

Wilfred Owen and the Culture of Commemoration

We can approach the First World War from the perspective of the historian, with a view to providing an accurate, comprehensive and impartial account. There is a second way of dealing with the First World War, however: one which is less interested in the specificity of past experience than in the uses that its memory may have for the UK today. Here, the cataclysmic event which changed the face of the nation takes on relevance precisely because it affected the entire community and left nobody unscathed. In the context of cultural memory, the single most important detail about the First World War is the fact that its history is shared by all.

Cultural memory focuses on a society's past. It is collective memory with a purpose: remembering the hardship and heroism of the First World War creates a shared sense of 'we-ness'. It helps to smooth over social fissures and sets down national identity in concrete historical terms ('we are the nation who endured - and won - the First World War?'). Through its partisan construction of a shared past, cultural memory provides normative answers to such fundamental questions as 'Who are we as a nation?', and 'Which values should define our nation's future?'

The ideas, precepts, narratives and evaluative assessments of cultural memory - i.e. its contents, its ideological message - are dependent on a wide range of commemorative media for their dissemination. Wilfred Owen's war poems make for potentially very compelling memory texts. The reason why they strike us as intensely personal and heartrendingly authentic is their combined use of narrativity, tellability and embodiment. Often in Owen's teleological mini-stories, formal and content-related climaxes will coincide, and poems will reveal the narrative's tragic twist in a particularly pungent, sometimes bitterly sarcastic, sometimes shockingly graphic or deeply symbolic punchline.

Most importantly, the poem's central voice always speaks firmly from a vantage-point within the projected world. The speaker's sensual perceptions are the sensations of a body placed in a defined position: in a trench, in a German underground shelter, walking behind a cart. It is through its limited perspective and its concomitant restrictions of movement, perception, cognition and affect that Owen's poetry emulates real-life experience in a convincing three-dimensional fashion. Reading Owen, we feel we know what being a soldier in the First World War was like. This is exactly what memory texts are supposed to do: they negotiate the remoteness of historical experience and make the past our own.

Is Owen's poetry key 'memory material', then? Surprisingly, the answer to this question is not an unequivocal 'yes'. Of the many rites of remembrance performed in the UK on and around Armistice Day, there are several high-profile televised events which feature poetry, either as short recitations or in the form of song lyrics, psalms or solemn lyric pledges to the memory of the fallen. As far as I have been able to ascertain, however, at least for the past ten years not one of them has featured a text by Wilfred Owen.

This may seem surprising, but a short glance at events such as the annual Royal British Legion's Festival of Remembrance will reveal that Owen's art would indeed sit strangely in this context. The Festival of

Remembrance has the logic, the precision and indeed the personnel of a military operation. In many ways it can be viewed as a formidable example of a modern-day ritual entirely devoted to cultural memory. Its main semiotic technique is one of linkage, of 'articulation' (in Stuart Hall's terminology), where linguistic and performative proximity lead to a transfer of value. It aligns the much-quoted 'fight for justice and freedom' of the two world wars with politically and economically motivated campaigns; it constructs a link between natural disaster (such as the devastation caused by hurricane Irma in the Caribbean) with the Grenfell Tower fire; it rebrands the army as an aid organisation in selfless service of queen and country. Rather than endorsing the credo of 'Never again', the implicit logic of the festival's dramaturgy demands that British society unreservedly support the military as a tribute owed to Britain's war dead. When Wilfred Owen in his famous 'Preface' spoke of 'the pity of War' this, clearly, is not what he had in mind.

Works Cited

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Footage from several Royal British Legion Festivals of Remembrance (excerpts and in full) are available on YouTube.

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