

"I watched those agonies:"Poetic Witness in Selected
War Poems by Wilfred Owen

"لقد شاهدت تلك العذابات": شهادة العيان الشعرية فى قصائد مُختارة
عن الحرب لـ ويلفريد أوين

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Abstract

This paper deals with five of Wilfred Owen's war poems investigating how they bear witness to the suffering endured by the soldiers on the battlegrounds of World War I. 'Dulce et Decorum Est,' 'Exposure,' 'The Last Laugh,' 'The Show,' and 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' are poems written out of Owen's personal experience as a soldier who was himself killed in action. 'Poetry of witness' is a term coined by Carolyn Forché in her 1993 anthology Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness. It refers to poetry written by poets who have witnessed tragic events such as war, persecution, torture, exile, slavery, and military occupation. Drawing on Forché's theory of witness poetry and trauma theory, the paper explores how the selected poems record war atrocities and detail soldiers' plights and traumatic experiences on the battlefield.

Keywords: agonies, Forché, poetry of witness, trauma theory, war poems, Wilfred Owen

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In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.

— (Brecht 320)

So writes the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht in his short poem 'motto' raising a significant question which he expressively answers. 'In the dark times / Will there also be singing?' 'Yes,' Brecht asserts, even 'in the dark times,' 'singing' is possible as long as poets can compose their rhymes and create their elegies about the traumatic events and horrific incidents they have seen in those gloomy days. The meaning implied in Brecht's poem applies to Wilfred Owen's war poetry that reflects 'the dark times' of World War I in which the poet took part, had first-hand experience, and was an eyewitness to human tragedy on the battlefield. As Owen states in 'The Show,' one of his most evocative poems, "I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten" (*The Collected Poems* 50)¹.

'Poetry of witness' is a term first articulated by the American poet and scholar Carolyn Forché in her 1993 anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. According to Forché, the term refers to poetry written by survivors of political oppression and trauma "who endured conditions of historical and social extremity during the twentieth century – through exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare, and assassination (29). The idea of the anthology came to Forché in 1980 when she was coming back from El Salvador where she had worked as "a human rights activist," she indicates, showing how on going through "the occupied West Bank, Lebanon, and South Africa" (30), she could watch the atrocities of war and witness the violation of human dignity that was proceeding on a daily basis. As she tells us in the introduction to *Against Forgetting*, Forché was greatly disturbed by

the horrific scenes she had seen, and reacting to that situation, she at once

turned to the works of Anna Akhmatova, Yannis Ritsos, Paul Celan, Federico Garcia Lorca, Nazim Hikmet, and others. I began collecting their work, and soon found myself a repository of what began to be called 'the poetry of witness.' (30)

In addition to the poems written by the above mentioned authors who are successively from Russia, Greece, Germany, Spain, and Turkey, Forché includes in her collection other poems by writers from Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and many other places in the world. She elucidates that her volume, being the product of "a thirteen-year effort" finally comes to contain works of 145 leading poets whose anthologized poems help us "understand the impress of extremity upon poetic imagination" (30). Of course, placing "such disparate poets together in one book," Robyn Creswell writes, allows "the reader to make unexpected, even startling, connections, which is what anthologies do at their best" (par. 6). It is worth noting that the poets whose works are included in *Against Forgetting* are carefully chosen by Forché who has set three major 'criteria' for selection. Firstly, poets must have had first-hand experience with the events they describe. Secondly, they must be distinguished figures in their 'national literatures.' Thirdly, Forché has specified that the works of those poets who do not write in English, in order to be accepted for the anthology, must be available in a good-quality translation (30).

According to Forché, the main feature of witness poetry is the biographical, historical, personal experience of its author. Forché decisively makes it clear that "poets must have personally endured" the conditions about which they write, or else their work will be excluded from her collection (30). In this sense, Forché insists that readers respect the author as a real historical figure whose words are backed up by first-hand experience. In their poetry of witness, writers call upon the audience to share them their feelings and to be involved in the situations and events described in the poem. Thus, the audience has a role to play while reading or listening to a poem of witness; the word

'witnessing' itself is "heavy with spiritual and legal tones of obligation," Anne Herzog argues maintaining that the process of poetic witness involves within itself a sense of responsibility which is "not limited to the artists alone but also extended in a much larger circle to include the witnessing audience" (28).

In *Against Forgetting*, Forché provides the reader with the true account of historical events through the poems of those who witnessed those incidents first hand, the very people who, according to Owen, "watched those agonies" [50]. An important issue Forché raises in the collection is that the personal goes in harmony with the political without conflict or contradiction. This is a defining characteristic of witness poetry, a sub-genre of poetry which, resisting the world view that splits the political from the personal, "posits instead a world of poetic and political, personal and public, merging" (Herzog 27). As Forché asserts,

Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretive problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between 'personal' and 'political' poems—the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary. The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality. (31)

Thus, Forché sees that blending the personal and the political is necessary. She justifies her viewpoint by arguing that it is not enough for us to read theoretically about political events. Knowing the

authenticity of those incidents can only be attained through turning them into something personal. Through the words of those who suffered, *Against Forgetting* attempts to locate their personal history with the 'larger structures' of public or political history in which they experienced the bitter taste of pain and torture.

For Forché, poets of witness achieve one of the most important functions of poetry during times of trouble, namely, the response to catastrophic events in human history; as Alicia Ostriker argues, "not to go on with poetry would be like not going with life: a surrender to the powers of human destruction" (35). Addressing the same issue, John Berger maintains that "every authentic poem...bring[s] together what violence has torn apart...it defies the space which separates. And it does this by its continual labour of reassembling what has been scattered (249). In this way, the poets whose works are included in Forché's *Against Forgetting*, 'reassembling what has been scattered' by the violent acts they have witnessed, provide us with the previously unwritten history of the most tragic events of our past. In the words of Harriet Davidson, "the witness faces toward the future, gathering together a new knowledge of the past in the intersubjective performance of the present" (166). Therefore, poetic witness helps us know about the past and consequently enables us to weave the present and get ready for the future. Without the poems of witness, we might never have known the truth of lots of events or might have had no idea that such events had happened at all; as Forché puts it, "The poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence" (33). Consequently, the poems anthologized in Forché's *Against Forgetting* "not only bear witness to the large-scale historical atrocities of the [20th] century," states Gail Wronsky, but "they also provide irrefutable and copious evidence of the human ability to record, to write, to speak in the face of those atrocities" (536). More importantly, these poems are meant to be 'against forgetting,' that is, they are intended to help us remember those traumatic actions which have grievously wounded humanity; therefore we do not forget the past and, recording such catastrophic incidents, we become able to avoid

their happening once more. This is exactly what Forché asserts in her analysis of witness poetry:

We all know that atrocities have taken place on an unprecedented scale in the last one hundred years. Such monstrous acts have come to seem almost normal. It becomes easier to forget than to remember, and this forgetfulness becomes our defense against remembering – a rejection of unnecessary sentimentality, a hardheaded acceptance of reality....Such forgetfulness...is willful and isolating: it drives wedges between the individual and the collective fate he or she is forced to submit. These poems will not permit us diseased complacency. They come to us with claims that have yet to be filled, as attempts to mark us as they have themselves been marked" (32).

Remarkably, the selections in *Against Forgetting* are regarded as a strong warning from the authors to those tyrants who insist on terrifying and oppressing helpless people. Obviously, the tragic events described in the anthology are echoed and repeated 'daily' and 'hourly' in our life, taking the form of 'deep sighs or 'desperate messages' from the victims depicted in the poems to their fellow human sufferers in the future. As Adrian Oktenberg, a poet of witness, writes in *Bosnia Elegies*:

The messages continue to come in daily, hourly
desperate messages messages of all kinds
the second to second pulses of lives flickering out
the messages come in come in come in come in come in
and disappear. (qtd. in Ostriker 38-9)

According to Forché, the agonizing stories recounted in *Against Forgetting* resist "terror" everywhere making "life possible" and "the world habitable" simply because "the protest against violence will not be forgotten" (46).

In *Against Forgetting*, Forché emphasizes that the traumatic events narrated in her work will "remain with us as poetic witness to the

dark times in which they" occurred (29). Addressing a similar issue, Cathy Caruth--a major contributor to the development of trauma theory--asserts in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that each traumatic experience "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available"(4).

Generally speaking, trauma is a harsh emotional shock caused by a highly distressing event. Accidents, rapes, violent acts, natural disasters, and the extremely horrifying sights of war are examples of traumatic experiences. Specifically, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) defines a trauma as

direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate...The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror...(463)

Outstandingly, Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* explores the ways psycho-analysis, literature, and literary theory "portray and witness to bodily and historical woundings and the stories that recount them," writes Dianne F. Sadoff pointing out that the key figures revealed in Caruth's analysis are "departure, falling, burning, and awakening; each trope engenders stories that cannot be reduced to a text's thematic content or a theory's statements, and each bears witness to 'some forgotten wound'..."(104). Describing the link between literature and psychoanalysis, Caruth states,

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it, indeed at the specific point at which knowing intersect that the language of literature and the

psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (2)

In his article "Trauma Theory and Its Implications in Humanities and Social Sciences," Khan Touseef Osman refers to the evocative interpretation Caruth makes of Freud's deliberations on traumatic experiences as explained in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*. Osman argues that "what Freud once called 'traumatic neurosis,' the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 officially acknowledged and termed as 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD), a concept central to trauma theory" (par.8).

Admittedly, war is a main source of traumatic experience. A soldier suffers what is called war trauma when he is exposed to or witnesses physical or psychological damage. A large number of soldiers who fought in the American Civil War, World War I, World War II, Vietnam, Armenia, Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Bosnia were victims of the traumatic events that happened to them or to their comrades. In *Memory, War and Trauma*, Nigel C. Hunt shows how the traumatic experience of war affects memory. Reviewing Hunt's book, Edgar Jones explains how the British soldiers during World War I 'exhibited' what was called 'shell shock' which is widely known today as 'a synonym for the very experience of trench warfare' (122). Those soldiers experienced war trauma because they had endured an extremely terrifying experience, one that would exceed the psychological and mental capacity of any person.

It is worth mentioning that Wilfred Owen was subjected to the trauma of shell shock, and "in June 1917, he was admitted to Craiglockhart Hydropathic Hospital Establishment, a healing ground for shell-shocked officers outside Edinburgh, Scotland, where he remained until October," Daniel Hipp writes (27) explaining that Owen's Trauma was primarily caused by

a single horrifying experience – days spent in a dug out, far into No Man's Land, during which he played the role of the passive commander of his men, as all endured some fifty hours of shelling. But the event that triggered the

onset of his symptoms of stammering and disorientation occurred three months later, when a shell blast threw him into the air and left him face to face with another dead companion. (26)

Owen wrote a letter to his mother telling her of what had happened:

For twelve days we lay in holes, where at any moment a shell might put us out. I think the worst incident was one wet night when we lay up against a railway embankment. A big shell lit on the top of the bank, just 2 yards from my head. Before I awoke, I was blown in the air right away from the bank! I passed most of the following days in a railway Cutting, in a hole just big enough to lie in, and covered with corrugated iron. My brother officer . . . lay opposite in a similar hole. But he was covered with earth, and no relief will ever relieve him, nor will his Rest be a 9 days-Rest. (*Collected Letters* 452)

The poet completed the whole process of "his wounding and healing from shell shock during his final year and a half of life," states Hipp adding:

Although the war threatened to reduce Owen to psychological ruin after his four months of combat duty, it was the writing of poetry about the war which functioned as his most effective therapy and which enabled Owen to reconstruct a coherent voice that allowed for his return to the front, where he met his death in November 1918. (25)

As a soldier poet of World War I who breathed his last in action, Owen figures prominently in Forche's *Against Forgetting* and Gail Wronsky, reviewing the anthology, describes his poems as "real treasures" (536). Forche' too acknowledges Owen's uniqueness as a poet of witness and presents an extract of his poem 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' in the introduction to her work. Thus, Owen is one of the greatest poets of war and "his war poems," writes the famous poet Cecil Day Lewis, "seem to me certainly the finest written by any English poet

of the First War and probably the greatest poems about war in our literature" (11).

Having experienced the harsh realities of war first-hand, Owen took it upon himself to tell the truth of what he had seen and witnessed. His poetry of witness provides an insight for those who had not taken part in war to understand better the traumatic experiences of those who had. A victim of trauma, Owen has become the voice of those helpless soldiers who could not bear the physical and psychological burden of war. As stated in a draft 'Preface' to a collection of war poems that was published after his death:

My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.
Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense
consolatory.
They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn.
That is why true
Poets must be truthful. [31]

In this sense, Owen is determined to give his readers a 'truthful' account of what has taken place on the battlefield so that they can be aware of the stressful conditions of war which stir the feelings of 'pity' for those desperate soldiers who have suffered endlessly. This meaning is embodied in 'Dulce et Decorum Est,' a poem whose title is inspired by a Latin maxim by the ancient Roman poet Horace who wrote in one of his odes, "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" (144), meaning 'it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.' Daniel Hipp argues that 'Dulce et Decorum Est' for all its 'graphic horrors,' for all its 'political and public rhetoric of protest,' stands as an important stage in a continued attempt by Owen to heal himself from the trauma he had endured in the trenches (25). Ridiculing those propagandists who glorify war and urge young men to die for the mother country in an unjustified fighting, Owen honestly reveals the brutal and disgusting realities of war through articulating the suffering of soldiers on the front lines, whom he portrays as hopeless and helpless victims who are

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 towards 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 gas-shells dropping softly behind. [55]

Physically and mentally overcome by their heavy burden of suffering, the soldiers are weary, disillusioned, and shocked by the harsh experience of war. Horribly, they are 'bent double' exactly like the 'beggars' and 'hags' who are old, weak and desperate. 'Knock-kneed,' and unable to breathe easily, the terrified soldiers turn away head back, marching on, vaguely and aimlessly, without any clear direction or specific purpose. All the men are rendered disabled by the agony they have experienced. Hobbling slowly through the mud, all are 'exhausted,' 'lame,' 'blind,' 'and 'deaf.' In brief, the traumatic realities of war have overwhelmed all their senses, leaving them unaware even of the 'shells' of 'gas' falling 'behind' them. Indeed, "if not classifiable as shell shock cases now, these men are not far from it" (Hipp 35).

The terror of a gas attack characterizes the second stanza in which Officer Owen uselessly attempts to warn and save his men:

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. [55]

As noted above, the speaker's language becomes more powerful, more concrete, and more direct in order to reflect the terrible effects gas can have on a human body and, accordingly, to suit the portrayal of the soldiers whose lungs are unbearably poisoned by the thick fumes. Thus,

Owen is keen to find the terms that can accurately convey the dreadful reality of the battlefield with its terrifying actions and dreadful sights. This carefully selected vocabulary can be seen in expressions like 'an ecstasy of fumbling,' 'floundering like a man in fire,' 'the misty panes,' 'thick green light,' and 'as under a green sea.' The apostrophe at the very beginning of the stanza in which the officer calls upon his men prepares the reader for the gas-attack from which one of the soldiers, 'too clumsy' to put on his mask on time, emerges 'yelling and stumbling and floundering.' Noticeably, Owen is no longer speaking about general conditions that could apply to all soldiers; rather, he is, in the moment, watching when suddenly one of his men is seen 'stumbling,' 'yelling' and 'floundering;' clearly, the '-ing' suffix in the verbs 'stumbling,' 'yelling' and 'floundering' creates a sense of immediacy. Like his men, Owen is ultimately helpless and unable to assist others particularly that dying man who, amidst the 'thick green' gas, 'plunges' at him hoping to be saved by his commanding officer. Unfortunately, Owen can do nothing in the face of the horrors he is witnessing. Watching powerlessly as his soldier horribly dies, the poet is being traumatized not only by the unbearable cruelty of war but also by the sense of guilt of being a survivor of that human tragedy. As he regretfully puts it, "All a poet can do...is warn" [31].

As previously indicated, Forche' argues in *Against Forgetting* that the audience is an essential part of poetic witness. Likewise, Muriel Rukeyser speaks of three components of the witnessing process; she writes in *The Life of Poetry*:

The giving and taking of a poem is...a triadic relation. It can never be reduced to a pair: we are always confronted by the poet, the poem, and the audience. The poet, at the moment of his life at which he finished the poem. The poem, as it is available, heard once, or in a book always at hand. The audience, the individual reader or listener, with all his life...(174-75)

Addressing this principle of poetic witness, Owen makes the reader of 'Dulce et Decorum Est' involved in the situation, one time

addressing him / her as 'you' and another time as 'my friend.' This can be seen in the final stanza of the poem:

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 gargling 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. [55]

The poet wishes that his readers could imagine and share him the traumatic experience of war and its awful reality. Most shocking, the speaker reports, is the sight of that dying soldier's eyes 'writhing in his face;' also, the sound of the blood which comes 'gargling from the forth-corrupted lungs' is indeed very horrible. Owen finally calls upon his reader as 'my friend' referring, particularly, to every war propagandist who might tell 'children' that 'old lie' which says that it is noble and patriotic to die fighting for their country. Obviously, the ironical tone of the concluding quatrain enriches the poem and deepens the poet's protest against those who romanticize war in the eyes of young people. If such leaders and politicians see, for example, the horrible scene of the gas-attack and its destructive effects on Owen and his men, they will not of course call for involvement in trench warfare 'with such high zest.' Noticeably, the use of the word 'children' in the above stanza is very suggestive. It implies how the British youth who lack experience and wise judgment are deceived about war and its dreadful reality. Betrayed by war propagandists who have promised them to find glory on the battlefield, the deluded soldiers have joined the warfare only to be used as cannon fodder.

'Exposure' is another poem in which Owen continues to bear witness to the traumatic realities of the trenches and the psychological pain the soldiers are 'exposed' to. The poem is an attempt to reflect the scene as it is, to present the soldiers' plight through the eyes and tongue of one of them--the soldier poet who has shared his comrades the horrors and agonies of war:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...
Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
But nothing happens. [48]

Ironically, Owen states that his soldiers are dying, not because they are exposed to "the monstrous anger of the guns" as the case in his poem 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' [44], but rather because of their 'exposure' to nature with its 'merciless...winds' and cold indifference. Written in February 1917, 'Exposure' presents a vivid description of the frosty weather and awful conditions soldiers had to face during one of the worst winters in World War I. In addition to the sense of pity the speaker evokes in us towards his 'wearied' and 'worried' men who daily find themselves in a tragic confrontation with death, we feel that nature in 'Exposure' comes to revenge itself on man who insists on disfiguring its beauty and disturbing its tranquility through destructive wars and bloody conflicts. Skillfully, the poet portrays the psychological state of the confused soldiers who are passively lying in the trenches amidst that severe cold weather. Their acute uneasiness are vividly conveyed by words like 'ache,' 'merciless,' 'wearied,' 'worried,' 'curious,' 'nervous' and 'knife us.' Furthermore, the difficulty in pronouncing the vowel sequence "merciless iced east winds" /'mə:siləs aist i:st windz/ not only implies the cruel progress of those 'east winds' that reach the helpless soldiers and mercilessly 'knife' them in the trenches which they take as a shelter from enemy fire and attack, but it also reveals the trouble and difficulty the soldiers have in forming a clear idea about their obscure state in those trenches.

Remarkably, the /s/ sound is repeated throughout the whole stanza as in 'merciless,' 'iced,' 'east,' 'us,' 'silent,' 'salient,' 'silence,' 'sentries,' 'whisper,' 'curious,' and 'nervous.' The hissing sound produced by this repetition denotes an atmosphere of terror, tension, mystery and secrecy in which the terrified soldiers 'whisper' their words lest they are heard and discovered by their enemy. A skilled poet, Owen concludes each stanza of the poem with the refrain 'But nothing happens' which amazingly reveals the perplexity of a brain slowly 'aching' and freezing to death. The aching 'brains' of Owen and his men cannot understand why they keep waiting in such a cruel atmosphere while 'nothing happens' and no enemy action takes place. However, although the poet states that 'nothing happens' to his soldiers who remain waiting in the horrifying trenches, he paradoxically implies that many things do happen to them. That their 'brains' deeply 'ache,' that 'the merciless...winds' 'knife' them, that the 'drooping flares' confuse their 'memory,' that the 'silence' of 'night' frightens them, that they are always kept 'awake,' 'wearied,' 'worried,' 'curious,' and 'nervous', all this means that much is happening to those distressed soldiers and tremendous aggression is being practiced against them.

In 'Exposure,' Owen not only criticizes war propagandists, but he also gives voice to traumatic war experience which he and his comrades endured on the battlefield. The poem functions as a truthful description of one of Owen's experiences of the shock and horror of war, "not simply gas, being blown into the air and falling on corpses, or the fear of being drowned in mud," Catherine Lanone points out, "but also the deadly cold of winter; the icy numbness also functions as a *metaphor* of trauma, in the sense of Caruth" who "ends *Unclaimed Experience* with the image of frozen words" and Peter Levine, the American developer of Somatic Experiencing and author of *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*, who argues that "being traumatised means being literally frozen with fear, and disconnected from nature" (par.30).

A poet of witness, Owen has come across horrible scenes at the front that are "worse than even a poet's imagination," writes Paul Fussell pointing out how the young officer has been dominated by the feelings of "horror, outrage, and pity: horror at what he saw at the front;

outrage at the inability of the civilian world...to understand what was going on; pity for the poor, dumb, helpless, good-looking boys victimized by it all" (289). Such feelings feature heavily in 'The Last Laugh,' a poem in which Owen describes how three of his comrades meet their painful deaths, each in a different way. Throughout the lines, Owen uses imagery to convey the tragic ends of his men. Weapons are personified as human beings who are heard having 'the last laugh' at the helpless soldiers whose lives end catastrophically. Thus, 'the last laugh' is not the dying soldiers', as the readers of the poem may expect at first glance. The poem consists of three stanzas each of which presents a horrible case of death. For example, in the first stanza, the dying soldier seeks divine help crying:

O Jesus Christ! I'm hit,' he said; and died.
Whether he vainly cursed or prayed indeed,
 The Bullets chirped—In vain! vain! vain!
 Machine-guns chuckled—Tut-tut! Tut-tut!
 And the Big Gun guffawed. [59]

It is clear that the soldier's tragic plea does not soften the cruel weaponry that seems uncaring 'whether he vainly cursed or prayed.' Quite the opposite, the 'Bullets' have indifferently reacted to the situation and rejoiced, 'In vain, vain, vain!' Similarly, the 'Machine-guns' have mockingly laughed, 'Tut-tut! Tut-tut,' exactly like 'the Big Gun' that has sarcastically burst into laughter. Noticeably, Owen capitalizes the names of weapons and war equipments such as the 'Big Gun' and 'Bullets', the latter referring to the cartridges or the material that is shot out of a gun; Owen personifies these inanimate things providing them with a human identity through which they can contempt and 'laugh' at the dying soldiers. Onomatopoeia is clear in line four as the expression 'Tut-tut! Tut-tut' reflects the sound of guns and implies the dominance of weapons on the speaker and his companions. Put another way, the machinery of war is depicted as masters who not only tyrannize their powerless human victims but also ridicule them even when those helpless sufferers are about to breathe their 'last.' Owen also makes a skilful use of the verbs 'chirped,' 'chuckled,' and 'guffawed'

which are employed one after another to mean 'laughed;' thus these verbs emphasize the title of the poem and at the same time convey the feelings of ridicule and indifference which the personified artillery shows towards the dying men and their tragic calls for pity.

'Another sighed,—‘O Mother,—mother,—Dad!’/ Then smiled at nothing, childlike, being dead' [59]. This is the second case of death witnessed by Owen, a soldier who, feeling that he is about to pass away, innocently appeals to his parents for help and support. Unfortunately, the bitter sigh of the dying young man does not affect the cruel weaponry which not only kills him, but also scorns the dreadful way he dies. Witnessing the incident, Owen narrates:

And the lofty Shrapnel-cloud
Leisurely gestured,—Fool!
And the splinters spat, and tittered. [59]

Again, the poet uses personification to convey the pitiless nature of war machinery. Described as arrogant, haughty, and proud of its destructive capabilities to explode and wipe out the powerless soldiers, the 'Shrapnel-cloud' is personified as a human being whose arm is raised in a gesture of ridicule of the dying man who is called a 'Fool.' Adding to the tragic effect of the story, the falling 'splinters,' also personified by the poet, daringly contempt the distressed soldier and disrespectfully laugh at him. Like the verbs 'chirped,' 'chuckled,' and 'guffawed" in the first stanza, the verbs 'spat' and 'tittered' are used here to suggest the meanings of scorn and mockery which the guns and shell demonstrate toward the helpless soldier who is totally unable to withdraw the destructive effect of the warfare machines.

The final stanza of 'The Last Laugh' is a witness of the third victim's death at the hands of the arrogant artillery:

‘My Love!’ one moaned. Love-languid seemed his mood,
Till slowly lowered, his whole face kissed the mud.
And the Bayonets’ long teeth grinned;
Rabbles of Shells hooted and groaned;
And the Gas hissed. [59]

While the first soldier has sought divine help, and the second has looked for parental assistance, the third soldier here yearns for romantic love to console him in the final moments of his life. Calling on his beloved, he moans bitterly lacking power and endurance. Instead of giving the girl he loves a farewell kiss, he finds himself kissing the sludge. In an undignified way, his 'whole face' has been in 'the mud.' As usual, the personified weapons feel happy and cheerful at seeing the helpless soldier meeting his tragic death. To express their sense of pleasure, 'the Bayonets' rejoice smiling and making fun of the dying man. Compared to a human being who has a mouth of long teeth, war machinery continues in laughing at the soldier's useless cries for love and help. Similarly, 'the Gas' is personified and shown hissing as if it joins the other armaments in their disdain of human suffering. To conclude, the three traumatic stories narrated by the poet reflect the brutality of war and shows how the poor soldiers have become objects of ridicule for war weaponry that always enjoys having 'the last laugh' at man's helplessness and agony.

Not only does war snatch life out of the helpless soldiers who are inhumanly crushed by its merciless weapons but it also reflects its disgusting shadows on the battlefield itself making it look like a horrific place characterized by 'woe' and 'gloom.' This is what Owen indicates in 'The Show,' a poem that stands as real witness of 'those agonies' that have prevailed throughout the battleground. Himself a flesh and blood eyewitness, Owen tells us how he

saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
And fitted with great pocks and scabs of plaques. [50]

According to the poet, the land he is describing is a miserable, bloody place which is dreadfully filled with the dead bodies of the innocent young men and tragically marked by the signs of weakness and deficiency. As witnessed by the poet, the battlefield is gloomy and 'cratered like the moon with hollow woe.' Despair, misery and loss are the main features of that 'grey' landscape. Furthermore, that horrible

place which the poet describes is personified as an ugly creature with 'a beard,' Owen states, adding:

Across its beard, that horror of harsh wire,
There moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled.
It seemed they pushed themselves to be as plug
Of ditches, where they writhed and shrivelled, killed. [50]

That hellish landscape, the poet tells his readers, is the site of many tragic deaths he has witnessed on a daily basis. An example he narrates is that of those powerless soldiers who, crawling 'slowly' like 'thin caterpillars, fail to 'cross the harsh wire,' and are tragically victimized and horribly 'killed' at that gruesome place. Very vivid is the poet's depiction of the horrific battlefield as a disgusting human being across whose 'beard' small creatures that resemble worms move 'slowly' toward their destruction, exactly as the soldiers who find themselves going gradually in the direction of their tragic end.

The poem concludes with 'Death' being personified and shown as the most dominant performer in that bloody 'show' in which the dead bodies of the helpless soldiers are presented filling the stage of war theatre. Human defeat is deeply elegized by the poet who heartbreakingly tells his audience:

I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.
Whereat, in terror what that sight might mean, I reeled and
shivered earthward like a feather.
And Death fell with me, like a deepening moan. [50]

Indeed, what Owen presents in this poem is a 'show' of the traumatic realities of war with its catastrophic scenes and awful sights that he is truthfully showing to everyone especially those who delude people at home about the real conditions of the warfare; such people are in fact in oblivion of the harsh life soldiers have been compelled to undergo in the trenches. The unspeakable horrors and stressful circumstances of these trenches have traumatized the helpless young men reducing them in mind and body.

The poetry of witness written by Owen indicates that he is not only keen to reveal what he has 'watched' on the battlefield, but he is also determined to expose what has been taking place on the home-front during the war. According to him, the general public are completely unaware of the plight of the innocent soldiers who have joined the war only to 'die as cattle,' Owen writes in 'Anthem for Doomed Youth,' a highly suggestive poem in which he expresses his anger at the improper funerals the dead soldiers receive when their bodies are back home. The main theme of the poem is the pity for those 'doomed' young men who are left to die on the battleground and are accordingly insulted twice, one time by war itself that has destroyed, and dehumanized them and another time by those at the home-front who have provided them with little honour after their death. The poem is a sonnet divided into an octave and a sestet. The octave opens with a rhetorical question in which Owen angrily asks,

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires. [44]

No sooner does the reader come across the first line of the poem than his / her attention is immediately captured by the cattle-image which not only nullifies the humanity of the dead young men, but also presents the battlefield as a brutal site where people are mercilessly slaughtered like animals. Obviously, such unbearable sights stand as primary causes of war trauma which a soldier may experience. Outstandingly, the question raised by the poet at the very beginning is given expressive answers throughout the whole stanza; those who pitilessly die at the front are honoured, the poet asserts, not by the religious 'bells' of the church, but ironically by 'the monstrous anger of the guns.' Here, the weapons of the battle are personified and depicted as angry creatures that brutally put an end to the lives of those young

men and at the same time mourn their tragic end. In other words, the violent sounds produced by 'the guns' substitute the holy rituals that should mark the horrible deaths of those dead fighters. The poet sarcastically indicates that the songs sung for those dead soldiers are the tattered sounds of 'rifles,' that is, the 'rapid rattle' of the 'the stuttering rifles' serves as prayers that are hastily said to mourn the dead young men. Very clever is the poet's use of alliteration in the third line of the poem, 'Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle.' Here, the three words 'rifles,' 'rapid,' and 'rattle' begin with the same consonant sound /r/ and thus create a very suggestive example of alliteration. Furthermore, the two words 'rapid' and 'rattle' gives an instance of assonance as both contain the same vowel /a/. Being very short, the three words 'rifles,' 'rapid,' and 'rattle' can be pronounced quickly, exactly as a gun that shoots out bullets in a very 'rapid' way. Owen continues, pointing out that the actual rituals, such as 'prayers and 'bells,' that may mourn the poor soldiers will make 'mockeries' of the horrible way in which they are slaughtered and victimized; they are too helpless to face that grotesque war. Ironically, the only voice that can be heard mourning the dead soldiers comes from the battlefield; it is the harsh, wild sound of the fire produced by the 'shells' and bombs, accompanied with the sorrowful sound of 'bugles' which is usually heard in military ceremonies. As Forché puts it in the introduction to *Against Forgetting*, "The dead are mourned not by human song, but by the cacophony of new technologies and armaments. The comforts of religion seem to have no place in this poem. They only remind us of the lack of comfort of the present" (38). In this sense, the weapons and equipments of the battle seem to bemoan the death of those young men while both Church and State fail to endow them with a respectable ritual of mourning.

Like the octave, the sestet of the poem begins with a metaphorical question:

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds. [44]

In the above lines, Owen seems more sorrowful than angry; he asks: what candles can the mourners hold in hands in order to honour those dead soldiers and let their innocent souls pass on peacefully? Then, he convincingly gives the answer. Instead of the candles that are lit in the church during a funeral service, tears in the eyes of the families and friends of those killed in action will bid the dead the last farewell before they leave to their final resting place. In addition, the pale and sad faces of the 'girls' will be the cover of their coffins and the true ritual mourning their losses. The sad girls here may be the dead soldiers' wives, daughters, sisters, or sweethearts. As an alternative to the 'flowers' that are usually put on the graves of the dead, the love, softness and compassion of those 'patient minds' will beautify the tombs of those dead young men. 'Patient minds' may refer to the enduring minds of the victims' mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and relatives who, despite losing their dearest ones, are patient and serene; the noble feelings of these people are like the flowers that decorate the place. In replacement of lowering the formal flags at the burial place of the dead soldiers, shades will be drawn in every British house as a sign of mourning and sorrow for those innocent young men whose lives are drawn and brought to an end forever. Evocatively, the phrase 'drawing-down of blinds' gives the suggestion that the dead soldiers' tragic tale is now coming to its close. Nevertheless, their story will stay in our minds fresh and memorable, that is, 'against forgetting' as the main title of Forche's anthology reads, simply because Owen's poems of witness including 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' will remain, through the ages, as a strong reminder of those soldiers' plight and suffering "so long as men can breathe or eyes can see," to quote William Shakespeare (41).

To conclude, Owen's war poems bear forceful witness to the traumatic events of World War I reflecting the tragedy of soldiers on the battlefield. 'Dulce et Decorum Est,' 'Exposure,' 'The Last Laugh,' 'The Show,' and 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' vividly stand as examples of the harsh realities of war and truthfully convey the suffering endured by the helpless soldiers. Owen, as a poet of witness, reveals the truths of modern warfare to his readers in an honest manner. Remarkably, the characteristics of poetry of witness, as specified by Forche' in *Against*

Forgetting, are clearly achieved in the war poems written by Owen for many reasons. Firstly, Owen's war poetry is written out of his first-hand experience in the trenches; he himself has been traumatized by war and its unbearable horrors. Secondly, Owen allows the audience to have a role in the process of poetic witness; he shares his readers the issues he is raising and involves them in the events he is describing in hope that they can have a better understanding of the traumatic situations experienced by the powerless soldiers in the trenches of World War I. Thirdly, Owen blends the personal with the political in a highly harmonious way; through his personal experience on the battlefield and the human suffering he has daily witnessed in the front line, he can address the political awareness of the British public exposing the war propagandists' false claims about the warfare and its actual realities which traumatize soldiers and shatter their psychological balance. Fourthly, if Forché asserts that the poets of witness are those who positively respond to the devastating incidents during the times of troubles in which they live, then Owen is deservedly a leading poet of witness; his war poems honestly reveal the horrors and destructive consequences of World War I. Throughout his poetry of witness, he gives his readers an accurate account of the war and therefore allows them to know and remember the past and its traumatic events each of which, Caruth sees, tells the story of a grave wound in the history of humanity. Furthermore, Owen's poems of witness can be regarded as a forewarning for the young men against taking part in war and its bloody battlefields where soldiers are turned into cannon fodder or become victims of trauma and endless suffering. Finally, Owen's war poems--addressing a key characteristic of witness poetry--stand not only as a decisive opposition to violence and its promoters but also as a strong message for anyone who thinks of degrading human dignity through any form of killing, oppression or persecution. Forché concludes her introduction to *Against Forgetting* with quoting the French surrealist poet Robert Desnos who writes in a poem titled 'Epitaph':

You who are living, what have you done with your treasures?
Do you regret the time of my struggle?
Have you raised your crops for a common harvest?
Have you made my town a richer place? (qtd. in Forché 47)

Like his fellow poet of witness Robert Desnos, Owen hopes that we can learn through his 'treasures,' his poems of witness, how to speak out against violence, oppose the glorification of war, empower the helpless, and put an end to the bloody conflicts everywhere. If we do this, we will then reach the time of 'a common harvest' and can therefore make our world 'a richer place.'

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ⁱ Wilfred Owen. *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*. Ed. C. Day Lewis. New York: Chatto & Windus, 1963. [All poems by Wilfred Owen in this paper are from this edition and hereafter cited between square brackets as page numbers only.]