

"Smile, Smile, Smile": Wilfred Owen and the Politicians

*Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag
And smile, smile, smile...*

One of the most famous songs of the Great War provides the title for what may be Wilfred Owen's very last poem. Written in France in September 1918, about the same time as the tremendous "Spring Offensive", "Smile, Smile, Smile" is a satirical, angry poem in the manner of Owen's mentor Siegfried Sassoon. It targets the press and politicians at home, who, at a time when the German armies were in retreat and the war approaching its end, insisted that peace should not be made before the enemy was comprehensively defeated, and demanded guarantees that the winners would be indemnified – that is, promised full financial compensation for their losses in the war. While this unbending spirit prevailed at home, soldiers on both sides continued to be killed in the last weeks of fighting. One of them would be Wilfred Owen.

We may be inclined to think of Owen as a poet who achieved a grand, comprehensive, tragic vision of the conflict. But it is good to remember that he was also politically aware, and like many of his fellow soldiers he knew the fighting was not only a tragic predicament: it was also the result of policies and decisions made by people far from the battlefield. News from home could reach the troops quickly. "Smile, Smile, Smile" begins with a group of wounded soldiers in France, reading, as it happens, yesterday's *Daily Mail*, with "the casualties (typed small) / And (large) Vast Booty from our latest Haul" (2013, 190). The newspaper is much more interested in the profits of victory than in its cost in human lives. The paper goes on to report a politician's speech rejecting any idea of making an early peace.

*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.* (2013, 190-1).

We know, from a letter he wrote on 22nd September 1918, that Owen had been reading the *Daily Mail* at the front (1967, 578), and he mentions the report of a speech by the British Minister of Labour, George Henry Roberts, and one by the French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau, both of which make their way into his poem. Both politicians, speaking on behalf of their nation, contrive to praise the front-line soldiers in a way that betrays their patronizing ignorance. "The sons we offered might regret they died" -- Owen's sarcastic phrasing shows the people at home taking the credit for making sacrifices for victory ("the sons we offered"), while getting ready to enjoy its profits. Unwittingly, the reported speeches open up a chasm between "we", the warmongers, and "they", the suffering troops.

Politicians, particularly in a democracy, are used to speaking on behalf of the nation: this is what they mean when they use the pronoun "we". Owen's poem is, among other things, a useful education in the politics of pronouns. It reminds us to ask: Who do you mean by "us"? The speech goes on:

*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.* (2013, 191)
*Nation? Whose nation exactly?
Nation? ? The half-limbed readers did not chafe*

(2013, 191)

These damaged combat veterans do not feel that they belong to the nation that the politician is speaking about. They have been sent into a conflict they did not choose, against an enemy they do not hate ("I am the enemy you killed, my friend", as Owen's "Strange Meeting" has it), on behalf of a nation they do not recognise, represented by men they do not trust or respect. In these circumstances, who are "we" and who are "they"?

A few days before he died, Owen wrote in a letter: "Did I tell you that five healthy girls died of fright in one night at the last village. The people in England and France who thwarted a peaceable retirement of the enemy from these areas are now sacrificing aged French peasants and charming French children to our guns. Shells made by women in Birmingham are at this moment burying little children alive not very far from here" (1967, 590).

There is more than one way of conscripting people into a conflict with others who are not their enemies. "Smile, Smile, Smile" is a reminder that we do not have to accept the boundaries that other people set between "us" and "them". In the poem the "secret men" smile at what they have read in the newspaper, but their smile shouldn't be misinterpreted as assent and acceptance. The secret of their smile is opposition and solidarity. They have their own idea of what the nation means, and of who "we" are.

Works Cited

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