

SOAR, FALL 2018, DOUG ROSE
THE POETRY OF WILFRED OWEN AND SIEGFRIED SASSOON
POEMS FOR WEEK 2, OCTOBER 30

“Anthem for Doomed Youth” – Wilfred Owen

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. 4
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. 8
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 goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall; 12
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

“The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” – Wilfred Owen

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father, 4
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there, 8
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,

["Parable" continued]

Neither do anything to him. Behold, 12
 A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
 Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
 But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
 And half the seed of Europe, one by one. 16

"Counter-Attack" - Siegfried Sassoon

We'd gained our first objective hours before
 While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes,
 Pallid, unshaven and thirsty, blind with smoke.
 Things seemed all right at first. We held their line, 4
 With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,
 And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench.
 The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs
 High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps 8
 And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,
 Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;
 And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
 Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime. 12
 And then the rain began, – the jolly old rain!

A yawning soldier knelt against the bank,
 Staring across the morning blear with fog;
 He wondered when the Allemands would get busy; 16
 And then, of course, they started with five-nines
 Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud.
 Mute in the clamour of shells he watched them burst
 Spouting dark earth and wire with gusts from hell, 20

["Counter-Attack" continued]

While posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke.
 He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear,
 Sick for escape, – loathing the strangled horror
 And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead. 24

An officer came blundering down the trench:
 "Stand-to and man the fire step!" On he went . . .
 Gasping and bawling, "Fire-step . . . counter-attack!"
 Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right 28
 Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left;
 And stumbling figures looming out in front.

"O Christ, they're coming at us!" Bullets spat,
 And he remembered his rifle . . . rapid fire . . . 32

And started blazing wildly . . . then a bang
 Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out
 To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he choked
 And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom, 36
 Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans . . .
 Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,
 Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

"Does It Matter?" – Siegfried Sassoon

Does it matter? -losing your legs?
 For people will always be kind,
 And you need not show that you mind
 When others come in after hunting
 To gobble their muffins and eggs. 5

Does it matter? -losing you sight?

["Does It Matter?" continued]

There's such splendid work for the blind;
 And people will always be kind,
 As you sit on the terrace remembering
 And turning your face to the light. 10

Do they matter-those dreams in the pit?
 You can drink and forget and be glad,
 And people won't say that you're mad;
 For they know that you've fought for your country,
 And no one will worry a bit. 15

"Repression of War Experience" – Siegfried Sassoon

Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth;
 What silly beggars they are to blunder in
 And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame –
 No, no, not that, – it's bad to think of war,
 When thoughts you've gagged all day come back
 to scare you; 5
 And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad
 Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts
 That drive them out to jabber among the trees.

Now light your pipe; look, what a steady hand.
 Draw a deep breath; stop thinking; count fifteen, 10
 And you're as right as rain

Why won't it rain? . . .

I wish there'd be a thunder-storm to-night,
 With bucketsful of water to sluice the dark,
 And make the roses hang their dripping heads.

["Repression" continued]

Books; what a jolly company they are, 15
 Standing so quiet and patient on their shelves,
 Dressed in dim brown, and black, and white, and green,
 And every kind of colour. Which will you read?
 Come on; O do read something; they're so wise.
 I tell you all the wisdom of the world 20
 Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet
 You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out,
 And listen to the silence: on the ceiling
 There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and flutters;
 And in the breathless air outside the house 25
 The garden waits for something that delays.
 There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees, —
 Not people killed in battle, — they're in France, —
 But horrible shapes in shrouds--old men who died
 Slow, natural deaths, — old men with ugly souls, 30
 Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins.

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
 You'd never think there was a bloody war on! ...
 O yes, you would ... why, you can hear the guns.
 Hark! Thud, thud, thud, — quite soft ... they never cease — 35
 Those whispering guns — O Christ, I want to go out
 And screech at them to stop — I'm going crazy;
 I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

**For any or all of the poems, feel free to write down comments,
 observations, or questions you would like to share.**