Jon Silkin

OUT OF BATTLE

The Poetry of the Great War

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Wilfred Owen

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The Parable of the Old Man and the Young depends for its meaning and effect on the discrepancy between the Biblical story and Owen's re-telling of it. In the Hebrew original, Abraham's reluctant sternness and the sacrifice are both averted on to the 'ram caught in a thicket by its horns'. The angel requires the father to 'offer the Ram of Pride instead'.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Joseph Cohen disturbingly suggests that Owen's re-creation embodies an instance of Christian 'Greater Love' in the slain youth of Europe. The crux is hard to argue in that the Hebrew story indicates complete filial obedience, which in theory involves love, but which, even then, might not in fact have coincided with it. In any case, in the Hebrew story the greater test is put on Abraham, who binds Isaac, thereby making him a passive participant. My sense of Owen's re-creation is that he does not approve of the old man's sacrificial killing, so the poem can hardly at the same time be intended to demonstrate the youth's greater love. Moreover, the angel, representative of God's love, explicitly forbids the killing, which is then undertaken.

The innocence of youth is further explored in 'Arms and the Boy':

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

This has its ancestry in Shelley's Mask of Anarchy:

Let the fixed bayonet
Gleam with sharp desire to wet
Its bright point in English blood
Looking keen as one for food.

This is not the kind of luddite transference found in the sonnet 'On Seeing a Piece of our Artillery Brought into Action', because the bayonet is not the true focus of attention so much as the capacity of its user. The weapon may look evil, but it reflects the minds of its designer and user; indeed the object, through the mind of