

Owen Sheers' 'Mametz Wood' Analysis 21st-century poet's response to World War One

Nick Phillips analyses a 21st-century poet's response to World War One.

In a recent article in emagazine, I attempted to trace the different ways in which contemporary poets had continued to return to the events of the Great War in their writing. I noted how graves and images of burial were recurring features in the work of the Irish poet, Michael Longley. Here I want to extend that discussion with a close reading of another recent poem that attempts to unearth the dead from the fields of France, 'Mametz Wood' by Owen Sheers.

The graves in Sheers' poem are not the tidy, orderly plots of military cemeteries, those we might visit on tours of the battlefield sites in Flanders or France; they are, rather, the lost and hidden graves of soldiers whose bodies were not found until many decades after the war, dug up perhaps by modern-day farmers, builders or archaeologists. The poem begins with such a scene:

*For years afterwards the farmers found them -
The wasted young, turning up under their plough blades
As they tended the land back into itself.*

This return (we might say pilgrimage) to the site/sight of burial is characteristic of many contemporary responses to the war. It may even be possible to argue that each poem is, in Sheers' phrase, an 'unearthing' of the dead in some way. Furthermore, this process of recovery is often connected to a need to heal the scarred landscapes of battle. For example, in David Constantine's poem 'A Calvary on the Somme' the way in which the earth yields up its horrors is imagined as a kind of disease; he describes how 'the ground breaks out in an eczema of iron,/ Lead and the bones of men and the poor horses'. In Sheers' poem the land has to be 'tended ... back into itself' as if it need to be healed. If we look in detail at Sheers' opening lines, the idea of the bodies 'turning up' produces a complex effect. It suggests both a casual or unexpected arrival (the way someone might 'turn up out of the blue' perhaps) but it also captures, with a degree of terrible visual accuracy, the physical process of the corpse as it appears from the earth: the casual and mundane merge with the gruesome. This tone of quiet horror is characteristic of the poem as a whole and makes it all the more effective: it is always hinting at and suggesting something. For example, later in the poem, the speaker imagines the scene in which the buried men were probably sent to their deaths, and how they walked:

*Across this field where they were told to walk, not run
towards the wood and its nesting machine guns.*

The grimly ironic way in which the men's movements are remembered prompts us to recall the incompetent orders given to many soldiers by those in command. Simultaneously, it echoes the advice given by many concerned and worried parents to their children. The effect of this is to render the men more innocent and vulnerable and to depict them both as the victims of their own innate helplessness and as the tragic victims of others' failings. Sheers' subtle and unobtrusive skill can be seen again in the image of the 'nesting machine guns'. The word 'nesting' is, at first, suggestive of care and safety - it recalls how eggs and baby birds are tended and nurtured. But this particular nest harbours only death in the form of the machine gun. Perhaps it is this forcing together of the natural 'nesting' with the mechanical 'machine' that creates the unsettling and menacing effect of the image.

One of the most impressive features of Sheers' poem is the way strands of imagery are connected throughout the poem. For example, the use of the 'nesting' metaphor already noticed in stanza three echoes the description of shattered corpse in stanza two, with its head like 'the blown/and broken broken bird's egg of a skull'. Not only does this set up a complex series of relations between images but also it manages to convey the terrible delicacy and vulnerability of the human body.

Like Michael Longley's poem 'The War Graves', Sheers' poem also explores the relationship between burial and memory. As I suggest in my discussion of Longley's poem, the delicate fragile flowers scattered among the battlefields remained the most eloquent means of accessing the past and of retaining that past through acts of memory. The final stanza of Sheers' poem dramatizes a coming together of past and present in a single moment of time. The speaker describes how the 'socketed heads' of the newly revealed corpses were 'tilted back' and their 'jaws, those that have them, dropped open'. As we read these lines, the effect is one of visceral disgust and sadness at the sight of the mangled bodies. This is particularly evident in the way Sheers uses punctuation to mention, as if in a casual, matter-of-fact aside, that many of the men's jaws had been blown away. But, despite the horror of the scene, something strange and even wonderful begins to happen as we read on. The dead men become a sort of macabre choir

*As if the notes they had sung
Have only now, with this unearthing,
Slipped from their absent tongues*

In this final image, the past and present are brought together through an act of poetic imagination and commemoration; it is as if the lost voices of the dead men are joined with the voice of the text itself.

The poem, which began in a series of grim retrievals, has become transformed into something lyrical and darkly beautiful. But even now Sheer's own 'unearthing' of these men resists a simple response. The final image reminds us of the men's 'absent tongues', that is to say both their physical mutilation and the fact that they cannot really sing or speak to us - war has silenced them and they cannot tell us what it was really like. They can only speak now through the poet, who now acts as their mouthpiece and living substitute; their voices are brought to life through his metaphors and similes. We could claim that Sheers, like many other contemporary poets, accepts the obligation to keep these lost voices alive.

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