7 November 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

I've had a busy week. I've not had time to collect my thoughts for a proper letter. So, you're spared.

Instead, to mark the approach of Remembrance Day, I'm foisting a poem upon you. It's the work of one of the many fine poets who will forever be associated with the Great War.

Poetic Power

Not everyone 'likes' poetry. I know that. Some openly hate it. They're proud about it too.

But there was a time when, like so-called 'classical music' (Beethoven, Brahms, Bach, Bruckner – though their names don't all begin with 'B'), poetry was wildly popular, widely read, and deeply loved. Children memorised long passages of well-known poems in Public School, the way they used to memorise passages of Scripture in Sunday School.

Then, soon after the Second World War, it was deemed 'uncool' to love poetry and listen to 'classical' music of any kind. They were thought to be 'unmanly', too, for some enormously stupid reason. I will say this, though. To sneer at something because it's sophisticated is to be ruled by our subterranean fear of it. This is the very opposite of valour. It's not a good 'look'.

At some point after that, the forced labour of making children read and recite poetry was deemed to be a mild form of child abuse. So, it stopped, making way for new kinds of educational abuse, I guess. As a result, few people read or listen to poetry anymore. Theatre will be next. Then literary novels.

(I once went into an 'Indigo' near the Railway Station in Toronto "Where's your poetry section?" I asked.

"Not much call for it," I was told. "I'm afraid we don't have one.")

I *do* read poetry, but not just because I'm a pretentious weirdo. For me, it's a duty as well as a pleasure. Any Minister worth his or her salt *should* read poetry, if only to be acquainted with its methods and bewitched by its magic.

Why? Because Presbyterian Ministers, more than any other 'brand' of Minister or Priest, used to see themselves as 'Servants of the Word'. Now, alas, they see themselves as Entrepreneurial Game Show Hosts. Once upon a time,

though, *language* well-wielded was the Presbyterian Minister's chief tool. Sometimes a weapon too.

Words have weight and warmth, the way living creatures do. They denote and connote things. They move through time with rhythm, and they sound out their meanings in rhyme. When they're spoken well, with just the right pitch and pause, poems approach the condition of music. The rhyme and rhythm of words are the bricks and mortar of poetry.

The same is true of Holy Scripture, whose words do their work on us, not just by *what* they say, but by *how* they say it.

Some 'modern' poetry, like modern 'classical' music, is devilishly difficult to absorb. I grant that.

In their attempt to be 'innovative', and to refrain from displaying the heart of the poem's meaning on its sleeve, modernist poets deliberately distort poetry's conventions. This can be baffling. By *wanting* their poems to be difficult, they sometimes go down a rabbit hole, daring you to discover their meaning in the pitch dark; or, failing that, to make it all up on your own. But who wants to do that?

The poets of the Great War sometimes flirt with these 'modernist' tendencies. But for the most part, they still have one foot in the previous century.

The real discipline of poetry, in my mind, is not to be needlessly difficult. Rather, it's the difficult task of using just the right words, in just the right order, displayed in just the right way on the page, to convey the poem's precise meaning – neither one word too many nor one too few, but each in its proper place, making its good effect.

I'm not sure those stringent standards are fully met in the poem that follows here. It's not the 'best of the best'.

But I love the poets of the Great War for another reason too. It's their unflinching desire to put the pain of war onto the page; to entice us, through the cold beauty of language, unflowery but exact, to stare into war's black abyss.

Even so, "poetry makes nothing happen," wrote W.H. Auden. Poetry cannot 'redeem' the pain of war or dress it up in a pretty bow. In some of their poems, when they *seem* to do this, the poets of the Great War do it ironically, even sarcastically, in the way of embattled soldiers everywhere. (You'll see below.)

To hear the pain of war articulated in this way is to be in touch with its truth and to hear it from within in the form that only poetry can provide. I love

these poets for *that*. (Of course, there are other ways, also, to be in touch with the truth.)

Siegfried Sassoon

Many of these poets died in the trenches before the war was over. A few lived on, damaged in body and spirit. The poem I've chosen, almost at random, is by Siegfried Sassoon, who, despite his German-sounding first name, was a thorough-going Englishman. He was an excellent poet, too, though I have not chosen his 'best' poem.

He befriended and encouraged a fellow poet, Wilfred Owen. Sassoon met Owen at Craiglockhart, a mental hospital in Edinburgh. Their psyches had been badly damaged by the shelling, the killing, the gassing, and the utter brutality of trench warfare. At Craiglockhart, they were 'patched up' and sent 'back to the front' (what a funny way of talking). That's what they did back then. Stiff upper lip and all that.

Owen died in battle in the war's dying days. Sassoon survived, improbably, but badly shellshocked.

Here's the poem. It's written in 'plain' language, in the voice of a violently wounded soldier who has returned to his family's happy, affluent home. Or maybe it's not-so-happy. The 'happy' feels forced, and that's no accident. Family life can be like that, can't it?

So, don't be fooled by the poem's seeming sincerity. Its sarcasm is raw, real, and, if you ask me, quite beautiful. It skewers what so much saccharine 'religious' advice sounds like, insipid to the point of insult.

Does it Matter?

Does it matter? – losing your legs?...
For people will always be kind,
And you need not show that you mind
When the others come in after hunting
To gobble their muffins and eggs.

Does it matter? – losing your sight?...
There's such splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be kind,

As you sit on the terrace remembering
And turn your face to the light.

Do they matter? – those dreams from the pit?…
You can drink and forget and be glad,
And people won't say that you're mad;
For they'll know you've fought for your country
And no one will worry a bit.

Sorry, I've said much more than I meant to.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew

Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon