

ON WAR POETRY: WILFRED OWEN VS. MEHMET AKIF ERSOY

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ABSTRACT

"War" means bargaining many innocent lives away in an outrageous bloodbath for the benefit of God-knows-whom for the ones who truly and closely have experienced it in the battlefield and it means sacrificing a few with a just cause for the good of many for the ones who have watched it in home fronts. These are the perspectives of English war poet Wilfred Owen and Turkish war poet Mehmet Akif Ersoy respectively. Owen actively participated in World War I (1914-1918) and witnessed the savagery and atrocity of the war on the hot battle ground fighting for his life, which made him realize the disparity between what is won and what is lost and question for what cause they fight. On the other hand, Ersoy was a political and religious figure during the Turkish Independence War (1919-1922), but he never actively fought in a battle. Thus, his ideas about the war remained more idealistic and hopeful about the future.

Their ideas and beliefs are reflected in their poems concerning the important war of their times. Wilfred Owen sarcastically criticizes the false assumptions and empty promises that are given to the soldiers on the battlefield in his poems such as "Dulce et Decorum Est" and reflects the brutal and apathetic side of the war. Whereas, Ersoy in his poems such as Çanakkale Şehitleri'ne (To the Martyrs of Çanakkale) and "Cenk Marşı" (Combat Anthem) encourages people to fight for their nation and supports the idea of glorious death and divine cause which is the very thing that Owen criticizes.

Key words: Mehmet Akif Ersoy, Wilfred Owen, war poetry

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There is not one country, nation or a people that has not experienced a war in their history. Tadeusz Slawek (1985) asserts that war has been considered as an "inescapable necessity of human history, indeed of human nature". These wars have been all remembered by the people not only via historical texts but also with literature, novels, poems and stories. Mehmet Akif Ersoy and Wilfred Owen are the two of those literary figures who first come into mind when it comes to the War in Turkish literature and World War I in English literature respectively. Their approaches to war, and especially to fighting for something and dying for your people, are different as a result of their different roles at the time of wars. Ersoy was a political and religious figure and believed in the

of fighting for the continuation of the country and for the wellbeing of the people. On the other hand, Owen served as a soldier during the war and witnessed the atrocity of the war on the battle ground fighting for his life. As a result, he found it difficult to embrace the idea of glorious cause and martyrdom in the face of death.

To understand that they are not at cross-purposes and to do justice to both of the great poets of their cultures, it would be best to find out and appreciate that Ersoy also condemns the war in his poems and is aware of the brutality of the war as Owen does. Though Ersoy encourages young men to fight for Islam and for the country in his poem “To the Martyrs of the Galipoli” (“Çanakkale Şehitleri’ne”), he also portrays war as an apocalypse, destroying everything that comes into its way:

Old World, New World, all the nations of men,
Like Armageddon, the whole world rages. (9-10)
...
Lightning severes horizons;
Earthquakes regurgitate the bodies of the dead; (25-26)
...
The sky rains down death, the earth swallows the living;
A terrible blizzard heaves men violently into the air...
Heads, eyes, torsos, legs, arms, chins, fingers, hands, feet,
Body parts rain down everywhere on earth.³ (31-34)

He cannot be claimed to be ignorant to the facts and savagery of the battlefield when looking at the atmosphere described in the given lines. In one of his speeches, he also stresses that their aim, the Ottoman army’s aim is only to defend as they have no other choice but to fight off the invaders. Ersoy says “It must be understood by all, enemies and allies alike that this battle, this fight is only for the defence of our land and religion” (as cited in Oba, Öztürk, & Gürbüz, 2014)⁴.

Still, he believes that it is appropriate and glorious to fight and die for your country and people in a war if it has a just cause because in his case, the Ottomans were defending their invaded lands and they had no other choice but to fight back. Another reason for his support for the war was the fact that he didn’t actively fight in a battle and he was a political and religious figure whose duty was to advocate the justness of their cause and encourage the young to join the army. All these and his religious belief, which is equally important, make him more idealistic and hopeful in his poems.

³ Translation of this poem (“To the Martyrs of Galipoli”) belongs to Michael R. Burch. For the full text, see <<http://www.thehypertexts.com/Mehmet%20Akif%20Ersoy%20English%20Translations%20Turkish%20Poet.htm>>.

⁴ All translations from Turkish to English are mine unless indicated otherwise.

He points to the need to fight for the country in his poems and speeches, for his status and position at that time required him to do so. In the course of the War of Independence, he gave sermons in different parts of the Ottoman Empire. He was a fervent Islamist, and he held the belief that this war was a "jihad" and it was a "religious obligation" to join the fight (Düzdağ, 1996). He was selected as a member of the parliament and traveled across the country (Eskişehir, Burdur, Antalya, Afyon, Konya, Kastamonu) giving sermons and speeches summoning the men of the empire to take part in the battles (Düzdağ, 1996). He also took place in a committee comprised of members of the parliament, who visited the battlefield and the trenches between 1-16 August in 1922 and he delivered speeches that would encourage and give moral support to the soldiers in the fronts (Düzdağ, 1996). He was a patriot not in the sense that he supported nationalistic views but in the sense that he supported action and participation in the battles for Islam and God. One of his speeches also explains his attitude, "We are not going to allow them to violate our rights and assault our religion. If we can't find weapons to use against those who attack fiercely towards us, we will fight them with our bare hands; eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" (Ersoy as cited in Düzdağ, 1996).

He supported the battle not only with his speeches and sermons but also with his art, poetry. One of his passionate poems, "The Battle Anthem" ("Cenk Marşı") is like a recruitment call for the young boys of the Ottoman Empire, especially the Muslim ones.

Leave your land to Allah, and go;
Cry, "To war" and the land will be saved.
It is a rare chance to fight such a holy war,
Go, my fearless soldier, farewell to you. (1-4)

Ersoy believes that it is a holy war and encourages young men referring to one of the most sacred things in Islam: Jihad. He bolsters their spirit to hearten them so that they would not cower and they would fight to the end. Later on, he continues to impassion them and consciously or unconsciously employs masculine ideals to convince them;

O brave young man, far behind the crowd
Don't halt, follow your comrade (5-6)
...
Be the roaring flood, slit through the ground,
Exceed the mountains, go beyond the hills,
Amaze the rankers with your zeal
Go, my boy, farewell to you. (13-16)

Here, he attributes superhuman features to soldiers and commends them to be "real men". His use of expressions such as "my boy", "my brave hero", "my fearless soldier" may be the indicative of the fact

that he stands by the soldiers, comforts them and sees them as "sons", which suggests that he loves and it is not his wish for them to die, but it is a must that they fight.

After convincing and encouraging the boys to join the war and fight for the country in this poem, in another one "To the Martyrs of Galipoli" ("Çanakkale Şehitlerine"), he prepares the soldiers for the inevitable end: death. He again makes use of religious notion of martyrdom and tranquilizes their fright assuring them that they will not die in vain, they will be rewarded by God hereafter, and they will save the land and the people;

What power can make religious men bow down to their oppressors
When their stronghold is established by God? (43-44)

...

The mountains and the rocks are the bodies of martyrs...(51)

...

Dear soldier, who fell for the sake of this land,(55)

...

How great you are, your blood saves the Muslims!(57)

...

Oh martyr, son of the martyr, do not ask me about the grave,

The prophet awaits you now, his arms flung wide open, to save. (83-84)

Here, he dignifies their fight and glorifies their death, presenting the soldiers as supreme, noble and the makers of the history. Not only will they be rewarded hereafter, but also in this world by being remembered and honored;

Who then can dig the grave wide enough to hold you and your history?

If we try to consign you to history, you will not fit.

No book can contain the eras you shook...

Only eternities can encompass you. (59-62)

When it comes to Wilfred Owen, he also portrays the atmosphere of the battlefield, similar to Ersoy's but focusing more on individual experience; he depicts soldiers struggling to survive in between the trenches:

Gas! Gas! Quick boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,

And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. (9-16)

His engagement in the war helped Owen explicitly reflect such a setting from the war and feelings of a soldier. However, from the biographical information, we find that Owen wouldn't have written the same kind of poetry if he hadn't joined the forces. This fact goes along with the main idea of this work which asserts that the experiences and deeds of the poets at the time of the war have clearly an impact on their literary works. "He would not hesitate to join up, he said, if he thought the war was threatening" writes Dominic Hibberd (2003) in his biography of Wilfred Owen. And after some time into the World War I, Owen writes, in one of his letters to his mother, "I *now do* most *intensely want to fight*" (as cited in Hibberd, 2003). As his enthusiasm grew, he was offered to try for a job in the War Office. Yet, Hibberd (2003) asserts, for Owen, "[t]hat would be safe, but not heroic". In October 1915, he was finally admitted to the army and in his letter to home, he wrote "I am the British Army!" (Owen as cited in Hibberd, 2003). His poem, titled as "Ballad of Purchase-Money" that he wrote before getting drafted further proves his interest and passion in joining the war and fighting,

O meet it is and passing sweet
To live in peace with others,
But sweeter still and far more meet
To die in war for brothers. (1914)

Considering his thoughts and poems about the war, the turning point in his life and in his poetry seems to be his participation in the fight. In his poems such as "Dulce et Decorum Est" his "progress as a poet from the insipid romantic imagery of his prewar poetry to the recognizably 'modern' language and sensibility shows itself" (Bogacz, 1986). In his war poems, he speaks directly from the trenches, which is why his works are regarded among the best examples of World War I poetry. And he personally believed that "every poem ... should be a matter of experience" (Owen as cited in Norgate, 1989). Thus, he only wrote what he experienced during the war,

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. (17-24)

In these lines, he does not tell us about the state of mind or the feelings of the dying soldier, but the feelings which arouse in the soldier, who might be Owen himself, watching his friend die, as he considers it appropriate only to reflect what he has seen and felt. Throughout his service in the British Army, he has witnessed much more than what he portrays in this poem. He writes in a letter to his mother,

The marvel is that we did not all die of cold. As a matter of fact, only one of my party actually froze to death before he could be got back, but I am not able to tell how many have ended in hospital. I had no real casualties from shelling, though for 10 minutes every hour whizz-bangs fell a few yards short of us. Showers of soil rained on us, but no fragments of shell could find us (Owen as cited in Hibberd, 2003).

Likewise, his statement in a letter to his mother, Susan, “I have suffered seventh hell” (as cited in Hibberd, 2003) summarizes the true face of the war.

Yet, what he truly criticizes in his poems is the idea or lie of heroism, glorious death and martyrdom. He is against the convention of promoting soldiers as “clean-limbed, young, Adonis-like, handsome young man marching off to war for King and country and happy to do so” (Baker, 2014). One of the reasons that he does not advocate martyrdom and heroism is that he is not much of a religious man. He sees religion as “false creed” (Hibberd, 2003). Still, the most important reason is his experiences in the trenches and the sights he had to see on the battlefield. In another letter, he again portrays such kind of a scene;

[E]verything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night ... and a week later to come back and find them still sitting there, in motionless groups, THAT is what saps the ‘soldierly spirit’ ... (Owen as cited in Hibberd, 2003).

Thus, after these kind of sights, he portrays in “Dulce et Decorum Est” the soldiers whose spirits are drained off and who show no signs of heroism,

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
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. (1-8)

He subverts the old, traditional understanding of the soldier as a semi-God Hero and turns it into an image of a beggar and an old hag to demonstrate that there is nothing glorious dying like that. His portrayal represents the so-called “heroic individual” who is “sunk in a passive mass army, where, indeed, his actions frequently ceased to have meaning at all, and where death was often random, hideous and futile” (Bogacz, 1986). In another poem, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, he also refutes the claim or the “lie” that martyrs will be remembered and their stories will be told through the ages with gratitude and vigor. Here, he likens the soldiers to cattle sarcastically,

What passing bells for these who die as cattle? (1)

...

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs. (5-6)

His poems can rather be called as “anti-recruitment” poems because he rejects the inflated language which is used by the “ignorant civilians” (Norgate, 1989) to encourage the young and restless population of England. Yet, he does not clearly object to the war, but objects to the lie that is told to the innocent and unlearned young. After he invites the reader, in “Dulce et Decorum Est”, into his nightmares about the dying soldier, the part where he tells us about the soldier who is killed by gas bomb and is flung in a wagon, he cries out,

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. (25-28)

In these lines, we can also sense his disappointment, for his expectations before the war about dying for your brothers and country, which he assumes to be gallant and flamboyant, as seen in “Ballad of Purchase Money”, could not be met. What he tries to achieve in his poems is to disillusion the people so that no other young man could be deceived to believe in the glory of fighting and dying for others in a war.

As for conclusion, Owen’s poems touch more on individual experience of soldiers, which might be an outcome of the mindset of the time. Under the influence of modernist understanding which gives individual and his/her experiences a higher value, Owen portrays personal experiences of soldiers. Also, with the decreasing interest and faith in religion in many Western cultures, including England, as a long-term result of technological and scientific discoveries and inventions, many people lost their faith and they were skeptical about the authenticity of God and the Christ. That’s why Owen has difficulty in coming to believe that he and other soldiers would be rewarded in the afterlife by God, which discourages and demoralizes the fighting soldiers. Yet, Ersoy believed wholeheartedly in God and His Prophet’s teachings, he had no doubt that they were fighting in the name of God and Islam just like many soldiers in the Ottoman army, who devoted themselves to the will of God. Moreover, Ersoy was living in a land under attack all around, where his people’s and country’s freedom was in danger, under which conditions individualism didn’t mean much for the people. That’s why he deals with urgent social problems like survival and freedom, and appeals to the collective mind and collective conscious in his poems.

It must be understood that their poems actually point to similar ideas though they appear to be opposing views. Their differences, as discussed above, are the result of the positions they held and the circumstances in their countries during the wars. Wilfred Owen was the soldier of an invading army in World War I, who had a close brush with death. On the other hand Ersoy was one of the religious and political authorities of the Ottoman Empire for the Independence War and World War I, whose duty

to tell the people that they had no choice but to fight because the Empire was occupied and threatened be lost. After all, despite their differences, both Ersoy and Owen have achieved to comprehend the of their time and place and to reflect their social atmospheres in their literary works.

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