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| Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918) |
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| Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (1893-1918) is among the most renowned British poets of the First World War (1914-1918). His style can best be described as elegiac or tragic, standing defiantly against the idealised or propagandistic depictions of the battlefield prevalent during the Great War’s early stages. In opposition to the sentiments of Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) and Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), and more akin to those of Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918) and Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Owen considered such reductive glorifications of mass slaughter ignorant, if not outright dishonest — a radical viewpoint at the time (Hibberd 222).  Owen’s influences range from Dante and Shakespeare to Thomas Gray, William Collins, Percy B. Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Burns, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and especially John Keats. Owen’s poetic signature and chief innovation was his subversion of traditional rhyme schemes. He experimented with consonantal end-rhyme (or ‘pararhyme’), a technique that, along with Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), he helped popularise (Day-Lewis 25). Critic Sasi Bhusan Das interprets Owen’s use of this technique, in conjunction with broken rhythms, as an effort to capture ‘the disharmony of the [Great] War’ (13). |
| File: owen1.jpg  Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (1893-1918) is among the most renowned British poets of the First World War (1914-1918). His style can best be described as elegiac or tragic, standing defiantly against the idealised or propagandistic depictions of the battlefield prevalent during the Great War’s early stages. In opposition to the sentiments of Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) and Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), and more akin to those of Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918) and Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Owen considered such reductive glorifications of mass slaughter ignorant, if not outright dishonest — a radical viewpoint at the time (Hibberd 222).  Owen’s influences range from Dante and Shakespeare to Thomas Gray, William Collins, Percy B. Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Burns, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and especially John Keats. Owen’s poetic signature and chief innovation was his subversion of traditional rhyme schemes. He experimented with consonantal end-rhyme (or ‘pararhyme’), a technique that, along with Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), he helped popularise (Day-Lewis 25). Critic Sasi Bhusan Das interprets Owen’s use of this technique, in conjunction with broken rhythms, as an effort to capture ‘the disharmony of the [Great] War’ (13).  Born on 18 March 1893 in Oswestry, Shropshire, England to Harriet Susan Shaw (1867-1942) and Thomas Owen (1862-1931), Wilfred Owen was raised in an Evangelical Christian household. Owen passed the matriculation exam for the University of London in 1911, the same year in which he served as a pupil and lay assistant to the Reverend Herbert Wigan in Dunsden, Oxfordshire. While performing his duties in the rural slums of Dunsden, Owen, who was raised in a relatively privileged middle-class household, witnessed the rampant illness and poverty in the lives of the people who lived there. According to Day-Lewis, this experience shook Owen’s faith and ‘forced him to look outwards at the real world’ (16), thus planting the seeds of intense sympathy and empathy that would grow into the guiding principles of the war poetry that made him famous.  In Owen’s preface to his posthumously published *Collected Poems*, his philosophy is summed up with a haunting simplicity: ‘This book is not about heroes…Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity’ (Owen 31). Owen’s pity reaches from the abyssal horror of the front lines with its bullets, shells, gas, mud, vermin, and annihilation (‘*Dulce et Decorum Est*,’ ‘Exposure’) — to the home front (‘Smile, Smile, Smile’), and to the liminal spaces of hospitals and societal exile where survivors with broken bodies (‘Disabled’), and minds (‘Mental Cases’, ‘Conscious’) live out their terrible fates. Indeed, Owen knew these liminal spaces well, as much of his poetic development occurred within the confines of Craiglockhart War Hospital from June to October 1917, while he recovered from a concussion and shell-shock or ‘neurasthenia,’ now recognised as post-traumatic stress disorder. Under the guidance of his friend, artistic mentor, and fellow ‘Uranian’ (homosexual) Siegfried Sassoon, and his physician, Dr. Arthur Brock (1879-1947), Owen translated his nightmares into such works as ‘*Dulce et Decorum Est*’ and ‘Strange Meeting’, two of his most powerful and enduring poems.  Owen was notoriously excluded from *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), edited by William Butler Yeats. Das argues that this exclusion was Yeats’s ‘deliberate act of retaliation on the [nineteen] thirties poets who ignored him’ and instead drew on the works of Owen for their inspiration (432). Despite this setback, Owen’s reputation has increased; his works are widely considered to be some of the finest poetry on war ever written in the English language. Who can say what Owen could have achieved had his life not been cut short in battle? He was killed in action at the Sambre Canal in France on 4 November 1918. |
| Further reading:  (Cuthbertson)  (Das)  (Day-Lewis)  (Hibberd)  (W. Owen)  (Owen) |