THE POEMS OF
WILFRED OWEN

A NEW EDITION
INCLUDING MANY PIECES NOW
FIRST PUBLISHED, AND NOTICES
OF HIS LIFE AND WORK

BY

EDMUND BLUNDEN

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Contents

MEMOIR BY EDMUND BLUNDEN 1
FROM MY DIARY, JULY 1914 45
THE UNRETURNING 46
TO EROS 47
MY SHY HAND 48
STORM 49
MUSIC 50
SHADWELL STAIR 51
HAPPINESS 52
EXPOSURE 53
FRAGMENT: "CRAMPED IN THAT FUNNELLED HOLE" 55
FRAGMENT: "IT IS NOT DEATH" 56
THE PARABLE OF THE OLD MEN AND THE YOUNG 57
ARMS AND THE BOY 58
THE SHOW 59
THE SEND-OFF 61
GREATER LOVE 62
INSENSIBILITY 63
DULCE ET DECORUM EST 66
THE DEAD-BEAT 67
THE CHANCES 68
F R A G M E N T: "I T   I S   N O T   D E A T H"

It is not death
Without hereafter
To one in deark
Of life and its laughter,

Nor the sweet murder
Dealt slow and even
Unto the martyr
Smiling at heaven:

It is the smile
Faint as a [waning] myth,
Faint, and exceeding small
On a boy's murdered mouth.

THE P A R A B L E   O F   T H E   O L D   M E N
A N D   T H E   Y O U N G

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And bulided parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would do so, but slew his son,—
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.
MENTAL CASES

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?
Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hands’ palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished.
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

—These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable, and human squander,
Rucked too thick for these men’s extrication.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh
—Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
—Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knots of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

FUTILITY

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 old 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?
SONNET

ON SEEING A PIECE OF OUR ARTILLERY BROUGHT INTO ACTION

Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm,
Great gun towering toward Heaven, about to curse;
Sway steep against them, and for years rehearse
Huge imprecations like a blasting charm!
Reach at that arrogance which needs thy harm,
And beat it down before its sins grow worse;
Spend our resentment, cannon, yea, disburse
Our gold in shapes of flame, our breaths in storm.

Yet, for men's sakes whom thy vast malison
Must wither innocent of enmity,
Be not withdrawn, dark arm, thy spoilure done,
Safe to the bosom of our prosperity.
But when thy spell be cast complete and whole,
May God curse thee, and cut thee from our soul!
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 for them from prayers or bells,  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?  
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

THE NEXT WAR

War's a joke for me and you,  
While we know such dreams are true.  
SASSOON.

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death;  
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,—  
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.  
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,—  
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.  
He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft;  
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!  
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.  
No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.  
We laughed, knowing that better men would come,  
And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags  
He wars on Death—for Life; not men—for flags.
VOICES

Bugles sang, saddening the evening air,
And bugles answered, sorrowful to hear.

Voices of boys were by the river-side,
Sleep mothered them; and left the twilight sad.
The shadow of the morrow weighed on men.

Voices of old despondency resigned,
Bowed by the shadow of the morrow, slept.

[ ] dying tone
Of receding voices that will not return.
The wailing of the high far-travelling shells
And the deep cursing of the provoking [ ].

The monstrous anger of our taciturn guns.
The majesty of the insults of their mouths.

APOLOGIA PRO POEMATE MEO

I, too, saw God through mud,—
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.
War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child.

Merry it was to laugh there—
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.

I, too, have dropped off fear—
Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon,
And sailed my spirit surging, light and clear
Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn;

And witnessed exultation—
Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl,
Shine and lift up with passion of oblation,
Seraphic for an hour; though they were foul.

I have made fellowships—
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips,—
But wound with war’s hard wire whose stakes are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

I have perceived much beauty
In the horse oaths that kept our courage straight;
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 bawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

LE CHRISTIANISME

So the church Christ was hit and buried
Under its rubbish and its rubble.
In cellars, packed-up saints lie serried,
Well out of hearing of our trouble.

One Virgin still immaculate
Smiles on for war to flatter her.
She’s halo’d with an old tin hat,
But a piece of hell will batter her.

QUIVIÈRES.
SMILE, SMILE, SMILE

Head to limp head, the sunk-eyed wounded scanned
Yesterday's Mail; the casualties (typed small)
And (large) Vast Booty from our Latest Haul.
Also, they read of Cheap Homes, not yet planned
For, said the paper, "When this war is done
The men's first instinct will be making homes.
Meanwhile their foremost need is aerodromes,
It being certain war has but begun.
Peace would do wrong to our undying dead,—
The sons we offered might regret they died
If we got nothing lasting in their stead.
We must be solidly indemnified.
Though all be worthy Victory which all bought,
We rulers sitting in this ancient spot
Would wrong our very selves if we forgot
The greatest glory will be theirs who fought,
Who kept this nation in integrity."
Nation?—The half-limbed readers did not chafe
But smiled at one another curiously
Like secret men who know their secret safe.
(This is the thing they know and never speak,
That England one by one had fled to France,
Not many elsewhere now save under France.)
Pictures of these broad smiles appear each week,
And people in whose voice real feeling rings
Say: How they smile! They're happy now, poor things.

23rd September 1918.

THE END

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 of Life 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 sea, be dried."
STRANGE MEETING

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 by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.
With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
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,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richer than here.
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.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;
To miss 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 with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
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..."