

WILFRED OWEN AND THE GEORGIAN CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

Although critics' views on the Georgians are generally not positive, many recognise their importance in the development of early twentieth century English Literature. In this article, the role the Georgians played in the post-Victorian literary arena is touched upon. Then, given that the inclusion of Wilfred Owen in this poetic movement is a controversial subject -despite the fact that Owen saw himself as a Georgian - the views of some of Owen's better-known critics are considered and the possible influence the Georgian movement had on Owen is outlined.

RESUMEN

Aunque las opiniones críticas sobre los Georgianos no suelen ser positivas, muchos estudiosos reconocen su importancia en el desarrollo de la literatura inglesa de comienzos del siglo veinte. En este artículo, se hace referencia, en primer lugar, al importante papel que desempeñaron los georgianos en el panorama de la literatura inglesa de la época post- victoriana. En segundo lugar, y dado que la inclusión de Wilfred Owen en este movimiento poética es un tema controvertido entre los críticos - a pesar de la opinión del escritor, que se consideraba parte de él - trataremos de establecer - tras exponer las opiniones de los principales estudiosos del tema - cuáles son, a nuestro juicio, las influencias que el movimiento georgiano ejerció sobre el poeta.

Prior to examining the role the Georgians played in the literary arena of the early twentieth century, their “identity” must be established. The greatest obstacle in describing and defining them arises because their era spanned a time of great social and political upheaval which means that the word “Georgian” came to denote something different between 1910, 1914 and 1922. With the build up to, the outbreak and the aftermath of the First World War, society unavoidably underwent dramatic changes which were reflected in changing literary interests that had to be satisfied by the writers of the time. By undertaking what he describes as “an essentially historical study of the Georgians and their age,” Robert H. Ross outlines the difficulties that exist in attempting to provide an adequate definition of the Georgians.¹

Critics’ views on the Georgians are generally not positive but many recognise their importance in the development of post-Victorian English Literature.² In *The New Poetic*, C. K. Stead describes Georgian poetry as the precursor to modern poetry: “...it represented a revolt against the established poetry of the time” (81) and this is possibly why it was not widely accepted at first. On quoting writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Laura Riding, Robert Graves and Edmund Gosse, John Press gives an outline of the critical climate that prevailed during the Georgian period and comes to the conclusion that “The more one studies the Georgians the less inclined one is to write them off as mediocre upholders of a stale poetic tradition.”³ C. K. Stead remarks that many critics insist that any poet from the Georgian epoch who is admired does not really belong to the Georgian movement (88).

It may well be true, as is often said, that the Georgians were limited in their experience and therefore limited in their poetic range but this could be considered a virtue since they tried to confine their poetic boundaries to their own experiences, which signified that they wanted to be specific and tell the truth about specific things. Their aim was to bring life and poetry together, not to keep them in separate compartments that were decorated with excesses of many kinds. To be realistic meant to get back to basics and that is precisely what the Georgians intended. With the

outbreak of the war, the basics became truly horrific and the Georgians' task was to present both the horror and reality of war.

At first, as with many things, poetry was slow to respond to the effects of war and to change and as David Perkins explains in *A History of Modern Poetry*, "For at least two years the war had no important effect on poetry. Poets described the sights and incidents of war, but with methods and sensibilities carried over from peacetime. Only toward the end of the war do ideas of the nature and function of poetry begin to change - at least to expand -under the pressure of war emotions" (268). Thus, it seems that it was only with the passing of the war years that some of the war poets realised that their function could be to respond, with shock, indignation and criticism to what was happening and so the voice of intolerance towards "greed, deceit, false pride, blind unimaginativeness, selfish indifference to the suffering of others, and stupid slowness to learn from the past" was eventually raised (268). Perkins has put forward reasons why he thinks poetry took so long to change: "Trauma does not usually induce an immediate change in habits of feeling. The tendency is much rather for the old patterns to assert themselves even more. Secondly, the Georgian mode of nature poetry could not easily assimilate war and the responses it awakened ... Poetry ... had nothing to do with the war" (273-4). However, it was with great pride that Wilfred Owen considered himself to be both a soldier and a Georgian poet. At the end of December 1917, he wrote to his mother: "I go out of this year a Poet, my dear mother, as which I did not enter it. I am held peer by the Georgians; I am a poets' poet."⁴ It was poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen who began to produce poetry that reflected what war was really like for those who had to endure its hardships. It was as if through the powerful verse of men like Owen and Sassoon, the poetic landscape had suddenly been converted from a peaceful Constable-like scene into a gnarled and twisted Nash painting.⁵

Referring to a letter Wilfred Owen had written to his mother from Dunsden vicarage on 21 November 1911, in which he had stated that he had bought "a five shilling book of poetry by a modern aspirant, (unknown to me)..."⁶ Dominic Hibberd suggests that this was Owen's first

encounter with the Georgian movement since he believes that the book was undoubtedly *Before Dawn: Poems and Impressions* by Harold Monro, who was the publisher of Edward Marsh's anthologies *Georgian Poetry*. Almost two months later, Owen quoted from Monro's book in another letter.⁷ Hibberd feels that "The impact of this verse on the immature and doubting Owen must have been considerable and traces of it are evident in a number of poems he wrote in 1912 and 1913" and he names "The Unreturning", "The time was aeon" and "Impromptu" as examples of Monro's influence (29-30). "It was thus at this early stage in his career", writes Hibberd in *Owen The Poet*, "that he encountered Monro's work and not, as might otherwise be supposed, in 1915, when his letters first record a conversation with Monro in person" (14). In Hibberd's opinion, it was not only from Siegfried Sassoon that Owen learnt to write satire; Monro's work also played its part - to such an extent that echoes of Monro can even be seen in some of Owen's more Sassoon-like work. Hibberd finds similarities between a piece from Monro's *Impressions* and the final part of "The Dead-Bear" as well as early work on "The Sentry" (15 & 101). In his article "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians" Hibberd points out that a minimum of fifty percent of the twenty-two sonnets which were selected by C. Day Lewis for *Collected Poems* were written after Owen had met Monro but before his first meeting with Siegfried Sassoon (32). Thus, it seems that Monro was Owen's principal contemporary model until mid-1917, when he met Sassoon at Craighlockhart.

During the last week of October 1915, whilst Owen was in London to initiate his army training, he met Harold Monro after a poetry reading in Monro's shop. Approximately four months later, Owen had to attend a ten-day course in London and was fortunate to find lodgings in one of the two small attics over the shop. It was only on the last night of his stay there that Owen managed to speak to Monro who commented in some detail on a few of the sonnets that Owen had left him to read.

Owen's last known visits to Monro's "Poetry Bookshop" were whilst he was on leave on 8 November 1917 and then a few days later, on his way back home to Shrewsbury. In *Wilfred Owen: The Last Year*, Dominic

Hibberd suggests that it was during these two visits that Owen bought Monro's latest volume of poetry, *Strange Meetings*, and Robert Graves's *Fairies and Fusiliers* (58 & 62).

In *Wilfred Owen's Voices*, Douglas Kerr refers to Monro's *Before Dawn: Poems and Impressions* and explains that it "can be read as a sort of Georgian manifesto, inaugurating a counter-discourse to challenge a debilitated late Romanticism" (274). A few lines later, Kerr describes it as "an intelligent book, and Monro had an important lesson for Owen, showing a fresh modern idiom - plain, realist, above all not conceived with poetical decoration - and a role for the socially responsible modern poet, facing the future with the confidence of his progressive views." In Kerr's opinion, the plainer Georgian style and their experience-based poetry served Owen as yardsticks against which to measure his tendency to be over-sensuous and excessively Romantic. In other words, through the Georgians, Owen learnt to reinterpret and adapt Romanticism to his poetic needs.

Owen met Robert Graves and other important literary figures thanks to introductions from Siegfried Sassoon. He met Robert Graves at Craiglockhart War Hospital when the latter had gone there to visit Sassoon. Graves was positive in his appraisal of "Disabled" and in a letter which is reproduced in Appendix C of *Collected Letters*, he encourages Owen to carry on writing poetry. Whilst on leave in November 1917, Owen also met Robert Ross, Osbert Sitwell, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett as well as the editor of the *Daily News*.

Owen's delight at being a Georgian and becoming a "poet's poet" can be linked to the apparent subconscious need he always had to identify with somebody or something. Earlier, he had been just as happy identifying with the dead Romantic poets. As an officer in the army, he enjoyed the identity he partly shared with the soldiers and officers. Now, he was content to be a Georgian. In *An Adequate Response*, Arthur Lane describes Rupert Brooke as having been the typical Georgian: "...well-educated, socially conscious, and more bound by the conventions of his predecessors than he would have been willing to admit" (59). If one

accepts Owen as having been well-educated in the sense that he was highly motivated towards intellectual self-improvement, then he fits the description of the typical Georgian. In a paragraph that sums up the characteristics which mark off the Georgians from their immediate predecessors, C. K. Stead explains why he feels that Owen could be classed as a Georgian despite the fact that none of his work was ever published in a Georgian anthology. The characteristics of the Georgians are:

...a rejection of large themes and of the language of rhetoric that accompanied them in the nineteenth century; and an attempt to come to terms with immediate experience, sensuous or imaginative, in a language close to common speech. The work of a poet like Wilfred Owen proceeds naturally out of the Georgian method ... And poets like Sassoon, Owen and Sorley inherit the honest gentleness and openmindedness of the liberal intellectual movement out of which had come the Georgian anthologies. Observing suffering that they felt could be avoided, they attacked stupid patriotism, not with abstract argument, but with a true presentation of the facts. (88).

In “Wilfred Owen and the Georgians”, Hibberd explains that Owen’s work never appeared in Edward Marsh’s anthologies simply because he was “discovered” too late; and Marsh did not accept the work of dead authors (37). In Hibberd’s opinion, Owen rapidly became a Georgian in terms of style: “Nineteenth-century diction, vagueness and insincerity were to be rooted out, and satirised if necessary; realism, technical accuracy, and fidelity to experience were the modern goals in composition, and the lifestyle that went with them was expected to be perhaps unconventional but always plain, sincere and courageous” (*Owen The Poet*, 120). Thus, Owen abandoned his old custom of writing for the sake of writing and that was why, in his Preface, he wrote that above all, he was “not concerned with Poetry”: poetry without a message was no longer valid for him, and so he became spokesman for those who were unable to transmit their own messages in poetry.

Owen was concerned with the idea of merging life and poetry so that they could reflect reality and each other and he realised that the way to achieve this was through precise observation and accurate reporting. In order to do this, he had recourse to some of the techniques of his old

Romantic heroes: their emphasis on perception and the importance of the senses in order to appreciate things was to be a useful tool for the young army officer who hoped to become a modern and technically accurate poet. Despite a certain degree of dissatisfaction, Owen was aware that he was making changes in poetry, as can be seen from a postcard he sent to his cousin, Leslie Gunston, in February 1918: "I suppose I am doing in poetry what the advanced composers are doing in music. I am not satisfied with either" (*Collected Letters*, 531). Perhaps Owen's dissatisfaction was caused by a feeling that he had not yet quite attained the degree of "reality" he was searching for. In his article, "Brooke and Owen", Geoffrey Matthews explains how difficult it was for most Georgian poets - including Owen - to differentiate between reality and idealism:

There is all the difference in the world between a realist who understands that "reality" is an alloy and an idealist on whom ugliness presses because his only real interest is in Beauty. Almost all the Georgian poets began with this same disability - the anomalous urge to pursue Beauty in a world suddenly full of dusty streets and insurance offices - and the best of them solved the problem in their own ways. An early letter from the Army shows that Owen at first felt this problem as acutely as any; surrounded as he was by ugliness, how could he write poetry? (30).

Perhaps Dennis Welland is aware of the "reality" problem many of the Georgians had and this is possibly why he feels that Owen was not a true Georgian. In his opinion, Owen belonged to the Georgians in terms of time and in the sense that he received help and encouragement from some of them. However, his poetic style and content was far removed from that of the Georgians: "...he was engaged upon the composition of poetry markedly different from and far more important than anything the Georgians produced."⁸ Having said this, Welland also finds affinities between Georgian poetry and some of Owen's work. He makes specific reference to the poem "To Eros", which he feels resembles the Georgian style in theme, diction and imagery (40). Later, Welland draws our attention to the similarities that exist between Owen and other Georgian poets, explaining that Owen's "Purple" is reminiscent of

Brooke's South Sea poems,⁹ that "Long ages past" recalls Flecke's *Hassan* and that "The Fates" is similar to Masefield's "Forget". (The fact that Masefield's sonnet was not published until after Owen's death shows that, unknown to each other, the two men were thinking along parallel lines). Welland suggests that these similarities are due to the poets drawing on common sources because they all shared the same desire to escape from the "pressing actualities of their time." Welland observes, however, that it was "Owen alone among them [who] realised the ultimate impossibility of this" (43-45). As Robert Ross points out, the Georgians "were possessed of positive, definitive beliefs about life and art; they tried to see once again with their own eyes, feel with their own passions."¹⁰ Does Welland, like Geoffrey Matthews, feel that perhaps the Georgian beliefs about life and art were too positive and too definitive in the climate of the war?

If a Georgian line were to be traced through Owen's poetry, it would begin at Dunsden. Monro's influence in Owen's early work has already been mentioned and echoes are present from time to time even in his later pieces. Both Jon Stallworthy and Dominic Hibberd have detected similarities between Monro's work and Owen's "The Unreturning", "Strange Meeting", "Asleep", "Arms and the Boy", "The Show", and "Mental Cases".¹¹ Siegfried Sassoon substituted Harold Monro as Owen's guide in the field of poetry and introduced Owen to Robert Graves. In "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians", Hibberd reminds the reader of Sassoon's "The Daffodil Murderer", which was a parody of John Masefield's "The Everlasting Mercy" and he suggests that "A Terre" is a reflection of Masefield's piece thanks to the influence of Sassoon (34-35). Hibberd then discusses the influence of Robert Graves and refers to Owen's "The Next War" and "Asleep" and suggests that "the friendly help of Sassoon and Graves, much more than the war experience itself, helped to set him [Owen] on his feet as a mature poet" (36 & 38). Towards the end of his article, Hibberd mentions other Georgian influences that Owen was subject to:

He read in December Nichols's *Ardours and Endurances* (1917), W. W. Gibson's *Battle* (1915), and two books by Masfield ... Some of Owen's poems, particularly "Disabled", "A Terre", and "The Sentry" are close to Gibson both in spirit and in style. His first composition in 1918, "Miners", may be compared with the introductory poems in Gibson's *Fires* (1912)¹². ... In all, ten Georgians were represented on his shelves: Brooke, Chesterton ... de la Mare, Drinkwater, Gibson, Graves, Masfield ... Monro ... Nichols, and Sassoon ... his batch of Georgians was his only substantial holding of twentieth-century poetry" (38-39).

Becoming an imitator of the styles and conventions he had learnt from other poets was, however, not sufficient for Wilfred Owen and so he took the more traditional frameworks of his poetic heroes (both Romantic and Georgian) and gradually built around them in such a way that a more personal style that was better fitted to the circumstances in which he found himself emerged.

NOTES

- 1 Robert H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt - The Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal, 1910-1922*, 13-15. Chapter six, "Georgian Summer" provides detail of pre-war Georgian poetry whilst Chapter Seven, "War and the Georgians" is of particular interest when considering Owen's relationship with the Georgians.
- 2 For further reading, see Timothy Rogers, *Georgian Poetry 1911-1922: The Critical Heritage*, chapter six of Lawrence Durrell's, *A Key to Modern British Poetry*, and Neil Brennan's article "Sweet Georgian Brown", which reviews Ross's book.
- 3 John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse*, 111.
- 4 Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, 521.
- 5 Paul Nash was a promising young painter who, before the First World War, concentrated on symbolic landscapes. He served as a Lieutenant in the infantry at Ypres.
- 6 Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, 96.
- 7 Dominic Hibberd, "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians", 28-40.
- 8 Dennis Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, 32.
- 9 In an article in *The New Statesman*, 28 August 1964, Donald Davie suggest the importance of Rupert Brooke with regard to Owen and Sassoon: "...without Rupert Brooke as their foil, both Owen and Sassoon would shrink" (282-3).
- 10 Robert H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt, 1910-1922*, 117.

- 11 For further details, consult Jon Stallworthy, (ed.), *Wilfred Owen: Collected Poems and Fragments*, Dominic Hibberd, *Owen The Poet* and his article "Wilfred Owen and the Georgians."
- 12 In *Owen The Poet*, Hibberd describes "Miners" as "the first product of the fully launched poet in 1918, but his consciously Georgian phase was already nearing its end" (126).

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