

THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR ON WILFRED OWEN'S POETRY

BİRİNCİ DÜNYA SAVAŞININ WILFRED OWEN ŞİİRLERİNE ETKİSİ

Fikret GÜVEN

Doktora Öğrencisi, Erciyes Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı ABD.
Kayseri/Türkiye

ABSTRACT

The First World War was idealized as a war to end all, however, it became the "Great War" itself, and created a great stir in Europe in terms of radical, ideological and political changes. Since literature reflects society, a change in Georgian and Modernist discourses was also reconstructed by means of poetry. While the pro-war Georgian poetry disseminated the ideas of knightly, heroic and a romantic discourse of the war with its strident rejection, the Modernist anti-war poetry adopted an oppositional and socially responsible mission to deconstruct the false heroic ideas of the pro-war poetry.

The Georgian sentimental ideas such as duty to one's country, heroic self-sacrifice, knightly glory, honor, justice, Christian values and sentimentality were under question in the anti-war poetry. Georgian poets especially fond of conjuring dream-worlds of their own and longed for a romantic return to the nature. Georgian poet Brooke shows his dashing nature and patriotism in his poetry. He represents war as an opportunity to show his patriotism. Modernist mood of trench poets, however, created a new kind of poetry of protest against disillusion of pro-war propaganda. This counter-poetry committed itself to the construction of an anti-war sentiment through its controversial representation of the war. As such Owen's poetry of progressive protest as a means of expressing the solid truth about the harsh realities of war manifests itself in a Modernist discourse. The purpose of this paper is to bring an approach to Owen's haunting and innovative poetry, which can be interpreted as an attack against Georgian ideals of sentimentality. His poetry invites all to see and feel the shame and guilt war has brought upon them.

Keywords: WWI, Wilfred Owen, Georgian Poetry, Modernism, Poetry

ÖZ

Birinci Dünya Savaşı tüm savaşları sona erdirecek bir savaş olarak idealleştirildi, ancak "Büyük Savaş" ın bizzat kendisine dönüştü. Diğer taraftan radikal, ideolojik ve politik gelişimler açısından Avrupa'da büyük bir heyecan yarattı. Edebiyat toplumu yansıttığından, Georgian ve Modernist söylemlerde açısından bu değişiklik de şiir yoluyla yeniden oluşturuldu. Savaş yanlısı Georgian şiiri savaşa karşı şövalyelik, kahramanlık ve romantik söylem fikrini ciddiyetle redderken, Modernist savaş karşıtı şiir ise, savaş yanlısı sahte kahramanlık düşüncelerine muhalif ve sosyal açıdan sorumlu bir görevi benimsedi. Savaş karşıtı şiirde, ülkesine düşen görev, kahramanca fedakârlık, şövalyelik, şan, şeref, adalet, Hıristiyan değerleri ve duygusallık gibi Georgian duygusal fikirler sorgulanıyordu. Georgian şairleri özellikle rüya dünyalarını kendilerine ait olmaktan ötürü severken, doğaya romantik bir dönüş için özlem duyuyorlardı. Georgian şairi Brooke şiirindeki çarpıcı doğasını ve vatanseverliğini yansıtmaktadır. Savaşı, vatanseverliğini göstermek için bir fırsat olarak görmektedir. Ancak, hendek şairlerinin modernist havası, savaş yanlısı propagandanın hayal kırıklığına karşı yeni bir şiir akımı geliştirdiler. Bu karşı-şiir, savaşı tartışan ve temsili yoluyla bir savaş karşıtı anlayış inşa etmeyi taahhüt etti. Owen'in savaşın sert gerçekleri hakkında katı gerçeği ifade etme aracı olarak ilerici protesto şiiri, kendisini Modernist bir söylemde ortaya koyar. Bu yazının amacı, Owen'in unutulmaz ve yenilikçi şiirine bir yaklaşım getirmektir; bu şiir, Georgian şairlerinin duygusallık ideallerine karşı bir saldırı olarak yorumlanabilir. Şiiri, savaşın onlara getirdiği utanç ve suçluluk duygularını görmeye ve hissettirmeye davet etmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Birinci Dünya Savaşı, Wilfred Owen, Georgian Şiiri, Modernist Şiir

1. INTRODUCTION

Wilfred Owen's poetry serves as a truthful source to denounce the pro-war Georgian ideals. In his critic for war perception Samuel Hynes states that:

A generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like honor, glory, heroism, knighthood, crusade and England went off to war to make the world safe for democracy, peace and justice. They were slaughtered in senseless battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned, and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values and ideals of the society that had sent them to war, and in so doing separated their own disillusioned generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance.

(A War Imagined XI)

The Georgian period was an era of naïve innocence, a chauvinistic atmosphere which created a romantic idealism. Likewise, the tradition of chivalry, which conducted the code of honor, glory, knightly codes were the ideals upheld during this era. The nation's vision employed these ideals in the representation of the modern warfare. The soldiers were taken as the ideal warrior heroes who were glorified for their talents, merits and noble qualities. As such the modern soldier was identified with the great heroes of epic battles and Georgian ennobled death of the youthful on the battlefield as heroic.

Other than the knightly ideals of heroism, crusading heritage was also used during WWI in the justification of war and glorification of the soldiers. As a perfect Christian knight, the modern soldier was represented as an honorable warrior who waged a holy war against injustices. Even more, the modern soldier's heroic sacrifice was identified with Christ who sacrificed his life for the redemption of humanity. This particular heroic warrior view was especially promoted by the Georgian poets. Martin Stephen puts it "as the public opinion and the common sense were completely overwhelmed by the official discourse of the war and the declaration of war was greeted with mass enthusiasm and expressions of patriotic fervor and heroic idealism" (Bell, 1985: 275).

However the real war experience proved those legends obsolete. Modern warfare was incomparable to the ancient heroic combats because the 20th century technology had changed the nature of war completely. The machine guns, bombs, gas and several other weapons were employed effectively and of course, its effects were devastating. As Crawford puts it "the 20th century was a passively suffering victim at the hands of an artillery gunner five miles away that had no personal involvement or even knowledge of injury it might have inflicted" (Crawford, 1995:73). The soldiers were passive victims who were reduced to tunnels and trenches waiting for gas, grenade, bomb, sniper, or mortar attacks. The modern machine made warfare caused slaughter of the youth as soon as the soldiers marched in line across the open field, they were exposed to mass killing machines. Owen wrote in his letter "the lines had broken, the entire field of fire was covered with lines of the helpless figures, all crawling and wormy with mutilated bodies"(Owen, 1917: 611).

This betrayal of holy ideals of the war resulted in the frustration and dissent among soldiers. While they fought for survival, a disappointment was inevitable. The trench soldiers sadly realized the older generation's lies for military and political profits of imperial passions. This sudden but powerful change of hearth had consequences in poetry. The real experience of the war brought reconsideration of the idealized values and as a response, Wilfred Owen penned realist, modern poetry. His employment of poetic techniques were of protest and a vehicle to express sad side of the truth. Hence, while Georgian poetry committed itself to the promotion of the romance of the war the Modernist poetry committed itself to the deconstruction of the Georgian romanticism.

Modernist poets aimed to awaken the ignorant and chauvinistic civilians to the waste of modern warfare. As expressed by Wilfred Owen, they wanted to put an end to the old official lie "Dulce et Decorum est Pro Patria Mori". Lane described Owen as: "the greatest English soldier the trench poet of the First World War has left the most eloquent and moving protest against the old heroic lies, official hypocrisies and wrongs as both a soldier and a poet" (Lane, 1985: 14).

Owen's poetry acts as a means of constructing a modernist discourse of the war. As Hibbert suggests, "Owen's poetry of warning is conditioned by an inescapable awareness of himself as the spokes man of the truth of war: a truth compounded of passive suffering, brutality, horror and mechanical slaughter" (Owen, 1918: 46) For Owen it is the mission of the true poets to act as the spokesmen of the true conditions of trench warfare, and thus, to contest the Georgian romanticism. In this respect, it deconstructs the standard

idealization of the warrior hero, and constructs instead the ideal of helpless victim – heroes “ who die as cattle” (Owen, 1918:76)

Owen’s poetry serves as a means of deconstructing the Georgian discourse of the home front and as a tool for shaming and calling the “wretched/ cursed” and “mean” civilians who “ should be as Stones/by choice made themselves immune/ To Pity” to stop telling “ with such high zest/ To children ardent for some desperate glory,/ The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro Patria mori” (Dulce et Decorum Est”). His poetry is a modernist approach for deconstructing Georgian over romantic interpretation of the war by telling the hidden truth of the war. Based on his theory of poetry as “ truth” and “pity of War” Owen clearly fits to a modernist category.

19th century Georgian poetic tradition could not cope with the anti-romantic nature of the modern machine war reality. The new truthful poetry born in the trenches demonstrated a startling reversal of the conventional poetic process: instead of “ language bestowing significance on experience,” the pressure of experience and truth to it began to compel a new significance in the use of language (Powell, 1996:157).

Owen’s Preface illustrates the radical transformation from poetry as the “thoughtless pursuit of beauty” to poetry as the product of the “ true Poets” who, in being faithful to their actual experience, must abandon their preoccupation with poetry which is either false or irrelevant to the present historical situation. Owen, 1918: 36). True poets, according to Owen, must use their art as an urgent, discursive and reconstructive vehicle for voicing their disillusioned protest and the truth untold: the futile and tragic “ pity war distilled” (Owen, “Strange Meeting”). Owen rejects poetry for its own sake as he points out “ Above all, I am not concerned with Poetry” (Owen, 1918: 535). Instead, he uses poetry as a truthful tool for constructing a modernist discourse of the war. For him, poetry should serve as an instrument to communicate “ the pity of War” (Owen, 1918: 535) to the civilian world.

Accordingly, the subject of Owen’s poetry is “not heroes, nor deeds or lands, nor anything about glory, honor, might, majesty, dominion or power (Owen’s Preface, “ The Complete Poems” 535). As he points out, to him, English poetry which is “ not yet fit to speak of” these traditionally sanctioned values and heroic official lies, can only speak of the modern truth which is the senseless waste and disgraceful pity of War. (Owen, 1918: 535). This is an important portrayal of war. As a spokesmen of the true nature of war, Owen takes poetry as a modernist approach to bring surface the world of lies: “ All a poet can do today is warn. That is why true Poets must be truthful”.

As such Georgian poets who wrote sentimental poems, Modernists glorified warning. Owen’s biggest hope is that these warnings are to his generation in no sense consolatory may be next” (Owen, 1918: 535). Owen at the beginning was impressed with those patriotic Georgian discourses and his decision to enlist were not any different than the other enthusiastic masses. The deep sense of national pride and responsibility, he states in his letter “ There is a fine Heroic feeling about being in the front, and I am in perfect spirits. A tingle of warrior excitement is about me, but excitement is always necessary to my happy crusade” (Owen, 1918: 512). Thus, Owen’s early influence of Georgian poetry demonstrates ideals of chivalry where the soldiers are idolized as knights. As the frontlines showed its real face and witnessing the harsh reality of war, he states;

War is Hell! I have suffered seventh hell. My frozen dug-out held 25 poor victims tight packed. Water filled it to the fullest dept. Some froze to death, some let themselves drown in the water that was rising over shoulders and I nearly broke down. Those at home want ot call No Man’ s land ‘England’ because we keep supremacy and honor there. The people of England needn’ t hope. They must Agitate. But they are not yet agitated even. Let them imagine 50 helpless men trembling as with ague and fear and unshared anguish for 50 hours! I suppose I can endure cold, fatigue, and the face to face Heroic death, but extra for me there is the universal perversion of Ugliness, machine made violence, hideous landscapes, everything unnatural, inhuman, broken, inglorious, the distortion, faint sickening smell of the innocent dead, whose un-buriable, butchered bodies gradually sink into mud, into oblivion and rot, though sit in the dug- outs one on top of each other six feet high all day and night, and men must climb over corpses in every position; the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them most glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night and a week later to come back and find them still sitting and gradually putrefying therein motionless and nameless groups, That is what saps the soldierly spirit as well as poetic glory (Owen, 1918: 518).

Owen saw it as honorable duty to share the first hand experience of the deception he and others were exposed to. In “ Dulce et Decorum Est” he demonstrates the socially faithful, pleading function of the true poets. It serves as an ideological means of refuting the Georgian discourse through its redefinition of war as a dreadful and lamentable. Moreover, Owen reconstructs the Georgian ideal of happily fallen hero as, fearful

and powerless sufferers under brutal conditions. The soldiers are insensible under the burden of the war's unending torture and "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,/ Knock-kneed, coughing like hags" (Owen, 1918: 1-2) and "cursed through sludge" (Owen, 1918: 2). Far from being glorious, soldiers are exhausted, war-ridden and miserable. Soldiers walking like dead and deprived of their humanity:

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 tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind (Owen, 1918: 6-9).

While they are waiting for the attack, the soldiers are exposed to a gas attack and the only precaution they could take for the time being is "An ecstasy of fumbling" (Owen, 1918: 9) and a frantic race against time prevails. Of course there is nothing heroic by being burned by the gas. Instead of heroic acts there is "yelling out and stumbling, / And floundering like a man in fire or lime". The speaker is well aware that he will be haunted in his shell-shocked dreams by the slow and torturous death of his fellow soldier who will "In all his dreams, before his helpless sight, will plunge at him, guttering, choking, drowning" (Owen, 1918: 17).

Owen forces us to watch his anti-hero representation and challenge the people of England that if they witnessed a soldier's death, it would not be possible to speak of the ideals of glory and honor of Georgian poets:

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.

In his justification for his poetry Owen declares his mission as the true spokesman who must get the blinded world to sympathize with the tragic waste of the desperate fighting man. Similar to soldiers in "Dulce et Decorum est," Owen's fighting men in the poem are "spiritually broken" "helpless wretches" (Owen, 1918: 2). They curse and cannot even feel sickness or remorse of murder. The heavy burden of war afflicted the soldiers with unresponsiveness: "War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,/ And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child". Owen calls the world in which lives in to stop propagating the false portrayal of the soldier and to feel pity for the fighting man:

Nevertheless, except you share / With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell, / You shall not hear their mirth: / By any jest of mine These men are worth / Your tears. You are not worth their merriment.

"Insensibility" curses the civilians who "should be as Stones" to the wretchedness and suffering of soldiers. Paralyzed by the overwhelming calamity of the war, Owen's fellow soldiers have lost their youthful innocence, human sympathy and sanity. The soldiers are spiritless and have "lost imagination" (Owen, 1918: 18) The poem acts as an attack on the Georgian ideology of war and soldier. "Having seen all things red" (Owen, 1918: 22), the soldiers "eyes are rid / Of the hurt of the color of blood for ever" / Fatigued by anxiety, despair and terror, the soldiers have become dispassion.

Owen finds these lifeless, coldhearted men who "keep no more check on armies' decimation" (Owen, 1918: 17) fortunate since it is much more difficult for the alive to endure the war's vicious cycle of torture, and degradation.

Happy are men who yet before they are killed / Can let their veins run cold. / Whom no compassion fleers... / We wise, who with a thought besmirch / Blood over all our soul, / How should we see our task / But through his blunt and lashless eyes? / Alive, he is not vital overmuch; / Dying, not mortal overmuch; / Nor sad, nor proud, Nor curious at all.

When compared to the fearful hours of silent waiting for death, Owen says "Dullness best solves the tease and doubt of shelling" and "deaf and blind" Owen calls them "wretched" and "mean" and says they can not be forgiven for their "paucity" which means littleness of heart and mind.

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns, / That they should be as stones. / Wretched are they, and mean / With paucity that never was simplicity. / By choice they made themselves immune / To pity and whatever mourns in man (Owen, 1918: 49-54).

In "Mental Cases" Owen talks about stone hearts who dealt with war and madness. To create empathy among civilians, he depicts the mental devastation war has inflicted on its wretched victims. The fighting

men are paralyzed by an overwhelming sense of guilt for killing their German brothers and are exhausted of pain of silence:

These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished. / Memory fingers in their hair of murders, / Multitudinous murders they once witnessed. / Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander, / Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter. / Always they must see these things and hear them, / Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles, / Carnage incomparable and human squander / Rucked too thick for these men's extrication

War is clearly hell for modern soldiers and every second before inevitable death is a bonus. There is no hope of romantic dawns of the healing and enriching promise of "Sunlight" in their "Carnage incomparable". For them "Sunlight seems a blood – smear; night comes blood – black; and "dawn breaks open like an incurable wound that bleeds afresh." The infantrymen are destined to "sit here in twilight" and suffer between life and death, light and darkness with their "purgatorial shadows". In the last stanza, Owen makes a painful warning:

Thus their hands are plucking at each other; / Picking at the rope-knots of their scourging; / Snatching after us who smote them, brother, / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness (Owen, 1918: 25-28).

Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth" explains the theme of futility of young deaths: "What passing – bells for these who die as cattle?" The second line declares the answer to this angry question, Only the monstrous anger of the guns / Only the stuttering rifles' s rapid rattle / Can patter out their hasty orisons. / No mockeries now for them: no prayers nor bells....

Owen stresses the infectiveness and hypocrisy of the civilians' mourning for those whom they sent to die as cattle. The youth has been wasted in nameless, insignificant masses as cattle so all human mourning is mockery.

2. CONCLUSION

Poetry played a significant role to act as a powerful tool to redefine the truth of war and displayed soldiers as mere victims fallen into the hands of devastating effects of war. The ideological battle between Georgian and Modernist poets created a battlefield where discourses, representations and truths of war were displayed. The Georgians ideals were reconstructed by modernist approaches. The actual experience of trench warfare caused a serious reconsideration of Georgian romantic approaches and the deepening sense of disillusionment and alienation burdened the men at frontlines. This sense of disillusionment and alienation necessitated a new representation of the war. The mission to tell the untold truth about the war served modernist ideas and this is why Wilfred Owen should be considered as a Modernist poet.

REFERENCES

- Bell, John (1985). *Wilfred Owen: Selected Letters*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Crawford, Fred (1995). *British Poets of the Great War*. Selingsrove: Susqueshanna Up.
- Hibberd, Dominic (1994). *Poetry of the Great War: An Anthology with an Introduction*. London: Macmillan.
- Hynes, Samuel. (1990). *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. London: Bodley Head.
- Lane, Arthur. (1985) *An Adequate Response: The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen*. Detroit: Wayne State UP.
- Powell, David (1996). *The Georgian Crisis: Britain 1901-14*. London, Macmillan.
- Stephen, Martin. (1996). *The Price of Pity: Poetry, History and Myth in the Great War*. London: Lee Cooper.
- The Complete Poems and Fragments*. 2 vols. Ed. Jon Stallworthy. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984.
- Wilfred Owen. (1997). *Complete Works*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.