Wilfred Owen

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) was perhaps the greatest of the English “war poets” confronting the first ghastly, mechanized war of the twentieth century. He was a second lieutenant and was killed just a week before the armistice ended the war. “Ducle et Decorum Est” was written between 1917 (when the attack occurred) and 1918. The title is taken from the Roman poet Horace. The complete phrase means: “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.” It is a response to patriotic poetry appearing in English newspapers, particularly that of Jessie Pope.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.--
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.