

Strange Meeting

Wilfred Owen

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 fears 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 that 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 richlier 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. . . ."

'Strange Meeting' is a poem themed on war where, although the end of the war had seemed no more insight than the capabilities of flight, it is widely assumed by scholars that neither side had any enmity between them – at least on the level of the common soldier. Both British and German soldiers lived in terrible conditions, suffered from similar, if not exacting, diseases, and were, on occasion, treated at the same hospitals. At the start of the war, there was even a period of time when German soldiers and British soldiers laid down their arms and had a friendly football match.

Analysis

"Strange Meeting" is one of [Wilfred Owen's](#) most famous, and most enigmatic, poems. It was published posthumously in 1919 in Edith Sitwell's anthology *Wheels: an Anthology of Verse* and a year later in Siegfried Sassoon's 1920 collection of Owen's poems. T.S. Eliot referred to "Strange Meeting" as a "technical achievement of great originality" and "one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war." That war, of course, is WWI – the central element in all poems in Owen's relatively small oeuvre. The poet Ted Hughes noted in his writings on "Strange Meeting": "few poets can ever have written with such urgent, defined, practical purpose."

The poem is renowned for its technical innovation, particularly the pararhyme, so named by Edmund Bluson in regard to Owen's use of assonant endings. A pararhyme is a slant or partial rhyme in which the words have similar consonants before and after unlike vowels – escaped

before and after unlike vowels – escaped and scooped, groaned and grained, hair and hour. Almost all of the end lines in this poem are pararhyme; the last line is a notable exception. Critics have noted how this rhyme scheme adds to the melancholy, subterranean, and bleak atmosphere of the poem.

The poem's description of a soldier's descent into Hell where he meets an enemy soldier he killed lends itself to a critique of war. The dead man talks about the horror of war and the inability for anyone but those involved to grasp the essential truth of the experience. There is more than meets the eye, however, and many critics believe that the man in hell is the soldier's "Other", or his double. A man's encounter with his double is a common trope in Romantic literature; the device was used by Shelley, Dickens, and Yeats, among others. The critic Dominic Hibbard notes the poem does not "[present] war as a merely internal, psychological conflict – but neither is it concerned with the immediate divisions suggested by 'German' and 'conscript' [initially what the dead man

calls himself] or 'British' and 'volunteer'."

The dead man is the Other, but he is more than a reflection of the speaker - he is a soldier whose death renders his status as an enemy void. Another critic reads the poem as a dream vision, with the soldier descending into his mind and encountering his poetic self, the poem becoming a mythological and psychological journey. Finally, Elliot B. Gose, Jr. writes that "the Other...represents the narrator's unconscious, his primal self from which he has been alienated by war."

The style of the poem was influenced by several sources. "Strange Meeting" echoes Dante's pitying recognition of the tortured faces in Hell, the underworld of Landor's *Gebir*, and, of course, Keats and Shelley. Owens was an ardent admirer of both Romantic poets, whose [*The Fall of Hyperion*](#) and *The Revolt of Islam*, respectively, were no doubt instructive to Owen as he composed his own work. *The Fall of Hyperion* features the goddess of memory revealing her dying but immortal face and

her blank eyes, allowing the poet to grasp her monumental knowledge of wars and heroes past. The emphasis in Owen's work on truth and dreams also resonates of Keats'.

The title of the poem, however, may be taken directly from Shelley's work: "And one whose spear had pierced me, leaned beside, / With quivering lips and humid eyes; - and all / Seemed like some brothers on a journey wide / Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall / In a strange land." In *The Revolt of Islam*, Laon tells his soldiers not to avenge themselves on the enemy who has massacred their camp but to ask them to throw down their arms and embrace their shared humanity. The two sides gather together in the "strange meeting".