

Scripting the Texture of Pain : Tropes and Pathos in Seven War

Poems

Abdul R. Yesufu, University of Venda

In some of the most cynical commentaries on the banality of human passions, Jonathan Swift, utilizing the narrative proxies of Lemuel Gulliver, the Lilliputian secretary, and the Houyhnhmn master, deflated the arrogant sense of achievement which invariably characterizes man's celebration of his 'Avalour on the battlefields'. In a sardonic interrogation of this attitude, Gulliver catalogues the puerile origins and nature of man's grounds for and participation in wars.

His highly ironic list remains relevant in any consideration of the reasons advanced for the wars and conflicts men engage in and which, from time immemorial, have virtually turned the world into a vast battlefield purpled with the blood of their kind. The modern patterns of war are, one must concede, as old as humanity. Men have always resorted to war even in situations that could have been resolved otherwise. This is in spite of the fact that common-sense has perennially spoken out against the senseless self-slaughter occasioned by war.

From the Classical tongue-in-cheek exhortation in Horace's 'dulce et decorum est pro patria mori', so effectively applied and popularised by Wilfred Owen in his poem of a similar title, to the Nigerian civil war poet J.P. Clark's transvaluation of standard semantic criteria in his conception of the casualties of war, poetry has always served as a veritable medium for calling war-mongering man back to his senses. But, unfortunately, does man listen to these voices of sanity in the heat of political exigencies?

Through a focus on characteristic tropes (especially irony and figures of sound) and pathos, this essay studies seven war poems by Siegfried Sassoon (World War I), the Nigerian Gabriel Okara, John Pepper Clark, Chinua Achebe (Nigeria-Biafra War) and Thomas Hardy (Anglo-Boer War), to illustrate the interplay of form and subject and their combined effect in arousing the readers' feelings of pity and sorrow for the victims of war.

Thus our purpose in examining how effectively form has been deployed in scripting the texture of pain and misery in our selection of poems would correspond, with some modification, with Wilfred Owen's creative blueprint when he averred:

My subject is War, and the pity of War
The poetry is in the pity. (Thorpe 18)

We could accordingly say that the aim of this study is to treat the subject of war, the pain of war, and the depiction of this pain in poetry.

The five poets whose works constitute the focus of this study were all witnesses to the horrendous events of war in their societies. Some of them (Sassoon, Okara, Achebe) were participants who either wielded the machines of death and mayhem in battle or used art to beat on the drums of the human hearts in order to draw a gullible world into a dance macabre (Clark 37) . Hardy and Clark were rather helpless onlookers of the frenzy of the collective madness with which war inflicts those who live through it. Their poems narrate the painful details of the World War I , the Nigeria/Biafra civil war and the Anglo-Boer War. Their entire contribution to the world corpus of war poetry does not necessarily lie in their expression of the recurrent themes that have come to be associated with this form of literature; rather it is the fresh nuances they have introduced, by their expression of the subject through effective tropes, that single them out for critical attention. They are all masters of the deflating irony; the telling idiomatic twist; the incongruous juxtaposition of details for contrastive effect; the Gorgolian tragic humour that bespeaks the heart-wrenching pain masked by a veneer of light-heartedness; and apt figures of sound that mediate the gulf between the cacophony of war and the essential import of war. The overall effect of the combination of these stylistic strategies in the seven poems studied below is the sensuous presentation of the structure, appearance and feel of the pain which results from war in a manner that would not have been possible otherwise. Through these techniques the poets are able to sing their requiems for the doomed humanity who, in the apt words of Clark ,were all summoned from office

Or study, from sound of highlife
And sweet taste of tongues, straight to
The siren arms of war (39)

II

Appropriate diction combines with a disturbing situational irony in Thomas Hardy's 'Drummer Hodge' (Gibson 90 - 91) to paint a powerful picture of the horrors of war. Better known for his novels in which 'life's little ironies' are dramatized with chilling incisiveness, Hardy brings into the poetic form his keen sense of scene (setting) and the cosmic depiction of man framed and left to the hazardry of an inscrutable world by 'some Vast Imbecility' (Wain 6-7). The poem is about a young rural Wessex boy who was killed in the Anglo-Boer War. Like the young man in the poet's 'The Man He Killed' (Gibson 287) who 'thought he'd >list, offhand like-', this drummer boy joined the Army extempore hoping to reap honour and fame but instead ends up dead in a strange and faraway land. The subject of the poem is as commonplace and terse as that, but it is the special choice of words employed by the poet that lingers in one's mind long after reading the poem. To illustrate this idiom, one would need to quote the first stanza of the poem as follows:

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined - as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest
That breaks the veldt around;
And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.

These lines underscore the unceremonious, unsung, and unheralded burial of the young man. This is certainly a far cry from what he must have been told about an honourable interment marked by the traditional sounds of the lonesome bugle, the gun salute, and the solemnity of the dead march. Through a shocking discrepancy between this idealism and the reality of this pauper's funeral, the poet etches the details of the young man's miserable end through the following words and phrases: 'throw', 'uncoffined', and 'just as found'. Thus the painful reality is that Drummer Hodge was buried unwashed, without a coffin and extemporaneously. His burial even has a whiff of the profane which is conveyed by the use of the word 'throw' with all its connotations of a hasty disposal devoid of any respect and dignity. It is against the background of these details that one relishes the rich irony of the phrase 'to rest' in the first line of the poem. Indeed one wonders whether one who has been so ignominiously treated in death, in spite of his sacrifice *pro patria*, will rest in his indecent grave. The pathos of Drummer Hodge's end is further heightened by the

sentiments expressed in the last stanza of the poem to the effect that his destitution in death is final and irreversible : he will forever be part of the 'unknown plain' watched over by some 'strange-eyed constellations'. The pity of his irreverent burial also owes much to the situational irony so effectively deployed by the poet; where one would have expected the drummer boy who, by his action, embraced the old lie that it was glorious for one to die for one's country and as a lasting recompense secure a befitting resting place amongst his fellow bravehearts in a national cemetery, he will be the eternal guest 'of the broad Karoo,/ The Bush, the dusty loam'.

The nature of war and the trauma that it entails are expressed through irony which manifests in the audacious transvaluation of standard criteria and the outright sarcasm in Clark's 'Casualties' (37-38) and Sassoon's 'The Hero' (Thorpe 25) and 'Base Details' (Thorpe 28). The power of Clark's poem lies in its ability to challenge our conventional view of what and who constitute the casualties in a typical war situation. The overall tenor of his argument in the poem is ironic in that it calls into question the convenient grounds and justifications by which we distance ourselves from the pain and ugliness of war. By affirming views that contest our long-held ideas of some semantic categories, he stands the popular conception of war casualties on its head in order to attract attention. He commences his unorthodox redefinition of the well-known concept in a self-assured declarative thus:

THE CASUALTIES ARE not only those who are dead;
They are well out of it.

Although the truth of this assertion is not in any doubt, yet it jolts the reader into a new awareness through its bluntness; it is a truism that we find it convenient not to express. Similar to the concept in Alexander Pope's memorable definition of 'true wit', it is an idea that is often thought about by people but is never so well (or so boldly) expressed (87). After the remarkable opening lines, the poet proceeds to catalogue five similar negations of the popular idea of casualties:

The casualties are not only those who are wounded,
... ..

The casualties are not only those who have lost

Persons or property ...

... ..

The casualties are not only those led away by night;

... ..

The casualties are not only those who started

A fire and now cannot put it out.

... ..

The casualties are not only those who escaping

The shattered shell become prisoners in

A fortress of falling walls.

According to the poet, these conventional casualties are neither the only nor the real casualties. And in a spectacular transvaluation of this concept, he says:

The casualties are many, and a good number well

Outside the scenes of ravage and wreck:

They are 'the emissaries of rift', 'the wandering minstrels who, beating on / The drums of the human heart, draw the world / Into a dance with rites it does not know'. Thus even the non-combatant propagandists and peace delegates, and indeed 'the stay-at-home unsettled by taxes and rumours' and the 'looters for office and wares' become casualties without their knowing it. The elements of will-lessness and inadvertent complicity in a war situation is suggested, on the one hand, through harrowing images reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's hollow men and, on the other, of Peter Appleton's archetypal Everyman in 'The Responsibility' who accepts mankind's collective responsibility for the horrors of war in a climactic *cri du coeur*: 'I am the man behind it all / I am the one responsible' (Thorpe 32-33).

In Sassoon's 'The Hero' and 'Base Details', plain irony as a trope in which 'the speaker says one thing and means another' transforms into an unmitigated sarcasm. The former poem labours under the burden of 'some gallant lies' which a young soldier had just conveyed, through a nicely written letter, to an old lonely mother about how her son Jack 'fell as he'd have wished'. Contextually, this lie clashes with the truth contained in an aside expressed by the same young officer in an interior monologue in the third stanza of the poem. This aside shows that far from being the hero he is made out to be, Jack was in

fact a ‘cold-footed, useless swine’ who panicked in the heat of battle, ‘tried to get sent home’ and had died blown into smithereens. The irony here resonates the stark contradiction of a similar juxtaposition of appearance and reality in war in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* where a young cowardly soldier is lionized after he had been wounded as he panicked and attempted to flee from battle. In the third stanza of ‘The Hero’, the reader senses the discrepancy between what, according to the commanding officer’s letter, Jack would have wished and what Jack actually wished : he certainly did not wish to die ‘blown to small bits’ no matter the attraction of a posthumous apotheosis; he wished to die at home and in bed hence his failed attempts ‘to get sent home’. This notion of the two versions of death a soldier looks forward to is taken up by the poet in the latter poem ‘Base Details’ where the persona wishes that he could be safe at the Base with the indolent scarlet-faced Majors who live through the wars, grow fat from ‘guzzling and gulping in the best hotels’ and retire home after the war to die peacefully in their beds. The unsoldierly indolence of these Majors accordingly evokes the most caustic venom that the poet could muster. In a tone laden with resentment and contempt, he heaps opprobrium on them in the opening conditional sentence which quavers with feigned envy:

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I’d live with scarlet Majors at the Base
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.

The sarcasm packed into these lines may not recommend them as vintage satire of the type prescribed by Dryden, because in the poet’s determined effort to make these veterans of idleness appear as fools, blockheads and knaves, he uses some opprobrious terms; yet, in line with the revered poet-critic’s reasoning, ‘there is still a vast difference betwixt the slovenly butchering of a man, and the fineness of a stroke that separates the head from the body , and leaves it standing in its place’ (Gibson 64). There is no doubt that Sassoon deals this fine stroke in this poem and concludes his caustic depiction in a fitting final couplet:

And when the war is done and youth stone dead
I’d toddle safely home and die - in bed.

The telling diction, exemplified by the words 'done', 'dead', 'toddle', 'die', 'bed', and their tonal and figurative implications in the context in which they are used are striking. The skilful combination of end and internal rhymes and the thudding heaviness of the alliterative 'd' effectively serve as auditory correlatives which suggest the inertia and slow death-march of the idle Majors. Besides, the fact that the youth are stone dead is of little consequence, for their age at death is deployed as a contrastive strategy to highlight the toddling uneventful idleness of the Majors.

Apt sound effects of the type briefly noted above in 'Base Details' and tragic humour constitute the major stylistic elements used by Gabriel Okara in his scripting of the texture of the pain of war. His poem titled 'Suddenly the Air Cracks' (37-38) is an intense study of the relation between sound and sense (meaning) in poetry. In it the air cracks with the sounds of fighter planes which leave in their tracks untold destruction. Such figures of sound as alliteration, assonance, consonance, and phonetic intensifiers are generously drawn upon by the poet to represent the exact sounds and feel of the misery of the Nigeria-Biafra War in which he was one of the minstrels who beat on the drums of the hearts of an impressionable world. In his capacity as 'Director of the Cultural Affairs Division of the Ministry of Information for Biafra' (Goodwin 143), he was certainly privileged to access horrific information about the carnage of the war; and, of course, in a setting in which everyone, irrespective of social position and degree of participation, was a casualty, he must have shared directly in the events that he so graphically depicts in his poems. Achebe, the vintage story teller, has captured the prevalence and impartiality of death in war as follows:

A friend of mine had his three children killed...they went out to buy books -
five minutes later it was over, it does not take long - ten seconds. It is
quite frightening.... The planes generally avoided anywhere they think they
would have no protection, so they go into the centre of the population

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)

The air raids and the mayhem that they caused are objectified by the staccato rhythm of clashing consonantal and vocalic sounds and syllables. The resultant cacophony is complemented by the jerkiness of the first section of the poem where the people's panicky and frenetic' reaction to the raids is described as follows:

Suddenly the air cracks
with striking cracking rockets
guffaw of bofors stuttering LMGs
jets diving shooting glasses dropping
breaking from lips people diving
under beds nothing bullets flashing fire
striking writhing bodies and walls

The alliteration and consonance in the first two lines above combine with the assonance that attains a mimetic proportion in the third line. The cracking rocket shells seem to provoke an equally cacophonous retort from the anti-aircraft guns which are mobilized to scare away the jets: their ear-blasting noises are described onomatopoeically as 'ack ack flacks', 'guffaw', and 'stutter'. Indeed one can almost hear these noises and smell and see the blinding smoke that accompany them: 'the thick black smoke / rises sadly into the sky as the jets / fly away in gruesome glee'.

The oxymorous collocation of words in 'gruesome glee', employed in the description of the departure of the attacking jets, introduces an ambivalent interlude before another attack is unleashed on the city and its people. This interval provides a brief respite for the contemplation of the resilience and stoicism of the people in the face of the horror of the war; and this resilience is foregrounded through the tragic humour which the poet employs as an artistic means of escape from the sentimentality which the scene of carnage would naturally elicit. The silence that follows the departure of the jets is quickly filled by 'a babel of emotions' and voices of parents calling their children and others joking shouting 'where's your bunker?'/laughing teasing across streets'. Yet other members of the crowd loudly admire 'jet's dive/'pilot's bravery blaming gunners' while dusting their dishevelled bodies 'with trembling hands'. Thus a very serious and traumatic event is masked by a contrived light-heartedness that one would not normally expect at such a time. M.J.C.

Echeruo succinctly expresses the sensibility which the poet evinces in this regard when he noted that 'though Okara's poetry...was protest poetry, the poetry of frustration and even of failure, it was essentially that of affirmation' (31). And this typical optimism is expressed by the poet in his closing stanza of the poem when nature seems to upstage the destructive technology of man 'as dusk descends/and a friendly crescent moon/appears where the jets were'. This is in spite of the fact that the painful memorials of the passing day are 'the curling black smoke', 'the sadless hearts' of the people who have almost become immune to the pain of warfare, and 'the mangled bodies stacked in the morgue' (38) where they are divested of the traditional respect due to the dead.

The novelist Chinua Achebe is another Nigerian writer who was an unfortunate casualty of the Nigeria-Biafra War in more than the general sense of the term. In his own words, '... a hugely traumatic event occurred in the life of my people in the late 1960s: one of the bloodiest civil wars in history. This was the Biafran War' (Burness 3). On the personal level, the event had a rather catalytic effect on the writer, for it activated quiescent emotions in him and gave him the impetus to make his first major foray into the realm of poetry ; this crystallized in his only poetry volume *Beware Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1971) from which 'Refugee Mother and Child' is taken. He acknowledges this inevitable transformation when he explained:

I can write poetry - something short, intense, more in keeping with my mood
.... All this is creating in the context of our struggle. At home I do a lot of
writing,
but not fiction, something more concrete, more directly related to what is going
on (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 149).

Apart from his participation in the war efforts at the general level, as was required of all able-bodied citizens of the secessionist republic, he was a casualty who had more than a few personal stories of loss and woe to tell about the tragedy of war. Although he partly fitted into the elite group whom Clark described as 'the emissaries of rift' and 'the wandering minstrels' who played the ambiguous dual roles of propagandists and peace canvassers and were generally 'outside the scenes of ravage and wreck' during the war, yet he experienced the traumas of having his house bombed in one of the incessant raids

on Enugu, the administrative capital of the republic, as well as of the loss of a dear family friend, former schoolmate and fellow writer, the poet Christopher Okigbo, who was killed in the war in September 1967 . His heartrending narration of these two events, especially the latter, is a classic articulation of the pain and sorrow of war. Accordingly, in his own words, his 'war poems were not recollected in tranquility but caught on the wing' (Burness 4).

Certainly his 'Refugee Mother and Child' (Burness 9), described by Don Burness as 'a hauntingly painful poem' (xxiii) because of its infectious pathos, was caught on the wing; it exudes the immediacy of a contemplated scene complete with all the little gestures, movements and routines that constitute it. The civilian refugees represent the most vulnerable segment of the population in any African civil war situation; they are always on the move and suffer all manners of traumas and deprivations. In this poem, the poet's focus is on a mother and her child in a refugee camp and they are a harrowing metaphor of the uncountable such cases that objectify the catastrophic consequences of war. Achebe effectively evokes the pathos 'of a mother's tenderness/for a son she soon would have to forget.' The vignette he paints is all the more striking because of the manner in which he manipulates the stench of sickness in the expression 'The air was heavy with odors/of diarrhoea', the emaciation and premature withering of the children, and the loving care of a mother, to make a powerful statement about the devastation of war. The young and innocent ones are depicted as pitiable spectres of their former selves: they are unwashed but have 'washed-out ribs and dried-up / bottoms struggling in laboured/steps behind blown empty bellies'. It is out of this unfortunate group that the poet picks one for his special attention because of the special relation that still exists between him and his mother in a situation where 'most/mothers ... had long ceased/to care'. This relationship is skilfully foregrounded right from the opening lines of the poem as follows: 'No Madonna and Child could touch/that picture of a mother's tenderness'. This allusion to the Virgin Mary and the holy child Jesus is meant to underscore the classic example of love and sacrifice which are virtues generally associated with the prototypic mother and child. And these are the virtues manifested by the refugee mother as she smiles at her child and betrays 'the ghost of a mother's/pride as she combed the rust-colored/hair left on his skull'. The poet's deliberate choice of words in this section of the poem enhances the

overall pathos of the situation/poem: he speaks of ‘a ghost smile’, ‘the ghost of a mother’s pride’, and ‘his skull’ in verses where the words ‘ghost’ and ‘skull’ are proleptically deployed to hint at the inevitable demise of the child. To emphasize the pity of this vignette of a doomed mother and child, the poet recalls what could have been in a different place and time and its implication for the sad reality of the present situation in the refugee camp:

In another life this
must have been a little daily
act of no consequence before his
breakfast and school; now she
did it like putting flowers
on a tiny grave.

The comparison that runs ominously in the lines of this poem attains an apocalyptic quality in the closing simile in ‘did it like putting flowers/on a tiny grave’ to hint at the virtual state of death-in-life that pervades the camp.

After such an impassioned depiction of scenes that evoke the reader’s feelings of pity and sorrow for the hapless victims of war, especially the young ones, one cannot help but appreciate the aptness of Okara’s highly imagistic vision of war as a cancerous growth. In ‘Cancerous Growth’ (41), the poet effectively allegorizes war through the images of ‘the noon sun’ that scorches tender buds, the ‘wanton massacre /that/burns up tender words’ and in turn spawns hatred which forces ‘its way/like mushroom through yielding soil’. Structurally, these images follow a path representative of warring man’s sordid descent from light to darkness. The latent tension present in the collocation of the positively symbolic ‘sun’ and ‘tender buds’ and the negative acts of scorching and massacring speak of this descent which is occasioned by war.

III

Although, in conclusion, one would accept the general truth inherent in Remy de Gourmont’s assertion that ‘the sole excuse which a man can have for writing is to unveil for others the sort of world which mirrors itself in his individual glass’ (Wheelwright 15), one would also be sympathetic to Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s collectivizing vision of the

provenance of the creative impulse as expressed in his commendation of the writers of the literature on the Nigerian civil war, for their role as the mirror of society who in the process of mirroring society and criticizing its pitfalls, serve as a compass for social redirection (*Postexpress wired* 1, 2). Thus, far from merely plumbing the private inner recesses of their souls and painting impressionistic pictures of them for the readers, the latter category of the artist reflects the collective and public predicament of man. This is the role which the five poets (whose works formed the basis of this essay) played in their respective societies and indeed in a wider world whose attitude to the issues of war and conflict require a radical redirection.

There is a congruence of opinion among the poets that war is destructive, it makes us all insentient accomplices and casualties, and it ultimately fails to provide lasting panaceas for human problems because from the ashes of its fires spring hatred, suspicions and other myriad ills that plague the world. In the suave phraseology of Ezra Pound, those patriotic idealists who engage in wars believing they do so ‘pro domo’ and sundry other reasons merely waste their lives ‘pro patria/non ‘dulce’ non ‘et decor...’; they walk ‘eye-deep in hell believing in old men’s lies’. Thus the war dead are seen as man’s dubious (if not unnecessary) sacrifice of atonement ‘for an old bitch gone in the teeth,/for a botched civilization’ (190). Nothing could be more senseless than to waste mankind’s vital blood in the service of a moribund world that lusts for the lives of its youth. This fitting Poundian elegy for a militaristic humanity is also taken up by Achebe in his meditation upon the fact that life would go on in careless oblivion of the individual sacrifices made by those who choose to lay down their lives on behalf of the world. On learning, through a news bulletin, of the death of Christopher Okigbo on the battlefield, he wondered in a gripping narration:

Now I was half-listening to the radio when suddenly Christopher Okigbo’s name stabbed my slack consciousness into panic life. Rebel troops wiped out by gallant federal forces. Among rebel officers killed: Major Christopher Okigbo. I pulled up at the roadside. The open park land around Nachi stretched away in all directions. Other cars came and passed. Had no one else heard the terrible news? (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 129).

Of course other people may have heard ‘the terrible news’; but in a manner starkly

reminiscent of Auden's unforgettable expression of man's nonchalant disregard of his fellow men's disasters in 'Musée des Beaux Arts', they did not regard the poet-soldier's death as 'an important failure' (Jacobus & Moynihan 328). So in a mute but resounding condemnation of wars and conflicts, man and physical nature choose to turn away quite leisurely.

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