

Poetry review essay

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



Although the poems “ Recalling War” by Robert Graves and “ Mental Cases” by Wilfred Owen are both concerned with the damage that war does to the soldiers involved, they are different in almost every other respect. Owen’s poem examines the physical and mental effects of war in a very personal and direct way – his voice is very much in evidence in this poem – he has clearly seen people like the ‘ mental cases’ who are described. It is also evident that Owen’s own experiences of the war are described: he challenges the reader with terrifying images, in order that the reader can begin to comprehend the causes of the madness. Graves on the other hand is far more detached. His argument is distant, using ancient images to explore the immediate and long-term effects of war on the soldier. The poem is a meditation on the title, Graves examining the developing experiences and memories of war with a progression of images and metaphors.

“ Mental Cases” is a forceful poem, containing three substantial stanzas which focus on different aspects of Owen’s subject. The first stanza is a detailed description of what the ‘ mental cases’ look like. Their outward appearance is gruesome, “ Baring teeth that leer like skulls’”, preparing the reader for the even more horrifying second stanza. The second verse concentrates on the men’s past experiences, the deaths they have witnessed and the unimaginable nightmares they have lived through: “ Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.” The last stanza concludes the poem, explaining how the men’s lives are haunted by their experiences, they go mad because the past filters into every aspect of their present lives, the men retreat away from the memories and into madness. The form of Owen’s

poem is, therefore, built around three main points: the appearance of the men, their experiences, and the effect this has on their lives.

In Graves' poem the form is also key to understanding the poem, but perhaps in a less obvious way. "Recalling War" has five stanzas, in a form that corresponds to the psychological emotions and physical experience war provokes. The first stanza describes how Graves expects the war to be remembered twenty years after the event: the wounds have healed and the blind and handicapped men forget the injuries the war caused, as their memories are blurred by the distance of time; "The one-legged man forgets his leg of wood". In the second stanza Graves moves on to question the nature of war. This verse is a description of the atmosphere and setting of war. "Even when the season was the airiest May/ Down pressed the sky, and we, oppressed, thrust out". The third stanza focuses on the battle itself, and the fourth explores the aftermath of battle and the unbearable nature of the war. The fifth and final stanza returns to the ideas expressed in the first stanza, of war being an unreal memory. The form of this poem is crucial to its understanding. The progressions marked by the stanzas highlights the argument Graves is making.

"Mental Cases" and "Recalling War" are both poems that rely on the atmosphere and tone they create, indeed this is a key source of their power. Owen creates a terrifying atmosphere throughout the poem, which is clearly a reflection of his subject matter. Not only does Owen describe in awful detail the shocking appearance of the men, he also includes horrific images of war. The tone is very powerful, with Owen asking questions in the first

stanza, “ but who are these hellish?”, a device which cleverly establishes direct contact with the reader and an engaging discourse. This connection with the reader is exploited in the second verse, in which the reader experiences the full force of Owen’s imagery. The final stanza opens with a tone that is factual: “-Thus their hands are plucking at each other”, summarizing the fact that these men behave the way they do because of the events they have and are experiencing. Owen ends the poem by insisting on the complicity of both himself and the reader in the fate of these men, an accusation which, after the powerful prelude, is hard to deny.

Whereas Owen’s poem is powerful as a result of its consistently horrific atmosphere and tone, Graves’ poem changes tone from stanza to stanza, emulating the different stages of feeling a soldier experiences. The poem opens with a tone that is factual yet distant, as though an old tale were being told “ As when the morning traveller turns and views/His wild night-stumbling carved into a hill”. This tone emphasizes Graves’ description of dimly remembered suffering which is fading into the distance: “ Entrance and exit wounds are silvered clean”. The second stanza moves into a different tone, war is described as not only a war between countries, but a universal disaster “ No mere discord of flags/ But an infection of the common sky”. The tone and atmosphere created are ominous, there is a feeling of anticipation and fear reminding the reader of soldiers waiting for battle:

oppressed, thrust out

Boastful tongue, clenched fist and valiant yard.

Natural infirmities were out of mode,

For Death was young again

The third stanza does not immediately change tone, however the feeling of fear increases as Graves dwells on thoughts of premature death and little on “valiant yard”. However, roughly half way through the stanza the tone does change dramatically. The poem becomes not fearful but simple and clear, the necessities of life are described and the tone reminds the reader of an adrenaline filled soldier, thrilled with the battle and instinct of survival, “A weapon at the thigh, surgeons at call.”. However, by the next stanza the battle is over and the experience of war assumes a hopeless guise.

Everything good in the world has turned to ashes “Extinction of each happy art and faith” and the duty to fight turns into “the duty to run mad.” The tone of the poem is tragic, having seen hope turn to fear, exhilaration and finally collapse. The powerful climax of the poem in the fourth stanza is further emphasized in the last verse, as the tone returns to one of unreal memory. The poet’s voice is ironic with child-like naivete:

Machine-guns rattle toy-like from a hill.

The last lines of the poem change in tone again as the poet describes a future of despair if the past cannot be remembered with accuracy and acceptance:

When learnedly the future we devote

To yet more boastful visions of despair.

Both poets use a very descriptive and revealing choice of vocabulary. One particular feature of Owen's poem is the use of alliteration to emphasize the image he is trying to create:

Memory fingers in their hair of murders,

Multitudinous murders

The repetition of the ' m ' sound serves to increase the impact of the image, reminding the reader of a stammering, shell-shocked soldier. " Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous" is another example of alliteration. Owen's choice of words such as " slob", " baring", " swelters", " hideous" and " flesh" all help to increase the reader's horror as these words describe so well the nightmares the men are experiencing. Graves' words also have a strong impact on the reader: his words highlight the differences between the stanzas. The second stanza describing the wait for the battle uses words like " sagged", " ominously", " oppressed", " clenched" and " pressed". In contrast to this the last stanza includes words such as " piecrust", " nibbling", " rattle" and " dandelions", emphasizing the child-like memories of war. The contrast between the third and fourth stanzas are even more noticeable. The second half of the third stanza aims to highlight the simple and uncomplicated feelings the soldiers experience while they are in combat, this is reflected by words like " roof", " call", " wine", " rage" and " lack" , these are all monosyllabic words stressing Graves' point. In the fourth stanza Graves' vocabulary changes and becomes more complex: " foundering" " sublimities", " protesting", " Extinction", " unendurable", again these are words which reflect the fact that the soldiers are now questioning and trying

to solve a problem or paradox. The contrasts in the two poets vocabulary is intriguing. Owen's vocabulary is far more raw and hard hitting, thought about but not agonized over. Graves' choice of vocabulary reflects the fact that he is making a more complex series of points; the words are perhaps rather contrived.

The images in "Mental Cases" by Owen are perhaps the most shocking aspect of the poem. There are three central images within Owen's poem, contained within the three stanzas. The first images are those which describe the 'mental cases'. Owen uses simile and metaphor. "from jaws that slobber their relish", the men are described like animals, drooling with "Drooping tongues". These images imply that the experience of war for these men has taken away their humanity. Owen then describes the men as having "teeth that leer like skulls' teeth". This simile not only creates a clear picture in the mind of the reader, it also serves to show how these 'mental cases' are not lucky to be alive, in fact, they suffer more than their dead comrades: not only do they look like death and behave like animals, they also continue to suffer the miseries of the living world, that of memory, nightmares and madness: "What slow panic/Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?". This image is continued to the end of the stanza as Owen claims that seeing these mad men would make anyone think they were in hell because of the ghastly picture they create. This again strengthens Owen's argument that, although these men survived the war alive, the scars they suffer are worse than any death we can imagine.

Within the second stanza Owen progresses to create images of the living hell which the mental cases experienced and are now reliving. This is the climax of the poem as line upon line brings new horrors. The first line of the stanza shows more explicitly the idea that the men are suffering perhaps more than even the dead men: “ There are men whose minds the Dead have ravaged”. This explores the feeling that the mad men owe their lives in some way to the death of their comrades. The image of their fellow soldiers who are now dead haunts them, this is a parallel with the sentiments Owen develops at the end of the poem, that the reader and poet are somehow to blame for the madness of the ‘ mental cases’, in the same way that the mad men feel guilt about the men killed. Owen uses imagery in the poem in such a way that the reader is actually haunted by the images of the mad men, and we are also left with a strong sense of guilt at their sacrifice for our life and sanity. The images continue to horrify throughout the rest of the stanza. One of the most shocking images is that of the mad men walking on the corpses of dead men “ Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander” an image which is disturbing not only because of the image it creates, but also the idea that these suffering men reached the position they are in because of the deaths of thousands of others, “ Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter”. This is a terribly shocking image mainly because Owen has chosen to give one of the few references to emotion in the poem to a decapitated corpse on which the mad men walk. The choice to put “ loving laughter” next to “ blood from lungs” is such a stark contrast that the horror of what Owen is describing cannot sink in on the first time of reading, it is further emphasized by the use of alliteration which stresses the link between the words; It is an

image too terrible to comprehend so it serves its purpose, the reader is disgusted and revolted by what is described.

The second stanza ends with a very powerful image “Carnage incomparable, and human squander/Rucked too thick for these men’s extrication.” This is a continuation of images earlier in the stanza, however the men are no longer walking on the bodies of dead men, they are being drawn under by them, unable to escape from the thousands of bodies of men whose dying was unnecessary. This image emphasizes Owen’s belief that not only did war result in millions of wasteful deaths, but the men who survived are also lost because the memories of the horror and “carnage” they experienced means these men can never return to sanity.

The closing verse of the poem concludes that these memories are understandably too horrid for the ‘mental cases’ to face, however life and the living only serve to remind them of the dead: “Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black” . Here Owen links the images of two natural things, sunlight and night with blood, also a natural element. However when placed together and within the context of the previous stanza, the natural become unnatural and disturbing. The reader is able to identify with the suffering man because we too are repulsed by the idea of dawn breaking “open like the wound that bleeds afresh”. This is an image which suggests the inability for the wounds to heal, and even the dawn, an image associated with re-birth is just a re-opening of wounds, a stark contrast with the wounds “silvered clean” in Graves’ poem. The close of the stanza refers back to the beginning of the poem, as the mad men are described again as being like

dead men: “ Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses”. The last lines describe the images of the ‘ mental cases’ trying to touch the living and sane, the poet and the reader, who knock them back with horror, even though Owen claims it is us “ who dealt the war and madness”

Graves’ imagery, unlike Owen is subtle, not as shocking and direct, but considered carefully it is as effective and complex. The poem opens with a powerful image “ Entrance and exit wounds silvered clean” this relies on the clever juxtaposition of the words “ exit wounds” with “ silvered clean”. The reader is taken by surprise as they are unusual words to find together, the poet, the reader realizes, is describing the new skin of a scar left by an old wound. The first stanza is full of images of the healed or forgotten scars of the world war, and the poet explains why:

Their war was fought these twenty years ago

And now assumes the nature-look of time,

As when the morning traveller turns and views

His wild night-stumblings carved into a hill.

This image subtly argues how the distance of time does not always clarify, objectify and make accurate past events, in fact time blurs the details and obscures the negative memories. This directly contrasts with Owen’s view. Owen maintains in his poem, that the mad men can and will never be able to forget the events they experienced in the war. Their scars will not become “ silvered clean”, but remain unbearably painful.

Graves' poem begins to examine the war that the men experienced throughout the second verse. The stanza examines the build up and anticipation of battle, using a tone that is a mixture of fear and anticipation. Graves uses pathetic fallacy, the weather reflects the feelings of pressure and suppression that the soldiers experience " the common sky/That sagged ominously upon the earth". This also gives the impression that the soldiers do have to face not only the full might of the German army, but the strength of the elements too: " Down pressed the sky". Graves then goes on to contrast the natural elements to the unnatural death of the young men: " Natural infirmities were out of mode,

For Death was young again: Patron alone

Of healthy dying, premature fate-spasm.

This image is particularly effective as it personifies death, a device which brings death closer: the reader feels that death is approaching the waiting soldiers. The enemy is no longer a distant storm, but an encroaching " Patron" looking for his prey. This last line is also emotive of a dying person. The commas and hyphen give the line a jerky feel, like a spasm of death.

The poet then moves into the battle itself as the third stanza begins. This verse is particularly interesting as it is full of images of " antiqueness of romance", images reminiscent of ancient tales of fighting men, concerned only with " wine, meat, log-fires, a roof over the head", an ancient chivalry and heroism. The men become purely physical beings, as your body is surely the primary concern on the battlefield and " Our youth became all flesh and

waived the mind.”. The image conjures up pictures of young soldiers experiencing the adrenaline of danger, an emotion which leaves little time to worry about the massacre which surrounds them, only swearing when “ in lack of meat, wine, fire,/In ache of wounds beyond all surgeoning.” The simple words Graves uses reflects the simple necessities and animal-like instincts the soldiers experience.

The fourth stanza is the climax of the poem, the battle is over and the images are no longer simple and straight forward. Graves answers his question “ What, then, was war?” with “ War was foundering of sublimities, Extinction of each happy art and faith”. War has destroyed everything noble and impressive, everything that made life livable. After the physical exertion of the battle, Graves now presents the grim aftermath, where the mind begins to process the events it has just experienced. Graves presents an image of a fragile sanity which attempts to understand the war “ Protesting logic or protesting love,”. The stanza ends with the image of a soldier finally breaking down under the weight of the immediate memories and his inability to reason the horrors he has witnessed:

Until the unendurable moment struck-

The inward scream, the duty to run mad.

The last verse of Graves’ poem returns to the ideas explored in the first stanza. The poet’s voice is ironic as he uses images from childhood to describe the terrifying war he displayed the previous verses. “ And we recall the merry ways of guns-“, the images make war sound child-like and unreal,

the word “ recall” reminds the reader of the poem’s title “ Recalling War”. It has the effect of almost silently posing the question, ‘ is this how war should be recalled?’ The answer is of course evident having read the previous stanzas, and the final lines of the poem just serve to confirm the reader’s conclusions:

When learnedly the future we devote

To yet more boastful visions of despair

This is a warning from Graves. He argues that our future will be filled with the “ despair” that his generation experienced if the horror and brutalities are not remembered. Graves has used a wide variety of imagery to create a complete picture of various stages that the soldier experiences while at war, a powerful sequence of emotions that illustrate not only the damage war does and the painful memories it creates, but the damage which can be done if these memories are forgotten or blurred. This contrasts directly with Owen’s poem that seeks to describe the damage done by war when it is not forgotten.

Both poets discuss the scars that war leaves, both physically and mentally. Graves’ poem is very much a detached reflection on war, focusing on before, during and after effects of a battle in order to argue the point that war should not be forgotten. The immediate effect of war is very powerfully described, but the long term scars are claimed to be forgettable and “ silvered clean”, a strong contrast with Owen’s view. Owen’s poem portrays the very personal effects war has, he describes people whom he has met.

Indeed as a poet who spent some of the war in a mental institution for soldiers called Craiglockhart, it is amazing that he is as detached as he is, considering he could well have been described as a ‘mental case’ himself, as he suffered from shell shock and nightmares.. Owen’s portrayal is gruesome and shocking, finally concluding by laying the responsibility for the madness at the feet of the reader and poet. This poem, not only demonstrates Owen’s view of the scars war leaves on people, it also serves as a useful insight into the way in which Owen was scarred by war. He clearly feels guilty at his survival, and he too is haunted by the images of the dead that he describes, how else could they be so vivid? This is perhaps the most interesting aspect revealed by Owen’s poem, the scars left by war on a real human with the ability to express and communicate the damage in such a way that the reader is not only shocked, but greatly moved. The poem has its intensity because Owen was writing it while in direct contact with the ‘mental cases’ whereas Graves is more distant as well as describing the memories of war. A poem which describes an inability to remember is far less disturbing than a poem which describes not being able to forget.

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