written at Craiglockhart after his first period of service, the scruffiness of a rating on parade takes the place of the human condition: the man is 'dirty on parade'. We learn that the 'damned spot' is his own blood/dirt. Any reference to the blood of another is simply left out, though there is a trace of substitution, the soldiers for the world, which is 'washing out its stains' through sacrificing its men: 'Young blood's its great objection'. The soldiers will be 'washed clean' by being bled dry in death, and then,

But when we're duly white-washed, being dead,  
The race will bear Field-Marshal God's inspection.

Here, those who fight, suffer and die mock the atonement by their own death. Their whiteness comes from being drained of blood, a sacrifice required by the politicians of the Great Powers, and – to a lesser degree – those who stayed at home. These are celebrated in the 'Anthem for Doomed Youth.'

A second theme can be best illustrated in 'Maundy Thursday', 54 which should properly be named 'Good Friday' because it refers to the Veneration of the Cross, an experience Owen seems to have had in France in Holy Week 1914. This theme is of the deadness of the image of the crucified Christ, not in the late medieval sense of the *Christus patiens* but of the powerless and pathetic idol. The crucifix in the 'brown hands of a server-lad' is now merely 'the emblem of a creed', 'a silver doll' for the children. When Owen comes forward and bends his head (can he not quite bring himself as an erstwhile Protestant to venerate the crucifix?), he sees that the 'Christ was thin, and cold, and very dead'.

Just as dead, in Northern France in time of war, is the 'church Christ' of 'Le Christianisme' 55 who has been hit and buried in the rubble of a bombed church, with a Virgin 'halo'd with an old tin hat', immaculate but defenceless: 'a piece of hell will batter her'. To complete the pantheon, the saints lie in serried ranks in the cellar 'well out of hearing of our trouble'.

In contrast to this, is the aliveness of those described in 'Maundy Thursday', mourning women with 'meek mouths', the children with 'eager lips and glad' and the sensual brown hands of the acolyte: 'I kissed the warm live hand that held the thing'.

Which brings us on to the third use of semi-Christological language: that of each human being as carrying within them some of the beauty, the tragedy and the redemptive possibility that Owen would have been taught in Sunday School belonged properly to Christ alone, the Second Adam. The blessedness of the flesh endues the individual with Christic beauty, where Christ's redemptive 'beauty' is replaced by the beauty of human love, compassion and suffering. We have already seen such material in earlier reference to 'The Time was Aeon' and 'The Ballad of Many Thorns'. We should also note that Owen sees 'God through mud' 56 in the begrimed faces of the soldiers in the trenches, and that the red of loving lips and of shed blood replace the sacrificial blood of Christ. So in 'Greater Love' – entitled by Owen in obvious allusion to John 15:13, he says,

Red lips are not so red  
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead. 57

Later in the poem, in a rare reference to the cross, it is the soldiers who bear it, dragging it 'through flame and hail'. They are the ones who in '1914' sow for a new spring, giving 'blood for seed'. 58 Conversely, the vivid red of such passages is contrasted with the bloodlessness, and feebleness of Christ who 'too lost a limb'. 59 Similarly, in 'Soldier's Dream', he dreams that Jesus 'fouled the big-gun gears' and damaged all the weaponry. As the dream goes on, however, the gentleness of Jesus is subverted by a vexed God, who 'gave all power to Michael; / And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.' 60

When the archangel is stronger than the Redeemer, it becomes clear that the humanity of Jesus is much more attractive to Owen than the majesty, sovereignty or power of God.

## **A Humanist's Faith**

I have noted Owen's and Sassoon's disenchantment with a church that so often seemed to act in a way diametrically opposed to the teachings of Christ. Owen himself lived out this tension between his inherent pacifism and his equal sense of duty to his fellows and his country in going to war. Jesus himself may not be able to bring peace, but when the disciples have run away, and the priests rejoice in their war-wounds, Jesus and the soldiers remain. Then it is in the soldiers' laying down their lives for peace, and in Jesus' gospel of loving the greater love that the possibility of peace is to be found. This is Owen's version of a virtue ethic which marks out the vulnerable, the helpless, the broken, the ones taken advantage of, as the only ones through whom hope might be found again. Of the politicians he can only say,

The scribes on all the people shove  
And bawl allegiance to the state. 61

Inevitably, however, the dominant tone is one of lament, irony and occasionally, of anger. It is indeed surprising that there is not more anger in his poetry. In one of his latest poems, probably only finished by March 1918, he describes a group of servicemen in church saying the psalms. 62 He starts relatively gently by commenting that few of them are 'heartful' in

their recitation, then moves on to the one who seems to be full of feeling and spirituality. This one, however, is smiling 'for things beneath' rather than for Zion's praises. And it is he whom God picks on, seeing the life-affirming sparkle in his jewelled eyes. And so,

God the boy's jewel took  
Into his casket,  
Flinging the anthem book  
On His waste-basket.

Having portrayed God as the violent cause of death in war, Owen rounds the poem off with four more lines, suggesting that God decorates his world (his casket) with our tears, and then, even more damningly, that God does not listen to our prayers: 'Prayers show as eyelids pearled. / God hath no ears.'

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I named two theological questions that for me hold literature and theology together in a common hermeneutical task: 'In the great scheme of God's plan, what does all this have to say to us, and what spiritual authority might it carry?' I end with a brief commentary on these questions in the light of Wilfred Owen's life and writings in the hope that it might encourage others to listen out for the signs of God's presence in such conversations.

### What does this have to say to us?

Wilfred Owen is one of the prophets of the end of Christendom, a warning that should have been heard a good fifty years before the church began to take it seriously. It is true that WWI signalled the end of Christian jingoism in the United Kingdom, but the association of Christianity with militarism, nationalism and political power continues to be an issue. The church's participation in Christendom through formal establishment and informal alliances remains a blot on Western Christianity.

For Christians struggling to make sense of a world full of questions, the continuing inability of some Christian leaders to face those questions and risk trust in a God who can cope with our doubts ought to be more shocking than we find it, particularly in an evangelical constituency. Owen's mother continued to the end of her life to be completely defended about her faith, closed to questions, and in the end there was no space for spiritual uncertainty to be aired between mother and son. The silencing of dissent led, and leads to detachment from faith.

More positively, the nagging presence of God in the background of Owen's writing is a salutary reminder that God inhabits the places of spiritual anguish and agnosticism as surely as he meets us in times of certainty and confidence. And the lingering attractiveness of Jesus for Owen – and for many of the dechurched – ought to be an encouragement: Jesus draws many for whom the institution has lost credibility, and here is opportunity for dialogue, scope for evangelism, and a sign that the rumour of the good news is kept alive in the strangest places.

Owen's criticism of the church for lacking an aesthetic sense remains a major concern of mine, and is a pressing issue in evangelicalism. Our commitment to the Word of God as inspired, reliable and authoritative has carried with it a parallel suspicion of the slipperiness and ambiguity of art. Evangelicals fear ambiguity. Yet we know that God is the source of all that is good *and* true *and* beautiful. A proper theological aesthetic would give us a meeting point for the experiential priorities of postmodernism and the beauty of the gospel.

### **What spiritual authority does it carry?**

In the classical understanding of scriptural authority conversations such as the one I have outlined with Wilfred Owen carry no authority of any kind at all. They are merely human observations, opinions, consonant or dissonant with the gospel, irrelevant for the theological task. If, however, we take the view that the authority of Scripture is mediated by the Holy Spirit to individuals and communities in and through the stuff of life, it becomes possible to construe the means of communication as vehicles of the Spirit's work, potentially inspired though never assured.

When I began, as a teenager, reading seriously, I read for enjoyment, but there was a deep sense even then that reading was a vocation, one that I have never lost. As I have worked with Wilfred Owen over the past few months, I have found his biography and his poetry re-engaging me with God in new, surprising and quite disturbing ways. You may say, at this point, that this would have happened anyway, without his troublesome verse. I remain wedded to the idea that this art-form, with all its beauty and all its pity, is the means through which God has chosen to reconnect me to his story and the story of my family, a tool for cracking open the scriptures, a means for me to hear the voice of God.



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Adrian was born in Trinidad, and brought up there and in Brazil. After training for ministry at the College of the Resurrection in Mirfield, he worked in parish ministry for 15 years in Trinidad and Devon. For the last 19 years, he has been a theological educator in Nottingham, Johannesburg and Oxford, while continuing in non-stipendiary parish ministry. He is married to Jill, with 2 children, 4 granddaughters, and a passion for cycling, running and hill walking.

His interest in the interface between Theology and Literature dates back to his undergraduate days, when 19th century Church History was taught partly through a novelistic medium. He pursued this interest in his PhD on 'Spiritual Identity and Experience in the Literature of the English-speaking Caribbean' and continues to explore the importance of the arts in evangelism and spirituality in church, college and Simeon Centre work.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Owen, "Supposed Confessions Of A Secondrate Sensitive Mind In Dejection" in Stallworthy 1990:11
- 2 Attwood 2009:485
- 3 Edwards 1967:160
- 4 Wilkinson 1978
- 5 Wilkinson 1978:36
- 6 A monk of the Community of the Resurrection, an Anglican order founded by Charles Gore with a Benedictine emphasis
- 7 Wilkinson 1978:43
- 8 The theoretical elements of this article are based on Chapters 2 and 3 of my unpublished PhD thesis, 'Spiritual Identity and Experience in the Literature of the Anglophone Caribbean', Leeds 1997
- 9 Matthew 6:26 NRSV
- 10 Stallworthy 2004. accessed online at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37828?docPos=1>. Stallworthy was Owen's first biographer after Harold
- 11 Stallworthy 2004, accessed 24 August 2012
- 12 Hibberd 2002:22
- 13 Stallworthy 2004, accessed 12 August 2012
- 14 Hibberd 2002:54

- 15 Stallworthy 1990:39, henceforth referenced as 'Poems'
- 16 Stallworthy 1974:75
- 17 Stallworthy 1974:83
- 18 Edwards 1984:12
- 19 McFadyen 1990:22
- 20 Gerhard Thomasius (1802-1875), pupil of Schleiermacher, Hegel, Neander and Tholuck, father of kenotic Christology in Germany
- 21 McFadyen 1990:82
- 22 Macbeth, Act 5 Scene 5, lines 23-25
- 23 McFadyen 1990:21
- 24 Wright 1992:140f
- 25 This relates to Ruth Etchells' reading of literature as containing implicitly the *logos spermatikos* of the creative Word, which owns all that is good and stands in judgement over all that is evil
- 26 Elliott 1995
- 27 Elliott 1995: 202
- 28 Elliott 1995: 204
- 29 It is difficult to illustrate fully in an article of this length, and reference should be made to the full text of each poem if possible. Many of these are available at [www.poemhunter.com](http://www.poemhunter.com)
- 30 Jude 4
- 31 '[Stunned by their life's explosion]' in Poems: 96
- 32 It is striking of course that Beardsley converted to Roman Catholicism towards the end of his life and then begged his publisher to 'destroy all copies of *Lysistrata* and bad drawings... by all that is holy *all* obscene drawings.'
- 33 Poems: 92
- 34 Poems: 53
- 35 Poems: 75
- 36 Poems: 85
- 37 Poems: 91
- 38 'Miners' in Poems: 112
- 39 'The Ballad of Many Thorns' in Poems: 99
- 40 Poems:58
- 41 Stallworthy 1974: 67
- 42 Stallworthy 1974: 78
- 43 Poems: 149
- 44 Poems: 151
- 45 Poems: 192
- 46 Poems: 50
- 47 Poems: 82
- 48 Poems: 14

- 49 Poems: 39
- 50 Poems: 39
- 51 Poems: 146
- 52 Poems: 183
- 53 Poems: 126
- 54 Poems: 86
- 55 Poems: 103
- 56 'Apologia pro Poemate Meo,' in Poems: 101
- 57 Poems: 143
- 58 Poems: 93
- 59 'At a Calvary Near the Ancre' Poems: 111
- 60 Poems: 159
- 61 'At a Calvary Near the Ancre' Poems: 111
- 62 'A Tear Song' in Poems: 119