Published on *Great Writers Inspire* (http://writersinspire.org)

At the Water?s Edge: Wilfred Owen and Water

By the look of the photograph reproduced in Jon Stallworthy's biography, it was a fairly run-of-the-mill canal but for the bare trees and shattered planks. The Sambre and Oise canal, to which Wilfred Owen led his platoon that lethal day in November 1918, looks chilly, dusky and ominous. Many men died trying to cross the canal; as Stallworthy describes it, the "far bank bristled with German machine guns ... [that] kept up a scorching fire" (Stallworthy 2013, 284-5). The dramatic culmination of the fatal crossing is captured in telling detail: "Through the hurricane the small figure of Wilfred Owen walked backwards and forwards, between his men, patting them on the shoulder, saying ?Well done' and ?You're doing well, my boy'" before "at the water's edge, giving a hand with some duckboards, he was hit and killed" (286). According to one witness, the Battalion "eventually crossed lower down by means of a bridge near the village of Ors, a few miles south of Landrécies" (Collected Poems 1963, 178).

Water, like other natural elements, features sparsely in Owen's poetry. The sea, rivers, coastlines and canals are abstract or even shockingly nightmarish, such as "As under a green sea" in "Dulce Et Decorum Est" or "Yet search till grey sea heaves" in "Elegy in April and September (jabbered among the trees)". Owen's landscapes are more often than not claustrophobic, alienated, de-familiarised like the Dickensian image of the boat, "Budging the sluggard ripples of the Somme" in "Hospital Barge".

Might these estranged imaginings go back to his childhood and a bizarre experience in 1902 when, aged nine, Owen along with his parents and siblings visited Ireland for the second time on holiday ? the first had been in 1898 when he was five? That second summer holiday in Tramore, Co. Waterford is recalled in Harold Owen's Journey from Obscurity and retold in Stallworthy's biography. Fishing, swimming and strolling seemed to be the order of the day, notwithstanding family anxiety about a shark that had been caught and displayed: "Tom persuaded two fishermen to help him drag it back, through the darkening village, to the jetty where it had been landed in triumph some hours before. It was restored to its element and sighted in the bay on numerous occasions for many months afterwards" (2013, 26). But it is a further experience in the village which catches the eye.

Out for a walk the family "came to an open space" and where they were, in Harold's recollection, "faced with what appeared to be a sheet of water". The "eerie quality of a mirage", "this mist", "utter unreality", this "dreamlike unrealness" and "weird mystery" transforms the ordinary Irish countryside as the family outing "realized that the water and the wall of mist were receding" (10). The "whole scene" we are told "had taken on a transcendent appearance" in which "my mother and Wilfred were trembling violently" before their mother gives "a stifled scream" on seeing "standing ten yards or so from us, the shadowy figure of a tall man". The father and his family watch as the unresponsive figure disappears: "We all looked back towards the lake. It was no longer there" (1968, 10-11).

This extraordinary event -- which the local fisherman and his wife "begged [the Owens] not to speak of it to anyone at all [...] to forget all about it entirely" (1968, 13) - sounds very like a classical Irish folk tale of the Visitant foretelling of danger and death. In the obscure light of such a disorientating experience are there

grounds for psychological insight into what may have been on Owen's mind during the final moments of that self-less rallying of his "boys" along the deadly water's edge a mere sixteen years later?

Works Cited

Stallworthy, John. Wilfred Owen. London: Pimlico, 2013.
Owen, Harold. Journey from Obscurity. Edited by H. M. Gornall. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.
Owen, Wilfred. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen. Ed. Cecil Day Lewis and Edmund Blunden. London: Chatto & Windus, 1963
