

Reliving Wilfred Owen's 'Exposure' in Louis Simpson's World War II Poem 'The Battle'

Wilfred Owen's legacy is often characterized by hallmarks such as his use of pararhyme or half-rhyme to create an aural dissonance that reflects the clashes of pastoral settings disrupted by war, and his terrifying firsthand accounts of youth destroyed in mechanized combat. Yet, as a canonized voice of the First World War, Owen's legacy might also be measured by the impact he had on subsequent generations of soldier-poets. One such example of direct influence is how Owen's 1917 poem "Exposure" resonated with American World War II poet Louis Simpson, who channeled Owen when writing his 1955 poem "The Battle" reflecting on the Battle of Bastogne.

In the Preface to Louis Simpson's *Collected Poems*, Simpson recalls his experience as a soldier in World War II, treading the same ground as his Allied predecessors from the First World War. "When I came upon an old trench of the First World War," Simpson writes, "I remembered the lines by Wilfred Owen: Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us... / Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent..." (Collected xiv). Here, quoting from Owen's "Exposure," Simpson registers "the tragic simultaneity of experience" (Arrowsmith 292). Encountering a trench used by the Allied Powers on the Western Front, Simpson recognizes the cyclical nature of global conflict, and the parallels between the experiences of infantrymen of the two World Wars. Simpson continues his Preface by noting: "Weeks later, in the snow around Bastogne, I could apply these words to myself and my companions. Poetry speaks from one generation to another, yet speaks to the individual as though it were meant for him or her alone" (Collected xiv).

The link between Owen and Simpson's experiences is exemplified by clear parallels in Owen's "Exposure" and Simpson's "The Battle." Both these poems of winter combat:

1. begin in anticipation of conflict by focusing on silence broken by gunfire. Owen writes "Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence" ("Exposure" 16) and how "Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles, / Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war" (8-9). From literally "some other war," Simpson writes "At dawn the first shell landed with a crack" ("The Battle" 9) and that "Somewhere up ahead / Guns thudded" (2-3).
2. contain "sentries." Owen observes how "Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous" ("Exposure" 4). Simpson writes "sentries, standing in their holes, / Felt the first snow" ("The Battle" 7-8).
3. express fear that the natural elements of snow, ice, and freezing temperatures are as deadly a threat to their survival as the enemy. Owen asks, "Is it that we are dying?" ("Exposure" 25) and describes how "the air that shudders black with snow" and "this frost will fasten on this mud and us" (36). Simpson similarly captures subzero temperatures by writing "The snow was black. / The corpses stiffened in their scarlet hoods" ("The Battle" 11-12).
4. contrast imagery of fire and ice to convey natural opposites, with "fire" serving multiple meanings: the discharging of a weapon, a metaphor for life and one's desires, and the literal source of warmth that can save them from the cold. Owen imagines being back home "glimpsing the sunk fires" ("Exposure" 26) before his

attention turns "back to our dying" (30). Simpson distillates the image of fire as a sign of life by recalling "how hands looked thin / Around a cigarette, and the bright ember / Would pulse with all the life there was within" ("The Battle" 14-16).

5. switch between the use of third person plural and first person singular and plural.

Owen's "Exposure" is written primarily in first-person plural using "Our" and "we" for the subject throughout (1, 2). In stanzas six and eight, however, the perspective temporarily includes third-person plural, when the speaker is lost in thought and imagining what it would be like to return home during battle. This same hallucinatory shift between third- and first-person also occurs in Simpson's "The Battle," which is written in third-person plural for the first three stanzas of the four-stanza poem before shifting to first-person for the final stanza. This ambiguity of perspective means the poems could also be written about "some other war," to use Owen's words.

Examples of the similarities between Owen and Simpson were suggested in a 1963 *Times Literary Supplement* review of *Five American Poets*, which proclaims Simpson's poetry is "one of the nearest things to Wilfrid [sic] Owen to come out of the last war" (Lazer 71). Simpson inherited from Owen that it is sometimes critique enough to describe war exactly as it is experienced. Both were willing participants in their respective wars, and as stated in an interview with Micheal O'Siadhail, Simpson explained "the most effective anti-war writings, like the poems of Wilfred Owens [sic], though he does protest sometimes, mostly are just descriptions of the sheer horror of it. Just to see something is enough" (Simpson and O'Siadhail 16-17).

Simpson's "The Battle" is more than an homage to an admired poet; it is a commentary on the universality of war through the prism of the soldier experience. Simpson has adopted a mode of letting his poems convey the impulse directly instead of instructing the reader how to interpret them, and therefore the mimesis of Owen's "Exposure" in Simpson's "The Battle" is a subconscious commentary to the reader that the horrors of the past repeat themselves. If, according to Simpson, "Just to see something is enough" of a critique, his poem "The Battle" could be asking the same question posed in Owen's "Exposure": "What are we doing here?" (10).

Works Cited

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