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Giotto, Michelangelo, Raphael and the First World War: William Orpen's Picture of a 'Simple Soldier Man's' Death

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Analogies

> [...]
> He, the man who dies in No Man's Land, doing
> Some great act of bravery for his comrades and
> Country –
> Here he lies, Pure and Holy, his face upward turned;
> No earth between him and his Master.
> I have no right to be so near.[1]
> [...]
> I hate myself
> I hate them all
> All, except one man
> Alone.
> He I can admire
> Truly
> And with all my soul
> Entire
> I mean the simple soldier man,
> Who when the Great War first began,
> Just died, stone dead
> From lumps of lead
> In wire.
> [...]
> No man did more
> Before
> No love has been
> Like his, since Christ
> Ascended.
> [...][2]

[1] W. Orpen, *The Onlooker in France 1917–1919*, London, 1921, p. 23.

[2] S. Dark, P.G. Konody, *Sir William Orpen, Artist & Man*, London, 1932, pp. 85-86.

'The fighting man – that marvellous thing that I had worshipped all the time I had been in France – had ceased to exist.'[3]

Christ's sacrifice, interpreted as an analogy of mass death in the First World War, was very common during the war and its aftermath. The reasons for this are obvious. Catherine Moriarty named them:

> The losses of the First World War were on a scale incomparable to any recent precedent and it was essential that their commemoration should employ the ultimate symbol of noble and heroic death [...] The symbol with the greatest potency was the figure of Christ. The parallel of His sacrifice with that of the soldier killed during the First World War was a particularly poignant analogy: it met an urgently felt need to place the losses in a historical continuum of needful sacrifice.[4]

The 'Obsession'

Like so many of his contemporaries, the artist William Orpen[5] was obsessed with the so-called 'simple soldier man' of whom he had seen so many lying slaughtered on the battlefields of the Western Front. He missed no opportunity to express his views about his favourite subject, especially in the aftermath. In letters, poems and prose, he wrote about the brave fighting man. He gave several interviews after the war, and probably he sold himself in his entire war oeuvre to the idealisation of the 'simple soldier man's' sacrifice.

Since the end of the First World War, there has been quite a lot written about Orpen's engagement as an official war artist for the British

[3] Orpen, op. cit., p. 97.

[4] C. Moriarty, Christian Iconography and First World War Memorials, *IWM Review*, 1990, no. 6, p. 71.

[5] Sir William Newenham Montague Orpen (1878–1931) was an Irish-born painter whose studio was based in London. He was one of the most fashionable portrait painters of his time, and one of the main representatives of British Impressionism. His œuvre was influential on the Irish realist painters. In the First World War he joined the War-Artist-Project of the British government, and produced war paintings at the Western Front and war memorial paintings. His war pictures were very successful in the UK. While the peace conference was being held in Paris 1919, he was the official portrait painter of the British delegation. It was then that he painted his most famous painting *The Signing of the Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, 28 June 1919*.

1. William Orpen. *The Signing of the Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, 28 June 1919*. 1919

propaganda machine from 1917 to 1919. But, strangely enough, there have not been any studies about his 'obsession', that is, his picture of the 'simple soldier man'. If historians of art and art critics had examined it, perhaps they would have recognised the religious reverberations in his war works. This failure is so much the more amazing because of the obviousness of the analogies to Christian iconography.

Why, for example, are just the devastations of the Western Front the suitable environment for Adam and Eve's paradise?[6] What is Mary doing with her child on the battlefield?[7] And why does one of the most famous war pictures *The Signing of the Peace in the Hall of Mirrors* (Fig. 1) remind us today, to some extent, of Leonardo's *The Last Supper* with Judas in front of the table, symbolised by the German representatives?

[6] Orpen painted a picture depicting a French peasant girl who offers a soldier an apple as they stand in an archway looking out to the shell-damaged houses of Péronne. The title is *Adam and Eve at Péronne*.

[7] Orpen's picture shows three French peasant women, two of them bent (as if harvesting) and tending a grave surrounded by barbed wire, another standing and offering her breast to a young blonde child, who looks towards the viewer, crying. They are standing in the remains of a battlefield filled with grave markers. The mother and child remind us of Mary and Jesus.

Thesis

In the following, I argue that there was an ideological need to employ Christian iconography of sacrifice for the comprehension and description of the 'simple soldier man's' death, which arose from an objective and a personal 'dilemma' of the artist. This 'dilemma' is recognisable in Orpen's whole war oeuvre, but particularly in his pictures of death, where he was, to some extent, obliged to legitimise death, for reasons of censorship and propaganda, and where he 'obliged himself' to legitimise death as sacrifice.

But how could alienated mass death be sanctioned when the traditional Edwardian value system was out of touch with the reality of modern war and consequently lost any meaning?

As we know, the First World War was the first industrialised war characterised by trench warfare and devastating battles of attrition. Hence, the traditional value system of warfare became meaningless and anachronistic. The scale of slaughter was beyond human comprehension, only comparable with a 'human slaughterhouse', as a German author described modern war before the outbreak of the First World War in an anti-war book, where the death of the single individuum lost all sense.[8] Former virtues of the warrior, like bravery, gallantry and heroism, were given the lie to the propaganda. Because of that, Geoff Dyer could say about the role of the army on Remembrance Day in November 1919: 'The role of the army is not to celebrate victory but represent the dead.'[9]

Death was alienated; it was rationalised, and, above all, industrialised. Certainly because of this form it is not accidental that later, in the 1970s, the First World War was to be denounced as the 'first holocaust' in our century of total war.

Therefore, not surprisingly, Robert Williams in a late drawing (Fig. 2) gave his dead soldiers a similar shape to the one we find in the international memorial at the former death camp by Dachau, Germany (Fig. 3).

[8] A. Jürgens-Kirchhoff, *Schreckensbilder. Krieg und Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 1993, pp. 56-58.

[9] G. Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, London, 1994, p. 22.

2. William Roberts. *With a Machine-Gun to Cambrai*. 1972

3. Nandor Glid. Sculpture at Dachau International Memorial. 1967

Williams had been, like Orpen, an official war artist in the First World War.

It is also certainly no accident that the ordinary soldier became, in Orpen's phrase, a 'marvellous *thing*', because modern warfare is synonymous with the decline of the gallant warrior. In wars of attrition, his meaning was reduced to a mere thing: alienated to an object, to human material.

On the basis of three examples, which I believe to be representative, I want to examine the function of Christian iconography in Orpen's war pictures. I hope that this examination helps to reconstruct the artist's perception of the 'simple soldier man's' death and his meaning for him.

First Example: The Lamentation

A dead soldier lies on a stretcher *in* the snow, surrounded by his mourning comrades. Orpen made this drawing *A Death among the Wounded in the Snow* probably in 1918 (Fig. 4). The analogy to the motif of the Christ legend, the lamentation, is noteworthy. One look at Giotto's *Lamentation* proves the similarities to the way the dead soldier and Christ are depicted. Even the way the mourners are grouped around the dead corpse makes the parallels obvious. In both pictures, we have a view of the corpse. (I have chosen Giotto only as the most striking example out of numerous very similar depictions.) Another example for the depiction of the corpse of Christ is Hans Holbein the Younger's *Christ's Corpse in the Grave*. The whole composition of Orpen's mourning scene is rooted deeply in the iconography of the lamentation. It seems to the onlooker that there is not just an 'ordinary' casualty to be mourned, but actually the death of Christ himself. Having the shape of Christ, the dead soldier seems to represent all losses in the war. Through the pattern of the lamentation, Orpen exposes the casualties' sacrificial character. He transcended the 'simple soldier man's' death to something more meaningful; death gets a deeper sense, it becomes a sacrifice. So the greatness of the 'simple soldier man's' death is only comparable with Christ's sacrifice.

4. William Orpen. *A Death among the Wounded in the Snow*. Ca. 1918

It is important to bear the following aspect in mind. In our example, death occurs as the death of a single individuum, not in the form of mass death, which was the reality in the First World War. Industrialised death was not depictable for several reasons, but above all because this totally secularised death lost all sense. Instead, the symbol of Christ's death had to be employed to disguise rationalised, alienated death, and give it again a meaning: in other words, to save the meaning of death. All these masses of soldiers could not have died for nothing. Moriarty said: 'Religious iconography directed thoughts to a spiritual plane; it diverted contemplation from the iconography of the dead and helped sanctify the profanity of mass death.'[10]

[10] Moriarty, op. cit., p. 73.

Second Example: The Passion

In 1923, Orpen said in an interview to *The Daily Graphic*:

> This picture [...] is an actual portrait of a man I met behind the lines in France. This soldier had been blown up by a mine. Practically every shred of uniform had been torn from his body. He was wandering cracked and naked, still clinging to his rifle[11] (Fig. 5).

5. William Orpen. *Blown-up – Mad*. Ca. 1917

Orpen claimed that he had seen the shell-shocked man in 1917, the year the drawing was probably made. That might be true, but it seems to be not the whole truth. Firstly, there is this very peculiar static posture of the soldier. The positions of his arms and his legs are so unnatural and stilted that it does not correspond with the mental condition of the man. Even if we assume that Orpen actually had seen this man, he could never have seen him in the way he depicted him. Secondly, the nakedness and the way of holding the rifle are very similar to a pattern we find in Christian iconography. If we compare Orpen's drawing with Michelangelo's *Christ* then the parallels are evident. Here we find the model of the overexcited posture, the loincloth. Christ held the crucifix in the same way as the shell-shocked soldier held his rifle. Even the nimbus corresponds with the tin hat.

Why did Orpen give the shell-shocked soldier the shape of Christ?

One explanation could be that the Passion of Christ recurs in the sufferings of the soldiers in the war at the Western Front, which was to be seen not just as another war but as the decisive war for mankind. Orpen's shell-shocked soldier does not stand for a real particular individual man,

[11] *Daily Graphic*, 8 May 1923.

but for vulnerable mankind; he stands for the thousands and thousands of men who suffered in war; to expose this immeasurable suffering, Orpen employed the iconography of Christ's Passion, for He symbolises the way of the cross, and the salvation of man.

Third Example: The Crucifixion

6. William Orpen. *To the Unknown British Soldier in France.* First version. 1919–1920

'That I, of all people, should be accused of desecrating the dead is one of the most astonishing things I have heard in my career.'[12] In another interview, with the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* in 1923, Orpen explained his controversial painting *To the Unknown British Soldier in France* (1919–1922) (Fig. 6): 'The two figures on either side of the coffin represent a young soldier who was mad [...] [They] represent a dead soldier and the ghosts of the man who fought.'[13]

Somewhere else he said: 'The original [the drawing] is realistic and necessarily gruesome. The copy is meant to be symbolic of all companions of the tragic soldier I met in France – legions of British soldiers who died an agonised death to bring peace.'[14]

[12] *Evening Standard*, 7 May 1923.
[13] *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 7 May 1923.
[14] *Daily Graphic*, 8 May 1923.

We are already well aquainted with the 'tragic soldier'. It is the shell-shocked man. This is not the place to repeat the full story of this most debated painting of all Orpen's war pictures. The history of the painting is described in the literature in detail.[15] My primary task is to reveal the Christian conception of this very strange picture. But before that, I have to recall briefly its history.

In 1919, Orpen was entirely occupied with painting three pictures commisioned by the British government which commemorate the Peace Conference in Paris in the same year. He executed two of them, but, while working on them, he felt more and more uneasy. The general mood of disillusion with the peace process did not exempt the artist. Again and again, he thought that his admired 'simple soldier man', who fought and won the war, had ceased to exist.

In a letter to his friend Robin Legge, Orpen drew a cartoon. He sketched a row of delegates at the conference table in the ornate chamber of the Quai d'Orsay in Versailles, which is the subject of the first conference painting, but the classical figure and the cupids which are in reality on the wall and depicted in the oil painting have been replaced by the figure of Christ on the Cross; and at His feet kneel two soldiers in helmets and full kit. An inscription reads: 'I dreamt, and lo, the figures over the clock had changed – and I remembered the war.'[16]

Remembering the war in the shape of the crucifixion: Christ died again on the battlefield of the First World War. But only the combatants, and the artist himself, really feel for the sacrifice. However, the cross implied a relationship between the sacrifice of the soldier and that of Christ. How common this analogy actually was is shown in one of the letters by the *New Statesman* journalist Ben Keeling, who was killed in the Somme

[15] B. Arnold, *Orpen, Mirror to an Age*, London, 1981; M. and S. Harries, *The War Artists, British Official Art of the Twentieth Century*, London, 1983; S. Hynes, *A War Imagined, The First World War and English Culture*, London, 1990; R. Cork, *A Bitter Truth, Avant-Garde and the Great War*, London, 1994; K. Artinger, *Agonie und Aufklärung, Krieg und Kunst in Großbritannien und Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Weimar, 2000; R. Upstone, *William Orpen, Politics, Sex & Death*, London, 2005.

[16] Arnold, op. cit., p. 337.

offensive in August 1916. He wrote: 'It is bad enough to have to listen to those people who justify war because it gives them a quasi-sensual satisfaction to see humanity crucified after the manner of the founder of Christianity.'[17]

Because of being deeply dissatisfied with what he was supposed to paint in the third conference picture, a group portrait of the politicians, generals and admirals ('who won the war') in the Hall of Peace in Versailles, Orpen broke up the work in despair. In the previously mentioned interview with the *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, he said:

> I made studies for them [the politicians, etc]. I painted the room, and then I grouped the whole thirty-nine or whatever the number was, in the room. It took me nine months' incessant painting [...] And then [...] I couldn't go on. It all seemed so unimportant somehow. In spite of all these eminent men, I kept thinking of the soldiers who remain in France for ever. Whether the Hall of Peace deserves its title or not, it must deserve it in future only so far as they gave it. So I rubbed all the statesmen and commanders out, and painted the picture as you see it – the unknown soldier guarded by his dead comrades. The long dark room behind there is the hall where the Treaty was signed. The cherubs? Well, I should not call them cherubs, nor did I see that they conflicted with the mood of the picture as a whole [...] I painted it in all seriousness and in all humility. I have satirised nobody, nor did I intend to set any problem. All the meaning is in the title of the picture itself.[18]

Orpen remembered his dream. It contains the idea of the crucifixion. And a crucifixion scene seemed to be one suitable way of remembrance: 'It was a way of coming to terms with death, for it abstracts and sanitises war.'[19]

The other, also religiously motivated, way of remembrance after the First World War was the installation of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which symbolises the anonymous mass death on the battlefields.

In his repainted picture, Orpen combined both ideas of remembrance in a montage-like manner. The coffin seems to have the character

[17] Hynes, op. cit., p. 108.

[18] *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 7 May 1923.

[19] Moriarty, op. cit., p. 73.

of an altar above which the cross soars; in addition, the coffin calls to mind the entombment of Christ, because His sacrifice and that of the 'simple soldier man' are synonymous.

But what is different here is that it is the combatants themselves who mourn at the foot of the cross, and not the saints.

If we compare the picture with Raphael's *Crucifixion* in the National Gallery in London, it becomes clear that the origin behind the strange composition with a coffin, dead soldiers as guards, and the angel-like cherubs, lies in the iconography of the crucifixion.

The Death of a 'Simple Soldier Man'

In the preface of his book *The Onlooker in France*, published in 1921, Orpen wrote: 'The only thought I wish to convey is my sincere thanks for the wonderful opportunity that was given to me to look on and see the fighting man and to learn to revere and worship him – that is the only serious thing.'[20]

Catherine Moriarty said in the immediate postwar years the facts of death in the First World War were overriden by a need for solace, and Christian symbolism provided an accessible and paliative language.[21]

So it is certainly not surprising that Orpen did not mention at all what a 'wonderful opportunity' he had to look on and see the dying man. To keep silent about death in war is not self-evident. The German historian of culture Eduard Fuchs wrote about 1916: 'If one wants to write about war, one has to begin with the end of all things, with death because the essence of war is killing and destroying.'[22] And Paul Nash's bitter and ironic statement pointed in the same direction: 'I was forbidden to draw dead soldiers obviously because in war there are no dead soldiers.'[23]

In the third conference picture *To the Unknown British Soldier*, the onlooker does not see the reality of dying at all; what he sees is death

[20] Orpen, op. cit., p. 5.
[21] Moriarty, op. cit., p. 74.
[22] Jürgens-Kirchhoff, op. cit., p. 58.
[23] R. Fabian, H. Adam, *Image of War, 140 Years of War Photography*, Kent, 1985, p. 169.

heavily symbolised in a Christian pattern of sacrifice. Was this the fact that George Bernard Shaw had pointed out: 'We don't need a censor; during the war we must censor ourselves'?[24] Was this Christian symbolism in fact a matter of self-censorship? Certainly it was not as easy as this, but I argue here that the impossibility of giving a true picture of death was caused not only by censorship but also by the artist's perception of the 'simple soldier man'. His picture of this figure was all but true.

How could it have been different?

Orpen's friend, the journalist Sidney Dark, described the artist as a man who knew nothing about politics. 'When the war began, he probably had the vaguest ideas as to what it was all about.'[25] And what did he know about the former life of the man in the trenches, the lives of the working people? Not much, I presume, because after he had become established as a distinguished portrait painter of high society, there were not many bonds with the lives of the lower classes. How could he know the 'simple soldier man' when even this particular figure did not exist, because the term describes an idealised man? Since Denis Winter's painstaking study of the British soldier in the First World War,[26] we know that the simple soldier is a simplification, with the aim of idealisation. This idealisation was an ideological need, since a mass army of citizen soldier and land workers was created. The former 'dubious and dangerous' men of the working classes in arms were more acceptable as 'Old Bill', for this 'charming' figure stressed the so-called common possessions.

If we read, for example, Orpen's *The Onlooker in France* very carefully, we will recognise that there are very few descriptions of the 'simple soldier man', despite the fact that Orpen should have been 'always fascinated'[27] by soldiers. Truly, he was fascinated, but it was not the real ordinary man he was interested in.

Before the war, Orpen had already been a member of high society, and he remained so throughout the war. At the front, he lived not only

[24] Fabian, Adam, op. cit., p. 169.
[25] Dark, Konnody, op. cit., p. 42.
[26] D. Winter, *Death's Men, Soldiers of the Great War*, London, 1978.
[27] Dark, Konnody, op. cit., p. 133.

7. William Orpen. *The Thinker on the Butte de Warlencourt*. 1918

a very privileged life, but he also had closer bonds with the command and high-ranking military than with the 'simple soldier man'. That doesn't mean that he was blind to the realities of the war, but it explains why his picture of the common soldier remained abstract in the sense that it tends to impose simplicity as grandeur. Although the industrialised and rationalised war, because of the scale of mechanisation, was 'faceless', anonymous, Orpen tried to give him a 'face'. He revived the single individuum, saved it from the faceless mass, but in doing so he had to veil reality. A good example of this is the drawings of 'Rodinesque' thinking soldiers, again an old pattern in Christian iconography, which heroify the 'simple soldier'. The *Thinker on the Butte de Warlencourt* is obviously thinking about the vast subject of death and war (Fig. 7). The German helmet in the foreground, in an exposed spot, gives a broad hint of this interpretation. But what was the reality?

> There are references without number to the depths of fear soldiers felt when confronted with death in its most tangible form. Ewart after Loos saw a whole company, one by one, turn to look at a dead man who seemed almost to be asleep. They did not find the clue they were looking for. Reid once emptied three Lewis gun drums into a German platoon with fierce satisfaction at doing a frightful execution at Marval, but afterwards he and his whole section stood for a few moments silently by watching a heavily bandaged, dead German holding a rosary in his sole remaining hand. Reid thought that most of the men were visibly shaken. They had not expected an enemy to die like themselves.

> That effects of the thoughts and the situations which triggered them, was cumulative, reinforced by shell bursts, illness, lice, mud and constant uncertainty. Receptive men saw that at the time. Sassoon observed that the effect of war could be traced in weeks and months, though differences of age and rank affected the precise timing. Graves pinned the thing down more precisely. He thought three weeks sufficient to learn the rules of safety and degrees of danger, with peak efficiency reached in three months. Thereafter there would be rapid decline [...] after six months most line troops were off their heads, horribly afraid of seeming afraid.[28]

So far the reality. There was not much space or rest for deeply thinking the unthinkable.

If we look at contemporary war cartoons, for instance, Bruce Bairnsfather's really gruesome depiction of a German soldier torn to pieces by a bomb explosion, then it is very difficult to understand what is so funny about this horrible death of the enemy. British soldiers were likely to die in the same way.

We find Orpen's abstract perception of the 'simple soldier man' not only in his artistic oeuvre but also in his writings, especially in *The Onlooker in France*:

> Sir Douglas [Haig, the commander-in-chief] was a strong man, a true Northerner, well inside himself – no pose. It seemed it would be impossible to upset him, impossible to make him show any strong feeling, and yet one felt he understood, he knew all, and felt for all his men, and that he truly loved them; and I knew they loved him [...] Whenever it became my honour to be allowed to visit him, I always left feeling happier – feeling more sure that the fighting men being killed were not dying for nothing. One felt he knew, and would never allow them to suffer and die exept for final victory.[29]

And further:

> When I started painting him he said, 'Why waste your time painting me? Go and paint the men. They're the fellows who are saving the world, and they're getting killed every day.' He was a great man.[30]

[28] Winter, op. cit., p. 133.
[29] Orpen, op. cit., p. 27.
[30] Orpen, op. cit., p. 28.

After reading these sentences, it is hard to believe, even if one has not taken notice yet of Winter's reassessment of Haig's command,[31] that *The Onlooker in France* had been valued in the earlier 1930s as 'one of the most effective pacifist documents that was ever printed'![32]

Orpen was not alone in not caring for the reasons for the war, nor for what cause men died in the First World War. A similar document of the making of the 'simple soldier man' is a letter by Paul Nash to his wife in 1917:

> There is an easy confident strength, an easy carriage and rough beauty about these men which would make your heart jump and give you a lumpy throat with pride. The other day as I watched them I felt near tears somehow. Poor little lonely creature in the great waste [...] I begin to think in much, much larger forms. I confess too this thing that brings men to fight and suffer together, no matter from what original or subsequent motives, is a very great and healthy force. The cause of war was probably quite futile and mean, but the effect of it is huge. No terrors will ever frighten me into regret.[33]

However, Orpen's belief in the reason for the military and the cause of the war was, even after his disillusion during the peace process, unshaken. Only thus is it understandable that he could have finished his war reminiscences with a passage full of praise for the priority of the military over politicians:

> I remember one day, during the Peace Conference in the Astoria, asking a great English general about the delegates and how things were getting on, and he said: 'I wish the little "frocks" would leave it to us – those who fight know best how to make peace. We would not talk so much, but we would get things settled more quickly and better.' Surely that was the truth![34]

If we bear in mind Orpen's opinion of the military, we come to another reading of his picture *To the Unknown British Soldier*. Then the employment of the Christian iconography of sacrifice can be read as an

[31] D. Winter, *Haig's Command. A Reassessment*, London, 1991.
[32] Dark, Konnody, op. cit., p. 97.
[33] M. Eates, *Paul Nash 1889–1946*, London, 1973, p. 21.
[34] Orpen, op. cit., p. 120.

explicit exhibition of 'military sacrifice', that is, the death of the 'simple soldier man'. The picture is meant less as a critique of war, but it is the angry demand to the public at home to forget this incomparable sacrifice. It was a desperate attempt to rescue the meaning of war at a time when its profanation had already started. For this purpose, the challenge of profanation, Orpen employed Christian iconography of Christ's sacrifice; it should sanctify the deaths. And what is perhaps no less important, it should reestablish the artist's lost peace of mind, for he had to justify for himself his role as an onlooker in the wasteful slaughter.

Why them and not me? For what reason did they die? These questions, already raised in the First World War, the survivors of the 'second holocaust' had to live with again.

And what did the 'simple soldier *man*' think about the resurrection of Christ? Moriarty believes that only few servicemen thought of their suffering in this light.[35] It is no wonder, if we think of the infamous 'crucifixion', field punishment No. 1, in which a prisoner was tied spread-eagled to the wheel of an artillery piece. Only in 1923 did Parliament abolish this brutal practice.[36]

I want to finish my thoughts with a quotation from the German Dadaist Johannes Baader, who in 1917 interrupted a service in Berlin Cathedral with the question, 'What is Christ to the common man?' and who, as no one answered, shouted his own response, 'He's crap to him.'[37]

[35] Moriarty, op. cit., p. 73.

[36] Hynes, op. cit., p. 465.

[37] T. Shapiro, *Painters and Politics. The European Avant-Garde and Society*, New York, Oxford, Amsterdam, 1976, p. 162.

Kai Artinger

Giotto, Michelangelo, Raphael ir Pirmasis pasaulinis karas. Williamo Orpeno „paprasto kareivio“ paveikslas

Santrauka

Pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais ir po jo dailėje išpopuliarėjo Kristaus aukos įvaizdis, traktuojamas kaip masinės karo mirties analogas. Žymus britų dailininkas Williamas Orpenas buvo tiesiog apsėstas taip vadinamojo „paprasto kareivio“ motyvo, nes kaip karo dailininkas matė daugybę nukautų karių Vakarų fronto mūšių laukuose. Jis nepraleisdavo progos išreikšti savo nuomonės apie šį motyvą, ypač po karo, o visą karo tematikos kūrybą pašventė „paprato kareivio“ aukos idealizacijai.

Britų ir airių literatūroje nuo Pirmojo pasaulinio karo pradžios nemažai rašyta apie Orpeno kaip oficialaus karo dailininko angažuotumą britų propagandai 1917–1919 m. Tad keista, kad iki šiol (net paskutinėje didelėje Orpeno retrospektyvinėje parodoje Imperiniame karo muziejuje Londone 2005 m.) nėra tyrimų apie jo obsesiją – t. y. „paprasto kareivio“ mirties paveikslą. Iki šiol dailės istorikai ir kritikai nerado ir neminėjo religinių atgarsių pagrindiniuose Orpeno karo paveiksluose. Šis apmaudus neapsižiūrėjimas ypač stebina, nes jo kūriniai akivaizdžiai panašūs į žymiųjų Renesanso dailininkų Giotto, Michelangelo, Raphaelio kūrinius.

Straipsnyje įrodinėjama, kad ideologiniai poreikiai skatino panaudoti krikščioniškąją aukos ikonografiją „paprasto kareivio“ mirties motyvavimui ir vaizdavimui; šis poreikis kilo ir iš paties motyvo, ir iš asmeninės dailininko „dilemos“. Pastarąją matome visoje Orpeno karo tematikos kūryboje, ypač tuose kūriniuose, kuriuose cenzūra ir propaganda įpareigojo jį legitimuoti mirtį, ir kuriuose jis pats norėjo parodyti mirtį kaip sakralinę auką. Bet kaip susvetimėjusi, masinė mirtis galėjo būti sakralizuota, kai net tradicinė Edvardo epochos vertybių sistema neteko ryšių su modernaus karo realybe ir galiausiai prarado bet kokią prasmę? Kaip žinome, Pirmasis pasaulinis karas buvo pirmas industrinis karas, pasižymėjęs apkasų kova ir nuodingų dujų atakomis. Taigi tradicinė karžygiška vertybių sistema tapo beprasmė ir anachronistinė. Naikinimo ir skerdynių skalė pranoko žmogiško suvokimo ribas. Mirtis susvetimėjo, tapo racionalizuotu ir galiausiai industrializuotu žudymu, neatsitiktinai aštuntajame XX a. dešimtmetyje Pirmasis pasaulinis karas buvo paskelbtas pirmuoju holokaustu XX a. totalinių karų amžiuje. Neatsitiktinai eilinį kareivį pats Orpenas pavadino „įstabiu *daiktu*“, nes modernus kariavimo būdas reiškė tradicinės karžygystės žlugimą. Naikinimo mūšiuose kareivis tapo tiesiog daiktu, susvetimėjo iki objekto, iki žmogiškosios medžiagos. Remiantis trimis pavyzdžiais straipsnyje tyrinėjamos krikščioniškosios ikonografijos funkcijos Orpeno karo tematikos paveiksluose. Ši ikonografija padeda rekonstruoti, kaip dailininkas suvokė „paprasto kareivio“ mirtį ir ką ji reiškė jo kūrybai.