Summary

The speaker escapes from battle and proceeds down a long tunnel through ancient granite formations. Along his way he hears the groan of sleepers, either dead or too full of thoughts to get up. As he looks at them one leaps up; the soldier has recognized him and moves his hands as if to bless him. Because of the soldier's "dead smile" the speaker knows that he is in Hell.

On the face of the "vision" the speaker sees a thousand fears, but the blood, guns, or moans of above did not reach into their subterranean retreat. The speaker tells the soldier that there is no reason to mourn, and he replies that there is – it is the "undone years" and "hopelessness". The soldier says his hope is the same as the speaker's; he also tells him he once went hunting for beauty in the world, but that beauty made a mockery of time. He knows the truth of what he did, which is "the pity of war, the pity war distilled", but now he can never share it.

The soldier/vision continues, saying men will go on with what is left to them, or they will die as well. They will not break their ranks even though "nations trek from progress". He used to have courage and wisdom. He would wash the blood from the wheels of chariots. He wanted to pour his spirit out, but not in war.

Finally, he says to the speaker that "I am the enemy you killed, my friend," and that he knew him in the dark. It was yesterday that the speaker "jabbed and killed" him, and now it is time to sleep.

Analysis

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"Strange Meeting" is one of Wilfred Owen's most famous, and most enigmatic, poems. It was published posthumously in 1919 in Edith Sitwell's anthology *Wheels: an Anthology of Verse* and a year later in Siegfried Sassoon's 1920 collection of Owen's poems. T.S. Eliot referred to "Strange Meeting" as a "technical achievement of great originality" and "one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war." That war, of course, is WWI – the central element in all poems in Owen's relatively small oeuvre. The poet Ted Hughes noted in his writings on "Strange Meeting": "few poets can ever have written with such urgent, defined, practical purpose."

The poem is renowned for its technical innovation, particularly the pararhyme, so named by Edmund Bluson in regard to Owen's use of assonant endings. A pararhyme is a slant or partial rhyme in which the words have similar consonants before and after unlike vowels – escaped and scooped, groaned and grained, hair and hour. Almost all of the end lines in this poem are pararhyme; the last line is a notable exception. Critics have noted how this rhyme scheme adds to the melancholy, subterranean, and bleak atmosphere of the poem.

The poem's description of a soldier's descent into Hell where he meets an enemy soldier he killed lends itself to a critique of war. Th dead man talks about the horror of war and the inability for anyone but those involved tó grasp the essential truth of the experience. There is more than meets the eye, however, and many critics believe that the man in hell is the soldier's "Other", or his double. A man's encounter with his double is a common trope in Romantic literature; the device was used by Shelley, Dickens, and Yeats, among others. The critic Dominic Hibbard notes the poem does not "[present] war as a merely internal, psychological conflict – but neither is it

concerned with the immediate divisions suggested by 'German' and 'conscript' [initially what the dead man calls himself] or 'British' and 'volunteer'." The dead man is the Other, but he is more than a reflection of the speaker - he is a soldier whose death renders his status as an enemy void. Another critic reads the poem as a dream vision, with the soldier descending into his mind and encountering his poetic self, the poem becoming a mythological and psychological journey. Finally, Elliot B. Gose, Jr. writes that "the Other...represents the narrator's unconscious, his primal self from which he has been alienated by war."

The style of the poem was influenced by several sources. "Strange Meeting" echoes Dante's pitying recognition of the tortured faces in Hell, the underworld of Landor's *Gebir*, and, of course, Keats and Shelley. Owens was an ardent admirer of both Romantic poets, whose *The Fall of Hyperion* and *The Revolt of Islam*, respectively, were no doubt instructive to Owen as he composed his own work. *The Fall of Hyperion* features the goddess of memory revealing her dying but immortal face and her blank eyes, allowing the poet to grasp her monumental knowledge of wars and heroes past. The emphasis in Owen's work on truth and dreams also resonates of Keats'.

The title of the poem, however, may be taken directly from Shelley's work: "And one whose spear had pierced me, leaned beside, / With quivering lips and humid eyes; - and all / Seemed like some brothers on a journey wide / Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall / In a strange land." In *The Revolt of Islam*, Laon tells his soldiers not to avenge themselves on the enemy who has massacred their camp but to ask them to throw down their arms and embrace their shared humanity. The two sides gather together in the "strange meeting".