

2 Strange Truths: Romantic Re-Imaginings in Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon

Mark Sandy

Any exploration of the Romantic legacies bequeathed to the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon is, inevitably, indebted to the paradigmatic models that Jon Silkin established for First World War poetry.¹ Yet, as Michael O'Neill rightly observes, these borrowings of Romantic vocabulary, rhythms and voices by First World War poets are not necessarily or exclusively 'simply "ironic"'.² This chapter explores the ways in which the strange truths of the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are imbued with the poetry of William Wordsworth, P. B. Shelley, John Keats and John Clare. The debt of Owen and Sassoon to these Romantic writers is not in the form, as has often been contended,³ of an aesthetic that was found wanting and in dire need of demythologising in the wake of their experience of the First World War. Both Owen and Sassoon often fuse together the solidity of Keats's poetic language with the kinetic energy of Shelley's imagination as a means to find a new expressive poetic mode equal to the strange truths of the battlefield.

Retaining something of Shelley's protean elemental imagination 'of flame transformed to marble',⁴ 'Spring Offensive' recasts phrases drawn from Keats's autumnal ode to round out and intensify the vernal, anticipatory, moment of battle that Owen's poem depicts:

Halted against the shade of a last hill

They fed, and eased of pack-loads, were at ease;

And leaning on the nearest chest or knees

Carelessly slept.

But many there stood still

To face the stark blank sky beyond the ridge,

Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.

Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass

Swirled

By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge;

And though the summer oozed into their veins

Like an injected drug for their bodies' pains,

Sharp on their souls hung the imminent ridge of grass,

Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.

Hour after hour they ponder the warm field...⁵

This temporary haven from the exertions and dangers of battle for the 'halted' soldiers conveys its muted natural music of late spring's 'May breeze' (and 'murmurous' sounds of wasp and midge) through a modulated echo of the musicality of Keats's 'The murmurous haunts of flies on summer eves'.⁶ In depicting the ominously cloying atmosphere of a promised anaesthetization to the threat 'at the end of the world' of the 'imminent ridge of grass' and further action, Owen fractures and reimagines the personified figure of Keats's 'To Autumn', who can be found 'sitting careless on a granary floor' (l. 15), or drugged with the narcotic 'fume of poppies' (l. 17), or else watching 'the last oozings hours by hours' of the 'cyder-press' (ll. 20-1), to point up the increasingly strained relations between humanity and nature.

Owen's lines thick with Keatsian allusion, finally, settle for a Shelleyan infused portentous image of 'Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.'⁷ In 'Spring Offensive', Owen is closer to Shelley in poetic technique, but not necessarily in sentiment. Responding to *The Triumph of Life*, Owen's line imaginatively commingles Shelley's imagery of the 'opposing steep of that mysterious dell' (l. 470) and 'fragile glass' (l. 226) with an appreciation of Shelley's use of 'flashed' as meaning revelation or insight. Typified by Shelley's account of the poet-figure's moment of revelation when 'meaning on his vacant / Flashed like strong inspiration' (*Alastor*, l. 126-7), or the 'sun-like truth / Flashed on his visionary youth' (*Rosalind and Helen*, l. 618-19).⁸

Here Owen's 'fearfully flashed' augurs the soldier's apocalyptic experience of their military campaign on an infernal 'world's verge' where 'instantly the whole sky burned with fury against them' and 'the green slope / Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.' The existential and spatial dilemmas of occupying this 'infinite space' and 'world's verge' resonate further with Keats's sonnet, 'When I Have fears that I may cease to be,' where the speaker finds himself 'on the shore / of the world I stand alone' (ll. 12-13)⁹. Surprisingly, unlike Keats's sonnet, the close of Owen's 'Spring Offensive' attests to the possibility of spiritual renewal for those who 'crawling slowly back, have degrees / Regained cool and peaceful air in wonder'. Owen's lines hold out for, even strain after, a recovery of Wordsworth's 'cool air' of 'the unencumbered Mind' ('VIII. Retirement', l. 12). But Owen's final ambiguous question asked of those who have survived the 'fury of hell's upsurge' — 'Why speak

not they of comrades that went under?’ — disturbs with its haunting silence any possibility of recovering an ‘unencumbered Mind’.

Within the seasonal and metrical rhythms of Keats’s ‘To Autumn’, human existence ebbs towards its own natural demise and non-existence, coming into being and expiring as naturally as the ‘light wind that lives or dies’ (l. 29).¹⁰ In this manner, ‘To Autumn’ is perfectly poised between states of living and dying and as such enacts that eased ‘die into life’ (*Hyperion*, 3, l. 130) that his *Hyperion* fragments could not effectively bring into being. Keats’s transitional twilight of the day, season, year and human existence is the fully and finally realised form of Hyperion’s ‘grief and radiance faint’ (*Hyperion*, 1, l. 304). So saturated with their war experiences are the perceptions depicted in ‘Mental Cases’ that Owen reconfigures Keats’s defiant ‘bright Titan’ commingled with the twilight into a ‘Dawn [that] breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh’. Owen’s imagery is both alert to the latent tragedy within Keats’s hushed, muted and dignified autumnal Apollonian light and affirms the Dionysian tragic acceptance of a negatively capable poetic self given over entirely to a ‘World of Pains’ and ‘Things real’.¹¹

‘Things real’ and a ‘World of pains’ speaks directly to the increasing realism of Sassoon’s poetry. An early sonnet by Sassoon, printed in the collection *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* (1917), on the subject of ‘October’, in spite of its mawkish, often overly ornamental, affectations of Georgian poetry, draws on aspects of the sombre affirmation of Keats’s ode:

Across the land a faint blue veil of mist
 Seems hung; the woods wear yet arrayment sober
 Till frost shall make them flame; silent and whilst
 The drooping cherry orchards of October
 Like mournful pennons hang their shrivelling leaves
 Russet and orange: all things now decay;
 Long since ye garnered in your autumn sheaves,
 And sad the robins pipe at set of day.
 Now do ye dream of Spring when greening shaws
 Confer with the shrewd breezes, and of slopes
 Flower-kirtled, and of April, virgin guest;
 Days that ye love, despite their windy flaws,
 Since they are woven with all joys and hopes
 Whereof ye nevermore shall be possessed. ('October')

The imaginative ambit of Sassoon's treatment of autumn can be traced in the wholesome promise of Keats's external autumnal landscapes, where the 'harvest's done' and the 'squirrel's granary is full', which can readily translate into dearth, bereft and negative mindscapes, where 'the sedge is wither'd from the lake / And no birds sing' (*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, ll 7-8; ll 47-8).¹² In Sassoon's 'October' we find, instead of Keats's 'moss'd cottage-trees' ('To Autumn', 5), 'The dropping cherry orchards of October / Like mournful pennons hang their shrivelling leaves'¹³ and the realisation, with overtures of 'a shade of grief'¹⁴ typical of John Clare's late poetry, that 'all things decay; / Long since ye garnered in your autumn sheaves / And the sad robins pipe at set of day.' (l. 6-8) There are also present here recycled

elements of the poetry of Thomson and Goldsmith (perhaps, filtered through the language of Keats's ode), but the figure of autumn as gleaner — Sassoon's use of 'garnered' recalling, in Keats's 'When I have fears that I may Cease to be', those who 'Hold like rich garnerers' the full-ripen'd grain'(l. 4) — and the robin's presence at the close of day are certainly indebted to Keats's 'To Autumn'.

Readily identifiable, too, is the Keatsian origin of the volta to Sassoon's sonnet. Sassoon remoulds Keats's self-conscious questioning of 'Where are the songs of spring?' (*To Autumn*, l. 23) to ask 'Now do ye dream of Spring' (l. 9) only to conclude that 'all joys and hopes / Whereof ye nevermore shall be possessed' (ll. 13-14). Keats's question, 'Where are the songs of spring?' (l. 23), dissipates the speaker's anxious presence into a cacophony of autumn's mournful whisperings.¹⁵ The question born of a hankering after new beginnings, birth and rejuvenation finds a rejoinder in the funeral orchestra of the season which reaches its climax with the 'treble soft' (l. 31) of the robin. Deliciously bitter-sweet in its Keatsian aspirations, Sassoon's conclusion resonates with Clare's own mournful sense that even 'summer's prime a leaf / [is] tinged with autumn's visible decay' ('Decay').

A year later (coloured by his experience of trench warfare and stay at Craiglockhart, where he read Shelley voraciously),¹⁶ Sassoon returned to the subject of October in a short lyric poem, titled 'Autumn', published in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918):

October's bellowing anger breaks and cleaves
The bronzed battalions of the stricken wood
In whose lament I hear a voice that grieves

For battle's fruitless harvest, and the feud
Of outraged men. Their lives are like the leaves
Scattered in flocks of ruin, tossed and blown
Along the westering furnace flaring red.
O martyred youth and manhood overthrown,
The burden of your wrongs is on my head. ('Autumn')

Sassoon's previous poem, 'October', in spite of its indebtedness to Keats, contained flashes of Shelley's elemental protean brilliance found here and in Sassoon's earlier description of 'the woods [that] wear yet arrayment sober / Till frost shall make them flame' (l. 2-3). It is the transformative and kinetic energy of Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' that powers Sassoon's description of the Scottish landscape of 'Autumn' in which (as in Owen's 'Exposure') the natural world is saturated with the language and experience of war to bear witness to 'battle's fruitless harvest' (l. 4). The 'lives' of those killed in this futile harvesting, Sassoon writes, 'are like the leaves / Scattered in flocks of ruin, tossed and blown / Along the westering furnace flaring red.' (ll. 5-7). Here Sassoon rejects the quintessential harmony and solidity of Keats's English autumn in favour of the chaotic commotions of Shelley's distinctly Italian autumn in 'Ode to the West Wind' where, cutting across the *terza rima* stanzaic form, 'the leaves dead / Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing, // Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red, / Pestilence-stricken multitudes.' (ll. 3-5)

Nature, for Owen, as Sassoon discovered in the poetry of Thomas Hardy,¹⁷ is increasingly indifferent and obdurate to the active hostilities of the soldiers. Such indifference, for these soldier poets, is expressed through a remodelling of Shelleyan

and Keatsian tropes. The Keatsian ‘feel of not to feel’, condensed in ‘as though of hemlock I had drunk’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, l. 2), finds a reimagined form in Owen’s account of anaesthetised and stumbling soldiers who, in ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’, ‘All went lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue’. Owen’s start of ‘Exposure’ explicitly rewrites Keats’s opening lines, ‘My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense’ (ll. 1-2), to ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ as the painfully visceral and nerve-frayed exhaustion of ‘Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...’ in which memory and reality are blurred.¹⁸ Within a space of a few lines ‘knife us’ finds its pararhyme with ‘nervous’ to reinforce Owen’s deadly sense of the freezing balm that nature pours on the physical and psychological effects of warfare.

Owen is equally capable of translating with biting irony Shelley’s credo of ‘I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone’ into the brutal ‘philosophy of many soldiers’ in ‘À Terre’. Here to be one with the earth is to be interred within it. By contrast Shelley writes, in his elegy for Keats, *Adonais*, that ‘He is made one with Nature’ and his ‘presence to be felt and known, / In darkness and in light, from herb and stone.’ (*Adonais*, l. 370; ll. 373-4) Shelley knew the risks, as did the Wordsworth of ‘A Slumber Did My Spirit Steal’ (the lyric ambiguously closes with the line ‘Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees’),¹⁹ attached to trusting spiritual salvation to the transcendent. Owen’s ‘À Terre’ strips away any sense of spirituality or comfort (““Pushing up daisies” is their creed you know’) to confront the stark reality of the dead corpses of the soldiers, eventually, incarcerated in the ground.

Such infernal sights are gauged by Owen's surreal and nightmarish landscapes 'scooped / Through granites which titanic wars had groined' ('Strange Meeting'). These physical and psychological landscapes speak to, and through, Keats's own scene of 'Spaces of fire, and all the yawn of hell' (*Hyperion*, 1. 1. 120) that mark Titanic disaster, as much as they find affinity with Shelley's visionary 'world of agony' (*The Triumph of Life*, 1. 295). As has been noted by critics, including Jon Silkin, John Stallworthy, and Alan Tomlinson,²⁰ the visionary strangeness of Owen's poem takes its title 'Strange Meeting' and narrative shape of descent into 'some profound dull tunnel' from Canto V of Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* and Rousseau's recount of his encounter with 'a shape all light' (l. 352) within 'the deep cavern' of Shelley's final poem, *The Triumph of Life*. That both Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* and Keats's 'Hyperion' project exist, for very different reasons,²¹ as incomplete textual fragments is likely to have appealed to Owen's imaginative struggle to come to terms with the catastrophic, mechanised, mass slaughter of the First World War. Forgoing usual anti-Romantic sentiment, T. S. Eliot's 1922 poetic memorial for the lost generation, *The Waste Land*, with its declaration that 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins',²² underwrites Owen's artistic inclination towards the fragment and fragmentary. Romantic textual fragments offered up the fragmentary and fractured as an appropriate poetic mode to eulogise the death and destruction that Owen, Sassoon and his comrades experienced on such a titanic scale.

Owen's choice of the adjective 'Strange' in his poem's title offers a further allusion to Shelley's description of the dream-narrator's first sighting of the 'strange distortion' (183) that 'was once Rousseau' (l. 204) in *The Triumph of Life*. In this final, unfinished work, Shelley frames Rousseau's elegiac regret for a fled vision as akin to

Wordsworth's own. Tellingly, Shelley's description of the birth of Rousseau's 'shape all light' from 'the bright omnipresence / of morning', which 'Burned upon the waters of the well' (*Triumph*, l. 343, l. 346), is infused with those 'Waters on a starry night' and the sunshine's 'glorious birth' that chart Wordsworth's own mourning for the passing of 'a glory from the earth' ('Ode: Intimations of Immortality', ll. 14, 16, 18):²³

...there stood

Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze

Of his own glory, on the vibrating

Floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays,

A Shape all light, which with one hand did fling

Dew on the earth, as if she were the dawn,

And the invisible rain did ever sing... (*The Triumph of Life*, 348-54)

That Shelley invites parallels between the figure of Rousseau and Wordsworth, as well as the poetic diction of *The Triumph of Life* and Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', testifies to Shelley's desire to draw out the scepticism within Wordsworth's poetry through a process of imaginative revisionism.²⁴ Shelley's testing of Wordsworthian ideals through these acts of revision marked out the darker contours of Wordsworth's poetic thought and provided an imaginative revisionist model that spoke to the unprecedented situation in which Owen and Sassoon found themselves.

Uncertainty over the exact nature of the visionary state experienced by Owen's soldier-poet narrator (who feels that 'out of battle' he has 'escaped' and, simultaneously, 'knew we stood in Hell') strongly recalls Shelley's Rousseau, who can no longer tell 'Whether my life had been before that sleep / The Heaven which I imagine, or a Hell' (ll. 332-3). This ontological and epistemological confusion characterises Owen's reimagined and abridged version of the experience of the dreaming narrator in Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* and *The Triumph of Life*. More significantly, Owen's 'Strange Meeting' re-imagines a dominant pattern of vision and sceptical quest that persists throughout Shelley's poetic career:

'None,' said the other, 'save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braider hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.'

...I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with the truths that lie too deep for taint. ('Strange Meeting')

Though striking a distinctly Keatsian register, Owen translates the psycho-biographical quest of the poet-figure into terms that both disavow and avow Romantic ideas. Recalling the opening of *Endymion* and Keats's final axiom, in 'Ode

on a Grecian Urn', that 'Beauty is truth, truth Beauty', Owen recalibrates Romantic ideas about beauty and truth. For Owen the permanence of beauty cannot exist in truth, but must reside in a true poet's ability to be truthful. For Owen, true poets must come to understand that truth is not an idealised form that mocks the 'running of the hour', but must convey that truth is the 'pity of war'. Beauty, in Owen's poem, grieves not for those who are already dead, but for those still living who continue to run the risk of losing their lives. Owen's 'Strange Meeting' implies that if war is able to teach one single lesson – one single 'untold truth' – it is the need for compassion. Other than that war, as Owen knew all too well, destroys everything else utterly, even our human ability to comprehend eternal beauty or appreciate the beauties of the natural world.

The dilemma maybe a very Keatsian one, but the unsettling trajectory of Owen's romance quest, ending in disappointment and disillusion, finds its prototype in the discernible pattern of Shelley's poetry of visionary quest.²⁵ A late reprisal of the quest motif central to *Alastor* and Shelley's *Epipsychidion* opens with a symbolic record of his youthful poet-figure's encounter with a female 'Spirit [that] was the harmony of truth' (l. 215):

There was a Being whom my spirit oft
Met on its visioned wanderings, far aloft,
In the clear golden prime of my youth's dawn,
Upon the fairy isles of sunny lawn,
Amid the enchanted mountains, and the caves
Of divine sleep, and the air-like waves

Of wonder-level dream, whose tremulous floor
Paved her light steps... (190-7)

Typically, for Shelley, this idealised biography of the poet begins in the revelatory mode of visionary dream ('divine sleep') and with a sense of connection between the self and all that is spiritually and intellectually beautiful and good in the universe.²⁶ Such vision, inevitably, ends with a waking, troubled, consciousness that embarks upon a potentially fatal quest to recapture the ideal figure of lost vision in 'one form resembling hers, / In which she might have masked herself from me.' (ll. 254-5) Playing out a similar predicament, the poet-figure's unquenchable desire for knowledge of the 'sacred past' (l. 73), in *Alastor*, is a product of his highly individuated consciousness that separates him from both his fellow beings and the material universe.

His quest for self-knowledge becomes a search for meaning across time and space amongst the ruins of civilisation (ll. 109-115). Through uncovering the origins of time itself and translating the hieroglyphs, the poet-figure emerges as a consciousness more independent than the poet-narrator of *Alastor*, who is incapable of deciphering those hieroglyphics or the 'thrilling secrets of time' (l. 128).²⁷ Restoring significance to these 'speechless shapes' (l. 123) causes the poet-figure of *Alastor* to acknowledge an incongruity between meaning and language and increases his own anxiety that reality will never match up to those idealized visions of his adolescence.

For Owen the only reality is the inharmonious 'truth untold, the pity of war, the pity war distilled', which in its chiasmic formulation both enigmatically takes on shapes of

speech and eludes them. Inverting the Shelleyan paradigm of irrecoverable lost vision, Owen's narrating soldier-poet is confronted 'With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained'. Owen's description of this visage is closer verbally and in type to Keats's figure of Moneta, whose 'wan face' (l. 256), as we are told, is 'deathwards progressing / Towards no death' (l. 260-1) in *The Fall of Hyperion*.²⁸ 'Strange Meeting' revises Shelley's idealised biography of the visionary quest through Owen's depiction of a nightmarish phantasmagorical revelatory encounter.

Recalling Wordsworth's 'fled visionary gleam' ('Ode: Intimations of Immortality', 56), Shelley's account of the passage from childhood to adulthood in *Epipsychidion*, by contrast, reveals a painful process of individuation which irrevocably separates the poet-speaker from the once all-pervasive presence of the Spirit of his dream-vision. Growing up only teaches the idealized and idealizing poet his many limitations. A mortal 'man with mighty loss dismayed' (229), he is unable to track the flight of his visionary Spirit, as she departs 'like a God throned on a winged planet... / Into the dreary cone of our life's shade' (ll, 226, 227). Owen shares in a similar tragic realisation (in which the 'Strange friend' implicates the narrating soldier-poet) of the 'undone years' of 'hopelessness' born of 'hope' that defines a 'life' of 'hunting wild / After the wildest beauty in the world'. The language maybe Keatsian, but Owen's vision shares in a dynamic Shelleyan scepticism about the limitations of idealizing and idealized fictions in the face of harsh realities. 'Hope', as Shelley has it in *Prometheus Unbound*, 'creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates' (IV, ll. 573-4).

Shelley's early poem *Alastor* presents such scepticism, in Wordsworthian terms, through the narrator's love of nature and sceptical search, founded on a 'dark hope' (32), for a power within the natural world that will 'render up the tale / Of what we are.' (27-8) Infused with the language of Wordsworth's commitment to nature, the appeal of Shelley's narrator to the 'Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!' (l. 1) revises and qualifies Wordsworth's belief in the elemental trinity 'Of something far more deeply interfused / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns / And the round ocean and the living air' ('Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', ll. 97-9).²⁹ Hopeful faith in the revelatory power of nature, enabling us, as Wordsworth assures, 'to see into the life of things' ('Tintern Abbey,' l. 49), in the hands of Shelley's narrator gives way to a darker realisation that such revelation is merely an 'incommunicable dream' (*Alastor*, l. 39). The narrator's sense of failed vision and abandonment by the force of nature is reiterated in the description of the broken body of the poet-figure that subjects the sentiment of Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' to critical pressure by recognising 'a woe "too deep for tears"' (l. 713). Shelley modifies Wordsworth's closing line of the 'Ode', 'Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears', exchanging 'thoughts' for 'a woe' and silently dropping the crucially qualifying 'often' to draw out the more negative implications of Wordsworth's sense of loss.

'Strange Meeting' re-imagines this same line from Wordsworth and, in the poem's original draft, Owen writes of 'thoughts that lie [...] / Even too deep for taint. In the finalised version of the poem, Owen substituted 'thoughts' for the more Keatsian 'truths' and, perhaps, refracted through Shelley's own allusion to Wordsworth does not retain the qualifying 'often' of the Ode's original settling on the line: 'Even with

truths that lie too deep for taint'.³⁰ Owen's choice of taint suggests an investment in a Shelleyan poetic language of 'pestilence' and 'contagion', as well as his own sense of a darker, more tainted, mode of Romanticism.

Compared with Owen, Sassoon's own engagement with Shelley was brief and intense. But Sassoon, whose work is often identified with a Byronic mode of satire,³¹ shared with Owen an abiding fascination with the poetry of Keats. Sassoon often echoes the world of Keats's nightingale in his depiction of those soldiers who abandon 'safety [...] and the bird-sung joy of grass-green thickets' ('Prelude: The Troops') for battle or Sassoon's reimagining of Keats's seductively rich synaesthesia of 'embalmed darkness' ('Ode to a Nightingale', l. 43) as nocturnal rainfall 'rustling through the dark; / Fragrance and passionless music woven as one' which 'wash[es] away life' and the thoughts of the dying soldier ('The Death-Bed'). Its 'passionless' nature adds a touch of cold irony (as does the substitution of Keatsian heavenly light for a curtain's 'glimmering curve') to Sassoon's otherwise sensuously and sensually inviting Keatsian 'embalmed darkness' in which the fatally injured soldier is 'blind' to the stars:

Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers
That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps
Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace,
Gently and slowly washing life away.

As in Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', the 'fragrance' of Sassoon's enclosed benighted space presses in upon the poet-speaker and threatens to overwhelm (or stifle) the very

act of breathing itself. Keats's poet-speaker strains, as must the waning consciousness of the soldier, to recreate the nocturnal scene ('flickered and faded in his drowning eyes') as a series of precise and wholesome tropes from an inexact approximation of things which, at best, remain uncertain shadowy presences.³²

In 'The Death-Bed', Sassoon dismembers the personified figure of Keats's autumnal ode to realise a fatally wounded casualty as one who 'drowsed and was aware of silence heaped'. Sassoon's image, like Owen's 'Spring Offensive', verbally echoes Keats's account of autumn 'on a *half-reap'd* furrow sound *asleep*, / Drows'd with the fume of poppies sound asleep' ('To Autumn', ll. 15-16). Sassoon's account of the soldier's passing truncates and reverses one of Keats's extended similes — describing the grief-stricken words of the fallen Titans, 'As when upon a tranced summer-night... one solitary gust comes upon the silence and dies off' (*Hyperion*, 1. 71-76; 79-80) — into the matter-of-fact statement, 'So he went, / And there was silence in the summer night'. Through this reworking of Keatsian imagery, Sassoon intends us to register the irony that this young soldier's life is claimed by a Titanic war 'he hated'. Sassoon's echo of Keats's 'half-reaped' tellingly relates to the eventual fate of the dying soldier who, having drifted for hours in and out of consciousness, is eventually claimed (no matter how unjustly as his comrades may feel) by the ultimate reaper, 'death'. For Sassoon and Owen, nature's processes afford both the prospect of an anaesthetic relief from pain to the soldiers and a bleak promise (and fatal judgement on the unnatural act of the war itself) of their extinction.

Published in the inter-war years, Wallace Stevens's 'The Death of a Soldier' is alert to the presence of this existential threat in these post-Romantic responses of Owen and

Sassoon to Keats's original homage to autumnal processes. Drawing on the sensibilities of Owen and Sassoon, Stevens casts a sceptical eye over the kaleidoscopic effect of temporal modes, in Keats's own 'To Autumn', which dissolves harvesting activities into the eternity of nature and the annual cycle of the seasons into the single passage of a day. For Stevens, the contraction of life and expectation of death is a symbiotic process that occurs in, and is encapsulated by, the simile 'As in the season of autumn'.³³

Reserving the verb 'falls' for the deceased soldier (and not the tumbling leaves of the season), Stevens repeats the simile in the third stanza, where the death of a soldier, as the Owen of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' would have agreed, is 'absolute and without memorial'. With the emphasis on collective loss, Owen's pivotal question in his sonnet, 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?', both pluralises and compresses Clare's 'passing bell' ('Graves of Infants') of natural processes with a Keatsian allusion to ritual sacrifice (taken from stanza 4 of Keats's 'Ode upon a Grecian Urn') to press home the point that the mass slaughtering of young soldiers in mechanised warfare is neither noble sacrifice nor a consequence of natural outcome.

Stevens may permit a fleeting glimpse of spiritual salve or transcendence but, in 'The Death of a Soldier', the ceasing of the wind (doubly emphasised by the repeated 'When the wind stops) is less nature's respectful acknowledgement of the death of the soldier than a reinforcement that all natural processes and life itself comes to an 'absolute' end. Such finality can be a consequence of natural or unnatural processes which, like those clouds, indifferently ('nevertheless') pursue 'their direction'.

Owen and Sassoon, like Stevens after them, were committed Romantics albeit with, adapting Owens's own self-description, 'very seared consciences'.³⁴ These verbal, often unsettling, echoes of Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Clare indicate the commitment of Owen and Sassoon to the continuation of the sceptical, imaginative, revisionism practiced by these Romantic poets; a practice itself born of colossal upheaval, historical, and experiential crisis in the early nineteenth century. By fracturing the tropes, diction, and imagery of their Romantic inheritors, Owen and Sassoon trusted that the Romantic poetics of the fragment might afford an elegiac mode that could speak to, and of, the tragedy of modern warfare. Owen and Sassoon also found within Romanticism itself, a resilient scepticism and spirited interrogation of ideals that remained robust enough to survive and communicate the unsettling, strange, truths of the unprecedented catastrophe of the First World War.

Notes

¹ Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*. 1972. (London: Ark, 1987).

² Michael O'Neill has Owen particularly in mind. See O'Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American, and Irish Poetry since 1900* (Oxford; Oxford UP, 2007), p. 1.

³ For a recent view dissenting from those of Bernard Bergonzi and Jon Silkin, see Nils Clausson, "'Perpetuating the Language": Romantic Tradition, Genre Function, and the Origin of the Trench Lyric', *Journal of Modern Literature* 30 (2006): pp. 106-7; pp. 104-28.

⁴ P. B. Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. 1979. Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), *Adonais*, l. 447, 425. Hereafter *SPP*. Subsequent references to this edition.

⁵ Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments by Wilfred Owen*. Ed. Jon Stallworthy. Vol 1. (London: Chatto, 1983), 'Spring Offensive', pp. 192-3.

Subsequent quotations from this edition.

⁶ John Keats, *Poems of John Keats*. 1978. Ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1979), 'Ode to a Nightingale', p. 371, l. 50. Subsequent references to this edition. For an alternative and persuasive reading of Owen's 'Spring Offensive' that places Keats's 'Nightingale' ode as the key precursor text, see Emma Suret, "'Among the Unseen Voices": The Influence of Shelley and Keats on the Poetry of Wilfred Owen'. PhD Diss. U of Sheffield, 2017, Chapter 5.

⁷ Paul Fussell notes that life in the trenches offered a renewed awareness of the sky, an awareness that 'was a cruel reversal of that sunrise and sunset, established by a century of Romantic poetry and painting, as the tokens of peace and hope and rural charm should now be exactly moments of heightened ritual anxiety' (p. 59). See Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory: An Illustrated Edition*. 1975. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000). Shelley's tropes of light, however, often unsettle Wordsworth's sublimely soothing fiction of the trinity of light, water, and air as expressed, for example, in 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey'.

⁸ See F. S. Ellis, *A Lexical Concordance to the Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley: An Attempt to Classify Every Word Found Therein According to its Signification* (London: Quaritch, 1892), p. 439.

⁹ For an astute reading of Owen's poetic apprenticeship to Keats in art of the sonnet as open ended form, see Emma Suret, 'John Keats, Wilfred Owen, and Restriction in the Sonnet' *English* 66 (2017): 145-62.

¹⁰ Compare with Jon Silkin's reading of the metrical emphasis on 'bloom' in Keats's line 'While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day' ('To Autumn', l. 25) to stress the

enmeshing of the ‘three cycles of nature, day, and man’ in the ode. See

‘Introduction’, *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*. 1979. Ed. Jon Silkin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp. 70-1.

¹¹ John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Eward Rollins. 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1956), 2, p. 102.

¹² For a discussion of ‘negative fiction’ in Keats, see Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 48-9.

¹³ Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried Sassoon: Collected Poems 1908-1956* (London: Faber, 1986), p. XX, ll. 4-5. Subsequent quotations taken from this edition.

¹⁴ John Clare, *John Clare: Selected Poems*. 1990. Ed. Geoffrey Summerfield (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 178.

¹⁵ Helen Vendler observes that ‘the perpetuity of nature’s music ... is based on the cyclicity of nature. There is something false in the metaphor: human life reaches, as seasons do not, an utmost verge; human music ends.’ (p. 236). *The Odes of John Keats*. 1983. (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

¹⁶ See Patrick Campbell, *Siegfried Sassoon: A Study of the War Poetry* (North Carolina: Macfarland, 1999), pp. 74-5.

¹⁷ See Oindrila Gosh, “‘How Curious and Quaint War is’: Thomas Hardy and the First World Poets’ *The Thomas Hardy Journal* (2015): 133-4; 130-9.

¹⁸ See O’Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air*, p. 1.

¹⁹ William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (1984; Oxford, 2000), p. 147. All quotations from this edition.

²⁰ See Jon Silkin, ‘Introduction’, *First World War Poetry*, p. 28 and see Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*. 1977. (London: Pimlico, 1988), p. 256. See also Alan

Tomlinson, “Strange Meeting in a Strange Land: Wilfred Owen and Shelley”, *Studies in Romanticism* 32:1 (1993): 75–95.

²¹ Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life* is left incomplete after the poet’s accidental drowning off the coast of Lerici on 8 July, 1822. Keats abandoned the first *Hyperion* for artistic reasons and recasts it in Dantean mode as *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, which was also left unfinished.

²² T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 2004), p. 75, l. 431.

For further resonances of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* with survivors of the First World War see Peter Lowe, “‘Exploring Sunken Ruinous Roads’: The First World War Poet as Archaeologist”, *English Studies* 97:1 (2016): 51; 42-60.

²³ Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 118.

²⁴ See J. Hillis Miller, ‘Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life”’, in *Shelley*, ed. Michael O’Neill (London, 1993), p. 233, pp. 218-40,. For a detailed account of the imaginative responses of Byron and Shelley to Wordsworth’s ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’ see Mark Sandy, “‘Lines of Light:’ Poetic Variations in Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley’, *Romanticism* (3) 22: 260-8. Bernard Bergonzi recognises that an importance of ‘The Wordsworthian theme of the obscuring of early innocence’ (78) for war poetry (in particular the work of Herbert Read). See Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (London: Constable, 1965). Michael O’Neill observes that ‘Owen reminds us how important Wordsworth’s ode’ (p. 69) is for poetry of the early twentieth century. See also O’Neill, ‘English Poetry, 1900-1930’, *William Wordsworth in Context*. 2015. Ed. Andrew Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017).

²⁵ The account that follows is indebted to my discussion of Shelley and ‘Quest Poetry’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, eds. Michael O’Neill and Anthony Howe, with the assistance of Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 272-88.

²⁶ Such an idealised biography of the poet’s life would have appealed to Owen, who read Keats’s *Endymion* as an ‘autobiography’ that spoke of the Romantic poet’s experience and his own. See James Najarian, *Victorian Keats: Manliness, Sexuality and Desire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 177. Owen responded in an equally empathetic way to reading Shelley’s poetry and biography. See Guy Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2014), pp. 76-77.

²⁷ See Ronald Tetreault *The Poetry of Life: Shelley and Literary Form* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 51.

²⁸ Alternatively, Alan Tomlinson finds a ‘pre-echo’ for Owen’s description in Shelley’s remark about the poet that ‘pains and pleasures of his species must become his own’. See Tomlinson, ‘Wilfred Owen and Shelley’, p. 84. See also Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, *SPP*, p. 517.

²⁹ ‘Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’ hereafter ‘Tintern Abbey’.

³⁰ Compare with Michael O’Neill’s sense that Owen’s revisionism ‘raises the stakes (Wordsworth had spoken of “thoughts” rather than ‘truths”, “tears” rather than “taint”) and suggests his speaker’s risky idealism; perhaps belief in such untainted “truths” was among the inadvertent causes of the war.’ (p. 79). See O’Neill, ‘English Poetry, 1900-1930’.

³¹ Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle*, p. 207.

³² For an account of the ‘speaker’s dark guesswork’ in Keats’s ode see Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle, eds. *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism* (New York, 2016), pp. 5-6.

³³ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*. 1984. (London: Faber, 2006, p. 89).
Subsequent references to this edition.

³⁴ Owen describes himself to his mother, Susan Owen, in a letter (?26 May, 1917) as ‘conscientious objector with a very seared conscience.’ See Wilfred Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Selected Poetry and Prose*. Routledge Revivals Ser. Ed. Jennifer Breen (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 132-4 (??).