

ANDREW M. MILZ

Of Cavalries, Calvaries, and Wilfred Owen's "Greater Love"

Many studies of Wilfred Owen include a touching yet eerily ironic photograph.¹ The picture is of a small boy, about six years old, dressed as a soldier and standing at attention with his wooden gun over his shoulder and his toy sword at his side. His left arm is at rest as if he had just saluted the photographer. His hat, embroidered with a star and crowned with a flowing tassel, sits snugly on his head, the chin strap digging in just below the bottom lip to produce an unnaturally serious scowl. He stands tall and proud as if to imagine himself a party to great adventures in India or Africa at the noble service of her majesty. The photograph, of course, is of Owen, in what was perhaps his favorite outfit, considering this was a time when young boys reveled in the imperialist fervor of Victorian Britain. Owen's mother, Susan, made this outfit for him (H. Owen 1: 99). Although it is doubtful she wished that her son would one day be a soldier, Susan's desire to have young Wilfred look the part reveals the high aspirations she maintained for her children. Ever class-conscious, she felt that her first-born son was ordained for greatness and would be a well-regarded gentleman one day. Looking at her child at the age of innocence, Susan could not have imagined that he would indeed become a famous soldier in the Great War and die, tragically, a week before the war's end.

Susan enjoyed arraying young Wilfred in the clothes she made for him (Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen* 21). In addition to the soldier outfit, another of Susan's homemade

articles of clothing, the ceremonial robes of an Anglican bishop, is significant to Owen's story. We have no picture of this outfit, so Wilfred's brother (and first biographer) Harold Owen's description of the outfit from his biography *Journey From Obscurity* must suffice:

My mother was kept busy making altar clothes, stoles, and a perfectly fashioned small linen surplice, all most beautifully worked for she was a superb needlewoman. Finally she made a bishop's mitre. This was most extraordinarily effective; it was made from Bristol boards, white and glossy and cunningly enscrolled [sic] with gold paint. (1: 150-51)

This outfit was not just for show. "Wilfred's Church," as Harold remembers it, was a Sunday event at which the young poet would preach to his family as if the Owens' small sitting room was a church. With absolute reverence and decked in his bishop's garb, young Wilfred read Bible passages and delivered sermons he prepared for the event; all done with Susan's encouragement (H. Owen 1: 151). The evangelical Susan, one can suspect, had serious wishes for her son becoming a bishop one day (Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen* 21). She could have never anticipated Wilfred's flight from the lofty faith in which he was reared.

Wilfred Owen did attain greatness. Not as a soldier or a bishop as his mother might have imagined, but as a poet. Like a flare burning for a short time above the fray, Owen's artistic career was short-lived and intense. Yet the poems he composed in a matter of twenty-one months between January 1917, when he first reached the Western Front, and his death on November 4, 1918, are some of the most moving pronouncements on war in the English language. In horrific detail they speak of the brutality and destruction of battle. Through verse that wrestles with the rigidity of classical forms as it stretches toward modernism, the poems capture a snapshot in time when the world itself was undergoing seismic changes. By manipulating classical traditions and beliefs about poetry and warfare, Owen reveals hypocrisy, routs patriotic blather, and undoes popular notions of "just" warfare. And with compelling realism his poems tell a tale of sacrifice and love between men still not completely comprehensible by those who did not experience the war for themselves.

Not to be overlooked in Owen's catalogue is the personal story each poem tells; the biographic puzzle pieces that provide insight into his poems. As part of this puzzle, the soldier's outfit and homemade bishop's robe are emblematic of two of the most profound subjects of Owen's poetry: war and religion. The war is an inseparable theme of his poetry and is certainly the theme that brought him fame.

The voice of the youth well versed in the teachings of the church is a shade subtler, yet ever present. There were, of course, times when the soldier and the acolyte struggled to emerge as one voice (Kerr 4). But they did emerge to add layers of salient meaning to a blood red and muddied canvas of war.

This article addresses the tension between soldier and acolyte and how a single physical object, the crucified Christ in statuary—itsself a symbol of both savagery and faith, appears and reappears throughout Owen's poems and comes to symbolize conflicting views on, among other things, politics, religion, and war. Real embodiments of symbolic irony, the wayside calvaries of the battlefields of France were a perfect study for Owen and contributed to his development of a war hardened (and distinctly modern) sensibility. Nowhere is this more evident than in "Greater Love," a war poem in which the cross's physical and thematic presence dominates—but is largely ignored by critics, as its presence seems out-of-place in an orthodox reading of the poem. The modern reader can better appreciate the complexities of "Greater Love" by understanding that the poem's "cross" is appropriated in equal parts from the "crossroad crucifixes" of the Western Front and the religion of the poet's youth.

The Problematic "Cross" in "Greater Love"

"Greater Love" contains many of the themes that run through much of the young British poet's limited volume of war poems: a soldier's sacrifice for his countrymen at home, an elevation of the camaraderie of young men at war to a level above that of typical friendships and even heterosexual love, a horrific depiction of the ravages of war on the human body, an ironic view of the place of God on the battlefield, and the waste and pity of war in general. In these lines, critics have seen glimpses of Owen's influences and source material, his evangelical upbringing, and his perceived homosexual or misogynist tendencies. The first of these subjects dominated early discussion of "Greater Love,"² more recently, critical dialogue has focused on the last of these three themes.³ Though a great deal of ink has been spilled about the religious (or anti-religious) nature of this poem, little has been said about the ambiguous fourth stanza, and in particular, the introduction of an image which carries more religious significance than any other in Western thought: the cross.

Owen was never satisfied with "Greater Love" as evidenced by the major revisions to his original draft over many months (Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen* 159). In a second or third draft, the poet replaced "rifles" with "your cross" adding a deeply religious metaphor to a poem already rich in Christian mythos (Owen, *CPF* 340)⁴:

Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
Kindness of wooed and wooer
Seems shame to their love pure.
O Love, your eyes lose lure
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

Your slender attitude
Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,
Rolling and rolling there
Where God seems not to care;
Till the fierce Love they bear
Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude.

Your voice sings not so soft, -
Though even as wind murmuring through rafters loft,
Your dear voice is not dear,
Gentle, and evening clear,
As theirs whom none now hear
Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed.

Heart, you were never hot,
Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;
And though your hand be pale,
Paler are all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail:
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.

Rosemary Freeman states the last line of this poem is a direct translation of Christ's words in John's Gospel to the women of Jerusalem on the way to his crucifixion: "noli me tangere" (321-22). Dominic Hibberd notes another interesting revision that imparts religious metaphor. In line 10, Owen replaces "where love seems not to care" with "where God seems not to care," alluding to Christ's dying words while on the cross, "eli, eli lema sabachtani" ("my God, my God why have you forsaken me") (*Owen the Poet* 159). And, of course, the poem's title itself derives from the famous passage from John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." This quote about the nobility of sacrifice, often

heard in the rhetoric of war propagandists, was adopted by Owen and other soldier-poets to describe the bond between men forged in battle (Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* 159)⁵ In all these cases, adapting the words of the bible to suit his thematic needs works swimmingly for Owen. The same cannot be said for the problematic addition of “your cross;” an image which seems to clash with what most critics view as the prevailing theme of the poem—the vivid description and outright denial of female beauty.

To a reader ignorant of Owen’s biblical allusions mentioned above, “Greater Love” appears, at least on the surface, to address a woman. Indeed, the existing first draft of the poem is addressed “To any beautiful woman” and successive drafts carry a dedication, later excised at Siegfried Sassoon’s urging, “To any woman” (*CPF* 337-39). The apparent conceit “O Love” in line five can be interpreted as an amorous ovation to an intended reader, who, from the dedication and the traditionally feminine descriptions of the body that follow, appears to be female. The persona comments on the subject’s “red lips” (1), “eyes” (5), “slender attitude” (7), “dear voice” (15), “heart” (19), and “pale” hand (21), only to say that these attributes of physical beauty lose luster when compared to the beauty of comrades who would sacrifice for each other. To Owen, the shallow love of women, the “kindness of wooed and wooer” (3), is a lesser love than the selfless “greater” love of soldiers. In other war poems, he alienates female and home front sentiment as out of touch with the reality of war, yet in “Greater Love,” a female’s (or as some critics would more generally claim, a heterosexual’s)⁶ affections are “shame” (4) when compared to the “love pure” (4) exhibited by soldiers. This interpretation is accessible and seems to legitimize feminist acrimony toward Owen generally and to this poem in particular.

However, the more compelling the case for linking Owen’s comments on physical beauty to a woman or women, the more the cross in stanza four seems out of place. Some critics have argued that the “cross” in “Greater Love” is an emblem of the love between a man and a woman as women gave crucifix necklaces to their loved ones before they were sent off and these crosses would be “trail[ed]” into battle much as the rifle slung over the soldier’s shoulder (Backman 78). While neither dismissive of this interpretation, nor the theory of the tension between the love of a woman and the love between comrades, this study views the cross in “Greater Love” as possibly representing a myriad of feelings toward Christianity and love in general.

Though the poet addresses some “Love” in line five and characterizes this entity by attaching the adjectival possessive “your” to descriptions of Love’s lips, eyes, voice, heart, and hand, the addition of “your cross” (23) is difficult to explain.

The traditional reading detailed in the previous paragraph might assign the cross metaphorical value along the lines of the colloquial “cross to bear;” implying that the soldier’s burden in life is to carry that cross, even if those for whom he sacrifices can not comprehend the meaning of his act. Such a reading incorporates a theme that runs through many of Owen’s war poems, the theme of soldier-as-Christ. Though minor poetry of the Great War is filled with sentimental and patriotic analogies to Christ and the crucifixion, Owen masters the paradox inherent in such a character. The paradox lies in the idea that the soldier who makes the Christ-like sacrifice, “may in the course of doing so, disobey one of Christ’s central commands [. . .] do not kill” (Welland 85). The soldier is, in D.S.R. Welland’s words, “both Christ and crucifier” (85). This theme appears in much of Owen’s poetry and will resurface later in this paper. But first, it is useful to turn to instances where the cross appears in other of Owen’s poems to explore its personal significance to the poet and the physical and symbolic gravity of the icon.

The Cross in Owen’s Juvenilia

Religious imagery is commonplace in Owen’s war poems, and is even more prevalent in his work before the war. As discussed earlier, much of this can be attributed to his evangelical upbringing and the daily Bible readings administered by his mother. His time as a lay vicar at the Dunsden vicarage allowed him to turn Christian theology into Christian works through application. Also, it was at Dunsden where Owen began to doubt his beliefs and finally sever ties with the religion of his youth. Disillusionment with his faith culminating in a mysterious undocumented event led to Owen’s abandonment of Dunsden and the church. Some critics maintain that Owen had become too intimate with a young boy in the parish community; others claim that the erosion of his faith had become too much to bear (Caesar 123-24). While tending to local poor and administering the parish youth group, Owen developed compassion for those less fortunate whose faith seemed closer to God, yet their socioeconomic position kept them farther from the church. Also, Owen was falling deeper under the influence of Keats and saw his passion for poetry as irreconcilable with the strictures of church teachings. Owen never ceased to feel the power of Christianity and its symbols though, and at this time, he began responding to it negatively in his poems.

During this period of questioning, the cross begins to appear as a symbol of his disillusionment from organized religion and the rigidity of church doctrine. One need only look to “Maundy Thursday” to see what effect the emblem of Christianity had on the young poet. A “silver cross” in the hand of an altar server, “offered to

be kissed” by men, women, and children alike inspires different interpretations of what the symbol means. To the men it is “the emblem of a creed” (5). To the women, the poet wryly states, it is “the Body of the Christ indeed” (7). The children of the parish approached and “kissed a silver doll, immensely bright” (9). When it is the persona’s turn to kiss the cross, he has a very different reaction to it than those who preceded him:

Above the crucifix I bent my head:
The Christ was thin, and cold, and very dead:
And yet I bowed, yea, kissed—my lips did cling
(I kissed the warm live hand that held the thing.)
(11-14)

Looking down on the cross, the poet sees only an emaciated figure, cold and dead, a “thing” rather than a tangible community. Rather than genuflecting, he bends his head to inspect—i.e., to take a closer look at the sufferings of the world portrayed in the symbol. But, in Owen’s case, looking down means looking into a hole of doubt and emptiness embodied by that symbol. By kissing the “brown” hands (read as the rough-hewn hands of the laboring class) of the server offering him the cross, the persona affirms his empathy for the poor in the parish community and seemingly elevates that empathy to a status superior to the lofty Christian icon. He kisses the hand that held the cross, rather than the cross itself.

Conspicuously absent in this scene is the reverence for the symbol that would have undoubtedly accompanied such an occurrence in the poet’s life only a few short months or years earlier. To Owen, the symbols and rhetoric of a detached and high-minded church can not be reconciled with the realities of close human interaction. Here the cross inspires the poet’s rejection of an empty display of symbolic affection in favor of the intimate contact that can exist between men.

“Maundy Thursday” offers a glimpse into the psychology of a young poet whose regimental upbringing in the cold, detached, symbolic ways of the church was being replaced by the humanistic, earthy tendencies of one enraptured by the poetry of Keats (Caesar 123). Though Owen would never embrace the Church again, his views on religion matured with his experiences in battle. In his war poetry, the cross and the crucified body of Christ, came to represent much more than the dissatisfaction of an immature poet; these images became important symbols in some of the most profound poems of the Great War. A few of these poems in particular, like “Maundy Thursday,” include direct references to real, physical statues or displays

of the crucified Christ and are integral to understanding the place of the cross in “Greater Love.” But first, it is useful to briefly digress to examine the place of Christ and the cross on the battlefields of the Great War.

The Wayside Calvaries of the Western Front

“One ever hangs where shelled roads part” (1) Owen declares about the landmark alluded to in the title of “At a Calvary near the Ancre,” one of the hundreds of shrines that dot the country roads and villages of the Western front. Calvaries are wayside sculptures that depict Christ on the cross flanked by various figures such as the Virgin Mary and St. John. The scenes are common throughout France and Belgium and often take on monumental proportions. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell elaborates on the ubiquity of these devotional markers:

The image of crucifixion was always accessible at the front because of the numerous real physical calvaries visible at French and Belgian crossroads, many of them named Crucifix Corner. One of the most familiar terrain features on the Somme was called Crucifix Valley after a large metal calvary that once stood there. (118)

The sculptures depicted Christ’s last hours, the passion and crucifixion, usually in vivid and bloody detail, and often left a mark on the psyches of the soldiers who passed by them.

In his study on the symbolic effect of the Calvaries of the Western Front, Nicholas Saunders notes that since medieval times, these megalithic monuments have acted as markers to symbolize the faith of the region’s inhabitants. Many wayside calvaries were, in fact, carved from pre-Christian megaliths that were converted by having images of Christ’s passion carved into them. As their pagan ancestors did before them, locals revered the sculptures as having healing powers and the sites were often the locus for religious rituals. Folk tales about other Calvaries claim that they were erected at the site of a battle between a local saint and the Devil, suggesting that they act as a manifestation of the growing pains the community suffered in its Christianization process (Saunders 9). These devotional symbols served as battlefield landmarks in the Great War and were converted into memorials for the dead after 1918. My grandfather, who, like Professor Fussell, was an American infantryman during the Second World War, spent months in

Belgium near that war's end and to this day vividly recalls these same sculptures being utilized as posts for telephone and telegraph wires by the Allies.

As observed by Saunders, the war infused the ages-old Calvaries of the Western Front with new meaning. The crucifix itself assumed new meanings to the men that fought the war as its image was everywhere; from the real crossroad Calvaries to corpses hanging on trees, from the "flying crosses" of biplanes silhouetted against the sky to self-inflicted hand wounds resembling Christ's stigmata (Saunders 11). Saunders elaborates on the meaning the cross held for the young men who fought the war:

For soldiers during the war [. . .] crucifixes, calvaries, and crosses merged with devastated countryside, broken human bodies, and "the missing," to forge the experience of "being in" a landscape—of simultaneously creating and living the commemorative act as an acknowledgement of the sacrifices made by the living as well as the dead. (19)

Before the scenes were monuments to the dead, they were, to the living soldiers that passed by them, representations of hope or hopelessness, embodiments of faith or disillusion, and icons of the virtue—or waste—of sacrifice.

What we know of the effects of the wayside calvary on the soldier of the Great War can be credited to the literary figures that emerged from battle to perpetuate the myths and realities of the front. The American, e.e. cummings, serving early in the war as an ambulance driver for the French, found the public displays of Christ to be remarkably *unimpressive*, commenting in his autobiographic war novel *The Enormous Room* that such a scene looked like a "little wooden man hanging all by himself" (in Fussell 160-61). But, Fussell notes that many of the protestant British soldiers, unaccustomed to such public displays of religion by the Catholics of France, found the devotional statues and glass-enclosed shrines something to write home about. Unnerved by these images, Rupert Brooke commented "What I don't like about this 'ere Bloody Europe is all these Bloody pictures of Jesus Christ an' 'is Relatives, be'ind Bloody bits of glawss" (in Fussell 118).

Scores of minor poets were taken with the image of the suffering Christ and used the wayside calvary as a metaphor for their experiences on the front. Some, like Edgar McInnis in "Croix Rouge", sentimentally saw it as a sign of hope based in devotion to the symbol and what it represents: "And let our humble hearts atone / As in Thou presence now we bend, / That in Thy strength, and Thine alone, / We may endure unto the end" (16-17). Frederick George Scott saw the "pallid Christ

with his broken shrine” (1) as a sign that the world “has wakened from its empty dream” (15) of materialism and selfishness and through the sacrifice of young life on the battlefield, new life and a new world will be born (“On the Rue de Bois” 10-11). In “The Wayside Calvary” Owen Seaman reproachfully wished the Kaiser could see the battlefield cross to realize the gulf of ideas between “Him who died that men might live—and you / Who live that men may die” (15-16, in Cunliffe).

The war’s most accomplished writers, that is to say, those whose poetry came to represent the moral conflict and utter devastation that tormented a generation, found the symbol devoid of hope and rife with irony—a perfect study for poetry. The most prominent of these, Sassoon, recognized the symbolic power of the wayside calvary. Owen’s hospital mate at Craiglockart and influential literary mentor and critic, Sassoon comments on a wayside shrine in “Christ and the Soldier.” In this poem, a war-weary private stumbles to the foot of a wayside calvary and pleads “O Christ Almighty, stop this bleeding fight!” (15) to which the Christ responds limply as machine guns rattle “Can you put no trust / In my known word that shrives each faithful head? / Am I not resurrection, life and light?” (22-24). The Christ’s rhetorical questions speak the private’s unspoken doubts about the church teachings that now seem so empty to one who turns to his faith to understand the incomprehensible horror of war. The Christ fails to ease the soldier’s moral conflict over killing and particularly, killing those whose beliefs are not very different from his own. “Be you for both sides? I’m paid to kill” the soldier queries, “Does that come into what your teaching tells?” (34-36). But the Christ remains silent as the private asks “Lord Jesus, ain’t you got no more to say?” (43). The dejected soldier stumbles away wondering why he was ever born, to which “the battle boomed, and no reply came back” (48). Sassoon’s private and Christ are two very different and separate characters in this poem, yet we see glimpses of the paradox of the soldier-as-Christ. The witty private delivers the poet’s dose of irony, but the intense conflict of conscience inherent in such a character does not seem to fully emerge.

Sassoon’s war-hardened cynicism is evident in “Christ and the Soldier,” written to express how soldiers viewed the roadside calvary as “merely a reminder of the inability of religion to co-operate with the carnage and catastrophe they experienced” (Sassoon 47). In his memoirs, Sassoon viewed this piece as nothing more than an ambitious failure. Blaming his lack of intimate knowledge of Christianity (Sassoon was, of course, half-Jewish) for his dissatisfaction with his poem about such a “potent parable”, he questions whether “anyone—from a fully informed religious understanding—[could] have made a success of the subject?” (Sassoon 47). This

paper is testament to the proposition that Sassoon's pupil, Wilfred Owen, did just that.

Owen and Calvary

More intimate with the image of the suffering Christ than Sassoon and probably a great many of his countrymen, Owen found a few crossroad calvaries remarkable enough to feature them prominently in poems and make the most of the semiotic fullness of the scene. We see this most dramatically in "At a Calvary Near the Ancre:"

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him.

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

The scribes on all the people shove
And brawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

In the crossroad crucifix, Owen found a perfect metaphor for delivering his messages. He directly links the plight of the crucified Christ ("He" in line 2) to that of the "Soldier" (4). By capitalizing "Soldiers," "Christ" (8), and their respective pronouns he establishes their privilege over "priests" (5) and "scribes" (6). In Christian biblical tradition, the high priests and Pharisees persecuted Christ yet professed adherence to God's laws. Indeed, these men called for Christ's death. Modern day scribes and priests—the leaders and elders of Owen's England, were often the subject of the poet's ire, having sent young soldiers to their own deaths. Sassoon attacks the same character in "They," the Bishop-quo-war hawk who can only reply to the disillusioned Tommies returning home that "The ways of God are strange!" (12).

In mentioning “Golgotha” in line five, Owen of course refers to the site of Christ’s crucifixion, alternately known as Calvary or “place of the skull.” In one of his most eloquent letters home, Owen elaborates to his friend and fellow poet Osbert Sitwell how the place of Christ’s demise is an apt metaphor for the western front of the Great War:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work—teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt; I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha. (Owen, *CL* 562)

As an officer charged with doling out orders to enlisted men, Owen obviously viewed himself as one not unlike the Roman guards charged to crucify Christ. Here, Owen saw in himself a variation of the soldier-as-Christ paradox: the Christ and the crucifier. The soldiers, of course, represent Jesus himself; sent to his death at the behest of Pharisees and scribes. These, who in “At a Calvary” “brawl allegiance to the state” are the elders and authority figures of Britain. Prideful, and branded by the devil, the scribes and priests assume the role of anti-Christ, serving righteous patriotic cant to the masses on the home front. Owen clearly understood that this contributed to a soldier’s friends and family—his “disciples”—knowing little of the sacrifice and hardships endured “over there.”

A similar equation is played out in “A Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” another of Owen’s poems which owes a great deal to Biblical mythology. In his take on the story of Abraham and Isaac, the “old man” is asked by an angel to stay the sacrifice of his son and offer “the Ram of Pride” (14) instead, but “the old man would not so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one” (15-16). Allen Frantzen notes that through Christian literary history, Isaac was seen as an Old Testament parallel to the sacrificial figure later portrayed by Christ, even appearing in medieval plays bearing wood “conspicuously shaped like a cross” (451-53). Indeed, by analogizing the soldier as Christ or Isaac, adding a physical cross, and blaming the “old man” and elders for an unquenchable bloodlust, Owen strikes violent chords of discontent about the war and the sacrifice he and his comrades are making. The final couplet of “At a Calvary” is evidence that Owen never really drifted far from the worldview in which he was reared: soldiers are the

modern Christ, sacrificing themselves for the benefit of their fellow man. He calls this “greater love” (12).

At this point, it is useful to turn once again to Fussell’s study of the “crossroad calvary” in Great War mythology. Fussell goes on to note that,

Perhaps the best-known calvary was the large wooden one standing in the town cemetery at Ypres. It was famous—and to some, miraculous—because a dud shell had lodged between the wood of the cross and the figure of Christ (it stayed there until 1969, when the excessively weathered crucifix was replaced). (118)

The scene Owen describes at Ancre bears striking resemblance to the battle-scarred crucifix at Ypres. He writes of the Christ near the Ancre that “In this war He too lost a limb, / But his disciples hide apart; / And now the Soldiers bear with Him” (2-4). Owen found hypocrisy in the fact the war’s most ardent supporters claimed the tightest adherence to Christian doctrine, all while soldiers carried the burden of their fellow man’s salvation. They “trail[ed]” this burden in the form of the crucifixes they wore around their necks and the rifles they dragged through the mud. The physically damaged Christ in “At a Calvary” is at once a metaphor for establishment religion and the soldier in the field, two casualties of the devastating world war.

A poet’s eye is not needed to recognize the irony in the scene at Ypres. The entire notion of a crucifixion scene on the battlefield is rife with irony. More than a body, more than the symbol of Christianity, the crucifix is a representation of the horrors that man conducts on his fellow man. It represents the love God and God incarnate have for mankind and it symbolizes man’s flesh-connection to the divine. In the troglodyte world of the Great War, such a connection conveys the deepest feelings of irony, a mocking of humanity.

The irony inherent in the crossroad crucifix is compounded when the devotional image is destroyed by the ravages of war, as we see in the brief “Le Christianisme:”

So the church Christ was hit and buried
Under its rubbish and its rubble
In cellars, packed-up saints lie serried,
Well out of hearing of our trouble.

One Virgin still immaculate

Smiles on for war to flatter her.
She's halo'd with an old tin hat,
But a piece of hell will batter her.

The “church Christ” can be taken properly as the community or the building that houses the community of the “Church of Christ” on earth, or it can be interpreted as the church’s statue of Christ. I contend that the description of the statuary Virgin that follows keys a reader to the latter interpretation. Smashed and buried under its own “rubble” (2), the physical statue of Christ (most likely crucified) seems to represent what happens when religion gets intertwined with the warring of nations. After all, both sides claimed they had God on their side. No doubt Owen recognized the foolishness of such a notion and used the metaphor of the smashed Christ to expose a misguided church whose “pharisees” championed the allied cause and solicited youth to be sent to their death. The exemplars of Christian tradition, the saints, once revered for walking the way of Christ are now “packed-up” and “serried” (3)—pressed close together like ranks of soldiers (OED). Perhaps Owen intended these saints to lie like his countless dead comrades—real-life saints, having sacrificed for the “greater love”—packed-up in rows in mass graves. Reflecting on those who lived by Christ’s teachings only adds to the troubling irony implicit in the pious actions of those who now “brawl allegiance to the state” (“At a Calvary” 10). Desmond Graham sees much of the same attitude in the second stanza regarding the statue of the Virgin still standing, smiling on for war to “flatter her” as “an ironic fantasy ridiculing the current myth that Christ was active on the British side” (71).

In its eight short lines, “Le Christianisme” is a simple yet fascinating poem. Its thematic and formal structure is twofold. The first stanza challenges the place of the Church in war much like “At a Calvary,” the second seems to reveal Owen’s sentiment toward ignorant women on the home front—the feminist (and prevailing) interpretation of “Greater Love” described earlier. The similarities are even more colorable when one considers that the three poems might have been composed around the same time of year, as Stallworthy’s editorial notes to *The Complete Poems and Fragments* lists all three as having been written between November, 1917 and January, 1918 (126, 134, 166). Another possibility, although a bit of a stretch, involves lumping the three poems together under Hibberd’s dating for “Greater Love,” early spring, 1918 (Hibbard, *Wilfred Owen* 309). Lack of scholarly consensus as to the dating of these poems allows for the speculation that the three pieces were penned during the Easter season. Perhaps it was the spirit of the season

conjuring images of the Passion forever imprinted on the poet's mind—images analogous to the struggle, death, and sacrifice he saw daily on the Western front. Seasonal coincidence aside, these three poems bear many thematic similarities. Each of these poems challenges the direction of the Church, each lambastes the paradoxically un-Christian message of pro-war church leaders, each places the character of Christ or the soldier-as-Christ on the hellish battlefield, and each depicts the destruction of that character. To accomplish this, "At a Calvary" and "Le Christianisme" employ the image of the physical crucified Christ in statuary. It might help a reader's understanding of the ambiguous "your cross" to suspect that in "Greater Love," Owen did the same.

Reprise: The Cross in "Greater Love"

Understanding the addition of "your cross" to "Greater Love" does not require relegating any other interpretations of the text to a lesser status, nor does it mean that one reading is more correct than another. It simply adds another dimension to an otherwise already complex poem. Owen brings this addition about through clever word play and subtle references to themes surrounding Christ's passion and Christianity itself.

"Greater Love" begins with negative comparison; stating "Red lips are not so red / As the stained stones kissed by the English dead." (1-2). This first line introduces the reference point for the contrasts Owen draws throughout the poem. The subject addressed by the pronouns "you" and "your" in each successive stanza is compared with these "English dead." Under the traditional reading, these pronouns refer to a woman or women. They can also be read to refer to address a Christ statue at a wayside calvary. It is common for men to address their God with personal pronouns in their prayers. Also, Owen's usage of the personal "you" can be likened to Sassoon's dialogue in "Christ and the Soldier", where the disillusioned private familiarly addresses the statue of Christ: "Lord Jesus, ain't you got no more to say?" (43).

The second stanza of "Greater Love" begins "Your slender attitude / Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed" (7-8), supposedly addressing a thin human figure of some sort that does not live up to the poet's high standards of gory realism. "Slender attitude" can very well describe the shapely body of "any beautiful woman" (*CPF* 337) but the choice of words makes Owen's seem a very strange compliment to pay. One's "attitude" refers to his or her posture of body or mind, and not typically modified by "slender." In the language of sculpture, however, "attitude" refers to the disposition of a figure in a statuary (OED), a form that can be molded or carved

to slender dimensions. In the following line, the colorful description of appendages as “knife-skewed” carries a connotation significant to sculpture as well. Wielding a knife “to skew”, i.e., to bevel or chisel, a carved item to its specifications is common practice to sculptors, who also skew their work to remove loose edges of silver or gold (OED). To the persona, this thinly posed figure in “Greater Love” does not convulse violently as one who has met the blade of his enemy’s bayonet. Like a statue, it moves not at all. A statue of the crucified Christ would certainly be of slender attitude and knife-skewed in a literal and figurative sense: hewn from wood or stone (perhaps even gilded) and traditionally represented as gored by the spear of a Roman soldier. Having established the possibility of this interpretation, one can look to the rest of the poem for other attributes that might be common to a crossroad calvary, glass enclosed statuary, or church Christ as Owen would have seen it. “Red lips” (1) and “stained” stones (2) immediately assume new meanings as painted-on characteristics of a statue, as do dulled “eyes” (5), pale hands (21), and of course, the cross.

The knife-skewed figure Owen addresses does not live up to the reality of a man dying from his wounds as Owen would recognize it. As seen in such poems as “Dulce et Decorum Est” (“He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (16)) and “The Show” (“I saw their bitten backs curve, loop, and straighten, / I watched those agonies curl lift and flatten.” (21-22)), the physical realities of dying were a subject Owen captured with artistic mastery. The form in “Greater Love” “trembles not exquisite” (8) like a real man would, one who is “rolling and rolling there” (9) till cramped by the onset of death.

The knife wound and all the attributes of the statue listed above are compared to those of a real man through the archaic technique of constructing lines without due periphrasis and featuring “not” prominently in sentences for effect (Backman 80-81). For example, “Red lips are not so red / as the stained stones kissed by the English dead” (1-2). In *Tradition Transformed*, Sven Backman comments on Owen’s use of this technique:

What Owen does, in “Greater Love”, is to use the same technique of heightening an effect by negative comparison, only he inverts the whole scheme: instead of claiming that *the pale beauty of an attractive woman* surpasses even that of certain familiar emblems of lovely pallor in Nature, [. . .] he describes *her enticing attributes* as inferior to the emblems, enumerated in the poem, of the sacrificial “greater love” shown by soldiers dying on the front. (80) (emphasis added)

Professor Bachman's take involves the prevailing theory that Owen was addressing a woman. I submit that replacing the italicized references to a woman's beauty in the passage above with attributes of the crucified Christ in statuary leads to the same general conclusions. Take for instance, an analysis of the opening couplet of stanza four: "Heart, you were never hot, / nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot" (19-20). Replacing the first italics in the Backman quote with *the "hot," fiery Corpus Christi of the statue, a traditional detail of devotional art*, and the second with *the statue's devotional attributes* shows how Owen contrasts the ideal of Christian faith and love as represented in the statue of the crucified Christ with the humanistic application of this "greater love" by the men at war together. The statue has no basis in reality as Owen knows it, a reality in which he regularly viewed horrific violence and brotherly love. The fiery heart portrayed on the statue was never "hot," never beating with the intensity of that of a young man adrenalized by war, the fear of death, and a willingness to give up his life for his comrades. Like the silver cross in "Maundy Thursday," the crucifix Owen views is an empty symbol, cold and very dead.

The language of "Greater Love" paves the way for religious allusions that further the idea that the poet had a physical Passion scene in mind. The place where the figure is stabbed and dies is described as "where God seems not to care" (10). As mentioned earlier, this rings of Christ's dying words, and in addition, would be a fitting description for the Golgotha of the bible and Owen's letters. In the following stanza, the poet comments that the voice of the figure "sings not so soft, / even as wind murmuring through a raftered loft." In many older churches, the place where the cross resides is called the "rood loft" (OED). This sequence conjures images of a young man retreating to church seeking philosophical answers but hearing nothing but the empty wind. Perhaps Owen is commenting on the convoluted message of the current church: follow the way of Christ but actively support the war effort. The two commands could not be reconciled in Owen's mind. Through negative comparison, he favors the voices of his dead comrades, that is, nothing at all, save memory, over the voices of false piety and jingoism he feels the empty devotional statue symbolizes. Like Eliot's "Wasteland," Owen's world has become one where questions of the spirit go unanswered, where one cannot find solace by retreating to the religion of his past, where "the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief" (22).

Finally, suggesting that the poet was addressing a statue of the crucified Christ leaves some questions unanswered. Most prominent of these is the persona's conceit to "Love," common in poems to woman yet inapposite when addressing inanimate

objects. A rational progression of this argument dictates that the love Owen refers to is “God’s love,” incarnate as represented by Christ. Like the cross in “Maundy Thursday,” the statue and all it represents loses luster in the eyes of the poet. Having lived through the events of war (significantly, the blinding of a soldier under his command (Owen, *CL* 428)), Owen believed the “greater love” was that exhibited on the battlefield. The poet learned even before the war that God’s love was like a great statue—an ideal contrivance of man, unattainable and unreal, meaning everything and nothing, “thin, cold, and very dead.” The “greater love” he shared with his comrades was real—living, breathing, and dying, and attainable on earth. However, this “greater love” was like God’s love in that it was unknowable to those who have never experienced it.

While he eventually outgrew his bishop’s robe and mitre and retired his “Wilfred’s church” routine, the religion of Wilfred Owen’s youth—and its symbols—never faded far from his psyche. These symbols, particularly the cross and the physical image of the crucified Christ recur throughout his finest war poems, including “Greater Love.” The wayside calvaries or “crossroad crucifixes” of the Western Front proved the perfect study for the young poet. These statues served as a vehicle for the emergence of a very modern irony, a canvas for Owen’s stylistic experimentation of negative comparison, and the physical embodiment (or antithesis) of one of Owen’s central themes, the “greater love” shared by young men at war.

Notes

1. See p. 99 of Harold Owen’s *Journey From Obscurity* for this photograph.

2. Many critics are quick to point out that the opening stanza of “Greater Love” mimics that of Swinburne’s “Before the Mirror.” Sven Backman claims Owen does this to parody the pretensions of Victorian poetry in order to deliver his powerful message about war as effectively as possible. Owen’s technique, Backman explains, worked best, however, when parodying the language of the Bible (66-67). Dominic Hibberd notes that Owen was probably reading Wilde’s *De Profundis* and “Ballad of Reading Gaol” at the time and cites these two works as contributing to the completion of this poem (Owen *the Poet* 158).

3. Sandra Gilbert claims that Owen bears an undeserved grudge against the female sex (260-61). Adrian Caesar advances Gilbert's meme by claiming that Owen relates the "love between soldiers to that of heterosexual erotic love," and that the former is the "greater" love of the two (153). Caesar's argument is emblematic of the trend toward a queer analysis of Owen's poetry, and specifically "Greater Love;" a trend exhausted by James Najarian who sees the poet's language in such lines as "Your slender attitude/ Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed," as evidence of "an eroticized description of the dying soldiers whom he views [...] show(-ing) off Owen's attraction to the men he praises" (33).

4. All citations to the *Complete Poems and Fragments* are cited as "CPF". Citations to the *Complete Letters* are referred to as "CL".

5. Hibberd notes that "there was, for example, a popular postcard showing an injured soldier and the caption 'Blinded for You!', one of many pictures which gave a sacrificial, Christian significance to death in battle. Numerous sentimental poems and newspaper articles had used the 'greater love' text for the purposes of consolation and propaganda."

6. See Caesar, Najarian.

Works Cited

"Attitude." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.

Bäckman, Sven. *Tradition Transformed: Studies in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen*. Lund Studies in English 54. Lund: Gleerup, 1979.

Caesar, Adrian. *Taking it Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality, and the War Poets*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993.

Cunliffe, J.W., ed. *Poems of the Great War*. New York: Macmillan, 1916.

Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. Ed. Valerie Eliot. New York: Harcourt, 1971.

- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. Vol. 2. *Sexchanges*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991.
- Graham, Desmond. *The Truth of War: Owen, Blunden, Rosenberg*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1984.
- Hibberd, Dominic. *Owen the Poet*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- . *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003.
- Kerr, Douglas. *Wilfred Owen's Voices*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993.
- McInnis, Edgar. *The Road to Arras*. Charlottetown: Irwin, 1920.
- Najarian, James. "Greater Love: Wilfred Owen, Keats, and a Tradition of Desire." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 47 (2001): 20-38.
- Owen, Harold. *Journey from Obscurity: Wilfred Owen, 1893-1918*. 3 Vols. London: Oxford UP, 1963.
- Owen, Wilfred. *The Collected Letters*. Ed. Harold Owen and John Bell. London: Oxford UP, 1967.
- . *The Complete Poems and Fragments*. 2 Vols. London: Oxford UP, 1983.
- "Rood loft." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.
- Sassoon, Siegfried. *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*. London: Faber, 1983.
- Saunders, Nicholas J. "Crucifix, Calvary, and Cross: Materiality and Spirituality in Great War Landscapes." *World Archaeology* 35 (2003): 7-21.

Scott, Frederick George. *In the Battle Silences: Poems Written at the Front*. Toronto: Musson, 1916.

"Serried." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.

"Skewed." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.

Stallworthy, John. *Wilfred Owen*. London: Oxford UP, 1974.

Welland, D.S.R. *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*. London: Chatto, 1960.

Andrew M. Milz has degrees in English Literature from King's College and the University of Scranton, as well as a J.D. from Temple University. The foregoing is