

## On My Songs

Though unseen Poets, many and many a time,  
Have answered me as if they knew my woe,  
And it might seem have fashioned so their rime  
To be my own soul's cry; easing the flow  
Of my dumb tears with language sweet as sobs,  
Yet are there days when all these hoards of thought  
Hold nothing for me. Not one verse that throbs  
Throbs with my heart, or as my brain is fraught.  
'Tis then I voice mine own weird reveries:  
Low croonings of a motherless child, in gloom  
Singing his frightened self to sleep, are these.  
One night, if thou shouldst lie in this Sick Room,  
Dreading the Dark thou darest not illumine,  
Listen; my voice may haply lend thee ease.

Owen wrote this poem in 1913, a year before the outbreak of World War I. It was during this period that he was being trained as a priest in a vicarage. Despite these circumstances, Owen found himself losing his faith as he increasingly felt more and more out of place in this religious setting.

In the first line of the poem, Owen alludes to “unseen poets” who have previously been able to answer his woe. In fact, it is almost as if their works of literature were written with the intention to echo his “own soul’s cry”, and as a result “easing the flow of his dumb tears”. In an earlier poem (FULL SPRINGS OF THOUGHT) Owen had dwelt on and communed with the spirits of Thomas Gray, Shelley, Arnold and Tennyson. Now, similarly, he recalls occasions when 'unseen poets' 'Have answered me as if they know my woe' (2) tailoring their thoughts to match '...my own soul's cry; easing the flow Of my dumb tears with language sweet as sobs' (4-5)

In line 10, where he describes himself as a “motherless child”, “singing his frightened self to sleep.” The word “motherless” is used metaphorically, almost in a self-pitying way, as this experience represented the first time that Owen found himself away from home for an extended period of time. At the vicarage, writing poems as well as practicing other similar art forms was discouraged, which left Owen in a moral quandary.

Yet, he does not seem to find consolation. Apparently these 'unseen poets' have their limitations. Their 'hoards of thought' don't always connect '.... with my heart, or as my brain is fraught.' (8) As the octet ends, the tempo slows, and the underlying melancholy is out in the open. The influence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in DEJECTION is vivid in the lines: '...shifted, drowsy, unimpassioned grief Which finds no natural outlet. no relief In word, or sigh, or tear.'

In line 9, he speaks of his “own weird reveries” - abnormal daydreams which he thought were out of place in the environment which he was in. This reinforces the central theme of inner turmoil and confusion. The assonance in the next line - “low croonings of a motherless child” - suggests a deep and depressed mood. He finds himself impelled to provide his own deliverance.

'Tis then I voice my own weird reveries:' (9)

He seems to be desperately seeking refuge consolation from his religious moorings. However, the last three lines redeem all.

'One night if thou shouldst lie in this Sick Room,

Dreading the Dark thou darrest not illumine,

Listen; my voice may haply lend thee ease.' (12-14)

Surely we have here an early hint of what would come to be, for Wilfred Owen, a fixed purpose - to rank others above himself and to speak for those unable to speak for themselves.

Later he would see the dread on the faces of his comrades, 'more terrible than terror' as he mentioned in his end-of-1917 letter home. 'It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it I think I must go back and be with them.'

### ANALYSIS:

ON MY SONGS is a prophetic title after all.

Throughout both classical and contemporary literature, the concept of religion is often posited as the unchangeable one which we, as humans, can count on amidst the turmoil of life. However, Wilfred Owen turns this idea on its head by portraying religion as one of the issues that contributes to his inner conflict. His poem “On My Songs” skilfully conveys this standpoint with the use of several poetic techniques, such as metaphor, diction and assonance.

It is written in the Shakespearean sonnet form, in iambic pentameter with its conventional archaisms with the standard 8 - 6 line division and the usual 4 - 4 sub-division of the octet. But, unusually, the sestet is without the final couplet, and having regard for what the poem is saying.

A count of first-person pronouns in ON MY SONGS affirms its subjective viewpoint. Altogether there are eleven of 'I', 'me', 'mine', 'my' plus one 'his' that refers to Owen himself. The self-regard slides into self-pity. What rescues it from that is suggested in the first words of lines 6, 9, and 12. After 'Though' in line 1 we get 'Yet', 'Tis then' and 'One night', signalling changes of mood. Owen is having a dialogue with himself.