

CBC SUNDAY NIGHT
“WILFRED OWEN’S WAR POEMS”
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Benjamin Britten’s score of the *War Requiem* is inscribed with words taken from the short preface that Wilfred Owen drafted in 1918 for a volume of his poems that he did not live to publish:

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity...

All a poet can do today is warn.

And it is from the small compass of Wilfred Owen’s work that Britten has daringly chosen nine secular poems to stand over against the Latin words of the Mass for the Dead. The music is disposed through three groups of musicians: a boys’ choir with organ sings at the greatest remove of innocence and detachment from any conceivable world of battle or horror, where even grief scarcely seems to touch the habit of praise and supplication; a massed choir, with full orchestra and soprano solo, unfolds the liturgy of mourning as it springs out of the overarching prayer “Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them;” in the forefront, representing the world of vernacular death and the violent reality of war, the voices of two men, tenor and baritone, as it were two soldiers, sing the poems written by Wilfred Owen.

A requiem mass is perhaps in any case beyond reason, praying in the face of death for a peace that we scarcely know and for a life that is almost beyond belief. Nevertheless, the words chosen from Wilfred Owen, except perhaps at the opening, scarcely harmonize at all with the words of the Mass; they remain in strong conflict with the liturgical dignity of the Latin, the reiterated commendation to the mercy of God, and the fervent prayer for deliverance from the bondage of death. For the *War Requiem* is not an elegy, but a threnody – a harsh outcry of grief and indignation, a lamentation so wild (it seems) that not even the compassionate power of the liturgy alone could subdue it.

Wilfred Owen was twenty-five years old when he was killed in action a week before the war ended. When Robert Graves who had served since the beginning of the war, had news in Wales of the armistice in 1918, and heard at the same time of the death of his friend Frank Jones-Bateman and of Wilfred Owen, the news sent him that armistice night “out walking alone along the dyke above the marshes of Rhuddlan (an ancient battle-field, the Flodden of Wales) cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead.” This sense of the desecration of war, the immedicable loss that war inflicts lies at the heart of Britten’s music. The *War Requiem* is dedicated “In loving memory of Roger Burney, Sub-Lieutenant RNVR; Piers Dunkerley, Captain RM; David Gill, Ordinary Seaman RN; Michael Halliday, Lieutenant RNZNVR.” But Britten, like Owen, is concerned with something more terrible even than a lamentation upon the death of friends, as though they would renounce comfort for the bleak and ghostly certainties of the survivor’s desolation. Owen caught this in a poem which Britten did not use: a group of soldiers, their uniforms stuck with flowers given them by strange women, board a train at a dark siding and pull out into the night.

So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went.

They were not ours:

We never heard to which front these were sent...

Shall they return to beatings of great bells

In wild train-loads?

A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,

May creep back, silent, to still village wells

Up half-known roads.

It is customary, I know, to refer to Wilfred Owen as the greatest poet of the First War; but Britten’s choice, responding to some deeper and more personal demand than public commendation, is arresting and hazardous. Owen had written in his draft preface: “These elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.” The need for a merciless truth shaped Owen’s technique to a clumsy but just originality and gave it a rough cutting edge that between the wars taught as much to Auden, Isherwood, MacNeice, Day Lewis, and later Dylan Thomas as – they say – Gerard Manley Hopkins did, or Eliot, or the later Yeats.¹ Britten has chosen Owen’s work

not only for its universality but for the fierce directness that could resist being assimilated into the strong consoling rhythms of the Mass. To trace Britten's use of the poems in the *Requiem* is to discover the complexity of Owen's indignation, and through this music to be sealed beyond remedy with

Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears.

Wilfred Owen was born in Oswestry in March 1893.² His family background was middle-class, his father a railwayman with an unsatisfied taste for adventure, his mother – his one confidante throughout his life – a stern Calvinist. He matriculated at London University at eighteen, but there was not enough money to send him to university. He went therefore as pupil and lay assistant to the vicar of Dunsden, near Oxford, with some thought of taking orders, and at this time seems to have started writing poetry systematically under that admiration of John Keats which colours all his early writing and much of the later. At Dunsden he first saw lives burdened with humiliating poverty and meaningless distress: his inherited religious conviction did not survive these revelations. Sceptical, but “convinced that I hold under my tongue powers which would shake the foundations of many a spiritual life,” he became an English tutor at the Berlitz School of Languages in Bordeaux in August 1913, and then tutor to two boys in a Catholic family in the same city. The war found Owen in Bordeaux, at twenty-one, “unsophisticated, inexperienced,” a provincial among provincials, certain only that he wanted to be a poet, yet comfortable enough to write: “I feel my own life all the more precious and more dear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe.” In September 1914 he visited in Bordeaux a place where grievous casualties from the front were receiving what crude attention could be improvised, and saw major surgical operations being performed without anaesthetics, and wrote to his brother with ruthless candor to tell him about this in detail “to educate you to the actualities of war.” But it was not until his tutoring contract was nearly completed in June 1915 that he decided to enlist.

He was received into the army in October 1915, was commissioned in the Manchester Regiment on 4 June 1916, being then aged twenty-three. At the end of that year he was sent to France and almost immediately into action on the Somme battlefield, where (as Blunden says in

his memoir) “the last sharp fighting was in progress, in that hardest of winters, before the Germans withdrew to their new trench system.” His first tour in the trenches could not have been much worse and included the horrors of the gas attack. “No Man’s Land under the snow is like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.” “Marooned in a frozen desert,” he was haunted by the exposure of the wounded and the impossibility of getting them back to medical care. There was “not a sign of life on the horizon, and a thousand signs of death. Not a blade of grass, not an insect; once or twice a day the shadow of a big hawk, scenting carrion.” He was afflicted by “the universal pervasion of Ugliness ... everything unnatural, broken, blasted.” And worst of all,

the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night – and a week later to come back and find them still sitting there in motionless groups, *that* is what saps the “soldierly spirit.”

After his first infantry charge, he reported that

The sensations ... are about as exhilarating as those dreams of falling over a precipice, when you see the rocks at the bottom surging up to you. I woke up without being squashed. Some didn’t. There was an extraordinary exultation in the act of slowly walking forward, showing ourselves openly. There was no bugle and no drum, for which I was very sorry Then we were caught in a tornado of shells. The various “waves” were all broken up, and we carried on like a crowd moving off a cricket-field. When I looked back and saw the ground all crawling and wormy with wounded bodies, I felt no horror at all, but only an immense exultation at having got through the barrage.

In April, after many hardships and dangers, his head injured by a heavy fall in the dark, he took part in another infantry attack across the open under heavy fire and spent several days in an exposed position, in a shell-hole in a railway cutting, close beside what he grimly called “the *disiecta membra* of a friend.” He was withdrawn from the line suffering from concussion and shell-shock. He made no satisfactory progress at Base Hospital and by June had been sent back to a hospital in Hampshire, and wrote from there:

Already I have comprehended a light which never will filter into the dogma of any national church: namely, that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, outraged, be killed; but do not kill And am I not a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience? ... pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism.

Later that same month he was sent to a hospital at Craiglockhart near Edinburgh. Though his letters have their passages of gaiety and self-mockery, he was profoundly horrified, and obsessed; and wished (as he wrote in the poem "Insensibility") that he could range with those happy ones who "lose imagination"

Having seen all things red,
Their eyes are rid
Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever.

On leave near Winchester in November, walking back alone across open country in the dusk, he caught in imagination so distinct a vision of the trenches that he could "almost see the dead lying about in the hollows of the downs" recalled at that time, in a poem, the futility of random killing that will reduce a man to poignant anonymity.

Under his helmet, up against his pack,
After the many days of work and waking,
Sleep took him by the brow and laid him back.
And in the happy no-time of his sleeping,
Death took him by the heart. There was a quaking
Of the aborted life within him leaping ...
Then chest and sleepy arms once more fell slack.
And soon the slow, stray blood came creeping
From the intrusive lead, like ants on track.

Whether his deeper sleep lie shaded by the shaking
Of great wings, and the thoughts that hung the stars,
High-pillowed on calm pillows of God's making
Above these clouds, these rains, these sleets of lead,

And these winds' scimitars;
– Or whether yet his thin and sodden head
Confuses more and more with the low mould,
His hair being one with the grey grass
And finished fields of autumns that are old ...
Who knows? Who hopes? Who troubles? Let it pass!
He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous, less cold,
Than we who must awake, and waking, say Alas!

By this time Owen had written only a handful of war poems, tentatively adapting Keats's unwarlike manner and vocabulary to an increasingly clear purpose. At Craiglockhart Owen met Siegfried Sassoon who, after serving since the beginning of the war, was also under treatment there. Owen already knew Sassoon's poems and admired him, and now for the first time met a fellow poet. Owen a little later told Sassoon that "you have *fixed* my life – however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I spun round you a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze." During the aching stagnation of convalescence, embittered by the sense of unreality in England, Owen warmed to Sassoon's friendship, and the companionship of Sassoon's friends – the Sitwells, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden: and Owen previously solitary and without literary associates, now rejoiced to find himself "the gravest and least witty of that grave, witty company."

But Sassoon's withering satiric manner was not, for all its compassion, Owen's way. Owen's mind was closed upon the reality of war, so that not even his anger could deflect him from his fascinated gazing upon the horror. In his search for an unwinking and impersonal truth, he set himself to the grim portraiture of what he saw in the hospitals: mental cases, the grotesquely maimed and disfigured for whom there was not even the benison of death. On New Year's Eve, when he looked back (as the custom is) over the past year, he told his mother: "I go out of this year a poet...as which I did not enter it. I am held peer by the Georgians: I am started. The tugs have left me; I feel the great swell of the open sea taking my galleon." But his letter, as he goes on writing, is like a bleak fragment torn from the Mabinogion. The year before at that time he had lain in France –

awake in a windy tent in the middle of a vast, dreadful encampment. It seemed neither France nor England, but a kind of paddock where the beasts are kept a few days before the shambles. I heard the revelling of the Scotch troops, who are now dead, and who knew they would be dead. I thought [ahead to] this present night [wondering whether I should live to see it] ... But chiefly I thought of the very strange look on all faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England, though wars should be in England: nor can it be seen in any battle. But only in Étapes. It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's. It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.

By July 1918, Owen was well enough recovered to be posted to the light duty of training troops in England; but he now wrote with half blasphemous wit to Osbert Sitwell:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work – teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaint; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.

So this man who had lived as wholly as he could for poetry, even through the ugliness of his brief experience of war, and had now out of his anonymous poetic isolation won “the recognition of his peers;” this man who carried with him photographs of the wounds and mutilations of his comrades so that strangers should not be ignorant of the truth he sought; this man now turned back the shimmering veils of revulsion and fear to the deepest reality he had yet encountered: a world without glory or dignity, “where death becomes absurd and life absurder” – a deliquescent and loathsome obscenity. When he heard finally in July 1918 that he was going back to France, he said, “I am glad. That is, I am much gladder to be going out again than afraid. I shall be better able to cry my outcry, playing my part.”

In September he returned to the front, directly into fierce fighting, and in October won the Military Cross in an action which (he said) “passed the limits of my Abhorrence.”

I lost all my earthly faculties and fought like an angel.... You will guess what has happened when I say I am now commanding the Company, and in the line had a boy lance-corporal as my Sergeant-major. With this corporal ... I captured a German machine gun and scores of prisoners. My nerves are in perfect order.... I came out in order to help these boys – directly by leading them as well as an officer can, indirectly by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can.

Less than a month later, on 4 November, he was trying to pass his company over the Sambre Canal in the face of resolute German machine-gunners. The engineers tried to build a temporary bridge but were prevented by artillery. Supervising and encouraging his men under heavy fire that forenoon in an attempt to improvise rafts, Owen was hit and killed. The battalion eventually crossed safely lower down by a bridge near the village of Ore. A week later the war was over.

Owen's small canon of fifty or sixty war poems had crystallized out of about seven months of service on the Western Front. His detachment is extreme. His poems are populated with half-eroded figures of men who labour and suffer; are immolated by cold, wet, noise, fear, horror, deprivation; are cut down peremptorily by screaming random shrapnel or by the blunt-nosed bullets that scour the moonscape and mud of No Man's Land. All these figures in his poems – companions and victims alike – stand at a great remove, like Homeric figures that gaze sorrowfully across a gulf of time and space. Here the hold life has upon men is so fugitive and arbitrary that life seems to abide only in the outside world: in the sight of a bird or flower or insect that can recall poignantly other times and other places, precious and pastoral. The value of these glimpses is not in the memories they arouse, but in the sheer fact that any life exists at all. The spring, intruding with its particular cruelty, sets a counter-rhythm to the outpouring of blood and the indignity of the abandoned and dissolute dead who have "almost merged forever into the clay." By an obsessive transformation, the flowers, like the red mouths torn by the mutilating steel, blossom in a nightmare garden of suffering. When a man is killed, the blood merges with the clay in a barren rite of mock-fertility, and his death is the sun dying out in the universe.

Clouding, half gleam, half glower,
And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.
And in his eyes

The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,
In different skies.

Owen's vision is refracted towards life itself, so that he sees life as a cosmic and inhuman process relentless as the spring, as humiliating as anger. The sun is life, but it can no longer with certainty bring life: "The summer oozed into their veins / Like an injected drug for their bodies' pains." The spring as the groundswell of life, carries the faceless figures of this horrible dream, not towards life but to their death. Owen finds no comfort in destiny, no ease in fate; and even the reality of the loving sacrifice of one man for another is so common and undeliberate as to seem almost a meaningless repetition of formula, and there is no conceivable comfort. For the advance upon the spring-flood of death does not, in Owen's eyes, carry him or his men to glory, or to some richer if inscrutable purpose, or to some fulfilment that life on earth cannot offer: but to the perplexity of sorrow and blank dismay. The blood merges with the clay in a fruitless ritual of mock-fertility, to no purpose, and

Dawn, massing in the East her melancholy army,
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray.

When a man dies, it is the sun dying out in the universe:

I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell,
Like a Sun, in his last deep hour;
Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,
Clouding, half gleam, half glower,
And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.
And in his eyes
The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,
In different skies.

At each encounter with violence and death, the men stand motionless like men arrested on the parapet at the instant of launching some disastrous attack

To face the stark, blank sky beyond the ridge,
Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.

Finally there is nothing left to Owen but the subversive affirmation of love and sanity in his writing and in his leading of his men – both unassuming enough tasks. But in the fruitless ritual

killing, he sees each individual death as universal, final, immedicable – as in “Futility,” the poem used by Britten in the *Dies Irae* section of the *Requiem*.

Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown;
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning, and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind of sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds –
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved – still warm – too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
– O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth’s sleep at all?

The soldier in his unprovoked suffering is inevitably seen as a figure of Christ: but Owen’s horrified discovery is that he himself becomes the crucifier as well as the crucified. In “Strange Meeting,” the poem that closes the *Requiem*, the poem that Owen marked in his handlist as representing the “Foolishness of war,” the “I” of the poem meets himself as the violated corpse who confesses that, as in some grave trance of revulsion, he could scarcely lift his hands in protest or protection against the bayonet thrust; and the murder may be made whole by the compassion of his victim – himself. Owen, least satirical, least the propagandist, even at the end, is overwhelmed by a self-implication more desolating even than guilt, and suffers the fascinated indolence of a man drowning in the undertow of heavy surf.

Benjamin Britten, with clear insight and a most sensitive tact – for surely no composer since Henry Purcell has had so subtle an ear for English verse – has chosen a group of nine poems to fall, in sequence, over against the unfolding of the requiem mass, to provide a strain of sharply rendered reality counter to the liturgical dignity and allusiveness of the Latin words.

Though the sequence of poems begins with Owen's best-known poem "Anthem for Doomed Youth," Britten draws least upon elegiac consolation; rather he pursues remorselessly Owen's fierce grief, his cynicism, his anger, the sorrow and horror that bring him in the poems – but not in this music – to the point of blasphemy. The Mass and Owen's words are almost wholly irreconcilable: the stubborn confrontation of elements that refuse to merge is the structural principle of the *Requiem*, pointed and heightened by the parallel and alternating emphasis upon the Mass and the poems, the shifting lights that fall upon the comparative naiveté of Owen's technique and Britten's superlative and effortless skill in ordering and disposing his musical resources.

The *War Requiem* opens quietly with the dark beatitude of orchestral sound and Latin sonority, mounting processionally in a grave ceremony of grief through the prayer "Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord," and receding until by an agitated transition the tenor voice introduces the actual world of war with the words of the "Anthem for Doomed Youth":

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
 Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs –
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires....

The music merges with the tolling of bells and the prayer "Lord have mercy upon us."

The second movement opens with the trumpets of the Day of Judgment, and the violent ominous hymn *Dies Irae* – first in the choir, then in the soprano voice seeking pity from the "King of majesty tremendous" – moves with terrifying momentum across a sequence of sharply contrasted poems. The first poem – "Bugles sang, saddening the evening air" – is a fragment in which the sound of bugles speaking and answering in the twilight recalls lost childhood, and makes the threatening sadness of the next day cast its shadow upon an old despair. After the

soprano passage, the soldiers sing with ironic jauntiness how “Out there, we’ve walked quite friendly up to Death” and how “We laughed at him –

... knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death – for lives; not men – for flags.”

The choir, taking up the *Dies Irae* again, first the women, then more violently the men to a trumpet sound like the snapping of the jaws of hell, offers contrition and pleads more desperately for mercy. Then the baritone sings Owen’s sonnet “On Seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought into Action,” deftly pruned to a curial sonnet of six lines; the great gun “slowly lifted up” reaches towards the arrogance that leads into sin, but when its necessary work is done Owen cries “May God curse thee, and cut thee from our soul!” The soprano takes up the *Dies Irae* again, now a tender song of grief, and is interrupted four times by that most poignant poem entitled “Futility” – “Move him into the sun.” The movement closes again with tolling of bells and the prayer for rest.

Britten, no less than Owen, will not spare us the whiplash of truth. The Offertory opens with the boys’ choir singing the prayer to “deliver the souls of all the faithful departed from the pains of hell and from the depths of the pit,” and praying that St Michael may bring the holy light promised unto Abraham and his seed. But Britten turns ironically upon the reference to Abraham (recalling also some earlier music of his own) by introducing Owen’s “Parable of the Old Man and the Young.” At the moment that Abraham is to execute Isaac, an angel calls from heaven ordering Abraham not to hurt the child, and to take in his place as sacrifice a ram caught in the thicket – the “Ram of Pride.” But (the poem ends) Abraham

slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

The boys’ choir closes the movement by pleading the promise made to Abraham and his seed “to pass from death unto life.”

The Sanctus opens with the long glowing crescendo of triumphant praise, its orchestration an astonishing act of intricate and sustained musical imagination: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabbath: Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.” In harsh contrast, after the

Benedictus has subsided, the tenor calls forth apocalyptic images as setting for an expression of sterility and despair. This is the strongest contrast in the whole work; it is crucial to the whole design.

After the blast of lightning from the east,
The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot Throne;
After the drums of time have rolled and ceased,
And by the bronze west long retreat is blown,

Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth
All death will he annul, all tears assuage? –
Fill the void veins full again with youth,
And wash, with an immortal water, Age?

When I do ask white Age he saith not so:
“My head hangs weighed with snow.”
And when I hearken to the Earth, she saith:
“My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is death.
Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified,
Nor my titanic tears, the seas, be dried.”

In the Fifth Movement the Tenor solo sings one by one the three stanzas of the poem “At a Calvary near the Ancre.”

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
 In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
 And now the Soldiers bear with Him.

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
 And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
 By whom the gentle Christ’s denied.

The scribes on all the people shove
And brawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

The verses are articulated by the choir singing “O Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world, grant them thy peace.”

The final movement is on the theme “Deliver me, O Lord, from death eternal ... When thou shalt come to judge the world by fire. I am in fear and trembling till the sifting be upon us, and the wrath to come.” The liturgical prayer recedes, and is given over to a dialogue between the tenor and baritone solo voices, singing in the bleak forefront of the music the poem “Strange Meeting.” Here the dreamlike amazement of Owen’s vision, in its sombre and pitiless self-accusation, hangs like a veil of light dazzling the eyes with sorrow.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes.
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.”
“None,” said the other, “save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also: I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,

The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Miss we the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells.
Even from wells we sunk too deep for war,
Even from sweetest wells that ever were.
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you joined and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold,
Let us sleep now.”

Then for the first time all the resources of the music unite in one prayer – a prayer that might have assuaged Wilfred Owen’s savage and indignant grief if only in the horror of real war and in the face of the death he knew he could have uttered it himself: “May the Angels lead thee into Paradise: at thy coming may the Martyrs receive thee, and bring thee into the holy city Jerusalem” – the soldiers singing over and over, “Let us sleep now.” And the music ends quietly with tolling bells, on the words: “Rest eternal grant them, O Lord: and let light perpetual shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.”

The contrast and tension between the Latin words of the Requiem Mass and Owen’s secular and often ironic poems is a powerful and deliberate element of the structure. Almost as eloquent is the contrast between the technical clumsiness of much of Owen’s writing and the virtuosity and sure-footed sophistication of Britten’s. When we examine the skill and critical insight that Britten has shown in choosing the poems, in trimming them to his purpose, and sometimes making his own text from the posthumous variants preserved by Owen’s editors, we understand how deep and of how long standing Britten’s acquaintance with Owen’s work is.

Nothing less than such a combination of mature literary and sustained respect could have made Owen's work – at this remove of time, in the poignant and doll-like inconsequence the figures of that earlier war now seem to have in our eyes – a means of expressing with the wonder and ambivalence of faith the futility of war.

¹ The virulence of Yeats's rejection of Wilfred Owen is partly explained by the attacks made on him for leaving Owen out of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, as when he wrote to Dorothy Wellesley on 21 December 1936. "When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets' corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution, and that somebody has put his worst and most famous poem [? *Anthem for Doomed Youth*] in a glass-case in the British Museum – however, if I had known it, I would have excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick (look at the selection in *Faber's Anthology* – he calls poets "bards," a girl a "maid," and talks about "Titanic wars"). There is every excuse for him, but none for those who like him." (See *Letters of Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade 1954, p. 874.) Yeats wrote two days later referring to the same poem: "I cannot imagine anything more clumsy, more discordant" – and here the supreme craftsman in Yeats speaks with indignation.

² This biographical summary is drawn largely from the biographical prefaces of Edmund Blunden and Cecil Day Lewis, and from the (still complete) work of Harold Owen, *Journey from Obscurity*.