

Remembered Sins: The Poetry of Britten's War Requiem

Lana Schwebel

In spring 2007 our friend and former colleague Lana Schwebel gave a talk about Britten's War Requiem at the ISM Colloquium. The talk was as lively and profound as was her personality. Professor Schwebel died in a tragic car accident on July 7, 2007, and was not able to turn her talk into an article for our journal. To honor her memory we reprint a short article she wrote in April 2007 for PRISM, the newsletter of the ISM. This short text cannot replace the wonderful reflections on the War Requiem she gave in her talk, but it gives a glimpse of Lana's deep understanding of poetry, theology, and music.

To discuss the *War Requiem* without reference to its music risks absurdity; to consider a small moment of the text in isolation is fantastically reductive. Nevertheless, a brief examination of an excerpt – the *Dies irae* passage – can point us toward larger questions about Britten's amalgam of the Latin Requiem Mass and Wilfred Owen's World War I poetry. At the very least such a consideration can complicate any notions we might have of an old, established Latin text, and a modern, disruptive poetic voice that destabilizes it. In a thoughtful encounter with this text our own perceptions of the tensions between these texts are, in fact, shaken.

In its opening passages the *Dies irae* offers a vision of the future, that day (distant? near?) when humanity will be judged, while Owen's poetry that immediately follows, in depicting the song of bugles, less wrathful than sad, alongside voices of boys "mothered" by sleep, speaks in the past tense. The *War Requiem*, then, appears poised in the space between what will ultimately happen and what did happen, between the apparent universality of the Latin hymn and the specificity of Owen's work, which gestures at the future only as the "shadow of the morrow."

Do these tensions hold fast, or do they come apart with Britten's return to the Latin text? To be sure, this passage speaks of judgment and revelation, offering the image of the heavenly Judge to whom all is apparent. After its introductory imagery, however, the hymn takes a profoundly individual turn: *Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?* it asks: on the day of wrath, when the world is called to account, "What will I say then, wretched me?" How can I possibly account for myself, wonders the hymn, when even the righteous are hardly secure?

In contrast with the individuated anxiety of this question, and of the prayer that follows beseeching the *fons pietatis*, the font of piety, for salvation, the ensuing English verse presents a unified soldierly mass delineated in the first person plural. And in place of the lone questioner's gravity, we are confronted with an aggressively jovial tone, articulating bleakness construed almost humorously: "we've walked quite friendly up to Death; / Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland." Surely, this verse offers a sour response to the lone questioner of the Mass text. Or does it? By the end of Owen's poem we have returned to the same struggle delineated by the *Dies irae*: "each proud fighter brags / He wars on Death – for Life; not men – for flags."

Despite the monolithic community joshing with death with which it opens, the verse ends by disentangling the individual, personal fear from the mock-hearty “we.” Here, then, the medieval Latin hymn and the twentieth-century English verse come far closer to each other than they might initially appear, complicating what might have been our initial understanding of the more jarring moments of Britten’s juxtapositions.

While the *Dies irae* section of the *War Requiem* continues, we might conclude our brief exploration with the following return to the Latin text, where the hymn makes a remarkable request: *Recordare Jesu pie, / Quod sum causa tuae viae*. “Remember, faithful Jesus, that I am the cause of your journey.” This moment contains within it a paradox as disruptive and potentially problematic as anything offered by Owen. After all, would not this reminder serve to highlight humanity’s sin – the “cause” of Jesus’ journey? What sort of request is this to be put into a prayer?

This moment of audacity is resolved, to a degree, in the larger context of the *War Requiem* text. After all, the entire piece insistently recalls to memory events that might be more comfortably forgotten. As Jesus is reminded of humanity’s sins, so are we – both in the *Dies irae* itself and in Owen’s depictions of battles, death, soldiers, and weapons – and of scars not happily recalled but not easily overlooked, either. What appears at first glance to suggest a problematic heavenly recollection, then, turns out to be emblematic of an earthly memorial that is as necessary as it is disturbing.

What manner of prayer is being articulated at this moment? Precisely the sort that does not offer immediate comfort, whether in the context of the Latin Mass or in the lamentation and fury of a soldier’s poetry. As the paradoxes of these texts merge and complement each other, we might acknowledge, too, that the merging of the battlefield with the heavenly court in the *War Requiem* offers eventual solace. By bringing together its seemingly disparate, but in fact mutually suggestive, texts, the *War Requiem* suggests that war and death – events that cannot and need not symbolize anything beyond themselves – may yet also delineate an earthly conflict and a heavenly anxiety that are not at odds so much as mutually representative, gesturing back and forth until some sort of resolution, even the possibility of peace, is allowed the chance to emerge in heaven and on earth.

Lana Schwebel was assistant professor of English at Stern College of Yeshiva University (New York). From 2002 until 2006 she was assistant professor of religion and literature at the Institute and Divinity School. She died in a tragic car accident in July 2007. Primarily a medievalist, her dissertation explored the ways in which poets understood the sale of indulgences in fourteenth-century England; she was particularly interested in the use of poetic language to articulate penitential thought and doctrine. She was recently working on a book about ghosts and earthly intercession in the later Middle Ages.