Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est” (1917):
The Form(s) and Function(s) of First World War Poetry

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), “Dulce et Decorum Est”

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And toward our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime…

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams 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 gurgling 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 zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Horace, Odes III.2

Disciplined in the school of hard campaigning,
Let the young Roman study how to bear
Rigorous difficulties without complaining,
And camp with danger in the open air,

And with his horse and lance become the scourge of
Wild Parthians. From the ramparts of the town
Of the warring king, the princess on the verge of
Womanhood with her mother shall look down

And sigh, “Ah, royal lover, still a stranger
To battle, do not recklessly excite
tactu leonem, quem cruenta
per medias rapit ira caedes.

**Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:**
mors et fugacem persequitur virum
nec parcit inbellis iuventae
poplitibus timidove tergo.

That lion, savage to touch, whom murderous anger
Drives headlong through the thickest of the fight.”

That glorious and the decent way of dying
Is for one’s country. Run, and death will seize
You no less surely. The young coward, flying,
Gets his quietus in the back and knees.

Unconscious of mere loss of votes and shining
With honours that the mob’s breath cannot dim,
True worth is not found raising or resigning
The fasces at the wind of popular whim.

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To those who do not merit death, exploring
Ways barred to ordinary men, true worth
Opens a path to heaven and spurs on soaring
Pinions the trite crowds and the clogging earth.

With him; for, slighted, often God confuses
The innocent with the evil-doer’s fate.
Yet Vengeance, with one lame foot, seldom loses
Track of the outlaw, though she sets off late.

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), “The Soldier” (1914)

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.
Works Cited


