Victims and Victimizers in Wilfred Owen's Poetry

In "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" Wilfred Owen retells the episode of the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abram, but in the two last verses he modifies the biblical story and allows the horrible sacrifice to take place.

> A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.
> But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one.
> (CPF, 174) [1]

The sacrifice is not only committed but magnified and generalised to a whole generation of young men; Abram is the old man and represents those who gave or transmitted orders but never suffered the consequences of them in battle, he is the victimizer. Isaac, the young soldier, is deceived by his father and then sacrified pointlessly, he is the victim. This simplistic view of the responsibilities where the old are to blame for the war and the young are the only ones that suffer its consequences was not uncommon in those days. [2] "The Parable" is the only poem in which Owen presents this view of things, but curiously the first reviewers of the earlier editions of Owen's poetry focused primarily on this idea and criticized him, assuming this was the basis of his attitude towards the war:

> And what shall we say finally of the strange intimation that the old men sacrifice the young?. As if any father would not face death sooner than send his boy to face it for him.
>
> Wilfrid Owen's [sic] poetical gesture springs in part from an error of judgement and we cannot appreciate his poems as they deserve without calling attention to that error. He might have been less a poet if he had not made it, for no doubt it was his sensitiveness that played him false. (TLS, 21)

Sir Henry Newbolt went even further in his criticism disqualifying his capacity as a true poet:

> Owen and the rest of the broken men rail at the Old Men who sent the young to die: they have suffered cruelly, but in the nerves and not the heart—they haven't the experience or the imagination to know the extreme human agony—"who giveth me to die for thee, Absalom, my son." Paternity apart, what Englishman of fifty wouldn't far rather stop the shot himself than see the boys do it for him? I don't think these shell-shocked war poems will move our grandchildren greatly—there's nothing fundamental or final about them. (Newbolt, 314-5)

No wonder, after the war this polemic about who was to blame was an issue of debate, and "The Parable" attracted the attention of the "old" critics who wanted an opportunity to defend themselves from such accusing generalizations as are expressed in "The Parable". After some time, the issue of who was to blame according to Owen's poems lost its interest and was scarcely mentioned by critics. But if we take a close look at Owen's poetry we soon notice that he assigned responsibilities in a complex way, much more than is expressed in the above quoted poem.

In a number of Owen's poems the division is still one between "you" and "us", between those who suffer the war and those who stand on the sidedrives and merely observe, but the accusations are more subtle than in "The Parable" and any person is susceptible of filling the place of the guilty "you". This is the case in "Dulce et Decorum Est", where Owen describes "the extreme human agony" suffered by a soldier poisoned by gas and by the poet who cannot get rid of the terrible sight of this death in his dreams. After describing with implacable realism the agony of the soldier, Owen appeals directly to the reader and involves him in the experience:

> If in some smothering dream you too could pace
> behind the wagon that we flung him in,
> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues.—
> My friend, you would not tell with such high
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
> Pro patria mori. (CPF, 140)

Although the reader cannot share the absolute feeling of horror that this experience causes the poet, Owen does not spare any shocking image to transmit, as vividly as possible, the nightmare that he cannot forget. To make the sense of reality even more imperative he avoids the use of metaphors and gives all his images the form of a simile so that there is no possible escape into the level of fantasy. The use of the vocative "you" at the beginning and at the end makes the appeal to the conscience of the reader more urgent and the guilt is attributed to anyone who believes in the honour and glory of war. It has been pointed out that the original intention of Owen was to address his poem to Jessie Pope, a famous pro-war poetess of the times, [3] but the omission of this dedication can make us think that Owen preferred to generalize his accusation to all those who were telling "the old lie" rather than particularize his criticism and direct it at a concrete individual.

In *S.I.W.* Owen does not directly put the blame on anyone, but shows the unconscious attitude of those who stay at home absolutely unaware of what is really going on at the front: their

guilt is the guilt of ignorance. The poem tells the well-known story of the boy who enlists, encouraged by his family, just to realize how incapable he is of enduring real combat and of telling those at home about his desperate situation. The only way out he can find is to commit suicide and the letter of condolence home conceals the nature of his death:

> With him they buried the muzzle his teeth had kissed,
> And truthfully wrote the mother, "Tim died smiling."
> (CPF, 160)

The black humoured ending evidences how reality can be manipulated and still be truthful, emphasizing at the same time the tremendous gap between two different realities: the one that is known at home, usually tergiversated by the informants, and the one that the soldiers experience at the front. Owen is once again dividing his world between the innocent and the culpable in a manichaean view of the problem.

Another of Owen's earlier war poems, "The Dead Beat", also narrates a common episode of the war. Here a soldier suffers a self injured wound to get away from the front line and is left to die by a drunken doctor. The poem is written in a Sassoonish style [4], with a bitter irony that erects a barrier between the poet and the reader, who is made uncomfortable by the unnatural treatment that the narrator gives to this unlucky soldier:

> He dropped more sullenly than wearily
> Lay stupid like a cod, heavy like meat. (CPF, 144)

But more interesting than looking for the traces of Sassoon's style in the poem is the urgency that the characters show of finding someone or something to blame for the absurd death of this soldier. At first we are led to find the soldier the cause of his own death, then the cause is found in England, in his wife, in the ones that have stayed at home, and finally it is the doctor who, by being drunk, provokes the death of the soldier:

> "It's Blighty, p'raps, he see; his pluck's all gone,
> Dreaming of all the valiant, that *aren't* dead:
> Bold uncles, smiling ministerially:
> Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun
> In some new homd, improved materially.
> It's no these stiffs have crazed him; nor the Hun."
> (CPF, 144)

Who is really to blame? Owen here illustrates what he himself is doing in many of his poems, looking for a scapegoat that can carry the responsiblity of the absurd disasters of war. It is only natural to try to find it, and it is also common to try to find it in a third person/s that can take the burden of culpability and discharge the poet and the poor soldier-victims who can only suffer in silence. But Owen saw further that the question of guilt could not be regarded from only one point of view, there were many agents involved and he himself was another participant in the general guilt.

In one of his letters Owen expressly recognizes a debate with his conscience that must have started before entering the army and continued during all the war, in an intent to reconcile the idea of opposing the war and being a soldier at the same time: "And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?" (Collected Letters, 461). This poignant contradiction was a common theme in his poetry and, as Gertrude White implies, it silences those poems in which he had blamed individual groups of people:

> In his great visionary poems he makes it clear that, whatever particular scapegoats he may seek at times, all men are involved, in the final analysis, in guilt; all are responsible for sin and pain; all are in some way blind, insensible, or helpless to do good and avoid evil. Far from excepting himself from the general indictment, he specifically acknowledges his own share in the guilt, identifying with the victims and with the oppressors too, with the slain and with the slayers. (White, 66-67)

This idea of universal guilt is closely related to Owen's strong feelings regarding religion and when he refers to his "seared conscience" he is both alluding to his pacifism and to his Christianity. Another interpretation of this sense of guilt has been pointed out by Joseph Cohen who regarded it as an unmistakable sign of Owen's homosexual personality which "motivates almost entirely the position he took towards the war" (Cohen, 256). Undoubtedly, Owen's sexual tendencies had a strong repercussion in his poetry [5], but it seems a little bit far fetched to try to explain all the creative work of a poet by one characteristic of his personality. Whatever the cause for this universal sense of guilt, be it religious, political or sexual, it is indisputable that it is a major theme in his poetry and one that rends it more sincere and personal.

"The Show" is the poem where Owen states more explicitly his sense of guilty participation in the war. In "The Show", a repulsive scene of cannibalism is described as a part of a horrendous nightmare: an army of worms is devouring a corpse, while they are being eaten and eating one another. A number of clues are given throughout the poem as to what the worms represent: their different colours, grey and brown, suggest the uniforms of the English and the German, and the spines of the animals are allusive to the sharp point with which the German helmet was crowned (CPF, 157). But it is not until the last stanza when the symbolism is made explicit:

> And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid
> Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,
> Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,
> And the fresh severed head of it, my head. (CPF, 155)

By this point we could argue that the interpretation of the symbolism is obvious enough and the poet could spare the reader from such an explicit statement, but in fact, Owen introduces a new meaning at this point which is important for

him to emphasize: the idea of his own participation in the massacre. And what is more terrible is that he sees himself, not as an anonymous individual immersed in the holocaust, but as the "head" of many men, as a leader and a responsible participant in the killing. Owen recognizes his guilt, and this acknowledgement is the real nightmare in the poem."The Show" is a symbolic poem, and thus, the representation of Owen's guilt is also symbolic, but in his anecdotic poems, Owen illustrates his share of the guilt by becoming one of the characters that is involved in the causing of the injustice. In "Inspection", for example, Owen portrays himself as the sergeant that agrees in punishing the soldier for being dirty on parade, he later finds out that the stain was caused by blood:

> He told me, afterwards, the damned spot
> Was blood, his own. "Well, blood is dirt," I said.
> (CPF, 95)

Stallworthy points out in this image of the blood as dirt an obvious reference to Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking speech (CPF, 95), but here the relationship is reversed and the blood is seen as a stain. At this point the tone of the language changes from a colloquial style to a highly poetical diction that sublimates the words of the soldier:

> "Blood's dirt" he laughed, looking away,
> Far off to where his wound had bled
> And almost merged forever into clay.
> "The world is washing out its stains," he said.
> "It doesn't like our cheeks so red:
> Young blood's its great objection.
> But when we're duly white-washed, being dead,
> The race will bear Field Marshal God's inspection."
> (CPF, 95)

The allusion to the stain in Macbeth continues here reinforced by a powerful biblical allusion: "Are you washed in the Blood of the Lamb?" (CPF, 95) and these references contribute to enhance the idea of a personified world that should be blamed for the sacrifice. No longer are groups of individuals to be made responsible, the whole world is committing the crime and at the same time is seeking forgiveness from itself.

In these poems of self guilt the division between "you" and "us" that was mentioned above changes and becomes one between "they" and "us". Owen does not include himself among the victims but among the victimizers as we can see in "Mental Cases", where the burden of the responsibility is taken by the author who sees himself as an active cause for the state of the mentally diseased:

> —Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
> Picking at the rope knouts of their scourging;
> Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
> Pawing us who dealt them war and madness. (CPF, 169)

The use of the first person pronoun stands in contrast with the third person exposing the division between two worlds: the one of the sane and the one of the mentally diseased; and the animalistic gestures of the mad soldiers expressed in a harassing succession of gerunds are seen by the poet as unmistakable signs of accusation. The vision of these mental cases results, once more, in one of Owen's nightmares.

Finally, I would like to mention one of Owen's most famous poems and one in which he states with great clarity the division of responsibilities concerning the war. In "Insensibility" Owen divides men into groups depending on how the war has affected them. If we summarize very roughly the poem we can see a division into three groups: "the happy", "the wise" and "the cursed". The first group are said to be happy because they are unable to feel any pain, they are not to blame, but they cannot be envied either. Their consciousness has become insensible from suffering too much and although they are spared any further pain, they have lost at the same time their human qualities, they are no better than vegetables:

> Alive, he is not vital overmuch;
> Dying, not mortal overmuch;
> Nor sad, nor proud, nor curious at all.
> He cannot tell
> Old men's placidity from his. (CPF, 145)

"The wise" are the poets; these are conscious enough to suffer for themselves and for others while they are also aware of their own complicity and guilt:

> We wise, who with a thought besmirch
> Blood over all our soul,
> How should we see our task
> But through his blunt and lashless eyes. (CPF, 146)

This implied definition of what a poet is enlightens most of Owen's poetry discovering his sense of purpose and his consciousness of responsibility towards other soldiers. This idea was the guide to all his war time writing and in every one of his poems we can observe a search of this identity as a poet and a struggle to express the feeling, not of himself, but of his fellow soldiers. The pronoun "we" in this case includes Owen among the poets and not among the common soldier victims or among the senseless victimizers and this is the image that most of Owen's readers have of his personality, the same he expressed in a number of his letters and the same we can read in his famous drafted preface. Finally, "the cursed" are those who "by choice they made themselves immune to pity". Owen does not state who these people are: the nation at home? the high ranking officers? the church?... It could be all or none. Here we do not see the simple accusation of some of the poems previously mentioned, instead, the denunciation is expressed as an understatement in some of the most memorable of Owen's verses where he combines his idea of guilt with that of pity:

By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;
Whatever moans when many leave these shores;
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears. (CPF, 146)

The theme of guilt is conspicuous in Owen's poetry, it comes associated with the idea of pity, of religion and of war, and it develops the inner conflict in Owen's mind between his actions and his "seared conscience". It is only natural that in many of the poems where Owen deals with this theme the accusations against some sectors of the population seem too harsh and the indictment of the reader and of himself can be hurting and cruel. But this was considered by Owen as his first duty as a poet and witness of the times and this was above any other consideration of aestheticism or balance. His victims are the victims of was, of a society that has let things go wrong to the point of self-extermination, but so are his victimizers, which are also the product of an extreme situation of agony and disorientation.

Notes

1. CPF refers to Jon Stallworthy's edition of Owen's poems: The Complete Poems and Fragments, New York: 1984.

2. Examples of this attitude can be easily found in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon as well as in the reports of some journalists. See the chapter "Adversary Proceedings" in Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (75-114)

3. W.O. Bebbington discusses the extent of the knowledge Owen had of Jessie Pope's poetry in her article "Jessie Pope and Wilfred Owen".

4. In a letter to his cousin Leslie Gunston, Owen writes "After Leaving him [Sasoon], I wrote something in Sassoon's style, which I will send you, since you ask for the latest" (Collected Letters, 485)

5. For a detailed explanation of what is known about Owen's sexual relations see Dominic Hibberd's *Wilfred Owen. The Last Year.*

Works Cited

Bebbington, W.G. "Jessie Pope and Wilfred Owen." *Ariel* 3, IV, 1972.

Cohen, Joseph. "Owen Agonistes" *English Literature in Transition* VIII, 5, 1965

Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory.* London: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Hibberd, Dominic. *Wilfred Owen: The Last Year.* London: Constable, 1993.

Owen, Wilfred. *The Complete Poems and Fragments.* Ed. Jon Stallworthy. New York: WW Norton, 1984.

Owen, Wilfred. *Collected Letters.* Ed. Harold Owen & John Bell. London: Oxford University Press. 1967.

Times Literary Supplement, 6 January 1921.

White, Gertrude. *Wilfred Owen.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969.

Berta Cano Echevarría
Universidad de Valladolid
Spain