The Poet as Rhetor: A Reading of Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est"

Stephen Benz
University of New Mexico

The year 2018 marks the centennial of Wilfred Owen's death and provides an appropriate opportunity for a reexamination of the poet's work. One of Owen's best-known poems, "Dulce et Decorum Est," though much anthologized, has not received the close scrutiny it deserves, particularly in terms of its linguistic and rhetorical features. While the poem's intensely felt emotions and horrific imagery capture the reader's attention at first, upon closer examination it is the artful diction, syntax, and construction of the argument that prove particularly compelling. In challenging what was considered a noble truth and in confronting an audience opposed to his message, Owen undertook a daunting rhetorical task in writing "Dulce et Decorum Est." The poem employs strategies from classical rhetoric to achieve its goal of persuading a hostile audience to rethink its acceptance of a cherished belief. In repudiating this belief, Owen helped shift the discursive frame surrounding war.

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In June 1917, as the First World War approached the three-year mark, Siegfried Sassoon issued his "Soldier's Declaration," a 236-word protest against what he considered an "evil and unjust" war. As Sassoon intended, the statement caused a volatile reaction among authorities, both civilian and military. It was discussed in Parliament and quoted in *The Times*. Official consternation over the "Declaration" was such that its author was deemed mentally unfit for further military service. Even in 1917, when the contradictions of the war were amply evident, anyone protesting the war was regarded as either traitorous or mentally

Stephen Benz (sbenz@unm.edu) has published scholarly articles on Graham Greene, Jane Bowles, and other authors, primarily focusing on Anglo-American literary encounters with Latin America. He is also known for his travel writing, including two books of travel narrative—*Guatemalan Journey* (University of Texas Press) and *Green Dreams* (Lonely Planet). Two of his travel essays appear in *Best American Travel Writing* (2003, 2015).

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unstable. A court martial was a strong possibility, but ultimately the authorities determined that Sassoon must have suffered a nervous breakdown. Accordingly, he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital, a facility for officers diagnosed with neurasthenia, or shellshock.

The "Declaration" appears in Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, the final chapter of which—"Independent Action"—reviews the process by which Sassoon composed the statement and his motivations for disseminating it. Persuasive in intent, the declaration is a good example of deliberative rhetoric in that it rejects the current state of affairs and argues for a change of policy. The performative nature of the "Declaration" is announced in its opening sentence: "I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority" (Sassoon 207). Sassoon contends that the war has "become a war of aggression and conquest" and is being "deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it" (207). The enlisted men "are being sacrificed," Sassoon claims, because of "political errors and insincerities" (207) that amount to deliberate deception. Nor are the politicians and military authorities the only ones at fault: the "sufferings of the troops" and "the continuance of the agonies" are also made possible by the "callous complacence . . . of those at home" who "lack sufficient imagination to realize" the extent of these front-line agonies (207).

Wilfred Owen, having himself suffered a series of traumas on the front lines, was already at Craiglockhart when Sassoon arrived. As an aspiring young poet, Owen was keen to meet Sassoon, who had recently published a volume of poems (*The Old Huntsman*) to some acclaim. Owen had read Sassoon's poems and knew about the "Declaration." In Sassoon, Owen found a kindred spirit, someone who was like-minded about the war and could provide him with a model for writing poems forged from his experiences at the front lines.

Shortly after first meeting Sassoon, Owen dashed off a draft of "The Dead Beat," a clear imitation of Sassoon and completely unlike the poetry Owen had written previously. For the next several weeks, Owen continued to write "Sassoonish" poems, even as he began to develop his own voice. One of the poems that Owen wrote while at Craiglockhart, "Dulce et Decorum Est," effectively summons the spirit of Sassoon's "Declaration" by giving poetic expression to its themes. Following Sassoon, Owen's poem provides graphic details of "the sufferings of the troops" in order to challenge "the callous complacence" and the insufficient imagination of those at home.

"Dulce et Decorum Est" makes a case every bit as rhetorically powerful as Sassoon's "Declaration." Indeed, it is not hard to suppose that Owen wrote "Dulce et Decorum Est" in part as a poetic counterpart to Sassoon's "Declaration." Owen addresses the same audience that Sassoon addresses. The goal, the rhetorical purpose, is the same for both texts: to change that audience's point of view about the war. "Dulce" is at once an artfully constructed poem and a skillfully constructed argument. This is decidedly harder to do in poetry than in prose. An in-depth analysis of its poetics and its rhetoric reveals the poem's sophistication and allows us, one hundred years on, to appreciate Owen's achievement.[1]

Owen wrote the first draft of "Dulce et Decorum Est" in early October 1917, while a patient at Craiglockhart. He included the draft in a letter sent to his mother, referring to it as "a gas poem" (*Selected Letters* 283). It is likely that he also showed the draft to Sassoon, though there is no record of the older poet's response. Owen revised the poem several times after he returned to military service. He died on the front lines in November 1918, just before the war ended. The poem, along with most of Owen's best work, was still unpublished at his death. Eventually, in 1920, "Dulce et Decorum Est" was included in a short posthumous collection of Owen's poems edited by Sassoon and Osbert Sitwell. It has since become one of the best-known English language poems about war, truly "one of the most passionate and influential condemnations of war in English literature" (Hibberd, *Last Year* 52).

So familiar is the poem's conclusion and its central trope—"the horror of war"—that it is easy to forget how radical the message was when Owen wrote it. Part of the greatness of the poem comes from the fact that Owen himself knew full well the radical nature of the message and his audience's likely resistance to it. Along with crafting a lyrical poem about an intense personal experience, Owen had to construct a forceful argument using a full repertoire of rhetorical strategies in order to sway that audience.

The gist of the argument is that Horace's well-known and highly regarded pronouncement ("Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori") is, in essence, a grotesque lie. At the time, Horace's sentiment was considered a noble truth. The phrase was oft-repeated during the Great War—in sermons, in newspapers, in morale-boosting speeches to the troops, in recruiting posters, and in numerous poems.[2] Anyone reading Owen's title at the time would expect another poem reaffirming Horace's glorious ideal and waxing both poetic and patriotic for the homeland. But after his experience at the front, Owen found the platitude absurd. In a letter, he translated the phrase for his mother, adding underlining and exclamation marks to indicate his derision: "The famous Latin tag means of course <u>It is sweet and meet to die for one's country</u>. <u>Sweet</u>! And <u>decorous</u>!" (*Selected Letters* 283).

To defy readers' expectations, to challenge the noble truth, to confront an audience hostile to his message—these were the daunting tasks that Owen undertook in writing "Dulce et Decorum Est." Challenging prevailing beliefs would require supreme rhetorical skill. Although Owen wrote the poem under stressful circumstances and although it is a poem heavy with emotion, "Dulce" demonstrates remarkable rhetorical and poetic control. Indeed, it is an extraordinary poem for its careful word choice, its complicated but controlled syntax, and its sophisticated argumentation. While the intensely felt emotions and horrific imagery capture the reader's attention at first, upon closer examination it is the artful diction, syntax, and construction of the argument that prove particularly compelling.[3]

The first section of the poem (lines 1–8) presents a picture of soldiers at war. It is not a pretty picture, even though these soldiers are relatively fortunate to be leaving the front lines and heading toward their "distant rest" (l. 4)—a reprieve

from the hardships of the front-line trenches. They are, however, too exhausted to feel relief or joy in the retreat. They still confront difficult conditions that cause them to curse. The worst of these conditions—and the immediate cause for their cursing—is the sludge that they must walk through, the same sludge that they have lived with day in and day out while at the front.

Owen's choice of "sludge" instead of the more common "mud" is apt, not only because "sludge" rhymes effectively with "trudge" (a rhyme that forcefully links the two words), but also because of its connotations of industrial contamination. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, sludge is "mud, mire, or ooze" that in some cases is "formed as waste in various industrial and mechanical processes" ("sludge"). This industrial connotation is appropriate given that the Great War had become "a war representing a triumph of modern industrialism, materialism, and mechanism" (Fussell 140). "Sludge" suggests this industrialism more effectively than "mud." In fact, the infamous mud of World War I did contain a variety of contaminants, as Santanu Das points out: "The mud was not just churned up earth, but compounded of organic wastes, empty shells, iron scraps and rotting human flesh" ("Slimescapes").

The bulk of the poem's first section focuses on the physical condition of the soldiers themselves. These men are suffering in the worst way, their bodies and minds severely debilitated. They are "bent double" (just like Wordsworth's leech-gatherer), "knock-kneed," and "lame." They are ill ("coughing") and so exhausted that they are virtually asleep as they march, limping on, barely conscious of their surroundings. Exhaustion has dulled their senses such that they are deaf and blind, essentially "drunk with fatigue" (l. 7).

Owen creates an image of severe debilitation, and this image is crucial for his rhetorical purpose. The soldiers we see in this scene are a far cry from the robust soldiers typically depicted in recruiting posters and propaganda—the image of soldiers that was most familiar to people back home, whose ready acceptance of the war the government needed to maintain. The official image—including the one presented in the censored press—was of strapping young men in the prime of life: strong, keen of purpose, eager, and happy to do their duty for the homeland. Examples abound; a representative British poster from early in the war depicts four hale and hearty soldiers smiling and looking sharp in their ceremonial uniforms (kilts) as they march in perfectly matched strides. They look every bit the formidable force; no knock-kneed trudging here (see **Fig. 1**).

But the soldiers that Owen describes bear little resemblance to the sanctioned imagery. As the poem describes it, the soldiers' physical condition has progressively deteriorated. They have lost their youth and are pictured in the first line as "old beggars" who cannot stand up straight. By line 2, they are not even men but "hags." This deterioration illustrates what Paul Fussell calls the "unmanning experience of battle" (161). In the first section of the poem, this unmanning occurs as the soldiers seemingly lose not just their vigor but their masculinity altogether. The lines expose the spurious idealization of soldiers in the War Office's authorized imagery and on recruiting posters designed to encourage men

Figure 1: Parliamentary Recruiting Committee poster, 1915. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WWI Posters (LC-USZC4-10911).

to enlist. The speaker of the poem and his fellow soldiers had responded to these images, fancying themselves as paragons of virility and courage.[4] Now, as veterans of the front lines, they are sorely disabused of their romanticized notions; their unmanning is inscribed on their now debilitated bodies.

Furthermore, Owen's imagery of diminishment and debilitation belies the propaganda and censored news disseminated on the home front. As Fussell has pointed out, "the press was under rigorous censorship throughout the war" (104). Likewise, Sassoon noted that "the newspaper men always kept the horrifying realities of the War out of their articles" (*Memoirs* 78). Consequently, people on the home front continually read and heard about the strong morale and high spirits among the troops. They only saw pictures of happy, vigorous soldiers at the front doing things like singing, writing, playing with pets—all to suggest that the fight was going well and that the soldiers were doing fine (the cover of *The War Illustrated* for 16 June 1917, for example, depicts smiling soldiers in their trench playing musical instruments, smoking pipes, and enjoying the company of pet cats and a dog). Laying the foundation for his case against the war, Owen presents an alternative picture of front-line conditions that directly contradicts the official view. The condition of these troops is desperate, the circumstances in the trenches dire and intolerable. Through this imagery, Owen gives a more detailed picture of what Sassoon meant by the "sufferings of the troops."

Conditions at the front are so bad—the unmanning is so complete—that the soldiers have been effectively dehumanized. This suggestion is conveyed through some surprising diction, one of several instances of carefully selected diction in the poem: in this case, the portmanteau-like neologism "blood-shod" (l. 6). Appropriately echoing "bloodshed," this hyphenated term, constructed from two words not normally joined (in a manner similar to Hopkins, whom Owen admired), draws attention to the condition of the soldiers' feet. Having "lost their boots" (l. 5)—most likely because their gear has rotted away in the sludge of the trenches—the soldiers must march barefoot, their feet now bloody and covered in sores. Owen could have said simply that the soldiers have bloody feet rather than resorting to such an unusual verbal expression. Did he have a point in choosing such unexpected language? Presumably so, for Owen would have known full well that "shod"—the past participle of the somewhat unusual verb "to shoe"—is used primarily for horses when they are fitted with shoes. In applying the word to soldiers, Owen seems to suggest that the diminishment and deterioration of the soldiers is so totalizing that they have been reduced to the level of animals, and ill-treated animals at that.[5] Thus, in the first section of the poem, the soldiers' condition has been compared first to that of old beggars, then to miserable hags, and finally to brutalized animals, each comparison a further diminishment and unmanning. At this point, the poem's first section ends ominously as shells land and explode near the soldiers, who are so exhausted and desensitized that they cannot hear the shells or immediately react to their deadly threat.

Since the poem is intensely rhetorical, it is worthwhile to examine the rhetorical techniques employed in the first section, starting with the basics of Aristotelian rhetoric: pathos, ethos, and logos. A persuasive argument, Aristotle pointed out, will necessarily include these three modes of persuasion in some form. Pathos generally refers to the audience's emotions. Ethos refers to the speaker's credibility. Logos refers to the logic or reasonableness of the argument. Together, these modes comprise the fundamental elements of Aristotelian persuasion.

Since "Dulce et Decorum Est" presents an argument and attempts to persuade the intended audience to rethink a cherished belief, we can expect the speaker to make use of persuasion's three modes. In the first section of the poem, lines 1–8, we find a strong appeal to the emotions (pathos) conveyed primarily through intensely emotional imagery. The audience is meant to empathize with the plight of the soldiers and to react with horror to the description of their desperate condition. Diction enhances the strong emotional appeal, as Owen's speaker chooses harsh-sounding words, such as "beggars," "knock-kneed," "hags," "sludge," "trudge," and "blood-shod." These words with their hard consonants are especially forceful in conveying the trauma of the experience. In short, the moving depiction enables the audience to share in the experience.

The first section also includes appeals to the speaker's credibility—the mode of ethos. As Aristotle pointed out, an argument is more likely to be persuasive if the audience finds the speaker credible. The speaker must have credentials that enable him to speak with authority on a given topic. In "Dulce et Decorum Est,"

the speaker establishes this credibility through eyewitness testimony: he has been at the front; he has witnessed these things personally. The use of the first-person plural indicates that the speaker has been a participant, one of the soldiers experiencing the nightmarish conditions at the front. He knows whereof he speaks. His eyewitness credibility is enhanced by his familiarity with the details of the scene. He knows that certain shells are called "five-nines," for example, and he speaks with specificity ("sludge," "flares," "hoots").

A speaker's credibility with an audience also derives from his speaking abilities: the artful use of language can help sway an audience, as the audience comes to recognize the speaker's authority, at least in part, through his skills as an orator. Here, we recognize an important quality of the poem: It is delivered in an oratorical manner with the characteristics of a speech in the high style. The presentation is dramatic; the oratory is declamatory. The poem begins with a thirty-three-word sentence of suspended syntax, constructed in the periodic or Ciceronian style. The core of the sentence—"we cursed" (l. 2)—appears only after four subordinate qualifying phrases. Even after the core, the sentence continues with a dependent clause whose subject and predicate ("we turned"; l. 3) are also delayed. The entire sentence leads up to the moment when the soldiers can actually begin to move, a movement that occurs with the sentence's final word, "trudged." In its structure, this sentence conveys the slow, unsteady, painful preparation for the long march back to the relative safety of base camp. The meter of these lines also reinforces the difficulty of the soldiers' trudging by relying on spondees and supernumerary beats that "perform the extra step each man must take" (Martin 49).

Such carefully devised sentence structure reveals—as periodic sentences tend to do—that deliberate thought has gone into this statement. The audience can trust that the speaker has ruminated on the matter at hand and is now speaking with justification. This oratorical style enhances both ethos and logos. Even if there is no direct appeal to reason or logic in the first eight lines, the presentation appears reasonable simply because it has been so carefully crafted. Logos will feature more prominently later in the poem.

After the first long sentence—running the length of a quatrain—Owen's speaker continues in an oratorical mode. The long sentence is followed by—and offset by—an emphatic three-word sentence: "Men marched asleep" (l. 5). This terse sentence provides dramatic counterpoint to the previous extended sentence. Immediately, the tone becomes dramatic and heroic: "Many had lost their boots, but limped on, blood-shod" (l. 6). The skillful orator is heightening his appeal to the audience's emotions, mixing heroism with pity.

The final sentence of this section of the poem continues the balanced constructions typical of a high (and highly rhetorical) style. Isocolon, parallelism, and alliteration are all operating here: "All went lame, all blind; / Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots / Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind" (ll. 6–8) Once again, the audience can hear the speaker's rhetorical control. His credibility as both a witness and an orator is firmly established.

For all the demonstrated control, however, something slightly off key appears in the final two lines of the first section. An alert audience (or reader) might notice that during the sentence beginning "all went lame," the speaker's control wavers ever so slightly. Yes, the phrasing displays balance, parallelism, and alliteration; but after the strong emphatic start to the sentence, subsequent phrases are hesitatingly added, with semicolons inserted to indicate pauses. These pauses hint at uncertainty, as if the speaker is grappling with the content. Verbs go missing, and the sentence turns into a sort of list—*lame, blind, drunk, deaf.* This list is artfully constructed, to be sure, employing as it does the devices of the high style. Nevertheless, there is a slight wobble, as if the speaker is disturbed by the memory that he relates—or distracted by the incoming shells that now demand attention. As the first section ends, the speaker is seemingly still in control of the oratory; but now something threatens to disrupt his delivery.

The imminent disruption explodes—literally—at the beginning of the poem's second section (lines 9–16). The carefully constructed speech of the first section is now interrupted by a sudden cry that awakens the trudging soldiers from their exhausted stupor: "Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling / Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time" (ll. 9–10). Whereas the first section of the poem was related in the past tense, these lines lack tense-marked verbs, suggesting that the action is more immediate. Instead of a measured recollection, the voice now speaks with panic, and the delivery is dramatic and intense, as though the event is happening in the moment. The eloquent and confident oratory with which the speaker began suddenly dissipates. It is as if the speaker is experiencing a waking nightmare—or, in contemporary terms, a PTSD episode—right before the audience's eyes.[6]

But there is also an odd note to the enactment of this apparent panic attack: the word "ecstasy" is striking given the context. It is Latinate (whereas most of the poem is solidly Anglo-Saxon). It does not seem appropriate for someone in the throes of a nightmare or PTSD flashback, nor does it seem apt to describe soldiers struggling to put on their gas masks as deadly gas envelops them. This word could only be arrived at after careful thought, the kind of word that a poet might settle on after mulling multiple options. Is this then a staged moment, a dramatization of a shell-shocked soldier reliving a war scene? Perhaps the speaker has deliberately resorted to a dramatic interruption of his orderly speech as a way of startling the audience into a better understanding of what the terrifying moment was like—the dramatization thus being yet another rhetorical device.

Whatever the interpretation, there is still the question: why "ecstasy"? In what sense does the word fit the moment? Undoubtedly, Owen is using the word in its most general sense, the primary definition as given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "the state of being 'beside oneself,' thrown into a frenzy or a stupor with anxiety, astonishment, fear, or passion." (The *OED* cites examples for this usage from Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Disraeli.) The sense of frenzy or fear certainly describes the soldiers' emotional state at the moment the gas shells explode, making the word appropriate for the context in terms of denotation. Still, there

is a question concerning connotation, namely the prevalent use of the word to reference the fourth condition listed in the *OED*'s definition—"passion"—which has all but superseded the other conditions. As the *OED* recognizes, "ecstasy" is now used chiefly to mean "intense or rapturous delight." Even in Owen's time, this connotation was emerging as predominant, so Owen likely knew that the word would seem incongruous to his audience. Given Owen's close attention to diction (not only in this poem but in all his work, including his letters), it seems likely that he deliberately chose the multivalent word "ecstasy" over another word, such as "frenzy," that would fit the context without dissonance. Perhaps Owen wanted to evoke the jarring sense of "rapturous delight" as an ironic commentary. Perhaps, too, the soldiers—being mostly young men—often had rapturous delight on their minds during the miserable, dreary, chaotic, and frightening hours in the trenches as they dreamed of lovers back home and imagined the "ecstasy of fumbling" with a lover's clothes or body. But those lovers are faraway and inaccessible. Clumsily fumbling with gas masks in a frenzy of fear is the only ecstasy available to them at the front.[7]

The poem reaches a false calm at the end of line 10 with the words "just in time." A semicolon forces a momentary pause, emphasizing the relief that comes with "fitting the clumsy helmets just in time" (l. 10) and narrowly escaping exposure to the poisonous gas. The speaker and his comrades can literally—and safely—take a deep breath. The frenzy subsides for the time being. But the relief is merely temporary. A semicolon indicates further action is pending.

Indeed, the nightmare has only just begun: One soldier has been exposed to the gas, sucking it into his lungs, and undergoing a torturous death. With intensified pathos, the speaker describes these death throes in detail. Just before the explosion, he and his comrades had been deaf and blind; now visual and auditory powers are fully restored as they vividly see and hear the gassed soldier's trauma. Forced to view the scene, the speaker likewise compels his audience to look and listen, exacting not only pity but also horror and perhaps disgust. This is what the front is like, the speaker effectively says. Look closely, do not turn away. Rhetorically, this description is an example of *enargia*, the rhetorical term for an extended, visually powerful description used for persuasive purposes.

It is a strange scene, fraught with uncanny sensations. The misty glass of the mask is greenish and gives a greenish aqueous tint to the scene.[8] The dying soldier yells, stumbles, and flounders. Owen's choice of "floundering" provides another example of his careful, resonant, and apt diction. The word (which Sassoon also used in a few poems) suggests violent and clumsy struggling, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which adds "as in mire" to the definition. The word thus recalls the mire or sludge of the first section.[9]

Next, Owen vividly compares the dying man's contortions to those of "a man in fire or lime" (l. 12). One can readily visualize a man stumbling in fire (this one without the divine protection accorded Daniel), but "in lime" is more unusual. Presumably, Owen has in mind chloride of lime, the chemical commonly called lime, which is used as a disinfectant. During the war, lime was also used to hasten

decomposition of corpses that could not be easily buried. Read in context, then, the image suggests a man who is as good as dead and already in the process of decomposition. Conversely, a soldier who had seen bodies in lime, as Owen had, might also envision a decomposing corpse suddenly reanimated and now stumbling and floundering about. Either way, it is a nightmarish, ghoulish image and no doubt quite disconcerting to Owen's intended audience, a home population that has been shielded from the true imagery of the war. In his "Declaration," Sassoon asserted that "those at home" did not have "sufficient imagination" to perceive these conditions. Owen's description provides their imagination with the appropriate details.

For the speaker, this commitment to truth-telling comes at a price. It forces him to relive the trauma of having witnessed this horror at close hand. The tone here becomes hallucinatory: the description of the floundering soldier trails off, trance-like, into ellipses. The punctuation suggests that the vision he has summoned has stymied the speaker, leaving him mesmerized and momentarily unable to continue. Once the speaker is able to resume the narration, the personal significance of the trauma becomes evident. Having previously spoken in first person plural as a representative of his fellow soldiers, he now speaks just for himself, using first person singular. An incantatory, left-branching sentence builds through two prepositional phrases to the climactic statement, "I saw him drowning" (l. 14). This declaration of eyewitness testimony, the first use of "I" in the poem, lends credibility to his case and underscores the speaker's ethos in these matters.

The next lines (15–16) are set apart as a two-line stanza, as if to emphasize their significance. The lines do, in fact, introduce a crucial shift in scene from the speaker's battlefield memories to his ongoing dreams. The traumatized speaker reveals that in his dreams—*all* his dreams—he relives the horrifying moment of the gassed soldier's death. Moreover, the dying soldier plunges directly at the speaker as though he, the speaker, is singled out, his helplessness called to account. Still mesmerized, the speaker says, "He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning" (l. 16).

This line, which brings the second section to a close, is noteworthy for several reasons. First, the word "guttering" continues Owen's penchant for unusual but apt diction. In this case, the word (from the verb "to gutter," meaning "to melt away rapidly," as a candle "becoming channelled on one side and the tallow or wax pouring down" [*OED*]) connects metaphorically to the image of "a man in fire" (l. 12). The gassed soldier, his lungs seared by chemicals, is in a sense burning and melting down as he gasps and chokes for air.[10] Second, the present tense appears for the first time, shifting the action from the concluded physical event to the ongoing psychological consequences of the event. Third, it is a long line of twelve syllables (though still pentameter). As such, it takes longer to deliver, as though the speaker is unable to shake the image as he recites the three participles (indicating continuous action) that draw out the soldier's agonizing death.[11]

The third of these participles—"drowning"—brings the second section to a close, albeit in a curious way. Line 16 ends with the speaker repeating the same word that had ended line 14. The word "drowning" in effect rhymes with itself.

The rhetorical effect of this instance of *conduplicatio* (repetition of a key word) is to suggest that the speaker cannot escape the haunting image of the dying soldier. The repetition reinforces the speaker's claim that he relives the nightmare over and over in all his dreams. The gassed comrade is drowning and drowning still; he goes on drowning. As Daniel Hipp puts it, "The repetition of 'drowning' at the expense of conventional rhyme emphasizes the persistence of the visual image within the poet's unconscious mind" ("By Degrees" 37). The speaker is stuck in the moment, and in his mesmeric trance he repeats himself, unable to find another word; "drowning" is seemingly the only word that fits.

Just as the vision threatens to stymie him into a kind of spiritual catatonia, Owen's speaker gathers himself together—"snaps out of it" as it were—and delivers the powerful statement that concludes the poem. This third section of the poem (lines 17–28) consists entirely of one carefully constructed sentence, ninety-two words long.[12] Involving periodic suspension, climax, and parallelism, it is a statement of consummate rhetorical skill. The sentence is predicated on three "if" clauses leading up to a syllogistic "then" clause (although the word "then" is implied).

Starting with line 17, the speaker directly addresses the audience, using the second person "you." The speaker posits three conditional premises: (1) if you could pace; (2) if you could watch; and (3) if you could hear. These premises are couched in the conditional because the speaker knows full well that his home-front audience cannot do these things—pace, watch, and hear—not as the speaker and his comrades on the front lines have done. In the poem's first section, the soldiers were depicted as lame, blind, and deaf; now it is the audience—the public back home—that is blind and deaf and unable to pace, or "walk in the shoes" of the soldiers. The speaker intends to stir the audience from their unaware state with his graphic description of the gas attack and its consequences. Once again, Owen is supplying the "sufficient imagination" that Sassoon had said "those at home" lacked.

As the premises are presented, the speaker details the scene that follows his comrade's exposure to gas. Not quite dead, the soldier is flung into a wagon. His white eyes writhe. Frothy blood spews from his mouth, and a horrific gargling comes from his throat, the sound of which penetrates the gas helmets that the surviving comrades are wearing. This description is presented in such a way as to maximize audience reaction—an extreme appeal to the audience's emotions (pathos). The extremity is necessary because of the audience's deafness and blindness, their insufficient imagination and total lack of awareness of conditions at the front. Only shocking them with graphic details will succeed in getting their attention.

The presentation of these graphic details in the third section of the poem merits its close examination. In line 20, the dying soldier's "hanging face" is compared to a devil's face. The principal point of the simile—that the disfigured soldier is horrible to look upon—is clear enough. But the comparison also suggests that the gassed soldier is seemingly possessed, his body taken over by evil.[13] Metaphorically, in the speaker's mind, this is true, for evil—the evil of war—is responsible for the soldier's death.

The simile is even more complex, however, for the devil's face in this case is "sick of sin" (l. 20). We are meant to imagine what a devil's face would look like if it were appalled at and disgusted by sin. What sin could be so monstrous? The suggestion is that sin and horror have become so prevalent on the battlefields of the Great War that even a devil who ordinarily revels in sin has now become repulsed by it. Moreover, the description presents a subtextual rhetorical question: If a devil is repulsed by the sin of this war, how can Owen's audience persist in its support? The implication: the public has a greater tolerance for the horror of war than even a devil.

Another startling, disturbing image in this section is "the cud of vile incurable sores" referenced in line 24. Drafts show that Owen reworked these lines considerably more than other lines in the poem, moving away from what originally was quieter and more refined imagery to the harsher imagery of the final version.[14] Apparently, Owen wanted to intensify the shock value of the *enargia*. On the most literal level, "cud" refers to "the blood … gargling from the froth corrupted lungs" (ll. 21–22) that fills the soldier's mouth and spews from it. This bodily matter is comparable to the digestive matter that a cow regurgitates, commonly called a cud.[15] But this cud is a "cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues" (ll. 23–24); the phrasing indicates something much more persistent and inimical than a regurgitated cud.

On one level, these are physical sores acquired as a consequence of the brutal conditions of trench warfare. On another level, they are metaphorical sores, spiritual wounds to match the physical sores. Moreover, it appears that the gassed soldier is not the only one who experiences the bitter cud, for the cud of sores plagues many tongues, not just one. Because the cud of sores is both literal and metaphorical, the poem is suggesting that the psychological and spiritual damage all soldiers suffer is as horrible as the physical suffering of the dying soldier. The afflicted tongues are "innocent." How so? Because the soldiers enlisted under a delusion—victims of deception, as Sassoon asserted in his "Declaration." The speaker and other "innocent" soldiers have been psychologically gassed and are suffering the consequences.

Another level of meaning might be relevant here. The word "cud" brings to mind the well-known expression "to chew the cud," meaning "to ruminate, to think reflectively" (*OED*). The speaker has chewed on the bitter cud of his experiences and has come to the conclusion that the war is "evil and unjust" (Sassoon's words) and that the soldiers are suffering "vile, incurable" damage—physically and psychologically—as a consequence. For those soldiers who, like Owen, have experienced shellshock, "chewing the cud" involves a kind of continual regurgitation, or reliving of their nightmarish experiences. Owen is calling on the audience to think reflectively, so that they might better understand the soldiers' experiences. In effect, the poem forces the audience to chew the same bitter cud.

In this sense, the cud can also represent wartime propaganda—the bitter and vile regurgitated platitudes, euphemisms, and outright falsehoods that the public

continually digests. The soldiers have swallowed such propaganda, too; their innocent tongues recited it and accepted it as true, leading them to enlist. At the front lines, they have been disabused; the cud of propaganda that they chewed has led to incurable sores. The public, however, is still swallowing it, unaware of its deleterious effects. Taking all these possible interpretations into consideration, "cud" is an unusual and powerful image, one that has been chosen carefully for its multilayered suggestiveness.

The image of the "vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues" closes out a long series of prefatory phrases and clauses leading up to the sentence's core: "You would not tell . . ." (l. 25). Before we can learn what would not be told, however, the intricate periodic sentence delays revelation for three more phrases ("with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory" [ll. 25–26]). At last the direct object for "tell" appears. What would not be told? "The old Lie" (l. 27). The sentence—indeed, the whole poem—has built dramatically, pointedly, and suspensefully to this word, a word capitalized for further emphasis.

All that is left is to name the Lie: It is "the famous Latin tag," "Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori" (ll. 27–28). Calling this lauded and oft-recited pronouncement a lie will disturb and perhaps shock the intended audience. The speaker's rejection of Horace will be met with a moment of disbelief, for these well-known words have all the authority of classical wisdom. They have been used repeatedly to honor soldiers such as the speaker's gassed comrade. They express a cherished sentiment, a truth that politicians, military leaders, churchmen, journalists, and citizenry—even poets—have embraced and held dear. In the public mind, they are noble words, refined words, inspirational words.

Despite the public's faith in Horace's aphorism, it is impossible to maintain this faith, for a voice stronger and more compelling than Horace's has spoken. The careful preparation for this moment of judgment; the evidence that has been marshaled; the imagery that has been presented; the passionate delivery; the carefully chosen language—all these rhetorical moves preempt any objection and demand that the audience accede to this repudiation of the Latin poet. Horace's words are no longer tenable. Forcefully rejected, they have lost credibility. The seemingly noble sentiment has been exposed as a platitude at best and at worst, a vicious lie.

Although this repudiation of Horace is delivered forcefully and with righteous indignation, the speaker's anger is tempered by another rhetorical move. As Aristotle advised, to establish ethos a speaker should exhibit goodwill toward the audience, which Owen's speaker does by addressing the audience as "my friend" (l. 25).[16] In doing so, the speaker signals his concern for maintaining a personal connection with the audience. Addressing the audience as "friend" mitigates the accusatory tone, even as the speaker points out that the friend has been all too enthusiastic and energetic in repeating Horace's false platitude "with high zest."

According to line 26, "the old Lie" has been and continues to be told "to children ardent for some desperate glory." Here, the Latinate word "ardent" stands out, since much of the poem's language has been resolutely Anglo-Saxon (along with

a handful of words of French origin, e.g., "glory"). But Owen deliberately chooses an appropriate Latinate word to match the Latin text that the poem repudiates. While in English "ardent" is used to mean "enthusiastic" or "passionate," the Latin root contains the notion of burning (*ardere*, to burn; *OED*). The idea of "burning with passion" is familiar enough and likely the most immediate interpretation suggested by the word. But within the context of the poem, the word becomes horrifically ironic. The poem's exemplum has presented the audience with a gassed soldier who, "like a man in fire," guttered as he died. In essence, the soldier burned up, consumed in searing gas as though consumed in flames. His fate—the fate of too many soldiers who have died for their country—has been to suffer a death neither "dulce" nor "decorum." Ardent for glory, burning for glory, these soldiers—innocent children in Owen's view—end up burning to death. It is the example par excellence in Owen's corpus of what Kerr calls Owen's "favored rhetorical tactic" of "a dramatic irony of false expectations" (295). Throughout the poem, Owen has carefully chosen words with layers of meaning, deepening the poem's implications. Here at the climactic moment, Owen draws on a key word's Latin roots (right before he challenges the words of a Latin poet) to underscore the bitter, ironic truth that the poem reveals.

Along with this mastery of language and sophisticated use of diction, the poem's third section displays consummate rhetorical skill. Logos, used sparingly in the first two sections, emerges forcefully in this third section, where it provides a structural framework for the intense pathos of the *enargia*. Constructed syllogistically, the speaker's argument is set up as an "if-then" proposition. To paraphrase: "If you could walk where I have walked, if you could see what I have seen, if you could hear what I have heard, then you would not repeat the old Lie." Because people on the home front have not actually experienced the conditions of the speaker's proposition, they continue to tell the old Lie. It has therefore been the speaker's burden to transfer the experience to the audience—to use vivid imagery and language in such a way that the audience will recognize the truth. This is why Owen's speaker uses such intense imagery: he must make sure that his audience will know, as viscerally as possible, what it was like to pace, watch, and hear as the speaker himself has done. If he successfully conveys the horror to the audience, they will have to acknowledge the validity of the speaker's claim, and they will necessarily abandon their firmly held belief in Horace's platitude. The speaker has led the audience to an ineluctable conclusion.

One final point concerning ethos: Owen's poem demonstrates what might be called "*ex post facto* ethos." For all that Owen's speaker does to exhibit ethos within the poem, the most notable aspect of the poem's ethos—its strongest exhibition of moral virtue—comes after the fact as a result of the poet's death. The story is well known. Lieutenant Owen died on November 4, 1918—one week before the armistice—while leading his platoon in an attempt to cross a canal and attack the enemy line. In Owen's case, death came not from poisonous gas but from machine gun fire. One week after his death, on November 11, 1918, news of Owen's death was delivered to his family even as the bells were ringing to celebrate the signing

of the armistice. Thus Wilfred Owen died for his country. His credentials—his ethos—cannot be contested; no one has more credibility to comment on and repudiate Horace's platitude than someone who has in fact died serving his country in battle. Owen's death retroactively endows his argument with even greater ethos; by dying in service to his country he has assumed an unassailable moral authority on the subject. As Arthur Lane puts it, "In his death as a man, and in his life as a poet, he gave example of the end of man's most pernicious myth: the glory of death in battle" (167).

Eventually, Owen's repudiation of Horace helped change the general view of the First World War and wars to come. Most war literature that followed would abandon the "glory of war" trope in favor of Owen's "horror of war" trope (e.g., Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Heller's *Catch-22*).[17] A hundred years after his death, many readers are more apt to think of Owen than of Horace when they encounter the phrase "dulce et decorum est." Though he did not live to know the outcome of his efforts, Wilfred Owen succeeded through his art, his rhetoric, and his life in giving the lie to "the old Lie."

Notes

1. "Dulce et Decorum Est" has generated plenty of previous commentary—no surprise given the poem's renown—but few critics have analyzed the poem as a whole. Among those that do, Stallworthy briefly addresses the poem's overall structure, while Martin focuses primarily on its metrical and sound structure. A common critical approach is to discuss "Dulce et Decorum Est" as it relates to thematic and prosodic concerns in Owen's corpus (see Lane, Hibberd, and Kerr). Other commentators (e.g., Fussell, Hipp, Das, Silkin) examine the poem in light of prevalent themes and issues evident in First World War literature as a genre. While it is common to describe "Dulce et Decorum Est" as "argumentative" or "polemical," no study that I know of discusses the poem as an argument or a polemic, that is, as an example of deliberately constructed rhetoric.

2. There are many examples of the prevalence of the phrase at the time. According to Hibberd, "Many patriotic versifiers had quoted the Latin tag" (*Owen the Poet* 114). See, for example, the anthologies of soldiers' poems entitled *Songs of the Fighting Men*. The 1916 and 1917 editions of the anthologies both contain patriotic poems entitled "Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori." Writing in *The Times* in 1918, Kipling called Horace's line "the best-known line of war poetry in all the world" (qtd. in Cuthbertson 163). According to Hibberd, Owen heard a commanding officer quote Horace in a motivational speech (*Wilfred Owen* 171–172).

3. Several different versions of "Dulce" appear in print. This study uses the edition edited by C. Day Lewis.

4. In the poem "Disabled," a soldier imagines himself "a god in kilts" when he puts on the ceremonial uniform. During battle, however, he loses his limbs. Douglas Kerr notes that the before/after rhetorical pattern in "Disabled" is the antithesis of drawings in *Punch*, which typically depicted "the metamorphosis of the mild or fastidious civilian into the grubby and formidable Tommy" (300). A similar reversal occurs in "Dulce et Decorum Est." Like "Disabled," it "reverses the militarist myth that the army turns boys into men" (Kerr 300).

5. Horse imagery is germane to a depiction of suffering in the First World War, given that horses numbered among the casualties. According to *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, the British lost 484,000 horses in the war (Holmes 417). Graphic descriptions of equine death feature prominently in *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

6. Cuthbertson mentions the frequency of screams in the night at Craiglockhart (182). Similarly, Hibberd notes that Owen saw many patients reliving terrible episodes of the war at the hospital, where "sudden shouts and hurrying feet would echo down the corridors" (*Last Year* 20).

7. Another possible interpretation: many soldiers have reported that there is something like an energizing joy or euphoria in having faced and survived imminent danger. In his letters, Owen himself noted the phenomenon, using words such as "exultation" and "exhilaration" to describe his sensations while in the midst of heavy fighting (Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen* 293, 351). In this sense, too, "ecstasy" is a jarringly appropriate word.

8. In *Undertones of War*, Blunden reports that gas mask goggles "seemed to be inevitably veiled with moisture" (24)—another, more literal way in which vision through the mask would be dim and misty.

9. The word "flounder" can also be used for horses—which Owen, a Shropshire lad, may well have known—meaning "to rear, to plunge" (*OED*). Perhaps there is a faint echo of "shod" in the poem's first part. If so, its choice here would reinforce the previously established trope of dehumanization.

10. The word also equates the soldier with an inanimate object, a candle, thus indicating one more step in the process of unmanning and dehumanization.

11. Cuthbertson points out a key linguistic feature of this section of the poem: "All the –ing words, 15 in 28 lines, serve to emphasize that the trenches are still very much present, returning uninvited and unwelcomed at night" (183).

12. For purposes of analysis, I have chosen to divide the poem into three parts. Other commentators regard it as a two-part poem. Stallworthy, for instance, considers the first sixteen lines the "*exemplum* … followed by a *moralitas* of passionate indignation" in the final twelve lines. Stallworthy's terms here are helpful for understanding the rhetorical structure of the poem.

13. In a letter from the front, Owen says that all soldiers, himself included, are "devil ridden" (*Selected Letters* 217).

14. The original lines read, "And think how, once, his head was like a bud / Fresh as a country rose, and keen, and young" (Fussell 369). According to Fussell, the original lines "presented a considerably more attractive picture" (369).

15. Here then is another word in the poem normally used for animals but now applied to the soldiers in their dehumanized state. Owen frequently used animal imagery in describing soldiers and their condition. One of the most notable uses of animal imagery in his poems occurs in the first line of "Anthem for Doomed Youth": "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" (*Collected Poems* 44).

16. Draft versions of the poem indicate that Owen originally intended to single out one member of that audience: Jessie Pope, a patriotic poet well known for her verses urging on the troops. The first draft of "Dulce et Decorum Est" is dedicated to Pope. Later drafts drop her name in favor of the dedication "To a Certain Poet."

17. Many passages in *A Farewell to Arms* sound notably Owenesque. For example: "I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyard at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it" (177).

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